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**ABORIGINAL HEALTH HUMAN RESOURCES INITIATIVE  
ROUND TABLE THREE  
PLANNING FOR ACTION**

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Edmonton  
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## I Context

Originally billed as an opportunity to engage stakeholders and potential partners in developing individual and collective action plans and entering into commitments for results in furthering the mandate of AHHRI, this Roundtable, the third in a series, focused instead on looking for practical ways in which five priorities in two categories (participation and retention of Aboriginal workers in the Health System) could be addressed.

The *five priorities* were identified during Roundtable II, held in Red Deer in September 2008.

As is often the case when fully involved players and participants meet, the discussions at times moved into the area of issue identification. Although the issues identified have high relevance they, for the most part, mirrored the issues identified during Roundtable I in January 2008 and for the sake of brevity, this report keeps the focus on suggested actions to address the five priorities.

At various points during Roundtable III invited presenters provided useful information on programs and services available. This included the University of Lethbridge SPANS Project (Judith Kulig and Marilyn Lamb); Yellowhead Tribal College (Trevor Duplessis); and the Alberta Employment Connections Team (Victor Horseman, Ann Many Heads, Gloria Anderson, and Karen Hamilton).

## II Message of keynote speakers

Two keynote speakers conveyed powerful messages grounded in a deep seated understanding of the challenges facing members of First Nations trying to gain access to- and establish themselves in the workforce.

Grand Chief Rose Laboucan of the Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta spoke of the priority and critical importance of teaching First Nations children their history from the First Nations' perspective.

The Treaty 8 Education Commission was established in 2003 with the mandate to create and develop an education system for Treaty 8. In the knowledge that all members have something to offer, the discussions leading to creation of the Commission involved many grass roots people. Elders were asked what should be kept in mind in setting up a contemporary education system and they responded by providing the following set of *Guiding Principles for Education*:

- Excellence
- Respect
- Revive culture and language

- Honour the Treaty and Treaty promises
- Kiya nikan “You first” (Treat yourself first to be able to help others)
- Parents have a voice
- Nurture, Discipline and Respect
- Recognize mothers and first caregivers such as fathers and grandparents as first teachers
- Embrace technology with balance
- Hand-in-hand partnerships of systems
- Traditional teachings
- Protect Mother Earth
- Teach responsibility – every leader has that as a task.

Members of the Commission were tasked to write about the principles to ensure that they became embedded in everything the Commission did. The Commission met with the Minister of the day and made it clear that it had set out to build a comprehensive education system for Aboriginal people, recognizing that teaching principles were universal, but that teaching had to take place within the Aboriginal framework.

In all the challenges they face Aboriginal people have to be part of the solution – helping those who want to help themselves. The existing expectation for handouts among some is totally wrong and self-destructive and, while colonization had been deadly, those who know who they are have it made. People who have jobs should be very grateful and the Aboriginal community as a whole should embrace the concept that *“We have to give something if we want to take something.”*

Dr. Patricia Makokis of the Blue Quills First Nations College presented a strong, balanced message – addressing the impact of differing perspectives and conflicting world views on human interaction; the role privilege plays in society; the value of meaningful partnerships and collaborations; and the importance of reclaiming indigenous ways of being.

She also touched on a number of significant books that are required reading for students in her courses. These included

- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* – Stephen R. Covey
- *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self Interest* – Peter Block
- *Managing from the Heart* – Hyler Bracey and Jack Rosenblum
- *Whale Done, The Power of Positive Relationships* – Ken Blanchard
- *The Saint, the Surfer, and the CEO* – Robin Sharma

- *A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi* – Keshavan Nair
- *Leadership Wisdom from the Monk who Sold his Ferrari* – Robin Sharma

Dr. Makokis honoured those gathered by relating a personal account centered on the message that Aboriginal people have to be true to their values, beliefs, and identity even when those appear unorthodox to western society.

### III The five priorities

Round Table II confirmed the list of challenges and root causes identified in Roundtable I and set about rating those on the basis of their impact on access to and retention of Aboriginal workers in the health delivery workforce.

In a series of breakaway sessions participants were asked to *collectively analyze* the impact of identified factors, *but individually rate* them in terms of the severity of their influence on access and retention efforts. The AHHRI Executive wanted to secure the benefits of group/team discussion, and yet avoid group thinking when it came to the final determination of the importance of specific root causes.

The *process* called for every individual participant to identify the top five contributory factors and rate them in order of the severity of their impact.

A numerical analysis of participant choices (for each breakaway group and for Round Table participants in total) produced the following results:

**Factors impacting on participation** – rated for severity of impact (1 being the highest impact):

1. Lack of parental involvement & lack of support from community leaders.
2. Schools failing First Nations students – inadequate math and science resources and support.
3. Socio-economic barriers; social dependency; negative lifestyles.
4. Failure to incorporate cultural norms; lack of identity, self-esteem & confidence.
5. Funding (subsistence support & education allowances).

