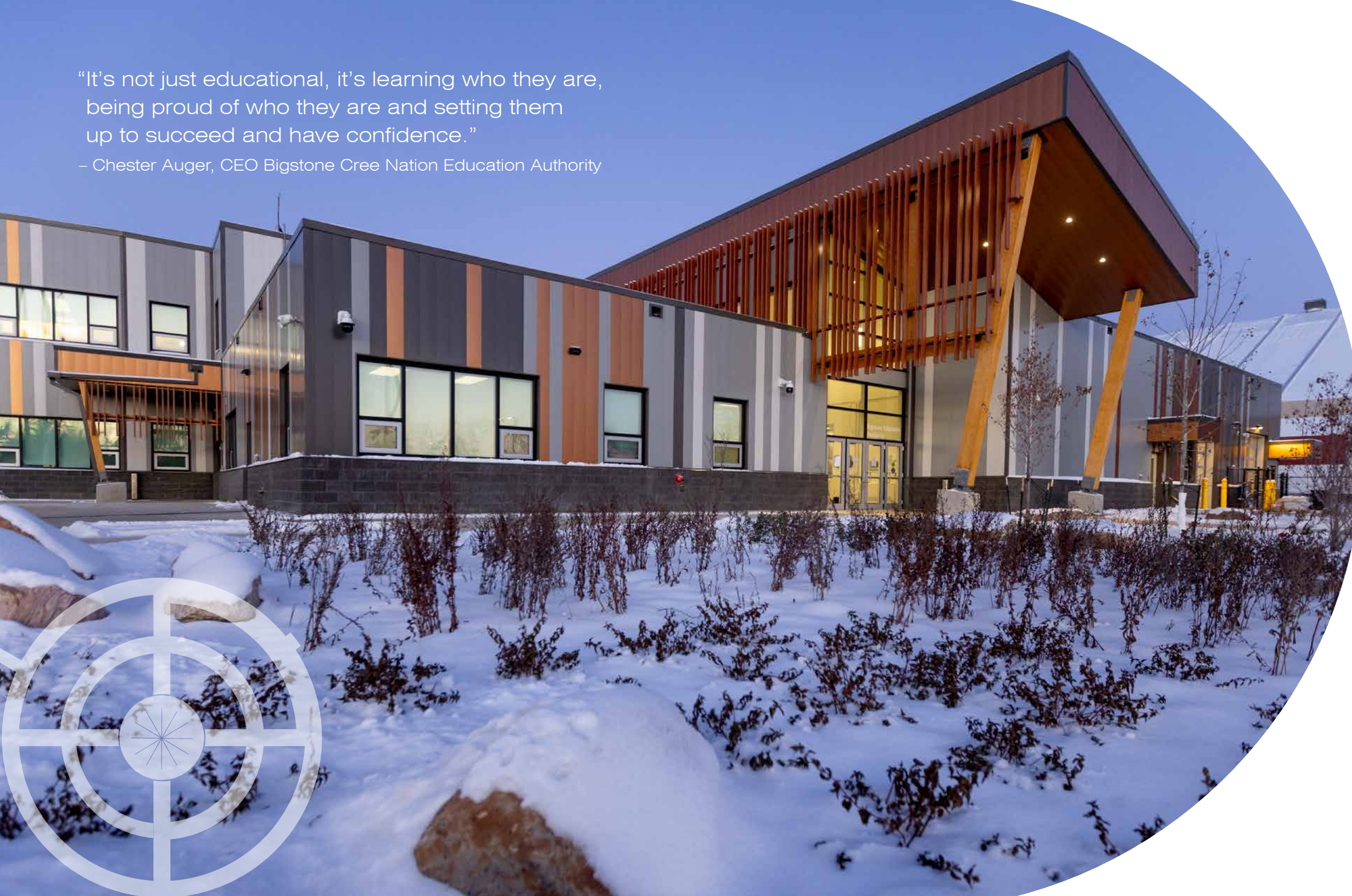


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“It’s not just educational, it’s learning who they are, being proud of who they are and setting them up to succeed and have confidence.”

– Chester Auger, CEO Bigstone Cree Nation Education Authority



## Executive Summary

For Cree (Sakaw Cree) the education of young community members is an important part of their culture. Written into the text of Treaty 8, of the numbered treaties signed between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government is the statement “Her Majesty agrees to pay the salaries of such **teachers to instruct the children of said Indians.**” Special note was also taken by the federal officers of their keen interest in education as a means to teach their children skills that would be advantageous to them. Historically the education of First Nation Peoples was part of a colonization process intended to assimilate First Nations into a European/ settler society, thus forcing the disconnection of culture, community, and identity. More recently, attempts have been made to move past this legacy of trauma and heal from the lasting damage that it has caused. Most notable is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was launched in 2007 to investigate how the federal government allowed and propagated the abuse of Indigenous peoples under the banner of education. In the delivery of their report in 2015, the Commission included 94 “calls to action” intended to further the goals of healing and reconciliation within Canada, with “calls to action” 6-12 detail the ways education must be changed in order to truly address the needs of Indigenous Peoples and heal from the past traumas caused by the Canadian Government.

For Bigstone Cree Nation, located in Northern Alberta, collective oriented, holistic education is becoming especially crucial as there is a rising population of young Bigstone Cree Nation people. Through education, the community sees a way to rebuild healthy families, reclaim cultural and linguistic vibrancy, and build a strong and prosperous community for future generations and beyond. Bigstone Cree Nation’s elementary school has achieved notable success through

a holistic and interconnected, culturally grounded approach that nurtures students’ academic, spiritual, and personal growth. As students aged out of this safe and empowering environment, a need emerged for a local secondary school that could continue this journey. In response, Golden Eagle High School (Osaw Kihew Kiskinwahamatowikamik) was created to extend the Nation’s educational vision—bridging traditional Cree teachings with global knowledge. Golden Eagle High School responds to a critical need: to provide continuity for students in their home community, through holistic Cree education, that nurtures identity and sense of place while preparing students for life beyond graduation.

Golden Eagle High School aims to provide a seamless educational experience for the growing population of young learners, ensuring continuity and support as they progress in their studies. It empowers students and builds their self esteem while following spiritual protocol, allowing the school to act as a ceremonial space. The school is designed to integrate gracefully next to the elementary school, creating a cohesive learning campus that fosters interconnectedness and supports the educational journey from early learning through to high school. With the potential for future expansion as the student population grows, the project is committed to sustainability, ensuring that the campus can adapt to the evolving needs of the community while maintaining a focus on energy efficiency, wellness, and cultural inclusivity.

Golden Eagle High School is understood to be not just a learning centre, but also a gathering space for the community. Its thoughtful design prioritizes both educational and communal needs, ensuring that the school serves as a welcoming space for students, families, and local residents alike by integrating spaces for community events and activities.



Scope of Work and Budget

Golden Eagle High School is designed with a capacity of 349 students from grades 7-12. Bigstone Cree Nation Education Authority values a holistic blend of traditional Cree teachings and 21st century design. These principles work to engage students, encourage collaboration, foster land stewardship, and focus on project-based learning. Connecting and building their community within a school setting, the design showcases traditional school layouts and teaching methodologies through the built environment.

The new high school has a total of 45,208 SF for the core school and 32,916 SF for the athletic pavilion, which marks the beginning of a sports academy program. The project has a total construction cost of \$39,000,000. More than just a school, it serves as a cultural centre for holistic learning, blending traditional and modern curriculums, and acts as an anchor connecting to the Bigstone Cree Nation.

