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After the Healing:

Safeguarding Northern Nishnawbe First Nations High School Education

By Paul W. Bennett

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Executive Summary

Making amends with Canada's Indigenous peoples for past injustices and chronic neglect has now moved to the top of the national policy agenda. With the release of the June 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report and the seismic political change in Ottawa, the mass healing continues and a new era of reconciliation in education has begun.

A Thunder Bay coroner's inquest report into the deaths of seven First Nations students, issued on June 28, 2016, added to the sense of urgency. It also gave fresh impetus to public calls for concrete, meaningful changes in Indigenous education, particularly in Northern Ontario.

Going well beyond its strict mandate to rule on cases of death, the five-person jury, presided over by coroner Dr. David Eden, delivered a total of 145 recommendations, most of which proposed sweeping changes in Indigenous education extending from pre-school to the end of high school and beyond. The far-reaching plan even proposed building a high school in each of Northern Ontario's mostly small, isolated reserve communities. That alone is a monumental undertaking that would take massive investments and years to achieve.

A January 2016 C.D. Howe Institute research report, written by Barry Anderson and John Richards, painted a bleak picture of the state of First Nations education on reserves. Such sweeping conclusions do not apply to all First Nations on-reserve schools, particularly the two largest Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) schools in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), covering much of Northern Ontario.

Over the past seven years, 2009-10 to 2015-16, graduation rates at the two NNEC high schools, Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFCHS) and Pelican Falls First Nations High School (PFFNHS) have not only exceeded the provincial on-reserve average, but risen steadily from 53.6 % to 76.0% this past year. Out of 424 students registered in Grade 12 over that period, 261 (61.5 %) achieved a high school certificate, significantly higher than the province-wide rate. In the 2015-16 school year, while the Thunder Bay inquest dominated the news, both DFCHS and PFFNS recorded their highest graduation rates ever, at 64.7 % (33 of 51) and 100 % (24 of 24) respectively.

Given a funding gap of 25 to 30 per cent per student and the adverse media attention, the label of "failing" schools does not seem to square with the facts. Yet much more needs to be done to immediately improve the quality of education and student life for First Nations students attending Thunder Bay's Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School and other First Nations-run schools in the Ontario North.

The earlier September 2014 NPI policy paper Picking Up the Pieces supported the full transition to First Nations control of education through Community-School Based Management vested in Indigenous education authorities such as the NNEC.

Investing in First Nations high schools remains the best way to capture the true "Learning Spirit," to embrace a more holistic, community-based philosophy of lifelong learning, to raise student performance levels, and prepare graduates for healthier, more satisfying and productive lives.

Fixing the problems threatening the very existence of the NNEC First Nations high schools, DFCHS and PFFNHS, is the new imperative. Taking action now will not only ensure that First Nations teens attending NNEC high schools will return home alive, but better prepared for successful lives.

The Thunder Bay Coroner's Jury bit-off much more than can be digested and implemented in a timely and effective fashion. This report focuses more explicitly on addressing the needs of students making the transition to high school in Thunder Bay, Sioux Lookout, and other northern Ontario towns and cities.

This report presents a five-point action plan, urging policy-makers to:

1. **Close the funding gap for NNEC and NAN schools;**
2. **Design, fund and build Dennis Franklin Cromarty transition lodgings to be known as the Student Living Centre;**
3. **Re-build and expand student support services to smooth the transition to city/town life;**
4. **Establish a Race Relations Commissioner and officers in cities and larger towns with sizable populations of First Nations youth and students; and**
5. **Expand and fortify 'Student Success' curriculum initiatives based upon Indigenous ways of knowing and learning.**

Introduction

After the Thunder Bay Inquest – Now What?

On June 28, 2016, the Ontario coroner's inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations high school students in Thunder Bay produced a report with a mountain of recommendations but relatively few answers (Ontario Coroner 2016). The seven youth – Jethro Anderson, 15; Reggie Bushie, 15; Robyn Harper, 18; Kyle Morriseau, 17; Paul Panacheese, 21; Curran Strang, 18; and Jordan Wabasse, 15 – left their remote northern Ontario reserves to go to high school in Thunder Bay, and did not return home. Living in boarding houses off-campus, we learned that they were totally unprepared for life in the city of Thunder Bay, and that the city did little to ease the difficult transition (Talaga 2016, Blatchford 2016). Over an 11-year period, 2000 to 2011, they all perished, five by drowning in local rivers, one of alcohol poisoning, and one, Panacheese, collapsed and died of indeterminate causes. Going well beyond its strict mandate to rule on cases of death, the five-person jury, presided over by coroner Dr. David Eden, delivered a total of 145 recommendations, most of which proposed sweeping changes in Indigenous education extending from pre-school to the end of high school and beyond (Ontario Coroner 2016).

The Thunder Bay inquest conjured up, once again, the bitter and haunting legacy of Canada's Indigenous residential schools. From the 1880s to 1996, the "Indian residential school" experience was a national shame and tragedy of epic proportions, as amply demonstrated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its revelations. Surveying the summary report and the thousands of pages of testimony, the voices of "survivors" bring back to life the hardships, deprivation, abuses and starvation inflicted upon many of the estimated 150,000 children who attended some 139 mainly church-run and federally managed residential schools (TRC 2015). While the National Residential School Death Register listed 3,200 cases, the actual death count may be in excess of 6,000 children (Schwartz CBC News 2015). Thousands of residential school students were, in the words of Commission Chair Murray Sinclair, victims of what amounted to "cultural genocide," treated in "sub-human" fashion by school authorities, and continue to be scarred by that experience (Galloway and Curry 2015). With the release of the TRC report in early June 2015 and the subsequent volumes, the mass healing continues and a new era of reconciliation has begun. The Thunder Bay inquest verdict and recommendations only add to the sense of urgency, giving fresh impetus to public calls for concrete, meaningful changes in Indigenous education, particularly in northern Ontario.

The seven youth death inquest recommendations do tackle First Nations high school education, but reflect the clear contradictions exhibited in the sworn testimony. While the inquest focused on "home-stay" students attending a Thunder Bay high school, the jury took a much wider ambit and attempted to 'fix' education in all 49 of the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation communities, many of which are small, remote, fly-in communities. Recommendation 25, for example, directs Ottawa through Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) to provide "additional core funding "to "expand new facilities or expand existing facilities" (and then maintain and operate them) for day care/ early childhood education, elementary education (JK-8), and high school education (9-12) in the community (Ontario Coroner 2016, 8-10). That recommendation, according to NAN counsel Julian Falconer's law firm, means "to build and fund a preschool, elementary school and high school in every reserve community in NAN" (Falconers LLP, 2016). In addition, the jury recommends significantly upgrading existing secondary school facilities in Thunder Bay, including not only Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School but Mattawa Learning Centre, and immediate INAC funding to build a campus residence, starting in the spring of 2017 (Ontario Coroner 2016, 19-20).

The Thunder Bay inquest recommendations raise a number of unanswered questions. Is the proposal to build or expand high schools in all or most NAN communities a feasible option? If not, can Indigenous schools in city centres and larger communities be reinvented to meet the educational needs of today's children and youth? In the case of two Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) schools, Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFCHS) in Thunder Bay, and its sister school, Pelican Lake First Nations High School (PFFNHS) near Sioux Lookout, what form might they take to better serve students from NAN communities? Most significantly, can they escape the tainted legacy of First Nations residential schools?

The reality is that First Nations communities, scattered across the North in remote places, are often too small to support conventional 'brick-and-mortar' high schools. For the vast majority of students seeking further education beyond Grade 8, the only currently viable option is to enrol in secondary schools hundreds of kilometres away. Building and revitalizing schools in Canada's First Nations territories is now imperative, but so is improving those First Nations-run off-reserve schools serving First Nations teens living in cities and towns a considerable distance away from home. The recent federal budget, proposed by the Justin Trudeau Liberal Government on March 22, 2016, allocated $969-million of the $8.4 billion spending over five years to building and refurbishing First Nations reserve schools, holding out the hope that some funding will go to shoring-up existing school programs (Galloway 2016).

Following in the wake of the Thunder Bay inquest, this research report, After the Healing, tackles the vitally important question: do First Nations off-reserve schools have any future? The widely-publicized October 2015 to June 2016 public inquest yielded fresh evidence that uprooted teens, vulnerable and not properly supervised, not only get completely lost and disoriented, but end up as tragic victims (Talaga 2015a and Porter 2016f). Yet the small size and sheer geographic distance separating isolated First Nations communities suggest that schools with associated student living centres will remain the most viable option for some time to come.

