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Program eases natives into higher learning

A mentoring program helps foster self-confidence as students prepare to leave small, often rural elementary schools for large high schools

By JOE MATYAS

He looked like a warrior.

He dressed in clothing that paid tribute to his native heritage.

And he spoke in a strong, confident voice.

Ojibway storyteller Aaron Bell radiated charisma yesterday as he addressed 80 First Nations Grade 8 students from 18 Thames Valley elementary schools at a relationship-building event in London.

"For this age group I like to leave the message of self-confidence and self-respect, because it's important for our youth to realize the strength is within themselves," Bell said after an hour of storytelling at a conference to help native youth prepare for high school.

Bell's address included traditional stories -- a Haida legend about the Raven's encounters with the first man and first woman and another about how the bear lost his tail and ability to walk upright because of pride and a cunning fox.

Bell urged the students to believe in themselves, but he also told them to "never walk down hallways with your chest out and snout up because someday you'll meet your own fox if you do."

He bookended his tales with a wider discussion about life from a native perspective, seasoning his comments with references to computer games, iPods and cellphones.

Bell said he's not a traditional storyteller but someone who uses the spoken word to build a bridge between the past and present.



A traditional storyteller knows and shares the stories of his or her people word for word in the oral tradition during ceremonies at recognized times of the year, he said.

"What I do is take what I learn from my own life and my own kids and combine it with the traditions of my people in a way we can relate to today."

Fiona Hurley said this was the third conference designed to help First Nations youth transition from elementary to secondary school. The first was held last fall and the second this spring.

It's about "the 4th R -- relationships," she said. "The belief is relationships can be taught and built and that can certainly help students in this age group."

Research has shown students from small communities can have trouble adapting to the move to big high schools from small elementary schools, she said.

"A lot lose their sense of community, get overwhelmed and lose their focus. As a result, they're vulnerable to dropping out of school. They're less likely to do that if they have relationships that can help them make the transition."

The program pairs elementary students with successful secondary students and gives native youth an opportunity to meet with mentors and hear inspirational speakers.