

# Indigenous Education | Cultural Protocols



learning | **as unique** | as every student



**Calgary Board  
of Education**

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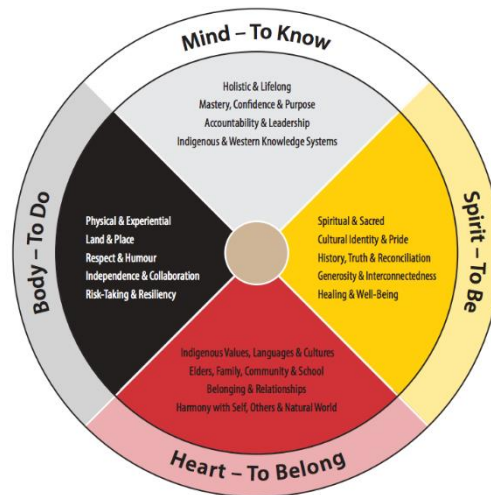
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# Indigenous Cultural Protocol Guidelines



The Calgary Board of Education (CBE) is committed to working in ways that reflect worldviews and Indigenous ways of being, belonging, doing and knowing that strengthen learning experiences for each student. In order to build meaningful relationships and to honour knowledge systems, it is critical that cultural protocols and worldviews are reflected in and through ways of working.

The CBE Indigenous Education Strategy is guided by a [Holistic Lifelong Learning Framework](#) which represents a holistic approach to learning.



Our goal is to embed Indigenous ways of being, belonging, doing and knowing within the K-12 curriculum in the most meaningful way that will support the learning of all our students. We strive to incorporate multiple perspectives within the curriculum so each student can see themselves reflected. Teachers and leaders strive to develop and apply foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students, as required in the Alberta Education [Teacher Quality Standard](#) and [Leadership Quality Standard](#). All staff in the CBE have an important role to play in promoting an inclusive school climate and learning environment as well as the implementation of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission Education for Reconciliation. All staff in the CBE have an important role to play in promoting an inclusive school climate and learning environment as well as the implementation of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission Education for Reconciliation.

*As First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities access and revitalize their spirituality, cultures, languages, laws, and governance systems, and as non-Aboriginal Canadians increasingly come to understand Indigenous history within Canada and to recognize and respect Indigenous approaches to establishing and maintaining respectful relationships, Canadians can work together to forge a new covenant of reconciliation. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015)*

The CBE Indigenous Education Team has been seeking guidance, wisdom and teachings from Elders and community Knowledge Keepers regarding cultural protocols over a number of years.

This document represents a summary of those teachings. It also includes knowledge gained from other organizations, districts and research.

This protocol document has been created to provide guiding principles for the CBE community as it moves forward in the implementation of the [2021-2024 CBE Education Plan](#). First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples have distinct and diverse protocols and teachings. Learning comes from asking, practicing, and building relationships. When asked, Elders have suggested to come with an open heart and good intentions. This guide is meant to provide some understandings but cannot contain all teachings for all peoples. Additional support from the Indigenous Education Team is available by emailing [IndigenousEducation@cbe.ab.ca](mailto:IndigenousEducation@cbe.ab.ca).

## What are Protocols?

The way knowledge is honoured, matters. The importance of following protocols cannot be overstated. Protocols refer to the guidelines, manners, etiquettes and rules that are in place to keep Indigenous ways of being, belonging, doing and knowing at the forefront. This is consistent with [Administrative Regulation 2060: Employee Business and Travel Expenses \(AR 2060\)](#). It is the first step to establishing good relations. It acknowledges that time has been spent learning Indigenous protocols and recognizing their importance.

**Protocol Events** are activities that involve consideration for the customs and regulations dealing with diplomatic or cultural formality, precedence and etiquette.

*Engaging with Elders* (n.d.) tells us that protocols “are part of our natural laws and keep things respectful of the process. They are ways to acknowledge the roles and responsibilities that each of us has to play when interacting with each other and Creator.”

Elder Dr. Miiksika’am, Clarence Wolfleg shares, “Always make sure that we are using protocols and ... that knowledge holders and Elders are present and consulted along the way”.

## Acknowledging the Land

Elders have taught us it is important to [Acknowledge the Land](#) where we gather and the first peoples who traditionally lived here. It shows respect for people, their contributions and their ways of knowing, which are reflected through the stories and songs that have lived on this land for thousands of years. We are making an acknowledgment to further demonstrate our commitment to work together as a community in laying the foundation for reconciliation through education.

