

# BEST EDUCATION STORY

There was a sizable gulf in this category between the cream of the crop and the rest. Several of the entries confused "education story" with "feature story that takes place in a school" or policy-based or politics-based school board stories. Those stories are important, but too often they focus on the minutiae rather than clearly explaining the impact on students, teachers and parents. Those that succeeded here did so by telling compelling stories from multiple points of view that resonated with the reader.

## Suspended Sentence

The Cree Justice Department partners with YMCA and others to help troubled youth avoid incarceration

by Lyle Stewart  
Photos courtesy of YMCA and Tim Horvath-Camp

The public conversation around the appalling over-representation of Aboriginals in Canada's prisons has recently shifted at the end result.

How, despite comprising less than 4% of the population, Aboriginals now account for more than 23% of Canada's inmates - 3,500 a day, on average. How those numbers increased overall by 37% during the years of the Harper government - and for Aboriginal women, by 109%.

Exacerbating these numbers are the reality that Aboriginal inmates are sentenced to longer terms, and spend more time in segregation and maximum security. They are less likely to be granted parole and are more likely to have parole revoked for minor problems.

Maclean's magazine reports that criminologists have begun referring to Canada's prisons as the "new residential schools." The Office of Canada's Correctional Investigator calls it a "systemic discrimination."

On the face of it, the remarks are justified. But the limboing, while producing headlines, never has any tangible effect. First Nations and Inuit people - from impoverished, underemployed communities torn by substance abuse and violence, suffering from the long cultural hangover of the original residential schools - continue to fill Canada's provincial prisons and federal penitentiaries.

David Nicholls is staring at the other end of the equation, the beginning. The Justice Director for the Cree Nation Government is trying any program that might help the troubled and at-risk youth of Eeyou Istchee avoid ending up behind bars.

Looking for organizations with hearts

On a mild late March evening in downtown Montreal, Nicholls is about to address the annual general meeting of the Quebec YMCA, located in an auditorium at the Museum of Fine Arts. He sits patiently as several housekeeping conductors, and gifts are handed out to board members who are resigning.

Then, the president of the organization, Stéphane Vallancourt, takes the stage. Among other remarks, he talks about a YMCA program for kids expelled from school, called "Alternative Suspension."

In it, the YMCA provides space and activities for children during their suspensions, to ensure they don't simply waste their time, continue to allow parents to get on with their lives, and above all, don't get into more trouble.

"The Vallancourt originally of Mentoring from Scott

"It's a point that good ideas can be adapted to work in any culture. And that's what Nicholls and the CNG is doing with the Alternative Suspension program in Eeyou Istchee. A pilot project in partnership with the YMCA is already up and running in Mistissin and Waskaganish, taking in 40 students temporarily suspended from their classes. Eventually, the goal is to set up programs in all the Cree communities.

Opening his remarks after Vallancourt's introduction, Nicholls talked about how often programs for Cree youth lack effectiveness because they were designed for a different reality. Teaching kids in the north how to safely navigate a subway system, for example, doesn't really apply. Ensuring the program can be taught in the Cree language is another necessity.

"When we started, we decided we need to build on our people, we are the ones who will make a difference in our communities. We looked for guidance-based programs that are adaptable to Eeyou Istchee," he said.

"So when we set out to form partnerships, we do so with organizations with hearts and an understanding of community and interconnectedness, of being there for each other. It's not always about the bottom line, but the people who are in there, the heart of the matter - organizations such

CNG Justice Director David Nicholls signs the new logo for the Cree Alternative Suspension program and donated with care. It was important not to have an isolated, parent or school staff by attending any kind of signs to participation in the program.

"We thought very deeply about how we can incorporate that we want to help and get support for children, schools and parents," he said.

Thursday, the Cree slogan translates to "Believe in yourself."

The snowshoe tracks represent the feeling that being suspended from school is the longest walk to deep water. "And we're going to provide you with snowshoes and walk you to the right direction," Nicholls explained.