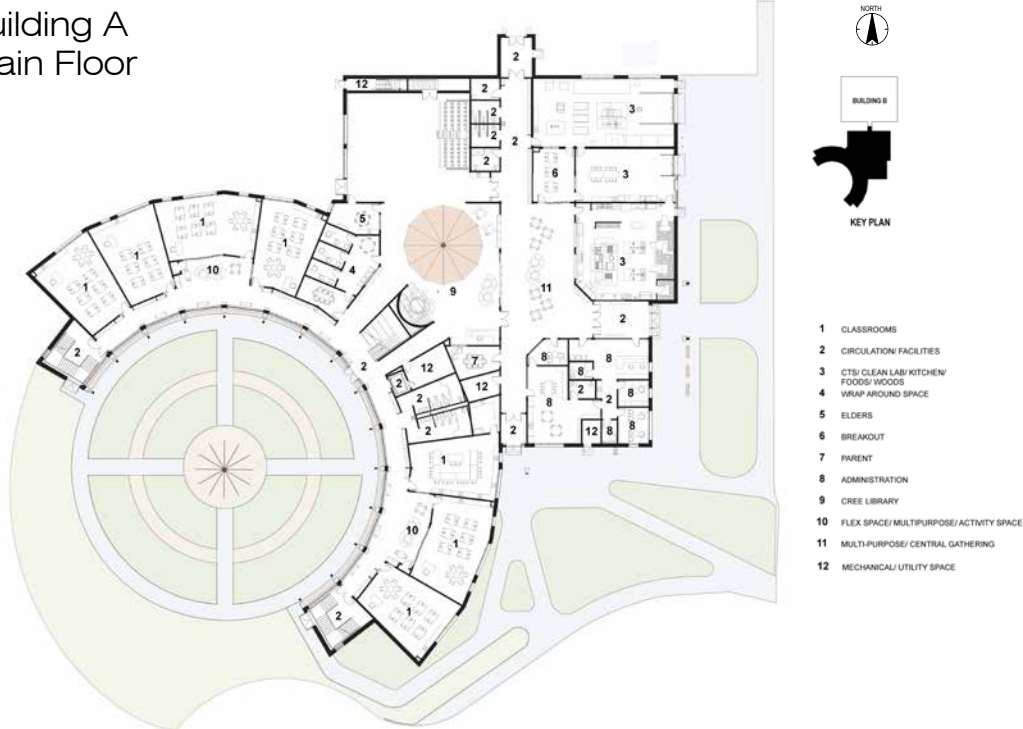
Budget and  
Schedule Specifics

**Target Budget**  
\$35,310,000

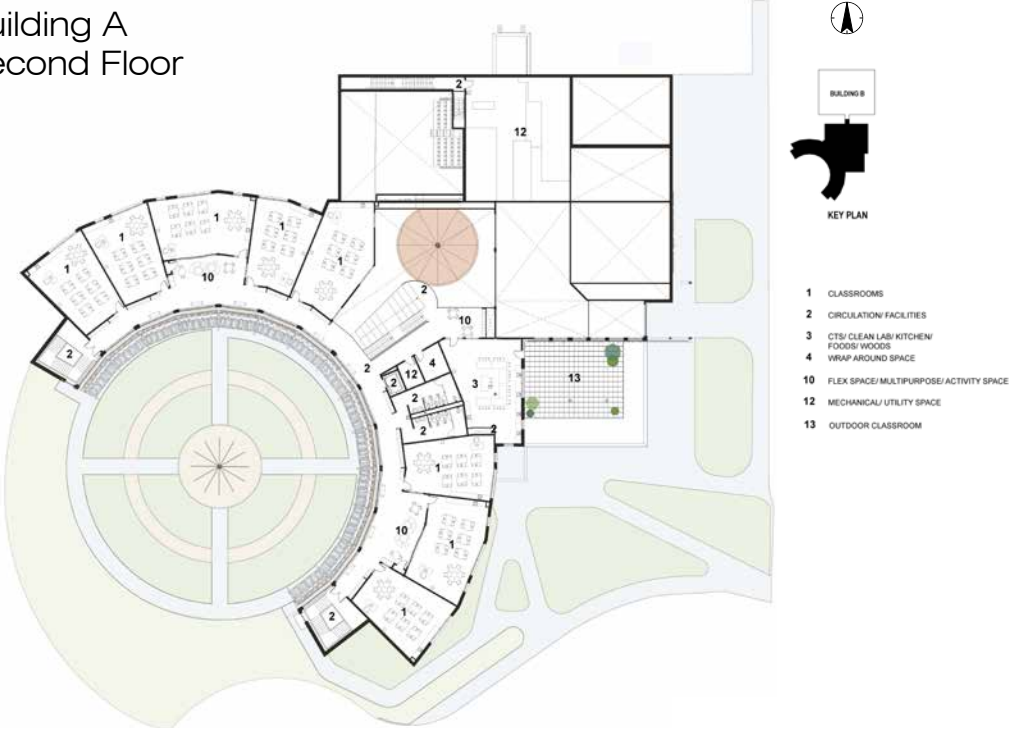
**Actual Budget**  
\$39,028,936

**Project Schedule:**  
December 2017–June 2024

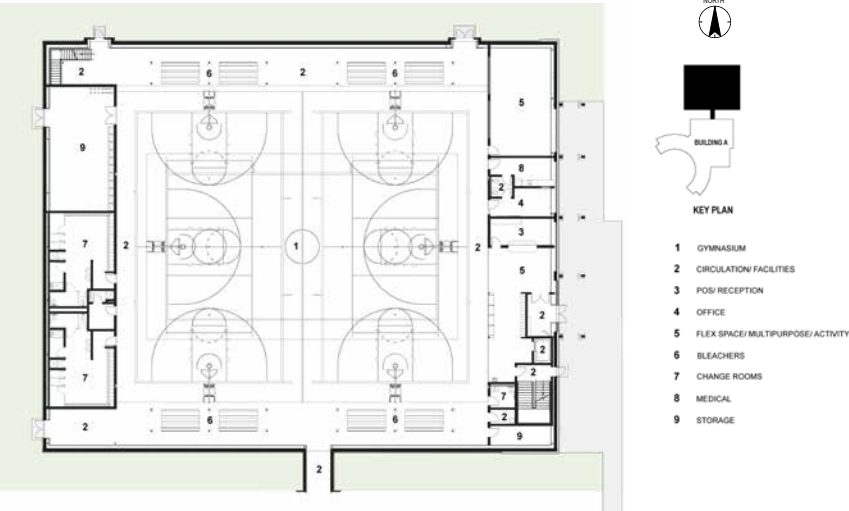
Building A  
Main Floor



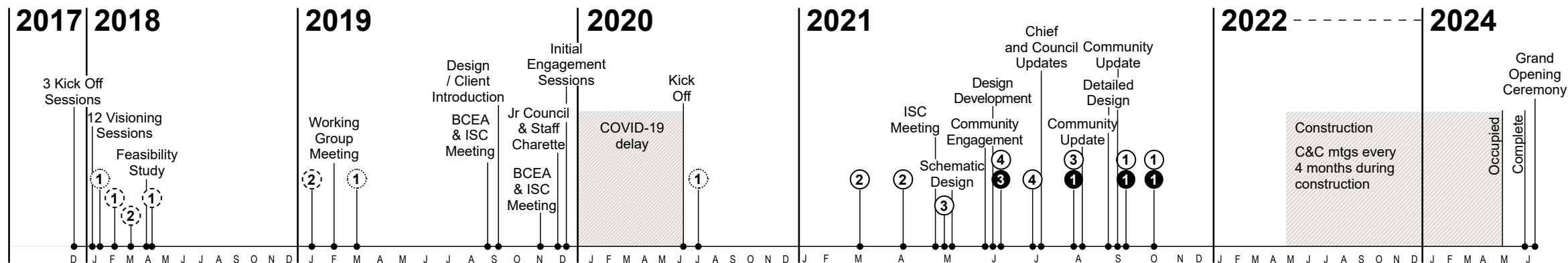
Building A  
Second Floor



Building B  
Main Floor



Project Timeline



**LEGEND**

- Review Meetings
- Design Meetings
- Chief & Council Meetings
- Community engagement meetings





