FIRST NATIONS
Centre of Excellence

Denetia School Case Study

Supporting land-based learning for students: FNCOE/Denetia School case study

Summary

The First Nations Centre of Excellence (FNCOE) supported School District #87, including Denetia School in Lower Post, in partnering with BC Parks on school and community projects. Graham Muncaster, the principal of Denetia School, connected with Harlan Schilling, the CEO of FNCOE, who introduced Graham to his contact at BC Parks and supported funding applications for multiple projects, including short-term project grants for each school in the district and a large project grant of $180,000 for Denetia School to build a nature park in collaboration with other organizations in the community.

As of spring 2026, the Denetia School B.C. Nature Park project is moving forward as a three-year design and construction project led by Seed the North in collaboration with Denetia School students, School District 87, Daylu Dena Council, Kaska leadership, Kaska Land Guardians and community members. The project team is using student-created designs as a foundation for the finalized layout of the park.

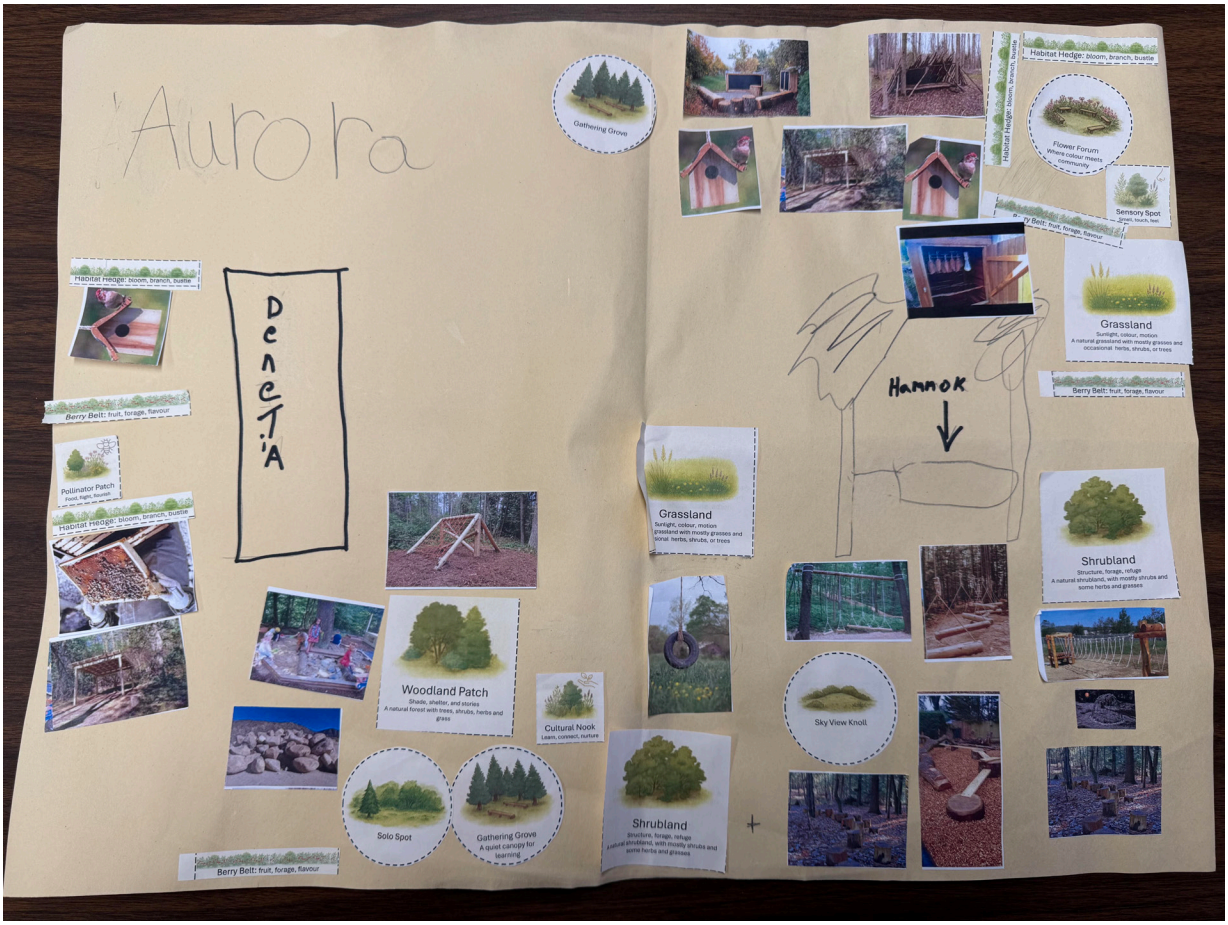
For this project, the FNCOE team recognized a need in the Lower Post community and connected them with the opportunity for BC Parks funding based on their relationship with the funding organization. FNCOE is dedicated to continuing to build this network to ensure funding flows to support economic and community development for rural and remote First Nations.