The three stars represent the partnership between the CNG, YMCA and Cree School Board.

Finally, the students, for a self-empowerment. "Our goal is education!"

**1**

**LYLE STEWART**  
*the Nation*

The clear winner. A great lede, solid writing, beautifully presented and clear initiative in presenting a perspective on a compelling subject. Well done!

**JOSHUA GRANT**  
*the Nation*

Another solid job with excellent presentation that stands out for excellence in writing, initiative and approach to subject.

**2**

## Community Ties

Youth Fusion peers help First Nations youth achieve academic success

by Joshua Grant  
Photos by Hanyou Kang

**Education**

### New school year brings new students to guide

JESSICA DEER  
THE EASTERN DOOR

As Kahnawake Survival School heads into the new school year, guidance counselor Petal McComber is looking forward to assisting the new crop of students discover higher education.

"Every day I come to work I'm passionate about my work and want to let the community know what I do because I think people just don't think about what we offer here," said McComber.

Last Wednesday, she sat down with *The Eastern Door* to discuss many of the programs the local high school has to offer to help its students succeed academically.

"I feel like my role is to support them no matter what. It is the drive and determination that is within that student that is going to determine them going," said McComber. "That's what I see. It's within that fire and my when I meet with them, it is to help them go."

This month, she'll begin to meet individually with the 27 grade 11 students.

"We have individual one-on-one meetings to talk about different things with their career, with their school, where they're going - I give them an action plan, which is detailed on the steps that they need to take for when they're applying," said McComber.

The action plan outlines advice, the differences between each college in the area, evaluations of the schools they visit, as well as questions for students to think about their interests.

McComber also takes a hands-on approach when it comes to helping her students succeed, even well after they've left the halls of Survival School.

"Jackie (Laclaire, KSS principal) and I have taken students to go look for apartments.

For us, what's offered is everything. That I know of, I don't think of any other schools that offers this," she said.

Her dedication to the job doesn't go unnoticed by her students or colleagues in the surrounding area.

"I nicknamed her saint Petal," said Paddy Hemlock-Charr, an academic advisor at Dawson College. "She goes above and beyond what she's really not a job for her. It's really a calling. She really takes good care of those kids."

Last fall, McComber spent every Wednesday in a vacant clubroom at Dawson to help KSS grads transition into their post-secondary studies. The space is now the college's new First Peoples Centre.

"If she hadn't offered to come once a week to touch base with the kids, we would not have had a centre because the space given to another group," said Hemlock-Charr.

"Everything just kind of grew from there and worked out well because it fell in line with our First Peoples Initiative that we started the year before."

Out of the 28 graduates last year, McComber said the major-

ity are now enrolled in the Kanien'kehé:ka Katiwemahatrat Adult Language Immersion Program, CEGEP or vocational school.

McComber helped alumna Belle Phillips narrow down which school was best for her when application season rolled around last winter.

"She arranges college visits before it's time to send out applications, that way you get a feel if the type of school you are interested. Then she follows up throughout the year to make sure you're on the right track mark-wise," said Phillips.

"She's very involved with the students that wish to go further in their education."

Even now that Phillips started her post-secondary studies in nursing at John Abbott College, she said McComber is still available to lend a hand when in need.

"I'm having a little bit of trouble transitioning because I'm currently living on campus at John Abbott but Petal is right there helping me transition. She's helping me come home during the week if I need them, if I need someone to talk to," said Phillips.

For McComber, going over and beyond her job description is about seeing students succeed.

"My goal is - whether a student comes to see me that wants to be a doctor, a lawyer, a mechanic, a welder, it's all the same - anything positive that I could help, I look at, to believe in our students," she said.

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**JESSICA DEER**  
*The Eastern Door*

A unique perspective on the stereotypical position of the school guidance counselor, told from multiple perspectives.