### **CBE Acknowledgement of the Land**

*We would like to acknowledge the traditional territories and oral practices of the Blackfoot Nations, which includes the Siksika, the Piikani, and the Kainai. We also acknowledge the Tsuut’ina and Stoney Nakoda First Nations, the Métis Nation (Region 3), and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.*

*Tip: take a picture of the Acknowledgement of the Land for quick reference*

When should schools use the land acknowledgement?

At minimum:

- At the beginning of the year, e.g., the first assembly of the year
- At the end of the year, e.g., the final assembly of the year
- At significant school celebrations, e.g., graduation, Indigenous Veterans Day, Remembrance Day, Indigenous Awareness Week, Truth & Reconciliation Week

Other possibilities include:

- To begin the school week
- During parent council meetings
- When hosting guest speakers/Elders/Knowledge Keepers
- To begin staff meetings or professional learning
- Teaching and learning about it in the classroom

When should service units use the land acknowledgement?

At minimum:

- At significant celebrations, e.g., retirements and long-service awards
- At significant system meetings and events, e.g., Leadership Meetings

Other possibilities include:

- To being professional learning offerings
- When meeting with outside agencies
- When hosting guest speakers/Elders/Knowledge Keepers
- To begin meetings

Elders have provided [pronunciation](#) examples for each of the Nations. Practicing pronunciation is recommended prior to events to ensure comfortable delivery. There are multiple resources connected to the Acknowledgement of the Land that are available on the [Indigenous Education Acknowledgement of the Land Insite](#) page.

## Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers

This document provides some basic information as a guide to approach and work with Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples defines an Elder as:

*Elders in Aboriginal communities are those recognized and respected for knowing, living and teaching traditional knowledge. They see the world through the eyes of the ancestors and interpret the contemporary world through lessons passed down through generations. Their wisdom is transferred to young people who seek their teachings. The elders are a living bridge between the past and the present. They also provide a vision for the future, a vision grounded in tradition and informed by the experience of living on the land, safeguarding and disseminating knowledge gained over centuries...The elders are willing to share if we are willing to listen. We hope to do justice to their words. (RCAP, Volume 4, p.3)*



An Elder or Knowledge Keeper is someone who has earned a reputation for wisdom and spiritual knowledge. Elders who perform traditional ceremonies, are respected as teachers and are often sought out as healers. Some people are recognized as Elders because they have spent a lifetime studying a particular aspect of their peoples' culture and traditions. Others are acknowledged as Elders because they are members of sacred societies or holders of sacred objects such as being a sacred pipe holder. Still others are respected as Elders for their kindness and generosity.

**Important Note:** Prior to connecting with an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to request support, please consult the most current guidelines on the [Indigenous Education Insite Page](#).

## Requests

Given the gifts and wisdom that Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers bring and their recognition in a community, it is suggested that each person work with the community to learn the specialized knowledge that each of them holds. It is important to ensure that gifts match the request being made. In the spirit of reconciliation, the Elder or Knowledge Keeper should be an integral part in the planning and unfolding of the whole event if they are to have a role. When inviting or requesting help from Elders, it is a generally accepted protocol in Treaty 7 Territory to offer tobacco. Requests should be clear and specific, and, when possible, made in person. Elders may or may not accept tobacco. If they feel they are able to fulfill the request, they will accept tobacco. The tobacco in this instance becomes a "contract". If they feel they are unsuited to the request or that another Elder may be more suitable to guiding the request, they will not accept the tobacco and may suggest another Elder or Knowledge Keeper. Indigenous artists and community members who are sharing cultural knowledge should also be offered tobacco at the beginning of the request.

## Tobacco Offerings

Typically, a pouch of tobacco, or loose tobacco wrapped in broadcloth, is used as an offering. If possible, the purchase of natural tobacco is preferred. Tobacco is usually presented at the time of the request or just before the blessing, ceremony, event or learning request, (even if the event is virtual). If tobacco is offered virtually, you may present it on the screen and ask the Elder or Knowledge Keeper for guidance as to whether they would like the tobacco mailed to them or what their preference might be. For larger requests such as a ceremonial event, square meters of cotton broadcloth may be offered with tobacco. Colours of cloth vary with each Elder. It is important to consult with the Elder supporting the event.

Tobacco should be stored in a safe secure location and out of reach of students. [AR 2060](#) section 6-32 makes allowances for the purchase of tobacco for protocol events. Tobacco can be purchased online, at specialty stores and gas stations.



