



# Cultural connections lead to systemic change in Cree Nation



## The Challenge

In northern Quebec, Canada, the Cree School Board (CSB) serves 11 schools in nine Cree Nation communities spread across 4,500 square miles—an immense amount of ground to cover for any reason. So when CSB decided to take on districtwide initiatives to improve graduation rates, reduce absenteeism, and better meet the needs of a trilingual population, it was clear that a blanket approach to school improvement wouldn't work.

## Strategic Solution

Beginning in 2010, CSB partnered with McREL to develop and implement a multi-year comprehensive school improvement plan that would serve as the foundation for continuous improvement across all 11 schools. Their first step was to address the fact that Cree students, teachers, and parents speak up to three different languages—Cree, French, and English. English or French is introduced as a second language in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, with Cree language and culture classes an ongoing and integral part of the K–12 curriculum.

McREL worked with curriculum teams to develop and implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum (GVC) in language arts for the elementary level that is written in all three languages and includes academic vocabulary sensitive to the needs of second-language learners. The GVC also reflects the cultural values of the Cree Nation and aligns with Quebec's state core competencies. Support for teachers focused on developing their oral academic language skills (especially for those teachers who are themselves second language learners) and on using research-based instructional strategies like cooperative learning and setting learning objectives.

School leadership teams came together regularly for large-group professional development (PD) sessions, with McREL providing technical assistance and following up with individual school visits to support implementation. The PD helped build the capacity of the CSB, principals, leadership teams, and teachers to sustain improvements by emphasizing the effective use of data and research-based practices, initiating shared leadership, creating a purposeful community, and establishing a continuous improvement process.

## Results

What the CSB schools lack in physical closeness, they make up for in the strong cultural values they share—including a belief that all Cree children deserve a high-quality education. Now, they are systematizing that belief with the structures and processes needed to help kids succeed. Teachers at each school are more united and focused on what they need to do, and Cree principals are collaborating in new ways—coming together for regular weeklong meetings to share their successes, challenges, and ideas.

As the schools have learned the value of working together and connecting with their local communities, attendance and punctuality across schools have increased, as has the average graduation rate. In one school, Cree students performed significantly better on 2012–2013 Canadian Achievement Tests than they ever had, exceeding Canadian norms.

## Next Steps

The CSB has shifted its focus from individual school improvement to system-wide improvement, finding ways to sustain efforts for existing and future school leaders. It continues to refine and help teachers take ownership of the elementary trilingual curriculum, and develop a similar GVC for the high school level.

Reflecting on the progress made so far, Eric Grimstead, a secondary counselor in James Bay Eeyou School in Chisasibi, puts into words what the CSB is working to achieve across all 11 of its schools: “[We have] adopted a new organizational standard. We have started to work in a collaborative manner, using a common professional language that we didn't have before.”