## School and Community Research and Engagement

Nestled on the shores of South Wabasca Lake—127 kilometre northeast of Slave Lake and 315 kilometres north of Edmonton—Bigstone Cree Nation stands as a beacon of resilience and tradition. The existing school is situated on #166A Reserve, on Treaty 8 Territory. As a Sakaw Cree community, they speak Nêhiyawêwin and hold fast to the values and knowledge passed down through countless generations. They continue to uphold their role as stewards of the land while navigating the modern challenges of environmental change and economic development. Language, culture, and land are interconnected, woven through stories, ceremonies, and a reciprocal relationship with the environment around them.

The community's spirit is rooted in ceremony and interconnection. Sacred rituals—like the sweat lodge, pipe ceremony, and seasonal feasts—mark the turning of the seasons and reinforce their bond with the Creator and their reciprocal connection to the land. Storytelling, is a living tradition, providing the young with holistic learning about the land, the hunt, and the sacred balance that sustains all life.

Today, Bigstone Cree Nation is actively reclaiming and revitalizing its cultural heritage using language preservation programs, cultural education, and youth mentorship. At Golden Eagle High School, Sakaw Cree language and teachings are woven into a holistic curriculum. Architecture nurtures a sense of identity, sovereignty, place, and pride for the next generation.

Their name—Bigstone—speaks to their enduring presence in the rocky, forested landscape they have long called home.

With over 8,900 members as of July 2024—more than 3,400 living on reserve across six land parcels totaling over 21,000 hectares—the Bigstone Cree stand as a powerful example of cultural continuity, environmental stewardship, and self-determination in northern Alberta.

### Stakeholders

**Chief and Council:** Chief and Council of the Bigstone Cree Nation played a vital leadership role throughout the entire school project, serving as the key decision-makers on behalf of their Nation. They were actively involved in every design meeting and milestone update, ensuring that the school reflected the community's vision and long-term goals. Their guidance was instrumental in aligning the project with community plans and in thoughtfully weaving cultural elements into the design—creating a space that is both functional and deeply rooted in tradition.

**Bigstone Cree Nation Education Authority (BCNEA):** BCNEA was created to support students by providing education rooted in community and culture. They are an experienced school authority who already operated a successful school. They helped strengthen the presence of nêhiyawêwin (Cree) in the school and guided the inclusion of spaces for traditional practices and ceremonies. Their focus remained on improving student attendance, retention, literacy, numeracy, teacher stability, and overall well-being.

**Parents and Students:** Students and parents played a vital role in shaping the vision for the new school. As key stakeholders, their input helped ensure the design responded to the real needs of the community. This project was not just about building a facility—it was about building a place where students feel inspired to learn and where families feel genuinely connected.



“One of my favorite things is watching the students fall in love with fitness through the use of our state of the art athletics facility. Our state of the art equipment provides an excellent opportunity for students to step into the world of weight training.” – Maddy McGrath

**Elders Society:** The Elders believe a high school should be a place that empowers students and builds their self-esteem. Bigstone needs to follow our spiritual protocol and be able to conduct ceremonies.

**General Community:** More than just a place of learning, the school was envisioned as the heart of the community—a space where life’s most meaningful moments could unfold. With few public buildings in the area, it needed to be versatile and welcoming, ready to host everything from weddings and cultural ceremonies to funerals and sporting events. Community members were invited to share their hopes and needs, helping shape a school that could serve not only minds, but milestones.

Other important stakeholders were High School Grad Coach, who helped us learn about barriers students are facing in the public high school; Treaty 8 Child and Family Services; Lands Department; Bigstone Cree Nation Education Authority strategic working group; and School Maintenance and Operations Staff.



### Challenges

Our approach to major issues started with communication and collaboration with Bigstone Cree Nation.

**Balancing Provincial Requirements and Local Needs:**

In Alberta, schools must align with the provincial curriculum. Unlike other districts in North America, they do not have the autonomy to design their own curriculum. The school thoughtfully integrates government standards with the community’s cultural traditions and priorities, resulting in a space that supports both academic achievement and a strong sense of Indigenous identity.

**Culture First Approach:** Design began with engaging Elders and Knowledge Holders to determine the vision and priorities for the new high school. Key design words were translated into Sakaw Cree, and the discussion on language and the meaning of the translations directed the architects and Bigstone Education Authority to focus creating a school design focused on the Sakaw Cree identity and language, fostered respect for all our relations, had opportunity spaces for to learn global skills and learn about yourself.

In the fast pace of design, it’s tempting to rely on experience and assumptions: designers tend to put forward answers without truly listening. But with Bigstone Cree Nation, we quickly learned that meaningful design starts with listening. Historically, the Bigstone Cree Nation has not been listened to, so to foster an environment that would make engagement—and, eventually, the design—successful, it was key that our team would always listen first. Meaningful design starts with listening—it was very important to the Bigstone Cree Nation that their partners—in this situation our team—had some knowledge of their ways, so engagement sessions also meant education for us. You don’t take without giving, everything you do must be done in equilibrium.