## Ceremony

The Calgary Board of Education is committed to cultivating a balanced and respectful relationship between Indigenous ways of being and existing CBE knowledge systems. This may include holding ceremonies when appropriate. Please contact the Indigenous Education Team for further guidance by emailing [IndigenousEducation@cbe.ab.ca](mailto:IndigenousEducation@cbe.ab.ca) .

## Smudge

The focus of school is to be a place of learning. The inclusion of relevant cultural, spiritual, and traditional knowledge and practices in school can positively impact student success. (Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools)

Smudge is a practice in many Indigenous cultures that involves burning a small piece of dried medicine such as sage, sweetgrass or cedar inside of a cast-iron dish or abalone shell. Elders, Knowledge Keepers, families, community members, staff and students may wish to smudge at the beginning of meetings, events or professional learning.

Smudge can be done individually or in a group. Smudging is a learning opportunity for students and staff to learn about Indigenous worldviews and perspectives, whether participating or simply observing. If students request access to smudge, it is important that schools support the students by making smudge available. A staff member can support with lighting the smudge for the students. There is a difference between offering space to smudge and leading or teaching about smudge: anyone is able to smudge individually but there are important considerations for teaching about or leading a smudge. If a staff member wants to lead students or staff in a smudge, there are protocols to ensure that the act of smudging is done in a good way, including considerations around the learning intentions and an understanding about the significance of smudge. If staff members have not received teachings from an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, it is recommended for them seek outside support.

If smudging in a group, participants sit in a circle and listen to the leader or facilitator offer teachings about the practice and its role in historical and contemporary Indigenous communities. Participants may be asked to pass the smoldering ember around the circle as part of this traditional way of opening or beginning time together, always with the option to pass. If an Elder or Knowledge Keeper is leading a smudge, they may offer a blessing afterwards. Please speak to students and staff ahead of time about the significance of a blessing. While smudging during CBE events or in schools, please be aware of the following protocols.

- When smudging with students or participants under 18, parents and guardians **must** be informed prior to. Please see appendix for a smudge letter template (see Appendix)

- Smudge needs to be led by an individual with experience and knowledge
- Contact building administration at CBE sites (CT Centre, Area offices, schools) for building specific protocols around smudging
- Use well ventilated spaces when possible (open window)
- Communicate smudge location and time with students, staff and families
- Smudge must be led by a person who has an understanding of what a smudge is and why it is done. That person may be an Elder or cultural teacher who has been invited to the school; it may be a knowledgeable staff member; it may be a family member or guardian; it may be a student (Smudging in Schools, 2016)
- The CBE Education Centre requires 24 hours' notice for smudging. Please contact security desk for further information

It is significant that this is an honoured practice in the CBE community. For additional information and questions, please contact the Indigenous Education Team [IndigenousEducation@cbe.ab.ca](mailto:IndigenousEducation@cbe.ab.ca) .

## Helpers

Elders may be accompanied by another person for help and support. Helpers (sspoómmihataawa in Blackfoot, or oskâpêwis in Cree) should be treated in the same manner as the Elders and it may also be appropriate to consider financial compensation. It is suggested to ask the Elder directly if they will have someone with them. The recommended honorarium scale for a helper is \$50-\$100.

Significant others of the Elders may also attend events/ceremonies and play an important role. Schools should be prepared to offer honorarium to significant others. You can ask if the Elder plans on bringing anyone along with them ahead of time.

## Hosting

Indigenous Elders are to be treated with great respect and held in the highest esteem. It is important that when Elders are visiting this is reinforced and shared with students and staff. It is customary to not interrupt Elders as they speak, allow for extra time in your itinerary for them to share their wisdom and knowledge. During the Elder visit Elders should be provided:

- Parking (communicate ahead of arrival)
- A warm welcome at the door (light handshakes are well received),
- Water, Tea or coffee
- Meals and/or snack
- An orientation to the washrooms
- Priority seating
- A school staff member or youth volunteer to stay with them throughout the event
- For larger events, it is customary to have a quiet room for Elders in which to rest. The quiet room should be equipped with chairs, beverages, and snacks.



## Gatherings/ Food / Hospitality

Food plays a vital and important role in meetings, gatherings, ceremonies and Indigenous protocols. Mother Earth gives food to all beings and sustains people in spirit, heart, body and mind. Food protocols include ethics around respect, reciprocity, relationality, sustainability, connectedness, and community. Be mindful of dietary restrictions and ask ahead of time.

