

Natives find 'home' in Academy

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Airport terminal will become 'a place of learning' for 800 eager pupils

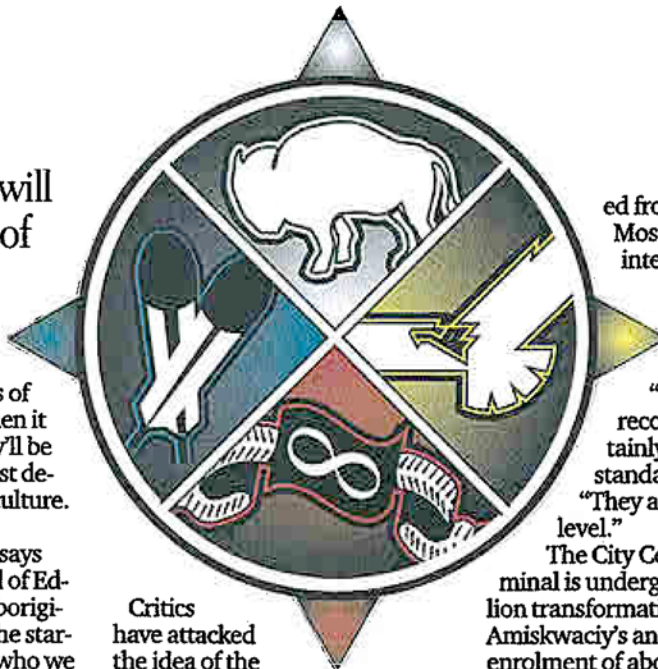
When the first students push aside the glass doors of Amiskwaciy Academy when it opens next February, they'll be greeted by a large starburst design representing native culture.

"It's the essence of what Amiskwaciy is all about," says Phyllis Cardinal, principal of Edmonton's experimental aboriginal high school. "Part of the starburst is the focal point of who we are as a people and that is permeated throughout the school."

Students will also find a new mural depicting aboriginal themes, berms planted with sweet grass and other traditional herbs and a circular room for meetings with elders. There's also a round steam room representing a sweat lodge where ceremonies can be held, a teepee and feather and buffalo patterns in the wall paint and floors.

"It certainly will be their home, their place of learning," says Cardinal, echoing the philosophy of the year-old school, which will operate in an old downtown Edmonton Telephones building until renovations of its new location in the empty 80,000-sq.-foot City Centre Airport terminal are complete.

"With that comes the expectations of their traditions and beliefs and the guiding principles of caring and sharing," said Cardinal, who is a dynamic role model for aboriginal students. "It will reflect the fundamental values of our people."



Critics have attacked the idea of the school because it separates, rather than integrates, aboriginal students from the rest of the student population.

Cardinal says students are not forced, but choose to come to the school from across Alberta. Several non-aboriginal young people attended last year.

"With our students in other schools, they have been segregated," she says of native students. "They haven't been given the opportunity to learn about themselves. They learn about other cultures before they learn who they are."

Dismal statistics bear Cardinal out. She said only about 300 native students graduated from high school in Canada last year.

Edmonton, with one of the fastest-growing aboriginal populations in Canada, has about 5,000 "self-declared" aboriginal students in the public school system. Less than 25 per cent of those have stayed in school long enough to finish.

In its first year, 16 students in the Grade 12 class of 25 graduat-

ed from Amiskwaciy. Most of the rest still intended to pick up needed courses for their diplomas, Cardinal says. "We'll soon break records and we certainly don't lower our standards," she says. "They are at a provincial level."

The City Centre Airport terminal is undergoing an \$8-million transformation to house Amiskwaciy's anticipated future enrolment of about 800.

Edmonton Public Schools is leasing the building for 25 years from Gibralt Capital Corporation of Vancouver. Gibralt, in turn, is leasing it from the airport authority that actually owns the facility, chosen by the school board from dozens of possible sites.

Alberta Learning has put \$12 million in special funding toward the school — approved by Learning Minister Lyle Oberg, a strong supporter of the project.

About 70 workers in a dozen trades are currently installing a completely new interior in the concrete, masonry, and glass shell. The initial completion target of this September was pushed back due to safety issues, which had to be resolved before the school could be located next to the airport, where many students will arrive in Edmonton from small communities throughout the northern Alberta.

"We were supposed to get going at the beginning of the year, but didn't get going till May," says Jack McCutcheon, project manager with Manasc Isaac Archi-

itects, the project design team.

Luggage carousels and back-room baggage handling areas are gone, replaced with vocational shops. The lounge and restaurant, where travellers once sipped beer and watched planes come and go, have been transformed into home economics classrooms, with spectacular runway views.

Former arrival, departure and office areas are turning into airy and bright student gathering spaces, a cafeteria, science labs, library, and English, math, social studies, foods, fashion and computer classrooms.

The structure will also get a new roof, but loses its escalator. "I don't think they'd want to waste the money to maintain it," McCutcheon says.

Still to come is a \$2-million gymnasium. Official opening ceremonies are scheduled for next May, when they'll coincide with next year's graduation.

As the Amiskwaciy Academy nears completion, the public school board is starting to plan its next big project — the \$63-million rebuilding of the Victoria School for the Performing and Visual Arts.

Construction is scheduled to begin in April 2003. The rebuilt school's official opening is set for June 2005.