

**Anishinabek Employment & Training Services (AETS)  
Systems Innovation Project – Project Summary  
Date: February 4, 2026**

**Purpose**

This project summary provides education leaders, First Nation education directors, employers, funder and system collaborators with an integrated overview on the Systems Innovation Project. It highlights the project’s progress since the beginning (2021) to present and next steps. The intent is to share learning emerging from formative research, applied research tools and data collected that will formulate two critical frameworks that will be referred to as:

1. Mino-Bimaadiziwin Youth Work Pathway Framework; and
2. Mino-Bimaadiziwin Educator Circle of Practice Framework (with a Teacher Guide to support a Professional Teacher Development Program).

This brief is intended to support a shared understanding, an alignment and informed collaboration at a system level.

**Project Context and Scope**

The Systems Innovation Project is a multi-year, Ontario Trillium Foundation funded initiative led by Anishinabek Employment and Training Services (AETS). The project serves Anishinaabe youth ages 15–25 from nine AETS’ First Nation communities within the Robinson Superior Treaty area and works in partnership with multiple school boards, educators, First Nation education authorities, and employers across Northwestern Ontario.

These nine First Nations include:

- Animbiigoo Zaagi’gan Anishinaabek (Lake Nipigon Ojibway First Nation)
- Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Pic River First Nation)
- Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek (Rocky Bay First Nation)
- Bingwi Neyaashi Anishnaabek (Sand Point First Nation)
- Kiashke Zaaging Anishnaabek (Gull Bay First Nation)
- Michipicoten
- Netmizaaggamig Nishnaabeg (Pic Mobert First Nation)
- Pays Plat First Nation
- Red Rock Indian Band

The project responds to persistently low high school graduation rates and limited education to employment pathways for AETS’ Anishinaabe youth. Rather than addressing these challenges through isolated programs, the Systems Innovation Project is designed as a systems level initiative that works across education, employment, and community contexts to understand and shift the conditions that shape youth experience, engagement, and success outcomes. Building on prior formative research and a Theory of Change model, the

project focuses on shifting education and employment systems through culturally grounded, relational, and strengths-based approaches.

At its core, the project treats education and employment as a connected continuum. It seeks to strengthen alignment between classroom learning, land-based and community learning, and meaningful work experiences so that Anishinaabe youth encounter coherence, relevance, and cultural continuity across their learning and employment journeys.

### **Project Participation**

The Systems Innovation Project will include participation from:

1. Anishinaabe youth – ages 15 to 25 years from nine First Nation communities served by AETS attending Lakehead District School Board and Superior Greenstone District School Board;
2. Educators – 1 to 3 teachers under Lakehead District School Board and Superior Greenstone District School Board; and
3. Employers (TBC) / Industry / Funder(s)

### **Establishing the Formative Research and Foundation (2021–2024)**

From 2021-2024, the Systems Innovation Project focused on building relationships with youth, First Nation Education Directors, educators and industry through engagements and talking circles. The baseline data collected with a literature research review resulted in a comprehensive formative research study called *Education System Change: Improving High School Rates & Future Employment Outcomes for Anishinaabe Youth in Northwestern Ontario* (led by AETS with past researcher Dr. John Hodson of Maamaawisiiwin Education Research Centre).

The research engaged with youth, educators, First Nation education directors, boards of education and industry partners through literature review, engagement and talking circles to closely look at the low high school graduation rates among Anishinaabe youth in Northwestern Ontario.

The research resulted in the development of an *Anishinaabe Theory of Change* model grounded in a *Framework for Action Medicine Wheel Teachings* and identified two primary determinants of Indigenous student success:

1. Daily access to traditional knowledge through a cultural continuum; and
2. Access to educators who practice culturally responsive, relational and strengths-based pedagogy that supports the learning needs of Anishinaabe youth.

Seven core educator practices were discovered as part of an effective teacher's profile, critical to improving outcomes for Anishinaabe learners. These seven daily practices are

described below and now serve as the conceptual foundation for the Mino-Bimaadiziwin Educator Circle of Practice Framework.

#### **A Foundational Teacher's Profile Supporting Anishinaabe Student Success**

1. They can create and maintain culturally responsive contexts for learning.
2. They can create and maintain culturally appropriate contexts for learning.
3. They have high expectations for student's behavior.
4. They care for students as culturally located individuals.
5. They have high learning expectations for students.
6. They can create and maintain a secure, well-managed learning environment.
7. They genuinely care for their students.

