Toronto Catholic District School Board

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

The Tree of Life
Indigenous Education Framework

Updated Sept. 2026



INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

A Cultural Learning Hub

Toronto Catholic District School Board's Indigenous Education Department is dedicated to becoming a leader in Indigenous education, fostering an inclusive community where Indigenous Knowledge is respected, shared, and celebrated by all. Our vision is to create a place of learning where every student, teacher, and staff member feels valued, included, and inspired to excel.

Land Acknowledgement

The land we walk on belongs to the Creator. Earth does not belong to humanity but rather, humanity is part of the Earth. The land was created to be enjoyed by all living beings, a principle reflected in The Dish with One Spoon covenant. Taking only what we need to preserve our earth for future generations, leaving some for others as a sign of our respect and caring, and keeping it clean by revitalizing the land to sustain generations to come.

All Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) properties are situated on the traditional territories of the Anishinabek, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Wendat peoples. We recognize that the land covered by Treaty 13 is held by the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. We also listen to the echoes of their prayers to the Creator, and respect the beauty of Mother Earth while striving to learn and draw wisdom from First Nations, Inuit and Métis traditions.

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The Tree of Life Teaching

Cultural and Spiritual Significance

The Indigenous Education Department of TCDSB, alongside community members from the Indigenous Education Council (IEC), gathered in circle for their inaugural retreat with the focus of developing an Indigenous Education Framework. This framework, which aims to foster an understanding of the histories, cultures, and traditional knowledge of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, is essential for advancing Indigenous education. It plays a vital role in promoting cultural awareness, respect, reconciliation, and in empowering Indigenous students to excel both academically and culturally.

During the retreat, Elders Wendy King-Phillips and Mark Phillips shared the teachings of the 'Tree of Life' with the IEC community members. This teaching served as the seed in the development of TCDSB Indigenous Education Framework.

In the Anishinaabe worldview, the Tree of Life is a powerful teaching that reminds us of our connection to all of Creation. It speaks to the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of balance and harmony in our lives and our learning.



Understanding of the Tree

The roots represent connection to ancestors and ancestral knowledge, forming the foundation of Indigenous identity. They embody traditional languages that ground communities in their unique worldviews. These roots symbolize cultural protocols and ceremonies passed down through generations, providing guidance for living in harmony with all relations. They contain historical memory and collective wisdom accumulated over thousands of years of observation and experience on the land. Most fundamentally, they signify the deep connection to Mother Earth herself, understood as the first teacher.

The trunk embodies community strength and resilience that has allowed Indigenous peoples to withstand centuries of challenges. It represents core cultural values that provide structure and support for individuals and communities alike. The trunk serves as the backbone of Indigenous

identity, connecting past and future generations in knowledge transmission. It symbolizes the remarkable survival of Indigenous cultures despite historical challenges including colonization and assimilation attempts.

The branches symbolize diverse paths of knowledge and learning that emerge from the same cultural foundation. They represent the spreading of teachings across different communities, adapting to local contexts while maintaining connection to core principles. The branches reach toward future possibilities, showing how traditional knowledge continues to grow and evolve in response to changing circumstances.

The leaves signify individual gifts and contributions that each person brings to their community. They represent new growth and adaptation, showing how Indigenous knowledge remains vibrant in contemporary contexts. The leaves symbolize the next generation of knowledge keepers who will carry teachings forward. They reflect seasonal cycles of learning and renewal, reminding us that knowledge acquisition follows natural rhythms rather than rigid timelines.

Educational Applications

The Tree of Life teaching offers rich educational applications through its holistic learning model that nurtures intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual development simultaneously. The teaching emphasizes intergenerational knowledge transfer, highlighting the importance of including Elders in formal educational settings. Land-based learning and Place-based learning recognizes that the natural world itself is a primary source of knowledge and wisdom. This model promotes a relationship-centered approach to education that prioritizes good relations between students, teachers, families, and communities.

