

## Reconciliation begins in school atmosphere and environment, Regina educators hear

The path to reconciliation with Indigenous people starts with young people, says Niigaan James Sinclair, an educator and expert on bridging a divide that spans generations of Canadian history.

“Reconciliation is not in the curriculum ... The atmosphere and environment in schools is where reconciliation begins,” Sinclair told Regina Catholic educators at the opening fall Mass.

Sinclair is an associate professor of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba and a commentator on treaties and reconciliation. He is also the son of Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which outlined 94 calls to action toward healing after the legacy of residential schools.

Most of those calls to action involve education in some way, Sinclair told more than 1,000 Regina teachers, trustees and school administrators on Aug. 29 in a series of lectures.

A simple but powerful suggestion, he said, is to display photos and quotes from Indigenous role models in schools beside traditional portraits of Queen Elizabeth II, Pope Francis, and the local bishop.



Niigaan Sinclair

That's something Regina Catholic Schools' Circle of Voices will consider, educators say. Circle of Voices was established a decade ago to redouble efforts to improve graduation rates among First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) students. Since then, Indigenous advisers have been appointed in two high schools where there was a high percentage of Indigenous students, and Regina Catholic now leads the province in its Indigenous graduation rates.

The school division's superintendent of education services, Joanna Landry, is the first Indigenous person to join the senior leadership team at Regina Catholic Schools. Landry was previously coordinator of Indigenous education and she has been involved with the Circle of Voices when it began in 2008.

Since the TRC report was released in 2015, the Regina Catholic School Division has focused on improving relations with Indigenous populations. Trustees and senior administrators have participated in sweat lodges, guided by elders and Indigenous knowledge keepers.

Staff and students have also taken part in the interactive blanket exercise, which graphically shows how Indigenous populations were slowly shifted from traditional lands on Turtle Island, the Indigenous name for North America, to reserves. That exercise is followed by a talking circle which sometimes becomes emotional for participants.

Special ceremonies have been held to raise the flags of Treaty 4, which covers the Regina region, and the Metis Nation. Both flags are also prominently displayed in the school division's boardroom.

Sinclair told educators the 1876 Indian Act defined the role of the federal government and First Nations. It also created the reserve system and continues keep Indigenous people in grinding poverty and injustices.

Reconciliation, Sinclair said, will involve building new relationships and commitment on everyone's part.

*-Frank Flegel is a freelance writer based in Regina*