

Circle of Knowledge Episode 2 – Matthew Wildcat

Conor Kerr: Today on the Circle of Knowledge Podcast.

Matthew Wildcat: I always really like speaking in Edmonton, because I always think of Edmonton as being one of the indigenous capitals of the world. It's easy to turn away from authority, but we actually need to dive into it and to define how we locate those forms of authority. But I prefer to talk about it in terms of responsibility, because what locating response does is it says, "okay yes there is going to be places where people make decisions and responsible for things, but then they're nested within that large web of relations and their acting based on those indigenous laws in order to do all this."

Conor Kerr: Tawow, come on in. Welcome to the Circle of Knowledge podcast sponsored by the Edmonton Community Foundation. My name is Conor Kerr, and I'll be your host today for a conversation with Matt Wildcat. Matt is a professor of political science at the University of Alberta and works on Indigenous governance structures. Today we're really going about wahkohtowin and his work with the Maskwacis Education Schools Commission. We are going to start off with our interview with Matt Wildcat and Eliot Young. And then move into a recording of Matt's lecture that he gave at NorQuest College.

Conor Kerr: All right. Good afternoon everybody and welcome to the second episode of our Circle of Knowledge indigenous speakers podcast. My name is Conor Kerr, and I am the manager of our Indigenous Relations and Services team at NorQuest College. A long title that basically means what I do is I try to create good Indigenous educational programs for our students and our staff. I'm from the Metis community of Lac St. Anne Alberta, and I feel very fortunate to be joined by some amazing guests today. I have my colleague Eliot Young here.

Elliott Young: Elliott Young. I am the Indigenous Community Engagement Advisor here at NorQuest so working with the Indigenous Community here in Edmonton but also with our Wetaskiwin Campus. Working out in Maskwacis quite a bit, which is my home community. I am from Ermineskin Cree Nation. Yeah, that's me.

Conor Kerr: Right on Eliot. And I'm also joined by Matthew Wildcat today.

Matthew Wildcat: Hey, it's great to be here. Yeah, I am an Instructor of Political Science in Native Cities at the University of Alberta, and I'm just finishing up my Ph.D. at UBC. My work focuses primarily on governance, but I have also started to think more broadly about Indigenous Institutions and the type of campaigns and movements that we need to foster within our communities in order to create institutions that take care of people and provide valuable supports that people need.

Conor Kerr: Right on. Awesome. First off, thank you so much, Matt, for earlier, your amazing lecture. Matt was here speaking about Indigenous Governance Structures and

really specifically what they did to create the Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission. Apologies if I said that one wrong there too. But I know a couple of the big things that you were chatting about in the lecture today. And one first thing that really stuck out for me was when you were talking about the elders and knowledge keepers. And just want to ask you, how do you make sure that their voices are incorporated or they were into these governance structures? Whether it's through that or it's just, in general, I guess in governance.

Matthew Wildcat: That's a really good question. Within the new school system, one of the things is that there is a formal elder circle. This will involve 10 elders, two from each of the four First Nations and then also two representatives from Pigeon Lake as well. And you have to have those formal structures where people are involved and where their voice matters. Because not only is that their elder circle but there is also people within that elder's circle are able to appoint members to the board. And so they have a formal board sit, they are voting members of the board. That's really important. But I also think in general what matters with any sort of relationship that you are trying to foster is that you need to build that up over time. I think it's really easy if you put a bunch of expectations on somebody and there is no ability to have a real relationship behind it, behind those responsibilities you ask from someone, or the authority you place on somebody. That it's really easy for people to become defensive about things.

Matthew Wildcat: And it's very easy for people to think that what they are responsible for is that they are going to have to fight against other people who would want a different, who would want a different way. And so unless you have actual real relationship between the elders who you've established those relationships with, that it's really easy for people to become defensive about things. For me, your relationship with the elders has to develop over the course of a number of years, even decades sometimes. And I think unless those real substantive relationships that it really hard to have elders be authoritative decision makers within your organizations.

Conor Kerr: Oh yeah. For sure, definitely. And I know you are mentioning stuff about that eight-year process of really starting to bring this in. But it's not really just that, it's that 30-year process you also talk about. These people who are there continually. Eliot, do you want to just add in a little bit about how we at NorQuest, we're trying to work with elders and knowledge keepers and our work and how you kind of envision that too?

Elliott Young: Yeah, in the Center we had Dolores Cardinal who is White Fish (Good Fish) Lake, who has been with the Center and been with NorQuest for a long time. And essentially, she has two roles. One being support for students and helping students with anything that they're dealing with it and also just essentially like kokum like our center's kokum. And the other side of it is really being involved in different capacities within the administration of NorQuest. She will be out doing presentations in classrooms. She will be working closely with the president of the college. It's not only a face that's a welcoming face within the center but it somebody that's leaned upon heavily within the institution to have

a voice around different tables and a voice in the classroom. And so that is one piece around how I would say NorQuest is working with elders.

Elliott Young: And then there the other piece, this is where it's a learning process and it's dynamic and fluid where when initiatives are being developed especially there is one project that we are working on right now that's looking at Indigenous Governance. And we've been thinking about it from a very Indigenous leadership view where we would need to share, or we would need to look at how we can start that program within Ceremony and continually have it within Ceremony. I think one important piece around it is ensuring an elder is there. And ensuring that there is protocol within that program and within the development of that program.

Conor Kerr: Yeah. 100% definitely agree with that. I think it comes back to as we've been talking about like that wahkohtowin like the relationships. And I also think I just want to ask you, Matt, you mentioned in your lecture today that the staff they are there for 30 years. And they are really working on creating a better education system for the children of the communities. Why do you think the staff are there for 30 years? Why do you think you didn't have that same kind of turnover that has affected other kind of communities and not just First Nations and Metis ones but just in general lots of rural education systems.

Matthew Wildcat: I think it was because people felt that they were something part of bigger than themselves. And they could envision themselves as being part of something where you had positive results coming out of it. And it's really easy if you are part of an organization where there is no hope for the future, you're not sure what you're doing, the type of important outcomes that are happening from it. It would be difficult to stay with something for 30 years if you feel like you're banging your head against the wall.

Conor Kerr: 100% yeah.

