

MECCS

A newsletter for Mother Earth's Children's Charter School to share its successful traditional and innovative programming.

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Our Outdoor Classroom and Cultural Camp

Earlier this year, our staff decided we needed to strengthen our overall program at MECCS to better meet our charter requirements. Our first step on that journey is creating an outdoor classroom/cultural camp that teachers and students can use all year long.

One of our major charter goals for MECCS is Indigenizing education. This means adding or redoing Indigenous elements in what we teach. Through Indigenization, students can gain a conceptual understanding of their school curriculum by exploring Indigenous knowledge systems and practices.

We need to teach how to connect to culture through land-based learning and experiential learning initiatives. This might include fishing, outdoor education, loose-parts play, connections to the land and environment, and talking about connectedness as reciprocal relationships.

Teacher Maxine Hildebrandt removing old trees on the MECCS cultural camp site.





Above: Mark Hildebrandt clearing out the old fire pit area.



Left, top: Dale LeMoignan, Maxine and Mark making plans for the site.

Left, middle: Breaking ground on the new cultural camp site.

Left, bottom: Some of the many boulders that had to be removed.

Several years ago, an attempt was made to encourage the teaching of tanning hides as a traditional skill to students. The space available had limited usefulness because the vegetation was overgrown and there was no access to water or a viable fire pit area. Students were able to try some of the steps in the hide-tanning process but could not complete it.



MECCS needs a dedicated outdoor space that will function as a cultural classroom. An outdoor classroom can be highly engaging for students and the natural environment can enhance learning. An outdoor cultural classroom will stimulate students' learning modalities. These are the sensory pathways through which individuals give, receive and conceptualize information. We plan to use this space to hold cultural activities such as traditional games, storytelling, arts and crafts, and to learn skills like tanning hides, birch bark basketry, and the Cree and Stoney languages.



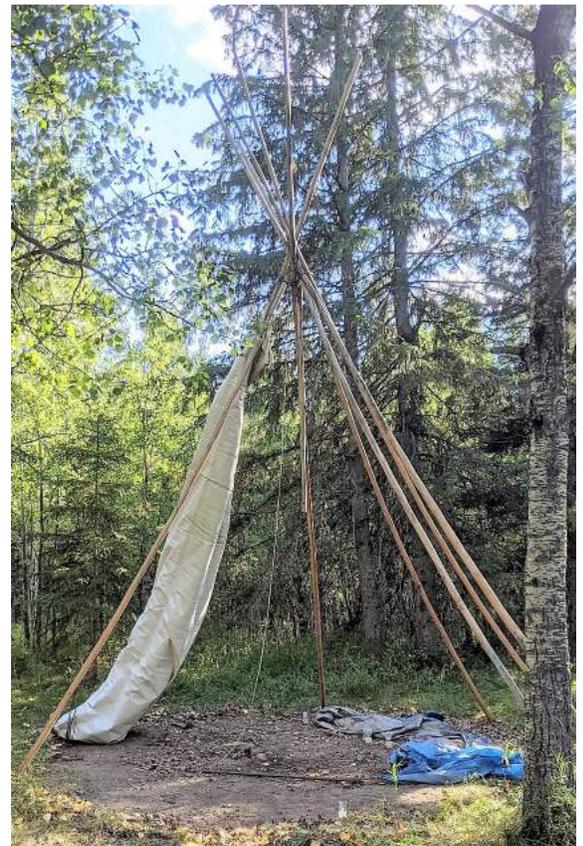
Our previous cultural camp area had become overgrown with vegetation and was no longer a viable work area. The tipi had significant mould and mildew and was showing advanced decay. The fire pit area was overgrown with grasses, weeds and overhanging trees, and the seating area had deteriorated badly. In that state, the area was inappropriate for holding cultural activities. There were no amenities available, like tables, overhead shelter or a functioning fire pit area. There were no washroom facilities outside. It is impractical to take students outdoors for extended learning activities without access to an outdoor washroom. Lessons can be interrupted while teachers escort students to use indoor washrooms.



Above: Maxine Hildebrandt taking down the old tipi.

Right, top: Our outdoor space storage shed and tipi site.

Right, bottom: Removing the old tipi and poles.



Credit must be given to the folks who put in time over the summer and weekends to get us through the planning stages into actual construction. Principal Erin Danforth and teacher Maxine Hildebrandt spent many hours discussing the potential of the site. Maxine then developed a proposal to submit to Superintendent Ed Wittchen for approval. Maxine and her husband Mark Hildebrandt researched various aspects, visited suppliers, got quotes and measured the site options in anticipation of approval. Once they had approval, they worked with Maintenance Director Dale LeMoignan to do the initial site preparation.

The first step saw the site cleared of rocks, logs, long grass and brush, and unsuitable trees and saplings. This created a space for the fire pit area, outdoor lean-to shelter and tipi area.

Next, the old tipi was dismantled. The area was then cleared of brush and grass, and the old tipi covering was discarded. Any poles and stakes that were reusable were saved. The base was dug out and the ground was levelled in each area.

The third step was installing our new outdoor washroom, courtesy of our corporate partner Kopala Towers. This washroom is a heated, well-lit space with a flush toilet and metered stainless steel sink washroom. It will be functional even at -45°C . We placed it close to the site next to our maintenance shop.

Step four was purchasing our fire pit kit. This will be placed in an 18-foot concrete circle. Students will be able to sit on medium and large tree stumps, which can be moved around as needed.

Our final step in this phase was cutting down unnecessary trees, removing excess brush, and using the skidsteer to level the ground as much as possible for the fire pit and outdoor shelter sites. The area is very rocky, and quite a few medium to large boulders had to be removed. Dale LeMoignan used the skidsteer to dig down to a depth of four inches in an 18-foot-diameter circle on the fire pit area, clear away the soil and level it. For the lean-to shelter, he dug down to a depth of four inches in a rectangular area of 14 feet by 18 feet, cleared away the soil and levelled it.

We hope to have the entire project completed by late October to early November. In the coming weeks, we will be completing the following tasks:

- Spread a load of road crush gravel over both areas, tamp it down and level it to prepare to pour the concrete bases.
- Clean out the shed and organize the contents into storage bins.
- Apply rebar for the lean-to shelter and fire pit pads. The contracted concrete company will deliver, pour, place, level, trowel and finish. After the concrete cures, forms will be removed and dirt will be filled in and packed.
- Finish the tipi base with artificial turf. This is a better alternative than indoor/outdoor carpeting. The 21-foot waterproof/fire-resistant Heritage Tipi has been ordered from Lethbridge Custom Canvas. We will set up the tipi poles and install the covering once the base is done. Woodland Lumber in Evansburg will supply materials for the outdoor classroom lean-to shelter.
- Finish the final tasks for all three sites, including installing tables and benches in the lean-to shelter, placing tree stumps around the fire pit, cutting and stacking firewood, and preparing the entrance in front of the tipi by packing the gravel base with any leftover gravel.

Our next issue will highlight the completed work on this project.

*Right, top: Our new outdoor washroom.
Right, middle: The cleared tipi site ready for the new tipi.
Right, bottom: Clearing the fire pit area to get it ready for concrete work.*

Left and below: Maxine Hildebrandt put in a lot of work to help prepare the new site, including weed whacking, stacking brush for firewood and removing trees.

