

Appendix B – WORKING WITH AN ELDER

Background

This appendix provides Division employees with guidelines for approaching and inviting First Nations, Métis and Inuit Elders, Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors into their schools and classrooms. It is important that Elders be approached, welcomed, and thanked following a protocol and a code of etiquette appropriate to the customs of the Elder's community.

Who is an Elder?

The term Elder refers to someone recognized by their community as having a high degree of understanding of First Nations, Métis or Inuit history, spirituality, traditional language, cultural teachings, ceremonies or healing practices. Elders have worked and studied over a period of time with other Elders to earn the right to pass on this specialized knowledge and give advice on personal and community issues. Elders are highly revered and respected role models and mentors for all people. They embody First Nations, Métis, and Inuit culture through their words, actions, and being.

Gender and age are not factors, nor is there criteria in determining who is recognized as an Elder. Some Elders may be female. Other Elders may be comparatively young in age but very well-versed in ceremonial and cultural practices.

Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors are persons recognized and identified by Elders of the community as being knowledgeable about cultural practices or world views. Rather than being called Elders, these people may be referred to as Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors. Generally, the First Nations, Métis and Inuit community recognizes and identifies the person as having acquired and earned the gifts of an Elder.

Genuine Elders never self-identify themselves as an Elder or say that they are a sweat lodge holder or pipe holder; they do not promote themselves, and it is the community that identifies them as having acquired and earned those gifts.

Be wary of those who describe themselves as Elders without confirmation from the community. It is also always best to find an Elder from the treaty area or Métis region where you are hosting the event. For these reasons, it is advisable to ask the community to identify an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor who has the spiritual or traditional knowledge and gifts appropriate for your request. School district liaison staff, local First Nations schools, band offices, friendship centres, and Métis locals may be able to assist in making connections with Elders, Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors.

What is Cultural Protocol?

Cultural Protocol includes the act of giving in order to receive (creates a balance). It can be viewed as a key to a door giving you access to the Knowledge Keeper. In doing so, you enter into a

relationship with them. The offering (protocol) is given before you receive the knowledge and is NOT the gift you give after you have received the knowledge.

Protocols for approaching an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor vary from community to community.

Standard Guidelines for Working with First Nation, Métis and Inuit Elders and Knowledge Keepers:

Define the Purpose:

Elders can play a significant role in schools when they are involved in meaningful ways such as:

- a) Bringing traditional ceremonies and teachings about ceremonies, spirituality, beliefs and traditional sacred practices
- b) Tipi teachings (facilitated by females from the Indigenous community), Sweatlodge teachings, Medicine Wheel teachings, and ceremonies need to be conducted by an Elder
- c) Talking about kinship, parenting, the importance of education, planning for the future
- d) Serving as role models
- e) Providing advice to parents, students, teachers, and school administrators

The roles of Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Cultural Advisors vary greatly from community to community, as do the protocols and traditions they teach (Our Words, Our Ways). Elders can be spiritual guides, healers, medicine men and women, artists, seers, and counsellors. Elders often perform such services as:

- a) Giving prayers before meetings
- b) Describing or performing traditional ceremonies
- c) Sharing traditional knowledge
- d) Giving spiritual advice to individuals
- e) Demonstrating traditional crafts and practices
- f) Teaching the community's protocols

If you wish to contact an Elder, it is best to do so through the Black Gold School Division First Nations, Métis and Inuit Lead Teacher. The Lead Teacher will review your purpose with you and then help you contact an Elder.

Contacting an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor (extending the invitation):

Extend the invitation to an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor well in advance. It is best to meet face-to-face to establish a relationship and discuss your request. The telephone can be used to set up a meeting to make a request and to ask about the Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor's preferred protocol. It is appropriate to ask the Elder ahead of time which type

of offering they would prefer and how it should be presented. In doing so, we honour life experiences and value their individual preferences. Allow the Elder, Knowledge Keeper, or Cultural Advisor some time to think about your request; do not expect an immediate answer. Sometimes an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor may not accept tobacco for various reasons and may refer you to someone else. Given COVID-19 restrictions, virtual meetings have become common and it is considered acceptable to mail the offering if there are no other options.

Prepare the Offering:

First Nations Elders, Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors often accept offerings of tobacco or one of the four sacred plants. However, depending on the area, sweetgrass, sage or cedar, as well as broadcloth, might be the preferred offering. Some Métis Elders, Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors accept tobacco, while others prefer a different gift, such as tea. Inuit Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Cultural Advisors do not accept tobacco, because it is not part of their traditional practices. In this case, a small gift is appropriate as the offering. Put positive thoughts and prayers into the offering as you prepare it.

Present the Offering:

Greet the Elder, Knowledge Keeper, or Cultural Advisor by thanking them for meeting with you. Ensure that you have learned the protocol for presenting the offering. When making the request, present the offering in your left hand out in front of you while stating your specific request. If the Elder, Knowledge Keeper, or Cultural Advisor accepts your request, they will accept the offering. The acceptance of the offering is similar to a contract: it signifies acceptance and a commitment by the Elder to agree to the request. It also shows that the person presenting the offering is committing to respecting the process.

