



OZHAAWASHKWAA ANIMIKII-BINESHI

Aki Onji Kinimaagae' Inun

2024-25 School Year

Report to our Community

MESSAGE FROM THE AKI CENTRE

What an amazing year it has been! It's been a pleasure to invite 4,825 students along with hundreds of Educators here through this school year, as well as Elders, Knowledge Holders, student and parent volunteers.

We celebrate with you by sharing some stories of our past year related to Land-based learning, ecological restoration, and community stewardship here at the Aki Centre.

LAND-BASED LEARNING

Each year we continue to grow in our relationships with the Land and our school community. We host classes from K-12, adult learners, and partner with wonderful programs in Seven Oaks such as Ojibwe Bilingual Program, Middle Years Cultural Education, Senior Years Cultural Education, and MET schools through internships and support with project-based learning. We strive to see the same classes multiple times per year to build and sustain relationships with this place, the Earth, and each other.

We also foster continued learning through action projects which extend and deepen learning over time through dedicated practices that connect us to the Earth and each other regularly. These build awareness, connectivity, dedication, responsibility, independence and mastery through active citizenship, creative collaboration, critical thinking and planning and communication. These are the Divisional Compost Program, Edible Gardens Action Project, and the Eco-Cultural Restoration Action Project.



LAND-BASED LEARNING HIGHLIGHTS

Land-based learning benefits us all, across nations. The Earth is our Teacher and we are grateful to build our learning from the Earth that sustains us. As we steward these 50-acres together, each year we witness the return of another bird, insect, plant, or mammal. Memories of this year are made of the moments we asked ourselves and each other what it means to be in good relationship with someone (human or more than human), what we can offer in return for the gifts from the Earth or other humans, and how we show respect and responsibility in our relationships. If there is something each interaction on the Land has in common, it may be that we are learning how to live in community and how to (re) build a community rooted in respect for the Earth and each other. The young ones show us great hope, as they demonstrate curiosity, openness, respect, and a desire to protect and cherish who we are and the Earth we live upon.

Here are some of our highlights through the seasons:

Autumn:

- Medicine teachings and harvesting
- Seed harvesting and saving (Indigenous Plants, Vegetables and Herbs)
- Harvesting vegetables and teas, how to utilize them and how they nourish us
- Life in the Wetland, the importance of water, waterways, and water protection
- Ecological biodiversity in the Grassland: Plant ID, climate change and colonization
- Cultural and historic connections to our ecosystems, restoration and reconciliation
- Composting, the cycle of life, and do-able climate actions
- Sweat Lodge preparations and Tipi Teachings

Freeze up:

- Human and animal adaptations through the seasons
- Animal Tracking
- Fire Building, cooking over the fire, Indigenous foods and foodways, team work
- Mapping and navigation, migration and seasonal changes
- Passive Solar Heat (Greenhouse) and Shelters
- Indigenous Games and Indigenous contributions to sports...and laughter

Winter:

- Snowshoeing and Indigenous Technology, Winter Games, Tobogganing
- Stratifying Indigenous plant seeds
- Indoor vermicomposting and the love of worms, identifying the cycles in nature
- Fire building, Hide work (frost scraping)
- Feasting together, teas, and stories

Thaw and Spring:

- Water on the Land, Water is Life
- Lessons of the Birch Bark Canoe
- Plant Medicines, teas, salves, and food as medicine
- Migration and seasonal changes
- Planting seeds for the vegetable garden, getting the gardens ready for planting

Summer:

- Indigenous Farming practices/land stewardship, gardening, ecological restoration
- Insects, bugs and pollinators
- Plant reproduction and honourable harvesting
- Composting
- Celebration, the importance of giving back, gratitude





CULTURAL EDUCATION - OJIBWE BILINGUAL PROGRAM, K-5

Each year, the K-5 Riverbend Ojibwe Bilingual Program learners visit the Aki Centre in each season. The familiarity with the place, people, and Land-based activities as well as ways of learning is evident as students brim with anticipation and excitement, and are ready to lead.

