

2023-2024

# BIRM IMPACT



# REPORT



**Saskatoon Public Schools**  
Inspiring Learning



**UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN**

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Written by Nahanni Olson  
with assistance from Faith Greva



# TĀWĀW - WELCOME, THERE IS ROOM



**NAHANNI  
OLSON**  
BIRM Director

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 fourth year of delivery in collaboration with Saskatoon Public Schools and funded by the Oyāteki, a tri-institute 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 students academic achievement and attendance for seamless support and implementation.

Four is a sacred number for our people. It teaches us to find balance and to respect what the natural world can teach us, and that there is something powerful in finding wholeness. In the phases of BIRM's development, one can consider the first four years as an infancy. Reflecting on the tipi teachings, there was much to learn about respect, humility, and obedience! In this way, we are entering into a transition phase of growth and stability. At the end of this program year the four schools are established and finishing strong, ready to embark on the fourth year of BIRM.

BIRM would not be possible without the selfless and generous support of the volunteers, the commitment and energy of the high school students, and the network of collaborators of our partner institutions and the donation of the Mastercard Foundation. As we like to say, “infinite hiy hiys” to everyone who work together to make this special program happen each year.



**oyateki**  
PARTNERSHIP

A partnership between



A photograph of a library or computer lab. In the foreground, a young woman with dark hair wearing a black headwrap and a red jacket is seated at a desk, looking at a computer monitor. Behind her, another young woman with long dark hair and glasses is also seated at the same desk. To the right, a young man with a beard and glasses, wearing a bright green shirt, is standing and pointing at a computer screen. In the background, there are bookshelves filled with books, several framed landscape paintings on the wall, and other people, including a woman in a green shirt standing near the bookshelves. The room is well-lit with overhead fluorescent lights.

# **BACKGROUND VISION**

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 isolation from community in urban settings. The only requirements for high school participants are self-identification of Indigenous ancestry and the willingness to try new things and make a change in their lives. For post-secondary student volunteers (mentors), we strive to improve the experience of Indigenous students during their years of schooling by providing a community of support of their peers, feelings of efficacy and impact on their community, hands on leadership and collaboration experience, as well as awareness and support of employment and scholarship opportunities. Non-Indigenous mentors build their cultural understanding and deepen commitment to working with and for Indigenous communities.



# DESIGNED FOR DIVERSITY

Why “Intercultural” resilience and not “Indigenous” resilience? There are powerful effects of the diversity of the mentors in BIRM groups. 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. We know that when students enter post-secondary or the workforce, it is likely they will be the minority. Many of the students who we support 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 the mentors are there because they care about them. The mentors want to learn from the students- hear their stories, learn about their culture, and that they believe in them.



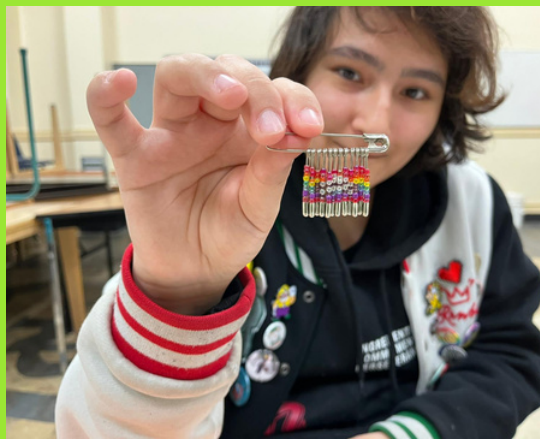
Secondly, the Indigenous mentors get to be leaders in the program as we rely on their stories and experiences to guide our programming. When mentors are struggling to connect with students or understand their perspectives, it is the Indigenous mentors who teach them. This does not mean these mentors are “cultural” experts, in fact many of the 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 those 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.

## 95% OF STUDENTS REPORTED SINCE ATTENDING BIRM...

- ✓ they feeling comfortable going to places and events with people who are different from them
- ✓ they understand and respect the preferred pronouns and identities people value for themselves
- ✓ an increase in understanding about the assumptions they may hold about people who are different from them





## WHO ARE BIRM STUDENTS

BIRM students represent a wide range of Métis and First Nations communities across Saskatchewan. There is a spectrum of experience in BIRM 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. There is no singular type of student who accesses this program, 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 participants from 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 students to find that safe community of support if they do need to change schools.

**“It definitely helped me feel more connected with the fact that I am Indigenous, and it has helped me know/seek out the resources I need to learn more about my identity.” - Student**



# MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

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.



“This program broke my introvert character barrier to be able to socialize...[and] enhanced my knowledge about the Indigenous culture and made me feel more connected with the Indigenous community.” - Mentor

“The most impactful part of BIRM was hearing about everyone else’s histories and being able to share my own as well.”  
- Mentor

**100%**

**OF STUDENTS**  
reported having  
meaningful relationships  
with mentors

“BIRM really helped to create a sense of community, it helped me to make so many amazing friends and connections, and also helped me to connect with my cultural roots and grow more comfortable in who I am.” - Mentor

“Helps me improve my mentality and willingness to strive to pursue my dreams and goals” - Student



# CHANGING BELIEFS

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”.

