

The Current Position of Aboriginal Support Workers in the BC Education System

**Respectfully submitted by the
Mostly Salish Consulting Co.
And its Associates**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During this survey we conducted eight focus groups in seven regions of the province. These were made up of over 70 Aboriginal Support Workers and sometimes their supervisors. In addition we received written feedback from 35 School Districts in total and received surveys back from Aboriginal Support Workers in over 44 School Districts. ¹

We also spent a day talking with the Aboriginal Education Department of Kamloops-Thompson School District as they regarding their job evaluation process (as opposed to personnel evaluations) of Aboriginal Support Worker positions. This is a process conducted by the Aboriginal Education Committee and the School District.

Several Aboriginal Support Workers phoned me individually to ask questions, offer insights and chat. Their time and interest is acknowledged here.

I interviewed Elaine Price, Patricia Wilson, Lorna Mathias and Gordon Reid about the historical information around Home-School Coordinators and Aboriginal Support Workers.

¹ Three School Districts do not access 1.31 Funding. Another district does not use their 1.31 funding to employ Aboriginal Support Workers.

Mostly Salish Consulting would like to acknowledge Gordon Reid and Craig Hillman for the work they did as subcontractors: Gordon for his work that included Merritt and Langley and Craig for his work in the Kootenay Region.

And thanks too, to the Aboriginal Education Branch.

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SUMMARY

The Aboriginal Education Branch values the work that the Aboriginal Support Workers do regarding the advocacy that is done between the home and school. Aboriginal Support Workers perform and fulfill a valuable role in the school communities. This study was to identify the roles and responsibilities of the position of Aboriginal Support Workers employed by the public school system. It is to profile the various activities in which Aboriginal Support Workers are involved in supporting Aboriginal students and to determine to what extent 1.31 program funding is used to fund these positions.

It is through targeted funding that many Aboriginal Support Workers are hired to work with Aboriginal students. The costs in some cases are shared with bands and tribal councils. It is estimated that out of the \$38 million targeted for Aboriginal education, approximately \$10 million is used for Aboriginal Support Workers salaries. There are approximately 500 Aboriginal Support Workers working in British Columbia's K-12 school system.

A typical Aboriginal Support Worker is a woman, with one or two years of postsecondary education. She is unionized, works closely with teachers and does a minimum of 10 tasks. She is 40 years old, status and working in her own

cultural territory. She has been working with the district for about 6 years. She has been hired through the district.

Generally they have incredibly large and chaotic caseloads and work in isolation with little respect or understanding of their jobs. Aboriginal Support Workers face a systemic assumption that they are under qualified, under worked and hired only because they are Aboriginal. Aboriginal Support Workers face and manage racism daily whether it is directed at them, their students or simply a generality directed at no one in particular.

Aboriginal Support Workers are generally bi-cultural and are intended to exist within the bureaucracy as paraprofessionals. And they do until the moment they advocate for an Aboriginal child. At that moment the system sees them as disloyal and responds to them as 'Indians' and not as colleagues. Aboriginal Support Workers are accountable to many bodies, including First Nations Advisory Committees, unions, parents, teachers, administrative officers and students, outside agencies. It is hard for them to predict who wants what and it often creates a sense of being in a state of constant defensiveness.

And yet, in all the interviews, we conducted I only met one person who said they were in the job only for the paycheque.

Nowhere did I find Aboriginal Support Workers who do not believe in their students. I found Aboriginal Support Workers who love their jobs despite the

difficulties. I found Aboriginal Support Workers who love their students unconditionally. And over and over again I heard the stories of individual children's successes that keep the Aboriginal Support Workers esteems in check and their hearts full.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain the broadest information possible, Mostly Salish Consulting Company utilized several data gathering tools. We chose a combination of ethnographic and statistical data gathering tools. A survey was developed and tested at the Vancouver Island Region Support Worker Conference. It was altered slightly and retested at the Metro Region Support Worker Conference. Letters were e-mailed, faxed and/or mailed to all School District First Nations contacts in British Columbia and 33 out of 59 responded.² We then sent surveys to those School Districts who indicated a willingness to participate. In total we received 293 surveys³ back from all regions of the province and encompassing 46 School Districts. The statistical data is based on these surveys.

We also conducted nine focus groups in seven School Districts in the province to elicit more information and expand on areas minimally covered in the survey. We had excellent responses in these groups. A total of 73 Aboriginal Support Workers participated. School Districts included Langley, Nicola-Similkameen, Vancouver, Comox, Coast Mountain, Quesnel and Southeast Kootenay. The

² Not every School District in the province has Aboriginal Support Workers.

³ Two surveys came back uncompleted. Therefore results are based on 258.

groups ranged in size from two to twenty-two participants and took approximately two hours.

We were able to obtain additional information from a further 15 School Districts, regarding job descriptions, professional development and other 1.31 information that pertained directly to Aboriginal Support Workers. In this sense we have also been able to analyze written material. Several School Districts have conducted smaller scale studies on their own Aboriginal Support Workers and we were able to look at several of these.

We conducted interviews with Kamloops School District and a band counselor from Vernon around particular initiatives that they have undertaken. We also interviewed two First Nations teachers.

Finally, we reviewed the current Aboriginal Support Worker handbook as available on the Ministry of Education's Aboriginal Education Branch website.

Using all of this data, we present the following report and recommendations.

HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL SUPPORT WORKERS

In British Columbia, the hiring of Home-School Coordinators began in the late 1960s when the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development began closing down Indian Residential Schools. Home-School Coordinators were “initially established in 1969 to serve as a liaison between schools, homes, and Government agencies for the purpose of bettering the educational opportunities for Native Indian people.” (p39 Shirley Joseph) Home-School Workers, or Home-School Coordinators were hired with federal dollars and were directed specifically at providing support to status Indian students.

The intent of Home-School Coordinators was to somehow ease the transition for Indian students and their families. Parents were suddenly being faced with raising adolescents after generations of having them attend school far from home. Schools were being inundated with Indian students and they were not always sure how to handle what they perceived as a problem. Home-School Coordinators, being the brainchild of Indian Affairs were funded and placed in strategic locations across the province.

