



# Mother Earth's Children's Charter School

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**Nurturing Capacity**  
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## **Preface**

### ***Nurturing Capacity: Building Community Success***

Indspire supports communities to improve educational outcomes through the documentation and evaluation of their innovative practices. This community-led process is supported by an Indspire-funded Indigenous scholar, who works with programs on the ground to provide training on data collection and evaluation methodology.

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## **Project Abstract**

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS) offers Kindergarten to Grade 9 and is cited as Canada's first and only Indigenous children's charter school located near Stony Plain, Alberta. The focus of MECCS is to utilize traditional Indigenous teachings to help students improve academically and develop a balanced sense of cultural identity and wellness. The philosophy and roots of this culturally-based approach to education is the teachings of the Medicine Wheel which emphasizes the importance of balancing intellectual, spiritual, physical, and emotional health and needs. Additionally, caregivers/parents and the community are given a voice to address their concerns and use their input to benefit the future of the program. The success of the MECCS program can be seen in key accomplishments such as improved academic achievement, increased student and parental participation in cultural programming and events, increase in students feeling safe and confident in their learning environment, and an increase in overall parental/guardian engagement.

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## **Acknowledgements**

This project would not be possible without the generosity of Principal Erin Danforth and the school community of MECCS. I was welcomed in a good way throughout my visit and learned a great deal about a school that has a tremendous reputation. I was able to connect with knowledge keepers and observe classrooms and engage with the school team and youth on my visit. Through the research process my team was able to look back at the historical roots and the early vision that continues to shape the programming at MECCS. Thank you for what you do in education.

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## Executive Summary

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS) was established in 2003 to help provide Indigenous students with an education based strongly on cultural context rather than a traditional western educational model<sup>1, 2</sup>. MECCS functions do not only benefit students academically but also to foster students' self-confidence and self-respect, develop their appreciation for their cultural ties to Mother Earth, and emphasize the importance of balancing the four components of self – spiritual, physical, social/emotional, and intellectual. Additionally, in recognizing that the needs of each student are unique, each child is provided with an Individual Program Plan to ensure they are being supported for success. Overall, it is the main goals of MECCS to help students achieve their academic potential and to nurture their spiritual connectedness<sup>2</sup>.

Specific achievements of the MECCS programming include:

- Improved student performance on Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs),
- Decreased drop-out rate,
- Higher percentage of students feeling safe at school based on survey data
- Increased number of students and parents/caregivers attending cultural/spiritual programming and events,
- Increased percentage of teachers/parents/caregivers that feel the students are being well-prepared to succeed in the work force then they finish school
- Increased number of MECCS alumni graduating from Grade 12<sup>3</sup>.

The positive outcomes addressed above show that the culturally rooted curriculum and innovative pedagogical approaches at MECCS benefits students not only during their time at MECCS but also after they transition to high school and post-secondary. The future of the program continues to improve through monitoring annual education results and listening to the voices of parents/caregivers in order to identify ways to further develop the program and increase positive outcomes. Current outcomes indicate that MECCS succeeds in meeting their main goals of increasing academic achievement and nurturing spiritual and cultural connectedness.

## Mother Earth's Children's Charter School – Canada's First Indigenous Charter School

### Description of the Program

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS) offers Kindergarten to Grade 9 and is cited as Canada's first and only Indigenous children's charter school located near Stony Plain, Alberta. The focus of MECCS is to utilize traditional Indigenous teachings to help students improve academically and develop a balanced sense of cultural identity and wellness.

### Context



Alberta holds the third highest percentile of the Aboriginal population in Canada, following Ontario and British Columbia. Information from the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) showed that just over 1.4 Million people, representing 4.3% of the total Canadian population, self-identified as being Indigenous. A majority of the total Indigenous population identify as First Nations (60.8%), Métis (32.3%), or Inuit (4.2%), with just under 3% reporting other Aboriginal identities or more than one Aboriginal identity. In Alberta, there were 220,695 Aboriginal people, representing 15.8% of the total Aboriginal population. Additionally, Indigenous youth (15-24 years of age) represent 18.2% of the total Indigenous population, and 5.9% of all Canadian youth<sup>4</sup>. The 2011 NHS also indicated that 28.9% of Indigenous people ages 25-64 had 'no certificate, diploma or degree' compared to a proportion of 12.1% for non-Indigenous people within the same age group, outlining the dramatic graduation gap that continues to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples<sup>5</sup>.

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School is located on the South banks of the North Saskatchewan River near Stony Plain, Alberta in Treaty Six territory, and is Canada's first and only Indigenous Charter School. Approximately 95% of MECCS students are of Indigenous ancestry and many students that attend are from Paul First Nation and to a lesser extent surrounding communities including Enoch Cree Nation, Alexis First Nation, Alexander First Nation, Alberta Beach, Stony Plain and Edmonton<sup>2</sup>. The student population is diverse and includes Métis, Cree, Nakota Sioux, and Stoney students.

### **MECCS Mission**

*To holistically nurture, guide and challenge each child's spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional self through traditional Indigenous teachings.*

### **MECCS Vision**

*Rediscovering the gifts and potential given to them by the Creator, our children will achieve personal excellence and fulfillment.*

### **MECCS Philosophy**

*With the support of adults who care and believe in their potential, youth will discover their hidden talents, develop personal responsibility, and find a purpose to their lives. As our traditions teach us, we must nurture the development and educate the whole child as was given to us by the Creator. Our school community and program are based upon traditional Indigenous teachings.*

### **Early history**

"I'm happy to see the kids learning their Culture...without that, they get lost along the way"

Elder Edna Rain

The original concept for MECCS evolved from a group of parents and educators who believed that it was time to engage in a different model of schooling that would better meet the needs of Indigenous students. Through careful planning and extensive lobbying, MECCS was established in 2003 as the first Indigenous Charter School for Indigenous children in Canada. Charlene Crowe and Wilson Bearhead initially founded a society and later sought school charter status. The philosophical roots of the program are clearly stated by Wilson Bearhead in a longitudinal study on MECCS<sup>1</sup>.

The importance of how you teach and how you present education was not considered and as a result we went through, I think, over 20 years of failure trying to teach someone else's structure and someone else's way of thinking. . . . We forgot who we were . . . we were trying to be someone we were not and as a result failures happened (W. Bearhead, personal communication, March 2005).





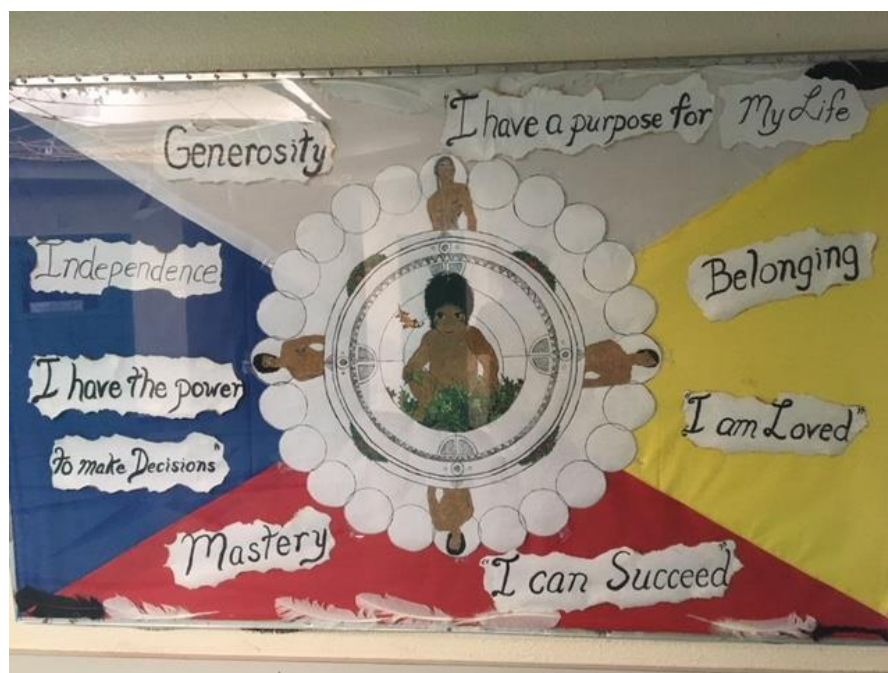
The educational program of MECCS is strongly built and supported through traditional Indigenous teachings and focuses on developing students' potential by providing an environment where they can feel safe and supported in their educational pursuits and personal growth. The school's early mission and policy work highlights the importance of cultural identity as part of a larger process of rediscovery within Indigenous youth. This approach to learning is essential to grounded Indigenous education, that is in direct contrast to euro-centered structures that are currently reinforced in schools. The MECCS Society Charter speaks to the early commitments and philosophy.