In **Autumn**, we harvested from the gardens, including the Three Sisters Garden which they planted at the end of the last school year. We visited the pond to learn about the importance of water and many forms of life in a wetland. We cooked together, as we always do, utilizing the foods from the gardens. Games brought us laughter and bonding as we started the year.

In **early Winter**, we connected to Gashkadino Giizis/Freezing Water Moon, observed the changes on the Land in preparation for Winter and how plants and animals respond. We cooked with foods harvested from the garden and with rabbit and bison. Students learned about hunting and trapping, observed how to turn deer bones into tools, and worked to soften sinew to make strong cordage.

In **late Winter**, we connected again to the water in its frozen form and to language around fish! With beautiful Ogaa/Walleye from Wanipagow, they learned to fillet fish, learned from the fish how they survive in water, and again how important it is to protect the water. The winter feasts are much anticipated as the kitchen skills are soaring by now. They prepared Manoomin, Bannock, fried fish and fruit salad and cucumber salad.

Our last visit together celebrated **Summer**. Coming full circle, we found ourselves back in the garden planting the Three Sisters for next fall's harvest, as well as potatoes and other vegetables for the soups and snacks we look forward to eating in a few months. We learned for the second time how to skin a rabbit and cook the meat, and to make the bones into a tasty broth. After a great feast featuring rabbit soup, we enjoyed the sun and our favourite Indigenous games.

We continue to see students excel at working together, accomplishing big jobs by learning skills independently and supporting each other, acquiring experience with traditional practices, and applying their language to what we are doing. We couldn't be more proud of these wonderful children! We were happy to invite their families out in May to celebrate their learning, and to allow the KIDS to show their families what they love about Aki.



CULTURAL EDUCATION - MIDDLE YEARS CULTURAL EDUCATION

What a wonderful new program to partner with! The Middle Years Cultural Education program connects Indigenous Youth across the division with opportunities to learn about their cultures, languages, traditions, and teachings. We had the pleasure of hosting them a number of times through the year.

Some of our highlights were working on hides together (fleshing, scraping, braining, wringing, stretching and softening), de-barking tipi poles, visiting with Elders and Knowledge Holders, recognizing a collecting LOVE of cooking together, beading, learning to start and keep a fire, and so much more. One school even prepared for a Sweat Lodge Ceremony, sadly postponed due to wild fires, however they received the teachings and understandings around the Lodge and helped to take care of the ceremonial area and materials, giving something back for what they received.

We thoroughly enjoyed meeting everyone, and welcoming them to the Centre through the year! We look forward to seeing you again next year!



CULTURAL EDUCATION - SENIOR YEARS CULTURAL EDUCATION

It's been many years now that we've partnered with Senior Years Cultural Education program, and it just keeps getting better! While they gather monthly, we are honoured to spend 5 sessions with each high school's cohort this year.

This year our October session focused on Tipi Teachings with Tipi Joe (Joe Lanceley), including learning how to put up and take down the Tipi, listening to the teachings of each pole and the tipi as a whole. Gardening, fall harvesting and cooking were also important parts of the day.

Our November sessions focused on Drum and Rattle Making with Elder Derek Courchene and Knowledge Holder Wayne Manningway. For the Maples students, Knowledge Holder Mark Hall and Educator Cory Demarchuk shared around the Deer Harvest, honourable harvesting, and how to process the deer.

Our January sessions were filled with warmth and laughter as we learned from and with Norbert Mercredi and his son, Norbert (as well), about Indigenous Winter Games. They shared about the history and origins of the games, around harvesting the materials (wood, hides, sinew) and the crafting that goes into each (carving and sewing, bending and binding). We learned MANY games that we can play indoors and outdoors in the winter. We utilized the Pond for games, clearing a rink for Shinny, creating a chute for snow snakes, and a smaller rink for whip top (the original BeyBlades). Not only did we learn the games and the share in stomach-cramping laughter, but we also learned about the philosophy and spirit behind the games, mental health benefits of the games, and ways of developing strengths physically and mentally, adding to our skills to thrive in life. We look forward to learning more with both Norberts !

