

June 23, 2026

Good evening and welcome.

This month, across the District, we celebrated National Indigenous History Month. And throughout the month, I've been reflecting on the many opportunities that have deepened learning, strengthened relationships, and created spaces where Indigenous voices can be heard more clearly across Burnaby Schools.

This month honours identity, culture, language, community, and the many contributions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. It is a time to celebrate resilience, achievement, and pride. But Indigenous History Month also calls on us to engage honestly with history and to recognize that Reconciliation remains unfinished work. It challenges us to reflect on where we are, how far we have come, and how far we still have to go.

There is much to be proud of in our District and community. At the same time, there is a sobering realization that the path toward Reconciliation is neither straightforward nor complete. At times it can feel overwhelming to consider the work that still lies ahead. Indeed, there are moments where we may question our progress, encounter discomfort or confront difficult truths about the systems and institutions we are part of. Yet, what I've found is that it is often through this discomfort that our deepest learning takes place. It's through honest reflection that we begin to better understand our responsibilities and the possibilities for meaningful change.

Over the last few weeks and as recently as yesterday, I've had the privilege of attending events that brought these reflections into sharp focus.

I attended both the Indigenous Youth Graduation Ceremony, honouring Grade 12 graduates as well as the Indigenous Grade 7 Leaving Ceremony that recognizes students transitioning to high school. While these gatherings marked different milestones, they shared a common thread: a celebration of Indigenous youth, their accomplishments, and the communities that have supported them along the way.

What struck me most at both events was the profound importance of family, culture, and connection. These celebrations were filled with pride, but also with honesty. They reminded me that many Indigenous students continue to navigate barriers that others may never see. They reminded me that success is not measured simply by a certificate or diploma, but by the perseverance, courage, and determination required to reach these milestones.

At the Grade 12 ceremony, students shared reflections that were both inspiring and challenging. Several spoke candidly about experiences of exclusion, isolation, and the difficulty of navigating school environments where they did not always feel seen, understood or reflected. Their stories confirmed that while meaningful progress has been made, Reconciliation is not measured solely by programs, events or initiatives. It is measured by whether students genuinely experience belonging, respect, and connection in their daily lives.

I must admit that these reflections weren't easy to listen to, but they were important to hear. They reminded me that we cannot celebrate the successes without acknowledging the challenges. And while there is much to be proud of, there is still important work ahead to ensure Indigenous students, families and staff feel valued not as symbols or representatives, but as individuals whose identities, voices, and experiences are respected and affirmed.

One message that I took from the Grade 12 ceremony stayed with me as I attended the Grade 7 Leaving Ceremony just last week. Some of the graduates reflected on what it was like when they were younger and how important it is to feel seen, valued, and represented. They spoke about not always seeing themselves reflected in their classrooms, in what they were learning about or in the people around them.

My hope is that this is changing in our schools.

My hope is that when Indigenous students walk into their classrooms, they increasingly see opportunities to learn about Indigenous histories, cultures, languages, and ways of knowing. My hope is that they see Indigenous role models, leaders, and educators who remind them that their voices matter and that they belong.

The Grade 7 students preparing to begin high school deserve to see themselves not only reflected in schools but leading within them. They deserve to see Indigenous students graduating, teaching, creating, advocating, and shaping the future. And my hope is that the graduates who came before them serve as living examples of all that is possible.

As educators, trustees and members of this District, we also recognize that we each have a responsibility in this journey. We know that schools have not always been places where Indigenous students and families feel safe, welcomed or valued. Acknowledging that truth is an important part of Reconciliation. It also challenges us to continue building relationships grounded in respect, understanding and trust, and to create learning environments where Indigenous students see themselves reflected, supported and empowered.

I want to acknowledge and thank the many staff members, school administrators, and support workers across Burnaby Schools who have helped create meaningful learning opportunities for Indigenous students and all learners throughout the District. Throughout this month – and throughout the entire school year – they’ve embraced the responsibility of helping students learn about Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives in thoughtful and meaningful ways.

I also want to express gratitude to the Elders, Matriarchs, Knowledge Keepers, and community members whose wisdom, teachings, and guidance continue to enrich our schools and our lives. Their contributions help ensure that Indigenous perspectives are not simply acknowledged but meaningfully woven into the very fabric of our learning communities.

Most importantly, I want to acknowledge the students themselves. The students we celebrated this month shared their stories, their talents, their aspirations and, in some cases, their vulnerabilities. Their voices challenged us, inspired us, and reminded us why this work matters. Their willingness to speak honestly about their experiences is a gift, and one that carries with it a responsibility for all of us to listen and act.

Before concluding, I would like to offer a personal note of gratitude to Trustee Mikelle Sasakamoose who spoke at the Grade 12 graduation ceremony earlier this month.

I want to thank her for the message she shared at that event, but I also want to thank Mikelle for helping me become a better trustee and person. Over the past four years, Mikelle has joined us at this table with leadership, honesty, and unwavering commitment to Indigenous youth and communities. She’s challenged assumptions, shifted perspectives, and helped strengthen both our Board and our District.

What I appreciate most about Mikelle is her ability to ground conversations in authenticity and accountability. If you haven’t had the privilege of getting to know Mikelle, I can tell you without hesitation that she has a remarkable way of cutting through complexity and reminding you of what matters most: relationships, responsibility, and the experiences of the people we serve. Through both her words and actions, she has helped create space for more honest conversations and deeper reflection on the work of truth and reconciliation.

As many know, Mikelle will not be seeking re-election this fall. While I am excited for the opportunities ahead of her and the important work she will continue to do in support of Indigenous youth and communities, her departure from the Board is bittersweet.

I know we are stronger because of her presence and leadership. Many of us around this table have been changed by her perspective, her candour, and her willingness to challenge us to do better. Mikelle's impact will endure beyond her term as trustee. It will live on in the conversations she's helped shape, the expectations she's helped raise, and in the young people she's encouraged to stand firmly in who they are.

As we come to the end of Indigenous History Month, I want to acknowledge why the work we do truly matters. The students, families, and staff we honoured this month – their voices, experiences, and aspirations – call on us to continue building school communities where every individual feels they belong, and where everyone sees possibility for themselves.

Thank you.

**Kristin Schnider, Chair
Burnaby Board of Education**