. . . to nurture, to support, guide and challenge each of our children to discover the gifts given to them by the Creator and [to create] a balance of their spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional selves. Through this each child will achieve personal excellence and fulfillment (MECCS Society Charter, 2003:1).

Through the teachings of The Medicine Wheel, it remains an important part of the goals of MECCS that students understand the importance of balancing the four components of self – spiritual, physical, social/emotional, and intellectual. Furthermore, the presence of a strong support network and positive educators, knowledge keepers, and Elders who care about the students and believe in their potential is a necessary component for students to gain confidence in themselves and their gifts throughout their academic careers and future endeavors<sup>2</sup>.

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School programming has worked strategically to increase student well-being and success as they believe that these are complimentary components that support each other, not separate entities. There are several important

data points to highlight that reinforce the school wide belief and philosophy. For example, programming has resulted in a significant decrease (less than 1%) in student leaving rates since 2013. The overall percentage of self-identified Indigenous students in Grades 6 and 9 who scored acceptable levels in Provincial PAT Examinations has dramatically increased from 36.4% in 2012 to 51.9% in 2016. The high school completion rate for MECCS alumni has also steadily increased from 16.7% in 2013 to 37.5% in 2016. Aside from the academic benefits of the program, there are several other outcomes that indicate this program is successful with over 90% of teachers, parents, and students reporting through survey data that students are not only safe in school but also that they are learning the importance of caring and respect for others.



The philosophy of MECCS is also connected to the Circle of Courage model conceptualized by Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern where they state that, *"In order to thrive, all children need the opportunity to be reared in schools and communities that cultivate belonging (I mean something to you), mastery (I am good at something), independence (I have power to make decisions), and generosity (I have a purpose in life)"*<sup>2, 6</sup>. Various programs that utilize culturally responsive programming, such as the Circle of Courage model, to meet the needs of Indigenous youth have been shown to provide exceptionally positive results. This further outlines the need to more broadly employ these school wide philosophies that champion a needs based approach to understanding the whole child.

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern Circle of Courage Model (1990)



### ***Brief Background of the Project***

On May 25, 1994, the *School Amendment Act* (Bill 19) was passed and enabled the establishment of charter schools in Alberta. Charter schools are “autonomous public schools that would provide innovative or enhanced means of delivering education in order to improve student learning”<sup>7</sup>. In other words, a charter school is established to provide a basic education as defined by Alberta Education but in an innovative way. Overall, the goal is to provide students with access to unique programs that can improve their academic achievement.

Some common characteristics of charter schools include:

- **Charter** – An agreement between the Minister of Education and an individual/group which describes the unique educational service, operation, and intended outcomes of the school.
- **Access** – Any student (meeting the requirements of Section 8 of the *School Act*) may enroll, provided sufficient space and resources are available.
- **Curriculum** – Structured around a basic education defined by Alberta Education and outlined in the *Programs of Study* such that students can easily transfer to or from these schools and achieve a high school diploma. All students must write Provincial Exams.
- **Purpose** – Expected to improve student learning through providing an educational environment that differs from what is locally available<sup>7</sup>.

Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School was established in 2003 by a group of parents and educators that felt their children could learn more effectively through Indigenous approaches to learning rather than conventional ones. A vast majority of the student population of MECCS are of Aboriginal ancestry, including children who self-identify as Cree, Nakota Sioux, Blood, Blackfoot, Ojibway, Dene, Inuit, and Métis, with only a small

population of those who identify as non-Aboriginal<sup>1</sup>. Baydala et al. (2007) outlined that although there are several public schools in Alberta that offer Indigenous programming, MECCS is unique in rooting the curriculum in Indigenous teachings, identity and experience rather than infusing these aspects into conventional core programming<sup>1</sup>. The approach of MECCS is deeply rooted in the teachings of the Medicine Wheel which “reminds us that the four components of the self - spiritual, physical, social/emotional, and intellectual - are all of equal importance”. MECCS differs from the current, conventional education system where intellectual and cognitive development of students is the main focus<sup>2</sup>. The central essence of these teachings is that each individual must make their own choices and learn from their experiences to keep moving forward. Two visual examples of teaching principles based from Medicine Wheel teachings that are used to guide and support the MECCS program can be seen in Appendix A<sup>2</sup>.

There are many key components to the Cultural Program of MECCS, including:

- **Elders/Knowledge Keepers** – Play a vital role in passing on traditional knowledge as well as providing instruction in Indigenous ceremonies.
- **Smudging/Cleansing** – Performed every morning in each classroom to begin the day with and to keep with traditional practices of self-care and personal development.
- **Language Revitalization** – Stoney and Cree language classes offered for all students as revitalization of languages is key to reconnecting cultural understanding and identity.
- **Land-based Learning** – 121 acres of land that is home to tipis, a sweat lodge, a Cultural Camp site, vast trails for hiking and snowshoeing, and access to the North Saskatchewan River provide extensive opportunities for experiential learning<sup>2, 8</sup>.

## Major Objectives of the Project



The major objectives of MECCS are to:

- ❖ Improve student learning achievement as indicated by increased Provincial Achievement Test scores, lowered annual drop-out rates, and an increase in students with skills that prepare them for the workforce and lifelong learning.
- ❖ Provide an educational environment rooted in traditional Indigenous teachings to holistically nurture, guide and challenge each child's spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional self.
- ❖ Create opportunities for students to engage in culturally-connected activities/learning to deepen their spiritual connectedness.
- ❖ Encourage parent/caregiver involvement in students' education through participation in cultural events as well as allowing a voice in the education of their children.
- ❖ Foster an environment that emphasizes safety, caring and respect.

Charter and provincial goals include:

**Charter Goals:**

❖ Charter Goal One: **Achieving Academic Potential**

*Outcome: Each child will have improved academic achievement.*

❖ Charter Goal Two: **Spiritual Connectedness**

*Outcome: Each child will understand how his/her spirit connects to the world around him/her.*

**Provincial Goals:**

❖ Goal One: **High Quality Learning Opportunities**

*Outcome: Schools environments are safe and caring.*

*Outcome: The education system meets the needs of all K–12 students and supports our society and the economy.*

*Outcome: Children and youth with at risk factors have their needs addressed through timely and effective programs and supports.*

❖ Goal Two: **Excellence in Student Learning Outcomes**

*Outcome: Students demonstrate high standards in learner outcomes.*

*Outcome: Students are well prepared for lifelong learning*

*Outcome: Students are well prepared for employment.*

*Outcome: Students model the characteristics of active citizenship.*

❖ Goal Three: **Success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) Students**

*Outcome: Key learning outcomes for FNMI students improve.*

❖ Goal Four: **Highly Responsive and Responsible Jurisdiction**

*Outcome: The jurisdiction demonstrates effective working relationships.*

*Outcome: The jurisdiction demonstrates leadership, innovation and continuous improvement.<sup>2</sup>*



### *Connections to Indspire Principles:*

- ❖ **Principle 3:** Indigenous knowledges (ways of being, knowing, valuing and doing), which convey our responsibilities and relationships to all life is a valued and foundational aspect of the learning program for all children and youth.
- ❖ **Principle 4:** Cultural/language communities have the right to define success for their own wellbeing.
- ❖ **Principle 5:** Learning is viewed as lifelong, holistic, and experiential, which is rooted in language and culture, is place-based, spiritually oriented, communal and open to multiple ways of knowing the world.
- ❖ **Principle 6:** Programs, schools and systems are responsive to both the aspirations and the needs of Indigenous peoples.

