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### New course opens up opportunities for guaranteed employment for First Nations youth

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A new program implemented under the Classroom Connections program promises to open up a new path for First Nations youth to have permanent employment as journeymen following an intensive training program implemented in cooperation with Portage College.

Representatives of Samson Cree Nation Classroom Connections and Portage College signed a letter of agreement on Tuesday, Jan. 21 at the offices of the Samson Cree Band, allowing the third phase of the program to get underway in March.

The program is funded primarily by the federal government with the provincial government's Human Services also contributing with funding support.

Heather MacTaggart: Executive Director of Classroom Connections, creator of the "Change it Up" program said the agreement was part of the two programs they were running with Samson Cree nation, one is "Change it up Entrepreneur" and "Change it up Trades".

While the first one builds up skills among First Nations members to start and/or operate businesses, the second one allows interested youth to acquire trade skills.

"As you know there is huge shortage of skilled trades workers in Alberta because of the growing economy and the energy sector, and there is also a very large pool of unemployed Aboriginal people," MacTaggart said.

"So what 'Change it up Trades' is all about is trying to bridge that gap."

"The direct purpose of the scheme is to get more First Nations people into the apprenticeship track of the skilled trades, so it is not just to get work, not just to start a job as a worker, but to become a journeyman, a skilled trade person," according to MacTaggart.

The First Nations youth who will benefit from the program have already spent about seven months with the Change it up to be brought up "socially and academically" to the level that they need to be at to write the trade entrance exams.

Stu Leitch, Director of Community and Industry Training Initiatives at Portage College, said the next four months starting in March would allow the youth to select and specialize in the trade they would want to pursue.

"They will be introduced to five different trades over that period and then they will be writing their trade entrance exams to qualify for those trades and start work with the group to assist them to get employment."

"It is a combination of more math and science and exposure to trades and hands on experience with carpentry, electrical, steamfitter/pipefitter, welding and heavy equipment technician programs."

"They will have exposure to each of these (trades) for three weeks and then select which trades they want to specialize in."

Trent Keough, President and CEO of Portage Collage said they were experienced in training individuals coming from underrepresented groups and that they had previously worked with First Nations and Métis in similar projects.

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16	17	18	19	20	21	22
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“But this is a unique program that we hope we can actually replicate and bring what we learn from this project to other projects.”

Classroom Connections have agreements in place with several companies, including Galloway of Ponoka, to employ the graduates of the program.

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