

BIRM 2023

IMPACT REPORT



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Tāwāw - welcome

there is room in the circle

Two and a half years ago I joined the University of Saskatchewan's Office of the Vice Provost Indigenous Engagement (OVPIE) on secondment from Saskatoon Public Schools after over a decade working in community schools as a classroom teacher and Indigenous Student Advocate. I had no idea what journey I was about to embark on and how this "BIRM" seed would sprout and grow. But I knew I had a toolkit full of love, support, community, and collaboration that I developed to make an impact on the Indigenous youth and families I had served for years as an educator.

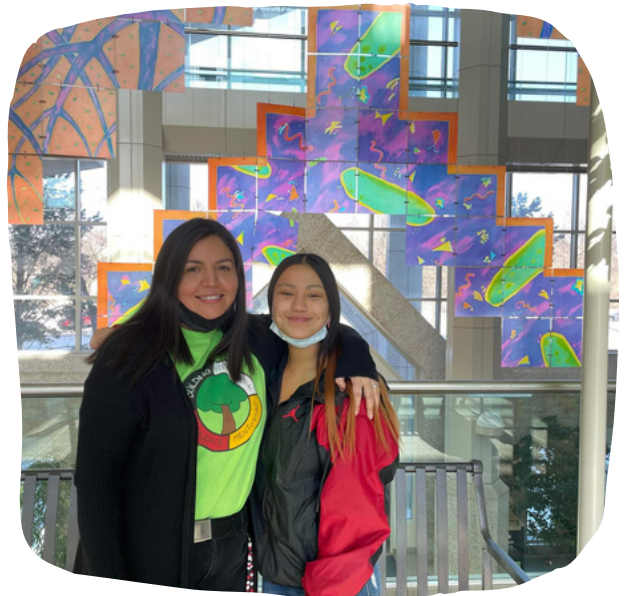
BIRM started as a seed and has grown exponentially in its short lifetime. As we enter our third year in schools, I am proud to be leading a team of coordinators who are passionate about uplifting Indigenous high school students and grateful for the leadership and guidance from VPIE Dr. Angela Jaime and our team, partnership and in-kind contributions of Saskatoon Public Schools and Deputy Director Brent Hills, continued financial support from the O'yateki partnership, and to the beautiful students and families who took a chance on a program and continue to trust us with their dreams for the future.

This report is my commitment to transparency and documentation of the impact of the program. It is also a celebration of our hard work, growth, and goals achieved. Thank you for taking the time to read more about us.

Nahanni Olson

Nahanni Olson

BIRM Director



Nahanni with a BIRM participant on USask campus



Saskatoon Public Schools
Inspiring Learning

What is BIRM

and what makes it work

The Building Intercultural Resilience Mentorship (BIRM) Program is an opportunity for Indigenous high school students to connect with a network of support through relationships with diverse post-secondary students. Together they develop skills and goals, broaden horizons of post-secondary pathways, and deepen their understanding of Indigenous culture and identity.

The program is entering its third year of delivery in collaboration with Saskatoon Public Schools and funded by the Ojateki partnership between the University of Saskatchewan (USask), Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI), and Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology (SIIT). BIRM is embedded into the school day, removing any barriers to accessing the program. School staff, teachers, and administrators work together with their Program Coordinator to ensure that the students in BIRM are staying in school and working toward graduation. Each Program Coordinator has access to the information systems and facilities of their school to monitor student academic achievement and attendance for seamless support and implementation.

“I used to be the low profile kid where I would go around doing bad stuff all the time but since I’ve been in BIRM, I...started focusing on my work and started focusing on BIRM, going on field trips, and learning about my culture” -Student

BIRM aims to remove barriers that Indigenous youth face while in high school including feelings of isolation or otherness, loss of Indigenous language and culture, credit attainment, education and awareness of career and post-secondary education opportunities, and disconnect from community in urban settings. The only requirements for high school participants are self-identifying of Indigenous ancestry and the willingness to try new things and make a change in their lives. For post-secondary student volunteers (mentors), BIRM aims to improve the experience of Indigenous students during their years of schooling by providing a community of support, strengthening self-efficacy and impact on their community, hands on leadership and collaboration experience, as well as awareness and support of employment and scholarship opportunities.



A BIRM student admires their work building willow dreamcatchers

Why “Intercultural” resilience and not “Indigenous” resilience? There are powerful effects of the diversity of our groupings within our mentors. First, the students are able to build their capacity to work collaboratively with people who don’t look and sound like them within the safety of their BIRM family. For most Indigenous students who enter post-secondary or the workforce, it is likely they will be the minority. Many of our students express feelings of judgment and prejudice from non-Indigenous community members, which can become a barrier to trying new things and accessing employment and educational opportunities. With BIRM they know that our mentors are there because they care about them; they want to learn from the students- hear their stories, learn about their culture. They believe in them.

What is BIRM, cont'd

Indigenous mentors get to be leaders in the program as we rely on their stories and experiences to guide our programming. When mentors are struggling to connect with students or understand their perspectives, it is the Indigenous mentors who teach them. This does not mean our mentors are “cultural” experts, in fact many of our Indigenous mentors have come to this program to learn more about their culture. They provide the priceless lived experience of growing up and getting through high school as an Indigenous person.

Finally, the non-Indigenous mentors become the stones in the waters of their home communities. They take their experience learning about and from Indigenous peoples and they create ripples of change in their families, classrooms, and future workplaces. They get to learn about the impacts of colonization that created the marginalization of Indigenous people but more importantly they are seeing the beauty, brilliance, and power our people still carry.

The impact of BIRM flows in many directions. There is no hierarchy of power or influence in the groups and we all come into the space as learners. The mentors and students guide the BIRM programming and activities. The program provides multiple opportunities for participants to drive the outcome of the sessions through collaborative planning, surveys, and focused goal setting. Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers are invited to share traditional knowledge and teachings. During the mentor training there is dedicated time (half day) to be guided by Elder voices. During the school year, program sessions have included language instruction, storytelling, smudge/sharing circles, dog sledding, survival skills, hide tanning, beading, ribbon skirt making, and traditional games.