The late Blackfoot Elder and scholar Narcisse Blood and Dr. Cynthia Chambers remind us of the following Blackfoot teaching:

As well as being a highly valued social activity, áakssissawáato'op, or visiting a place, is a primary means of knowledge exchange for Niitsítapiiksi. A visit holds an expectation that one will spend time, be amicable and relaxed, stay awhile, be a guest, converse, and probably eat a meal and drink a cup of tea.... (Blood & Chambers, 2010, p.15)

Hospitality should be forefront at gatherings, meetings, learning opportunities, and a part of everything we do. Additionally, if a meal is being served, Elders should be served their meal first. Elders should never serve themselves, unless they request otherwise. This shows respect for people and the knowledge they bring. Elder's may share important teachings about gatherings and should be consulted ahead of the event to see if they have preferences for blessing the food etc. It is important to attend hospitality in schools and service units while attending to [AR 2060](#).

## Honouring Knowledge

An honorarium is offered as a thank you, a gesture of reciprocity in recognizing wisdom and guidance that Elders offer. It is a way to honour the knowledge held and express gratitude to the Elder for the trust they have shown in their willingness to share their knowledge.

In addition to honoraria, expressions of gratitude such as medicines like sage or sweetgrass, blankets, mugs, or cards may be presented after the blessing, ceremony, or sharing is completed. It is suggested that the honorarium be included inside of a thank-you card and offered to the Elder with a handshake. These expressions of gratitude should be given upon completion of the event, ceremony or meeting. It is customary to offer them in a subtle and kind manner rather than in a public presentation. It is recommended to use your left hand when giving tobacco, honorarium or gifts as the left hand is closest to the heart and the heart is always giving. You would receive an item with your right hand to honour and acknowledge gift giving.



The CBE has established guidelines for engaging with Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Consideration should also be given to compensation for travel, exceptional time commitments, preparation, planning and materials provided, among other things. If a consultation meeting is required, this should be compensated. If the learning is happening virtually, please consider appropriate compensation for the time required to prepare and set up the technology. Be sure they are able to use technology as they may need assistance. It is also important to communicate how and when the individual will be compensated if the meeting is not in-person (eg. Mailed or delivered post event). When preparing the honorarium for the Elder, please include a note for services rendered to support clear communication, in the event that they are working with multiple school communities.

Half day	\$250
Full day	\$500

If a community member who is not an Elder or Knowledge Keeper is supporting your school, connecting with a member of the Indigenous Education team is a great place to start.

## Acknowledgement

The CBE acknowledges the countless Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community members, students, families and staff who have contributed their knowledge and understanding to this work over time.

## Appendix

The following text can be used in a message to parents/guardians prior to a smudge.

Dear Parents/Guardians,

As part of our ongoing learning, students in Grade [grade] at [school] will have an opportunity to participate in a traditional smudge on [date].

Smudge involves burning a small amount of dried plant such as sage, sweetgrass or cedar inside a cast-iron dish or abalone shell. During smudge, participants sit in a circle and listen to the Elder/facilitator offer teachings about the practice and its role in historical and contemporary Indigenous communities. The smudge bowl may be passed around the circle as part of this traditional way of opening or beginning time together. Participation in smudge is informed, voluntary, and always connected to learning. If, for any reason, a student is not participating in the experiential learning, the teacher will ensure that associated learning outcomes are available.

The inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and experiences in classrooms is supported and encouraged by:

- [The Education Act, Section 16](#): Provincial regulations for schools. This learning experience connects directly to Section 16: Diversity & Respect
- [Teaching Quality Standards](#): Professional standards which all Alberta teachers are expected to meet. This learning experience connects directly to: Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis & Inuit
- [Alberta's Education for Reconciliation](#): This experience connects to various outcomes in the Alberta Programs of Study which demonstrates Alberta's commitment to First Nations, Metis and Inuit Perspectives and experiences in curriculum

We are honoured to offer this learning opportunity to our students. For additional information and questions please contact your student's classroom teacher.

Warm Regards,

[Name]  
[Position title]

## Additional Resources

- Alberta Teacher's Association. (2018). *Stepping stones: Elder protocol* <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/IndigenousEducationandWalkingTogether/Pages/WalkingTogether.aspx>
- Engaging with Elders: A co-created story. (n.d). *With support of Native Counselling Services of Alberta*. Retrieved from [Engaging with Elders: A Co-created Story https://obrieniph.ucalgary.ca/files/iph/elders-protocol-.pdf](https://obrieniph.ucalgary.ca/files/iph/elders-protocol-.pdf)
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