With the closing of the Residential Schools, Master-Tuition agreements (the precursor to Local Education Agreements) were negotiated between the

Department of Indian Affairs and the Ministry of Education and money was passed from federal to provincial coffers.

“The Master Tuition Agreement was named because it was a single agreement between British Columbia and the Government of Canada. The present situation of Local Education Agreements and Local Improvement Agreements evolved via concerns about the single agreement having no First Nation or Aboriginal input, and no accountability. “ (Elaine Price, personal correspondence.)

The Master Tuition Agreement eventually gave way to the individually negotiated agreements. Who paid for the Home School Coordinator positions then became cloudy and in some cases they were paid for by the Department of Indian Affairs and in others by School Districts.

The position of Home-School Coordinators was to be a self-fulfilling role and “...the initial intent was geared to an eventual phasing out of the position.” (p.39 Shirley Joseph) It has not been the case.

When targeted funding became an issue during the early 1994, many School Districts had no idea how to spend the money and the bulk of it then was spent hiring Aboriginal Support Workers. According to one support worker who wishes to remain anonymous, “Aboriginal support worker positions were created to fit outside of mainstream system. They were seen as short-term measures historically, and this is how they are still seen in the system.”

Aboriginal Support Workers were put into positions with little guidance, leadership and at the time, little training. Many wrote their own job descriptions years after being hired. Today, there are approximately 500 Aboriginal Support Workers in British Columbia, now paid for by Provincial dollars and many still work without job descriptions.

The late Shirley Joseph in her groundbreaking document written for the Vancouver School Board in 1981, made recommendations to the Aboriginal Education Community that have sadly not been realized.

In the late 1970s Malaspina University-College (then Malaspina College) had a training program strictly for Home-School Coordinators, and while many of the original participants have since passed away, many more are still actively involved in education, as band administrators, support workers and teachers.

“A flawed foundation has been put into place. The fantasy– such an idea or mental picture- that one aboriginal support worker could make a significant impact on a well-entrenched system that was not working for aboriginal students and families.”
(personal correspondence, anonymous)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following section contains the bulk of what we learned in the research. Some of it is obvious and we have left it for individual interpretation. In other sections we have added more detail. There are further findings that were available, but we did not believe they fit the requirements of the research proposal.

Gender

Eighty-three percent of Aboriginal Support Workers are women. This trend is province wide and there is no regional differentiation. Many School Districts are actively recruiting male Aboriginal Support Workers in order to have more male role models. This may be significant given the significantly lower graduation rates of male Aboriginal youth.

One Aboriginal Support Worker noted that she witnessed the system react differently to male Aboriginal Support Workers than the female ones. She indicated that they are sometimes treated with more respect and given authority positions quicker than women.

Age:

The question regarding age is the one that respondents resisted the most.

Roughly 10% chose not to answer the question.

The average age of an Aboriginal Support Worker is 40.01 years. Further to this, the majority is in the 35 to 45-age range.

Table 1: Age Ranges

Age Ranges	Percent of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Under 25 years	5	
26-35	26	
36-45	42	
46-55	21	
55 years and older	6	

Only 5% of Aboriginal Support Workers are under 25 years old. Six percent are over 55. Ages range from 20 to 64 years. The pattern follows that of a bell curve.

Level of Education

An Aboriginal Support Workers education level varies considerably from master's degree to below grade eight. The table below illustrates the breakdown.

Indications are that an Aboriginal Support Worker's level of education does not affect his/her rate of pay. And while we met many Aboriginal Support Workers who are currently continuing their education (and several teachers who were once Aboriginal Support Workers) there is a sense that improving their education will not allow them to climb the corporate ladder.

Table Two: Education Levels

Maximum Education Levels of Respondents	Percent of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Less than Grade 12	6	
Grade 12	27	
1-2 years of University	49	
3-4 years of University	8	
Bachelors Degrees	9	
Post Graduate	1%	

The majority of Aboriginal Support Workers have at least one year of post secondary and less than 33% have grade 12 or less. It is also of note, that those Aboriginal Support Workers with less than grade 12 education are often culturally fluent and are hired for their specific cultural knowledge rather than academic training.

OTHER AREAS OF TRAINING:

The other areas of training were difficult to capture, as people indicated them anecdotally, by abbreviation, and using a variety of terminologies we were unfortunately unfamiliar with. It is assumed that these make sense to people regionally.

Many have had Drug and Alcohol counselor training. Many have Teacher's Aid training, Child and Youth care programs, Social Worker certificates, Human Service Worker certificates, Business Management programs, Early Childhood, and several have non-credited counselor-training programs. We were surprised at the number of Aboriginal Support Workers who have nursing backgrounds.

Additional training programs listed included a variety of workshops, that encompass everything from Occupational Health and Safety, to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Suicide Prevention, Food Safe and certified coaches.

Rates of Pay

Table Three: Rates of Pay

Rates of Pay	Percent of Respondents	Number of Respondents
13-14\$ per hour	4%	12
14-17\$ per hour	37%	104
18-21\$ per hour	48%	135
21-25\$ per hour	10%	27
25\$ or more per hour	1%	3

The majority of Aboriginal Support Workers make between \$18 and \$21/hour. Aboriginal Support Workers living in the north will likely make less than this. Aboriginal Support Workers hired through Band Offices or Tribal Councils will generally make less than those hired through School Districts.

Many Aboriginal Support Workers make between \$10-\$13/hour. (One indicated this level of pay even after 8 years of service). Others make more than \$25/hour. Some Aboriginal Support Workers work on contract with no benefits. Others have full benefit packages with access to substitutes, health plans, dental plans, holiday pay and professional development funds.

Caseloads do not impact rates of pay. The level of education or years of experience an Aboriginal Support Worker has will generally not impact his or her rates of pay.

Caseload Size:

The average caseload size for an Aboriginal Support Worker is 68.42 students.