Matthew Wildcat: But I think what happened in Maskwacîs is that there was people who were able to get traction on things. And one of the ways in which I have described this or posed it as the question to my students in my governance courses is, can an organization that's putting out fires all the time be classified as being successful? And so in Maskwacîs all of those schools have to go through a period where all they were doing is putting out fires every day. And they were just responding to things and the reaction. And that's what people talk, you get in that cycle and that you never jump out of it. But for whatever reason, in Maskwacîs they were able to transition from a phase where all they were doing is putting out fires to a phase where then they didn't have to put out fires all the time, and they could start devoting some of their energy to making policies. To making rules that they were going to follow all the time. And to creating processes and procedures. And then they started getting pretty good at that.

Matthew Wildcat: And then what happened after they started getting their policies in place and they started being able to cover most of the areas of their responsibility, they

got to a place where they said, "okay, we can actually start planning for the future here, we can think about planning for the future." And so they started planning. And then from planning, they said, "okay. Well, how are we going to measure our success? How do we know that our plans are actually being useful?" And then they started getting good at data management. But that process from putting out fires to being really good at keeping data and keeping records of measuring their success was a 15-year process. That's the thing that I think for our organizations, we need a little bit within Indigenous political organizing. We need to start looking at and considering when do we see organizations that are in that stage of putting out fires, but we can see that they are going to become successful over time?

Conor Kerr: Yeah, and I think that's a big thing even with us at NorQuest working with our Indigenous who attended. We want them to think more broadly about their education, what this is actually going to mean for them in their lives, what they are going to be able to do with it. Rather than thinking broader than just like, "this math test sucks, and I hate math." But thinking, okay you got to do this math because then you know you are getting into that Community Support Worker Program. Then you can go back to the community, and you can start working with your community which is overall the real reason that you are here. You want to help better that.

Conor Kerr: And so I want to ask you because there is a lot of young people on those videos that you showed today. And a couple of them they are talking about their future careers: going into the reserves or working on welding, or going to the U of A and starting indigenous sites, those type of things. Are you seeing these young people who are going off and getting education? Are they coming back to Maskwacis? Are they working in the community? Are they bringing these knowledge systems back?

Matthew Wildcat: Yeah, definitely, in Maskwacis there is many people who have gone through the schools who are now working in the schools. I think that's a benefit for them and even many people who have gone to their schools are now becoming teachers themselves. And one of the nice things about that organization and also the skill they have, is it means that they can kind of have constant supply of people from the community who are actually becoming teachers. But these are difficult challenges I think for many communities. There is a draw to living in the city and I don't think we should ignore it and pretend like everyone is going to move back to the community, right?

Conor Kerr: I got zero interest in moving back to Drayton Valley that's for sure.

Matthew Wildcat: And me and Eliot too. We grew up in Maskwacis. Me and Eliot were neighbors growing up. And so I'm saying it's not a possibility but probably unlikely at this time that I'm going to move back and go and live in... We couldn't even go back and live in Maskwacis because there are no houses there. We will have to go live in a Tuscan. These are serious conversations that we need to have, and that's why I think it's really important to conceptualize our political orders as

Indigenous people as being more broader and more expansive so that we can see them as happening in cities in really substantive ways. But then also we can encourage that kind of movement back and forth between cities in all the communities that we come from.

Elliott Young: And to add a little bit to that where in your presentation you were talking about isolation and even the isolation of membership where it's only you'd have two parents from two different bands and you'll only be able to have membership to one band. Matthew and I talked about this previously before where indigenous, really First Nations people, we weren't isolated. That's why there is Treaty 6 territory so large. It's because we are nomadic people. There is just so many pieces around how indigenous people and especially Nehiyaw people. How we traditionally lived our lifestyle that's now being eroded and with colonial structures and just with a lot of colonial structures it's now starting to impact Nehiyaw people or Nehiyawak are living. And how they perceive the world and how they perceive what is the status quo within a lot of communities.

Elliott Young: And that being very restrictive to on reserve, very restrictive to those imaginary boundaries like the ones that statement from Mario Swampy within the one in the videos that you showed. Talking about an invisible boundary between nations that a lot of people perceive as being boundaries for themselves and their daily lives. And being able to break those down and this one piece where I see your presentation as one around indigenous governance but also incorporating pieces around community development. That quote that you had about changing the story that you'd tell or at least the story that you have-

Matthew Wildcat: I said I'm now a social media influencer. I'm really famous, yeah.

Elliott Young: Exactly. It's really being able to put that narrative and have that power. It's really I would think that power dynamic through dialogue to allow the community to decide how power and how they are able to develop policy and really implement indigenous governance in their community. And it's all kind of on a spectrum of community development, which I think is really important.

Conor Kerr: Yeah. Thanks, Elliott. I think this leads me to the next question. It might not even be so much based on the lecture today. This might even be more of a personal one. How then do you engage an urban indigenous population who still maintains close ties to their communities? Or if they don't maintain close to the community, how do you still have them be in governance structure that are happening and are still affecting their livelihood even if they live in Edmonton, but they are from Maskwacîs or one of the nations there?

Elliott Young: There are I don't mean to promote Ermineskin a bit too much. But Ermineskin actually has a communications team that does really well in engaging off-reserve urban members through social media that being Facebook, Instagram, all these different platforms to ensures that: one, they are knowing about things that are happening within Ermineskin like any programs, any type of initiatives that they'd want to be involved in. And then on the flip side of it is now pushed

Ermineskin to start engaging those off-reserve members. I'm now looking at posters coming from Ermineskin Cree Nation through these media platforms that are advertising engaging sessions that are happening off reserve. That are actually happening within Edmonton that any Ermineskin members can participate in or be engaged through this. Ermineskin is not the first one to do it, Samson is doing a really good job of it. Samson Cree Nation out in Maskwacîs. One that's even more progressive in the sense of how they are interacting with them is Bigstone Cree Nation.

Conor Kerr: Yeah, I have seen a lot from Bigstone.

Elliott Young: They actually have an authority within Edmonton and have a corporate office here. And so they've really been able to mobilize themselves within Edmonton. But that's from like First Nation to their members within and off reserve. But then any type of organization like NorQuest well my job is community gifted but really being able to define what an indigenous community is within Edmonton is hard press. You are not going to be able to find one definition for it. It's really being able to define that within your own organization and what it means, and then from there, you will know how meaningful engagement will look like for you within that organization and what it means.

Conor Kerr: Yeah, thanks Eliot. You got anything to add on that Matt?