The Spring sessions included a Sweat Lodge Ceremony with each high school group in March, followed by making Ribbon Shirts and Skirts for those graduating in June.

An amazing year, with amazing memories, new skills, and life long lessons.



MET SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Internships

We are often visited by Met students for internship experiences or project support. This year we had a fantastic Exchange Met student join us for a year long internship and to support his project: a feasibility study considering the stocking of fish at the Aki Centre Pond. Weekly, he helped with visiting classes and land stewardship while progressing on his own inquiry and feasibility study. We are so proud of him for the contributions he made to the Centre, to each visiting class and to the land stewardship, and for his thorough work considering the pros and cons of stocking fish in our small pond. His research was truly impressive and highlighted both wonderful opportunities as well as potential challenges one must consider. Over the year, many snowshoes were put on, kindling split, seeds sown, activities set up and put away, and demonstrations given by this amazing intern. We are proud of youth who step into leadership roles and learn both inside and outside of the classroom!

Projects

A milestone was reached this year through a partnership with Maples Met. Beginning in 2022, two students deepened a relationship with the Aki Centre by sharing that they envisioned creating a grassland or prairie restoration on their school yard, inspired by the restoration work committed to at the Aki Centre. With less than 1% of Manitoba's Tallgrass prairie remaining, they aimed to plant Indigenous flowers and grasses to preserve the prairie we still have, and educate others about the importance of these plants, ecologically and culturally, in our environment. This began the Prairie Restoration Garden Project at Maples Met.

In 2022, the project began with learning, researching, obtaining grant funds, and preparing the garden space for planting by eliminating weeds and learning about the nature of "weeds".

In 2023, the student team grew from 2 to 4, the project was submitted to Caring for Our Watersheds, and earned them additional applause and funds to complete their project. The garden plan was visually displayed, taking into consideration how plants grow together, and ensuring the diversity in the garden would support pollinators from early spring to late fall. Students engaged in seed harvesting and the stratifying of seeds to contribute to the propagation of plants.

In 2024, the garden site was ready to plant. Volunteers from all grades at the Maples Met helped to mulch, plant and water the site which would soon be inhabited by roughly 400 plants and 38 different species of Indigenous flowers and grasses. At this time, one student began putting together a Zine to share the purpose of the project, its location, timeline, the significances of Indigenous Plants, how to get involved, and how to start a similar garden of your own.

This year, the 2025 graduates of the Maples Met each planted one more plant into this garden to remember where their roots have grown and to leave a legacy behind. Each year the goal is to have the graduating class add plants and diversity to this space, to grow it little by little each year. This graduation celebration also marked the launch of the Zine, a beautifully crafted, screen printed, and graphically rich informational document to carry the legacy.



MET SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS



ACTION PROJECTS - DIVISIONAL COMPOSTING

This year we collected 14,669 lbs of compost from schools. 24 schools/school sites received weekly or bi-weekly compost pick up each Friday over the 10 months of the school year. Well done!

This year, seven schools began or fortified efforts to compost at their school sites: Amber Trails, RF Morrison, Collicutt, HC Avery, Ecole Riviere Rouge, West St Paul and James Nisbet. Already there are more schools working towards fully or partially handling their organic waste on the school site for the next school year.

Congratulations everyone, and a BIG thank you to Alex Loeppky at the Aki Centre for coordinating the program, supporting schools moving to on-site composting, and showing our community how to compost and why it is so important.