Their caseloads range from 1 to 350 students, with the majority having the range of 51 and 75. High school workers have the highest caseloads.

Ministry of Education policy dictates that each student must receive service or the School District loses money to audits. Aboriginal Support Workers carry the load of this record keeping and ensuring that each child gets seen somewhat regularly. In one situation an Aboriginal Support Worker told me that he was unable to help the needy students because the process required him to see the strong students for fear of an audit.

In another School District the Aboriginal Support Workers are appealing to the union in an attempt to see Support Worker caseload parity. Their caseloads easily double those of Support Workers not paid from 1.31 dollars.

The caseload size is easily seen as being unmanageable and is often compounded with the Aboriginal Support Worker working in more than one school.

Schools Per Week

The majority of Support Workers work in one or two schools. The range is from one to eight schools, but we heard from Aboriginal Support Workers who work in up to 17 schools.⁴

The impacts of the larger number of schools include the inability to build healthy relationships with staff, students and families. The Aboriginal Support Worker often do not have a home space because of the school needing to service its full time staffs. The Aboriginal Support Workers often find themselves harassed by school secretaries who do not have a firm grasp of their chaotic schedules or job descriptions.

⁴ This is an exception.

Hours per Week

While the rates of pay may seem substantial, the hours an Aboriginal Support Worker might work in a week varies from four to forty. Some indicated 70 but that is not likely paid work. So at \$20/hour for a 35-hour workweek, an Aboriginal Support Worker is making a livable wage. However, many make \$20/hour for a 10 or 20-hour workweek.

Some Aboriginal Support Workers reported that increases in wages are often accompanied by decreases in hours. We also had respondents indicate that their hours could be cut without consultation from one year to the next. We were asked in some cases not to talk with the Aboriginal Support Workers for this very reason. Oftentimes a First Nations Advisory Committee that does not include representation by Aboriginal Support Workers determines the number of hours an Aboriginal Support Worker works.

Unionization

Eighty-one percent of the Aboriginal Support Workers sampled are unionized (238/193). In most districts membership is mandated. In a very few the choice to belong or not is given to the individual worker.

The unionized Aboriginal Support Workers have rights, seniority, a level of job security, and benefits. In some districts the Aboriginal Support Workers have their own shop steward and in other districts participation is minimal. Contract workers feel more of a job loss threat, as they have no systemic security. They do however feel they have more money and freedom.

I would suggest that many unionized Aboriginal Support Workers are not aware of their union rights. In several focus groups, questions I asked regarding sick days, holidays and access to substitutes lead to discussion around rights individuals did not know they had.

CUPE is the union that covers most School Districts, although we have found School Districts whose Aboriginal Support Workers are Teamsters or members of the Carpenters and Joiners Union.

Other Professional Organizations

A small number of Aboriginal Support Workers indicated they belong to the Native Indian Teacher's Association and/or the First Nations Provincial Specialists Association. The next clustering of other professional organizations revolves around the health field and included nurses and dental assistants. Truck drivers and skippers were also listed. Additionally, one Aboriginal Support Worker acknowledged his traditional cultural rank which carries with it rights, obligations and standards.

We asked Aboriginal Support Workers in the focus groups what they felt about a professional organization for Aboriginal Support Workers. While some were reticent, the majority felt it would be a good idea. They had questions around who would sponsor it and costs, but they still felt it would be a good thing. The sense is that it would give them a level of professionalism and credibility necessary for meeting some of the mainstream standards that they may not initially understand.

Hired Through

The majority of Aboriginal Support Workers are hired through School Districts. A number are hired through Band Offices or Tribal Councils or are cost shared between them and the School District. A further number are cost shared between more than one agency that may or may not be one of the three listed above. (Hence the total exceeds 293)

Table 4: Who actually Hires the Aboriginal Support Workers

Total # out of /294	Percentage	Hired through
266	90%	School District
30	10%	Band Office
14	6%	Tribal Council

A very few indicated that they were hired through other organizations such as the Ministry for Children and Families, Friendship Centres or First Nations Education Councils.

Aboriginal Support Workers hired through School Districts are generally paid a higher wage than those who are not. Aboriginal Support Workers hired through Band Offices or Tribal Councils are most likely to be band members or members of the same cultural community. This is sometimes interpreted as being in the

community's best interest as it reinforces their traditional territorial rights and builds capacity.

In several instances, Aboriginal Support Workers stated that it is difficult to be able to create clear boundaries between their home and their work lives, when they are working with children from their home communities.

Aboriginal Status

The majority of Aboriginal Support Worker are registered Status Indians (68%). Seventy percent of those are working in their own territory. Fifty percent of the total number of Aboriginal Support Workers are working in their own cultural territories. Twenty-four of those surveyed are not native. Thirteen people did not answer the question. Thirty identified themselves as Metis, and 35 as non-status.

While the province has data that shows on and off reserve student statistics, it is not an effective tool for finding out how many Aboriginal Support Workers live in their traditional territories. In fact, Aboriginal Support Workers who work with students from their home reserves have a difficult time not working during their off-work hours. Their boundaries are often vague when working with children from their extended families. This issue should be examined in each School District that employs Aboriginal Support Workers from the local reserves. Feedback we received indicated that working with children from neighboring reserves is far less stressful—but of course this is not often demographically possible.

We only visited one school district where none of the Aboriginal Support Workers were from the local First Nations community.

Number of Years Employed with School District

The number of years an Aboriginal Support Worker stays with a district varies from being new this year to having worked thirty years. The average is 6.1 years.

There appears to be two trains of thought regarding their times with the districts. One is that for some Aboriginal Support Workers the position is a career choice. They will be in the job forever because they love it and are not sufficiently motivated to train for any other position.

Secondly, the Aboriginal Support Worker positions are seen as dead-end jobs and the Aboriginal Support Worker believes s/he will never advance in the organization— so s/he looks for other work, or furthers her/his education and applies for other jobs within or outside of her/his current district. There are of course exceptions to both generalizations.