## AT THE END OF THIS YEAR BIRM STUDENTS...

**87%**

left with **goals** for the future



**98%**

felt they had some or all of the **skills** to achieve their goals



**98%**

reported an increase in **confidence**



**95%**

had increased **satisfaction** with their lives





# WHAT IS BIRM?

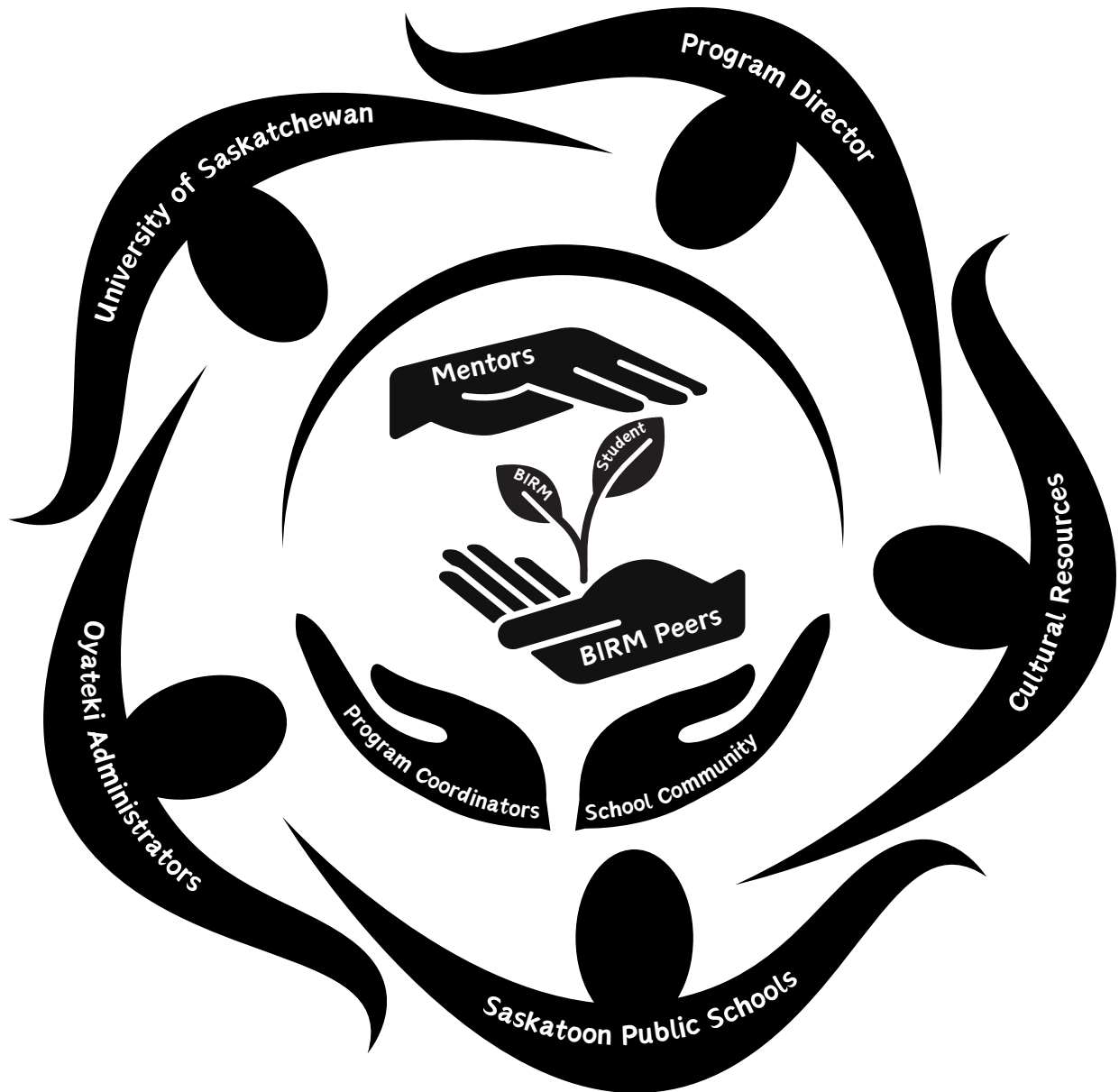


BIRM is now implemented at four schools in partnership with Saskatoon Public Schools: Bedford Road, Mount Royal, Nutana, and Tommy Douglas collegiates. Each school has a half time Program Coordinator, who work at the school to facilitate the sessions and activities students engage in with their mentors. Outside of the mentorship time they are there every day to support individuals and connect with the school community.

Each school hosts approximately 10 mentors to support the BIRM students. Every year, all 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 learners *and* leaders 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.



“I've been able to refine my interpersonal and communication skills, as well as my empathetic skills when it comes to working with and understanding youth. I am able to understand myself better as an Indigenous woman and encourage Indigenous youth to do the same which I believe is a valuable skill to have in any workplace, being confident in your identity and always being willing to teach others.” - Mentor



BIRM is structured as a wrap around network of support. In the center is the Indigenous high school student, around them are the mentors and BIRM peers. Around them are the program coordinators and school community. Surrounding and supporting everyone are the Director, USask, Saskatoon Public Schools and Oyateki administrators and cultural resources. There is collaboration between every level of support, and the programming is never done in isolation.

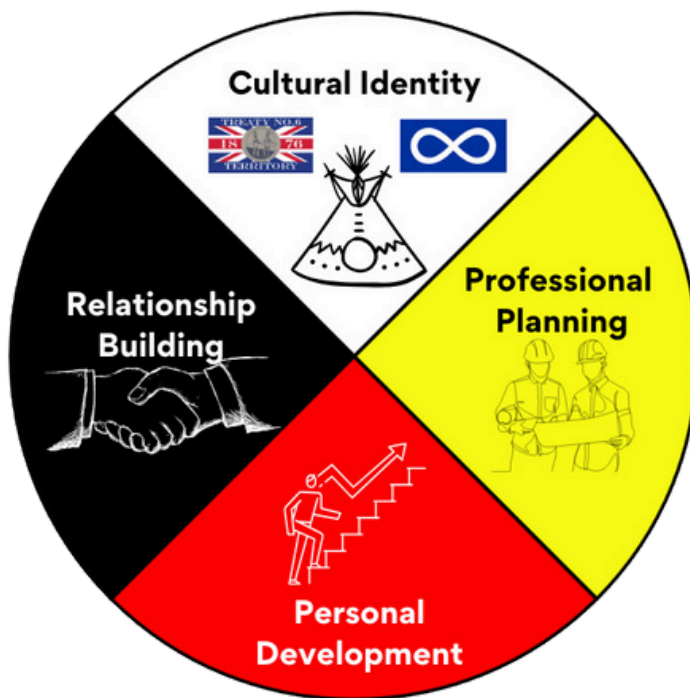
## WRAP AROUND NETWORK



# PILLARS OF SUPPORT

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 it all is the foundation of relationship: each BIRM group becomes a family over their time together. We aim to keep mentors at the same schools every term, so we have been able to watch students growing into their capacity each year, even as the program grows. In our BIRM families, we do hard things together and together we make those things easier.