Matthew Wildcat: For sure, there are really tough questions that I think we have ahead of us as indigenous peoples and thinking about our political organizations. We are just kind of scratching the surface. First Nations are still figuring out how they relate to their members who exist off-reserve, who maybe exist in large centers and cities. But how do them and cities interact? That's what Eliot was alluding to. And what role then do First Nation governments have in creating collective authority within cities? And then our indigenous people within cities through our own relationships with each other able to constitute different forms of indigenous authority, indigenous sovereignty within cities. And when you start to break down all the different issues that play there, then it starts to become quite complex, right? Do we afford special priority to indigenous peoples within cities whose traditional territories we are on, right? Because within Edmonton there's people who have come from all over. But then that itself is very trick to say, "okay we're going to afford this special priority to all the Cree people whose traditional territory is Edmonton."

Conor Kerr: Yeah, the ancestors and the Papaschase first nation. I could go for that one.

Matthew Wildcat: Because part of the processes, which have displaced people from say the North or from other areas to Edmonton have been part of colonialism itself. You can't just completely overwrite or cut off saying that indigenous peoples who have been displaced from other areas and now reside in Edmonton shouldn't have any sort of substantive say because I think that they should. These are people who this is part of where they live, and they live here because they've been subject to all the same forces of colonialism that we have. And these are

questions which I think we are not going to be able to solve overnight. But I think we need to start reconceptualizing both: A, how we think of citizenship and really allowing for a much greater degree of mobility or acknowledging how much greater degree of mobility which is already existing within our citizenship regimes. And then B, we have to reconsider where we locate sites of authority, where we locate sites of political authority and how those different sites of authority are going to rally to each other.

Conor Kerr: Yeah, I know that's a really, really good point. Thanks for sharing that. I guess it's all related. However, I guess I'm just going on a different kind of note here. You're studying Indigenous Governance; you're teaching Indigenous Governance. And do you have any advice for educators? Specifically, non-indigenous educators on how they could incorporate elements of that into their classrooms or into their teaching practices.

Matthew Wildcat: For me, I think that whenever you take on something, which you are a little bit unfamiliar with, or a little bit uncomfortable with there is... I could say all sorts of things, being reflective, understanding the type of privileges that you bring into a situation and your social location. Those things are really important, and I think that there is all sorts of people that have said that better than I have. But what I think is really important is that you actually, just commit to putting some time and effort into it. Sometimes I think that what's happened is that we think there is a straightforward path or an easy pathway to being able to teach about these things. But really there is always going to be a degree of discomfort for non-indigenous people who are teaching indigenous issues.

Matthew Wildcat: But you have to actually, move out of a place where you're like fully fish out of the water, fully uncomfortable into a place where you have a relationship with that discomfort that you think to feel good about and that you can manage. And I think the only way in which you move from that point A to point B is that you have to commit to putting in the effort and the time till getting out that zone of complete discomfort into an area that you are a little bit more comfortable with. And there is no real magic bullet for how to do that. I don't think.

Conor Kerr: Always, yeah. Do you got anything on that one, Elliott?

Elliott Young: No, I don't think so. I think Matthew talks about it very well in the sense of that discomfort, piece. And I don't think you'll be able to get away from that. Definitely with NorQuest as well, with the conversations that I've had with instructors, there's just that piece of discomfort that you are probably going to have.

Conor Kerr: I guess just talking about NorQuest here and getting some advice from yourselves. Right now I feel very fortunate at NorQuest because we have quite a couple of people who self-identify as indigenous on our board of governors. We have our elders in place here. But what can we do as an institution to start serving our indigenous students, our indigenous faculty and our non-indigenous

staff by bringing these indigenous governance structures. Is there a way for us to reevaluate the way we look at our college itself?

Matthew Wildcat: You know, it's a really tough question.

Conor Kerr: Oh yeah, totally.

Matthew Wildcat: I've been involved in quite a number of processes of setting up new organizations of new institutions now. Most of which have been Maskwacîs but also I did a lot of work in the North in Dene-tah, up in Yellowknife and over in Whitehorse. I was even up to Inuvik once. And I learned a lot up there of people who are these really amazing emerging indigenous leader up in the North who are thinking deeply about the type of organizations they create and the type of political future that they are trying to create. Out of all those experiences, I started to think more deeply about, is there actually a formal method that we could follow to address these questions? And so, I've been toying around with something recently that I'm calling Relational Governance.

Matthew Wildcat: This Relational Governance is actually I think like all good methods, it should be fairly straightforward at its core. And it asks a really simple questions of us. That question is how do we locate responsibility within a web of relations based on indigenous laws or ethics? And if you can answer that question as an organization, I think that you are in a really good place to be able to define how your governance structures are going to be set up or how they are going to transition in order to substantively include indigenous people. That question if you break it down it has three components. What are the indigenous ethics and laws that you're going to work from? Kind of setting the basis of your vision or your value of what you're going try to do. What's your relational web? Who is part of that web of relations?

Matthew Wildcat: And you can draw it in lots of different ways and concentric circles. You might have your immediate web within NorQuest of the people who are part of your institution. But then you might have the communities that you are trying to connect with as part of that. And then figuring out all the different ways in which you are going to connect with those communities and the communities that are relevant and involved. There may be degree of relevance but still you got a map of that relational web.

Matthew Wildcat: And then finally when you know what your relational web you are talking about is, you know the laws and the ethics that you want to work from. How do you look at responsibility? And there is a real sometimes especially people really want change and who see the devastating effects that very high forms of authority have in our society. It is easy to turn away from authority but we actually need to dive into and to define how we locate those forms of authority. But I prefer to talk about it in terms of responsibility. Because what locating responsibility does it says, "okay, yes. There is going to be places where people make decisions and are responsible for things but they are nested within that

large web of relations and their acting based on those indigenous laws in order to do all of this."

Conor Kerr: Okay, right on.

Elliott Young: And I think the only thing that I would add is that when working toward what Matt is talking about as well but with just overall the lingo of indigenization. I think the one thing to remember is that it's fluid. And it's looking at where it should be going, there isn't necessarily an end goal. I think there is always opportunity to build on what you've already done and where you're going to be going. For example, the land acknowledgement, and I had shared this with you earlier, that it has evolved now, into something that is common practice but is now challenged to being incorporated into something that is more meaningful. That it has to be more action oriented. When something is being done I think there is always the opportunity to build on it. And there is always the opportunity to strengthen the initials that you are developing, the movements that you are making within an organization to constantly think of, "we've done this. How can we make it better? How can we do it?" Just that innovative approach to just continually progressing.