Professional Development Opportunities

There appear to be professional development opportunities for Aboriginal Support Workers in the majority of School Districts. Choices include;

- Funding that the Aboriginal Support Workers can access for conferences, courses or other professional development activities.
- Regular School District professional development courses.
- CUPE professional development funds or workshops.
- Token systems where Aboriginal Support Workers 'earn' professional development rewards
- Regularly scheduled case conferencing and debriefing sessions
- Regional Support Worker Conferences
- Lists of other authorized conferences

The Aboriginal Support Workers in their focus groups indicated that they went to at least one conference per year. They were divided as to their belief that the School District professional development activities were useful or relevant to their roles.

Both Malaspina University-College (1978) and the University-College of the Caribou (1998) offered training courses for Aboriginal Support Workers.

Currently Douglas College, in partnership with the Maple Ridge School District

and the Okanagan University-College offer non-credit training for current or perspective Aboriginal Support Workers.

Non credit courses have been offered for Aboriginal Teacher's Aids and Support Workers privately. Examples include Tillicum Haus Native Friendship Centre in Nanaimo and the North Coast Tribal Council in Prince Rupert. These are not considered accredited programs and so Aboriginal Support Workers are often not able to use them to advance their education standing.

In many Colleges and universities today students may apply for prior learning assessments, which can potentially give them credit in a variety of topic areas. While Aboriginal Support Workers are in a perfect position to apply, the process is difficult for those working in isolated areas away from any university or college campuses.

Within the surveys we heard from a significant number of Aboriginal Support Workers that further training would make them more effective in their jobs. We also heard in the focus groups that there is little room for vertical movements in their positions so further training is often questioned as to its viability. While many recognize the need to increase their skill levels, it isn't necessarily sufficient motivation. The table below identifies the other barriers.

Table 5: Barriers to Furthering Education

Reason	Comments made by respondents
Time	➤ I just don't have time.
Access	➤ The college or university near me does not offer the courses I want.
Motivation	➤ How will the education help me advance in my job?
Family	➤ I'm unable to relocate my family. ➤ My husband works.
Jobs	➤ I don't want to lose my job.
	➤ I have two jobs and I can't leave the other one
Age	➤ I'm too old to go back to school now.
Priority	➤ My family is my priority right now.

Many Aboriginal Support Workers indicate they would be interested in furthering their education in the future.

Who do they Work Closest With?

Question 17 of the survey asked Aboriginal Support Workers whom they worked most closely with. While my initial intent was to know who they worked closest with in the school context, the question was obviously not clear enough, as many wrote in the word 'student' or in the blank 'other' space. The data shows that overwhelmingly they chose teachers and principals.

Table 6: Who do Aboriginal Support Workers Work Closest With?

Total Number /294	%	Position
254	86%	Teachers
163	55%	Principals
148	50%	Parents
96	33%	Counseling Staff
63	21%	Teachers Aides
38	13%	Band Office Staff

Where do they work?

Many Aboriginal Support Workers work in more than one school, with the range being from one to 17.⁵

Some support Workers working in more than one school, find themselves working with primary, intermediate and/or high school students in any given day or week.

Table 7: Which Type of School do They Work In?

/294	%	Type of School
201	68%	Elementary School
123	42%	High School
40	14%	Alternate School
36	12%	Middle School
27	9%	Primary School
16	5%	Junior High

'Other' included Band Offices, Adult Programs, District Offices, and K-10 Schools.

In high schools, the Aboriginal Support Worker's role likely is more focussed on the emotional well being of a student and their relationship issues. In elementary schools the Aboriginal Support Worker is likely to have more of a cultural or academic focus.

⁵ 17 is an exception that is far greater than most.

Only 41% of those in high schools indicated that they do liaison work with Post Secondary institutions. While this number seems significantly low, it is the high school workers who have the largest caseloads.

Typical Duties

Question 18 of the survey asked the Aboriginal Support Workers what duties they might perform in a typical day. After we initially tested the survey, we added *School Based Team Meetings* and *Individual Education Plans* to the list. This may have skewed the results somewhat, although we believe not in a major way, as many wrote them in the ‘other’ section at the bottom. (This was our cue to add them to the list.) We also asked the school districts to provide job descriptions and further analyzed the data we received from those districts that submitted. What follows is the list of what Aboriginal Support Workers indicate they actually do, and then the analysis of their expected work.

Table 8: Roles of Aboriginal Support Workers

/294	%	Role
253	86%	Liaison between student and teacher
241	82%	Cultural Awareness
222	76%	Tutoring
216	73%	Checking for Absenteeism
207	71%	Counseling
207	71%	Liaison between student and parent
199	68%	Liaison between parent and teacher
190	65%	Conflict Resolution
189	65%	Arts and Crafts
177	60%	Liaison between school and cultural community
167	57%	Teacher’s Assistant
162	55%	School Based Team Meetings
160	54%	Liaison between student and other social agency
137	47%	Liaison between school and band office(s)
117	40%	Individual Education Plans

115	39%	Early Literacy Intervention
90	31%	Curriculum Development
87	30%	Liaison between school and post secondary
77	26%	Family Counseling
77	26%	First Aid
38	13%	Teach Language

Further to this, when we examined their job descriptions we discovered the following.

School Districts in the province were approached and invited to submit their job descriptions for their Aboriginal Support Workers. We received replies from twelve School Districts for a total of 17 job descriptions. These job descriptions were variously headed as

- First Nations Education Assistant
- First Nations Student Support Worker
- First Nations Youth Care Worker
- First Nations Home School Liaison Worker
- First Nations Cultural Education Support Worker
- First Nations Education Worker
- First Nations Home School Coordinator
- Aboriginal Education Support Worker

The 17 job descriptions were carefully screened and compiled under four headings. These headings were those used on the job descriptions and included

1. Terms of Reference
2. Duties, Roles and Responsibilities
3. Qualifications
4. Characteristics.

Where responses were found to express the same intent on more than one submission, only one of the responses was used. As much as possible we have quoted directly from the submissions. As you will see there is similarity in some of the descriptions but we feel there is enough difference to include as many as possible.