The program is fundamentally making changes in how Indigenous youth, as well as teachers and school staff, see themselves and their futures. The program is shifting the worldview of its students, school communities, and volunteers from a deficit mode of thinking in regard to the outcomes for Indigenous student achievement. The program asserts that grade 12 graduation and post-secondary pathways are not a possibility of “what if” but an unquestionable “when”.

“It helped me consider going to post secondary school when I’m done high school and it helped learn all of the programs that I could go into that I’m possibly interested in” -Student



BIRM participants trying out a lecture hall on USask campus

“BIRM has taught me a lot of things about myself [sic], explore my identity and who I am more, helped me get my birth certificate and health card, and helped me with my personal life” -Student

Structure of Programming

In its pilot year (2021-2022), BIRM began at the outer edges of the pandemic during a time where masks were still required and we had to limit the number of students in each cohort. Students and mentors were desperate for connection, but they were also apprehensive about gathering and spreading illness into their homes and communities. We began at Bedford Road and Mount Royal collegiates with 15 mentors and 1 Program coordinator. That year we developed the foundation of what BIRM is, and we have been building upon that each year.

Every year our mentors must attend 2 full days of training before they begin their time in schools with students. The goal of this training is to deepen their empathy and understanding of the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous students in Saskatoon, review the expectations of volunteers according to Saskatoon Public Schools administrative procedures, to situate themselves as leaders and learned in the program development process, and to establish team bonds in their school groupings. They must also complete online modules that provide training to supplement their in person experiences, as well as deepen their understanding of cultural competency, their own cultural identity, and school emergency procedures.

Year 2 began with a growth in mentors and schools as we added Tommy Douglas collegiate's monthly sessions. Unlike the slow spark of our pilot schools, Tommy Douglas showed up in a way that proved their students' hunger for connection and culture. By term 2 we were able to add another Program Coordinator and weekly sessions.

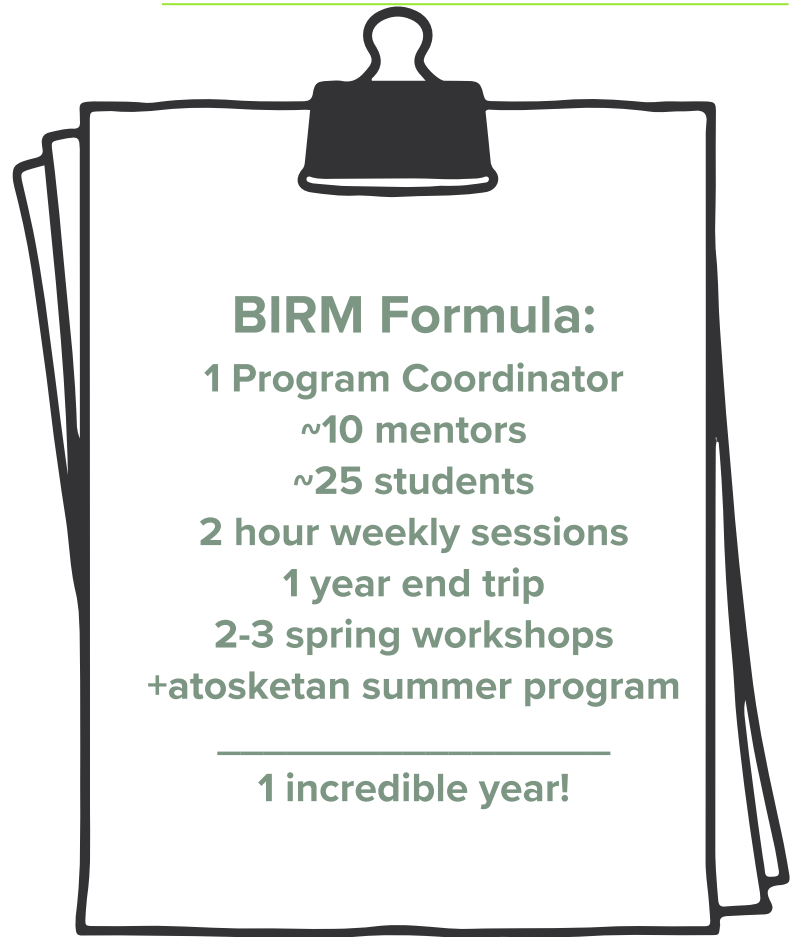


BIRM Mentors attending and co-facilitating training at Brightwater Eco-Science Center

“Many of the pillars of my own life have been scaffolded by BIRM and all of the great things involved in mentoring that I can't imagine my future without BIRM or a program like it.” - Mentor

Structure, cont'd

We have high expectations of our mentors—they must apply to the program, be invited to a group interview, and from there be selected to participate. They must attend in person training and commit to the 2 hours of volunteer time every week. This ensures that the volunteers, who are at the frontlines of our programming, are providing the best possible experience for our students. If a mentor misses more than 2 sessions per term they may be asked to pause their involvement in the program. This is because we know how important consistency is for our youth. Shortly after meeting their mentors, they begin to expect to see their faces every week. A mentor who is regularly missing sessions may cause more harm than good. Therefore we ask mentors to schedule their lives around BIRM- studying, socializing, appointments, work schedules, and extracurricular activities should all occur outside of their 2 hours.



BIRM Formula:

- 1 Program Coordinator
- ~10 mentors
- ~25 students
- 2 hour weekly sessions
- 1 year end trip
- 2-3 spring workshops
- +atosketan summer program

1 incredible year!

“[The mentors] are really nice. They take good care of us” -Student



Mentors in the Bedford Road culture room

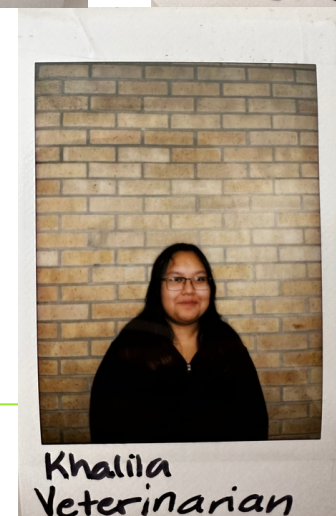


Top - Bedford students participate in a scavenger hunt
Bottom - Mount Royal participants playing in the gym

Participant Demographics

who do we serve?