Cutting through the enduring myths and harsh realities of First Nations education, the report analyzes and assesses the impact of First Nations-controlled high schools on the educational progress, well-being, and life chances of youth in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. Focusing on the DFC High School in Thunder Bay and PFFNHS in Sioux Lookout (NNEC 2016), it will provide an in-depth look at the real challenges and hard-won successes of community-based education in Northern Ontario's First Nations communities. We will bore more deeply into life at DFC and broaden the focus by looking at the critical lessons to be learned in turning around the lives of First Nations youth from remote northern communities. The current study will, in essence, explore and test the lessons and recommendations of the Northern Policy Institute (NPI) research report, "Picking Up the Pieces: A Community-Based Approach to First Nations Education Renewal," released in September 2014, two years ago (Bennett and Anuik 2014).

Setting the Context

Meeting the educational needs of First Nations youth in scattered and remote First Nations communities presents a formidable challenge. Two NNEC high schools with boarding students now exist in northwestern Ontario to serve that purpose, attempting to chart a far different path than that trod by Canada's widely-condemned Aboriginal residential schools. These schools, located roughly 400 kilometres apart, have slightly different missions, but both serve the bands of more than twenty fly-in reserves in the region (White 2015). They form a critical piece in the First Nations education network of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) comprised of 49 First Nations communities in the Ontario North, covering roughly two-thirds of the province of Ontario. A February 2012 NAN education brief did not mince any words about the general state of education. "As our First Nations are isolated," the report stated, "we need to ensure that although they are out of sight, they are not out of the minds of policy and decision makers" addressing "the immanent crisis in First Nations education' (NAN 2012).

Figure 1 – Nishnawbe -Aski First Nations -Map of Locations in Ontario North (NAN 2012)

Figure 2 – Northern Nishnawbe Education Council -Map of First Nations School Communities (NNEC 2011)

The NNEC, founded in 1973, is committed to achieving genuine self-government in education through First Nations-operated secondary schools and support services. It was born out of the movement for First Nations self-government and aimed at demonstrating the administrative capacity to assume control of boarding school programming for youth in the Sioux Lookout District attending grades 9 to 12 outside their communities. NNEC was formally organized as an area Education Authority in 1979 and is governed by the chiefs of the 24 Sioux District First Nations (NNEC 2015). While the schools are First Nations administered, they are still funded by the federal Department of Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development.

The NNEC's mission is very much in accord with the aspirations of First Nations for control of their own education and aimed at restoring "lost identity" in Aboriginal youth. Its "vision statement" provides a bold declaration that the NNEC aims to reinvent education as a key component in "a world where First Nations people succeed without the loss of their identity and have the courage to change their world according to their values."

Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, named after the revered late Grand Chief of Council Treaty #9 (NAN), has attracted a great deal of attention since its founding in 2000. Some 2,000 students have walked its hallways over the past fifteen years, most of whom from families deeply affected by the residential school experience (White 2015). All students leave home to attend the school in Thunder Bay by choice, and with their families' permission. It is essentially a day school where students are accommodated in boarding homes in the school's immediate vicinity. Students living far away from home are supported by a web of student support, counselling, and tutoring services.

Online courses are offered at DFCHS and 22 other First Nations schools through the NNEC's Wahsa Distance Education Centre (WDEC) based in Sioux Lookout, Ontario. The Centre provides access to Grade 9 to 12 Ontario Ministry of Education approved credit courses offered through various technological means, such as teleconferencing, the radio, the Internet, and Adobe Classroom, and are tailored to First Nations needs and interests. Students receive instruction, instructional packages, tutoring, and academic and personal counselling through local and central support systems. One Wahsa-affiliated course in Outdoor Education includes a unique opportunity to participate in a canoe trip through the traditional Ojibway territories of Quetico Park (NNEC 2016).

The NNEC high schools are making a determined effort to 'break the cycle' that entraps First Nations youth. The former principal of DFC, Jonathan Kakegamic of Keewaywin First Nation, saw DFC as a critical piece of the residential school healing process (Kakegamic 2015). Embracing the mission of its namesake, the

school is designed to "rebuild the connection between culture and identity" and to shepherd youth though a difficult stage in their lives. While DFC follows the core Ontario curriculum, students learn the OjiCree and Ojibway languages, have their own "Elders' Room," and learn traditional ways, such as drumming, beading, and bannock-making.

Building and sustaining DFCHS has not been without its trials and tribulations. Back in September 2009, when the student deaths threatened the school's very existence, Kakegamic was promoted to principal to provide renewed leadership. Under the new principal, student retention improved and support teams were added to the school's after-hours services to aid struggling students showing signs of loneliness, addiction and depression. In February 2012, after three years at the helm, Kakegamic was honoured as an Outstanding Principal by the Learning Partnership for "engaging students" and his success in assuring families that their Grade 9 to 12 teenagers will be "looked after" and "someone will be there to answer the call" at all hours (CBC Thunder Bay 2012).

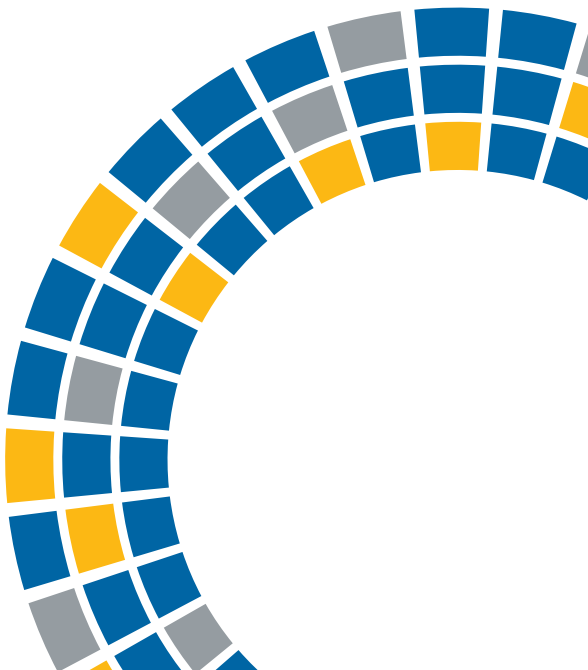
Kikinahamaagewin (Education) and Its Hard Won Lessons

The two NNEC high schools are worthy of more in-depth study in the search for a brighter future for high school Kikinahamaagewin (Education). Both DFCHS and PFFNHS are managed by the First Nations themselves and, as such, exemplify the School-Based or Community-Based Management model favoured in the September 2014 NPI report. The two schools are significantly underfunded at an estimated $7,100 per student, when compared to the $12,598 per pupil tuition rate charged (2011-12) to First Nations for the 500 on reserve students attending the Algoma School District schools (Bains 2014). In spite of that underfunding, they have also succeeded in raising their overall graduation rate from 53.8% in 2009-10 to 76.0% in 2015-16 (Nugent 2016). During the Thunder Bay inquest, the Community-Based model at the high school level was held up to intense scrutiny and severely tested. Fresh lessons can be gleaned from the testimony and recommendations.

Taken together with the 2014 NPI report, the current study, After the Healing, demonstrates that much more needs to be done to close the funding gap, break the mould, ease the transition, and deliver effective First Nations community-based education. Expanding the Grade 9 to 12 online course offerings of the Washa Distance Education Centre should be part of any plan. Responding directly to the multitude of Thunder Bay inquest recommendations, this report proposes a much tighter, more explicit five-point action plan:

1. **Close the funding gap for NNEC and NAN Schools;**
2. **Design, fund and build a DFCHS Student Living Centre;**
3. **Rebuild and expand Student Support Services;**
4. **Establish a Race Relations Commissioner and City Officers;**
5. **Expand and fortify 'Student Success' Curriculum Initiatives.**

Safeguarding First Nations community-based high schools is emerging as a top priority in Indigenous education renewal. In the case of Nishnawbi-Aski Nation, start small, seek maximum impact, and get on with the task.