Implementing the Teaching

In educational settings like the TCDSB, the Tree of Life teaching can be implemented by creating physical representations in learning spaces and incorporating seasonal cycles into curriculum planning. Involving Elders directly in classroom learning ensures authentic transmission of cultural teachings. Developing lessons that connect students to the land helps them understand their place within the broader web of creation. The Tree of Life teaching encourages educators to emphasize the interconnectedness of subjects rather than maintaining strict divisions between disciplines.

The Tree of Life teaching ultimately reminds us that education is not simply about acquiring information, but about growing in relationship with all aspects of creation. It offers a powerful alternative to compartmentalized educational models by emphasizing balance, connection, and holistic well-being.

Message from the Director of Education

The Tree of Life Framework embodies the Toronto Catholic District School Board's (TCDSB) commitment to Indigenous education and reconciliation. Rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, the Tree of Life fosters respect, identity, and connection to land and community. Developed in collaboration with the Indigenous Education Council (IEC), this framework aims to help Indigenous students and families feel valued and supported through land-based learning, language revitalization, and cultural safety. It is also meant to help realize one of the important Calls to Action to help all TCDSB members gain a better understanding of Indigenous principles.

As part of TCDSB's ongoing journey of learning, listening, and action, the Tree of Life aligns with our Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP) and Equity Action Plan (EAP). It advances our shared mission to create inclusive, culturally responsive and relevant learning environments where every student thrives—academically, socially, and spiritually. By integrating Indigenous perspectives, honouring self-determination, and fostering reconciliation, we strengthen our commitment to Growing in Knowledge, with Justice and Hope.

We are grateful for our Indigenous partners and remain dedicated to an education system that truly honours Indigenous knowledge, culture, and history.

Dr. Brendan Browne
Director of Education
Toronto Catholic District School Board



Message from the Head of Indigenous Affairs

Dear TCDSB Community,

As Head of Indigenous Affairs for the Toronto Catholic District School Board, with over 15 years in Indigenous education across post-secondary and K-12 systems, I'm honoured to present our Tree of Life Indigenous Education Framework.

This framework represents our collective commitment to Truth and Reconciliation and our responsibility to support Indigenous learners. Through my years working with Indigenous communities, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, educators, and students, I've witnessed the transformative power of education that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Reconciliation through education requires not just acknowledging the past, but actively creating a better future. Our Indigenous Education Department and Council developed this framework to improve success for Indigenous students while increasing the presence of Indigenous cultures, languages, and histories for all learners.

To Indigenous students and families, this framework represents our commitment to spaces where your identities are celebrated, voices heard, and dreams can flourish. We stand with you in maintaining strong connections to your cultures, languages, and traditions.

To educators, this framework will help bring Indigenous knowledge into your teaching practice authentically. We know this journey requires courage, humility, and willingness to learn alongside students. The Indigenous Education Department supports you every step of the way.

To our entire TCDSB community, this framework invites all to participate in reconciliation. By learning about and from Indigenous peoples, histories, and perspectives, we strengthen our educational community and move toward mutual understanding and respect.

The Tree of Life teaching reminds us we are all connected – our roots intertwine, branches reach toward the same sky, and growth nourishes future generations. As we implement this framework, may we nurture each learner like a sacred seedling, providing what they need to grow strong in their identities.

In the spirit of reconciliation,

Andre O'Bonsawin
Head of Indigenous Affairs
Toronto Catholic District School Board

Introduction

We acknowledge that we walk upon the traditional territories of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. We honour the original caretakers of this land and respect the longstanding relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples that continue to this day.

This Indigenous Education Framework is our commitment to nurturing the Tree of Life within our school communities. It is a living document, one that will grow and evolve as we journey together on the path of reconciliation and Indigenous education.

Our approach is rooted in the wisdom of the Elders and Knowledge Keepers who have guided us. It embraces the principle of Two-Eyed Seeing, which encourages us to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledge and ways of knowing, and to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.