If the Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor cannot do what you are asking, they will say so and not accept the offering. They have declined the request. They may direct you to other members of the community who are better suited to your request.

Example: On behalf of the Creator, I would like to offer you a cultural protocol to acknowledge and respect the teachings that you will be sharing related to *[insert specific request (i.e. tipi teachings, storytelling, fish-scale art)]*.

If it is not possible to meet the Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor in person prior to the event, it is appropriate to ask if you can present the offering to them at the beginning of the event in front of the audience.

Follow up With Details:

If your offer is accepted, make sure to follow up with a phone call, letter, or email that outlines all the details they would need to feel comfortable and prepared. The invitation should include:

1. Date, time, location
2. A detailed agenda noting the time you wish them to arrive
3. A description of exactly what is being asked of the Elder or Knowledge Keeper
4. If they are invited to stay for the whole event or if they have the option to leave once their role is complete

5. Clear information regarding the honorarium being provided (see AP 528)
6. Ensure transportation is taken care of or provided for in the honorarium
7. Information about who will be assisting them while they are onsite
8. If they are bringing their own helper, their costs should be covered as well
9. Information regarding photography and any recording that may take place

Take time before the event to connect and collect any information about the Elder or Knowledge Keeper (preferably by asking and taking notes) you should know including:

1. Full name with proper spelling
2. How they prefer to be addressed (grandmother, grandfather, Elder, moshum, or kokum)
3. Food allergies or aversions
4. Do they prefer coffee or tea?
5. Will they need to smudge upon arrival; if so, where is there space provided?
6. Do they have any questions for you?

Hosting Considerations:

1. How long is the event? Are there beverages and food available?
2. Parking: Is there a designated parking spot located in close proximity to the facility for the honoured guest(s)?
3. Gifts or honoraria: Make sure there is school swag, student artwork, gift cards, or other items of significance available to give in exchange for teachings. The gift may take the form of a predetermined dollar value established by Black Gold School Division.
4. Historically, Elders were given food, clothing and other necessities in exchange for their help, and therefore monetary gifts are now acceptable.
5. Travel: a financial reimbursement of any expenses or incurred costs in connection with the Elder's involvement with you (ex: travel, food, accommodations) should be offered to the Elder in addition to their gift or under a separate travel claim.
6. Photographs and video recordings are often unacceptable, so double-check protocols. Explicit consent must be received prior to any recording being made.

Assigning a Helper:

Knowledge Keepers are to be treated as most honoured guests. They will need a point of contact assigned to them when they are in a Black Gold facility to take care of their needs while at the event and familiarize them with the school building.

1. Greeting and meeting the Elder or Knowledge Keeper upon arrival
2. Showing them to the event space and pointing out the closest washrooms
3. Asking if they would like water, tea, or coffee
4. Offering refreshments
5. Checking in to see that they are comfortable
6. Organizing a quiet space for them to rest in between engagements, if necessary
7. For longer visits, ensure a light snack or lunch is provided, such as tea, bannock and jam. If others are eating with the Elder, the Elder is to be served first, then students, then others.
8. Having payment and a thank you note ready to present before they leave.
9. Ensure to thank the Elder at the end of the visit formally with a handshake and have students express their thanks as well.

10. If a gift is appropriate, offer it at this time. The gift purchase is to be completed well in advance of the event.

In some cases, Elders may be accompanied by an “Elder’s Helper.” This person will have an established relationship with the Elder and will be available to assist the Elder with whatever they need. Nevertheless, a host/helper should still meet them both to show them their way around campus and to make sure they both have what they need.

Prepare the Students:

- a) Review behaviour expectations
- b) Inform/remind them of the status of the Elder
- c) Explain the importance of Elders and the value of their knowledge
- d) Review good listening practices and manners, such as avoiding eye contact and not asking inappropriate questions

Events that typically require honorarium payouts:

- a) To start an event/activity with a prayer and end an event with a prayer
- b) Cultural workshop
- c) Graduation ceremonies
- d) Traditional ceremonies

Note: *If your budget allows for a lower or higher honorarium amount, then by all means, give what you can. The intention of offering an honorarium is to give ‘what you can’ with respect to what the Elder is offering you; guidance, prayer, ceremony, etc. It is extremely difficult to place a dollar value on sacred knowledge and ceremony therefore, this document is to be used only as a guideline.*

Post-event Follow up:

After the event has ended and the Elder or Knowledge Keeper is safely at home, it is important to follow up to close the line of communication that was opened when you first made contact with them. You can do this by mailing a thank you note, sending an email, or making a phone call. If you are contacting them by phone or email, ask them about their experience and if there was anything that you could have done differently. Lastly, ask whether or not they would consider attending future events. If so, ask if you may keep their contact information.

Places to Order Ceremonial Tobacco:

1. Mother Earth
2. Nation Imagination

Reference: Alberta Education - Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners
ATA Stepping Stones Elder Protocol
Indigenous Offices at Carleton University
University of Alberta Elder Protocols and Guidelines