### **Activities Accomplished**

A major accomplishment of MECCS was the purchase of the former St. John's School facility in 2012, which they had been renting since 2009. This purchase has not only given MECCS more stability as an organization but also provides access to a significant amount of land for their programming and has provided means and resources to fulfill their Charter mandate on a greater scale<sup>3</sup>. In order to include parents/caregivers in the education of their children, MECCS uses surveys and engages frequently in intentional dialogue to gather information and guide programming through the responses to help shape programming decisions. For example, in response to parental concerns that the program was not providing a broad enough education, MECCS has worked to include new programs such as Archery, Aboriginal Land Stewardship, Drumming and Advanced Techniques in Art. Additionally, MECCS is increasing their use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, e-Newsletters) for stronger school to home communication and to help inform and engage parents<sup>9</sup>. One of the key partnerships in line with MECCS strategic plan is the APPLE School Project. MECCS helps to promote healthy eating, physical activity, and mental health through the implementation of the Comprehensive School Health Model<sup>10</sup>.

### *Apple Schools Model*

APPLE Schools is an innovative school-focused health promotion initiative that improves the lives of more than 19,000 students annually in 63 schools across northern Alberta by targeting healthy eating, physical activity, and mental health habits.

"We know that healthy students are better learners and we strive every day to pair healthy eating with meeting the physical component of the medicine wheel to ensure we are being holistic in our approach to raising and educating our students"

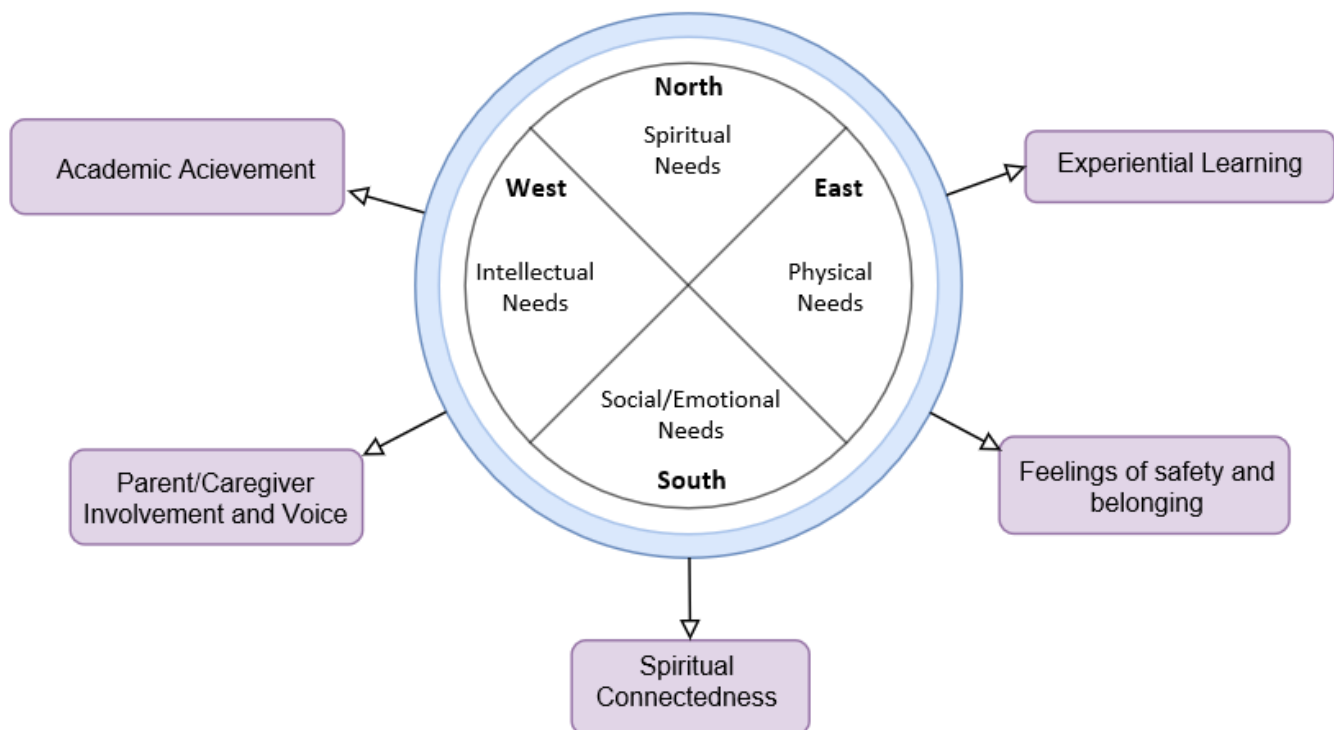
Mark Ehnes Teacher and School Health Champion

## Resource Materials

- ❖ Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS)  
<https://www.meccs.org>
- ❖ Alberta Government, Education – open report  
<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/mother-earth-s-children-s-charter-school-society/resource/c422b382-61a6-4bf9-982c-457195098651>

## Project Model

### *Conceptual Diagram of the Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Program*





## Logic Model Used for the Project

The logic model for this project is based on teachings from the Medicine Wheel which emphasized the importance of balancing the four aspects of self, including spiritual, intellectual, physical and social/emotional. Information from several online sources was used to build this model<sup>2, 9, 10, 11, 12</sup>.

**Table 1: Logic Model of the Program**

Inputs
<p>Staff resources including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 4 administrative staff (Superintendent, Principal, Secretary-Treasurer and Home Liaison);</li><li>• 5 teachers; and</li><li>• 4 support staff, and 2 bus drivers.</li></ul> <p>The Board of MECCS Society, including 5 members (1 Chair, 1 Vice Chair, and 3 Trustees).</p> <p>Parent and other volunteers.</p> <p>Funding from Government of Alberta, Government of Canada, donations, investment income and school generated funds (Total of \$1,500,652 for the 2017/18 school year).</p> <p>Facilities at the former St. John's School location including 141 acres of land on the North Saskatchewan River, kitchen area.</p> <p>Partnership with APPLE Schools which supports healthy eating, physical activity, and mental health.</p>
Strategies/Major Activities
<p><b>Cultural Curriculum (Spiritual):</b> The school focuses on using a culture-based education that is founded in the teachings of The Medicine Wheel. Students are taught the importance of balancing the components of self (spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional/social). Elders play a vital role in passing on traditions, conducting ceremonies and benefitting students through holistic teachings and counselling. Guidance from Elders and positive role models from the community helps to emphasize the importance of staying in school. Additionally, language revitalization is key to the cultural curriculum with MECCS offering classes in both the Cree and Stony languages. Other cultural curriculum components include smudging, storytelling, experiential learning, mentoring, 'on the land' programming, feasts, etc. These components all work together to strengthen students' sense of self and build their self-confidence and cultural identity. Teachers and support staff are provided</p>

training in cultural teachings and Elders play a strong role in the development of new culturally appropriate activities. Activities should help to reinforce the traditional teachings of respect for all living things.

**Educational Program (Intellectual):** Academic success is promoted through increased personalized programming and Individualized Program Plans are prepared for each child. Class sizes are kept low and student learning is reported to parents with Report Cards. The expansion of the program includes opportunities for hands-on, real-world learning through extended field trips. Professional development opportunities for staff are used to assist them in all subject areas via SMART board training courses, training in the use of other technologies, such as iPads, etc. MECCS also strives to increase their programming to provide a broader education to their students. Life-long learning skills are strengthened by organizing Aboriginal guest speakers to role model positive behavior and decisions for future employment.