**Bridging the Gap Between Design and Stakeholders:**

Engaging the citizens of Bigstone Cree Nation in the design

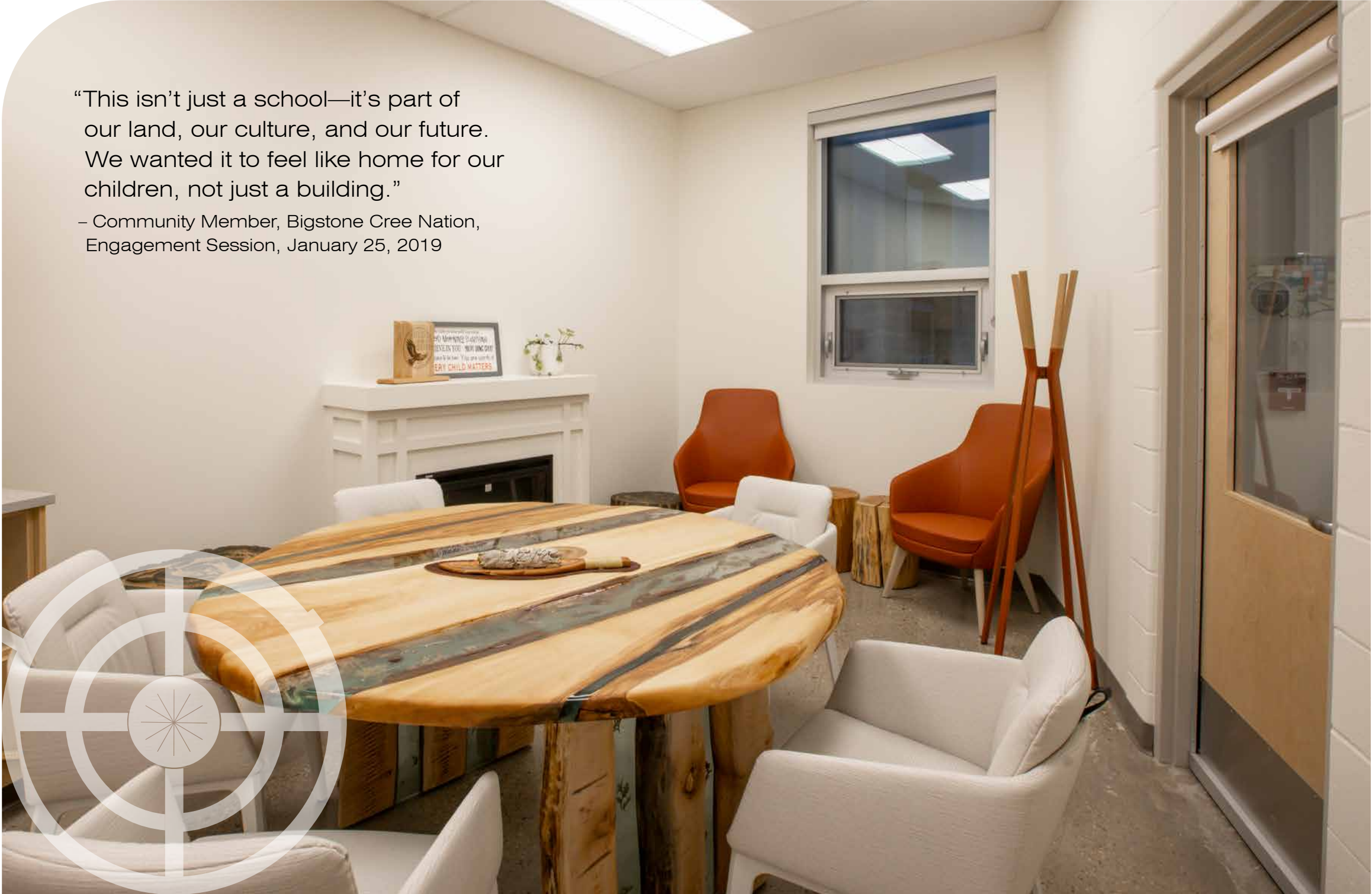


process required a thoughtful and tailored approach. The primary challenge was to foster meaningful participation by ensuring stakeholders clearly understood the design concepts being presented. This involved adapting our communication methods to be more visual, relatable, and grounded in the community’s lived experiences. We also tailored our engagement materials to follow a more storytelling-based approach, making the content more relatable and culturally resonant for the community, rather than relying solely on technical presentations. By doing so, we created an inclusive space for dialogue and collaboration, allowing the design to reflect the needs and values of those it was meant to serve.

A key example of this was in the programing engagement sessions where our team switched to using non-rectangular blocks to represent rooms. This allowed the community to open even more adjacencies in this activity and showed our team what connections were important to them.







“This isn’t just a school—it’s part of our land, our culture, and our future. We wanted it to feel like home for our children, not just a building.”

– Community Member, Bigstone Cree Nation, Engagement Session, January 25, 2019

**Concerns around engagement:** Concerns around engagement stemmed from the challenge of ensuring that all community members felt comfortable, equipped and listened to. Many parents and Elders carried painful memories of residential schools. To encourage participation, we reminded students to bring their parents to the community meeting, sent postcards home, and provided prizes as an incentive. ***Our goal was to create an open, welcoming space where the community could rally behind a school that represented their future.***

**Enrollment projections:** The success of the initial education program at OPK had increased enrollment beyond the original capacity for K–6. Rapid enrollment growth at OPK created pressure on existing facilities, pushing the school beyond its intended K–6 capacity. While modular classrooms provided a short-term solution, they were not sustainable for long-term learning needs. Planning for a dedicated Grades 7–12 school became essential to support continued growth and create an interconnected campus of learning for Bigstone Cree Nation.

For Bigstone, the campus of learning is a holistic learning environment that promotes student’s natural aptitudes for language, environment, spirituality, and other subjects. It consists of Existing OPK school, Secondary School (Grades 7-12), a new Elementary school (Grades 1-6) and Recreational Space and Options/CTS space.

**Local labour opportunities:** Our team worked closely with both the community and the contractor to provide necessary training and maximize employment opportunities for local workers. Community members made a meaningful impact—contributing 8,925 of the 21,060 general contractor labour hours, representing 41% of the total. Trade partners also reported over 8,000 hours of local labour, underscoring the Nation’s strong commitment to workforce development and economic participation.

**Environment:** We heard during predesign that Bigstone has a unique connection to the land and that this should be recognized at the campus of learning in addition to Kapaskwatinak (culture camp), where they partake in curriculum-based studies out on the land. This connection is steeped in history and has ties to the environment, economy, and social activities. A visit to Kapaskwatinak highlighted how nature can serve as a teaching tool, leading us to create a learning environment with strong visual and physical interconnectedness to the surrounding landscape.

**COVID –19:** This project unfolded during the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring a shift from in-person meetings to virtual engagement with the community—including students. Engaging diverse user groups online was challenging, but we adapted by creating more interactive presentations, using visuals and sketches to clearly communicate design concepts and

Local community members made up 41% of the construction workforce

encourage meaningful participation. We used visual storytelling, interactive tools like polls and live drawings, and breakout rooms for Elders, parents, and students. We began sessions with personal stories to build trust and connection. **Creative activities—such as colouring sketches, a design vote, and “draw your path” mapping—made participation fun and meaningful, with student work shared on the school’s Facebook page.**

### Available Assets

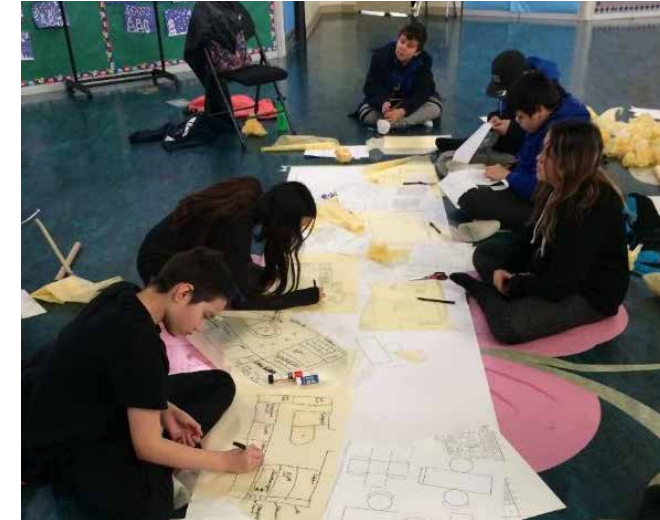
Golden Eagle High School, located adjacent to the existing OPK school, creates an interconnected campus of learning. However, the site is prone to seasonal flooding due to a nearby creek, and the road currently ends at the OPK parking lot, with future road extension discussions pending. To address these challenges, our team focused on planning solutions that mitigate flooding, improve road access, and coordinate parking and bus drop-off areas in a phased approach, ensuring smooth operations and a cohesive landscape between both schools.