The Residential School Legacy

Enduring Myths and Harsh Realities

For more than a century, Canada's Indigenous students were systematically colonized through education. Colonization in British North America took the form of "settler colonialism" which, in the words of American historian Patrick Wolfe, "destroys to replace" and insists that "invasion", in settler colonial contexts, is "a structure, not an event." It sought Indian removal and dispossession not just as "the original owners of the land but as Indians" (Wolfe 1998 and 2006). From the 1840s onward on the advancing Canadian settlement frontier, it gave rise to what Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste has termed the "forced assimilation" of children and youth through the schools. Under this assimilative process, their "heritage and knowledge" was not only "rejected and suppressed," but "ignored by the education system" (Battiste 2013). It began under "Indian residential schools" run by four Christian churches but operating under the auspices of federal authorities in Ottawa. With a revision to the Indian Act in 1920, the removal of children was sanctioned by the state and larger numbers of children were 'sent' to an expanding network of residential boarding schools, depopulating communities and further eroding Indigenous culture and values (Haig-Brown 1988, Miller 1996). Between the 1840s and 1996, some 150,000 children were sent to 139 such schools across Canada, including eighteen in Ontario and eight in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory (TRC 2011). "Reconciliation" and

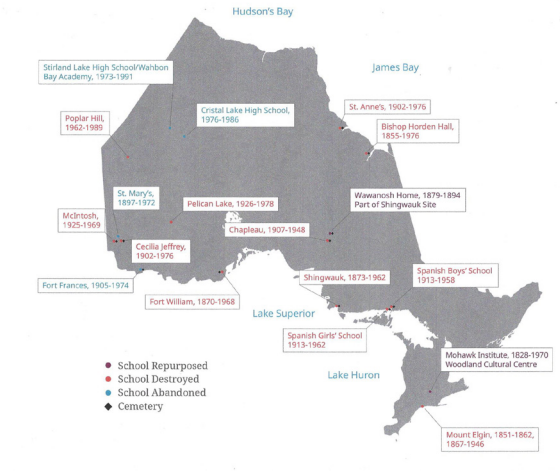


Figure 3: Indian Residential Schools in Ontario, 1828 – 1991. Map from Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2011)

"healing" are terms that dominate public policy discussion, especially since the establishment of a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the widespread protest sparked by the Idle No More Movement in the winter of 2012-13. Much of the focus has been on rectifying the social, psychological and generational damage inflicted by Church-run and federally regulated Aboriginal residential schools. Leading Canadian historian of residential schools J.R. Miller describes state support for such schools as "the worst of a phalanx of government policies that damaged First Nations society and created the conditions that make reconciliation a pressing national necessity in twenty-first century" (Miller 2013). In a February 2013 essay, Miller described, in graphic detail, the "devastating impact" on First Nations students, families and communities:

Instruction, both academic and vocational, was abysmal, and the 'graduates' of the schools never acquired the knowledge and skills they needed to succeed in Euro-Canadian society. The students were usually warehoused in deficient quarters, fed inadequate quantities of inferior food, denied necessary medical care, and all too often abused emotionally, physically, and sexually. Almost all residential schools' students experienced a degree of emotional deprivation that was scarring; and many were exposed to severe discipline that too often degenerated into physical abuse. And large, though undetermined, numbers of students experienced sexual abuse at the hands of staff or fellow students (Miller 2013).

Starting in the 1940s, the federal government began to shut them down and, after a 1969 decision by the Pierre Trudeau government, to phase them out of existence. In Northwest Ontario, the original "Indian residential schools" closed, one-by-one, starting with Chapleau in 1948 and ending with Stirland Lake HS/ Wahbon Bay Academy in 1991. The original residential schools in Fort William (1870-1968) and Pelican Lake (1926-1978) were not only closed, but demolished, like most of the others in Ontario (TRC 2011).

Recovering from the social trauma has not been easy for the survivors of residential schools and their families. Until recently, North American Indigenous peoples have been resistant to academic research, particularly anthropological research not grounded in an in-depth understanding of First Nations traditions and ways. Abuses at the Indian residential schools have given rise, over the past 15 years, to law suits based upon claims that "survivors" are suffering from one of two different types of trauma (Snow 1999, Robertson 2006). One form of trauma is termed "historic trauma transmission (HTT)" and is characterized by suffering from "a generalized intergenerational condition" dating back to the origins of colonization (Herman 1997). The other variant, perhaps more acute, is defined as a unique form of post-traumatic stress disorder called "residential school syndrome (RSS)" (Brasfield 2001). In its most virulent form, it perpetuates further abuses over generations, often culminating with the removal of children to child protection services. That generational impact was graphically revealed in the 1997 book Stolen from Our Embrace, written by Sto:lo Nation activist Ernie Crey and journalist Suzanne Fournier, which argued that provincial foster care had become the residential school of the most recent era (Crey and Fournier 1997).

Healing models and educational approaches rooted in Aboriginal knowledge and tradition are being proposed to address the historic trauma. A 2004 study conducted by Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux and Magdalena Smolewski for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation focused on HTT and identified five areas of impact: physical, economic, cultural, social and psychological, tied to historic phases of colonization form early contact "transition" to "cultural dispossession" to "cultural oppression." It proceeded to examine a variety of "healing models" and "First Nations' therapeutic interventions" utilizing aspects of Aboriginal knowledge and traditional values," such as balance, inter-connectedness, intra-connectedness and transcendence" (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004).

Resilience and tenacity have sustained, and will continue to sustain, First Nations peoples as they recover from the intergenerational impacts of residential schools. Among the rising generation there are clear signs of not only healing but restoration. Social work researcher Cheryle Partridge, an Anishinaabe and daughter of a survivor, put it this way: "We, as Aboriginal peoples, are regaining, remembering, and picking up our Sacred Bundles that were dropped beside the trail and stayed there for so long, waiting to be recovered." Coming from a family where her father lost his Anishinaabe language in residential school, and never spoke a word of Ojibwe the rest of his life, Partridge is determined to recover her native language and to pass it along to her children. "We who are now in the Western Doorway," she wrote, "are decolonizing ourselves so that we can hand over the reins of what has been revitalized to the next Seven Generations" (Partridge 2010).

After the healing, comes reconciliation and a fresh opportunity to reconstruct First Nations education on and off reserve communities. The Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) territory is so vast that it co-exists with ten different school districts operating some 41 different secondary school programs (NAN 2014, 18-22). For most children and youth living in remote and isolated First Nations communities, particularly in Northern Ontario, attending school beyond Grade 8 continues, for the foreseeable future, to involve attending high schools either on another reserve or in a town or city hundreds of kilometres away from home (White 2015). In the case of more than twenty fly-in reserves in NAN that means attending a provincial secondary school or one of

five First Nations high school programs, including two boarding schools, DFCHS and PFFNHS (NNEC 2015). Both of the NAN boarding schools, each in their own way, are attempting to erase the 'residential school taint' and to provide First Nations-run and culturally rooted secondary education.

While much public attention is focused on First Nations education on reserves, the vast majority (some 82 per cent) of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students in Ontario attend provincially-funded schools (Ontario MOE 2013). An August 2013 Ministry of Education report demonstrated that a "persistent gap in achievement" existed between Aboriginal students and all students, province-wide. Based upon Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test scores, the gap is more than 20 percentage points on reading, writing and mathematics test scores, comparing First Nations students and all students in English-language school boards. According to 2011-12 provincial data, some 59% of First Nations students were enrolled in applied courses, compared to the provincial average of 30 per cent. Applied courses in Ontario tend to be much less academic and are generally associated with lower achievement, credit accumulation, and post-secondary participation (People for Education 2013). That may explain why, in spite of significantly higher spending per student, only 62% of Indigenous adults have graduated from high school, marginally better than the 48.9 % educated on reserves (Toulouse 2016, Anderson and Richards 2016).

Ontario's public schools are awakening to the need for reconciliation and the recent adoption of a new provincial policy framework holds out some promise. The First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework, announced in August 2013, recognizes that "success should not be defined as coping well in the mainstream, (or by mainstream measures), at the cost of losing one's identity." It also tends to adopt a more collaborative approach to implementing curriculum and assessment that respects and builds upon "the knowledge and experience of Aboriginal communities." Since then, a 2016 People for Education paper, produced by Laurentian University's Pamela Rose Toulouse, claims that the Ministry's goals for revamping FNMI (First Nations, M**é**tis, Inuit) education are unlikely to be achieved within the established timeline. While recent data show some improvements, the Ontario People for Education funding lobby group still sees "significant gaps" in areas of teacher professional development and teaching-learning resources in Ontario's schools off-reserve schools with high proportions of Indigenous populations (Toulouse 2016, People for Education 2016). In spite of the funding shortfalls, indigenizing education is far more likely to happen in First Nations schools managed and led, like DFCHS and PFFNHS, by Indigenous people themselves.

Foundations

Origins and Ethos of the NNEC High Schools

The Nishnawbe-Aski Nations are engaged in a much larger project aimed at re-kindling hope and laying the foundations for revitalization. It began forty years ago with the formation in 1973 of NAN, bringing together the original 46 First Nations in a new social, political and economic association committed to achieving true Aboriginal self-government. That political territorial organization adopted a Declaration of Principles in 1977 and expanded to 49 First Nations communities in Northern Ontario with a total membership population (on and off reserve) of around 45,000 people. NAN now encompasses James Bay Treaty No. 9 and Ontario's portion of Treaty No. 5 and has a total land mass covering two-thirds of the province of Ontario. The seal of NAN features the "Great White Bear" against a red background standing in a circle – the traditional symbol of life for the North American Indian (NAN 2016). Central to the project was Dennis Franklin Cromarty (1947-1993), Director of Community Development Programs and later Grand Council Chief of Treaty No. 9 (NAN), after whom the Thunder Bay high school is named. In the eyes of the First Nations, Cromarty was "The Man with the Dream" and the living embodiment of achieving success through higher education (DFMF 2015).