#### **Transition from Formative Research to Applied Systems Learning (June 2025 – Present)**

Since June 2025, the Systems Innovation Project has intentionally shifted from theory-building into applied systems learning. The focus of this phase has been to operationalize the prior research findings, particularly the seven educator daily practices into practical tools, reflective processes, and structured dialogue mechanisms that can surface how systems enable or constrain Indigenous student success in real-world settings and to generate system-level insights into improved models of success.

Using the Medicine Wheel teachings as both a conceptual and practical guide, the project has developed and implemented the following tools:

- A visual on the Medicine Wheel teachings framework called Mino-Bimaadiziwin “Good Life” / Midewiwin “The Way of the Heart” (Appendix 1)
- Mino-Bimaadiziwin Education Pathway - Educator Circle of Practice (Appendix 2)
- Mino-Bimaadiziwin Work Pathway - Youth Employment Circle of Practice (Appendix 3)

These tools translate the Anishinaabe Theory of Change into lived practice. They support educators and youth in reflecting on their personal, learning and teaching experiences, sharing narrative evidence and engaging in one-to-one dialogue which allows both groups to tell their story with the lead researcher, Carolyn Zadnik and Elder Gene Nowegejick. This research approach makes Indigenous worldviews actionable within education and employment systems.

This phase marks a deliberate move from a conceptual agreement “*we value culturally responsive practice*” to applied inquiry “*how do current systems actually support or limit this practice?*”

## **Circles of Practice as System Learning Infrastructure**

The Circle of Practice approach functions as a learning architecture rather than a one-time intervention. It creates structured, culturally grounded processes through which individual experience can be translated into self-reflections narrative and system-level insight.

These reflections are guided by a Feather Circle of Growth Scale (Appendix 4), narrative learning, relational dialogue and evidence-informed storytelling. Supporting evidence may include educator artifacts, youth reflections, learner feedback, work, documents, lesson plan, outline, pictures etc. to honor practice, learning, and relationship as in grounded Indigenous research practices.

To deepen the education analysis, teacher reflections will be examined across five research evidence domains:

1. My Practice – What does this look like in action?
2. My Students' Voices – How do students experience this?
3. My Relationships – Who is involved and how are relationships built?
4. Change Over Time – Has anything shifted?
5. System Conditions – What supports or constrains this?

Together, the Circle of Practice reflections with the research domain analysis will result in a research summary report that will inform a teacher professional development guide of best practice, contribute to the development of both Mino-Bimaadiziwin Work Pathway and Education Pathway Frameworks, and a future system level model across both the education and employment contexts.

## **What Has Been Implemented to Date**

As of January 2026, both Youth and Educator Circles of Practice are operational. The implementation milestones include:

- The launch of culturally grounded narrative and dialogue reflection tools for youth and teachers;
- Completion of youth pre- and post-reflection dialogues (July–August 2025) with a pre-liminary summary of youth reflection report;
- Implementation of reflection tools with one teacher from Hammarskjold High School (Lakehead District School Board) and two teachers from Nipigon Red Rock High School (Superior Greenstone District School Board); and
- In-person educator orientation and dialogue sessions were held in October 2025 and January 2026.

The collection, dissemination and analysis of Semester 1 teacher data is currently underway, marking a clear transition from framework development into applied systems learning and early analysis.

### **Early Research Signals – Mino-Bimaadiziwin Youth Work Pathway Circle of Practice (July to August 2025)**

Originally seven AETS' youth registered with Ontario Youth Employment Program (OYEP) at Grey Wolf Scout Camp where three completed the pre-reflection dialogues and two completed the post-reflection. Three youth were dismissed from the program due to inappropriate behavior, and one did not follow through with registration.

The preliminary early research from the youth reflection data indicates the following:

**(A) Growth Phase:** Youth demonstrated notable progress in confidence, relationship-building, and workplace readiness. While cultural identity and exploration remains limited due to time constraints and inconsistent Elder presence, youth expressed a strong sense of connection and belonging fostered by working on the land / team and land-based activities, supportive staff, and peer connections.

**(B) Strengths:** Youth showed resilience, adaptability, and motivation to build on their skills. They earned workplace certifications, developed teamwork and leadership qualities, and expressed pride in tangible contributions such as building a bridge, making bush trail, tree planting and carpentry work.

**(C) Supports Needed:** The findings highlight the importance of consistent cultural integration (Elder access, daily/weekly ceremonies or teachings), identity exploration, mentorship opportunities, pathways for leadership, and structured wellness supports to help youth manage transitions, emotions, self-confidence, and balance.