**Parental/Community Engagement (Social/Emotional):** Parents are the primary educators of their children and surveys of parents/caregivers are used to guide the future of the programming. In response to parental concerns there have been new programs added to provide students with a broad range of options. Parent involvement in cultural/spiritual programming and events is strongly encouraged and use of social media helps with school to home communication. Home visits help encourage family support of their children's education.

**Healthy Living (Physical):** Recognizing the importance of regular physical activity MECCS gets students involved in daily physical education. Healthy nutritional practices are taught in the Health program and promoted through the hot lunch program. Additionally, participation with the APPLE School program helps promote physical, nutritional and mental health. MECCS continues to partner with Capital Health as well to provide students with a dental program.

#### **Intended Results/Outputs**

Observable outputs include:

- Decreased drop-out rate to 0% by 2013 which has since been maintained;
- A positive trend for Provincial Achievement Test scores to increase with more students reaching acceptable standards (Grades 6 and 9);
- Increased parental attendance/involvement for cultural/spiritual programming and events to 100%;
- Use of parental surveys to guide future programming such as introducing a broader range of programs available to students; and
- Increased satisfaction with the ongoing improvement of the program and with the quality of the education.

**Culture and Language:** Students develop self-confidence and a strong identity through cultural teachings. They learn the traditional Stony and Cree languages, participate in rites of passage and Sacred Ceremonies. Greater access to Elders enables a stronger connection with traditional teachings and pedagogy that is guided by the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge systems.

**Education:** The needs of each student are addressed through Individualized Program Plans to help them achieve academic success. Teachers employ strategies to help students feel confident in their abilities and prepare Grade 6 and Grade 9 students for the PATs. Experiential learning provides real-world context to students' education. Financial and human resources are available to support hands-on-learning opportunities for students. Students are provided with opportunities to visit high schools they may later attend to ease their transition.

**Parental/Community Engagement:** Parents are recognized as the primary educators of their children and encouraged to be a part of their children's education through participation in cultural ceremonies and through voicing their opinions on the program during surveys.

**Healthy Living:** Collaboration with other programs such as the APPLE School Project and Capital Health provide students with knowledge about healthy lifestyle choices such as daily exercise and proper nutrition. These programs also provide them with resources to help with other needs such as counselling for mental health and dental programs.

After leaving MECCS and moving into high school students receive ongoing support to help them continue to achieve success. High school completion rates for MECCS alumni has steadily improved. Students are taught important skills to help them throughout their academic career such as time management and organization. Talks from Aboriginal guest speakers offer students positive role models to look up to who teach them positive behavior and decisions for future employment

Through participation in MECCS programming, students are instilled with self-confidence and a deepened understanding of their culture that can benefit them throughout their lives. A focus on developing their life-long learning skills, including time management, organization and budgeting will help them not only throughout their academic career but also into their future employment. Increased high school completion will address the graduation gap and allows future access to post-secondary education opportunities which they otherwise may not have had. Employable skills are developed from prior opportunities such as working at the school canteen, handling money and participation in other work-experience activities.



### **Performance Indicators and Measures**

In order to track the success of this program there are several measures being looked at on an annual basis. These measures include, for example, student learning opportunities and achievement (PAT scores, drop-out rate, satisfaction with program diversity), participation in cultural/spiritual programming and events, positive response regarding feelings of safety at school, as well as several others.

**Table 2: Indicators of Success for the Program**

Goal	Measure	Success Indicators
Improve academic achievement and student learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of students achieving acceptable or standard of excellence Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs)</li> <li>• Annual drop-out rates</li> <li>• Percentage of teachers and parents who feel students are learning attitudes and behaviours to be successful in a work environment</li> <li>• Percentage of teachers and parents who feel students demonstrate knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Increased percentage of students scoring acceptable or higher on PATs</li> <li>✓ Maintenance of 0% drop-out rate</li> <li>✓ Increase in parents and teachers feeling that students are prepared to enter the workforce</li> <li>✓ Increase in parents and teachers feeling students are prepared for lifelong learning</li> </ul>
Develop students' spiritual connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of students, teachers, and support staff participating in cultural/spiritual programming, ceremonies and events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Maintenance of 100% participation of students and staff in cultural programming, events and ceremonies</li> </ul>
Encourage parent/caregiver engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of parents/caregivers participating in cultural/spiritual programming, ceremonies and events</li> <li>• Percentage of parents/caregivers and teachers satisfied with parental involvement in decisions about their child's education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Continued 100% attendance for parents/caregivers at cultural events</li> <li>✓ Increase in parents and teachers who feel they are provided with enough input in the education of their children</li> </ul>
Provide students with high quality learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of students, parents, and teachers who agree that students are safe at school, treated fairly and are learning the importance of caring and respect for others</li> <li>• Percentage of students, parents, and teachers satisfied with the opportunity for students to participate in a broad program of studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Increased percentage of parents/caregivers feeling their children are safe</li> <li>✓ More parents, teachers and students who agree that students are provided opportunities for a broad education</li> </ul>

## Interviews

- ❖ Janet House, Knowledge Keeper, Paul First Nation
- ❖ Erin Danforth, MECCS Principal

### ***Q1 Can you share with me the early beginnings of the programming vision here at MECCS***

#### **A1 E. Danforth**

Fourteen years ago, when the school started, it was a group of parents and one individual that saw the potential for Aboriginal children to be educated in a way that was best for them, and within the current constraints of the system at that time, she didn't feel that it was possible. Charleen Bearhead was a visionary that helped lead this as well as her partner.

#### **Janet House**

She envisioned this school - we took pieces of that vision and we've melded them in to what we are now. I would like us to continue to grow.

### ***Q2 What are some of the challenges and successes when developing a different education system?***

#### **A2 Erin Danforth**

Right now, there are some challenges like financial restraints that are the problem. These barriers prevent us from doing a lot of the good things that we want to do, and have done in the past.

For example, the maintenance for this school is significant right now and we subsidize our transportation budget to about \$200,000 / year. That's equal to two teachers or four support staff, or a teacher, support staff and some budget for electronic infrastructure in this school.

Many schools have 1:1 devices. We don't have that for our kids here. We just have computers that have been donated. The students aren't receiving all the bells and whistles that you would in other schools. But what we do have is a very small staff, and a family atmosphere. We make up for these pieces with having an amazing and caring staff, that is the biggest success and with that we have amazing well cared for students. These are all successes despite the challenges.

## **Janet House**

Yes, we have committed people and families that are committed to this vision that is the biggest success. We have people like me that have been here for a very long time and we are not going anywhere it is like a home here, it is our community and the kids understand that and can see that.

### ***Q3 What does the current staff look like in terms of composition?***

#### **A3 Erin Danforth**

We currently have four teachers, one Principal, one custodian, one kitchen helper, Janet who does everything, and one Teaching Assistant. The total numbers are nine plus our Superintendent, Secretary Treasurer, and a maintenance member that comes in three days a week to take care of the very large grounds we have here.

We also have a board (six members) and a Superintendent and Secretary Treasurer. We actually have a Superintendent for this school. If we were bigger, we might have an Assistant Superintendent. We have a very unique setting.

## **Janet House**

Plus, we have so many community members and family members that stop by and that help us out with teachings or just to come have a cup of tea. This makes our staff look bigger at times. We try to stay connected to our community members.

### ***Q4 So you would say it is a challenge in some ways to design a different system, can you give me a more specific example to highlight the discrepancies?***

#### **A4 Erin Danforth**

Yes, good question. For example, I had a psychologist out today to do an assessment on some kids, which is important to understand what the student needs are. We pay for that out of our pocket, operating budget. If I was in a big district, we'd have a pool of resources and expertise. We try to be creative which takes a great deal of energy we are partnering with a counsellor that was sent here a few years ago through the Parkland and Evergreen Health Unit when she was working towards her designation as a registered psychologist.