As we share this framework, we invite you to learn, to listen with open hearts and minds, to reflect deeply on your role in nurturing the Tree of Life, and to join us in creating an educational environment that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Vision

Our vision is to cultivate an educational forest where every Tree of Life every student, educator, and community member can grow strong and flourish. In this forest:

- Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing are honoured and celebrated
- The well-being and success of Indigenous students are nurtured holistically
- Understanding, respect, and positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are fostered
- Indigenous voices and leadership are empowered within our school communities
- The revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultures is supported and encouraged
- All students and staff are prepared to be active participants in reconciliation and to honour the spirit of treaties

Guiding Principles

Our Indigenous Education Framework is guided by the following principles, which are like the sap that flows through the Tree of Life, nourishing every part.

Respect for Indigenous Worldviews
We honour the diverse Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems, and ways of being.

Holistic Approach
We embrace a holistic approach to education that nurtures the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of each learner.

Indigenous Languages and Cultures
We affirm the critical importance of Indigenous languages and cultures in shaping identity and fostering well-being.

Land-Based and Place-Based Learning
We acknowledge the land as the first teacher and commit to incorporating land-based learning experiences for all students.

Elders and Knowledge Keepers
We honour the wisdom of Elders and Knowledge Keepers and ensure their involvement in shaping our educational practices.

Indigenous Self-Determination
We respect the right of Indigenous peoples to control their own education systems and support Indigenous-led initiatives.

Intergenerational Learning
We recognize the importance of connecting generations and fostering learning between Elders, adults, youth, and children.

Reciprocal Relationships
We strive to build and maintain respectful, reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities, families, and organizations.

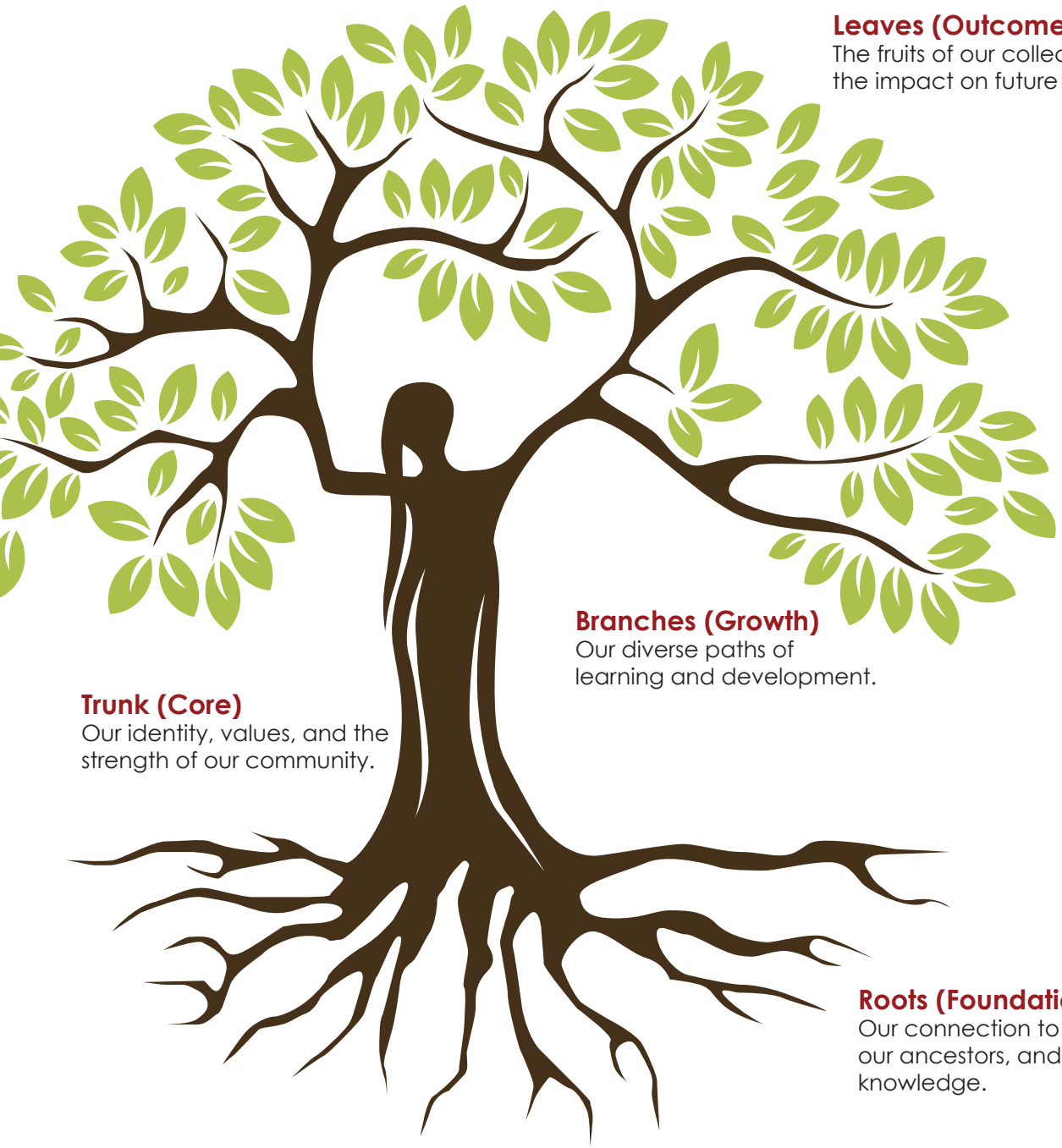
Two-Eyed Seeing
We value both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and seek to integrate them in ways that benefit all learners. Two-Eyed Seeing, or Etuaptmumk, is a guiding principle developed by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall

Commitment to Reconciliation
We are dedicated to advancing reconciliation through education, as guided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

The Tree of Life Indigenous Education Framework

Our approach to Indigenous education is guided by the teachings of the Tree of Life, which embodies the Four R's of Indigenous Education[1]. Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility. This framework reminds us that every part of the tree is interconnected and essential for the whole to thrive.

The Structure of the Tree of Life



Leaves (Outcomes)
The fruits of our collective efforts and the impact on future generations.

Branches (Growth)
Our diverse paths of learning and development.

Trunk (Core)
Our identity, values, and the strength of our community.

Roots (Foundation)
Our connection to the land, our ancestors, and traditional knowledge.

[1] The Four R's framework, Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility, was developed by Kirkness and Barnhardt in their 1991 article on First Nations and higher education. Rachel Thorne's 2019 Learning Bird post offers a practical application of that framework for classroom educators and is included here as a secondary reference. https://learningbird.com/teaching-through-the-four-rs-of-indigenous-education/

Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility

For each group within our school community, we outline their responsibilities, offer guidance on relevance, and provide direction on practicing respect and reciprocity. We also include relevant TRC Calls to Action and ways to implement Two-Eyed Seeing. The Calls to Action referenced below each group are addressed to governments and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, and this framework describes how TCDSB responds at the board level.

TCDSB Board Leadership

Respect:

- Acknowledge and honour Indigenous governance models
- Prioritize Indigenous voices in policy or protocol processes

Relevance:

- Ensure policies and strategic plans meaningfully reflect the lived experiences and priorities of Indigenous students, families, and communities
- Connect board-level decisions to the real needs identified by the Indigenous Education Council and Indigenous communities
- Ground governance actions in the contemporary realities facing Indigenous peoples, not only historical narratives

Reciprocity:

- Establish mutual benefit agreements with local Indigenous communities
- Share decision-making with Indigenous Education Lead and to best inform the Indigenous Education Council

Responsibilities:

- Nurture the roots of the Tree of Life by setting a vision that honours Indigenous Knowledge
- Ensure the trunk grows strong by allocating resources for Indigenous education initiatives
- Support the growth of branches by including Indigenous voices in decision-making processes

Two-Eyed Seeing

Integrate Indigenous and Western governance models to create a balanced approach to leadership.

Reflections

How are we embodying the Four R's in our leadership practices?
Are we creating space for Indigenous wisdom to flourish in our governance structures?

TRC Call to Action #63

Respond to Call to Action 63.iv by identifying the teacher training needs connected to Indigenous education and providing the funding and resources to meet them.