vision boards  
 conversation tables  
 dreamcatcher making  
 newo wellness coaching  
 halloween pumpkin painting  
 graduation planning/credit checks  
 post-secondary planning/applications  
 video games  
 sharing circle  
 resume writing  
 bannock making  
 gingerbread decorating  
 life skills after highschool  
 homework help/tutoring  
 relay/team building games  
 board games  
 smudge  
 debates  
 painting  
 beading with magpie  
 beading pins  
 bowling  
 usask campus tour  
 prep for rounddance  
 wilfred buck's star lab  
 study skills  
 aasis conference  
 art gallerie  
 wanuskewin  
 goal setting  
 culture camp  
 ubc indigenous recruitment  
 christmas gift exchange



# CULTURAL IDENTITY



**“I feel less ashamed of being Indigenous, and learning that everyone connects to their culture differently helps with the alienation I normally feel in regards to my cultural identity.”  
- Student**

**“This has given my son the desire to connect more to his culture.” - Parent**



**“It’s a place where you can introduce your culture to yourself. You can learn beading, you can learn about different Indigenous stories, you learn how to make bannock, and you can just connect with Indigenous culture.” - Student**



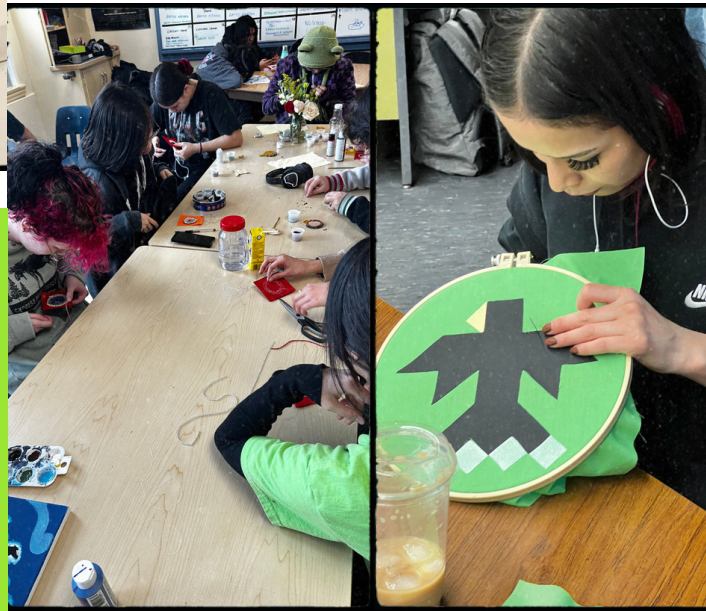


# CULTURAL IDENTITY



**“It made me feel like a stronger person and made me learn a lot about myself and what it means to be Indigenous.” - Student**

**“BIRM has been an incredible opportunity for me to connect with my culture through both a social and academic viewpoint. I now feel more comfortable in expressing that I am an Indigenous woman and proud to be so. I have value, I matter, and my voice matters. BIRM is a blessing and I can’t wait to join again next year.” - Student**



**“The program really helped to connect her with aspects of her cultural background that maybe she would not otherwise had an opportunity to experience.” - Parent**



# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

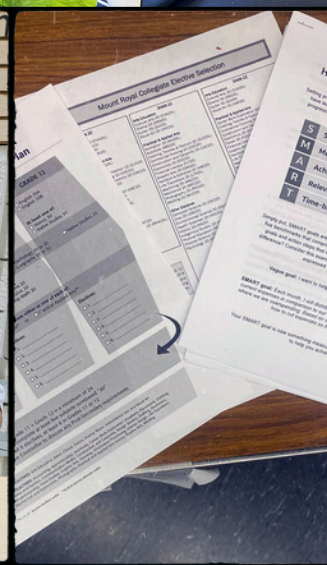
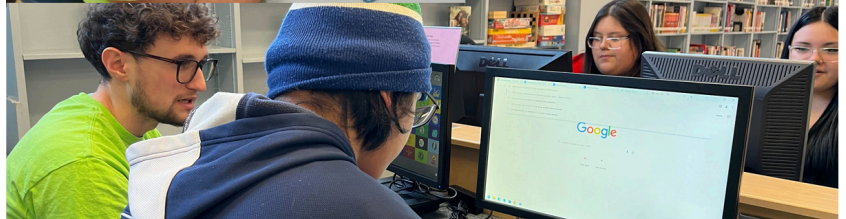
**“Participating in BIRM has given me more confidence with declaring what I want and need... [it] makes me want to work harder and reach all of my goals.”**

**- Student**



**“It made me wanna be a better student in my other classes.”**

**- Student**



**“Before BIRM, I was really, really shy. Like in high school, I didn’t talk to anybody, and after a few sessions I was able to get out of my shell and actually talk to other people and that was a pretty big thing to me.”**

