

First Nations and Métis Traditional Practices and Foods

First Nations and Métis communities are diverse. In Saskatchewan, the language groups include nêhiyawak (Cree: Plains, Swampy, Woodland), Denesuline (Dené), Dakota, Lakota, Nakota, Nahkawé (Saulteaux) and Michif. First Nations and Métis peoples have a special relationship with the earth and all living things in it. This relationship is based on a spiritual connection to Mother Earth and on the subsistence needs and values extending back thousands of years (Assembly of First Nations).

The land is valued as a source of food, shelter, medicine and knowledge, and is therefore also regarded as a relative, Mother Earth and a teacher.

(Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, Inspiring Success, 2018)

Relationship through Practice and Food

Food plays an important role in the lives of First Nations and Métis people. Food is considered a gift and there is a responsibility to foster healthy relationships with the land, water, plants and animals that provide the food. Decisions about the amount of food to hunt, to fish, to gather, to grow and to eat ensure that the environment is sustainable and meets the needs of all people.

There were many food related challenges that First Nations and Métis students experienced while in residential schools. During this time, some students who were raised on traditional foods that their parents had hunted, fished or harvested lost these foods in their diet and were served the standard European diet and foods. This change in diet added to the students' sense of disorientation and students found it difficult to adjust.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)

Each First Nation or Métis community may have traditional hunting and gathering practices and foods that are unique to their community. First Nations and Métis Elders are working towards regaining traditional practices to teach their children and their children's children about healthy eating in their communities. Involve First Nations and Métis Elders when planning learning experiences to ensure that the students learn about protocols and traditional practices used to harvest or gather the foods. Students will learn about the significance of the foods and the role food plays as part of their mental, spiritual, social and emotional well-being.

Changes to Traditional Food Practices

Saskatchewan Voices

Mother Earth provides all food that is eaten on earth. We are poisoning her with all the chemicals and pollutants we are putting in her; Mother Earth is angry with us. We need to treat Mother Earth better, as if she were our own mother and take care of her.

(Saskatchewan Elder, 2017)



People used their knowledge of their environment and food systems to survive off the land. The different seasons allowed people to harvest, gather and hunt for foods and not deplete their sources of nourishment. These food practices contributed to a healthy and physical lifestyle and knowledge of the land, environment and way of life.

Today, First Nations and Métis people face challenges to access traditional foods as there may be changes in the land and water. Chemicals and pollutants impact the environment and how food sources are grown. Diets are also influenced by processed food sources and the lack of access to certain foods based on where one lives.

Celebrate First Nations and Métis Cultural Practices

Celebrating cultural practices and foods will help families and students feel welcome at school. Traditional feasts help Métis and First Nations students and families feel included in the school community. Elders can share stories of protocols, traditional practices and the history of particular feasts. This will encourage all students to learn protocols and to participate in the feasts.

Saskatchewan Voices

Although each First Nations or Métis community does something different for their feasts, the food will always be at the centre of the room, it is always blessed before eating.

(Saskatchewan Elder, 2017)

Incorporate First Nations and Métis Foods and Practices

Saskatchewan's education sector is committed to ensuring opportunities exist for all students to learn about sustainability through land-based education and other learning programs that teach respect and ongoing care for the environment.

(Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, *Inspiring Success*, 2018)

To strengthen students' connection with nature and interest in healthy eating, consider place-based learning. Involve local experts, such as a Métis and First Nations Elder to assist in planning the learning experience to meet curricular outcomes and the needs of the students, and at the same time, to incorporate First Nations and Métis ways of knowing. A First Nations or Métis Elder may share oral traditions about the importance of local food sources to maintain a healthy body and mind. Collaborating with local experts ensures that the content, perspectives and ways of knowing are relevant to the students and reflective of the local community.



It is important for educators to work closely with local Elders, families and communities to develop a shared understanding of hunting and gathering practices, including traditional and contemporary First Nations and Métis perspectives.

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Sources:

Assembly of First Nations. Honouring Earth. 2013. Accessed April 4, 2018 from <http://www.afn.ca/honoring-earth/>.

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, *Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK-12 Education Policy Framework*. 2018.