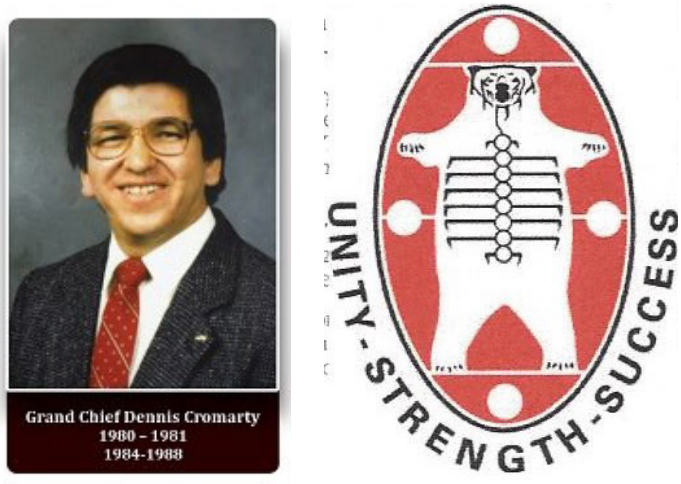


Figure 4 – Spirit and Soul of the Nishnawbe Aski First Nation – Dennis Franklin Cromarty and The Great White Bear Crest.

Cromarty beat the odds to achieve success in the Ontario North. Born in Pickle Crow on December 2, 1947, the son of a Trout Lake miner attended residential school, but did not allow that trying experience to hold him back. While studying Economics at Lakehead University from 1967 to 1972, he was swept up in the First Nations movement for Treaty rights and, after university, worked with the Friendship Centres of Ontario to help establish the Court Worker Program assisting Native people in conflict with the law. From 1974 to 1976, Cromarty was engaged by NAN to create its Community Economic Development Program, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the first Tribal Councils. For the next three years, he served as Director of Community Development Programs and Interim Grand Chief. With his humble approach, he made people feel welcomed and respected, instilling confidence in others. In 1979, he was elected, for the first time, to the position of Grand Chief, Grand Council Treaty No. 9 (NAN) and served in that capacity for three years. From 1981 until 1984, Cromarty served as a Commissioner and Constitutional Advisor, first on patriation of the Constitution, then on Treaty Rights at First Ministers Conferences. Re-elected as Grand Chief in 1984, he served for two more terms, totalling five years, travelling widely across NAN and successfully negotiating the first tri-partite MOU guaranteeing "Native Self-Government" in Canada. From 1989 until his sudden death by heart attack in 1993, at age 46, Cromarty established the Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund to assist NAN First Nations members in establishing their own enterprises and promoting the economic and social well-being of the scattered NAN communities (DFCMF 2015).

Virtually unknown outside First Nations circles, Dennis Franklin Cromarty lives on through the Thunder Bay school and a Memorial Fund established in his honour. Students at DFC are introduced to him and his legacy and see immediately the value of his positive example. "In his work, as well as in his family life," the official profile reminds them, "Dennis hungered for learning and personal growth. What he accomplished was not without struggle at times. He was private, passionate and personable. No problem was too big or too small when one of his people needed help." The concluding lines are particularly pertinent for today's generation: "He, like so many of his contemporaries, had to re-learn the culture, discover the old ways and to remember the mystique of harmony in nature" (DFCMF 2015). The mission of the school that bears his name seeks to perpetuate Cromarty's legacy through a firm commitment to "ensure students develop a strong sense of identity in the distinct language, culture and traditions of the Anishnawbek and achieve academic excellence and become active members of society" (NNEC/ DFC 2016).

The DFC Model
A Wrap-Around Urban School

Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School is by far the better known of the two NNEC high schools. Touring the Thunder Bay school is like stepping back in time because it looks, on the surface, much like any aging regular comprehensive high school. Looking up close, the students seem remarkably cooperative and the halls are far more tranquil than those in most urban high schools. Great efforts are being expended to establish a "safe zone" for the 100 to 140 Grade 9 to 12 students in attendance from September to June each year. Instead of the usual vulgarities sometimes found on the girls' washroom stalls, feature writer Madeleine White spotted a rather unique variation, scrawled on one stall: "Do you know your potential? !" (White 2015). That question, in succinct form, evokes the NNEC's "vision statement." A NNEC AGM Chiefs Resolution, passed October 21, 2009, proclaimed the organization's commitment to building "healthy sustainable communities" and preparing children for "a world in which First Nations people succeed without loss of their identity and have the courage to change their world according to their values" (McLoughlin 2011).

Students attending DFCHS come from scattered First Nations reserve communities which are among the most isolated in Canada. The Thunder Bay school arranges for boarding home placements, assigns them to a "prime worker," and enrolls them in Ministry of Education-approved courses at the secondary school level. It strives to provide graduates with more than just a high school diploma. The school's inspirational motto is "To Become All We Can Be." The real goal is to instill in graduates the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to help their home communities heal by setting positive examples, showing a pride in Indigenous culture and identity, and fostering employment on reserves (NNEC 2016 and White 2015). Over its sixteen years of existence, some 2,100 students have attended the school, many from families that experienced and endured the damaging legacy of the former residential school system. That makes DFC something of an anomaly – a "home-stay school" run by First Nations administrators and funded by the federal Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs. In spite of the past legacy, students attend DFC by choice and with their families' permission (White 2015).

While DFC has experienced its share of tragedies since 2000, it fills a critical need among remote northern communities. Going away for high school is fraught with risks, including natural feelings of anxiety, fear and loneliness, but for parents with higher aspirations for their children, it is currently the only option. Given the actual circumstances, Marie Wilson, a member

of the TRC, sees DFC playing a potentially helpful role in healing the trauma. While by no means a perfect solution, Wilson says First Nations families in isolated communities should look upon DFC with favour, providing that the school "helps to put students' minds to learning as opposed to protecting themselves and surviving" outside the mainstream. Schools like DFC, she notes, "have to be better than the historic alternative and (should) be appreciated in being bold and therefore important" (White 2015).

Principal Jonathan Kakegamic still believes that DFC can support the healing process by instilling confidence in students and rebuilding the severed connection between culture and identity. Originally from the small Oji-Cree Keewaywin First Nation, near the Manitoba border, he grew up in Thunder Bay and only learned about residential school abuses from his parents later on, in his thirties. AS principal since 2012, he has poured all his energies into removing the school's stigma and working almost around the clock attempting to provide a positive learning experience for his students. His real job, he confided to NPI, is "sending the students home alive" (Kakegamic 2015). Those who stay long enough benefit more. "They know who they are when they leave here," he told The Globe and Mail. "They need to know they are First Nations, that you can be proud of who you are" (White 2015).

From the outside, Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, housed in a former vocational school, looks remarkably like the nearby Lakehead School Board public high school, Sir Winston Churchill Collegiate and Vocational School. With fewer than 150 students (Grades 9 to 12) in the entire building, classes are generally smaller, and mostly under 20 students. Teachers and students know each other well, and that allows for an air of gentle comradery. DFC offers a scaled-down version of the Ontario academic curriculum, covering the essential core subjects like English, Math, Science, Business, and Physical Education, along with trade school and vocational courses (DFC 2015). Students do study OjiCree and are free to spend their spare periods in the Elders' Room, a unique student lounge serving tea and providing traditional activities, such as beading and bannock-making. Out behind the school, in fall and spring, is an open tipi and fire pit, usually tended by Bella Patayash, an in-house Elder who teaches traditional skills. When the school first opened, the Thunder Bay police proposed putting a so-called "gang office" inside the school. That idea evaporated once the school opened and local police discovered no need whatsoever for that kind of operation. "They thought they knew us," Principal Kakegamic recalls, citing it as an example of deep-seeded and erroneous perceptions (White 2015).

Under Kakegamic's watch from 2010 to June 2016, DFC bolstered its student support team operating outside of school hours. Four or five "prime workers" are responsible for supervising the students and by patrolling the streets in vans, set out to ensure the safety and security of students off school grounds. Their supervisory role is multi-faceted, combining that of guidance teacher, social worker, security officer, and foster parent. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, the vans drive around and "foot patrols" of current and former students walk the downtown streets and comb the riverbanks on the lookout for students drinking or consuming drugs. Prime worker Clarissa Fox, daughter of a Shingwauk Residential School survivor, claims that DFC is, little-by-little "breaking the cycle." Her father has since healed from the ordeal and her younger brother, Lyle Fox, a fellow DFC prime worker, has not only beaten drug and alcohol addiction, but teaches traditional drumming and has been inducted into the Midewiwin, a society that practices traditional medicine and healing through ceremony. The best antidote to the residential school legacy of broken families, according to Mr. Fox, lies in providing students with fresh opportunities to discover their heritage of harmony, respect and spirituality (White 2015). It's a very tall order, because resistance runs deep among today's popular culture-indoctrinated youth, the grandchildren of residential school survivors. Such traditional teachings, however, are just what is recommended in the final TRC report (TRC 2015).
The former DFCHS principal was appointed from the school's teaching ranks in the wake of the first cycle of student disappearances and deaths. It was a tough row to hoe, but he persevered, expanded student support programs, and forged partnerships in the community. Changing the school's public image was his biggest challenge and, up until the Thunder Bay inquiry, the change was palpable. Introducing the Frontier College Homework Club was a positive step forward and so was partnering with Wasaya Airlines, a local aviation company serving ten First Nations communities in the Ontario North. Pilots and operations staff from Wasaya Airlines not only visit the school but act as volunteer mentors for current students (DFC Annual Reports 2012-2013). After just three years at the helm of the school, Kakegamic was recognized nationally as one of 41 "Outstanding Principals" by the Toronto-based Learning Partnership. Responding in the media to his recognition, he was typically straightforward. His real job, he told CBC News, was to ensure that "parents know that the kids will be looked after, that someone will be there to answer the call" (CBC News 2012a).