Conor Kerr: I get you there. Even 10 years ago you went to any kid in Edmonton Public School and asked them, "Hey, what treaty territory are we on?" They looked at you like you were insane. Where now I bet if you go into a school and ask any student there from kindergarten up what treaty territory they are on, they'll be able to tell you. But that's a start. Now when you start moving forward from that and what does it mean to be that treaty person. What does it mean to really acknowledge it? That my personal side right there. And we've been having these discussions a little bit more. And I got one more just general question for yourselves before we wrap it up here. But how do we at NorQuest build a better relationship with Maskwacis and with Maskwacis Education Schools Commission? What can we do the help serve the students from Mas that are attending our Wetaskiwin campus or coming into the main campus here? We want to provide a better support service and we are always looking at different ways to do this?

Matthew Wildcat: Part of what I have seen that muddle the water in terms of how organization create relations with indigenous people is a lack of clarity around the type of relationship that you are trying to create. I think that there is two broad streams. On the one hand, we have indigenous communities that have representative organizations, right? Ermineskin has Ermineskin Chief and Council. And Maskwacis there is the four chiefs and councils, right? And sometimes it can be easy to think that the obvious thing to do is that you create relationships with those representatives institutions. And equally regardless of the organization, maybe you turn your attention to creating relations with the Metis settlements or with the Metis Nation of Alberta. All sorts of different First Nations or with the treaty six regional organization. There is all these representative institutions that exist out there for indigenous peoples.

Matthew Wildcat: And sometimes there is an impulse that's who you go create the relationship with, to create a relationship with the indigenous peoples. And so one of the things that I think sometimes that need to happen for sure. Especially if you are talking about governments like if you are Alberta government and you are doing something if you're a settler political body you need to be able to relate to indigenous political parties. But part of the problem is that what's being asked of those indigenous governments is that they have huge amount of things that they are supposed to be responsible for. In some respects they have more responsible for than any other Canadian government in Canada because they have deal with things of provincial concern, of federal concern, and municipal concern. They will deal the entire range. but then they only have limited capacity to deal with all these things and it creates a bottleneck. And in that bottleneck, it's really easy fir your organization to get lost. And then you turn and you're looking at yourself like, "oh, we tried to deal with Ham chief and council but they didn't really get back to us." And it hard to know what to do.

Matthew Wildcat: And so what I think institutions need to do is, to different when they are trying to create a relationship with somebody who can speak with representative voice for indigenous peoples and when they are creating a relationship with experts. And I think when you break it down that way when you, "when we want to a relationship with an indigenous person who is an expert in childhood education." Then what you need to is, you don't need to go start with the chief and council, you need to go find that expert in childhood education and create a relationship with them. And there has to some allowance that organizations can just focus on creating relationships with indigenous experts or indigenous knowledge holders or indigenous elders based on what the need of the organization is. And then in that situation you can feel comfortable with dealing with one or just a few indigenous peoples in order to meet your needs as an organization of what you're trying to look for. but then you also have to shade that notion or understanding within an organization that you've consulted with indigenous peoples. Because you have consulted with indigenous peoples.

Conor Kerr: Yeah, the classic one there.

Matthew Wildcat: What you've done is that you've gone and created a relationship with the appropriate indigenous people in whatever area of education or whatever your organization is dealing with that you've consulted with an appropriate indigenous expert and they provided expertise to allow your organization to get better. And I think we need to conceptually separate when we need to consult with indigenous representative organizations and when we're consulting indigenous individuals who have specialized knowledge.

Conor Kerr: Okay. Oh, that makes sense, yeah. Anything to add there, Elliott?

Elliott Young: I really like the approach that Matt talked about with building relationship. And with NorQuest, I think there is a lot of work that as an organization, as an institution we can build off and really not only use it a guiding principle but just really being able to put it into action. Our indigenous strategy is wahkohtowin,

we are all related. It's very relationship based to begin with. It is then now up to the institution, I will say, walk the talk of that indigenization strategy of understanding what it means to base those interactions, those engagements on relations and what it means not only on a, I would say on interpersonal level, but what it means from teachings that are within wahkohtowin that are around the medicine wheel and what it means for teachings. What it means for the land, what it means for medicine, what it means like really taking that wholistic approach. And really I feel NorQuest is moving in a good direction and other than that, it's really being able to put that indigenization into action. But I'm the Indigenous Community Engagement Advisor so I'm essentially talking about work that I'm going to be doing. It's kind of up to me to make sure we're doing that properly and doing it well. Essentially NorQuest just give me more money and-

Matthew Wildcat: That'll will be a really smooth move if you were like, "and someone needs to go do all these things."

Conor Kerr: Just lining up your job description for next little bit here.

Elliott Young: It's really fortunate for me to come in on a time where a lot of that groundwork has been done. But now it's just really focusing it and really being more strategic on how it's going to be implemented. And that way it's not a program initiative based type of relationship. Its a relationship focused on community. Then we can you see even through the development of MESC the community is willing, the community is going to be able to come together and wants to work together in that way. Of course, you won't get 100% support but you're going to get enough support to built some traction.

Conor Kerr: Yeah, anyways. Thank you so much, Matthew Wildcat and Elliott Young for joining us today in the NorQuest College's Innovation Studio podcast room. Really, really appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Matthew Wildcat: Great, thanks for having me.

Elliott Young: Yeah, thanks.

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Conor Kerr: Matthew Wildcat is an instructor in political science and native studies at the University of Alberta and is currently completing his Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of British Columbia. He is nehiyawak and grew up in Maskwacis and is a member of Ermineskin Cree Nation. Matthew is a research fellow at the

Yellow Head Institute. An Indigenous lead research body that provides policy and governance support. He is the co-lead of the Prairie Indigenous Philosophy project and was also the director of communications and a senior advisor on governance to the Maskwacis Education Schools Commission from 2016 to 2018. Let's all give Matthew Wildcat a big round of applause and welcome him to NorQuest.