Terms of Reference

- Support the educational programs of First Nations students
- Assist teacher, parents and guardians in promoting the success of First Nations students
- Assist the schools in the academic, cultural, social and emotional support of First Nations students
- Perform duties related to the preparation of teaching materials and working with First Nations students
- Provide a link between school, home and community of First Nations students
- Act as a role model for First Nations students
- Demonstrate positive interpersonal communication skills with students, teachers, parents and administrators
- Attend departmental meetings and in-services
- Aboriginal Support Workers will be supervised by the administrative officer
- Duties will be assigned by the District principal
- The Aboriginal Support Worker will work under the supervision of a teacher or counselor
- Aboriginal Support Workers will facilitate multicultural understanding
- Provide support that is relative and responsive to the needs of individual First Nations students

- Provide instruction in First Nations history, culture and language
- Provide remedial and program services to First Nations students
- Provide successful program methods and materials
- Aboriginal Support Workers will assist itinerant teachers
- Provide support to classroom teachers
- Support the classroom teacher in training and/or education of First Nations students
- Provide guidance and support to First Nations students
- Assist in incorporating Native content and cultural identity in the curriculum
- Assist with bridging cultural differences
- The Aboriginal Support Worker shall be a member of CUPE
- The Aboriginal Support Worker will provide academic assistance and tutoring to First Nations students.

In the terms of reference, rather than present the anecdotal summary used on the submissions we prepared the summaries in point form for clarity and for evaluating numerically. These summaries varied greatly from a simple statement as “To deliver support to First Nations students in order to foster educational successes and positive self esteem,” to a more specific statement of a hundred words including nine numerical points. These statements show a concern and empathy for the needs of First Nation’s students and First Nation’s communities. In the twelve job descriptions presented there is an average of 5 specific statements made in the Terms of Reference for each School District.

Duties- Roles- Responsibilities

- Function as an advocate for First Nations students
- Act as a role model and promote pride in First Nations students
- Assist teachers with students in arts, crafts, and recreation
- Work with groups or one-on-one under direction from teacher
- Provide student mentoring
- Contribute insight into Native cultural heritage

- Develop and present First Nations cultural workshops
- Assist teachers in implementation and presenting First Nations culture
- Consult with parents/guardian on school matters
- Represent students and parents in student dismissals
- Provide supervision in 'time out' settings
- Assist students to resolve conflicts in a positive manner
- Report incidents/accidents to the teacher and/or administrator
- Maintain awareness of custody/access to students
- Transport students home or to appointments as necessary
- Liaise with teachers and/or school personnel on student concerns
- Assist students in discussions on school difficulties with school personnel
- Alert school personnel on students who have social academic or discipline problems
- Distribute supplies, snacks, lunches and gym strip to students
- Function as a member of the school based team
- Attend staff or other scheduled meetings
- Maintain confidentiality
- Perform assigned tasks
- Reinforce overall teacher expectations of students
- Assist with the preparation of classroom displays and bulletin boards
- Assist in marking using a key
- Assist with classroom organization
- Assist with student supervision
- Operate equipment such as photocopies, audio visual aids and computers
- Liaise with community on behalf of the School
- Facilitate the involvement of First Nations resource people in the School
- Assist students in the classroom with learning activities
- Assist students in cultivating responsibility for learning
- Support regular attendance
- Monitor the progress of First Nations students
- Act as a confidant and advocate for First Nations students
- Develop a positive working relationship with students
- Support intellectual, social and emotional career needs of First Nations students
- Assist with cultural activities and projects.
- Provide written monthly and year-end reports to the local education council
- Act as a cultural resource person
- Maintain records and documents relating to First Nations student including anecdotal reports
- Monitor student progress, lateness and absenteeism

- Provide individual and group counseling to First Nations students
- Provide counseling and support services to families of First Nations students
- Provide tutorial services to First Nations students
- Provide a link to government and local agencies for First Nations students and families
- Develop and promote shared ownership of the Education of First Nations students
- Provide feedback to student on assignments and tasks
- Implement and monitor behaviour management programs
- Assist in classroom supervision as required

In the Duties Roles and Responsibilities we again used the same technique in compiling the statements in point form. Many of the statements were similar to those in the Terms of Reference but were far more extensive and specific. Here again responses varied from 7 statements to 26 and the average for the twelve School Districts was 13 statements.

Qualifications

- 1 year experience in First Nations education
- 1 year teacher assistant program or equivalent
- completion of Grade 12—Dogwood certificate
- First Nations Family Support Training or equivalent
- A minimum of 2 years college or university
- A minimum of 2 years college or university level counseling courses
- 6 months of current relevant experience with First Nations students
- Post secondary training in Special Education
- Post secondary training in First Nations education counseling and human services
- Completion of native Youth Worker Training Program
- Must be familiar with families and communities on and off reserve
- Be familiar with local Band staff and organization
- A working knowledge of local First Nations language
- Communicate effectively and with courtesy, tact and discretion
- Ability to use initiate and determine, judge and select appropriate course of action
- Working knowledge of behaviour management techniques conflict resolution and task analysis techniques

- Basic knowledge of computer spreadsheets and database packages
- Have a workplace Hazardous materials Information certificate
- Be familiar with WCB safety procedures
- Have a Class 5 drivers' license
- Have a private vehicle
- Have the physical capability to perform job duties
- Have training in Morningside technologies
- Ability to assist student to learn academic skills
- Ability to assist First Nations student with social and emotional development
- Demonstrated responsibility and effective time management skills
- Previous experience working in a liaison position
- Letter of reference regarding successful experience with at-risk adolescents
- Demonstrated healthy lifestyle
- 2 years experience working with members of the Aboriginal community
- Good observation skills and ability to keep accurate records
- Sound knowledge of needs and problems facing First Nations students
- Ability to bridge cultures by explaining and interpreting each to the other
- Ability to independently carry out assigned duties
- Ability to conform to established policies and procedures
- Ability to work with minimum supervision
- Valid Level 1 First Aid certificate
- Ability to work as a team member

The Qualifications section varied from no listed qualification to a maximum of fourteen specific requirements. Where qualifications were listed the minimum educational requirement requested is completion of grade 12 to two a maximum of two years college or university training.