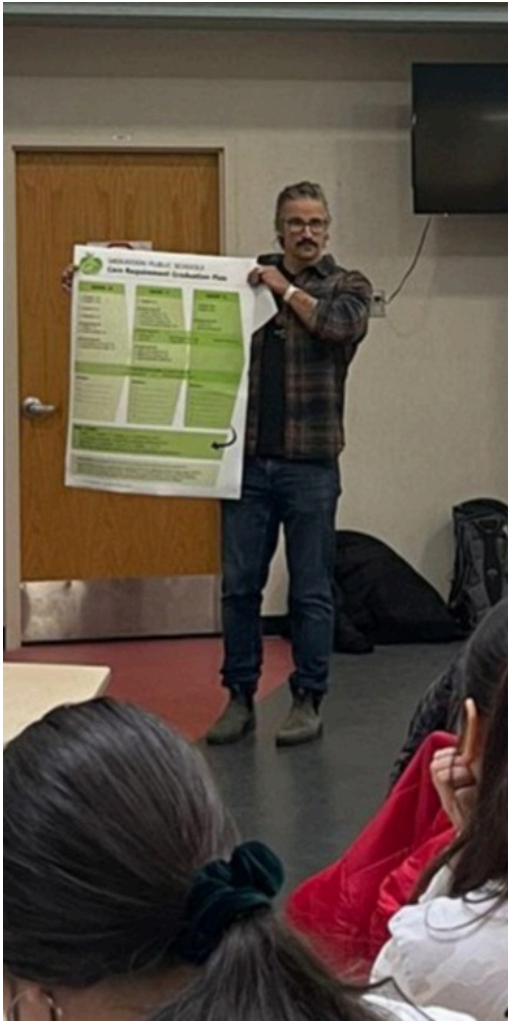
**- Student**

**“I’m more determined to reach my goals.”**

**- Student**



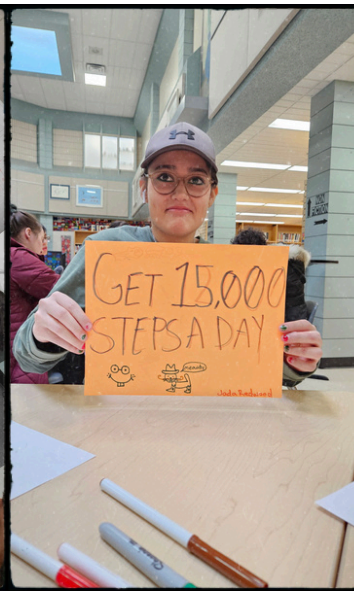
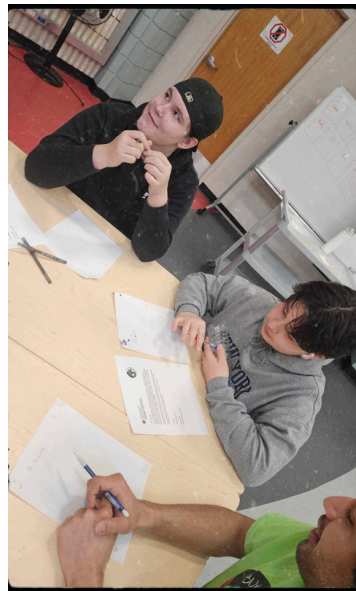
# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT



**“Absolutely would not be the person I am without all the trips, connecting and journeys I've taken with BIRM. Before the program I was very closed off and kept to myself, and wasn't very ambitious or good with speaking to people, but that changed...I got the inspiration to develop myself as a person and get the skills to achieve my dreams as an animator, artist, director, leader and individual.” - Student**

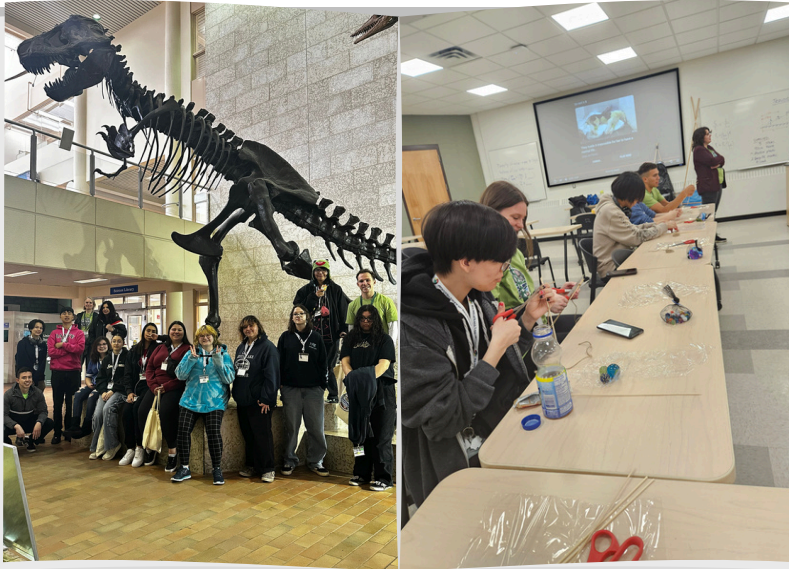
**“We are grateful that [our child] has had a welcoming and supportive space at school.”  
- Parent**

**“I have learned how to set better goals in order to achieve my hopes for my performance in academics.”  
- Student**





# PROFESSIONAL PLANNING



**“I just see myself really furthering my education and realizing what I want to do with my life, and then following after it... I know it will be very difficult, but I’ve been given the tools and the skills that I need. Largely it’s because of BIRM. It has taught me a lot, especially in graduation planning and with the university mentors that I think that I can achieve it.” - Student**

**[It]’s made me more aware of the opportunities that I have”  
- Student**



**“I’m hoping to work with Indigenous youth, as BIRM does, and maybe be a mentor - if I’m let in. Yeah, I’m just hoping to round myself out more, and give back to my community in the way it’s given to me.” - Student**