“Students look forward to the growth of our school and offer suggestions of how we can utilize the spaces in ways that better benefit them as well. There are comfortable places outside of classrooms so that students can work independently when the classroom may be too busy for them to focus. The amount of natural lighting in the building provides ample opportunities for students to enjoy the nature that surrounds us and to see what is happening around the school thanks to its openness.”

– Joline Lambert



## Process

### Value of Process/Project to Community

*Elders' voice: “Teaching our kids to be native in the 21st century.” Elder's Meeting, 2019*

The visioning process for the Golden Eagle High School was rooted in community-driven dialogue and cultural respect. Elders, youth, educators, parents, and community leaders were all central to the planning and design process. Through sharing circles, community meetings, and culturally grounded consultations, the vision for the school emerged as more than just a place of learning—it became a symbol of Nationhood, language revitalization, and intergenerational healing. **Elders provided guidance on cultural protocols, while youth contributed their aspirations for the future, ensuring the school would reflect both traditional values and modern educational needs.**

The Golden Eagle High School visioning process used visual tools, interactive activities, and storytelling to make community engagement more accessible and meaningful. By presenting 2D renderings and an immersive experience, stakeholders—especially students and parents—could clearly understand and provide feedback on the design. This inclusive approach ensured the school reflected the community's values, culture, and vision, fostering pride, trust, and long-term impact.

Golden Eagle High School is a foundational investment in the community's future. It serves not only as an educational facility, but also as an interconnected cultural hub—a space where Cree language, knowledge systems, and traditions are taught, celebrated, and protected. The process of building the school brought the community together around a shared purpose, strengthening identity and self-determination. In the long-term, the school enhances academic outcomes, supports mental and emotional well-being, and creates a safe environment for children and youth to thrive. The project also stimulates local employment and skills development, creating broader economic benefits for the Nation.



# Educational Environment

## Educational vision and goals

*Elders Vision: “The Elders believe a High School should be a place that empowers students and builds their self-esteem. Bigstone needs to follow our spiritual protocol and be able to conduct ceremonies. Ceremony is how they praise each person’s talents and ‘love them up.’ Culture and spirituality need to be taught as the foundation for their identity, so that they know where they come from and know that they have a purpose.” Elder’s Meeting, 2019*

Golden Eagle High School strives to provide an holistic education that balances cultural identity with modern opportunity, preparing students to stay rooted in their traditions while succeeding in the wider world. Bigstone Cree Education Authority and its working committee envisioned the need for a “campus of learning” to provide a new learning environment that promotes student’s natural aptitudes for language, environment, spirituality, and other subjects while fostering interconnectedness and land stewardship.

Golden Eagle High School supports this vision by achieving the following goals:

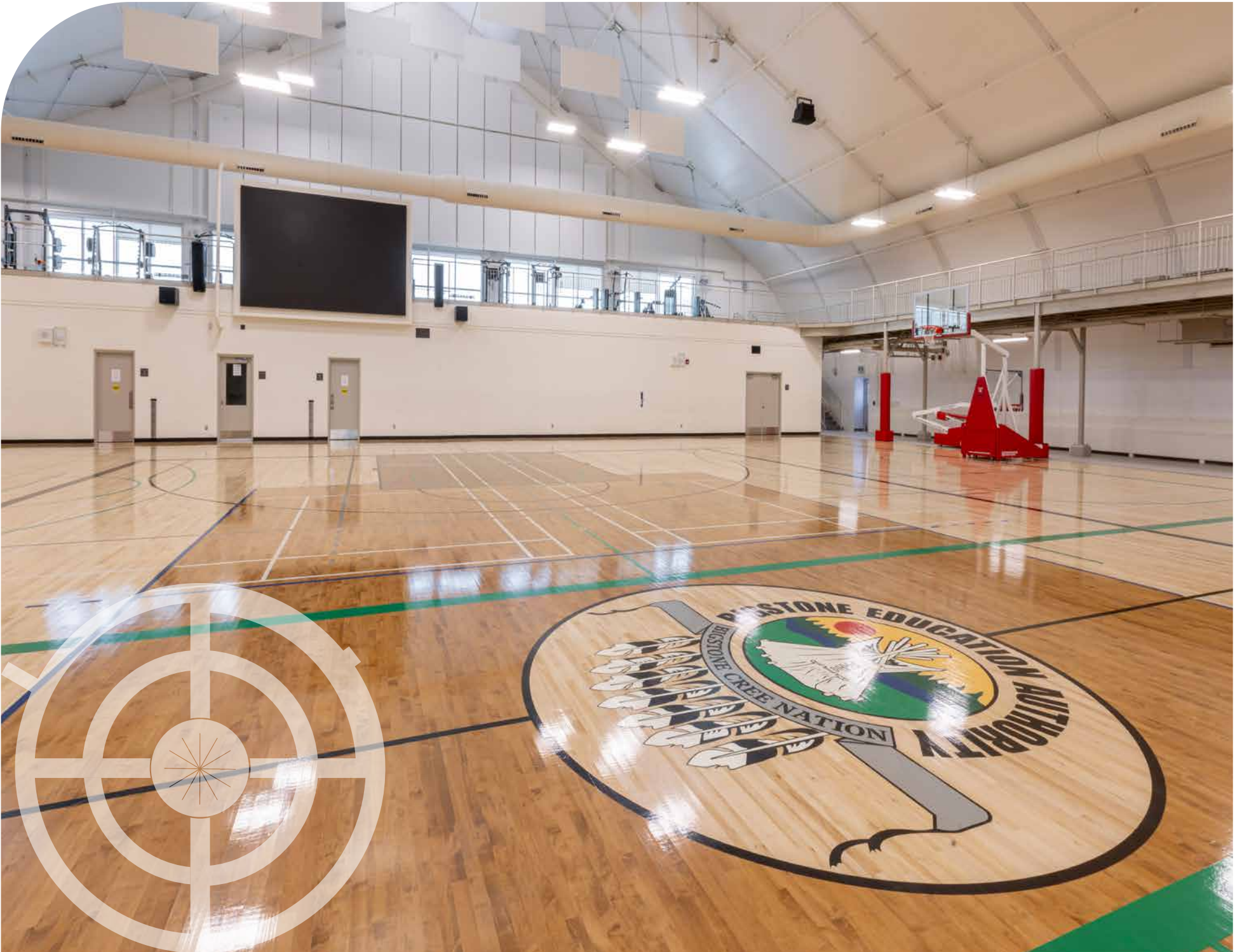
- Before Golden Eagle High School, students had to leave the community for high school, leading to low graduation rates and loss of cultural support. The school serves students, providing a holistic education rooted in community and tradition.
- Golden Eagle High School offers a culture-first educational space, which is crucial for the growing youth of Bigstone Cree Nation, as they need the knowledge, skills, and cultural values to lead in both their community and society, strengthening their traditions for future generations.

- Implement a Cree curriculum that complements the Western curriculum, integrating cultural teachings, language, and traditions alongside standard academic subjects to create a well-rounded interconnected educational experience for students.
- Provide a provincially approved education that prepares students for post-secondary opportunities, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed for further academic or vocational success.
- Preserve and impart traditional knowledge of the land, including the cultural importance and practices of plant gathering, fishing, and hunting. To encourage land stewardship and reciprocity and pass these vital skills and teachings on to future generations.
- Emphasize both Cree and English language skills, in both oral and written forms, fostering bilingual fluency. Holistic curriculum focused on traditional learning methods such as smoking and drying meat, knowledge about native species of flora and fauna etc, to preserve cultural heritage.
- First Nations have long fought to preserve holistic education. The Bigstone education system today reflects the vision of past and present generations, committed to education by and for their people, ensuring the strength of the Bigstone Cree Nation for generations.