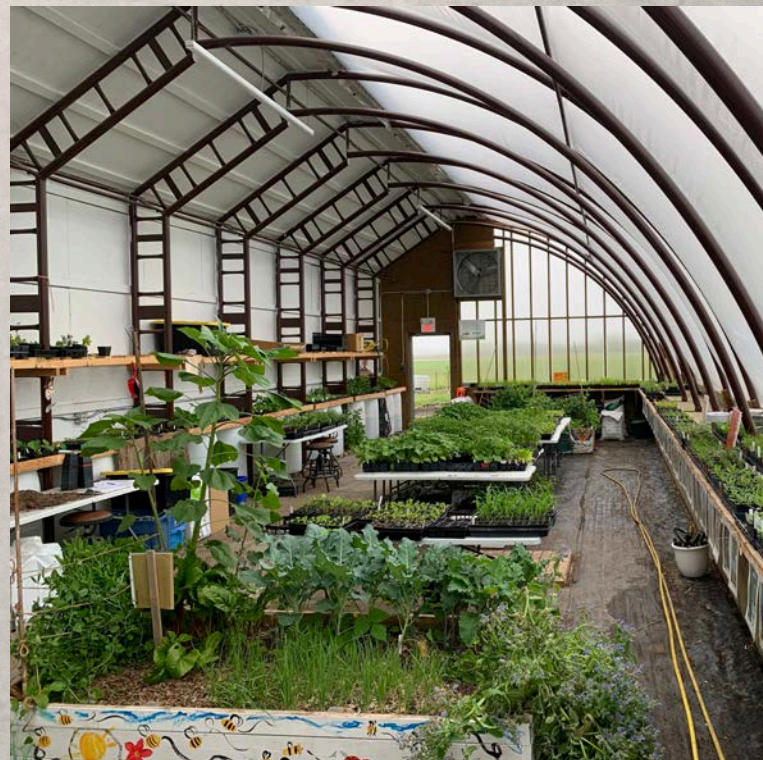


ACTION PROJECTS - EDIBLE GARDENS & ECO-CULTURAL RESTORATION

Each year, we plant seeds in the greenhouse with visiting students to support the Aki Centre and Division-wide gardening commitments. January marks when we begin stratifying seeds for the Eco-Cultural Restoration gardens, where schools plant out Indigenous flowers and grasses as a way of preserving our grassland ecosystem. March - May are when we plant vegetable and herb seeds as a part of the Edible Gardens project, a way of ensuring schools have the plants they need to provide an edible garden on their school yard.

This year we grew nearly 1,300 Indigenous plants and medicines and over 1,000 vegetables/herbs for schools. To support the larger community's growing interest and request, we also held our plant sale over two dates in June, with proceeds supporting our land stewardship and programs here at the Centre.

It is worth celebrating the impact each person is having at their school, home, or community garden.



STEWARDSHIP AT THE AKI CENTRE

Tallgrass Prairie

We continue to maintain and enhance the 35-acre Tallgrass restoration. You will notice some areas have been worked up, exposing the soil. Due to the pressures of salinity, these areas did not successfully grow Indigenous grasses, so they are being maintained to reduce weeds and have been re-seeded to a mix of Indigenous plants that are more tolerant of saline and wet conditions.

Wetland

The wetland is coming along so well, densely packed with a high diversity of grasses. Any flowers you see have been hand planted by students using plants we propagated in the greenhouse with our own saved seeds. Each year we plant a few more live plants to enhance diversity. This year we will plant Culver's Root, Wiike, Joe Pye, Tall Coneflower, and Milkweed.

Trees

This year we were fortunate to receive support from the East Interlake Watershed District who provide trees from the 2 Billion Trees Program, a federally and provincially funded initiative to provide trees for publicly accessible spaces to enhance tree cover, provide shade and shelter for humans and wildlife, capture run off, provide clean air, and enhance overall biodiversity and habitat. This year we received 4 apple trees, 4 Paper Birch, 3 Showy Mountain Ash, and 3 Linden. We will plant these south of the Centre where students can water them and access their shade next to the area we often use for games and running. We are grateful for partnerships that support positive climate actions.