Video Speaker: Hi my name of Lucy Cameron, standing on the road. I'm from Montana Reserve Maskwacis. I've been working with Meskanahk Ka-Nipa-Wit which in Cree means standing on the road. And I am really passionate about working in the school. Not only because it's my language that I'm teaching to the young ones. The other thing that I'm really proud of is the name was named after my grandfather Meskanahk Ka-Nipa-Wit. I'm really committed to carry on the language, not only for this generation but where I come from. All the elders spoke was Cree and I grew up speaking Cree. I had no knowledge of any English language in those days. Both my grandfather and my father were really dedicated to have their children, their grandchildren get their education.

Video Speaker: I believe they thought that was the best thing because we could live in the old ways that we did before. That's the history part of my life. But as an educator in the Cree language, when I learned of this amalgamation of the four bands school I was really happy about that. I thought it's about that. When we used to have meetings, the Cree instructors, I used to say, "why don't we get together? Why don't we have meetings and everybody speaks their language?" This is what's going to happen now.

Matthew Wildcat: It's really nice to see such a great crowd here today. My name if Matthew Wildcat. Thanks Conor for the introduction. I always really like speaking in Edmonton because I always think of Edmonton being one of the indigenous capitals of the world. You can't go a lot of places and you see so many native people especially so many visibly native people that have such a large percentage of a major city in the world. For me it's always really cool to come out here and speak with people. That opening video was a video that... I was part of a process in Mas and there was four separate Kat school systems being operated. And over a number of years and a number of meetings and big decisions, all the chiefs and councils in Maskwacis decided to merge all of their school systems together to create a single catered twelve school system. To the best of my knowledge, this is actually created the largest first nation run organization in the country. It has about 450 employees, there is 11 schools, there is around 2,300 students involved in these schools.

Matthew Wildcat: This sort of activity was in retrospect some people say now it was the obvious thing to do, right? There was two school systems which weren't operating at the same level as the other school systems. It made sense to raise them up. It made sense to collaborate for all sorts of other reasons. But even though now it seems like it was the obvious thing to do, at the time it wasn't the obvious thing to. And it involved a number of hurdles, it involved a number of really creative decisions and problem solving in order to put this project together. And so for

me this presentation today is telling you about the story of how this amalgamation got put together. For people in Mas, this all starts with a treaty. And so treaty number six had provision for education for people. This is the clause, "and further, her majesty agrees to maintain schools for instruction. Instructions are thus hereby made to a government of the Dominion of Canada may seem advisable whenever the Indians of reserves shall desire it." That's the start of the story of education. But of course the start of education as a treaty was quickly abandoned with the introduction of residential schools.

Matthew Wildcat: Residential schools are a really dark chapter in Canadian history, and I'm not going to go over them here. But in Ermineskin, a residential school was operated from 1895 to 1975. And then further the federal government continued to operate a day school from 1975 until 1990. In the picture here you have actually is a new school the Ermineskin Junior Senior High School. And that was built on the side of the old residential school which was a big decision for the community of what to do with this old residential school. And after consultation with elders people decided, "you know what, this was a dark chapter in our history. We don't need to keep this school around as a reminder, we can tear this school down and we can build something new on top of it." As I discussed earlier, there was the four First Nations in Maskwacîs: Ermineskin, Samson, Louis Bull, and Montana. And up until this fall, they had all been operating their own school systems. And they had all gained control of their education systems over the course of a little under 10 years in the 1990s. Nipisihkopahk Education Authority in 1989 for Samson Cree Nation. Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority in 1991 for Ermineskin. Nipisihkopahk Education Authority was created in 1994 for Louis Bull and Montana Cree Nation created the school in 1996.

Matthew Wildcat: But within these four schools, there was something that happened, which is a little bit different than the story that is typically told about first nation school where we think of them as having a high turnover. Within these schools there happened to be a core staff that actually stuck with these schools over the course of about 30 years that were running and building successful schools. And this was really key and fundamental to the story of this process of amalgamation. And these administrators over this time they developed a reputation for really excellent governance and delivery of education, which started to be noticed and for people to take heed of it. It wasn't just that they had a reputation, they had really good heart figures and thoughts that they could point to for this record of community success. I'll just point out two really quickly here.

Matthew Wildcat: In 1990, only 32% of children went to school on reserve. The remaining 68% went to school in nearby non-native towns. That's mainly Wetaskiwin and Ponoka. But now in 2018, 70% of children in Maskwacîs go to school on reserve. And in fact they have somewhere in the range, I forget their most recent figures, but last year I think it was 22 or 23 students who were traveling from Wetaskiwin and Ponoka to come to school on reserve. In 2003, they had their first graduating class of high school graduates with only 8 students. But in 2017,

they had 58 graduates and in 2018 they had 61 graduates. And I put both of those figures there to show it wasn't just the one off the 2017 or the 2018 figures. But its now a consistent figure of which they graduate students. And the schools are already projects to graduate 100 high school graduates within the next five years, is the numbers that they are planning for

Matthew Wildcat: One of the stories, which I think really illustrates how the schools were able to be successful to create this culture of success within the schools is what I call the student retention strategy. And so this I think was part of a larger focus within the community, within education on children. Its really easy for debates over education over the treaty right to education to focus on jurisdictional issues, to focus of issues of sovereignty. Who gets to control what, who gets to be in charge of what. And when discussions over education get shifted to questions of jurisdiction often what happens is that children get dropped out in the equation of what's the best thing to do for children.

Matthew Wildcat: One of the stories, which I think really illustrates this is one of the major battles that and first nations still face is enrollment. Funding for first nation schools is tied to enrollment; you get funded per student. And so the main strategy has been always to think of because in most cases the majority of students go to school off reserve in provisional schools, is how do we recruit students back from provincial schools to come to our schools? This is the typical strategy that's employed.

Matthew Wildcat: But in Maskwacîs what happened in the late 90s was, especially in the Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority, was that they said, "you know what, we're not going to focus on recruiting students from provincial schools back to schools on reserve. Those aren't our students. Our students are the students who are going to school in our schools right now, and our job as administrators is offering the best possible education to the students that are actually in our schools right now. And what they did is they shifted they focus away from trying to recruit people back to their schools and focused solely on the students that were in their schools and delivering the best possible education there. And while it didn't have the short term gains and short term benefits that having this other strategy of how you recruit people back did, what it did do over time is that the quality of education for students in their school gradually increased. And what that did is it meant more students stay in the school long term over time. You didn't have students drifting back and forth between provincial schools and on reserve schools.