Our students represent a wide range of First Nations and Métis communities across Saskatchewan. There is a spectrum of experience in our schools- some are new to the city, having moved here recently from their reserve and some are urban raised and have a vague connection to their home communities. They are ranging in ages from 14-19; some are bright eyed grade 9 students with high expectations of their high school future and some have attended several high schools and are disillusioned with what their school experience has become. There are students with full fridges and two stable adults at home and others who are surfing from one couch to another week to week. The students who access this program bring their own vibrant uniqueness, as one mentor eloquently remarked: “we have diverse skills, interests and experiences so we can respond to your (students) diverse needs and goals”. We aim to stay connected to our participants year to year, as transiency is a huge factor in the successful completion of high school requirements. The more schools we are connected to the easier it is for our students to find that safe community of support if they do need to change schools. Our students have big dreams after high school, from entering the work force to getting certified in a trade or a degree from a university.



BIRM Students '22-23



Nikki
tattoo-artist



Keanna
Barber



Ruski
Basketball
Player



Heaven
Lawyer or artist



Mathew
Photographer



Jayden
Music
Artist



Ilyria
Referee



Kakan
Carpenter



Ash



Nicholas
Carpenter



Alex B
Marketing



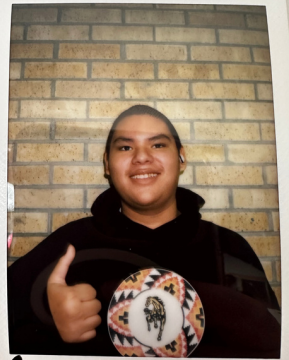
Nate
Gamer



Sky Harris
Teacher



Saris
Youtube



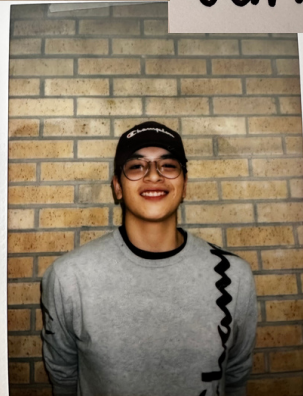
Sean
Musician



Jill
Paladini
EMT Wee-woo



Erimas

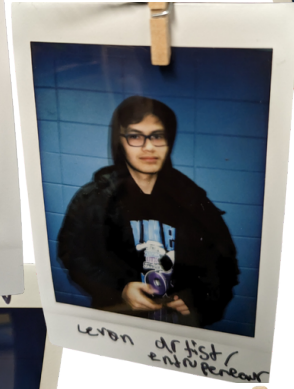
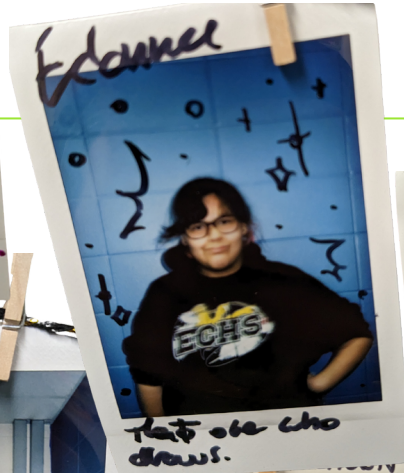


Dravyn
Construction
worker



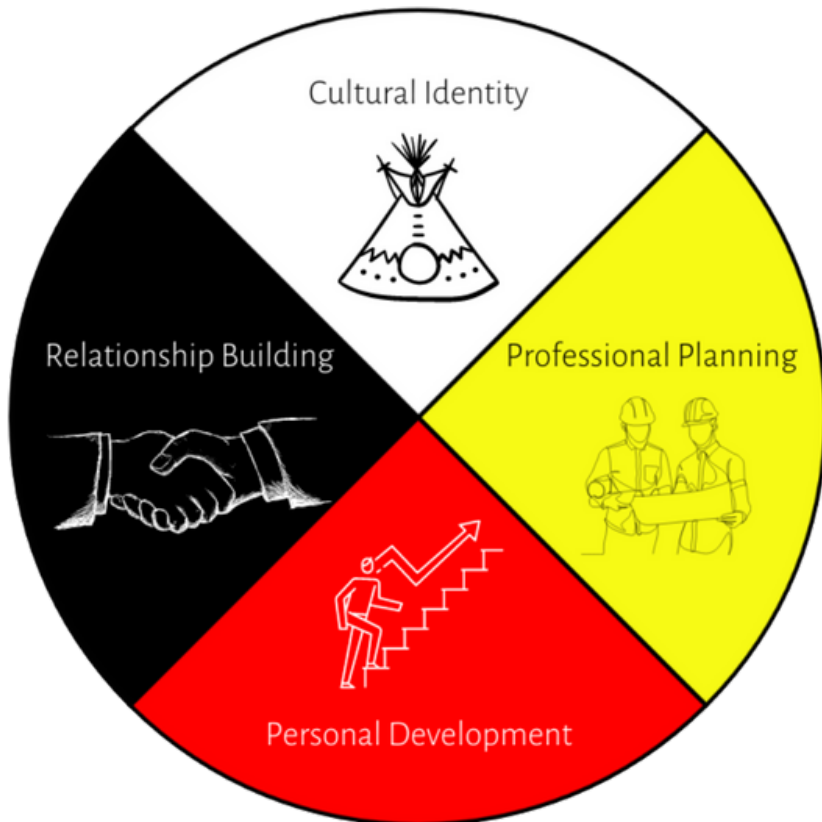
Savannah
Lawyer

BIRM Students '22-23



Structure, cont'd

BIRM Pillars of Support



“I think my passion for education is growing more now, so I think I still see myself in school and I see myself learning with BIRM and even after BIRM”

-Student



Mount Royal students learning to prepare traditional feast foods

There is no set curriculum for BIRM programming as we aim to tailor it to the needs and interests of our participants. However, we do align our activities within the pillars of support indicated, those activities are the most likely to impact our measured goals. Weekly sessions with mentors run from September to April, culminating in an expenses paid year end trip for participants. During May and June the school Program Coordinator works to continue to provide and support experiences for students in their schools such as culture camps, workshops, and campus tours. In July we offer the “atōsketan: Let’s Work!” summer work program where students are able to attend the Saskatoon Public Schools’ summer school to attain a Career Work Experience 10 credit (taught by BIRM staff), get 30 hours of unpaid work experience, and a bursary upon completion of \$300.