# PROFESSIONAL PLANNING

**“They are really helpful with school and applying for school, and give really helpful tips for your future and planning it out.” - Student**



**“I wanted to be in university and this group gave me confidence in what I can do and become.” - Student**



**“BIRM actually helped me a lot looking forward to my future and what I’m gonna be doing for the next years.” -Student**





# RELATIONSHIPS

**“It helped them with interacting with people a lot more better and they are more confident in themselves they have enjoyed meeting and gaining friends” - Parent**



**“I struggle to make strong friendships with people my own age, and through BIRM I have made a strong friendship/mentorship relationship with a university student. Being friends with [my mentor] has helped me to push myself to be more social with people my own age and has overall been a great learning experience. I am so glad to have met her.” - Student**



**“It gave me an additional place to belong and I've felt heard and actually listened to despite my insecurities around my age and inexperience...I'm truly grateful for everything this program has taught me in the last year, and I think I will carry these teachings and lessons and experiences with me for the rest of my life.” - Mentor**



# RELATIONSHIPS



**“My favourite experience...just talking to the mentors. A bunch of them are extremely talkative, and I can always get into a good conversation with them whether that’s talking about their major or talking about what I’m interested in.” - Student**

**“It just feels like a little family, even though that sounds super cliché, it’s obvious!” - Student**

**“You can find just incredible friends and kinship in this program as well as just having life-changing experiences and opportunities that will help you be your best self.” - Student**



**“I think my favourite part of the program is just to get to know people I definitely would not have talked to otherwise – I’m a socially anxious person – but I’ve made, like, a lot of friends that I wouldn’t have if I was not in BIRM. Not just students, but the mentors. I got to know a few mentors and they really helped me think about post secondary in realistic ways.” - Student**





# YEAR END TRIP



One of the highlights of the year for participants is the year end trip. The goal of this trip is to reward students and mentors for their hard work and commitment to the program, explore future possibilities by venturing out of our home community together, and learn from Indigenous peoples and youth across Canada. Unfortunately, during this program year only one school was able to attend a year end trip due to the impact of job action enacted by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, which all Program Coordinators are members of.

“The Bedford Road group took a year end trip to Whiteshell Provincial Park in Manitoba. We got the chance to connect with Falcon Beach Ranch and it gave the students the chance to ride horses, and go on a wagon ride through Falcon Beach. Students said that they loved that they got the chance to do both wagon and horseback riding. We also got to spend the day with Diane Maytwayshing with Whiteshell Petroforms where she talked to us about the Six Sister Falls and how her community is connected to the land, and what were some of the effects that the community has faced since they demolished the falls. Diane also took us on a guided tour of some of the first petroforms that were made pre-colonization. During our time with the petroforms she also showed us a traditional ceremonial grounds where people come and have Sundances and sweats each year...The evenings were spent hanging around the fire and playing games. Even though this trip was a long drive, the students continually talk about it. and were happy to get the chance to attend the trip.”

- Kourtney Bear, Program Coordinator

**“I have had the opportunity to experience a leadership role that has helped me stay connected to my Indigenous heritage, develop a sense of community, and make a positive impact on others.” - Mentor**



# YEAR END TRIP WHITESHELL, MB





# ATOSKĒTAN: LET'S WORK!

**The atoskētan summer work program is an opportunity for participants to gain employment skills and experience while earning an extra high school credit over the summer.**

In 2023, BIRM offered two course options for students to gain an extra credit: Life Transitions 30 and Career Work Exploration 10. The work program requires 30 hours (minimum) of work experience. Employers are supported by BIRM staff to ensure a successful placement and they 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 young people *feel*, the more successful they will *be*.



## OUR PARTNERS



- ✓ 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



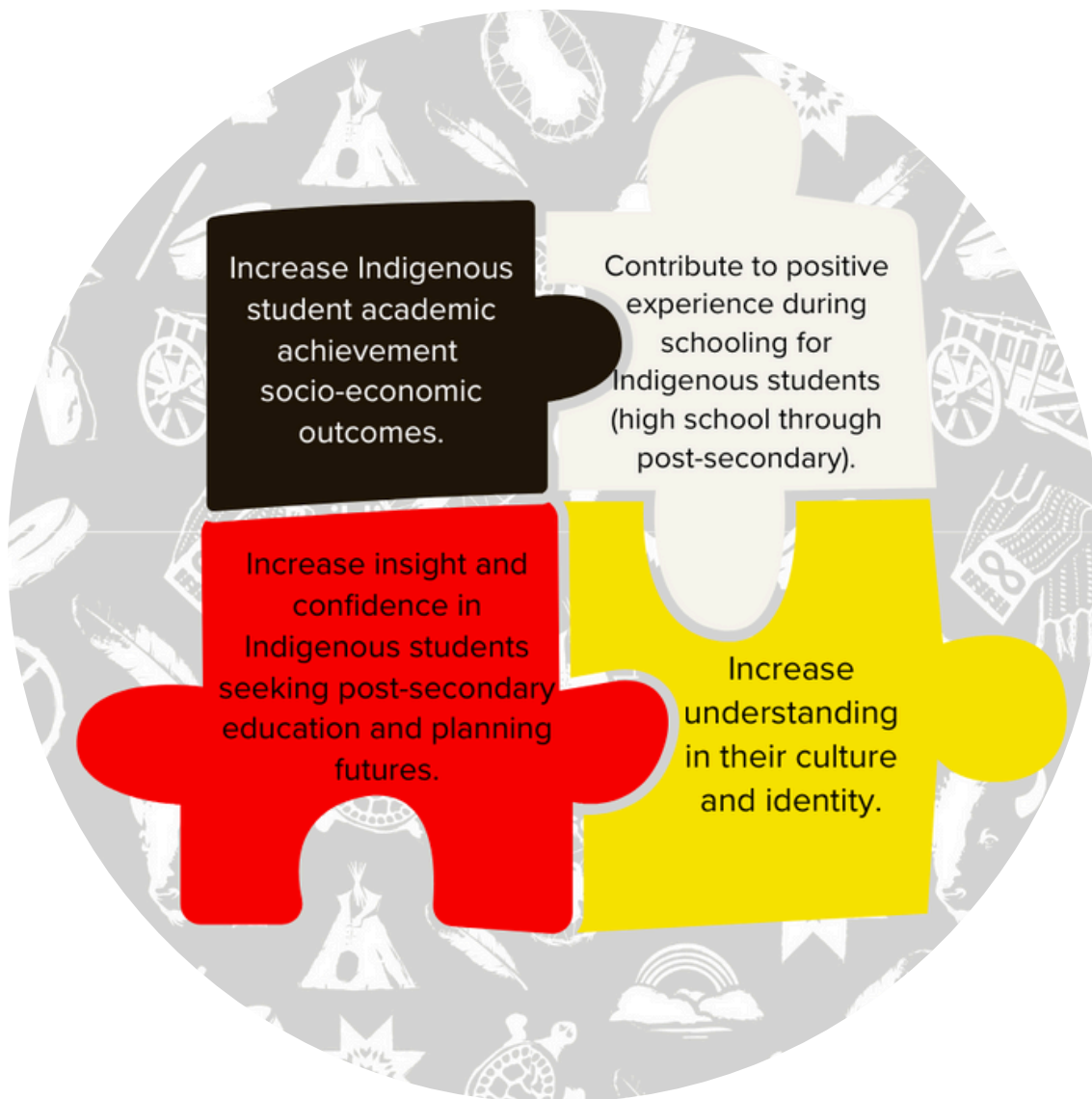
# ATOSKĒTAN: LET'S WORK!