## Supporting Cree Curriculum

*As Dale Auger (1999) explains, in the Sakaw Cree way of learning “Knowledge was shared in many forms including seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. The educational experience was connecting human to land, human to four legged and winged ones, human to human, and human to Spirit. This connecting of knowledge through direct experience in multiple dimensions is, to us, a way of expanding knowledge personally, and as a human society.” Dale Auger: 1999 (First Nations Education: Sharing of Knowledge)*

At OPK, Cree is taught daily with guidance from the school Elder, who also trains teachers in Bigstone’s cultural education. Students participate in weekly land-based learning at



“I remember well how our students sat around on the floor of the Primary school while they helped with planning and informing of things that they would like to see in our new High School... They recall their planning and they love having the space to visit with their friends, having a state of the art gymnasium that can enhance their sports and physical well being.”

– Joline Lambert



“The new school should help students learn their roots and help prepare them for the future urban setting they would walk past after graduation.”

– Chester Auger, CEO  
Bigstone Cree Nation  
Education Authority

Display cabinets throughout the school provide an opportunity to celebrate milestone events, and traditional Cree items.



Kapaskwatinak (culture camp), creating lasting memories while engaging in curriculum-based activities. OPK blends traditional and Western science, hosting the Treaty 8 Science Fair, where the community explores science through their own cultural lens. The school prioritizes students as individuals and community members, fostering a culture of safety, care, and appreciation. Staff greet students each morning and bid them farewell every afternoon, consistently demonstrating love and support. What stood out most was the deep respect and affection between students and staff. Students enthusiastically designed their ideal spaces, highlighting their passion for science, technology, performing arts, and cultural elements. The Elders developed the curriculum before they thought about the design of the school. They wanted to be able to teach ancestry through the stars, share their teachings, and teach in their language.

From these ideas and consistent engagement sessions our team helped the community to design a school that keeps students connected to the land, their cultural roots, and modern learning—fostering an environment of respect, creativity, reciprocity, and community. The Elders, teachers, and students were involved in all programming and development. A central gathering space, visible from all classrooms and teaching areas, acts as the heart of the school. Outdoor classrooms are easily accessible, nurturing curiosity and supporting experiential learning. The design also allows for a smooth transition between indoor and outdoor spaces, reflecting a land-based educational approach. A kitchen garden featuring berries and edible native plants was introduced, attracting local wildlife and offering students direct learning opportunities from nature. Teaching spaces were intentionally designed to be flexible, open, and responsive to diverse learning styles. The current design incorporates key cultural spaces, such as an Elders’ room, language room, parents’ room, and areas for cooking and astronomy. These



spaces were identified as important needs during our engagement sessions, ensuring the design supports both cultural and educational values.

Golden Eagle High School is designed to holistically blend cultural heritage with modern education, offering students the opportunity to connect with their roots while preparing for the future. One example is a dedicated space where students learn traditional skills, such as butchering a moose and preserving wild meat, which transforms into a sophisticated kitchen for culinary programs. This integration of cultural and practical learning was shaped by early engagement with food authorities and community input, including the collective desire to learn traditional practices during student consultations. These kinds of intentionally crafted spaces connect land-based learning and modern techniques.

## Supporting Learning/Teaching Styles

### Stewards of the Boreal Forest

For the children of Bigstone Cree Nation, the land is their classroom. They grow up exploring forests, lakeshores, and open spaces—learning through movement and connection to nature. Traditional classrooms are closed off and rigid, with long corridors that don’t reflect reality and often fail to be engaging. This school project changes that. It embraces the students’ relationship with the land, offering spaces that are open, dynamic, interconnected, and rooted in their environment—designed to support how they naturally learn and live.



We worked with the Nation to create this custom Elder’s table incorporating medicines into the resin.



**Circular Learning:** A circular learning space and massing of the new school design reflects both cultural significance and educational purpose. Rooted in Indigenous worldviews, the circle symbolizes equality, connection, and the cyclical nature of knowledge. In a school setting, a circular learning space fosters inclusive, community-based learning where every student feels seen and heard. It supports storytelling, collaboration, and traditional teaching methods guided by Elders or knowledge keepers. By removing the front-of-classroom hierarchy, this design encourages respect, participation, and a deeper sense of belonging—key to Bigstone’s vision of holistic, culturally grounded education.

**Athletic Pavilion:** The athletic pavilion functions as the community’s indoor space for play and recreation during harsh winters, offering a warm, safe place for students to play games in the corridors and gymnasium.

**Edible Garden:** The edible garden features native plant species, providing a sustainable space for students to learn about local flora, food sources, and environmental stewardship while supporting biodiversity and connecting them to the land.

**Smudge room:** The smudge room offers a sacred space for spiritual cleansing and reflection, allowing students and community members to engage in traditional practices

**Central Tipi space:** The central tipi space serves as a cultural hub, offering a gathering area for storytelling, ceremonies, and community events. It symbolizes connection, unity, and tradition, creating a welcoming environment for students to engage with their cultural heritage.

**Hands on experience:** The smoking and drying meat facilities integrated into the kitchen are an essential part of the curriculum, providing students with hands-on experience in traditional food preservation methods.





## Adaptability and Flexibility

Flexibility was key as the building needed to be able to adapt to a variety of teaching styles and changing pedagogy. The school is designed to accommodate a holistic blend of 21st century learning and traditional teachings. The school's design deeply reflects the wishes of the community, staff, students, parents, and general community members. The layout supports diverse learning styles, accommodates various activities, and can easily be reconfigured for different uses, ensuring the environment remains relevant and functional over time.

As you walk past the entry, the building opens into a large gathering space to be used for education and community events where imagery of the Seven Sacred Animals is placed in a manner compatible with the Cree teachings.

The school goes beyond being an educational space; it serves as a sacred gathering area, carefully designed with elements including furniture and patterns and that respect tradition and promote community connection, seamlessly shifting into a ceremonial space when needed.

## Engagement Process

The engagement process was intentionally started in predesign, ensuring that community voices shaped the facility from the ground up. The design journey began with a gathering of 30 Elders, whose insights laid the foundation for the project's guiding principles. Separate engagement sessions were held with a broad range of stakeholders, including educational authorities, school staff, students, parents, Elders, and community members. Importantly, outreach extended to grassroots participants such as bus drivers, maintenance staff, and waste management workers—ensuring no voice was overlooked. This inclusive and layered

approach honoured diverse perspectives, promoted equity by involving all levels of the community, and created a sense of shared ownership in the future of education.

The engagement fostered diversity, equity, and inclusion in several meaningful ways:

**1 Diverse Voices Were Heard:** Engagement sessions were done with as broad a variety of stakeholders as possible. Providing a platform for a wide range of perspectives, including parents, Elders, educators, and youth. This ensured that the conversation reflected the lived experiences and aspirations of the whole community.

**2 Cultural Inclusion:** The dialogue emphasized the importance of Cree language, land-based learning, and traditional practices. This cultural grounding affirms Indigenous identity and acknowledges that Indigenous ways of knowing as essential components in holistic education. Setting students up to be proud of who they are and succeed in the future.