She was here three years ago. She was a familiar face so we were able to achieve some good results in meeting the distinct needs of kids. Sometimes, out of three kids, only one might get assessed, but we've caught them in Grade one and two, so we can get them the help they need, rather than waiting until Grade nine - so that when they move to high school they can go in to a program that's appropriate for them. That is why we need those specialists to help us meet the needs of the whole child, and so we can better serve them.

***Q5 Where do the students come from who attend MECCS***

**A5 Erin Danforth**

Paul Band is our closest area where students come from. We used to take kids from Edmonton, but we only had five or six, and we have to have 15 students in order to make a bus work in terms of transportation costs. We had to tell those families which was very difficult. Other students are from the Parkland area. We go up to Alberta Beach. We used to get more kids from Alexis, but there isn't stable funding. We have an agreement directly with the Federal Government for tuition support. There are a lot of loops and no straight-line processes. As administrators and educators we have to think outside the box. We have to know where our students are coming from. If a student from Alexis wanted to come, we would have a difficult time negotiating because we wouldn't get any funding for that child. If funding wasn't an issue, I'd say sure so we have to continue to lobby between the province and federal government as well as communities to find unique agreements that benefit kids.

***Q6 What are the current number of students registered?***

**A6 Erin Danforth**

Our population is fairly transient as students move between places and homes. Currently, we have 69 students registered right now (K-9). If there was a way we could get some funding for Pre-Kindergarten or daycare we would be interested in offering that, because a lot of families would prefer that all their children go on one bus to the same building. It makes sense. This year we have one student whose paperwork came in late and we didn't get her funding, but that is ok, we need to meet the needs of this student and this family. That is what matters in education.

We also have these very unique situations where a student needs a school for 40 days. We have to make a decision on whether or not we take the student because there are no official funding dollars. These are decisions I have to make all the time, what's best for this student and the family and does it benefit other kids, and does it benefit our school.

***Q7 So tell me about your role in school and Janet tell me about your connection to the school***

**A7 Janet House**

Erin has been a principal for six years, but in the school for 12 years. She has been here for the long haul.

This is a legacy project. All of my (Janet's) kids have been through here. I live in Paul Band.



(A student came in to the office, to show some broken tile he had found in the bathroom) Erin and Janet mentioned how comfortable students are coming to the Principal's office, they stop by all the time. It's the environment that's been created.

### ***Q8 Lessons Learned and Next Steps***

#### **A 8 Erin Danforth**

The work on the charter started in about 2000. Charlene Bearhead came back a couple years ago for the Christmas concert. I was very grateful to her for creating this space and all the work, heart and soul put in to this legacy project. When she had to leave, it was hard for her to walk away. My perception, the fact that the vision that she saw was not ever fully formed, walking away from something you don't feel is finished, is challenging. She created this environment where so many good things can happen. I hope she realizes that good things have come from what she created. She is so important to us and we want to honour the work her and her partner envisioned long ago. Our lessons learned are that we have to stay strong in this work and stay together in it. It can be lonely work and sometimes it seems overwhelming but when we step back we can see that good steps are being taken and we are moving forward still, even when it seems like it is slow. Our next steps must be encouraging more students to come to this school and getting the message out that we are an amazing place to go to school. We want to enhance our land based programming and language programming. We, in a practical way, would like to pay down some of our operating costs and look for some unique partnerships to be sustainable.

#### **Janet House**

We want to keep going and keep our community connected to this work. I know firsthand how much this program changed my children's lives. I wouldn't send my kids anywhere else because they understood fully what my kids needed to be successful in school and life.

#### **Threads from the interview**

The common threads from the interviews are the importance of sustaining the vision and the importance of education in a different way that matters to Indigenous youth and families. The interview and the subsequent tour of the facilities offered insight into the larger educational vision. The ways in which the school team have continued to find ways to sustain programming despite challenges are noteworthy. The programming and the positive spirit to carry these ideas forward is what emerges from the interviews. The educational team with the support of community and families will continue to approach Indigenous education in a way that meets the needs of the whole child is evident and abundantly clear.

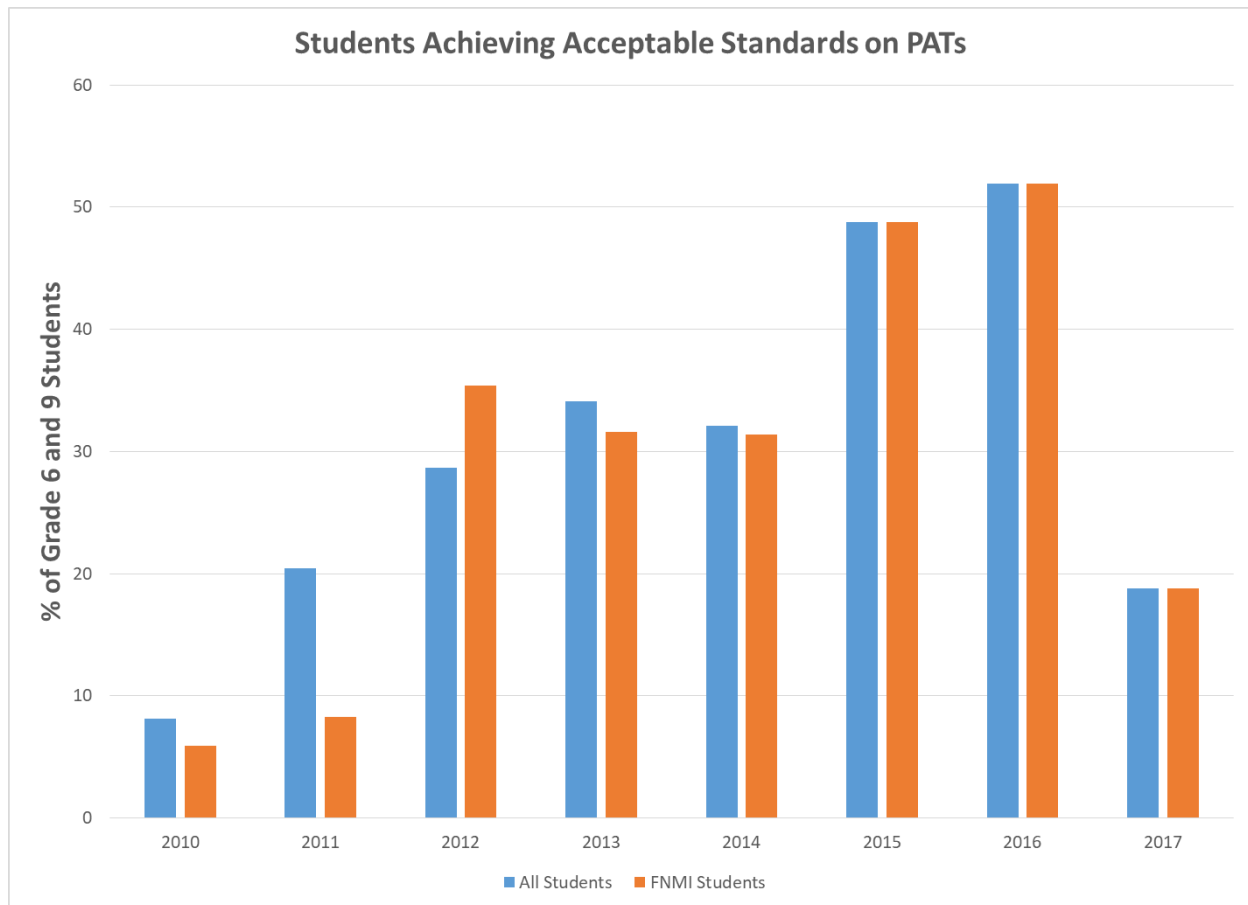
## Evaluation: Key Findings

Assessment of the MECCS program was done using Annual Education Results Reports, from the 2013/14 school year to the latest report from the 2016/17 year. These reports function to track the progress of the school and help identify areas which need improvement.