We want also to draw your attention to the expectations of Aboriginal Support Workers. They are asked to teach, counsel, monitor behaviour, and alert schools to issues. And yet they are asked to have First Aid Training when only 26% use it.

Desired Characteristics

- Confident
- Commitment to First Nations community
- Commitment to continuous learning
- Commitment to School District educational goals
- Show initiative, independence and sensitivity
- Show an aptitude for working in the childcare field
- Possess a professional attitude
- Possess a high level of adaptability and responsibility
- Possess a positive, mature, and energetic attitude
- Ability to be patient, encouraging, firm and fair
- Have a good sense of humor
- Ability to work as a member of the educational system
- Ability to work effectively with students

In the last category, only two School Districts listed desirable traits expected of candidates. Here each district listed seven.

From the foregoing we got the distinct impression that the onus and demands placed on the position of Aboriginal Support Workers were very high for these paraprofessionals:

Table 9: Expectations of Aboriginal Support Workers

	Average # of expectations
Terms of Reference	5
Roles and Responsibilities	13
Qualifications	8

To expect Aboriginal Support Workers to work to the specific requirements in the time allocated to them each day seems bit unreasonable considering the families they are working with, the amount of paper required and the number of students they are expected to care for. Their work extends far beyond the required six

hours per day. They are expected, by their communities to also perform during the evening and on weekends. By rule they are not to teach, but they all do. They are expected to counsel not only students but teachers, parents and guardians as well. Their pay is minimal, their benefits are minimal and they are caring and wonderful people.

Relationship with the School District

While many Aboriginal Support Workers indicated they had good relationships with the staff in their schools, they also acknowledged the fact that teachers, administrative officers, and other non-teaching staff have only a minimal understanding of First Nations issues or the role of Aboriginal Support Workers. Support Worker after Support Worker relayed instances of blatant assumptions and subtle racism. It is not unheard of for their colleagues to question their qualifications, belittle the work they do, or accuse them of treason. When Aboriginal Support Workers plan special pull-out events they are accused of gratuitous spending.

When we started at one school, we had to beg for everything. The secretary said “You don’t work for the school. You work for the District.” She wouldn’t even answer the phone or take messages for the Aboriginal Support Worker. Most schools are supportive and welcoming, but it is terrible when you have more barriers set up from the inside. (Focus Group Statement)

Aboriginal Support Workers are expected to mould to the school district. The School District rarely makes large-scale efforts to embrace First Nation teaching styles. While the system may be efficient it’s not necessarily effective.

Relationship with the Aboriginal Community

The Aboriginal Community is loosely defined as parents, formal Aboriginal community groups⁶, bands, Tribal Councils, Friendship Centres, and any other organized structure serviced by and/or servicing Aboriginal students and/or their families.

Support Workers generally report good relations with students' families.

Exceptions always exist. Home visits are a reality, and are sometimes expected by other School District staff, even if it should be the teacher or even the Social Worker doing the visit. Aboriginal Support Workers in several districts reported home visits that did not feel physically safe. While some find solutions for this in Administrative Officer escorts, other Support Worker escorts, or in some extreme cases police escorts, not all do. One Aboriginal Support Worker insists on carrying a letter from the principal each time she goes to the home. It gives her a level of safety being identified as somewhat separate from the school administration.

Relationships between bands and Aboriginal Organizations and the Aboriginal Support Workers vary from adversarial to familial. Some Aboriginal Support Workers find their relationships supportive and enjoyable, others feel victims to laterally violent activity on a regular basis.

⁶ Such as health organizations and child and family service organizations.

Where a School District has a First Nation Advisory Committee, Support Workers are generally not represented on that board. The ramification here is that decisions are routinely made about their jobs, without their recommendations, or input. In no School District did I find a governing body of Aboriginal Support Workers for Aboriginal Support Workers.

Aboriginal Support Workers are at the bottom of a bureaucratic system in many School districts. In extreme instances, they are required to report to their supervising teachers, administrative officers, union heads, assistant superintendents, as well as School District First Nation contact people concurrently. In extreme cases, those 'supervisors' compete politically and an Aboriginal Support Worker finds herself in the middle, often unable to meet the needs of her students because she needs to satisfy so many fronts.

What is the Most Difficult Part of Your Job?

In the survey, Aboriginal Support Workers were asked, “What is the most difficult part of your job?” Their answers are separated these into the following categories of responses.

Students

The most common response in this category is connected to the absenteeism of students. Statements relating to finding ways to keep students in school were also noted.

Student behaviour is cited as being difficult to work with and the most common response had to do with uncontrollable or severe behaviour. Angry students, problem behaviour and having to work with students who do not want to be anywhere near an adult, are challenges.

Sometimes the concern is around the heartbreak of children’s lives. This is compounded by disclosures of abuse whether it is physical or sexual, and children with no support at home. Personal cases that Aboriginal Support Workers have limited effect on are frustrating and include children being taken out of their homes and put into foster care. Students have so many different needs and challenges they are often difficult to prioritize. When consoling

students after trauma and when children shut down and no longer respond to help, Aboriginal Support Workers feel helpless.

Academic issues focussed on getting students to take their education seriously, motivating them, trying to help them feel success in their work, and trying to get children to concentrate on their schoolwork. Students who have learning problems that are not met⁷ and students who fail also impact the Aboriginal Support Workers in a personal way

Systemic issues include not being able to be there for all of the children consistently as a result of scheduling. Aboriginal Support Workers have no input into assessing students and instead find themselves tracking down students who are in the halls.

Aboriginal Support Workers note dropouts, accepting student's decisions to quit and seeing students leaving the system because of suspensions or other reasons as being difficult.

Students personally impact Aboriginal Support Workers. They get attached to the children and have a very human desire to fix all of their problems. Ultimately, the death of a student is the most devastating.