These early research signals point to the importance of land-based work environments supporting confidence, belonging, emotional regulation and connections. Personal growth and identity building is strongest when access to cultural supports are present through the utilization of Elders and Knowledge Keepers into programs as everyday practices.

### **Early Research Signals – Mino-Bimaadiziwin Educator Pathway Circle of Practice**

At this time, narrative reflection and evidence-based data on semester one courses: NAC10 (Grade 9 – Expressions of First Nations, Metis and Inuit Culture; TFJ20 (Grade 10 Foods); ENG4E (Grade 12 English); ENG1L (Grade 9 English); and HNC3C (Grade 11 Fashion) is still being collected from three participating teachers of both school boards. A pre-liminary research summary report will be completed February/March 2026 on semester one data that will contain key research findings.

From the information collected to date and through in-person dialogues conducted in January 2026, the following early research signals have been noted:

- Teacher Profiles:
  - All three participating teachers are non-Indigenous
  - Teacher 1: 5 years of teaching experience

- Teacher 2: 25 years of teaching experience
- Teacher 3: 22 years of teaching experience
- This reflection provides an opportunity for teachers to self-reflect in culturally grounded practices that will strengthen their role as a teacher;
- There is uncertainty regarding system level supports, cultural protocols and teachings, appropriate practice in terms of what is appropriate to share from a cultural context, fear of cultural appropriation, and limited access to Elders and Knowledge Keepers and community to support learning in the classroom and mental health supports;
- It takes time to contact cultural supports and community in making it as an everyday practice;
- There is a decrease in school staff to support Indigenous learners (e.g. a reduction in accessible attendance counsellors – from 5 to 2 staff); and
- The Indigenous graduation coach is only available to students of a different First Nation under a special agreement.

In-person dialogues reinforced that many educators are willing and motivated but require clearer system support, guidance, and relational access to walk this work in a good way.

### **What This Means for Systems Change**

Early research indicators suggests that meaningful and sustained change depends on both individual effort and the conditions created by systems. The Systems Innovation Project will reveal where alignment exists and where gaps persist between Indigenous worldviews and current Western education and employment structures.

For collaborators, this work is not about evaluation or compliance. It is about shared stewardship. Decisions made by school boards, First Nation education authorities, employers, and system leaders directly shape the conditions for Indigenous youth education and work experiences. Each partner holds specific leverage within their sphere of influence to strengthen alignment, remove barriers and ensure culturally grounded practice.

System change happens when many aligned partners make disciplined, relational shifts over time with Anishinaabe youth at the centre.

### **Looking Ahead: Next Steps**

The following next steps include:

- Collection, dissemination and analysis of semester one educator data (September 2025– January 2026);
- Continued teacher reflections and dialogues for Semester 2 (February – June 2026);
- Preliminary and evolving Mino-Bimaadiziwin Educator Pathway Circle of Practice Research Summary (March 2026 and ongoing);
- Engagements with youth, educators, and collaborators;
- Collaboration Agreement;
- Mino-Bimaadiziwin Youth Work Pathway and Educator Pathway Frameworks;

- Youth employment Circle of Practice reflections and dialogues (July – August 2026);
- Mino-Bimaadiziwin Youth Pathway Circle of Practice Research Summary #2 (September 2026);
- Continued teacher reflections and dialogues for Semester 1 (September 2026 – January 2027);
- Continued teacher reflections and dialogues for Semester 2 (February 2027 – June 2027);
- Final research summary reports August 2027; and
- Professional Teacher Development Guide (August 2027).

Beyond this phase, the Systems Innovation Project is intentionally designed to generate learning that is transferable and replicable. The Circle of Practice tools, reflection processes, and emerging frameworks are intended to inform long-term professional development, education-to-employment pathway design, and system planning within AETS collaborators and beyond.

The ultimate goal is a sustainable, Indigenous-led systems change model that supports improved graduation rates, stronger identity and well-being, and meaningful education and employment outcomes for Anishinaabe youth.