In 2017, specific findings include:

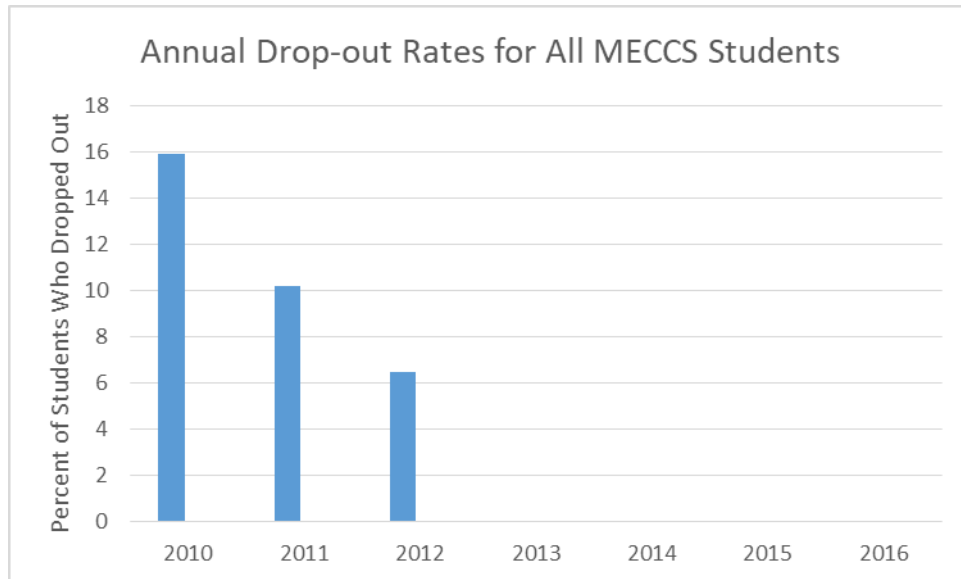
- ✓ Increase to the percentage of students in Grade 6 and 9 scoring acceptable standards on PATs (Graph 1).
  - Increase of 48.8% observed from 2010 to 2016.
  - Unfortunately, a decrease was observed in 2017, however, this was likely due to an extremely small cohort of eligible students who wrote the exams leading to an inaccurate representation of the program<sup>9</sup>.
- ✓ Maintaining a less than 1% annual drop-out rate (students aged 14-18; Graph 2).
- ✓ More MECCS alumni graduating from Grade 12.
  - Increase from 16.7% in 2013 to 37.5% in 2016.
- ✓ Increased percentage of parents and teachers agree that students were learning attitudes and behaviours to make them successful in the workforce (Graph 3).
- ✓ Increased agreement that students demonstrated knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for lifelong learning (Graph 4).
- ✓ Increased participation of students, parents, and staff in cultural events to 100% (Graph 5).
- ✓ Increased satisfaction with the opportunity for students to receive a broad program of studies including fine arts, career, technology, and health, and physical education (Graph 6).
- ✓ Large majority of students, parents, and teachers who feel that students are safe at school and are learning the importance of caring and respect for each other (Graph 7).

**Graph 1: Students Achieving Acceptable Standards on Provincial Achievement Test**

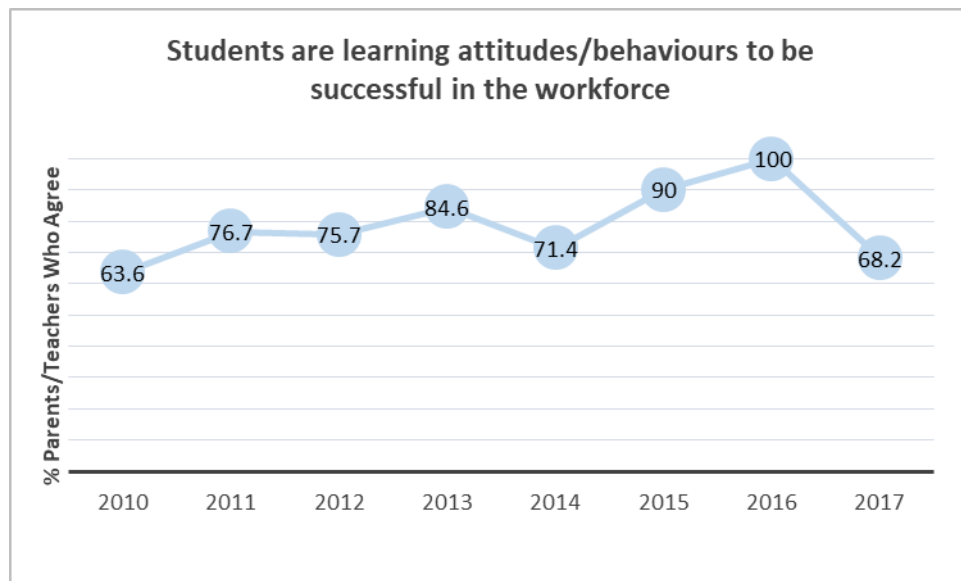


\*PATs = Provincial Achievement Tests; Percentages reported are averages of reported percentages from Annual Education Results Report documents from 2013/14 year to the 2016/17 year.

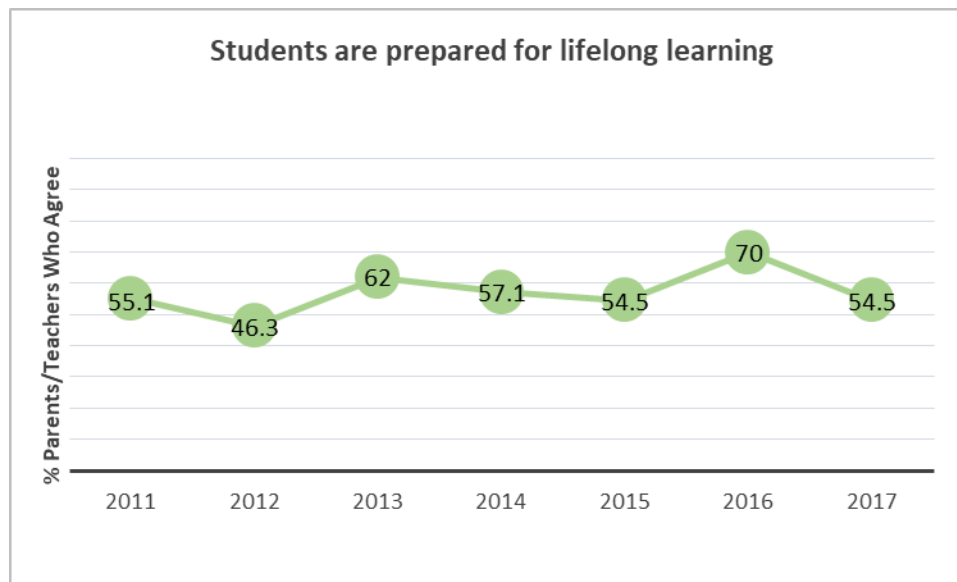
**Graph 2: Annual Drop-Out Rates for all MECCS Students**



