

Education Matters – Diversity and Inclusion with Kevin Chief - September 16, 2019

On September 16, teachers from Beautiful Plains School Division were engaged in a professional development event with guest speaker, Kevin Chief. Kevin was born and raised in Winnipeg's North End. He has considerable public sector and community experience. Mr. Chief was the MLA for Point Douglas and has worked in the field of education, training and employment of youth.

Kevin's message was one of hope and positive change where inclusion and diversity can be the key to a successful and resilient society. In his address, he stated that our country is becoming more and more diverse. And it is becoming increasingly important for young people to feel that they belong in our communities. This sense of belonging must be built into our schools and neighbourhoods so that young people don't feel disengaged and left out. Belonging is such an important value that if we don't give young people something positive to belong to, someone will seek them out and get them involved with something negative like joining a gang. We must be the example for our students by developing pride and believing that every person has potential for success. Diversity is our strength when we can learn from each other and grow as a community. We are connected more through our similarities than our differences. With the willingness to learn, share, and work hard - anything is possible. Kevin spoke of growing up in poverty in the North End of Winnipeg. With the encouragement of his teachers and the diversity of a neighbourhood that included the Polish, Ukrainian and Indigenous communities, he was able to feel a sense of pride and belonging.

The key to building a successful, diverse and inclusive community is a willingness to listen and learn from others and always being respectful of their thoughts and perspectives. We must realize that judging people without knowing their story never leads to anything good. We need to foster understanding and treat people with respect, kindness and compassion. Everyone has a gift and talent and is great at something. When we foster everyone's strengths and have a willingness to work together, a successful climate can be achieved.

Along with diversity, poverty is another growing factor facing classrooms and communities today. Understanding where people are coming from and the challenges they face daily is a necessary tool to build strong relationships. People need to feel like they have choices in life in order to succeed. And poverty often takes that away from people. Our schools need to create as much choice and opportunities possible to help all of our students achieve their full potential.

Mr. Chief spoke about Truth and Reconciliation and he fielded questions from the audience on the topic. Fostering a path of reconciliation is all about building successful relationships through understanding and bringing people together. Historically the First Nations people and

European settlers signed treaties to formalize long-term positive relationships, built on mutual respect, that had been established through the fur trade. All Manitobans are treaty people. But when the government imposed the Indian Act in 1876, it was used to weaken the treaties. Policies were written to isolate people on reserves, weaken or destroy Indigenous cultures and abolish languages. Truth and Reconciliation is not about blaming and shaming. It is about listening to each other, acknowledging the past and moving forward together in a meaningful way.

Kevin shared how land acknowledgements before public events can be a first step in building lasting relationships. A land acknowledgement is usually a verbal recognition at the beginning of a meeting of the Indigenous Peoples on whose territory or land we are living, meeting or working on. This was traditionally a part of the customs of Indigenous people when gathering. Preservation of Indigenous languages also ensures that the history and voice of those cultures is not lost. He noted the fastest loss of languages in the world are Indigenous languages. If they are not preserved here, in our country, they cannot be taught elsewhere in the world and therefore are gone forever. Recent changes to legislation have been made to maintain and strengthen Indigenous languages in Canada.

To help be part of building a successful community, we need to continue to acknowledge and accept our differences with a common goal of removing barriers that may hinder our ability to participate in our community. Let's continue to listen, learn, and engage - then repeat!