The Pelican Falls Model
A First Nations-Run Boarding School

The sister NNEC school, Pelican Falls First Nations High School (PFFNHS), located closer to the NAN communities is setting out to shed a more onerous legacy. Founded in 1979, PFFNHS is a First Nations-run boarding school operated by NNEC serving students from hundreds of kilometers away who live on site (NNEC 2016). Its predecessor school, the Pelican Lake Indian Residential School, operated between 1926 and 1973, before it was closed with more than fifteen students officially reported as "missing" during its existence (Porter 2012b). Erasing that image has not been easy, even though the school is now firmly under First Nations control and management. A two-week long search in July 2012 turned up animal remains in the bush believed to be those of two "lost boys," Charles and Thomas Oombash, who ran away from school back in 1956. Today's school officials, according to former education director Frank Beardy, continue to do battle with that legacy. Some of the Elders reportedly opposed building the new school on the old site, and continue to register their concerns. "Cleansing ceremonies" are held whenever issues arise reminding current students of past transgressions (Porter 2012b).

Pelican Falls is a clear example of a First Nations school managing to 'make do' with scarce resources. With nearly 200 students enrolled in late August 2012, PFHS was allocated only $6,618 per student living on site, more than 40 per cent below comparable public high schools. Students at Pelican Falls live in small, cottage-style houses with a live-in house counsellor and a ratio of 14 students per counsellor. "Once we cover the salaries of our staff," education director Norma Kejick reported in 2012, "we are left with two dollars a day to feed our students." A student survey in the spring of 2012 revealed that the scrimping even extended to the stock of toilet paper. At the school's 2012 opening assembly, Kejick promised "no more sand paper" to the laughter and applause of the students. Students who break down from homesickness are a common occurrence and it falls to support staff to provide the counselling and support. To secure that staff, according to school authorities, means squeezing the budget for food and basics. She is adamant that Pelican Falls students shouldn't be forced to make such sacrifices, especially after having left home to attend high school (Porter 2012a).

The PFFNHS educational program, highlighted in the Pelican Falls Herald Newsletter, offers an alternative to the DFC school option. While DFC is more explicitly academic in tone, PFHS emphasizes traditional skills and outdoor education. The school prides itself on offering "a vibrant and active school community" with activities for every student's interests, from sports like hockey and wrestling to leadership classes, a youth forum, annual powwow, career fair, and school trips. Nursing and dental services are provided, given the remoteness of the school's location. In addition to the usual science and computer labs, PFHS has a shop where native crafts are taught to students. Traditional learning is the school's forte, and – at PFHS—students can learn traditional skills like dogsledding, net-setting, trapping, snowshoeing, quinzee building, and survival skills. In keeping with the school's mission, it also offers programs teaching traditional technologies, such as birch bark basket and snowshoe building, paddle making, and tikinagan construction (NNEC 2016). It is, simply put, a true community-based, albeit terribly under-resourced First Nations school.

First Nations high schools like DFCHS and PFNHS, for all their challenges, are more rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and learning than the alternative – provincial comprehensive schools. Teachers at NNEC high schools and in Nishnawbe Aski Nation communities are immersed in Indigenous culture and educational traditions. Traditional knowledge is infused into official school ceremonies and, to an increasing extent, into the curriculum. The Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, drawn from the Anishinaabe tradition (Benton-Benai 1988), are embedded in school culture and convey life lessons to students. Each of the Seven Grandfathers, in the teachings, tutors the child on one principle leading to the "good way of life." Traditional teaching in contemporary situations is used in the community to impart the seven core principles –nikwaakaawin/ wisdom, zaagi'idiwin/ love, minaadendamowin/ respect, aakode'ewin/ bravery, gwayakwaadiziwin/ honesty, dubaadenndiziwin/ humility, and debwewin/ truth. Indigenizing education comes more naturally in First Nations schools tapping into the wisdom of elders steeped in Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being (McNally 2009, Gross 2016). While the Ontario Ministry of education is attempting to integrate Indigenous perspectives and knowledge throughout the K-12 provincial curriculum, that project is a massive undertaking in high schools with, at best, modest prospects (Toulouse 2016).

Preparing Students for Success

Comparing NNEC and Provincial Schools

A January 2016 C.D. Howe Institute research report, written by Barry Anderson and John Richards, painted a bleak picture of the state of First Nations education on reserves. Focusing on high school graduation rates, Anderson and Richards claimed that First Nation band, on-reserve schools, while much better than the residential schools they replaced, continued to lag behind provincial schools in their graduation rates (Anderson and Richards 2016). Based upon the 2011 National Household Survey data, they pointed out that 7 in 10 off-reserve First Nations students graduate from high school, but only 4 in 10 on-reserve First Nations students (42 %) secure a high school certificate. In the case of Ontario, the figure is closer to 5 in 10 (48.9 %) of on-reserve First Nation adults, age 20-24, who hold a high school certificate (Figure 3, 7). First Nations schooling, they contend, is "failing" by conventional measures of academic performance. Even though passing final high school exams is an "imperfect symbol of students' knowledge," Anderson and Richards conclude, the high school certificate itself has become "a widely used screen by employers and those responsible for higher education" Anderson and Richards 2016).

Such sweeping conclusions do not apply to all First Nations on reserve schools, particularly in Northern Ontario and Nova Scotia. Over the past seven years, 2009-10 to 2015-16, graduation rates at the two NNEC high schools have not only exceeded the provincial on-reserve average, but risen steadily from 53.6 % to 76.0% this past year (Nugent 2016). Out of 424 students registered in Grade 12 over that period, 261 (61.5 %) achieved a high school certificate, significantly higher than the province-wide rate. In the 2015-16 school year, while the Thunder Bay inquest dominated the news, both DFCHS and PFFNS recorded their highest graduation rates ever, at 64.7 % (33 of 51) and 100 % (24 of 24) respectively. Given the funding gap and the adverse media attention, the label of "failing" schools does not seem to square with the facts.

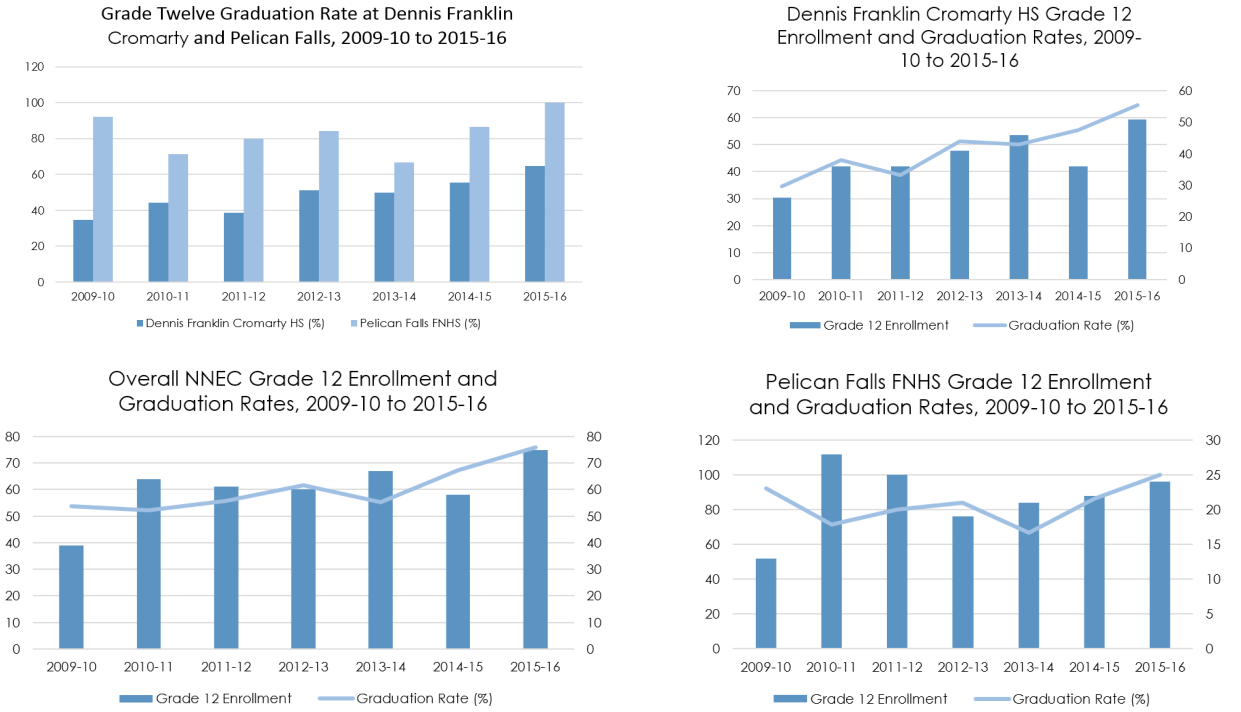


Figure 5 – Student Enrollment and Graduation Rates, NNEC Schools, 2009-2016.