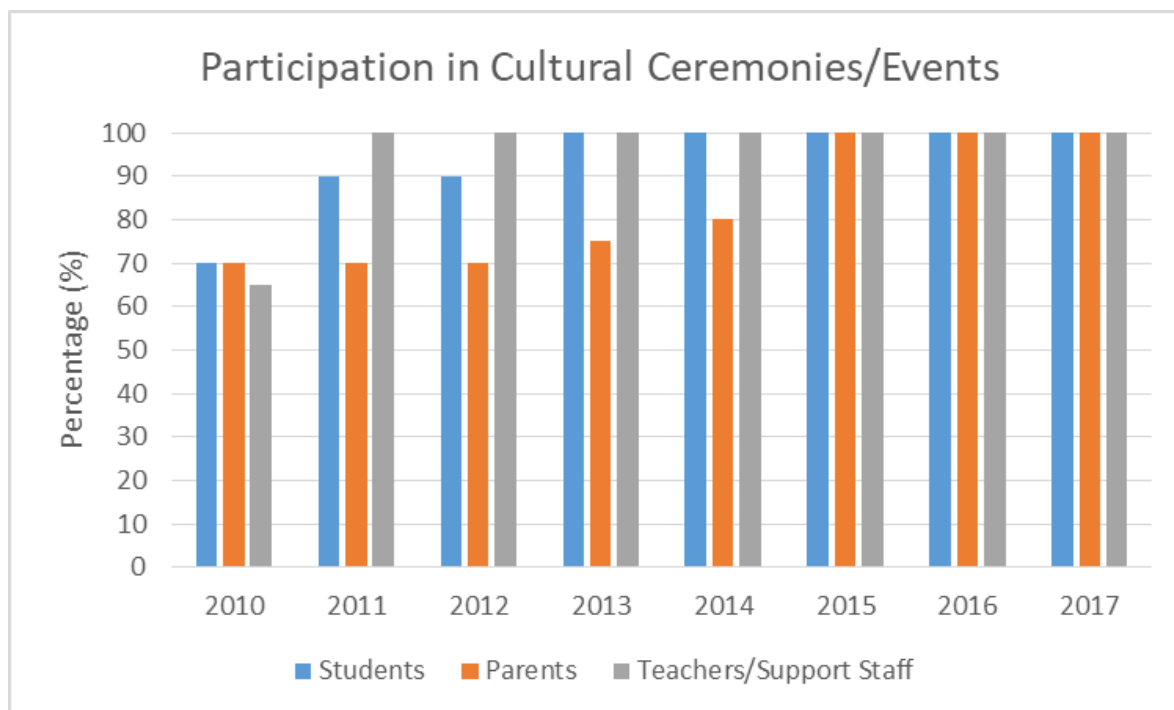
**Graph 3: Student Attitudes and Behaviours for Success in the Workforce**



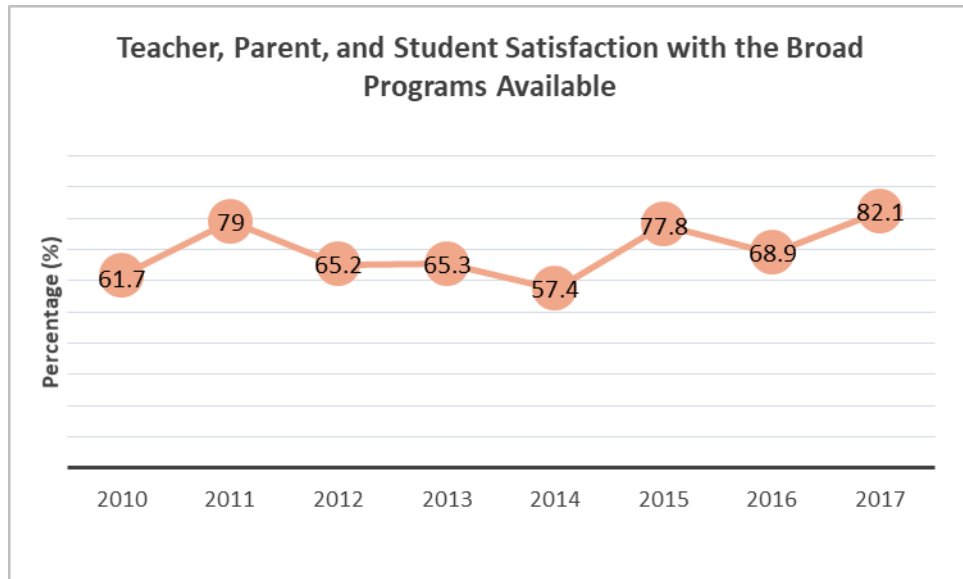
**Graph 4: Student Preparation for Lifelong Learning**



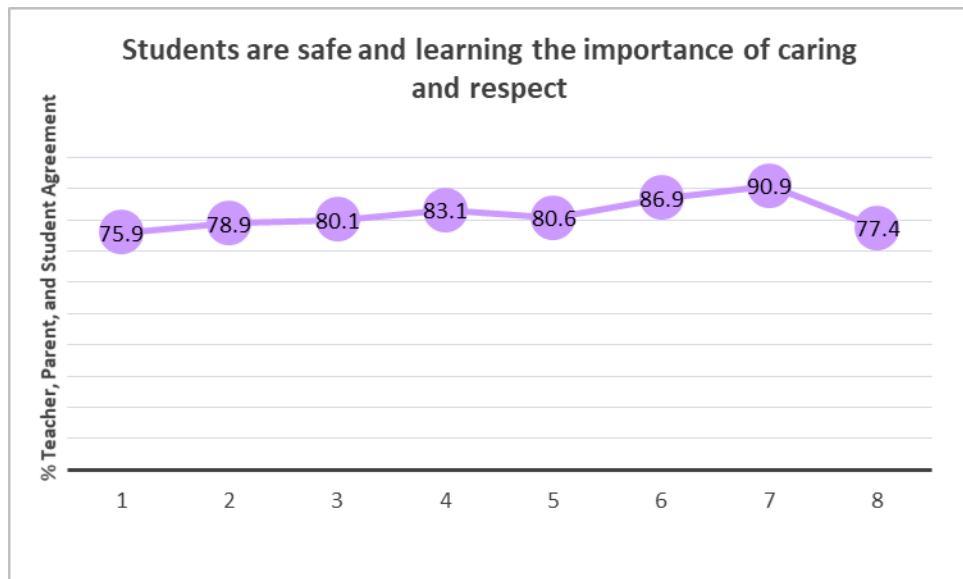
**Graph 5: Participation of Students, Parents, and Staff in Cultural Events**



**Graph 6: Satisfaction with the Broad Program of Studies Available to Students**



**Graph 7: Safety, Respect and Caring**



## Outcomes: Most Significant Accomplishments and Lessons Learned



Mother Earth's Children's Charter School has succeeded in utilizing a culture-based curriculum to help Indigenous students succeed both within the school environment as well as outside of it. The success of the program can be determined through academic achievements such as increased PAT scores from Grade 6 and Grade 9 students with an increased proportion of them achieving acceptable standards as well as a decrease in the annual drop-out rate, from 16% in 2010 to 0% by 2013, which has since been maintained. Additionally, although students age out of the program at Grade 9, there is an increased number of MECCS alumni graduating from Grade 12, indicating the program continues to empower students even after they leave the program. Other major accomplishments of the program include the maintenance of a respectful and safe

learning environment, implementation of an options program for Grade 6-9 students, increased participation of not only students but also parents and staff in cultural ceremonies and events, and raising funding dollars to pay off half the remaining mortgage on their current site.

## Common Themes

### *Staying with the Vision*

By charting the trajectory of the MECCS program, from its beginning points to its most current rendition, several common themes emerge. The programming came out of a need and a response to euro-centric education models that bumped up with Indigenous ways of knowing and teaching. This sharp divide led to advocates and early designers and innovators to create a pathway that was different and that would acknowledge the multiplicity within Indigenous students, families and communities. The central theme is the challenges and the struggles that come with developing and re-engaging with a different way of knowing. Many of the measures and metrics remain western standards of measurement whereas this current model looks to measure much more than

provincial achievement scores and data. The common theme is maintaining the spirit and intent of the charter and the vision that was first co-created with the larger community. The results can be measured in different ways and need to continue to capture the needs based decision-making and the holistic approach to achieving these outcomes.

## Next Steps for the Project

### *Capacity*

Capacity continues to be a challenge as the current cohort numbers remain small which create challenges in terms of operating dollars and long term planning through funding. As the numbers remain relatively modest (less than 100 students), which is an inherent strength, it also serves as a barrier as current funding is reflective of student number projections. The types of programs and innovations can be limited because of the smaller student numbers, decreasing the number of teachers and staff and increasing administrative functioning due to half time teaching and administrative duties. Challenges in the physical infrastructure and the cost of maintenance at this site is substantial, this alone is a challenging cost measure. School transportation is an inherent challenge because of the remote location that serves as a strength in terms of the raw physical elements and the ability to get "on the land" for teachings, but also this is a real challenge as transportation costs, maintenance and distance are all challenging factors.