The BIRM pillars of support were identified in response to the barriers facing Indigenous students completing high school and entering the workforce or post-secondary education: cultural and identity crises creating lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, lack of a sense of belonging in urban school settings (the odd one out), awareness of opportunities, home/community support or capacity to access programming and funding opportunities, financial barriers, and successful experiences in the workforce and/or building employability skills. The glue to all of it is the foundation of relationship: each BIRM group becomes a family over their time together. We aim to keep our mentors at the same schools so we have been able to watch students growing into their capacity each year, even as the program grows. In our families, we do hard things together and together we make them easier.

Cultural Identity

COOKING



WANUSEKWIN



CRAFTING



LAND BASED LEARNING

CRAFTING



WANUSKEWIN

ELDER TEACHINGS



“BIRM showed me a lot about who I am and what my background is..It’s okay to be Indigenous now, there’s not as much stigma. We’re actually loved!”

-Student

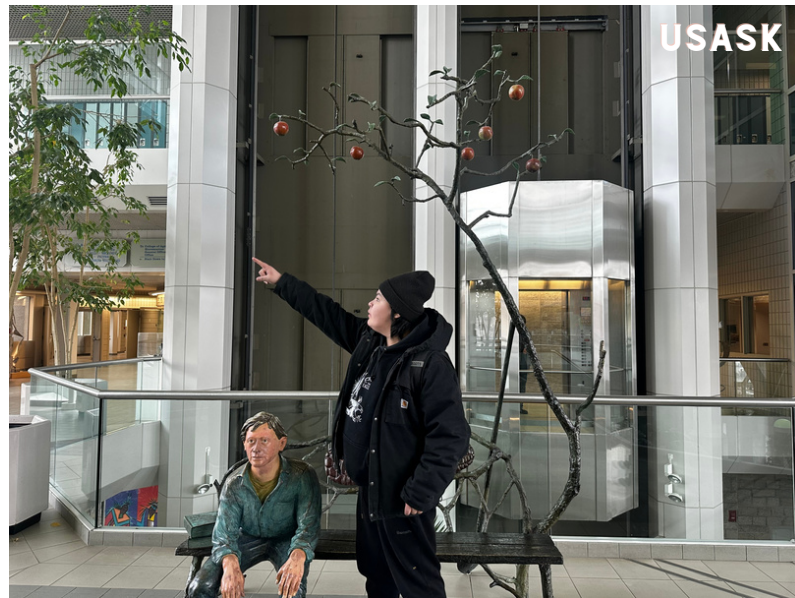
Cultural Identity

“The sharing circle and smudging . . . hearing everybody else's stories . . . everybody gets to speak without being interrupted, and smudging too, having a good day and having a good mindset”

- Student, describing their most meaningful experience in BIRM



Professional planning



"It's a really good opportunity to open up more doors . . . and it just helps open your eyes to other programs that are out there"

- Student

Professional planning

“I see myself helping people a lot in the future because of this program . . . which is the course that I’m going to take in a few years, which makes me feel really good about myself that I can help other people with their problems or just support them in any way”

-Student



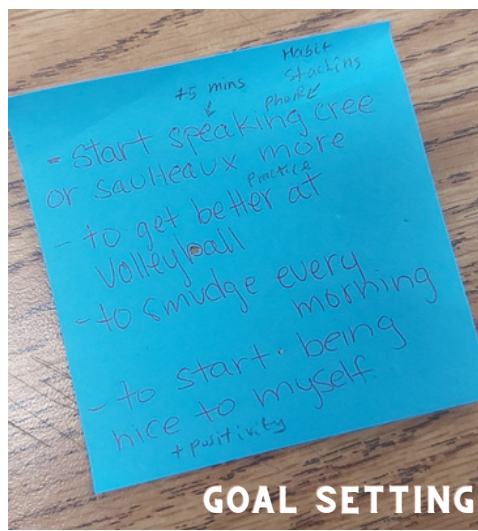
Personal development



APPLY FOR LIFE DOCUMENTS



TUTORING



GOAL SETTING



TRY NEW THINGS



RESUME WRITING



MAKE A PLAN

“I started taking risks more and it helped me build my confidence in a lot of ways, professionally, emotionally, and mentally. I started challenging myself a bit more and doing more stuff with my life . . . it just really helped my confidence and I don't think I would be as joyful as I am today if it were not for BIRM” - Student

Personal development

“Since I joined BIRM I gained a lot of confidence in myself and also communication skills.” -Student



ATTEND CONFERENCES



ACCESS RESOURCES



ROLE MODELS

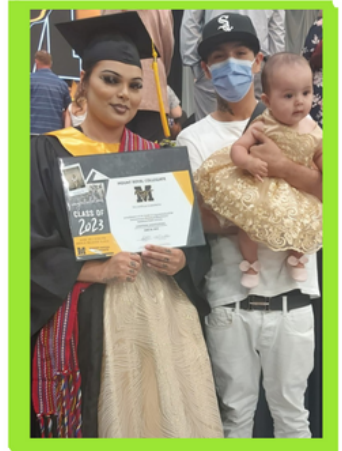
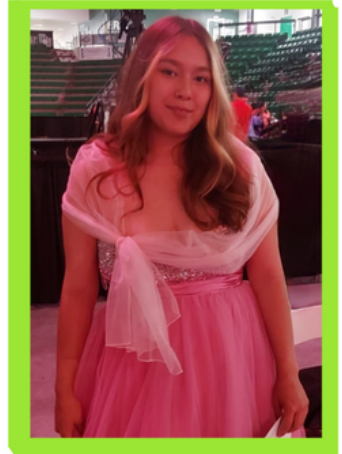


GUEST SPEAKERS



PUBLIC SPEAKING

Graduation



“...it shows you where you can go and how to reach a goal of higher education and options for the future”

- Student

Relationships



“It’s a once in a lifetime thing. You meet new people, interact with new people, and just make a good surrounding for yourself.”