# MEASURED GOALS

There are four goals we use to measure the efforts 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 the impact. Students, mentors, parents/home support, and school staff all participate in varying capacities.



**120**

Indigenous high school students reached



**43**

total mentors participation

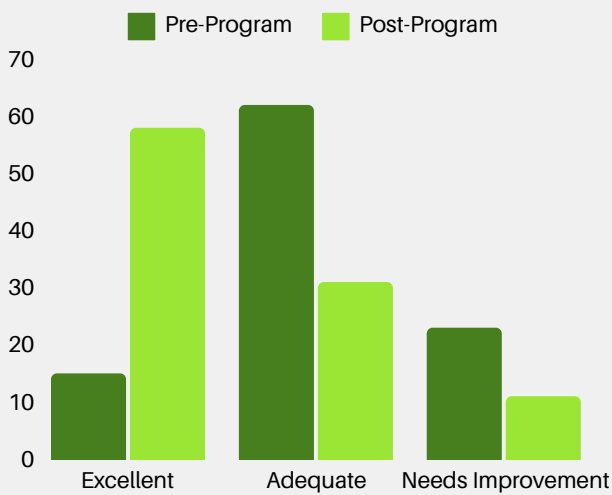


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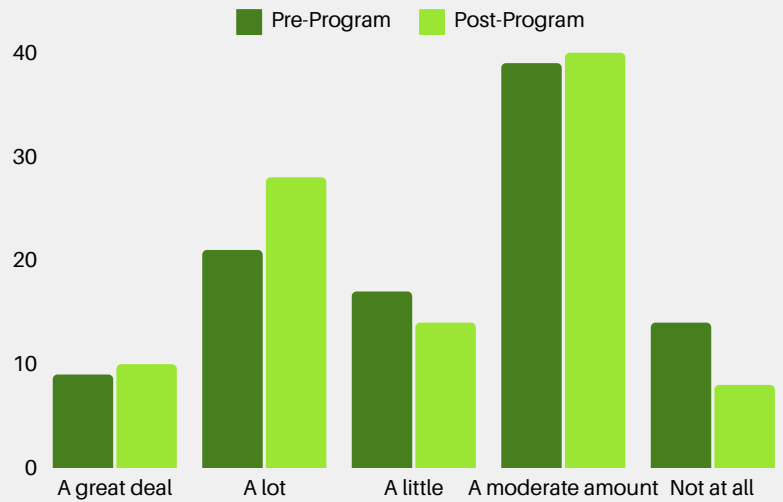
Indigenous mentors

# STUDENT SURVEY DATA

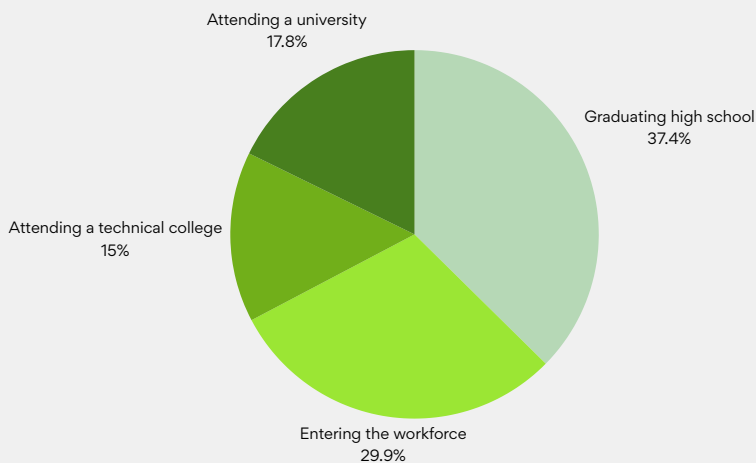
**How would you rate your social skills since you have joined BIRM?**