**3 Commitment to Equity in Education:** Participants voiced the need for students to have access to the same academic opportunities as those in urban schools.

**4 Inclusive of All Needs and Beliefs:** Discussions highlighted the importance of accommodating various religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and students with special needs. Creating a learning environment where every student feels respected, supported, and able to thrive.

**5 Respectful and Collaborative Process:** Constructive tone of the dialogue modeled inclusive decision-making, where all contributions were valued equally.





## Physical Environment

### Physical Attributes/ Fitting in the Larger Context

The Bigstone Cree Nation is situated on the banks of South Wabasca Lake in the boreal regions of Northern Alberta. Prominent fauna in the area are moose, woodland caribou, white-tailed deer, mule deer, lynx, cougar, and black bear. Moose are central to the lives of the Sakaw Cree acting as a building block for culture and language, and Elder Nora Yellowknee sees that education has the potential to become the 'new moose' a means by which to rebuild the vibrancy of their culture and create a strong, prosperous, and interconnect community for the generations to come. Important to the community is the idea of holistic education ensuring the children and youth are equipped with a balance of contemporary worldviews and traditional values and beliefs.

This goal is realized in the adjacent school where elementary age students are taught curriculum informed by community Elders, parents, and other community resources. Located on the west side of the site, it is a one- storey building with 7 modular classrooms. This existing elementary school supports the uniqueness, integrity, and creativity of individual students while remaining grounded in the wisdom of the ancestors. Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik, the roots of which translate to: 'Oski' - new or young people; 'Pasikoniwew' - lifting up or getting up; and 'Kamik' - a house or shelter solidifies this goal.

Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik is an important central location in the lives of Bigstone students providing safety and community. Golden Eagle School aims to provide continuity to this experience by connecting with the existing school and allowing a continuation of education on site. **The high school is designed to gracefully connect with Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik creating an interconnected learning campus with complimentary programming and the potential to build out in the future as the population increases.**

Sports fields are located to the North and two playground areas are located on the northwest and south areas of the site. The design of the Golden Eagle School also includes the expansion of the existing parking lot expanding

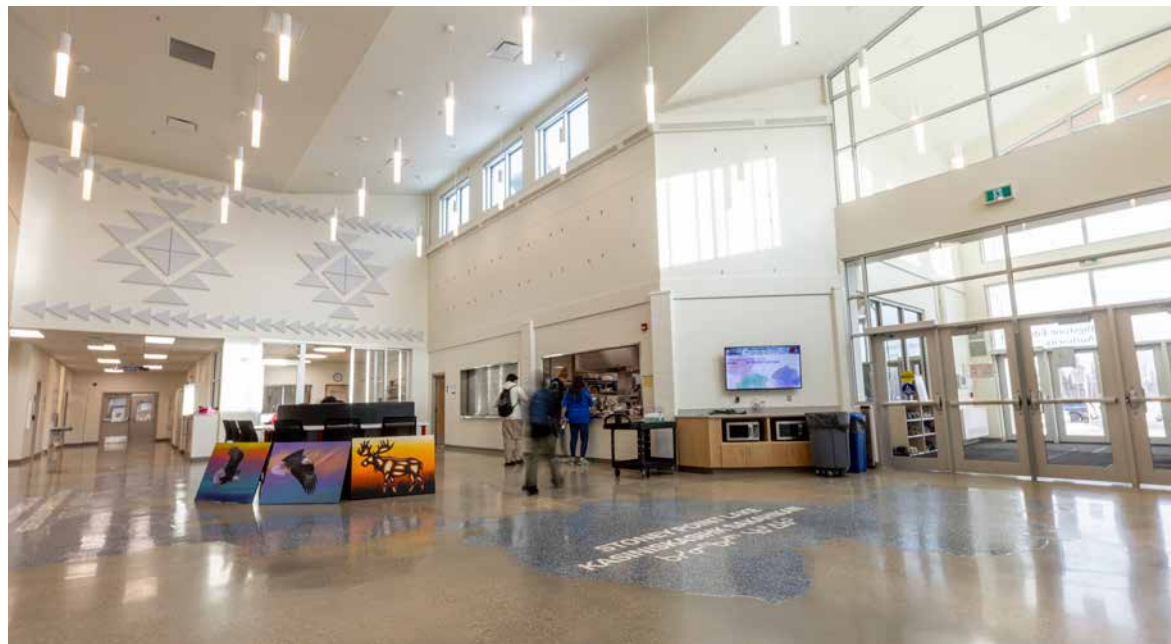


access to both schools. On the north side of the design is a sprung structure gymnasium which allows for the future expansion. The gymnasium also acts as a gathering space for the community and supports more sports opportunities in the colder winter months.

## Design Features

The design of Golden Eagle School focuses on the incorporation of values from the engagement process such as fun, engagement, presence, support, mobility, access, integration, social, sustainability, activity, and comfortable using these to inform the design of the new school. The school is designed to align with Cree culture and guide the shift from inward-focused early education to outward-facing secondary learning, fostering cultural identity while preparing students for life beyond graduation. The outward-facing learning refers to an educational approach in high school that shifts students' focus from primarily internal or personal development to an external exploration of the environment around them. The floor plan layout was developed to highlight inside-outside relationships in the building and to create a strong connection to the land. While also organizing the spaces to encourage and emphasize storytelling. As part of the client values, the main entrance faces towards the east, it is placed to create a strong visual connection with the interior Tipi, as **this place is understood to be not just a learning centre but also a gathering space for the community.** As such, these spaces were developed with flexibility as their main goal





with a secondary focus on supervision and safety. The central gathering areas are created for use during school hours and after hours for community events; clearstory windows are used for natural light in these spaces and natural light was prioritized throughout the design.

The main entrance of the school is designed to be grand but inviting, featuring a wooden canopy that extends out to welcome visitors. Situated nearby are the jumbo staircase and library which open to the circular outdoor gathering/learning space. Indoor classrooms are arranged in an arc around the outdoor learning space with large windows between them ensuring continuous visual connection to the landscape. The design prioritizes this outdoor classroom, and visual connections created from the main entrance with the interior Tipi. The outdoor classroom is developed based on the concept of Turtle Island from Woodland Cree culture and acts as a focal point for the overall design, celebrating and centring traditional practices. The space has alternating hard and soft landscaping centring a space for a tipi, it is designed to cater to flexibility and be dynamic with a multitude of uses.

It is a space that celebrates its identity and encourages engaging and learning, deeply rooted in culture and a strong connection to the land. In Cree tradition, light and shadow hold symbolic meaning tied to balance and rhythm. This concept guided the circular, outward-looking design. We tried to bring that essence to the learning spaces by the outward looking circular design. Extensive sun path studies were done to understand how to utilize the light and shadow effect to better help the learning environment. The wooden screen placed in front of this circular place is placed carefully as part of these studies to bring optimal light and shade to the interiors throughout the year.

The school is designed to be more than just a place of learning—it becomes a sacred gathering space, which, through elements that honour tradition and invite community connection, can take on ceremonial roles as well. Furniture design and interiors have been carefully crafted to highlight cultural elements. In one space used specifically by Elders for smudging, sacred tools are incorporated as part of the furniture with the table being crafted using ceremonial components and a special place being made to hold the ceremonial tool. Golden Eagle High School stands as a model of Indigenous-led educational innovation, embodying education's power to foster empowerment, self-determination, and community strength.