*Miigwech for walking alongside in this work!!*

**Project Summary completed by:**

Carolyn Zadnik, Lead Researcher

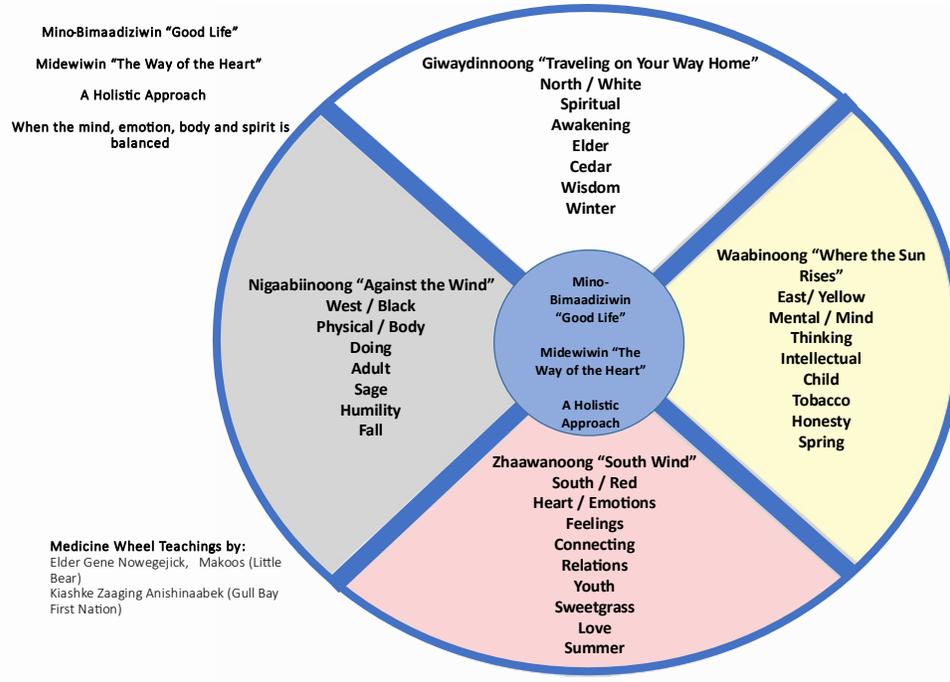
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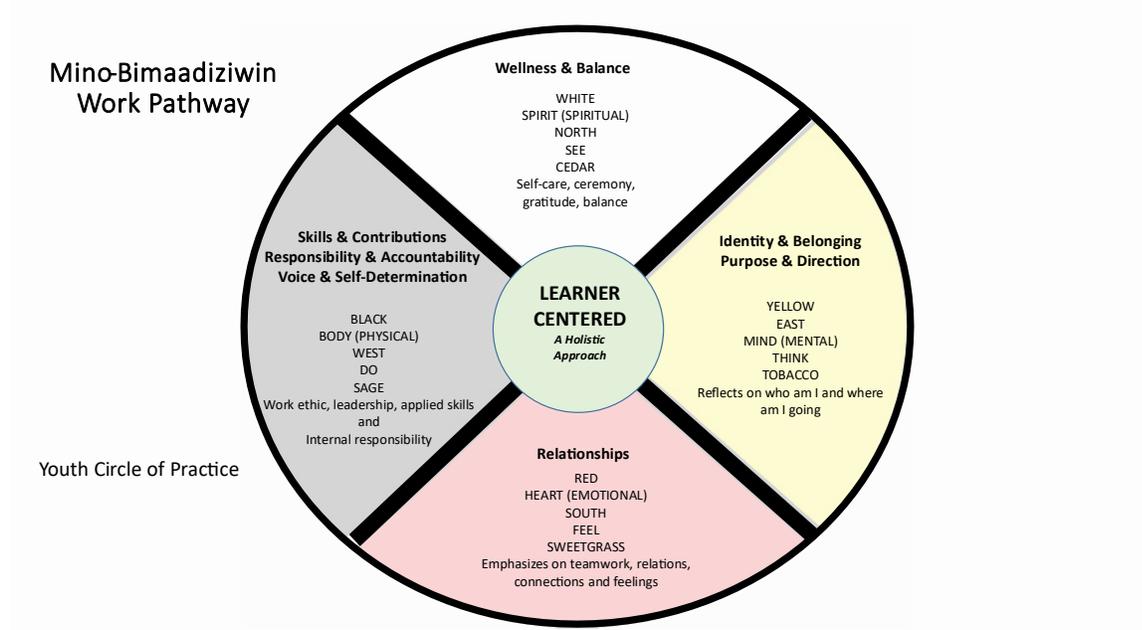
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# Appendix1: Medicine Wheel Teachings