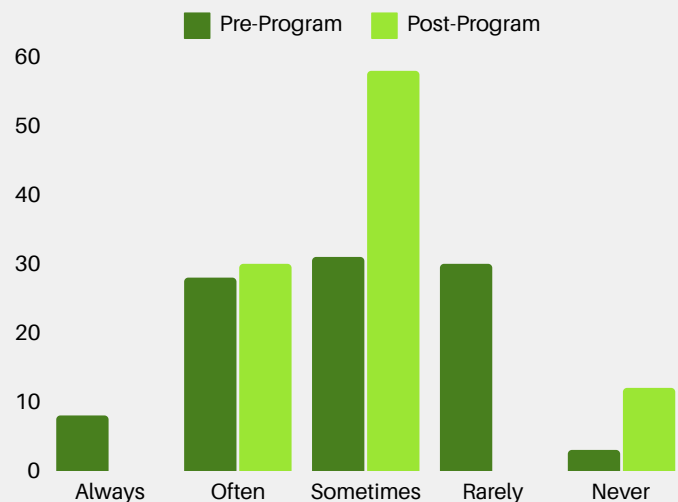
**Do you have an idea of what your future might look like?**



**Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years?**



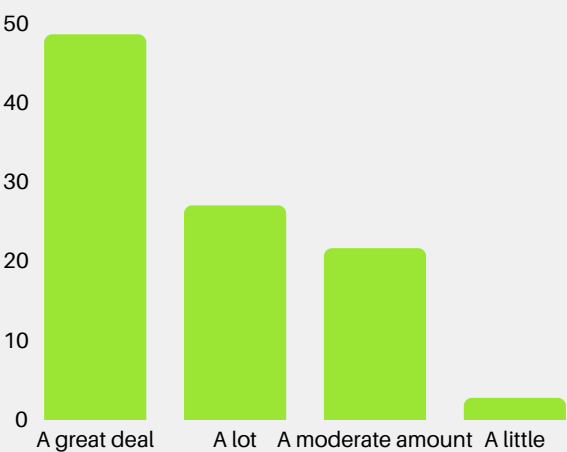
**How often do you set personal goals?**



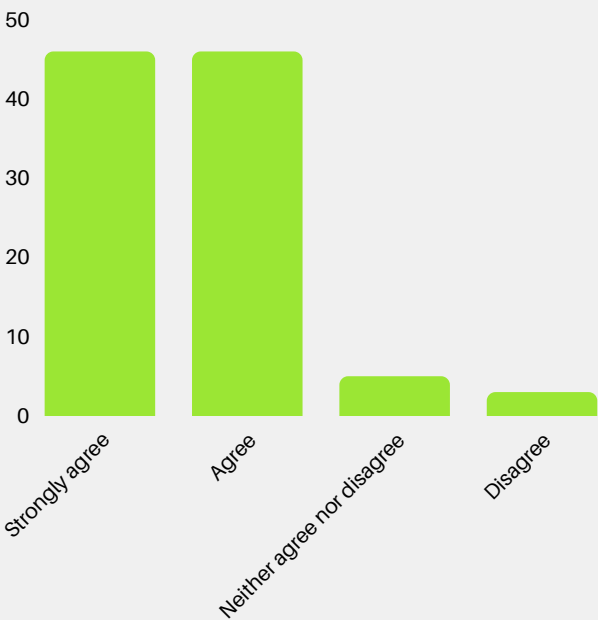


# MENTOR SURVEY DATA

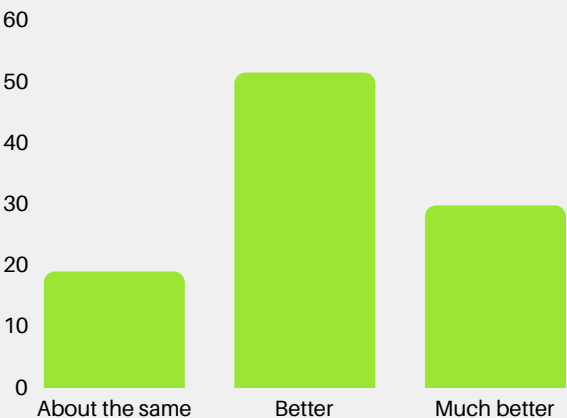
**In the last 6 months, do you feel an improvement in your abilities to self-regulate your emotions during high pressure situations?**



**Do you feel that you have gained more confidence in the past year?**



**Compared to the beginning of BIRM, do you feel a difference in your overall health (ex. physical and/or emotional)?**



# INDIGENOUS MENTOR IMPACT

“BIRM has made a significant addition to my post secondary life! It has allowed me to meet some incredible people and volunteer in a setting where I can see my impact firsthand. Additionally, the family like community that is BIRM is an excellent support system for not only the students but myself and the others mentors as well...[it] has had a tremendous impact on my academics, sense of belonging, and overall achievements. My sense of belonging and where I can take up space while making a difference has come from BIRM. As mentors, we are here to support our students, but the students have truly helped me in so many ways... They have also taught me to relax and enjoy the moments before they pass by.”

“This sense of belonging has given me confidence and motivation to do better in my academics not only for myself but also for all of those who look up to me....4 years ago I would have never thought that I could achieve a 90 average, and make it on the Dean’s Honour Roll, win an Indigenous Achievement Week award, or win a 2.5K leadership award from the university. All of those things were seen as achievements that were not for me. I did not have the confidence back then to push myself. Through BIRM I gained that confidence and knew that I wanted to do better for myself, my community and for all the students that I mentor.”



“BIRM has considerably expanded my confidence and sense of belonging with not only the Indigenous youth but also my non-Indigenous peers. I have an immense pride in saying that I am a part of the BIRM program and get the opportunity to mentor Indigenous youth. The BIRM program has provided me with an amazing family, from the staff to the mentees to all of the mentors. I am a lot more motivated within my academics and career path because I want to be a good role model for the youth.”