## Interior Design

The interior design incorporates elements and values that reflect the community's heritage and identity both aesthetically and in functional ways. The interior features wall murals with traditional symbols and acoustic wall panels inspired by traditional Indigenous blanket designs.

Natural materials like wood and stone, and circular ceiling features, and seating arrangements reflect Indigenous teachings on unity and equality. Language signage in both English and Cree reinforce cultural pride and accessibility. Cultural values such as respect, community, and storytelling are also embedded through open common areas for gatherings, display cases featuring student artwork and traditional crafts, and the integration of natural light and outdoor views, emphasize harmony with nature. This type of design not only enhances school identity but also fosters inclusion and cultural continuity.

The school's interior design embraces a warm and inviting atmosphere, featuring a soothing palette of neutral tones. Red and yellow, white and black, reflecting the medicine wheel accent colors are incorporated throughout. Natural



wood finishes add warmth and texture, while large clerestory windows allow for ample daylight to enhance the sense of openness and a natural connection to the surrounding environment. Complementary pendant lighting adds to the warmth of the space. The central gathering area serves as the heart of the school, designed to encourage connection and collaboration. The flooring incorporates a lake design, significant to the local residents adding color and texture to the space. Large windows provide natural light into the library, inviting students in while smaller collaboration areas allow for quiet study or group work.

The display areas within the school and sprung structure are thoughtfully designed to showcase

artifacts and achievements of the community and students. Placing these in a publicly accessible space was crucial, as they were previously stored in a community facility that lacked proper funding. This new visibility was a proud moment for the community, as it allowed their history and accomplishments to be celebrated and recognized in a meaningful way.

Throughout the school, flexible spaces outside of classrooms are thoughtfully designed to support collaboration, independent study and informal gatherings. These areas are defined by a warm and neutral colour palette and wood tones. Acoustic panels are used to maintain a quiet, focused atmosphere. Some areas feature writable walls and glass partitions.



# Results of the Process & Project

## Achieving Goals and Objectives

Prior to the opening of Golden Eagle High School, students graduating from the existing elementary school would be forced to move onto provincial secondary schools if they wanted to complete their formal education. This would force them to leave the safety and continuity of community created in this environment moving onto a school without the capacity to fully support their needs. This disruption of their base cultural, linguistic, traditional, and spiritual knowledge is exactly what compelled the creation of Golden Eagle High School. The school now serves a class of 271 students providing them with a holistic and interconnected education, preparing them for lives both inside and outside their community. Of note is the class of 28 grade 12 students.

New students have been moved by the design of the school, feeling included and seen within it. Knowing that its design has been shaped by the voices and wisdom of their Elders has inspired them.

Golden Eagle High School provides students with an education that supports their needs and culture, providing them with a continuity of community that maintains and strengthens their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual integrity.

## Achieving School District Goals

The vision of the Bigstone Cree Nation Education Authority is that to provide education where every student finds belonging, learns holistically, and is supported on their journey. They believe in providing education that meets their student's distinct, lifelong



needs allowing them to thrive during their time in school and beyond.

Our team hopes that the design of Golden Eagle High School will be a step towards achieving these goals for even more students. By extending the reach of this mission to older students and connecting with their existing school, we aim to turn the site into an interconnected learning campus that centres and celebrates their culture and way of life within the design.

## Achieving Community Goals

From the early stages of this project, it has been understood that the Golden Eagle High School would serve as more than just a learning space for the community. Great care was taken in the design details to ensure that spaces within the school are flexible enough to accommodate community gatherings in addition to educational

programming. Details such as the elevator make the school more accessible ensuring that no one is left out in the cold.

Construction made extensive use of local labour. Local workers were utilized for 8,925 hours of the general labour hours for the project with trade partners also using over 8,000 hours of local labour. This project was in large part constructed for the community by the community.

Golden Eagle High School is designed to nurture the leaders of tomorrow giving them the skills and knowledge to thrive while also maintaining strong cultural ties and continuity of community. Through this school and the teaching of the community, education becomes the key to the longevity of Bigstone Cree Nation people for seven generations and beyond.

## Unintended Results and Achievements

With the opening of this school, we celebrate more than a building—we celebrate the harmony of ancestral knowledge and contemporary learning. This space stands as a testament to how traditional Indigenous ways of knowing can guide and enrich modern education, lighting the path for generations to come.

**Inclusive Space:** At the opening ceremony, one young boy who uses a wheelchair was so excited to see that there was an elevator. He couldn't contain his joy as he moved freely through every level of the new school—even easily accessing the unique sprung structure which has the elevator. His excitement wasn't just about exploring the space but also about feeling seen and included in it. What touched him most was knowing that the school's design was shaped by the wisdom of Elders—whose voices helped guide every detail, ensuring the building reflected the heart of the community and embraced the needs of every child.

**Pride:** A young boy attended the grand opening with his foster parents, his heart swelling with excitement as he returned to his community to witness the unveiling of the new school and its remarkable facilities. It was more than just a visit—it was a moment of connection and pride. His joy was palpable as he realized that he was now part of this vibrant new beginning, a place where his roots, his community, and his future would all converge.

**Welcoming:** The Elders were particularly pleased with the thoughtful design of the school, especially the elevator, which offered them a warm and accessible way to move between floors, even in

the harsh -37°C temperatures. It was a simple yet powerful feature that reflected the community's deep care for their comfort and well-being, ensuring that no one would be left behind, no matter the weather. The main lobby is welcoming for all, close to the heart of the school (the tipi) and the display cabinets (specially requested by Elder Mike to celebrate cultural items because the community museum couldn't operate any longer). The main lobby was designed to welcome the community and all walks of life to the school and inspire lifelong learning and connections. It is important because the residential school system excluded the community and family and broke trust in the education system. Bigstone is working hard to rebuild that trust and reintegrate the family and community into education practices.

**Transformational space:** The school is more than a place of learning—it becomes a sacred gathering space, seamlessly transforming into a ceremonial setting through the careful thought process in choosing the design elements that honour tradition and invite community connection.

The project provides value and good stewardship of financial resources by ensuring that every investment contributes directly to the community's long-term educational and cultural goals. The design and construction of the school are done with a focus on sustainability, cost-efficiency, and community input, ensuring that funds are used wisely. By incorporating local materials and labor where possible, the project supports the local economy while minimizing costs. Additionally, the curriculum and educational spaces are tailored to the community's specific needs, ensuring that resources are spent on what will have the most

impact on students' academic, cultural, and personal development. This approach maximizes the return on investment by creating a lasting, positive impact on future generations.

As part of the project's sustainability efforts, energy modeling was conducted based on available design documents and standard assumptions. Sustainability initiatives at Golden Eagle High School actively create local opportunities for Native communities by integrating cultural practices with modern environmental stewardship. The study found that the proposed building design is on track to meet the energy performance requirements of the National Energy Code for Buildings (NECB) 2017. The study results show that the annual energy cost of the proposed design is projected to be lower than that of the budget building, indicating strong energy efficiency. Sun studies were conducted to understand the natural light patterns on the site, helping to design learning spaces including the central gathering spaces and classrooms around it including the corridor that maximize daylight, reduce energy consumption, and support student wellness through enhanced connection to the natural environment.

The project prioritizes long-term sustainability and holistic wellness by rooting education in community values, culture, and land-based practices. By keeping students in their home community, the initiative strengthens family bonds, reduces the stress of relocation, and fosters a stronger sense of belonging and identity. Wellness outcomes include a focus on student health, healing, and happiness—recognized by community members as key indicators of success.