TCDSB School Principals / Vice Principals

Respect:

- Incorporate Indigenous protocols in school ceremonies and events
- Ensure Indigenous artwork and languages are visible throughout the school, like leaves adorning the Tree of Life

Relevance:

- Ensure Indigenous education initiatives in the school are connected to the cultural identities and experiences of Indigenous students and families
- Make Indigenous perspectives visible and meaningful across all subject areas, not confined to isolated lessons or calendar dates
- Respond to the specific needs of Indigenous learners within the school community

Reciprocity:

- Create opportunities for Indigenous community members to share their knowledge in schools
- Offer school resources for Indigenous community events and programs

Responsibilities:

- Tend to the Tree of Life in their schools by implementing the framework
- Nurture a school environment where Indigenous perspectives are respected and celebrated
- Support teachers in integrating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, like branches reaching out to embrace new understanding

Two-Eyed Seeing

Blend Indigenous and Western approaches to school leadership and management.

Reflections

How are we nurturing the growth of all students through an Indigenous lens?
Are we creating a school environment where Indigenous students see themselves reflected and valued?

TRC Call to Action #62

Support Call to Action 62.i by ensuring that age-appropriate learning about residential schools, Treaties, and the historical and contemporary contributions of Indigenous peoples is taught across every grade in their schools.

TCDSB Teachers

Respect:

- Acknowledge the traditional territory at the beginning of classes
- Validate and incorporate Indigenous students' ways of knowing in lessons

Relevance:

- Connect Indigenous knowledge and perspectives to curriculum content in ways that are meaningful and authentic, not tokenistic
- Ensure lessons reflect the contemporary lives and contributions of Indigenous peoples alongside historical contexts
- Make learning experiences relevant to Indigenous students by drawing on their cultural strengths and ways of knowing

Reciprocity:

- Invite Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers as guest teachers
- Share classroom resources and practices with Indigenous educators

Responsibilities:

- Be like the branches of the Tree, reaching out to embrace Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in teaching practices
- Engage in ongoing learning about Indigenous histories, cultures, and contemporary realities
- Create inclusive classrooms that honour diverse ways of knowing, like a forest with many different trees

Two-Eyed Seeing

Integrate Indigenous and Western teaching methods to create a rich learning environment.

Reflections

How are we incorporating the Four R's into our daily teaching practices?
Are we actively seeking to learn from and with Indigenous knowledge systems?

TRC Call to Action #63

Respond to Call to Action 63.i by using and building Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Indigenous peoples in Canadian history and the history and legacy of residential schools.

All TCDSB Staff

Respect:

- Learn and use proper pronunciation of Indigenous names and terms
- Recognize and honour Indigenous cultural practices and observances

Relevance:

- Ensure that support services and administrative practices are responsive to the cultural needs of Indigenous students and families
- Connect professional development and daily practices to the realities and priorities identified by Indigenous communities
- Recognize how each staff role contributes to creating culturally relevant and safe environments for Indigenous learners

Reciprocity:

- Offer skills and resources to support Indigenous community initiatives
- Learn from Indigenous colleagues and community members while sharing own expertise

Responsibilities:

- Support the growth of the Tree of Life by implementing Indigenous education initiatives
- Engage in cultural competency training, like roots absorbing nutrients from the soil
- Contribute to creating welcoming spaces for Indigenous students and families

Two-Eyed Seeing

Use both Indigenous and Western approaches in administrative and support functions.

Reflections

How are our actions supporting the growth and well-being of Indigenous students?
Are we actively working to build reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities?

TRC Call to Action #57

Respond to Call to Action 57 by providing education to staff on the history of Indigenous peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal and Crown relations, supported by skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.

All TCDSB Students / Learners

Respect:

- Listen attentively to Indigenous perspectives shared in class
- Participate in Indigenous cultural events with an open and respectful mindset

Relevance:

- Connect what is learned about Indigenous worldviews and histories to their own lives, communities, and responsibilities as treaty people
- Recognize that Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are relevant to understanding the world today, not only the past
- Seek out meaningful ways to engage with Indigenous teachings that go beyond surface-level awareness

Reciprocity:

- Share their own cultural knowledge and experiences with Indigenous classmates
- Engage in peer-to-peer learning initiatives with Indigenous students

Responsibilities:

- Be like new leaves on the Tree of Life, growing and learning about Indigenous knowledge and perspectives
- Participate in reconciliation efforts within the school community
- Share experiences and needs to inform Indigenous education initiatives

Two-Eyed Seeing

Learn to view the world through both Indigenous and Western lenses.

