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Thu, December 11, 2008

PART 5: First Nations School teaches 'who we are'

By MARK BONOKOSKI, Sun Media

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Until the 2007 shooting death of 15-year-old Jordan Manners at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate, and the ensuing clamour for everything from cops in the hallways to an Afrocentric elementary school, the First Nations School of Toronto rarely showed up on the media's radar screen.

But all that changed when Toronto lawyer Julian Falconer released his 1,000-page report on Toronto school safety and, deep within that document, singled out the aboriginal elementary school at Dundas-and-Broadview for its extraordinarily low academic standards and high rate of suspensions.

The Native school's entire Grade 3 class did not meet provincial standards in reading, writing or arithmetic in 2006, said Falconer's report, adding that a full third of its students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8 had been suspended at one time or another during the previous three years.

Falconer called them "disturbing realities."

"The school occupies the lowest rung in academic standing amongst the 451 elementary schools in the (Toronto District School Board)," said Falconer's report. "(And) over the last three years, the First Nations School of Toronto has suspended an average of 33.44% of its students."



Wayne Kodje has been principal at the First Nations School of Toronto for the last nine years. (Mark Bonokoski, Sun Media)

"The fact that we are failing yet another generation of aboriginal students is not a secret. It is well known to the (school board) and it is well known to the teachers, parents and students," said Falconer.

The First Nations School of Toronto, despite optics that it is somehow new, started in 1977 as an "alternative school" called the Wandering Spirit Survival School, all in a push to close the "achievement gap" between the academic performance of aboriginal students and non-Native students.

Falconer's report noted, however, that the "achievement gap" for aboriginal students

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has increased, rather than decreased, over the past five years, and he blamed the school board for failing to support the school with, among other things, aboriginal role models and counsellors.

That was then.

Wayne Kodje, 56, has been principal at the First Nations School of Toronto for the last nine years and, while Falconer tossed no blame on his shoulders, he is not immune to the criticism nor is he unaware of the challenges.

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Born on the Nipissing First Nations reserve near North Bay, the Ojibway educator has taught in many northern reaches, and has been a school administrator for the last 15 years.

He knows progress does not happen overnight.

Already in the works when Falconer released his report, but not yet fully unveiled, says Kodje, was a cafeteria that serves students three meals a day (breakfast, lunch and a snack) — all free because of the low socio-economic circumstances of the majority.

Additions to the faculty now include, as part of the overall collective, two special education teachers, an Ojibway language teacher, a Native culture and traditions instructor, a full-time child and youth counsellor, a headstart program for at-risk youth, a day care centre, and a library that didn't exist three years ago.

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"This year ... one suspension," says Kodje. "That's it."

When Falconer was writing his report, the school had 75 students.

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This year it has 90.

"A lot of that increase has to do with us having a full-fledged cafeteria," says Kodje, the costs covered primarily by corporate sponsors and grants.

"We also now have white-board technology in most of the classrooms, which is very interactive and hands-on," he adds.

"Aboriginal kids are visual learners, tactile learners — the 'show me' kind of kids.

"Having white-board technology in class really engages them. They can go up and touch the screens, and move things around — all of which gets them more involved in the lesson," says Kodje. "It's beginning to turn things around."

Because the First Nations School of Toronto has less than 100 students, its academic results under the province's standardized Education Quality and Accountability Office are not publicly posted — not because of criticism of notables such as Julian Falconer but because the numbers are skewed due to the small sampling of participants.

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"But we're doing better," he says. "This year we had many kids at level two, several at level three, and even a couple at level four. So we're moving up."

According to Kodje, the rise in academic achievement, while not overwhelming, has its roots in the new technology brought into the school, increased participation in the program, and new teaching techniques introduced through the Ontario Focus Intervention Program in language, arts and mathematics.

"We've spent a great deal of our focus over the last two years on how to engage these kids," says Kodje.

"And the difference is in the results."

The First Nations School of Toronto teaches the same curriculum as any other elementary school in Toronto except that it takes any French lesson out of play and replaces it with Ojibway, with added instruction in Native culture and traditions.

Jason McQuabbie, 11, is in Grade 6, and Tasunka McDonald, 13, is in Grade 8.



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"It was important for me to come here to know my culture," says Jason, admitting, however, that it was his family's decision, not his.

Young Tasunka McDonald agrees, citing that he would have likely attended a "regular" elementary school if not for his father's insistence that he attend First Nations.

But both boys agree on one thing.

"We have a better idea of who we are," says Jason.

In "regular" schools it is undoubtedly taught that Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492.

But, at the First Nations school, more culturally correct information is taught — that Christopher Columbus, for example, did not find a deserted continent when he "found" North America.

So it would be wrong to say he discovered it, even though the United State's celebrates Columbus Day every October 12, usually around Canadian Thanksgiving.

Suffice, there were people already there.

And they were not Italian.

Nonetheless, his mistake in thinking he had actually landed on the East-Asian mainland led Columbus to refer to the indigenous aboriginals he met as "Indians".

It was a monicker that obviously stuck.

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