Biodiversity at the Path Intersections

Last year we committed to a large restoration effort by growing Indigenous plants for the large triangular intersections where paths meet along the trails. We grow about 3,000 plants, mulched the areas after keeping them weed free for 2 years, planted the live plants and watered them with harvested rain water. We hope they will spread their seeds into the restoration plots, and enhance biodiversity in the coming years. They look amazing!



SITE CHANGES AND IMPROVEMENTS

Interpretive and Storytelling Signage

We had warm gatherings on Nov 13th and 15th to unveil and celebrate the signage. In attendance were many guests, from community members, Trustees, Superintendents, Students, SOSD staff, and families. Thank you for celebrating with us.

Over 3 years, we engaged in a collaborative and multi-generational process to create signage that centres Indigenous voices. These signs offer stories of the land itself, language, and culture delivered through an Indigenous worldview that envisions a good life for all.

Elder Mary Courchene and Elder Dan Thomas are the voices and storytellers with whom you will walk alongside as you journey to experience the land and the stories within. Jaimie Isaac led, created, and curated the art. Second Nature Interpretive Creative Interpretation and Little Bluestem Architecture provided endless support and project management. Students contributed art and guidance, and even installed the signs. The collaboration team was extensive and vital.

Text, audio (QR code), and graphic artistry carry the story that is echoed by the land that surrounds you. "Look, listen, learn, live", the Elders remind us.

They are based on the following themes:

- Welcome Kiosk: Mino Bimaadiziwin, Importance of names and language, Sacred Teachings
- Nibi / Water. "My Life"
- Mashkode / Grassland. "Strong Heart"
- Maizhawekaamik / A Long, Long Time Ago
- Ma'iigiziik / Strangers Came to Town
- Naanagaatch Giiga-Bimosemin / Softly We Will Walk
- Baakichigewinan / Legacy "What will you take, and what will you leave behind?"
- N'daanikoobijigaanag / Continuity of Life's Journey

Please come and take a walk this summer to connect to the beauty of this place and allow the special signage project to connect you to the stories, values and actions that build our community.



SITE CHANGES AND IMPROVEMENTS

Sweat Lodge

Each year we plant trees and shrubs around the sweat lodge site to provide some shelter and privacy for important ceremonies. These acts of stewardship also support the birds and insects, as well as small mammals. Our shelter is becoming dense and diverse, a lovely range of colours from Red Willow to the silvery Buffaloberry. Last summer we year we added more Saskatoons, Red Willow and Laurel Leaf willow, this year we added more of the same species as well as High Bush Cranberry.

To adapt to our open and exposed landscape, we erected a canvas wall tent around the sweat lodge before winter to provide comfort during the cold season ceremonies. We thank the extra hands that help with this work, especially Career Ready Building Trades as they often come over to help with a big job. Many hands do make light work, and we are so thankful for all helping hands.



MIIGWECH

Each month we are honoured to spend time with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and guests who facilitate our learning, help us to build a healthy community, nourish us with their words and experiences, and bring a whole lot of fun and laughter to our times together. We'd like to acknowledge all who gifted us with their time, their stories, their teachings and skills this year. With your stories, actions, and laughter, we understand what it means to have a worldview that one lives by. Our community was seeded from your generosity.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the students, educators, and staff who have contributed to the amazing learning and experiences rooted in Land-based Education and anti-oppressive education this year. Your insights, openness, creativity, and willingness to learn together and share your experiences are the memories and experiences we now carry with us.

To all the volunteers and helpers, and to our summer staff, we truly believe no one knows this place like you do. You carry a unique perspective, and have dedicated countless hours to land stewardship and care of the site that is greatly appreciated. This place is cared for because of the commitments you have shown, and your dedication to creating a safe and healthy space for our community.

May we continue to connect with each other, learn together, and to honour and celebrate the Land together.