Reflections

How are we growing in our understanding of Indigenous worldviews?
How can we be active participants in reconciliation?

TRC Call to Action #63

Respond to Call to Action 63.iii by building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.

Implementation

Implementing this framework is like tending to the Tree of Life. It requires patience, care, and a long-term commitment.

1. Grow the Indigenous Education Council, comprising Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community members, educators, students, and TCDSB leadership, to guide and oversee implementation.

2. Revise Hiring Practices and Remove Barriers:
   - Review and revise hiring policies to remove systemic barriers for Indigenous staff and teachers
   - Create alternatives to pastoral letter requirements that respect Indigenous spirituality and ways of knowing
   - Develop Indigenous-specific recruitment strategies and mentorship programs
   - Establish clear pathways for Indigenous educators and staff advancement

3. Implement Cultural and Ceremonial Spaces:
   - Create dedicated Indigenous cultural spaces in schools for gathering, learning, and ceremony
   - Establish board-wide smudging protocols that respect traditional practices
   - Ensure access to the four sacred medicines (tobacco, sage, sweetgrass, and cedar) for teaching, ceremonial purposes, and wellness
   - Provide proper storage and handling protocols for sacred medicines
   - Train staff on cultural protocols and the significance of sacred medicines

4. Establish Safe Spaces for Indigenous Learners:
   - Create Indigenous student lounges or gathering spaces in secondary schools
   - Develop Indigenous student support circles
   - Provide access to Indigenous counselors and Elders
   - Establish peer mentorship programs
   - Create culturally safe spaces for Indigenous students to practice their traditions and ceremonies

5. Develop an annual growth plan with clear goals, timelines, and responsibilities, guided by the Tree of Life framework.

6. Create a transparent reporting process, including:
   - Seasonal gatherings to share progress and gather feedback
   - Regular sharing circles with Indigenous students, families, and staff
   - Documentation of Indigenous student experiences and needs
   - Regular assessment of cultural safety in schools

7. Implement a culturally appropriate evaluation framework that includes both Western and Indigenous methods of measuring growth and success:
   - Incorporate narrative and story-based assessment methods
   - Include Elder and Knowledge Keeper evaluations
   - Consider holistic measures of student well-being and success

8. Ensure flexibility to adapt the plan based on:
   - Community wisdom and feedback
   - Changing needs of Indigenous students and families
   - Emerging best practices in Indigenous education
   - Recommendations from the Indigenous Education Council

9. Allocate appropriate resources to nourish the Tree of Life:
   - Dedicated funding for Indigenous language and culture programs
   - Resources for sacred medicines and ceremonial materials
   - Support for Indigenous student spaces and programs
   - Professional development for staff on Indigenous ways of knowing
   - Funding for Elder and Knowledge Keeper honouraria

10. Share stories of growth and achievement:
    - Regular communications with the broader TCDSB community
    - Celebration of Indigenous student success stories
    - Documentation of Indigenous initiatives and their impact
    - Recognition of staff and community contributions to Indigenous education

Conclusion

This Indigenous Education Framework is our commitment to nurturing the Tree of Life within our school communities. We recognize that this is an ongoing journey of learning, unlearning, and relearning that requires humility, perseverance, and a deep commitment to reconciliation.