- Student

“It feels like home”

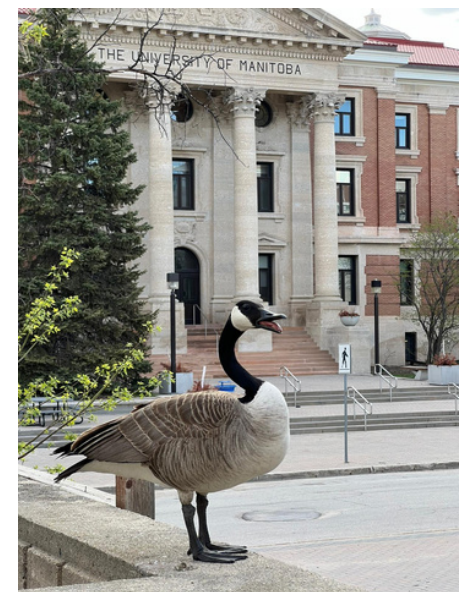
-Student

Relationships

“It helps a lot and you learn to be in a safe place and BIRM is like a family” -Student



Year End Trip



“It opened me up a lot more with meeting new people because I used to be a really shy kid so I never made friends easy, so when I joined BIRM, it felt like a second family almost to me” -Student

Year End Trip



“BIRM has changed my understanding so much, and I appreciate it so so so much because I felt weird for not clearly understanding my cultural background, But since we had so much activities involving culture that has made me learn so much” -Student

Year End Trip



“I feel like I can be myself and that no one will judge me for who I am.”
-Student

atoskētan

summer work program

The atoskētan summer work program is an opportunity for participants to gain employment skills and experience over the summer. Students who register in this program must attend 2 weeks of classroom instruction followed by 2 weeks of working in the community. The classroom experience provides instruction in the area of job skills, resume and cover letter writing, workplace rights and safety and much more.

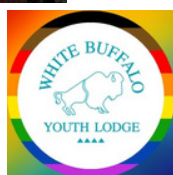
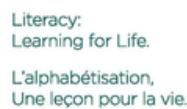
students receive:

- ✓ Tuition paid for registration with Saskatoon Public Schools summer school (\$500 per student)
- ✓ A high school credit toward their graduation
- ✓ Invaluable work experience with Indigenous businesses, organizations and mentors
- ✓ Transportation assistance and access to a dignity fund for needed hygiene supplies or clothing
- ✓ A \$300 bursary upon completion



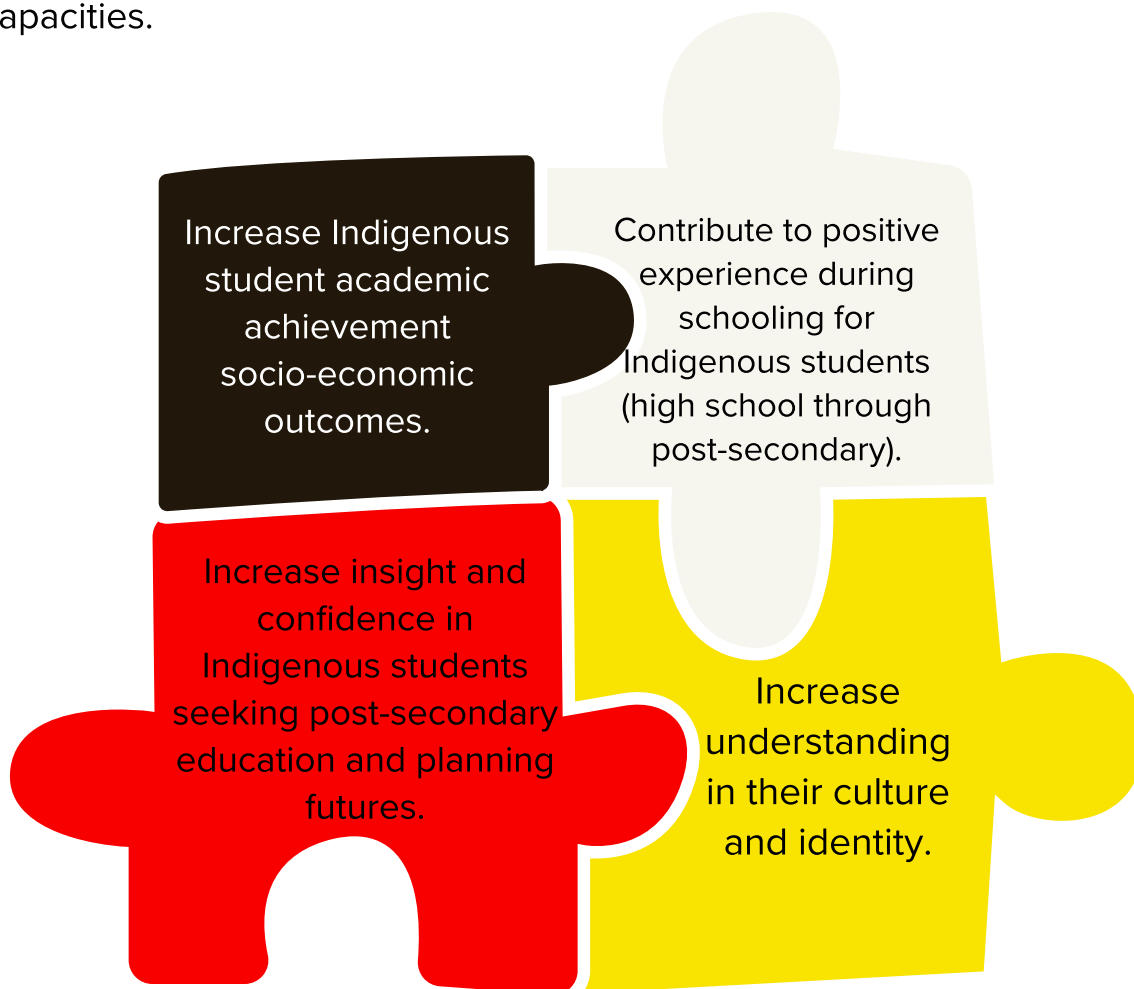
employers receive:

The program requires 30 hours (minimum) of work experience in the second half of July. Employers are supported by BIRM staff to ensure a successful placement. Employers get the opportunity to create meaningful change in our community by taking on young Indigenous students who are eager to build their resumes, grow confidence, and gain employment. Indigenous organizations and businesses are uniquely qualified to offer student work placements in culturally affirming and accepting workplaces. We know that the more safe and accepted our young people feel the more successful they will be.