⁷ Like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Fetal Alcohol Effect

Teachers

This section is particularly significant, given the number of Aboriginal Support Workers who indicate they work closest with teachers.

Relationships between Aboriginal Support Workers and teachers are sometimes wonderful and sometimes difficult. When things do get tense it is sometimes identified as a race issue and sometimes as a program issue.

Many Aboriginal Support Workers indicated that the teachers themselves were the most difficult part of their jobs, but did not elaborate. Others offered the following.

Teachers' limited knowledge and understanding of First Nations issues were noted significantly in the surveys. Respondents' statements included "Getting teachers to understand our children" and "Cultural insensitivity of Teachers." The end of this spectrum included teachers who were defined as 'red neck', 'narrow minded', 'racist', 'gruff' and 'biased'.

Aboriginal Support Workers often have to justify their positions to teachers, and especially to those who they label as 'closed-minded'. Aboriginal Support Workers feel that some teachers do not buy into the Aboriginal Support Worker program. They often feel as though teachers do not respect them.

Some respondents acknowledged that Aboriginal Support Workers have a problem relating to teachers, especially if the Aboriginal Support Worker positions are itinerant. Others acknowledged this might be a cross cultural communication issue.

Parents, Families and Homes

While they sometimes indicated that parents were a difficulty, the lack of parental support and involvement seemed to be the major issues. Dealing with difficult parents, dysfunctional families, and inconsistent parenting were also mentioned as problematic. Aboriginal Support Workers feel their students' pain when they learn of the difficulties that some kids have to endure.

Home visits are difficult if the visit is negative, or the Aboriginal Support Worker has to communicate sensitive information to parents. There is difficulty trying to make parents understand what goes on at the school. One respondent poignantly wrote that she wished she had time to get to know the parents better.

The System

This section is labeled The System because it applies to the bureaucracy within the School District Administrative network. While individuals may value the Aboriginal Support Workers—the system often does not.

Lack of time and not enough hours were indicated 27 times, as being a significant issue. This is added to by too many schools, too much paperwork⁸, and heavy caseloads. Being in the middle of huge bureaucracies and affected by internal politics is also suggested. It is compounded by a lack of their own physical space, red tape, limited budgets, policies, scheduling, and having no authority to report on student progress and expectations.

Aboriginal Support Workers have issues around working with staff (other than teachers). They find themselves justifying themselves and their positions to non-First Nations teachers, support staff and Administrative Officers. The program is seen as an annoyance and there is not enough networking with colleagues to attempt to fix it. They feel a lack of acknowledgement from their coworkers and do not feel comfortable in staff rooms. Aboriginal Support Workers do not feel a sense of belonging in the system because their positions are often minimized. They do not feel welcome and often feel isolated.

Mixed with all of this, the system has huge expectations of Aboriginal Support Workers. They lack resources, are not consulted in planning and feel torn as how to prioritize. The system also communicates poorly, which is an issue not only Aboriginal Support Workers face.

Support Workers readily acknowledge the racism they feel within the system. Racist teachers' assistants, teachers and staff who believe that First Nation students are getting special treatment feel they are free to tell Aboriginal Support Workers their opinions. Aboriginal Support Workers are often the only First Nations people in the school. They have no opportunity to debrief with other First Nation staff on a regular basis.⁹

To a lesser degree, Aboriginal Support Workers sometimes feel a lack of support from the Aboriginal community. This may include the fact that they are not consulted by First Nation Education Committees who make decisions about their jobs. Sometimes this comes in the form of lateral violence.

Aboriginal Support Workers often have difficulty getting community involvement in curriculum development, and finding a wide variety of resources and activities is difficult.

⁸ There is a systemic discrepancy in the record keeping expectations. Aboriginal Support Workers are expected to do far more than any other support staff.

⁹ While they identify racism as an issue, they also point out incidents of academic snobbery, and gender issues as well. It is common that non-Aboriginal people do not recognize racism—which is a significant factor when we belong to the privilege of mainstream.

What do Aboriginal Support Workers Like Best About Their Job?

Students

By far the majority of Aboriginal Support Workers indicated 'the students' as the best thing about their jobs.¹⁰ And those that didn't answer 'students' answered 'seeing students succeed'; 'working with kids'; 'children learning'; 'keeping children safe'. In fact, the total number of Aboriginal Support Workers who acknowledge children as total delight is so significant that it is an area to be noted. One Support Worker told me that "You know, we have an ability to meet with children at their own level; Teachers expect children to meet them at the teacher's level." Whether this is a cultural phenomenon, or simply an astute observation, it should be noted, as Aboriginal Support Workers often make significant positive changes in the self-worth a child feels. In a study done by School District 5, in 1995, it was noted that while School Districts are student-centered, First Nation's communities are child-centered. Aboriginal Support Workers fall somewhere in between.

Culture

Culture is also a part of the job that Support Workers love. They indicate that they themselves are always learning about their culture, and they enjoy too, teaching others about the culture. The development process for cultural

¹⁰ Well over two-thirds of respondents indicated this response.

materials and the honour and respect they are able to pay their own people is significant.

The Job

Many support workers enjoy the job itself. They love to make a difference in children's lives. And they like the variety and the flexibility of their roles. They have freedom to design First Nations programs and work in partnership with staff, parents and administration. They like to be creative and enjoy the diversity they meet each day, including staff, education, advocacy, and teaching.

Personal Growth

In terms of self, Aboriginal Support Workers also like to be healthy First Nations role models. They enjoy keeping busy, they are proud of their independence and they honour the fact that they are in positions that give them the opportunity to affect change. One Aboriginal Support Worker stated that she was glad to have challenges that bring out her own gifts.

What Changes Would Aboriginal Support Workers Make?

We asked Aboriginal Support Workers what changes they would make in order to feel more effective in their work. In essence perhaps, these are their recommendations.

Regarding Students, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- Let students have bus passes all the time
- Run lunch programs
- Work more for students and less for administrators

Regarding the School, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- Have decent spaces to work in
- Only work at one school
- Improve communication among all staff.