As we implement this framework, we aim to create an educational forest where:

- The wisdom, knowledge, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples are honoured
- Indigenous students flourish and grow strong in their identities
- All students become active participants in reconciliation
- Indigenous languages and cultures are revitalized and celebrated
- Meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities take root and flourish

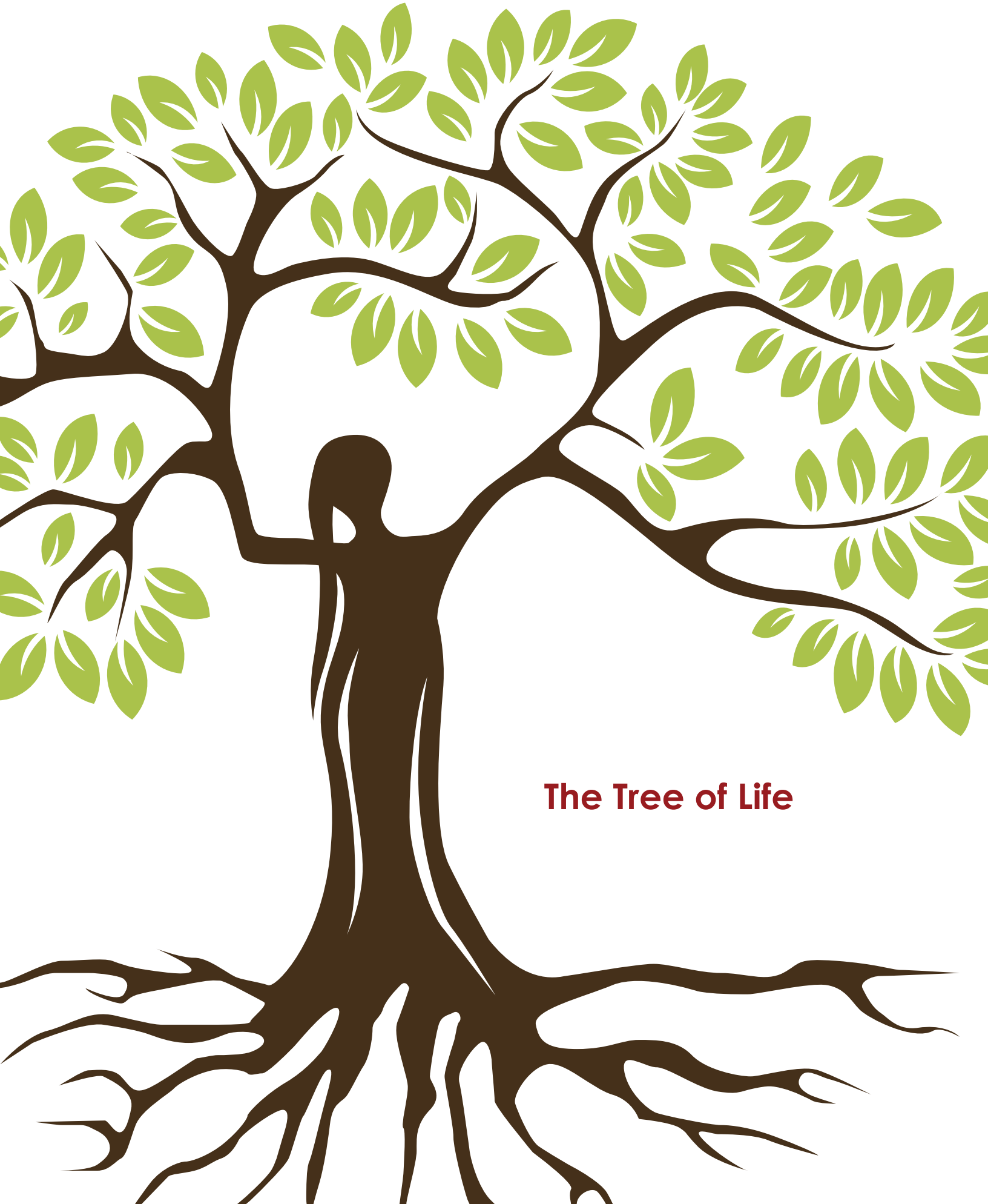
We invite all members of our school community – students, teachers, staff, principals, and board leadership – to join us in tending to this Tree of Life.
Together, we can create a thriving educational ecosystem that nurtures all learners and contributes to a more just and harmonious society.

Let us move forward with open hearts and minds, guided by the wisdom of the Elders, the strength of our communities, and the promise of a better future for all our children.

Miigwetch. Thank you.

Indigenous Education Department
Indigenous Education Council




The Tree of Life



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