Goals of Programming

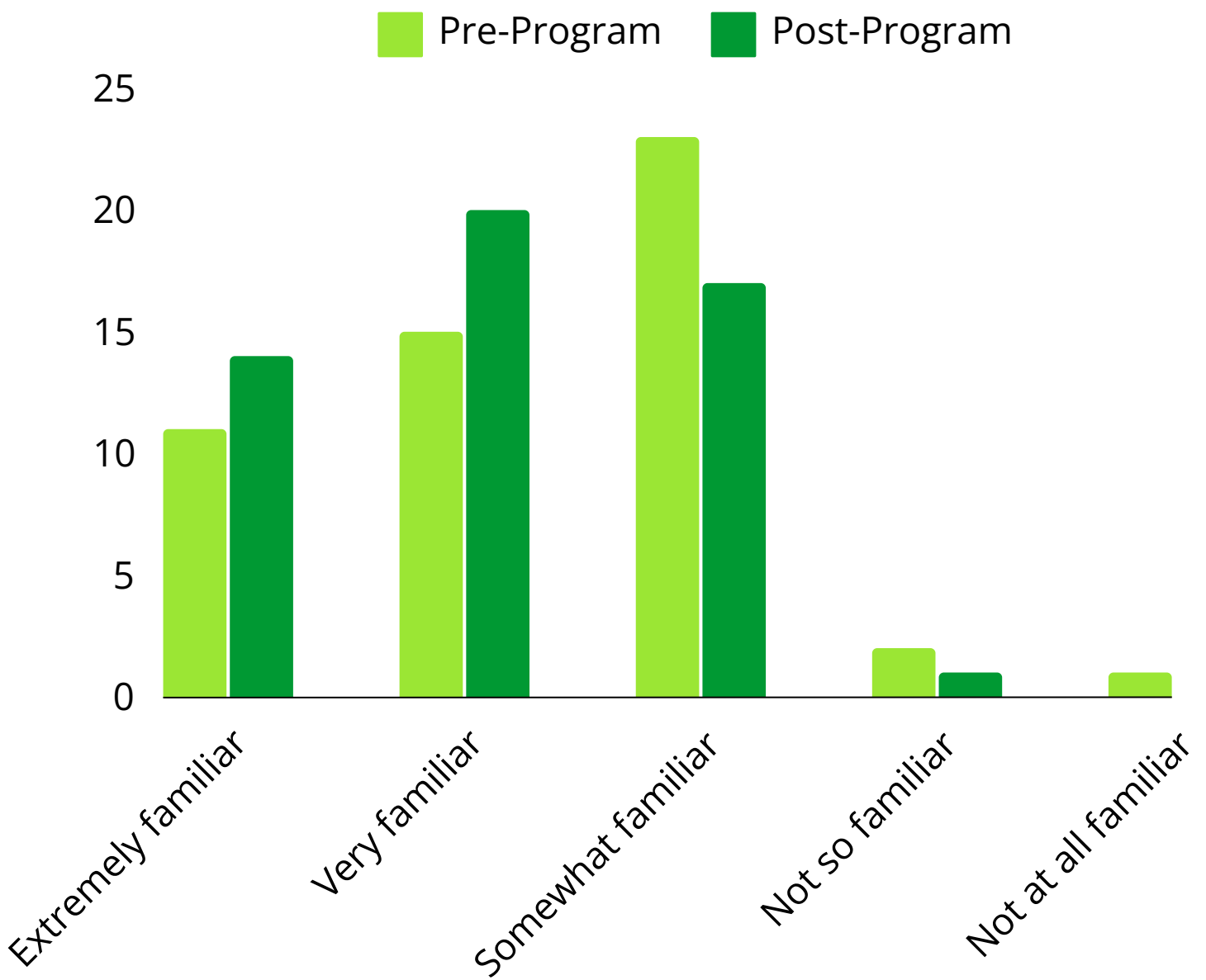
The BIRM Program has measured goals in relation to the overarching aim to remove barriers for students accessing and attending employment and post-secondary education opportunities after completing high school. Each year we use a combination of surveys, interviews, anecdotal observations, and enrollment data to assess our impact. Students, mentors, parents/home support, and school staff all participate in varying capacities.



