

Wellness Elders Program

Sarah Hyden and Carolyne Whenham

The Tłıchǫ Region initiated a Wellness Elder program to implement the 'Strong Like Two People' approach which was developed by Chief Jimmy Bruneau. The Wellness Elder program uses this approach to combine both Western and Indigenous knowledges in our school mental health and wellness programming.



Wellness Elder Frank Arrowmaker talking about Truth and Reconciliation to Gamètì students in school and during cultural camps. Photos by Carolyne Whenham

The Wellness Elders program was implemented in the schools to help further integrate the Tłıchǫ culture and provide access to cultural programming for all students. The Wellness Elder program provides direct student care including listening and sharing of traditional knowledge, advising and collaboratively delivering language and cultural programming, and participating in school wide initiatives to create cultural safety. The Wellness Elders make themselves available by being in the halls and accessing classrooms. Students can approach them to talk about anything and, depending on the situation, the Elder can talk with them or refer them to a different resource such as a counsellor. The Elders are also in place to initiate craft and sharing circles for students to feel welcome, practice skills, and be with others. A sharing circle is a way to bring about conversation and discussion in an organic way that is culturally safe. The Elders can provide stories for the students to learn and explore their culture while practicing traditional beading, sewing, and other crafts and skills.



Health and Wellness Elder Doreen Apples on the land with a group of girls from Chief Jimmy Bruneau School.

The Wellness Elders are integrated within the school so that they have a good understanding of what is happening day to day. They meet with teachers and program support staff, learn about different perspectives and issues that are impacting the students and try to incorporate these into their approach. The Elders work closely with our Child and Youth Care Counselling team to refer students that may be impacted by traumas and who are requesting counselling. In turn, the counsellors will participate in some of the circles to learn more about Tłıchǫ culture, highlighting the concept of 'Strong Like Two People'. It is a program that is benefiting the students and building strength within our community.

Sarah Hyden MSW, RSW is the Mental Health and Wellness Manager for Tłıchǫ Community Services Agency. She actively works towards building community capacity in the Tłıchǫ region.

Carolynne Whenham is the Regional Coordinating Principal at the Tłıchǫ Community Services Agency. She is a long-time advocate for culturally responsive services to support teachers and students in the Tłıchǫ region.



Edith Wellin talks about the body parts of a rabbit with students at Elizabeth Mackenzie Elementary School.



Health and Wellness Elder Celine Whane lends her support with primary school children.