Matthew Wildcat: But then also their reputation started to establish themselves of now when you go to that school you actually do get a very high level of education. And it's an education, which is attentive to your need, to the needs of the family and to the student. And what it led is that over time it lead to that increasing enrollment. And that's why you see that number moving from only 30% of kids going to school on reserve and now its at 70%. I think this is all really illustrated by this other video.

Male grad.: I just want to congratulate my fellow grads for getting here today. My late dad used to always say that life is a journey and that we can't take our lives for granted. All of us here have faced struggles and hard times but we still made it.

1st Female: We basically just walked to school showing off our glory if you will. We basically go through the elementary school, the primary, and then we eventually come here. That's basically it and like she said we usually go to the powwow and then we go for grand entry.

2nd Female: Mr. Cutknife we thought he was a good teacher because he gave us a lot of privilege to be ourselves and to express art too because he really loves art.

1st Female: He really pushes things like that.

2nd Female: Yeah. And the creativity and all that. He's really nice.

1st Female: Really fun guy.

2nd Female: Yeah, you just don't want to get on his nerves or anything. And Ms. Cutknife she's been the Cree teacher. So she taught us Cree since elementary blessed I had her as a teacher.

1st Female: I like the school because our traditions and our ceremonies and practices and what not they are normalized here. And I feel comfortable with that. I don't have to worry about judgment, I don't have to worry about people saying things and I don't know. Just that how I feel.

Male grad.: Next I actually hope to apply to NAIT for my welding. I was hoping that I would get into schooling for that. I was also to applying of the Canadian forces part time in reserves while I do my schooling as well. That's what I plan on doing in the future. My favorite teacher actually had to be Mr. Vantick. That's the short class teacher. He was my welding teacher, he taught me everything I know. That I know welding now, he taught me all that.

2nd male: I come here. I like seeing most of my good friends and I like seeing them every morning and playing in the gym with them. And just hanging out with my friends. And all these teachers are pretty good this year. Their personality and some of them are funny and some of them are funny to talk to in class and to be friends with.

3rd Female: The community, I don't think they understand how much of an impact they have on us. We may not go to every single individual and acknowledge the hard work you do for us when it comes to terms of staff, parents, grandparents, cousins, brothers, best friends. I want to say from the bottom of my heart and from the graduates as well, we appreciate your hard work, we appreciate your time and your support.

4th female: I like this school because there is no bullies here and everybody is nice. I'm going to introduce myself in Cree. And my favorite subject is social studies because get to learn about people all over the world and what they do in their countries and how they do it. I like dancing powwow because it's fun and I get to chance to show off my moves.

Matthew Wildcat: The essence video illustrates this focus on children which was such a driver of success in a really a driver of the philosophy behind why this amalgamation would happen. It's very very easy for things to become political matters but this really was grounded in this focus on children. The history of MESC itself, this Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission, it began in 2009. And what happened there was all the different systems in Mas decided that they should start having regular meetings. And they created the Mas education steering committee. Also in 2009 the federal government Indian affairs had first nation student success program. And the schools they came together at that time and they decided that they were going to administer that program together. In 2012, they took another baby step towards further collaboration and they started operating an outreach school together, the Mas outreach school. This was a high school that they jointly operated. In 2015, there was a study conducted, and this was after the first nation control of first national education act, introduced by the Harper government. And what happened at that time is that there was people within Indian affairs kind of said this is colloquial way.

Matthew Wildcat: My dad was the superintendent of Miyo and suddenly the superintendent of Maskwacîs, this is how colloquial this. Colloquial really described it as, Indian Affairs said, "well if you guys think you forgotten how to do it, then you've no choice." At that time Maskwacîs said, "okay we actually, we will tell you then if that's an option. We will tell you what we think education is going to look like long term in Maskwacîs." And a study was conducted on various different options for delivery of education. In 2015 there was the Maskwacîs education summit, the first of many. And all the chiefs and councils sat down and were presented with the various options. And what they chose at that time is that they should explore the possibility of amalgamating all the four systems into a single system together. In 2016, the Mas education transitioned from being a committee to being a commission. And that began that process of community consultation.

Matthew Wildcat: This is the resolution from the chiefs and councils in Maskwacîs that kicked this all off. "be resolved that we the Maskwacîs chiefs and councils direct the Mas education steering committee to investigate the possible of developing a Maskwacîs education authority that meets the following criteria, principles, conditions. One, treaty based, two, guaranteed funding for the process, three, adequate time frame to explore the process and finally, that all proper protocol be conduct the process." Which involved for us having pipe ceremonies for every single thing that happened because that's as people say, that's how you actually seal a contract in Mas is you hold up the pipe.

Matthew Wildcat: This began our community consultation. All this work happened leading up to the community consultation process. And there some people have looked at the process from the outside and said, "oh, clearly Maskwacîs is being controlled by the federal government." But that just simply wasn't the case. All that work happened internally to the schools but after all of that work it was necessary to take to the community and see what the community thought. And when we took to the community, we didn't really realize that at the time, now looking back on it I think what was happening is that we were building a wahkohtowin movement. We were building a movement around this idea of kinship, around being related to each other and align what kind of responsibilities do we have to have good relationships with each other. I am going to show these two additional videos to set the stage for describing this process of building a wahkohtowin movement.

Male Voice: The fact that we are contributing together, that we are working collectively as Maskwacîs this is amazing. And I'm really excited. I'm really excited about the potential we have and ultimately for the benefit of our students. Because sometimes we get kind of pigeon holed into looking through these lenses that are divided. What Samson doing? What Ermineskin doing? Montana, Louis Bull. And it's kind of funny because I have had the privilege of working with youth for many many years. And when I would speak with youth, especially our Mas youth. I would often ask them, "do you have to cross the border when you into Herne, when you going to Samson or whatever?" And they're like, "no." And I said but why do we operate like that? Why do we keep ourselves divided by these walls we have? And sometimes these walls exist in our mind. But today is an exciting day because we get to break down. We get to start working together and start working collectively. And start really modeling for our youth, what that looks like.