Measured Impact

Student Surveys

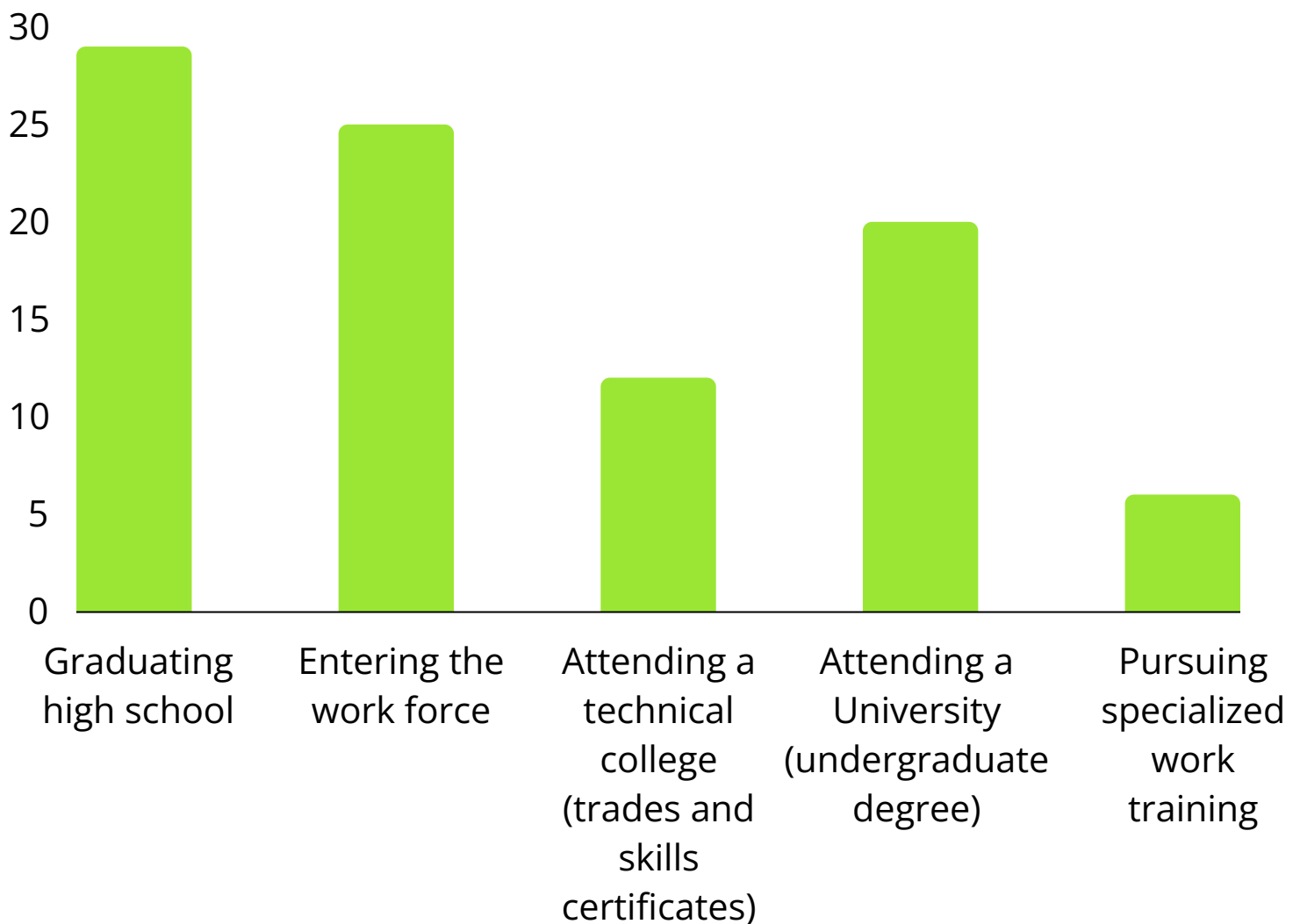
Do you have a clear sense of your own ethnic, cultural, and racial identity?



Measured Impact

Student Surveys

Do you have any goals for the near future (within one year)? Post program results



Celebrating Breakthroughs, Inspiring Progress

↑ **100%**

of students finished the program feeling like they had some or all skills needed to achieve their goals

↑ **94%**

of mentors reported that BIRM has positively impacted their overall wellness

↑ **88%**

of mentors reported an increase in their confidence

↑ **100%**

of mentors reported feeling close to people after the program

↑ **94%**

of mentors reported feeling useful

↑ **76%**

of mentors improved a specific aspect of their health

Indigenous mentor feedback

relationships
identity
employment
skills



- “BIRM has allowed me to grow as a leader. Through team building, professional and cultural development, and getting to know students, staff and the community.”
- “[It] has given me the confidence and skills I need to pursue jobs I did not think I was qualified for.”
- “Having [this experience] as a reference has also helped me out greatly when applying for things like scholarships, select courses, and summer employment.”



- “I am so grateful for this mentorship as I have much to learn from the students as I share my own experiences as an Indigenous post-secondary student that may help others in the program.”
- “[It] helped me a lot with my future employment. I was first able to get my resume done and have it be professional. I was also able to get some experience working in a work place and not long after I was able to find a job.”



- “BIRM is actually one of the main reasons I decided to further explore my indigenous identity and it one of the main reasons I feel confident enough to start learning my own language. I have developed a strong sense of belonging through BIRM and have met some life long friends with the other mentors.”
- “BIRM has been a great stress relief. If I’ve been having a stressful school week or even personal week, I always have BIRM to look forward to. I love interacting with the students but also my fellow mentors and coordinator.”

Family and school feedback

As part of our assessment we take feedback from the parents, caregivers, and school staff who support our students outside of session times. Outside of regular communication through email and monthly newsletters, we aim to involve our families through 1-2 engagement sessions outside of the school day where they can meet the staff, ask questions, and share their goals and dreams for their students.

“My child has had the privilege to be part of BIRM for the last 2 years. Their participation has been the catalyst in a fantastic change in their behaviour. Rather than aspiring to being a perpetual basement dweller, they are considering post secondary options relating to their passions both near and far. Their confidence increased to the point they were willing to participate in a performance group as the star of the show! Before BIRM this would have not been something my child would have considered. My child is also feeling more culturally appreciated and connected than he has in any of his past school experiences. Thank you BIRM.” -Parent

**“I've noticed since [my student] started the program that they have a better attitude at home and at school...they have a better attendance and a better attitude towards others they have a [lot] of self esteem and it shows”
-Parent**

**“This program is what brought my student to school somedays”
-Teacher**

**“I love how empowered students are coming out of this program.”
-Teacher**

**“My child has definitely has become more motivated to find paid employment. They seem more confident and able to advocate for themselves.”
-Parent**

**“It's helped her gain insight and perspective that I can't always offer. It's a great program and we look forward to it continuing for years to come. My youngest in grade 7 can't wait to be able to participate in it.”
-Parent**