**Factors impacting on retention** – rated for severity of impact (1 being the highest impact):

1. Lack of support mechanisms for existing health care workers.

2. Absence of salary parity with health care workers outside communities.
3. Administrative barriers – lack of collaboration.
4. Lack of adequate housing, amenities, & education for health care workers in communities.
5. Failure to blend traditional & western views.

#### **IV Factors impacting on workforce participation**

##### ***(a) Parental involvement and support from community leaders***

Parents are not generally involved in their children's choice of courses, allowing them by default to take the easy route & avoid academic subjects.

##### ***(i) Encourage and teach parent involvement***

Many parents are burdened by their own experiences in education and are not in a position to emphasize the importance of education. Taking advantage of library services and the development of learning centers in communities might provide an opportunity to raise their level of awareness.

Rather than place the onus upon Alberta Education, community leaders should explore avenues of involving role model parents to assist other parents in developing appropriate parenting skills and coach them in how to spend quality time with their children. Learning centers could serve as support groups for parents in facing the challenges of child rearing. To be effective this approach will require early intervention with the parents of small children, rather than wait until students reach junior high.

Parents should be encouraged to continue their own education to enable them to provide more assistance to their children. At present, illiteracy is holding many parents back from assisting or even encouraging their children.

Communities would do well to arrange parenting conferences where parents could be exposed to information on good parenting and ways in which to encourage education as a desirable goal for their children. The value of the old ways should be re-awakened – when children were taught progressively increased responsibility through the assignment of chores.

Parents should be encouraged to get involved in Head Start programs.

Community leaders should be looking for ways in which to reintroduce hope into education, without which education cannot be effectively promoted.

***(ii) Take learning outside the schools***

School provides only one element in the overall education of well-adjusted and competent community members.

Communities should consider taking education beyond the schools and involving community members who have valuable knowledge to contribute. The role of Elders and other local mentors and role models come to mind, especially when it applies to traditional life-long learning models.

Good role models are crucial to the development of good citizens and communities should look hard at benefitting from local resources available to them.

The proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” has application and community leaders would do well to enlist the support of the whole community.

***(iii) Role and responsibility of leaders***

There appears to be a significant disconnect between Chief/Councils and School Boards.

The elected community leadership should do more to hold school districts accountable and, at the same time provide better support to workers involved in any way, even peripherally, with education. A framework of sound policies and procedures has to be put in place. More should be done to ensure that those serving on school boards have the capability to make a contribution.

Greater attention should be paid to the caliber of educators brought into communities and in this regard the leadership has a major responsibility to fulfill.

Where elected leaders themselves lack a background in math, science, and health education they should contemplate opening the doors to local or external resources that could be of help in promoting the value of education among the youth and young parents.

Positive results in the field of education will remain elusive until communities and their leaders truly grasp the importance of self-determination.

**(b) Schools failing First Nations students**

Not enough is being done to encourage First Nations students in school and a greater emphasis must be placed on getting Aboriginal students into colleges and universities. Emphasis has to be placed on teaching math and science and providing increased resources and support.

**(i) Importance of starting early and applying discipline**

Good academic learning starts at kindergarten and for the sake of their own future, communities should insist on recognition of the importance of discipline in education.

Communities should find ways of having their voices heard on how discipline should be maintained.

**(ii) Need for a different 'take' on teaching/education**

It is clear that First Nations students are experiencing difficulties with the learning methods and techniques employed by schools. First Nations should do more to encourage Alberta Education and schools to review the curriculum to bring it more in line with the learning traits of First Nations students and to find ways in which to guide students through the difficult science courses.

Technology should be used as the powerful tool it could be. Video conferencing could be used to develop games to bring an Aboriginal focus to the sciences.

Consideration should be given to rotating youth summer science camps throughout the province to develop an early interest in the part of First Nations students in math, sciences, and computer literacy.

**(iii) Improve career counseling**

Beginning as early as Junior High School, parents and students should be educated on the importance of academic courses if students want to further their education.

**(iv) Lack of resources**

Schools in remote communities, and especially First Nations schools are suffering from a lack of resources and no one appears to be advocating on behalf of these schools to improve the situation. Laboratory equipment and supplies fall short of the mark and materials are generally outdated. It has even been necessary at times to photocopy textbooks.

First Nations leaders should agitate for more research into available technology and software to complement the lack of teaching expertise.

**(v) General**

It is time for communities to change the focus from the negative to the positive.

First Nations leaders should form partnerships with educational institutions, government and industry since it is in the best long-term interest of all parties to address the shortcomings in First Nations education.

Schools should be encouraged to do more outreach to communities and parents.

Mentorship can play a very important role in generating interest among the youth in academic subjects.

**(c) Socio-economic barriers; social dependency; negative lifestyles.**

Children are going to school hungry; impairing their capacity for learning, while lack of personal finances leads to dropouts when First Nations students cannot keep up with mainstream students.

