

# Community Conversations

Fort McMurray – November 20, 2012



## A Space for Change...

**Northeast Alberta Child and Family Service Authority (CFSA), Athabasca Tribal Council** and the **Aboriginal Engagement and Strategy** division together hosted a community conversation in Fort McMurray with people from the city and surrounding communities. The conversation was focused on the topic of over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in the child intervention system.



### Participant Quotes

"We need to go back to basics and have these tough conversations to make changes happen."

"We need to spend more time with families, participate in community events."

"I try my best to help others. I was raised to never think I was better than others. I was raised to respect people, especially older people. I practice our traditions, do a lot of story-telling and prayers."

"We need to stop being rule bound so workers can be creative. Give people permission to be creative at work in partnerships."

"Our way of teaching came from the heart and came verbally. It didn't come from a book. We learned verbally and put it in our heart and in our mind. That's how I grew up."

"We have to have caring and have a heart for these children. It's hard to get that training in University. You have to believe the potential of these children."

The conversation began on the morning of November 20 with fifty people attending. Elders, parents and foster parents, youth, as well as people from the fields of education, community organizations, business and various levels of government, came to share their stories and perspectives on how we can better support Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities in Alberta.

There was a vast amount of wisdom and experience at the tables. With a strong presence of people from schools in and around Fort McMurray, there was much discussion about the role they can play in the healthy development of children. It was also mentioned that when communities lack the capacity to provide high-quality primary education, this may have a compounding effect on other existing challenges. Several strategies emerged, such as building school capacity in surrounding communities, enhancing the cultural awareness of school staff within Fort McMurray, and providing transition supports to students coming into the city.

Not only did this conversation help generate some ideas about how to make things better for children, youth, families and communities, but it also forged some new connections among the network of people who care for children and youth.



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### Survey Responses

"We need to be courageous! Courage requires strength. Strength requires leadership. Leadership requires vision. Vision requires courage!"

"There is so much more work to do, but we are on the right track.."

"Let's create more interaction at the community level to share knowledge about culture, treaty, customs, beliefs etc."

"There are many promising practices in the community."

"Spread the knowledge; correct the stereotypes; do not accept racism - correct those that resort to it. Build relationships, influence positive change. Be Courageous!"

"Diversity of views/ experiences. Wonderful opportunities will come from these insights."

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## What We Heard – Themes & Quotes

These themes have been generally consistent with what has emerged from other conversations across the province. The most significant difference is primary important of capacity building and prevention.

### Capacity building and prevention

- "Incorporating culture into curriculum is a key to success – let them know that they are wanted, loved and respected."
- "There are strengths in our communities, and we can start to build some capacity in the communities"

### Relationship-based practice

- "Focus on providing what the family needs to be healthy."
- "I want to see foster parents and biological parents coming together as one team for children. Connected with extended family – better connection to family when in care.."

### Recognition of Aboriginal history

- "I would like to see more Education for all students about the history and heritage of Aboriginal people."
- "I would like all Canadians to have a better understanding of the historic trauma from Indian residential schools."

### Decolonizing systems

- "Have Elders in government to help guide legislation and policy change. The child welfare system needs to be guided by the Elders and by the community."
- "More flexibility in legislation/programs. I want to see these changed to meet the needs of the communities. Bring the community in and see what they think and what they want."

### Indigenous ways of being

- "I want the children today to be proud of their culture and to know all their traditions, language and ceremony."
- "I want to see a greater connection to culture and language, to build that identity and heritage and pride in it."

## Survey Results – What You Told Us

At the end of each conversation we asked participants to fill out our survey, sharing with us their thoughts and feelings on how the event went. Thirty nine people completed the surveys for a response rate of 78%.

We heard from participants that the event went extremely well. More than 94% of the respondents felt: the environment in which the conversation took place was respectful, they were given the opportunity to voice their opinion, their input was valued, and that the conversation was meaningful. Nearly 90% said that as a result of the conversation, they have a greater understanding of the issues.

In addition to multiple choice questions, we asked participants several open-ended questions. When asked, "what new questions emerged for you?" people often wanted to know how we will take the 'next step'. We also asked, "was there anything in today's session that made you think or feel differently about something?" Most people said that hearing from many different perspectives and sharing personal stories helped increase their own understanding of the issues.

We also wanted to know, what actions will you personally undertake to create change. We heard three common responses:

- Build relationships, especially with local communities;
- Maintain ongoing engagement; and
- To model the change they want to see.

All of this valuable information will be put together with past and future conversations to help set the course to improve outcomes for children, youth and families