Recorded Native: The purpose of MESC is create an organization just focused on student success and building the best possible education program for all the children here in Maskwacîs from the beginning of the organization our effort has always been focused on students and making sure that the quality of education that every child in the community receives is at the same standard. One of our main goals is to achieve this standard by bringing the group together and looking at the outcomes and the curriculum and making sure that those type of things are at the highest possible level for every schools and every student. And the culture of each individual school will be determined by the people that work in those schools and how they achieve those outcomes is their area. But for us the idea of bringing this larger group together is setting the bar high for ourselves and doing what is right for children.

New recorded: First nation across Canada manage all INAC programs. What we see and envision in MESC is that we will have true local control of education. MESC will determine our Maskwacîs Education will determine what our curriculum is. Who we report to are chief and council and parents not the government. We are excited to be a part of true local controlled education.

New Female: Today was awesome. Seeing all the teachers in the gymnasium, I've kind of felt overwhelmed at first and then I was excited. I'm like, "oh my god, this is great." And I was just excited for all the teachers this, to see what we've been working on for these past two years with Brian and with Kevin. I can't wait to see what happens.

Matthew Wildcat: Again there is some of these moving pieces and one of things I wanted to add on to this that came about with this idea of wahkohtowin and this idea of focusing on children, building of a record of success is that, this is one of slides that we actually had in our community consultation and then kind of the original slide show that we had. It just had this one line and it just said, "We become the stories we tell about ourselves." And it was really at Mas at the time to tell a story of disunity, to tell a story of lack of cooperation. And what we said is, "you know what, we can tell an alternate story." There wasn't as much cooperation within the community as we might have liked but when you went and looked at it, the actually was a lot more cooperation than people like to imagine. And after this slide we went and showed all those examples of the different ways in which we did cooperate, and we ended our presentation and community consultations with this message of hope of saying, "you know what this an opportunity for us to tell a story of unity, to tell a different story about ourselves as Maskwacîs people."

Matthew Wildcat: That slide was from before, this was from January of 2018 community report and this is some of our final numbers. We had 24 community consultation meetings with the approximately 1,500 people attending. From those sessions we got 1,317 community surveys and in final a 92% positive response rate to this question of, do you support the proposed amalgamation of the school systems? But it was part of a broader, a large scale outreach campaign. The videos some of which I've been showing were viewed over more than 95,000 times of Facebook. I think the Facebook page is now up to about 2,200 likes but we built in just over a year close to 1,700 likes or 1,650 likes. And our range through our social media strategies with any given post we can reach 33,000 within the surrounding region. And of course, out in Maskwacîs, Wetaskiwin, Ponoka that we are reaching a huge amount of the population out there.

Matthew Wildcat: There were so many moving parts to this. It involved a really dynamic and creative team to put this all together. But there is three levels of dialogue in the most with one of these big things. The final tally was actually the agreement stretch up to 10 years and the final numerical or financial figure ended up being over six hundred million dollars. Again the biggest deal ever negotiated in the history of the community. But really the most work was actually put in to the dialogue locally between the nations of Maskwacîs. That's where the effort and the most work had to be done. And really that's where the process came together. Yes, there was a dialogue with the Canadian government for the Maskwacîs education agreement and then there was also a separate side table which represents between the Alberta Government called the Framework Agreement. And it's very just basic stuff like we can talk to each other on this

areas and also the Alberta government kicked in about a 5% bonus on top of what the federal government was going to provide.

Matthew Wildcat: This was the old one of how monies would flow. They come from the treasury board, the government would give it to INAC and then INAC would finally devolve it down to the four nations. But this is really unique, the monies now come directly from the treasury board. The money is filled directly from the treasury board to MESC. And then what happens is that it frees chiefs and council rather than being money managers, the chief and councils are then elevated to the nation of being on a nation to nation relationship with the government of Canada in negotiating this agreement. The agreement is now done, but they have a table every year, they are actually going to Ottawa next week, where they look at the agreement and there is a possibility if in other parts of the country they called in an elevator clause. In other parts of the country, if another group has negotiated a new component within their education agreement, we are allowed to tack that on to our agreement. And so it means that anytime the federal government changes or morphs how they are funding education that Mas can be a beneficiary of that.

Matthew Wildcat: Within Maskwacís there is three points to our negotiations. One, we created a Maskwacís education law. This is a law, which governs the delivery of education in the community. And this originally wasn't going to be recognized by the federal government. But then over time initially the federal government said, "we can't put that Maskwacís education law in the agreement because you guys aren't law making entities. Chief and councils don't make laws." And we said, "okay, that's fine. We are going to create our law anyways because that's what we are going to follow in the administration of these schools." And then what happened is over the quest of a number of months, the federal government finally relented and said, "okay, we'll recognize the Mas education law in our agreement with you."

Matthew Wildcat: We also created this declaration on education. I'm hoping to read a few snippets from that later on. And then there is this Wahkohtowin and Inspired governance. This Maskwacís Cree Declaration of Education I'm just going to read this it's about a page and a half here. I'm just going to read the final paragraph. And it says, "as Maskwacís Cree we engage in continual process of teaching and learning how we enact our values and philosophies in the present. This includes enhancing our understanding of treaties and treaty laws and the continual process of defining and practicing how we maintain respectful treaty relationships with others. It's through these practices of wahkohtowin that we will maintain and strength our education systems for future generations." And this was really important because it was a definitive philosophy statement on what we wanted education to look like moving forward.

Matthew Wildcat: I showed this earlier, but it took me actually over a year to realize this. But when we put this board together ourselves and this board selection committee is actually unique. And what it allows for is it actually like formalizes wahkohtowin into the selection of the board because all the nations can't make decisions on

the own of who gets appointed to the board. They have to sit together and make them in front of each other. And what that means is that relationships are obligations that we have to each other on the forefront and center when people decide. Because there is always the concern that if people make their decisions behind closed doors, they make it internally within the nation, that there may be reasons for... People appoint their cousin, or people appoint someone for a political favor for some other reason. What it means is that all those decisions have to be made together and made in the best interest of the community and of children. And again this board, this is originally how we envisioned this wahkohtowin governance as yes there is a board with responsibilities but its nested within a larger dialogue that I has to have with the community.

Matthew Wildcat: The people who thought we were giving up our treaty rights by doing this, there was a core group who we never convinced and never will convince. But for me this was the final say on the issue. And why we believe that this was implementing the treaty right to education is because the treaty is something that is living. And if it's going to be living you have to be able to exercise it. And so Brad Rabbit, one of councilors from Montana, he said treaty is a spirit and when that pipe was lifted it left behind the spirit. We have to renew that spirit. When people we're breaking the treaty right to education, I thought, you can't break natural law, you can only let it die by not keeping it alive. Well we didn't limit the treaty right to education with MESC, and we are keeping that treaty spirit alive.