## Mino-Bimaadiziwin “Good Life” / Midewiwin “The Way of the Heart”

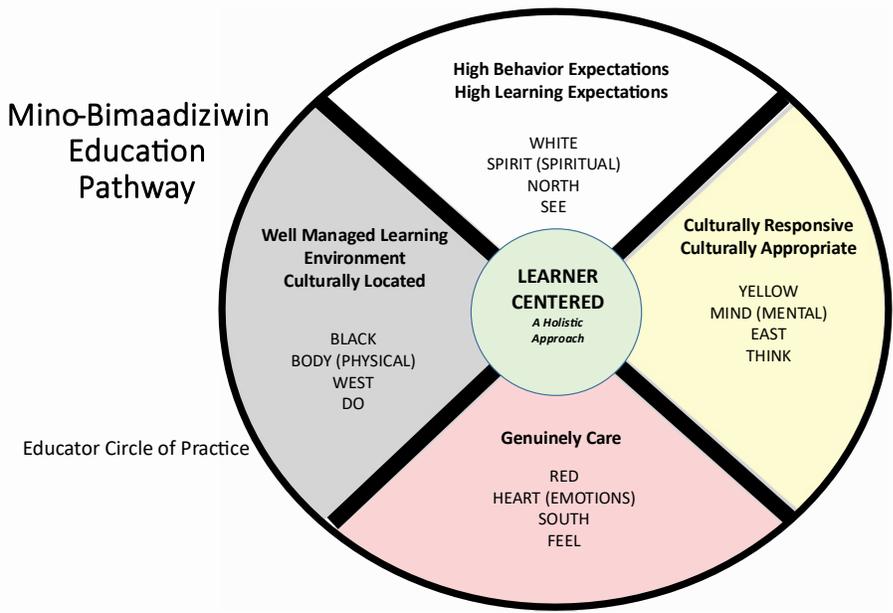


## Appendix 2: Mino-Bimaadiziwin Work Pathway – Youth Circle of Practice



Strand Themes	Inferences
<b>1. Identity &amp; Belonging</b> East / Mind / Think	Do I know who I am and where I come from?
<b>2. Purpose &amp; Direction</b> East / Mind / Think	Do I have a sense of my path / journey?
<b>3. Relationships</b> South / Emotional / Feel	How do I relate with others in a good way?
<b>4. Skills &amp; Contributions</b> West / Physical / Do	What do I bring?
<b>5. Responsibility &amp; Accountability</b> West / Physical / Do	How do I show up in work and community?
<b>6. Voice &amp; Self-Determination</b> West / Physical / Do	Can I express, speak and act for myself in a good way?
<b>7. Wellness &amp; Balance</b> North / Spiritual / See	Am I caring for myself as I grow?

### Appendix 3: Mino-Bimaadiziwin Education Pathway - Educator Circle of Practice



Strand Themes	Inferences
<b>1. Culturally Responsive</b> East / Mind / Think	I recognize and respond to the strengths, identities and cultural teachings that Indigenous students bring into the classroom.
<b>2. Culturally Appropriate</b> East / Mind / Think	I choose resources, language and approaches that respect and align with Anishinaabe values, teachings and protocols.
<b>3. Genuinely Care</b> South / Emotions / Feel	I show students that I see them, believe in them and care about their well-being.
<b>4. Well Managed Learning Environment</b> West / Physical / Do	I create a learning space where students feel they belong and can take risks in their learning.
<b>5. Culturally Located</b> West / Physical / Do	I connect learning to the land, local community, language and seasonal teachings.
<b>6. High Behaviour Expectations</b> North / Spiritual / See	I support students in learning and practicing respectful and responsible behaviour.
<b>7. High Learning Expectations</b> North / Spiritual / See	I challenge and support all students to grow as thinkers, doers and leaders while believing in their potential and gifts.

## Appendix 4: Feather Circle of Growth Scale

The Circle of Practice reflections are guided using a Feather Rating Scale, encouraging narrative written as youth and teacher self-reflections in a response worksheet and storytelling through dialogues as educators and youth share their Mino-Bimaadiziwin journeys. Evidence based documents are submitted as part of the data collection process to support the narratives.

The four phases of learning and growing include:

**1 - Feather Not Yet Lifted** – *Beginning the Journey* – The Educator is becoming aware of this area and is open to learning more about how to start.

**2 - First Feather Found** – *Exploring and Rooting* – The Educator is exploring new understandings and beginning to connect the practice to their teaching with small steps.

**3 - Wing Taking Shape** – *Integrating and Engaging* – The Educator is applying the practice in meaningful ways, engaging students, and deepening their understanding through experience.

**4 - Eagle in Flight** – *Living the Learning* – The Educator is consistently and naturally weaving the practice into their teaching, grounded in relationships, reflection, and responsive practice. They are walking in a good way that supports Indigenous student success.