Challenges

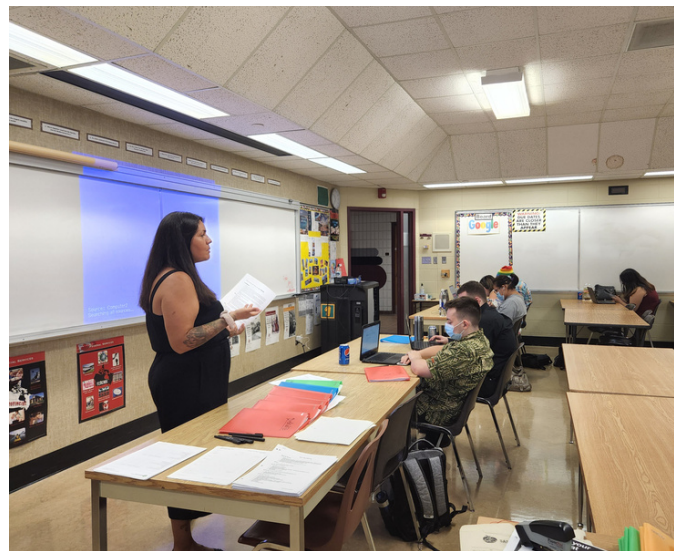
and creating solutions

Challenge 1 - Program expansion

The initial goal of the program expansion was to develop BIRM at all nine Saskatoon Public high schools. For Year 3 we will be adding another school (Nutana Collegiate) to bring our total to 4 schools. In order to do this, each school needs a 0.5 FTE Program Coordinator as well as the new Director to oversee the expansion and administration of the program at all schools. The challenges that arise related to staffing and increased number of participants.

First, the staffing challenge is that the Program Coordinator must be a certified teacher, of Indigenous ancestry and culturally competent, highly organized, excellent communicator and able to manage tasks and time independently. They should also be a master of developing relationships with students, mentors, staff and family. All of the Program Coordinators either are or become employees of Saskatoon Public Schools and are then seconded to USask. This allows them to work seamlessly within the school division and have access to the information systems and facilities as needed. The hiring pool for such candidates is quite small so it has become a consideration when expanding to more schools.

Solution: recruitment of future staff begins with awareness. Distribute program materials and expanding our network of information sharing throughout the school division and our partners. Go slow. We can't add 5 schools at a time and do a good job of it. Tommy Douglas expansion was successful because we embedded a significant amount of mentorship, training, and job shadowing for the Program Coordinator hired there.

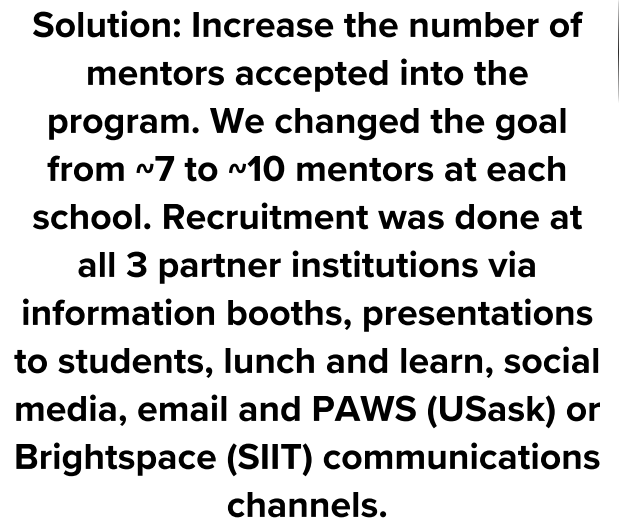


BIRM Program Coordinators are all certified teachers able to give credits for classes outside of the regular school schedule

Challenges & Solutions cont'd

Challenge 1 - Program expansion

Secondly, the number of participants continues to increase. At each of the 3 schools in 22-23 we had sessions with over 25-30 students attending. With ~7 mentors at each school we found ourselves stretched to manage all of the needs. The best work is done with a ratio of 1 mentor to 2 (max 3) students. So to add another school to bring our program up to 4, we would need 35-40 mentors, almost double the amount we had in year 2.



Solution: Increase the number of mentors accepted into the program. We changed the goal from ~7 to ~10 mentors at each school. Recruitment was done at all 3 partner institutions via information booths, presentations to students, lunch and learn, social media, email and PAWS (USask) or Brightspace (SIIT) communications channels.

Challenge 2 - Indigenous mentor recruitment

In year 2, 23% of the mentors identify as being Indigenous. This means there are only 1-2 mentors at each school who bring this important experience and worldview into the program development. Our goal is to achieve a 50% representation of Indigenous mentors. We opened up the application for year 3 to all partner institutions, however we had a low interest from the students at GDI and SIIT. This is a result of a lack of knowledge of the program, but also due to our delivery model. We have learned that the students attending GDI and SIIT are taking shorter programs and they may not even be at their institute for more than a few months so unable to commit to BIRM's rigorous year commitment. We also have learned that those students, like all Indigenous students, are often managing a disproportionate amount of pressures outside of school (children, financial strain, mental health difficulties, and employment). When we visited SIIT there were many students who believed in the work we are doing and were excited to hear about it but expressed they could not manage the extra responsibilities right now.



Solution: Create a paid position for Indigenous mentors "Student Leader" to address the financial strain volunteering may create*. Deepen our relationship and presence at GDI and SIIT to draw from their student population. Future planning should include embedding BIRM into practicum/internship hours for students in colleges and programs that require it. Expanding to other post-secondary institutions.

Broadening horizons, future goals

As we enter into year 3, there is no denying the growth of interest and engagement with our schools and students. We have been able to maintain the number of mentors needed to deliver authentic and powerful programming at each school. Moving forward, we are working to develop relationships with the O'yateki partnership institutes' program leads and students in order to meet this growing demand. We will continue to expand this program into Saskatoon Public Schools and beyond.

by 2026...

- Open mentorship application to all post-secondary students in surrounding communities
- Minimum 50% representation of mentors from Indigenous backgrounds
- Create a sustainable expansion plan to include all 9 Saskatoon Public high schools
- Begin expansion in Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools and northern communities connected to Prince Albert post-secondary campuses
- Secure long term funding from partner institutions and create a donation model to allow philanthropic financing

infinite hiy hiys

This program would not be possible without the commitment and dedication of our mentors, the trust and support of our families, and the students themselves who show up each week to build relationships and a better future for themselves and their communities. As our students like to say, "infinite hiy hiys": we give endless thanks for everything you give to this program.

If you are interested in learning more, collaborating, or supporting BIRM programming please reach out to BIRM Director at nahanni.olson@usask.ca.

Keep up to date by following our journey on social media!