**(i) Healthy lifestyles**

First Nations members have to learn to cope with their environment and exercise a choice to be either resilient or victims. The challenge facing them is to increase the factors that lead to resiliency.

After generations of families on social assistance it is time for First Nations leaders to manifest and promote the value sets of working hard and taking charge of the future.

Communities have to think in terms of what they have to offer as positives to the world. It may be a challenge, but ways have to be found to use the experience of good role models and apply it to the general community for the betterment of all.

Among the ideas offered to overcome barriers and promote healthy lifestyles were

- Showcasing community and individual successes.
- Rekindling the community spirit and emphasizing the value of independence through a good work ethic and character.
- Initiating parent advisory committees to provide support and exercise community strength.

**(ii) Nutrition**

As a start to regaining community spirit, communities should consider bringing back the 'old days' of community gardens and kitchens. Not only would this provide good nutrition, but it would play a role in community development through inclusion of whole families and serve to transfer valuable skills through group work such as food preparation and canning.

A community garden could provide food to schools.

Alternatively, communities could improve their sense of cohesion while improving diet and health by establishing food cooperatives to undertake cost effective group buying.

**(d) Cultural norms; identity, self-esteem & confidence**

The cultural norms of First Nations people are not readily compatible with western science and students should be given access to literature that incorporates traditional teachings with science. Cultural programs are not generally understood by institutions and there is not enough understanding & recognition of the diversity of First Nations.

Aboriginal students have a different learning style and this needs to be accommodated.

It is important that First Nations people take steps to protect and preserve their traditional knowledge with the awareness that it can be done without bringing money into the equation. There is no need to wait for the government and schools to incorporate traditional teaching into programs – because nothing is stopping communities from providing community education courses.

First Nations people should stop 'defending' cultural programs and recognize that it is not about the programs, but about core values. Individuals should look at their personal responsibility to protect and preserve the positives in their existence as members of First Nations.

Parents, too, have a responsibility in this regard. Male children need positive male role models and families should stay together.

**(e) Funding – subsistence support and education allowances**

Insufficient subsistence support is available to First Nations students outside their communities. Education allowances have not kept pace with the high cost of rent, transportation, or the general increase in the cost of living in urban centres.

**(i) Personal commitment**

Although inadequate funding is seen as a factor in hampering further education, participants recognized the requirement for First Nations students to manage both their education and the funding received so as to maximize the benefit.

The desire to learn is a powerful motivating factor and a key ingredient for success.

Participants have an obligation to take the dialogue back to their home communities and make a commitment to something that is bigger than any individual. Reference was made to a community where a leader managed to rally the people to pull together and address the issue of illiteracy.

**V Factors impacting job retention**

**(a) Support mechanisms for health care workers**

Health care workers in First Nations communities often work in professional isolation without the support of colleagues who understand the challenges they face. This can take a toll in terms of stress and suggested ways of mitigating the circumstances included:

- Providing them with access to support persons such as Elders.
- Providing opportunities for debriefing.
- Strengthening mentorship programs.
- Providing opportunities to attend professional conferences where networks can be developed and maintained.
- Explore how First Nations people traditionally handled stress and incorporate those mechanisms into modern day practice.
- Provide health care workers with the option of working flexible hours wherever possible.
- Assisting health care workers to obtain child care.
- Acknowledging and honouring the contributions made by health care workers.

**(b) Salary parity with health care workers outside communities**

First Nations receive a set amount from the federal government and find it difficult – impossible for the most part – to pay health care workers competitive salaries.

First Nations leaders should consider

- Building a case to convince the federal government of the longer term benefits of establishing salary parity for Aboriginal nurses and how that could impact health.
- Researching available housing programs and the feasibility of options such as developing nurses cottages (similar to teachers' accommodation) on reserve.
- Recognizing the value of professionals – research has shown that professionals stay in jobs for their own gratification when in an environment that is motivating and progressive.

**(c) Administrative barriers and lack of collaboration**

Lack of collaboration between departments (federal, provincial, and First Nations) complicates service delivery.

**(d) Housing, amenities, & education**

Unavailability of suitable housing as well as amenities and retail services presents a problem for professionals. They are also put off by the standard of education available to their children.

First Nation governments should consider addressing the needs of health care workers in their long-term plans.

**(e) Failure to blend traditional & western views**

There is a strong challenge involved in blending western and traditional views, especially in the health services field.

First Nations should lobby for the inclusion of herbal remedies in the curriculum for training Aboriginal health care workers since First Nations members show a strong preference for both western and traditional medicines.

## **VI Conclusion**

Round Table III reminded participants of the importance of genuine partnerships, collaboration, and engagement; of the need for creative planning and movement to action; and of the fact that all stakeholders were there for one primary purpose – to be servants of the people.

Round Table III served to reaffirm that stakeholders are indeed interested in collaboration and that the doors are open for mutual efforts to address the issues.