Improved graduation rates have been achieved in spite of chronic underfunding. Students attending the two NNEC high schools are funded at about $6,600 per student for room and board away from home, according to NNEC education director Norma Kejick (CBC Thunder Bay 2015). That is significantly less than the funding level provided for First Nations students attending local publicly funded high schools. The Algoma District School Board, for example, accommodates some 500 on-reserve First Nations students, one of the largest on-reserve populations in Ontario. In 2010-11, the school district charged First Nations authorities an average tuition rate of $12,819 per First Nations student attending their schools, slightly more than the $12,598 per pupil stipulated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (Bains 2014). It remains a major unresolved issue not only because of the stark inequity in funding levels, but because the funding used to pay tuition fees to provincial school districts comes from the same source of funds used to support on-reserve First Nations schools.

Conducting cross-national assessments of First Nations education high school graduation rates are a challenge, dependent upon how graduation is defined in each jurisdiction and on the reliability of the reported data. The 2016 C.D. Howe Institute study, for example, focuses on high school certification rates in 2011 among First Nation adults, ages 20 to 24, in six provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan. In that sample, BC comes out ahead at 59.4% and Manitoba lags behind the others at 29.8 % (Anderson and Richards 2016, 7). The data comparison (Figure 3) does not include Nova Scotia, a province where reported First Nation on reserve graduation rates are much higher. From 2009-10 to 2014-15, for example, the Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK) provincial authority reports that graduation rates hovered from 87% to 89.6% in First Nations band operated schools (MK Annual Report 2015). The MK currently enrols from 2,100 to 2,200 Mi'kmaw students, living in 12 different scattered reserve communities, and graduates about 180 students a year, some 25% of whom proceed to university studies (Peters 2016).

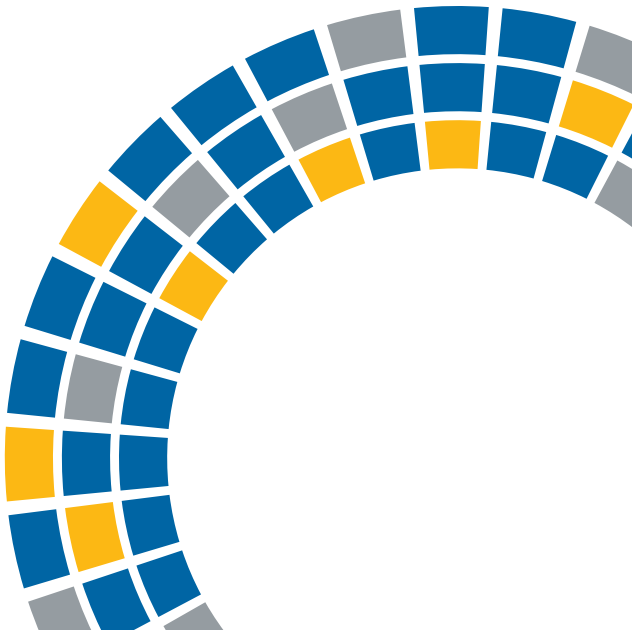
Excluding Nova Scotia from cross-national comparisons meant that the C.D. Howe Institute researchers missed an opportunity to assess the potential impact of providing schooling in a wholly First Nations managed education system. Since 1997, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, has exemplified Mi'kmaw self-governance in education, supporting relatively autonomous schools serving a dozen Mi'kmaw communities. With a Mi'kmaw-focused teaching pedagogy, the MK claims to have made substantial gains, such as raising graduation rates to 88%, improving lagging literacy and numeracy scores, providing intensive special education supports, enrolling 500 students in post-secondary institutions, and helping 88 students to secure college/university graduation in 2013 (Simon 2014). While MK authority's

claims of success (MK 2014) need to be subjected to more independent analysis, the results do warrant serious consideration for the example they set for the overall project of improvement in First Nations education.

Recent Ontario education reform initiatives such as People for Education's Measuring What Matters (MWM) seek to broaden the measures of student success in ways that accord with the holistic vision of learning embraced by Indigenous education (Toulouse 2016). Instead of focusing almost exclusively on test scores and compliance with standard curriculum, the Ontario MWM education strategy puts far more emphasis on the holistic development of children, youth, and society. That approach is consistent with the philosophy and practices which guide Indigenous communities in their commitment to lifelong learning for students and adults (Nadeau and Young 2006). Student achievement is not confined to the school attendance years but viewed along a birth to death continuum that is holistic and fosters awareness and knowledge of interconnectedness (Malott 2007).

First Nations community schools are far better situated than provincially funded schools to provide what is known as Indigenized education (Battiste 2013, 71-76, Iseke-Barnes 2008). What matters most in Indigenous education is providing a place of learning that brings together children, youth, adults and the Elders in a mutually supportive, respectful circle of conversations. Whether nurturing younger children or imparting the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, all community members are invited to contribute to student learning with the goal of achieving "balance" in "living a Good Life" (Toulouse 2016). Educating the whole person draws upon the sacred and the secular – and encompasses four dimensions: spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional. Mastering literacy and numeracy is considered important, but within a broader context that encompasses fostering identity, facilitating well-being, connecting to the land, honouring language, and fostering the inherent right to self-determination (Lee 2015). Fusing the sacred and the secular is far easier in First Nations schools than in state schools where the concept is still largely foreign to provincial school authorities. Raising graduation rates is seen as a measure of intellectual development, but cast within a broader holistic learning experience.

Educating the **whole** person...
fostering identity,
facilitating well-being,
connecting to the land,
honouring language, and
fostering the **inherent right**
to self-determination.



Students at Sachigo Lake First Nation take a break in the sun
(Photo: KiHS)

Bridging the Distances: A Pioneering First Nations Internet High School

By Paul W. Bennett and Rick Garrick

Tapping into the Internet has tremendous potential for bridging the vast distances in First Nations education – and opening up new horizons for students in remote, fly-in communities.

Keewaytinook Internet High School (KiHS), founded sixteen years ago and based in Fort William First Nation, is ahead of the curve. Without leaving home, First Nations high school students in eleven far-flung communities gain access to teachers and courses previously out of reach.

For one recent KiHS graduate, it was a life changing experience. "He was living in a trailer where you couldn't stand up — no water, no heat, no electricity and he came to school every day," says Cathy Rodger, KiHS classroom teacher. After completing his high school courses, he is now pursuing a millwright apprenticeship.

KiHS brings a true personalized online education to students living in their home communities. "Because the environment is smaller," Rodger adds,"you don't have those social pressures, say, if you were going to school in town where there are a thousand students. There is a level of comfort here, and there is a high level of respect between the students and myself."

As a teacher and Fort William band member, Rodger has been developing and teaching science courses at KiHS for the past 10 years. "My job is to take the curriculum and make it meaningful to the student," Rodger says, noting the Ministry of Education scrutinizes and approves all of the KiHS courses. "I try to make content that is culturally appropriate and also relevant to living in the north."

In addition to teaching her science classes to students across the KiHS network in northwestern Ontario, Rodger also assists students in the Fort William KiHS classroom with their other classes. "If the content of the course is something I can't help with, let's say a Grade 12 math or a Grade 12 university prep lab course, we have an IP phone and the student can put the headset on and talk to their teacher directly," she says.

KiHS was originally created as a pilot program in 1999 by Keewaytinook Okimakanak to provide a high school education for students in its remote First Nation communities. Connected classrooms are currently located in Bearskin Lake, Deer Lake, Fort Severn, Fort William, Keewaywin, Mishkeegogamang, Neskantaga, Nibinamik, North Spirit Lake, Poplar Hill, Sachigo Lake and Weagamow.

Fort Severn is a success story particularly because it has kept Grade 9 and 10 students in school. "Without the online programming that we offer," KiHS principal Kevin Dempsey points out, "there aren't enough high school-aged students to run a full high school program there."

