



# Classroom Celebrating Neurodiversity Indigenous Community Consult

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## Introduction

On September 7, 2023, Surrey Place was honoured to host our first Indigenous Community Consultation on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat where we are grateful to occupy office space at the Scarborough Hub building in Toronto. It is our hope that this first Indigenous community consultation will support our agency and staff to meet the needs of the community and inspire our growing journey (health, growth, inclusion, etc.).

## Acknowledgements

We express our deepest appreciation to the individuals who generously dedicated their time, expertise, and unwavering support to ensure the success of our inaugural Indigenous Community Consultation. Their invaluable contributions and guidance will play a pivotal

role in navigating challenges and fostering a sense of community and collaboration. We extend heartfelt thanks to the Healer, Helper, MC/Indigenous Consultant, Wellness Supports, Caterer, and discussion facilitators. The energy, safety, knowledge, and spirit they infused into the consultation were instrumental in its success.

## **Agency Background and Profile**

Surrey Place is a non-profit organization started in 1962, that serves people of all ages with various neurodiversity's such as Intellectual Disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and visual impairments in the Toronto region and Northwestern Ontario. We aim to provide trusted services and education which encompasses integrated and inclusive support in a safe and welcoming environment. Our Surrey Place team consists of caring clinicians, staff, valued partners, and other specialists in the sector. We strive to ensure the greatest access to services and support our clients in navigating the health care and social service systems.

## **Statement of Purpose**

Indigenous Community Consult to collaborate and receive community feedback for the classroom's curriculum and future objectives.

## **Night of Our Gathering**

We were brought together in spirit and energy with an opening ceremony from Healer Peter Kashane and Helper Isaiah acknowledging and giving consent for the assembly, followed by Surrey Place CEO Terri Hewitt offering a land acknowledgement recognizing the traditional territories of Indigenous people(s) we gathered on that evening. We took the time to openly share stories about Surrey Place, our goals, our classroom, and our students. After, we broke out into groups to gather feedback and ideas on culturally specific needs and supports within the classroom, developmental services, and health care that the community believed were required for better support. After serious discussions, storytelling, and laughter, we joined together for a meal allowing time for reflection and connection.

In the "Feedback from Community" section of this report, there is an objective recollection of the common themes and ideas imparted from community members based on the questions offered during our sharing sessions.





## Classroom Celebrating Neurodiversity

Historically, Toronto's public school system lacked programming, training, resources, and support for youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Surrey Place has responded to the needs of the community by developing (or co-creating) this important program.

Specializing in FASD education and support, Surrey Place in partnership with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and Education Community Partnerships Program (ECPP) to create a safe and unique day treatment classroom called the Classroom Celebrating Neurodiversity. We aspire to uphold Indigenous knowledge in the areas of youth health and educational development and address the separation and removal of young people from the land.

The Classroom Celebrating Neurodiversity supports transitional teens (grades 10-12) suspected of, or diagnosed with FASD, aiming to provide an environment that supports Truth and Reconciliation and promotes the following:

- Healing
- Health development and learning
- Community inclusion and accountability as community stakeholders as it pertains to Truth and Reconciliation.

In keeping with best practices for supporting FASD and Indigenous ways of knowing and supporting children and youth, our program operates from a needs-based approach with land-based education and healing. This successful pilot at West Hill Collegiate Institute in Scarborough highlighted the need for deeper community involvement.





## Feedback from Community

Below is a collection of feedback provided by community members during the discussion portion of the consult. Ideas and comments have been listed without modification and common themes have been combined. We thank everyone for helping us better understand community needs.

### **What culturally specific supports, needs, developmental services, and health care are required?**

- Having Elders and Traditional Healers connect and be a part of the classroom. Diverse background to fill up all gaps, flexible, multiple perspectives, and self-identification such as a 2-spirited Elder to connect, partner, and teach by passing knowledge down.

- Have access to traditional healers with the ability to use the Medicine Wheel, 4 Medicines, 4 Directions while having medicines available in the classroom, such as Smudging, Sweat Lodges, Land-Based Healing Circles, and Ceremonies.
- Teaching Indigenous History and Truth. Reconnection back to Indigenous Roots.
- Educate to eliminate culture-based learning and integrate Land-based teaching, identity, and diversity. Have more Indigenous people teaching.

### **What do you look for when seeking services related to mental health, developmental services and or Health Care?**

- Holistic approach: Understand the needs of the individual and the family. Support the family providing childcare. Utilize the services of: Naturopath, chiropractor, Indigenous Health Care Provider, Mental Health Worker, Counselling for addiction and mental health.
- Offer traditional culturally competent history trauma informed care / activities. Learn about Indigenous culture to create cultural safety and empathy and a proper political climate.
- Meet where at and gaining trust, understanding stereotyping, stigmas and labelling fears and provide friendliness, inclusivity, compassion, empathy, and patience.
- Provide Spiritual Well-Being through Medicine People and Elders along with sharing and healing circles.