Regarding Teachers, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- See more training for teachers around First Nations issues
- Feel respected by teachers
- Improve their working relationship with teachers
- See more First Nations teachers hired

Regarding the Community, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- Like more Aboriginal parents to become involved
- Appreciate more parental support
- Work closer with parents
- Have some decision-making power in regards to their positions

Regarding administration, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- Hire more Aboriginal Support Workers
- Work in fewer schools
- Have secretarial support
- Wade through less red tape
- Feel supported and respected by their administrators
- Educate the administrators about First Nations issues.

Specific to their jobs, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- Have their own phones and offices
- Be employed for more hours
- Have smaller caseloads
- Feel more supported by their colleagues
- Have more flexibility in their scheduling
- Know their job descriptions
- Make more money
- Have monthly or bi-weekly meetings

- Understand the district's policies, procedures and guidelines
- Have more job security
- Have more training provided for new staff

Regarding social issues and levels of respect, Aboriginal Support Workers

would:

- Have higher profiles in their district
- See cultural sensitivity training for all staff
- Have their work seen as credible
- Have their opinions and experiences respected

Around Cultural Issues, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- See more elders in classrooms
- See more cultural awareness taught in classrooms
- See physical images of First Nations at all schools

As for their own skills, Aboriginal Support Workers would:

- Like to have more training and education for themselves
- See more relevant Professional Development Activity at the School
District level
- Be less timid around their colleagues
- Ask more questions
- Better understand Ministry of Children and Families policy

- Have a better understanding of how the education system works.

Other than those areas, Aboriginal Support Workers would like things to slow down and speed up. They'd like some autonomy, some structure, a copy of the Support Workers Handbook and they would like politics to quit affecting their students.

Head Lice and Funerals

Two issues arose in frequent enough quantity that they warranted a closer look. The first is head lice. A significant number of Aboriginal Support Workers are required to routinely check Aboriginal students for head lice. In some cases I was told this expectation is in their job descriptions. The peripheral questions around this are many.

- Are head lice such a judicious reason for expecting children to leave school? (In one case an Aboriginal Support Worker reported that a child missed three months of school because the School District has a zero tolerance policy regarding head lice.) I think this may be flagged as a human rights issue.
- Are checks for head lice not the responsibility of volunteer parents, or a school nurse or the public health nurse?
- Perhaps most significant, why are Aboriginal Support Workers expected to check Aboriginal children for head lice in the first place? Who checks the heads of non-Aboriginal children as part of systemic policy?

Generations of First Nations children were routinely and unnecessarily deloused in Residential Schools—and so I question why this shameful history has followed

Aboriginal children into the public school system. It is a blatant form of institutional (as opposed to systemic¹¹) racism and it must be addressed.

The second issue is funerals. Aboriginal people die young and they die with a frequency that surpasses most of mainstream. Most Aboriginal people have a form of grieving that is healthy and that has followed tradition through the assimilation attempts of the federal government. School Districts do not have a thorough cultural understanding of the frequency of funerals that Aboriginal people may be expected to attend. The issue might easily be addressed in the recommended First Nations social issues awareness (as opposed to arts and crafts) training for all staff.

¹¹ Systemic racism is often defined as unintentional. Institutional racism may be defined as intentional and conscious.

THE SUPPORT WORKER'S HANDBOOK

While I believe that the current Aboriginal Support Worker's Handbook had its place in history, it needs to be updated significantly. The on-line version is bulky and time consuming to print, as there is no 'button' that allows the entire document to be printed. In addition to this, the lack of a hard copy means the majority of Aboriginal Support Workers are not able to access it because of their own lack of computers, office space and/or computer skills.

About 2/3 of Aboriginal support workers had never heard of the handbook. Of the ones who had, roughly 1/3 use it. In part they don't find anything useful at a policy level, or in terms of offering information.

I would suggest that the Ministry of Education develop a book somewhat akin to a teacher's daybook or a student day planner. Suggestions from the field include:

- A standardized reporting section
- Brief blurbs of information that are significant to their jobs
- Some of David Rattray's material on Aboriginal Support Workers and their roles and conditions
- Colour!
- Lists of the First Nations Contacts at all of the universities and colleges for use by either students of the Aboriginal Support Workers themselves.

-Lists of programs Aboriginal Support Workers might take themselves at colleges, universities or other academic facilities.

-FAS/FAE information

-Affirmations

If the Aboriginal Education Branch chooses to continue with the current Support Worker handbook, I would recommend including more 'information' and fewer blank pages. I would suggest that the majority of the current format could be contained in a section entitled 'For New Aboriginal Support Workers'. The language should be changed so that the child is not seen as a problem, but rather it is the school that has a challenge that consists of the teacher, the administrative officer, the student, the student's family, and any other significant players. I would also delete the section that encourages Aboriginal Support Workers to meet with Parents in Bingo Halls as this is an incredibly stereotyped suggestion.

BEST PRACTICES

There were examples of some administrative processes that can be described as being very Aboriginal Support Worker-Friendly. Two examples will be given and described without identifying the school districts.

Administration

- The direct administration of the Aboriginal Support Workers is supportive, collegial and empathic.
- Aboriginal Support Workers are given a choice as to their union membership.
- Aboriginal Support Workers feel they have an advocate in the system.

Professional Development

- There are adequate, challenging internal professional development activities within the department or the school district itself.
- There are opportunities for Aboriginal Support Workers to attend professional development activities outside the district.
- There are emotional and financial supports offered to the Aboriginal Support Workers professional development opportunities, if necessary.

Emotional Support

- Regularly scheduled debriefing sessions are offered to Aboriginal Support Workers

- Aboriginal Support Workers feel listened to by their supervisors. Their issues are taken seriously and addressed when necessary.
- Aboriginal Support Workers are allowed time to manage personal issues.

Community

- There are good relationships between the First Nations community and the Aboriginal Support Workers, as well as their administrations.
- There is adequate community buy-in for functions.
- There is an informal connection with the cultural community or communities.
- There is an acknowledgement of the conflict of interest with Aboriginal Support Workers working with their own family members.