**39 high school credits were attained outside of the regular school schedule!**



**BIRM added another school, creating 4 half-time employment opportunities for Indigenous teachers in the school division!**



**29 students received a bursary from BIRM for graduating grade 12!**



**Over \$900 was used to apply for identification, transcripts, and application fees need to apply for post-secondary!**



**Three BIRM mentors received awards recognizing their contributions to the academic and greater community.**

# **CELEBRATIONS**



**Despite ongoing job action,  
students connected with special  
guests like Wilfred Buck's  
starlab, Rachel Smith's Bannock  
Express, and Bernadine Sapp's  
quilt making with Brave Girl  
Quilts, and visited Wanuskewin  
and USask campus for the AISES  
convention!**



**CELEBRATIONS**





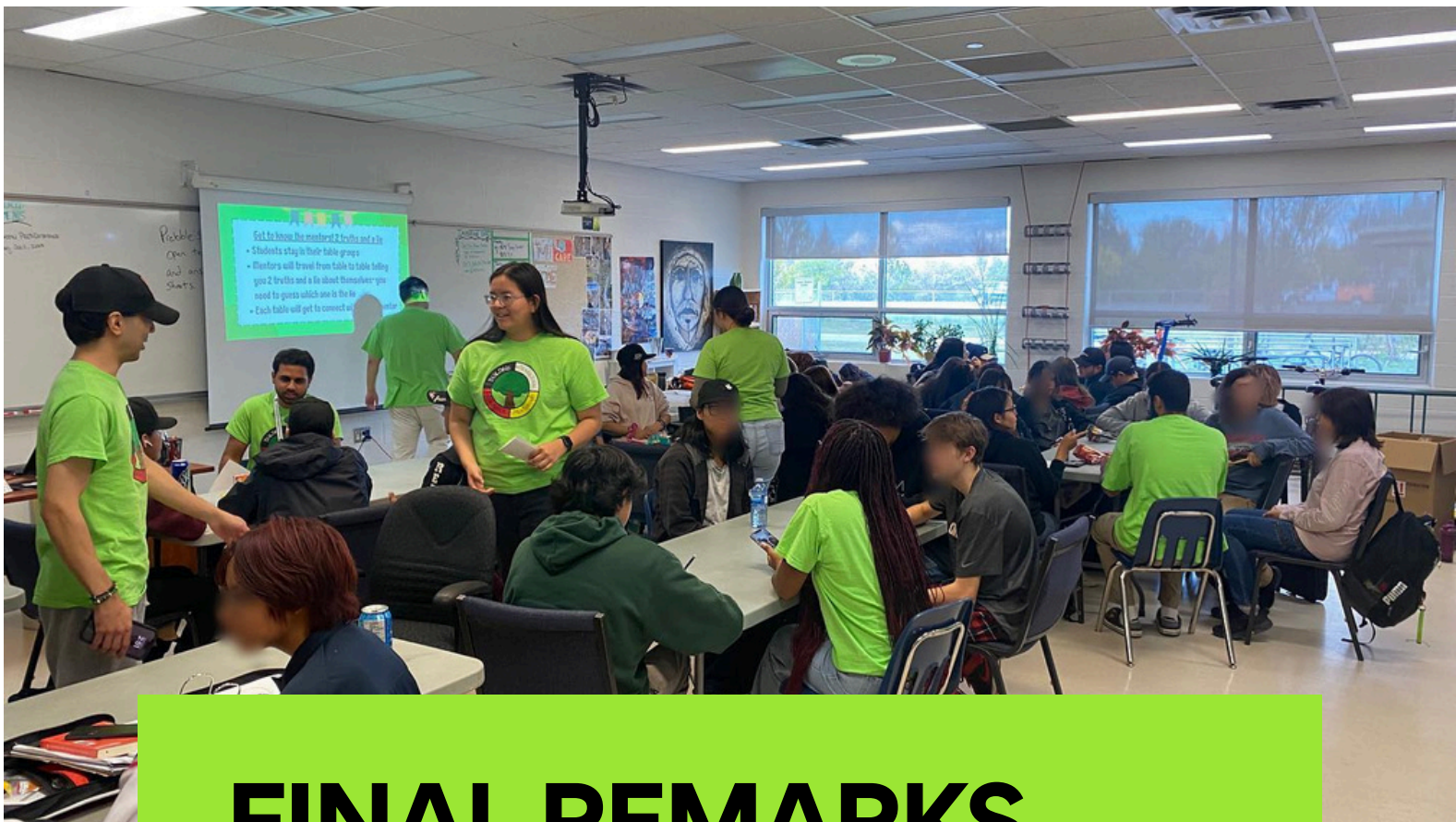
Lakehead  
UNIVERSITY

**BIRM Staff were able to travel Thunder Bay, Ontario to meet with the “niiiji” program to learn from each other, share ideas, and meet their mentors and coordinators.**



**CELEBRATIONS**





# FINAL REMARKS

Thank you for spending time getting to know this program and the incredible community of people who make up the BIRM family. BIRM has a lot to look forward to this coming year, including having new staff, more mentors than ever, and a growing interest in program expansion. Organizations interested in building partnerships to sustain and grow this programming can reach out to BIRM Director, Nahanni Olson using the following contact page.

In the fourth year of implementation BIRM will be established at four schools with more mentors than ever to accomodate growing interest there. The program will also be developing a “BIRM Grads” group for students who have finished or left high school to provide continued support for youth transitioning into post-secondary pathways.

This program is made possible through the partnership with the University of Saskatchewan and Saskatoon Public Schools. Thank you to the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement team and Dr. Angela Jaime, as well as Deputy Director of Education for Saskatoon Public Schools Brent Hills for their ongoing guidance and support.



# STAY CONNECTED

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**Social media/**



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