The next steps include getting the word out, paying the mortgage down on the site property and targeting funding opportunities regionally, provincially and nationally. The program and the initial vision have merit, the youth and the communities deserve this space to re-imagine the possibilities within themselves. The next steps will include looking at multiple opportunities for sustained funding, and viable partnerships that complement the original vision and mission.



## **Interactive Tools and Weblinks**

Apple Schools Report

[http://www.appleschools.ca/files/Mother\\_Earth\\_s\\_Charter\\_School\\_Low.pdf](http://www.appleschools.ca/files/Mother_Earth_s_Charter_School_Low.pdf)

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School's Reasons to Stay (Student Led Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkjH0GV58uI>

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (Early promotional video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHRYAHyplko>

## References

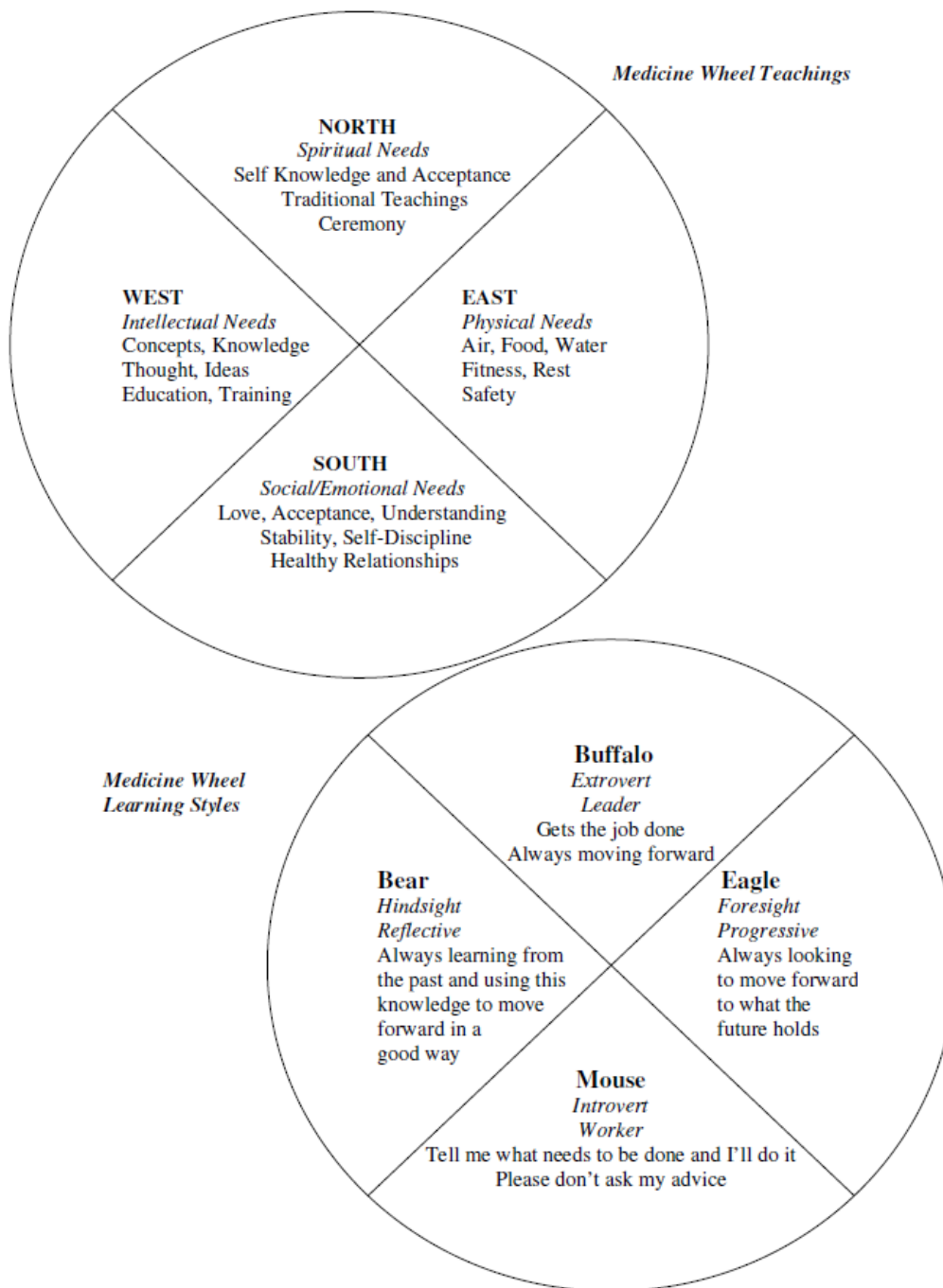
- <sup>1</sup>Baydala, L., Letourneau, N., Bach, H., Pearce, M., Kennedy, M., Rasmussen, C., Sherman, J., & Charchun, J. (2006). Lessons learned through research with Mother Earth's Children's Charter School. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 5(2):201–16.
- <sup>2</sup>Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (2012). Staff Handbook 2012-2013. [online] Retrieved from <http://www.meccs.org/site/staff/staff-handbook/> [Accessed Mar 18, 2018].
- <sup>3</sup>Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (2016). Combined 3 Year Education Plan 2016-2019 & Annual Education Results Report 2015-2016. [online] Retrieved from <http://www.meccs.org/site/documents/3%20Year%20Education%20Plan%202016%20to%2019%20and%20AERR%202015%20to%202016.pdf> [Accessed Mar 18, 2018].
- <sup>4</sup>Statistics Canada (2016). *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit*. [online] Retrieved from: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/99-011-x2011001-eng.cfm> [Accessed Mar 18, 2018]
- <sup>5</sup>Statistics Canada (2016). *The Educational Attainment of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*. [online] Retrieved from: [http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003\\_3-eng.cfm](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003_3-eng.cfm) [Accessed Mar 18, 2018].
- <sup>6</sup>Brendtro, L. K., Brokenleg, M., & Van, B. S. (2002). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future*. Bloomington, Ind: Solution Tree.
- <sup>7</sup>Alberta Education (2015). Charter Schools Handbook. [online] Retrieved from: <https://education.alberta.ca/media/3227599/charter-schools-handbook-september-2015.pdf> [Accessed Mar 18, 2018].
- <sup>8</sup>Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (2017a). Culture. [online] Retrieved from: <http://www.meccs.org/site/culture/> [Accessed Mar 18, 2018].
- <sup>9</sup>Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (2017b). Combined 3 Year Education Plan 2017-2020 & Annual Education Results Report 2016-2017. [online] Retrieved from <http://www.meccs.org/site/documents/3%20Year%20Education%20Plan%202017%20to%2020%20and%20AERR%202016%20to%2017.pdf> [Accessed Mar 18, 2018].
- <sup>10</sup>APPLE Schools (2017). Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Report, September 2016 to May 2017. [online] Retrieved from:

[http://www.appleschools.ca/files/Mother\\_Earth's\\_Charter\\_School\\_Low.pdf](http://www.appleschools.ca/files/Mother_Earth's_Charter_School_Low.pdf)  
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<sup>11</sup>Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (2017c). Staff. [online] Retrieved from:  
<http://www.meccs.org/site/staff/staff-contact-information/> [Accessed Mar 18,  
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<sup>12</sup>Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (2017d). Admin. [online] Retrieved from:  
<http://www.meccs.org/site/admin/board/members/> [Accessed Mar 18, 2018].

## Appendix A – Medicine Wheel Teachings and Learning Styles



\*This figure was taken from the Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Staff Handbook 2012-2013. Available online at: <http://www.meccs.org/site/staff/staff-handboo/> [Accessed on March 7, 2018]