Matthew Wildcat: Why was it successful? Why were we able to put all this together? It's not an easy story to tell but I think ultimately it was this belief that we could tell a story about ourselves grounded in our traditions but also looking out forward to our future. But it was I think this core group of 25 to 30 leaders. This is not just educators within the school but also chief and people of council and other people within the community who were early believers in this idea. Who said, "yes, you know what? This is something we can do, we have the capacity and the ability to do it." I think there was a dynamic dialogue within our core team that could effectively confront and overcome challenges, many roadblocks along the way, lots of moving parts but ultimately we can always figure it out. And whenever something came up, we never thought, oh man this is the end. We just thought, how do we figure this out, how do we get around it? Again it was built on this record of community success, a strong community consultation and communication strategy. And ultimately, this we created a community movement that told the story of unity of wahkohtowin and with a focus on children.

Matthew Wildcat: And this is ultimately, I think you can see it. And these are the four concepts, the Cree concepts, which are really guiding the school. Wahkohtowin and kinship, and the Cree language, living the good life, and Cree knowledge or Cree way of thinking. And that's really what I think helped guide them forward. And so I will just finish here, there is one final video for me to play and this one just came out in the fall. And I think it kind of nicely raps up not only the process but what's happening moving forward. I'll play the last video.

Final speaker: Now we are stepping into an area of responsibility. And our leadership has got a new opportunity to really focus on that. Now it's our turn, it's our responsibility like it was traditionally as parents or as grandparents as community, family members to surround the individual child in an education atmosphere and to support the children in their pursuit of education. It's a really new and distinct opportunity that we have and really I think only the future will tell how successful we will be in taking over that control of our education and exercising the responsibility and authority that we have as leaders. It is exciting.

Final female: I think going to school on the res is a huge part of my make-up and kind of makes me who I am as being here and going to school here. And for the longest time especially in elementary, I thought that if I stayed here, I stayed going to school on the res I wouldn't make it. Like the education that they gave me wouldn't be enough to make it to qualify. But here I am and applied, and I'm going to U of A in the fall and its amazing. School is what you make it. We demanded to have higher stream courses, so we could apply directly. Last year Am had their first ever math thirty dash one, like high stream math. And it was an all-female class, and I got to be a part of it and I passed my diploma.

Final Female 2: What I'm most excited about with the creation of the new authority, obviously its history in the making. But I'm also really excited about learning and listening from students and families and engaging them in a collaborative decision making process. And I believe that being responsive as well as we listen to our students and families. I think it is really important as part of engaging them and having them part of the decision making process.

Matthew Wildcat: Hai Hai (something in Cree)

Conor Kerr: Circle of Knowledge was recorded at the NorQuest College innovation studio and is hosted by me yours truly Conor Kerr. Production and editing by Corey Stroeder, theme song is Eagle Rock by West Hutchison. Special thanks to the Edmonton community foundation whose generous sponsorship made the indigenous speaker series and the Circle of Knowledge podcast a reality. Lastly, and most importantly, big shout out to all the speakers who have been involved. We are incredibly grateful for the knowledge and time you shared to make this series a possibility. Thoughts, comments, questions, anything else regarding today's Circle of Knowledge episode we'd love to hear from you. Contact us at podcast@norquest.ca.

Corey Stroeder: Good morning, Conor. Welcome back to the innovation studio recording booth. How is going today.

Conor Kerr: Corey, good to be here. And thanks for your work in putting this together again.

Corey Stroeder: Oh, my pleasure. My pleasure. Matt Wildcat, great lecture again.

Conor Kerr: So much knowledge. So much knowledge.

Corey Stroeder: Listening to him, it was really neat to see the success that's going on down with the Maskwacîs school commission.

Conor Kerr: Yeah, they've done some crazy work in just getting that cultural element infused in their education there and within their governance too. It was great to hear Matt's perspective on all that.

Corey Stroeder: Yeah, a lot of success. And actually one of the things that really stuck with me was he said, "speaking Cree in medicine." And so what does that mean to you?

Conor Kerr: Yeah, just for myself in learning as being a Cree language learner, when you here these stories of the words and how they actually connect back to the land. Something like () its like where are you from, and it that connection with the belly button. And where your roots are buried in ground there, where your umbilical cord is buried. Just right there is that power and medicine of something like that and such a common phrase. Its like is where are you from but really it means who are you from? Who are your people? What are your roots on this land here?

Corey Stroeder: Root to your past.

Conor Kerr: Yeah. Its cool just to see that. And then just re visiting those words, and you just get that sense of cultural belonging and that connection back to your ancestors, and their guiding voices.

Corey Stroeder: Cool And another thing that I had noticed, Conor, is that recently you've been walking around with this leather square patch on you. Can you explain that to me?

Conor Kerr: Yeah, yeah. Those low patches there are for this moose hide campaign. And the moose hide campaign has been around for a few years now and its to recognize murder and missing indigenous women. and children and so its for men and others to wear just to say that we hear that this is an issue and that advocating for it and we want to recognize that and to start those conversations around it. And so when you see someone wearing one of those moose hide patches that what those recognize. And I've been wearing one for a few years and the amount of people that come up to me on a regular basis and ask what is that? What is that for? And then we start that conversation. This is for the awareness round murdering, missing indigenous women and children.

Corey Stroeder: Yeah, sounds like a great cause. Makes it very visible and its also very cultural appropriate instead of just a red ribbon you see, right?

Conor Kerr: Yeah. It was started by some guys out of BC there. A guy and his daughters and I think its movement that's grown a lot across Canada. You often see politicians or other people wearing these moose hide squares. There is a lot more information on it if you just Google moose hide campaign.

Corey Stroeder: Okay, so if someone here at NorQuest College wanted to get a patch?

Conor Kerr: Yeah, they could swing by the indigenous student services center. We have lots in there and we want to maybe have a conversation with them about what that means and give them a patch as well.

Corey Stroeder: Great. Everybody check it out. Come see Conor down at the indigenous student center. All right Conor, hai hai buddy.

Conor Kerr: All right. See you later Corey. Hai Hai