### **Share ideas on how to ensure the Indigenous communities voices are heard and upheld in the classroom.**

- Accountability, follow-through: show what you are trying to do.
- Regular Town Hall / Community meetings consistently. Community focus, hear multiple opinions.
- Consult Elders and Healers from different nations and tribes. Many have diverse backgrounds and teachings. Share different teachings, with the heart of the message the same.
- Partnerships with Indigenous agencies such as the Indigenous Youth Agency (ENAGB).



### **What does Surrey Place need to consider when creating a safe classroom that is culturally inclusive and response to your needs?**

- Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous teachers in the classroom.  
Feedback from Elders, students, and student's families.
- Cultural, spiritual, and emotional safety.

### **What does the ideal classroom look like?**

- Nature and land-based learnings in the classroom. Use outdoor spaces and bring the outdoors into the classroom, plants inside, plant wall, gardening...etc.
- Utilizing traditional medicines.

### **What do you NOT like about the current Education System?**

- Ridged types of teaching such as: pen to paper, computer screens for learning and homework, repeating and memorizing, not enough individual learning styles and curriculum.

### **Are there aspects of cultural and/or spirituality you would like our classroom to be able to support students with?**

- Acknowledging the child, building their story and self-esteem, setting boundaries on self-respect and authentication. Being acknowledged, having a voice, being able to express.
- Indigenous knowledge holders and Indigenous staff share culture and spirituality.
- Using traditional medicines, creating a medicine garden.



## Program Community Commitments

We heard during the community consultation the importance of engaging traditional healers in our classroom, sharing information with and continuing to build relationships with the community, and creating cultural and spiritual safety in the classroom. Our future includes reaching out and connecting with an Indigenous healer to join the classroom, build a Working Group to engage with the community on policies and practices within the classroom, and continuing to connect through community engagement building activities.

### Information sharing

- Conduct Classroom Celebrating Neurodiversity focused town halls, sharing and engaging with community.
- Create a safe space for the community to gather and discuss systemic barriers and other challenges that may be present in the classroom.

## **Hiring**

- Hire an Indigenous healer to engage in the classroom program.
- Ensuring at minimum one classroom staff member be Indigenous.

## **Indigenous Community Engagement and Partnerships**

- Reaching out and connecting with the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC).
- Establish an Indigenous community knowledge network: connecting and inviting into the classroom for teaching and cultural work.

## **Create and Establish a Combined Working Group**

- Engage with the community on hiring practices and policies, professional development, education, and teachings within the classroom.



## Current Classroom Initiatives

We are proud to announce the closing of our students in the Classroom Celebrating Neurodiversity's "*Housing is a Sovereign Right: Orange Shirt Day Fundraiser.*" Our students raised \$6720.00 in profit for the fundraiser stemming from a combination of t-shirt sales and pledges. Students sold t-shirts across Turtle Island including the U.S.A, and a few t-shirts even made their way to Europe and Mexico. 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations supported the classroom team to ensure the funds were received by an Indigenous family in Toronto who could benefit from this fundraiser.

As part of our commitment to meeting the therapeutic needs of our students and providing individualized support and counseling, both students and classroom staff are actively engaged in the creation of a Prayer Blanket. A West Coast spiritual item, these teachings will be passed on to students. They are working on a design to honour MMIWG. This initiative serves as a symbolic representation of our collective commitment to healing and well-being within the classroom environment. By collaboratively assembling the



Prayer Blanket, students not only learn valuable skills, participate in a meaningful activity that honors Indigenous traditions and offers the opportunity to partner with the Urban Indigenous Education Centre sharing teachings and spending time on the land at the outdoor education centre.

## Closing Statement

In closing, Surrey Place is truly grateful for the opportunity to engage in this community consult focused on creating a safe Indigenous culture focused classroom for high school students with suspected or diagnosed Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The community's invaluable insights, wisdom and perspectives have laid a foundation for a collaborative and culturally responsive learning environment. As we move forward, we are committed to incorporating your feedback, noted throughout this report, and working hand-in-hand with the community to develop an educational space that honors Indigenous culture, recognizes the unique needs of students with or suspected FASD, and fosters an inclusive and supportive atmosphere. Surrey Place looks forward to continued collaboration as we embark on this journey together, ensuring that the educational experience is both enriching and deeply rooted in cultural understanding and respect. Thank you for your unwavering support and partnership in this important endeavor.