Background

Lower Post is a Kaska Nation located in northern British Columbia, close to the Yukon border, about 25 km southeast of Watson Lake, Yukon. Lower Post has an approximate population of 300 people.

Lower Post has a K-7 school, called Denetia School, which means ‘Good Person’ in the Kaska language. Denetia School has approximately eight students (as of 2026) and three staff members. Graham Muncaster and his partner Rachel chose to relocate to Lower Post as a teaching couple after meeting Harlan Schilling, the deputy chief of Lower Post and the CEO of First Nations Centre of Excellence (FNCOE). Along with the staff, the school partners with local groups and knowledge holders for learning opportunities for the kids.

After moving to Lower Post from southern BC, Graham and Rachel hit the ground running by connecting with different groups, such as the land guardians, to collaborate on educational programming. They worked closely with Harlan to ensure they were providing high-quality education that is grounded in the community.



Opportunity

As principal of Denetia School, Graham recognized their need for funding and new opportunities for the kids. This is where Harlan Schilling, CEO of the First Nations Centre of Excellence, stepped in.

Funding access:
Newly in his role as principal, Graham learned that getting grants for a small school was crucial to provide opportunities for his students. The FNCOE team supported the school by opening doors to funding not only for Lower Post, but for the entire School District #87 through BC Parks.

FNCOE connections:
Harlan made the connection between Graham and FNCOE's funding contact at BC Parks. The funding available was part of a pilot project in which Lower Post was one of five schools who got the funding for nature-based education projects.

Funding opportunities:
Smaller grants of $3,000 from BC Parks enabled short-term individual school projects such as bat houses and traditional gardens. Denetia School also received a large project grant of $180 000 and is working towards building a nature park on school property with the students involved in the planning and implementation process.

The goals for building a nature park are to provide the opportunity for experiential, land-based learning for kids with a longer-term vision of 'rewilding' the area. School District #87 prioritizes Indigenous land-based and experiential learning within all its schools, which is directly aligned with this initiative. Plans include a traditional plant garden in the area and building a smokehouse with the district and community as moose harvesting is a large part of Kaska culture.

Approach

Once FNCOE made the connection to BC Parks as a funder and facilitated the grant application process, Graham put together a project team, including community members, land guardians, knowledge holders, environmentalists, contractors, and the Denetia School students. The nature park is a multi-year project with different planting stages and a maintenance schedule. Due to the location of Lower Post near the northern border of BC, seasonal weather conditions are a big factor that impact planning and implementation. In 2026, the team is moving forward with a site evaluation as a preliminary step in establishing a foundation for the park.

FNCOE set Graham up with a funding meeting and helped build partnerships with the funder across the district. There is ongoing collaboration with Harlan and the FNCOE to plan for the school and Graham knows he can reach out if he needs support. Projects like this ground education in community and culture and bring identity back to the school.

BC Parks has also provided $20,000 for follow-up maintenance of the park once it is established.

Results

As of spring 2026, Denetia School has been approved to move forward with the next steps in building their nature park. Additionally, each school in District #87 has completed their smaller projects with the $3,000 individual grants from BC Parks, facilitated by FNCOE's connection.

As for next steps in the process, the project team will continue with the nature park build, including planting stages and developing the cultural area. Graham plans to maintain the connection with the FNCOE team and see what else can be done together.

Recommendations

- Be open to learning, trying new things, and hearing different perspectives.
- Keep your doors open for community members to be involved, the school is the local culture and a part of its voice.
- Build partnerships and work with as many folks as possible. This is especially crucial for small communities.
- Push to bring back cultural knowledge, projects like this are important for small communities.

"Working with Harlan and the Centre of Excellence made sense because they were aligned with our values at Denetia School and know our context so well. Support comes from people who know the context matters. These kinds of projects give reconciliation meaning."

- Graham Muncaster, Principal of Denetia School




fncoe.ca