Some 25-30 students in Weagamow register every year for KiHS courses, averaging about 24 credits per term, and earning some 100 credits a year. Students receive all of their lessons online and submit their work online. One recent student graduated with a quality transcript that included university English.

Teacher Raj Budhram says the KiHS modal platform is "very interactive" because it allows students to post questions about their lessons. "And the teacher will respond very quickly," Budhram says. "We have a system in how we provide feedback to students."
KiHS employs fifteen teachers situated in twelve different small communities. Each community has its own certified teacher who provides assistance to students for all of their courses while also teaching their specific courses to students across the KiHS network.

"This is a good way to offer good programming to a lot of small communities," Dempsey says. With fifteen staff, they are also able to offer many different courses. KiHS currently offers 65 Grade 9-12 courses in all streams: locally developed, applied, academic, workplace, college, or university preparation.

Fluctuating student enrolment numbers remains one of the challenges. When class numbers fall below five or six students, KiHS either absorbs the costs in higher enrolment sites or, in rare cases, makes other online tutoring arrangements.

"We have a teacher who is living in the community," Dempsey says, and that's a real strength of KiHS. "(The teachers) have lived and worked in the north so in general they know the student body they are working for."
The future of First Nations high school education may rest with KiHS and the next generation of schools providing blended learning, combining face-to-face teaching and online course programs.

Dr. Paul W. Bennett is a Fellow in Education Policy at the Northern Policy Institute and Rick Garrick is a Thunder Bay-based news reporter.

Warning Signs

The Thunder Bay Inquest and Its Impact

On a Monday morning, October 5, 2015, the largest-ever Ontario joint public inquest into Aboriginal deaths began in a crowded and cramped Thunder Bay courtroom with seats for only ten observers. After a three-year-long wait, that inquest finally commenced into the mysterious deaths of seven First Nations youth who lost their lives while far away from home attending Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School and, in one case. Mattawa Learning Centre. All of the students came to Thunder Bay to attend high school from remote reserves scattered throughout Nishnawbe Aski Nation, home to 49 communities with a total population of some 45,000 (Talaga 2015 and Porter 2016f).

About 100 of the 140 students attending DFCHS come from remote northern Ontario First Nations communities. They travel most often alone, hundreds of kilometres from their parents, to obtain a high school education in Thunder Bay because their communities have either no secondary schools or totally inadequate ones. A sizeable number of students go into boarding at Pelican Falls First Nations High School on the outskirts of Sioux Lookout. The inquest, presided over by Dr. David Eden, heard that there are only five on-reserve high schools (most going up to Grade 10) serving 23 First Nations communities in the region. Those attending DFCHS are accommodated with local families in boarding houses where the funding is scarce and totally inadequate (Talaga 2015b)

A handful of shocking revelations surfaced during the first five weeks of Thunder Bay inquest testimony. Five of those revelations were neatly summarized in November 2015 by CBC News reporter Jody Porter, assigned full-time covering the inquest:

- Mothers received no official information about their children's deaths;
- Students face 'racism' in the city of Thunder Bay;
- Teen's alcohol use was fuelled by loneliness;
- Police were slow responding to the missing person reports;
- Parents seeking answers may never know the full circumstances.

NAN lawyer Julian Falconer claimed that the local police were inclined to "default to a drowning and liquor scenario, almost automatically." The inquest process, Jethro Anderson's lawyer Christa Big Canoe

testified, was not designed to provide "a perfect answer" about the deaths, but rather to produce recommendations to address the underlying causes and problems (Porter 2015b).

Students attending the Thunder Bay high school, the inquest revealed, do face overt and visible acts of racism. Former student Skye Kakegamic of Keewaywin First Nation testified that, several times, food was hurled at her from passing vehicles, local residents made a war-whooping noise and yelled out "stupid savage, go home." "It's very scary," she said. "To them, we are just savages, they think it's funny. Like some people when they pick on a dog, or torture it, they think it's funny. They treat us like that." Even though some 11,000 Thunder Bay residents are Aboriginal, or 10 per cent of the city's population, many and perhaps most report being either marginalized or subject to racism (TVO, The Agenda 2015). Federal cabinet minister and MP for Thunder Bay, Patty Hajdu, former manager of a city homeless shelter, went further. "There's a swirling storm of racism and discrimination," she said, "against people who take substances and people who live in poverty, and it all comes together in a perfect storm where people are actually dying because they can't access the services they need" (Porter 2016a). Aboriginal youth struggling alone to 'make it' in such a city fall victim to that "swirling storm" of racism.

Municipal authorities in Thunder Bay tended to look at the struggles of First Nations teens in the city through a completely different lens. Four senior city administrators testified on March 3, 2016 and attempted to explain why the seven DFC students had fallen through the cracks. Recently retired city manager Tim Commisso, city clerk John Hannam, corporate communications manager Karen Lewis and acting director of recreation and culture Donna Sippala answered questions and defended their previous efforts to combat racism. While the city had established an Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and produced short "Walk A Mile" series films in 2013, plans for a $10-million Youth Centre, in partnership with the Thunder Bay Friendship Centre, were dashed when the federal government passed on the project. The critical lack of recreational opportunities for Fist Nations students attending DFC was recognized and offered as an explanation for why students were hanging around the mall, movie theatres, or the bus terminal – or simply riding on public buses to pass their idle time (TBNews Watch 2016a).

Police conduct and attitudes towards First Nations youth surfaced as a major source of concern at the Thunder Bay inquest. The disappearance of 15-year-old DFC student Jethro Anderson in October 2000 was cited as an example of the all too typical response (Porter 2015c). Anderson, from Kasabonika Lake First Nation, was staying with his aunt, Dora Morris and went missing, while he attended high school in Thunder Bay. His body was eventually pulled from the Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay on November 11, 2000, nearly two weeks after he disappeared. At the inquest, retired police officer Allan Shorrock revealed that the Thunder Bay police did not launch a criminal investigation until six days after he was reported missing and last seen in a public park. His aunt, Ms. Morris, told the inquest that she had called police about her nephew's disappearance within hours of him missing curfew, but testified that her concerns were not taken seriously, "I called every day just to ask if they had any leads, Morris told CBC News reporter Jody Parker. "And every time I called, the answer was always, 'He's just out there partying like any native kid,' and those kind of comments." NAN defence Julian Falconer saw the Anderson case as symptomatic of the "bigger picture." Local police, he claimed, had "tunnel vision" when it came to investigating such incidents. "The police have a tendency to default to a drowning and liquor scenario, literally, almost automatically, "he added, pointing to the five DFC students whose bodies were pulled from local rivers. In short, treating Indigenous cases as "less than worthy victims" smacked of institutional racism (Porter 2016d and Labine 2015).

Teens from remote First Nations attending high school in Thunder Bay, the inquest heard, are at significant risk. Prodded by her lawyer Meaghan Daniel, Kejick, testified that much more needed to be done to keep them safe before and after school. Six of the seven who died who were DFC students, Kejick testified, were living in boarding homes hundreds of kilometres away from their parents, and would have benefited from a much more comprehensive, better funded 'wrap-around' support system (Porter 2016c). She also recognized the need for a range of improvements: establishing improved communication with parents, developing a contract with boarding homes outlining legal liability, encouraging students to engage more with the elders, strengthening relationships with local police, and providing better orientation for students at the community level (TBNews Watch 2016b).
The mother of Paul Panacheese, Maryanne Panacheese, from Mishkeegogamang (Mish), 500 kilometres north of North Bay, provided compelling evidence of how bad the accommodations were for her son, who collapsed in his kitchen and died on November 11, 2006. After spending his first year at DFC staying over in the home of a Mish band member, Paul lost his way, started drinking and smoking drugs ---and bounced around more than 10 different boarding homes in four years. Maryanne told CBC Radio producer Mark Apollonio of The Current that the vetting process for boarding families needed improvement. In more than a few boarding homes, Paul was "subjected to a long list of poor treatment," including intimidation, theft of personal items, and going hungry because food was under lock and key. Boarding accommodations have improved somewhat since 2012, but DFC principal Jonathan Kakegamic still maintains that severe funding shortfalls mean that he cannot always recruit quality families. (Apollonio 2016).

School authorities represented by principal Kakegamic and NNEC director Kejick used the Thunder Bay inquest to proposed five changes to improve student safety while attending DFC in Thunder Bay. That list was neatly summarized by CBC Thunder Bay reporter Jody Porter:

1 **Dedicated funding to send homesick students to visit their parents, particularly during the long first semester;**

2 **More student support workers, to reduce the present 20 to 40 student per worker case load;**

3 **Education about racism for First Nations students coming to Thunder Bay and for city residents;**

4 **A "crisis fund' to be used at times when students go missing;**

5 **A dedicated staff liaison person to keep parents current about their child's school and social life (Porter 2016c).**

The list presented at the inquest was remarkably specific and practical, stemming from specific problems raised in testimony.

The greatest need at DFC, strongly voiced at the Thunder Bay inquest, was for a student residence with student life and recreational services. An earlier plan to build a residence at Confederation College in Thunder Bay with the support of Wasaya Airways fell apart and such a project was ineligible for INAC funding because the site was off-reserve. "I do think in order to keep our students safe, we need a residence," Kejick testified. "We need to know where our students are (outside of school hours)." The NNEC is now proposing to build a 50-room dormitory on property right beside Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School. The formidable challenge is how to make it happen. School officials like Kejick were at great pains to dispel the impression that "it's all dark clouds." More than 240 students had graduated from DFC since it opened in 2000, she said, and then asked: "How many would have graduated if not for our school?" (Porter 2016b). Judging from the DFCHS graduation record over the past seven years (Nugent 2016), the answer is clear: far fewer would have achieved their high school certificate. With proper student living accommodations and improved transition services, the graduation rate would be even better in future years.

The greatest need at DFC...
is for a **student residence** with
student life and recreational services.

Alisha Hill and her Class at Kejick Bay School, 2015
(Photo: Teach for Canada)

Getting a Good Start: Teaching Kindergarten at Kejick Bay School

By Paul W. Bennett
and Rick Garrick

Alisha Hill's initial apprehensions disappeared a year ago when she met her Kindergarten class. Like most teachers heading to Northern Ontario to teach for the first time in a First Nations community, she had read the tragic stories and was painfully aware of the troubles affecting reserve life.

"Twenty-five little Kindergarteners welcomed me. It was a little chaotic at first, learning their names," the 31-year-old teacher recalls. "It's turned out to be the most rewarding teaching experience of my life." That's why she's returned for a second year at Waninitawingaang Memorial School in Lac Seul First Nation, an hour's drive northwest of Sioux Lookout.

Alisha not only survived, but thrived as one of the 31 initial teachers recruited, and trained by the Toronto-based educational venture Teach for Canada, to serve during 2015-16 in six different First Nations communities scattered throughout northwestern Ontario.

While looking for teaching opportunities in early 2015, Hill spotted Teach for Canada on social media and the whole venture piqued her interest. "I had always wanted to teach in First Nations communities, and Teach for Canada provided the support and professional development to help make it possible."

Like many Teach for Canada recruits, Alisha was not a raw, untested rookie teacher. After graduating in May 2007 from Dalhousie University, she had taught for two years in Japan, moved to Ontario, completed her B.Ed. at Trent University, and held a few posts in the Ottawa and Western Quebec school systems.

"You have to be a little adventuresome," Hill notes, but Teach for Canada provides the support to ease

opportunities up North. I was mobile and free to explore, so it made perfect sense for me."

As one of five brand-new teachers at her Kejick Bay school in 2015-16, Hill benefitted greatly from the mutual support of other Teach for Canada participants. "Having the introductory Teach for Canada 4-week summer training last July really helped forge a bond amongst all of us. Then, within our little school team, we've built strong connections and friendships."

Teaching in Kejick Bay on the Lac Seul First Nation was not as much of a culture shock as she first imagined. She was better prepared than most new teachers for life in a tiny, remote reserve community housing some 400 of the total 2011 population of 870 Anishinaawbe people, of whom 39.7 per cent are under 19 years of age.

"The biggest adjustment for me," Hill reports, "was getting used to living in a very small place where everyone knows you. It's up close and personal when you live right in centre of the village. In my first year, I felt nothing but acceptance and warmth in the close-knit community."

What was the secret of teaching success? "Being ready for new experiences, flexible, and ready to roll with whatever arises," she replies, after pondering the question. "You cannot let it throw you off when a child shows up at night asking you to read her a bedtime story, or a parent shows up at your door with moose meat for tomorrow's feast."

Having a teacher-mentor like Eric Bortlis, her Acting Principal last year, was also critical to Alisha's success. After three years of teaching at Cat Lake School in a more remote fly-in First Nations community, Eric knew the ropes.

Although raised in Milton, Ontario, her principal was of Mohawk ancestry and totally committed to First Nations education. "I told Alisha and the other incoming teachers that going to the North was not about teaching for five days and then watching Netflix on weekends."

Bortlis' personal credo was deceptively simple: "You need to get out and join in with the community. I can pay you to teach, but not to care." Perhaps that's why he is returning this coming year as the new Education Director for the three schools in Lac Seul First Nation.

Teachers posing as "saviours," according to Bortlis, do not usually fare very well in First Nations schools. "I'm not here to save the North. I love the whole experience because I can give the kids a pat on the back without fear of repercussions. It's far more personable here, and far more than a job."

Teachers like Alisha Hill, Lac Seul's Bortlis fervently believes, have the staying power to begin making a difference in the lives of First Nations children and families. "The communities are exceptionally welcoming places, if you give them a chance," he maintains. "You certainly build lifelong relationships."

Dr. Paul W. Bennett is a Fellow in Education Policy at the Northern Policy Institute and Rick Garrick is a Thunder Bay-based news reporter.

Restoration
Closing the Funding Gap

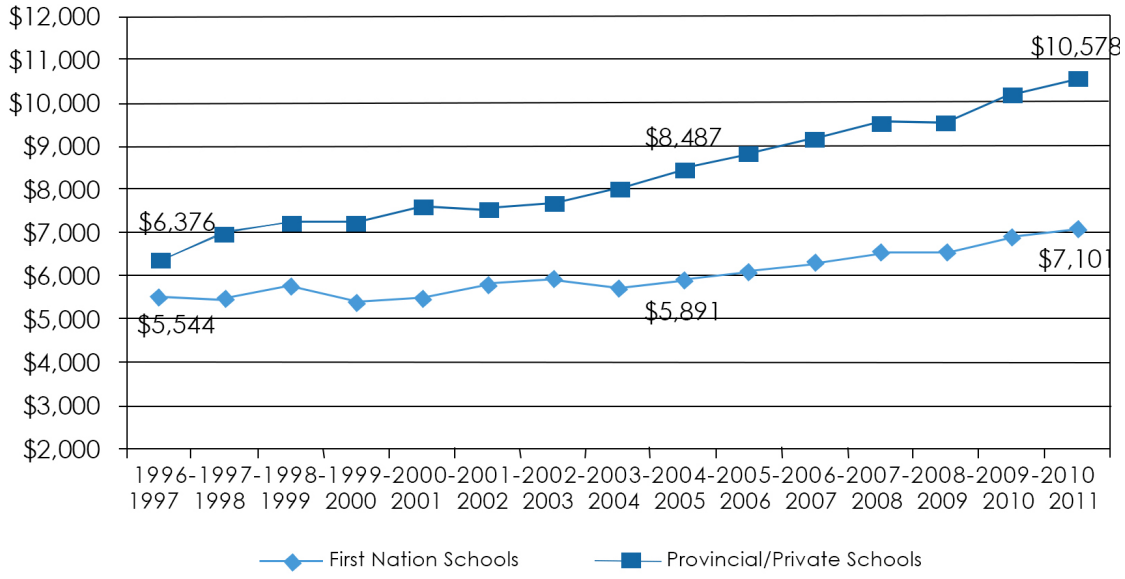
The protracted public debate over First Nations education funding has essentially been resolved, for now. Since the release of our 2014 report, Picking-Up the Pieces, and the election of the Justin Trudeau government "closing the funding gap" has become public policy and the fundamental issue is how to ensure that the actual funding ends up in the schools. From 1996 until 2016, the federal government maintained a cap of 2 per cent on First Nations education funding. Only about 3 per cent of First Nations students, or 1,925 out of 110,597 total population (2011-12), attend so-called "private" First Nations-run schools like DFC and PFHS. While the total raw allocation of funding averaged some $14,056 per FTE student in 2011-12, only 60 per cent ($9,839.20) actually covers instructional services (Drummond and Rosenbuth 2013). Comparing instructional services costs per FTE student with provincial boards enrolling fewer than 1,000 FTEs, First Nations schools do receive less funding (Bennett and Anuik 2014). That underfunding has clearly impacted school programs at the two NNEC high schools.

Funding alone will not fix First Nations schools, but without significant increases in funding levels do not expect much in the way of improvement. While the actual funding gap is difficult to calculate, Queen's University economist Don Drummond claims the discrepancy is real. His 2013 policy paper, produced for the Queen's School of Policy Studies, provided the most detailed analysis of the competing claims based upon comparative data for federal funding, by province, 2011-12; average instructional services dollars per FTE in 2009 for districts with fewer than 100 FTEs; and average per-student funding for First Nations and provincial schools, 1996 to 2011 (Drummond and Rosenbuth 2013). Wading through the complexities, Drummond concluded that federal funding for First Nations schools fell short of that of provincial schools, and, even more telling, did not properly reflect the significantly greater funding needs of smaller high schools, like those in NAN, facing the challenge of remoteness and higher levels of special needs. "Relative to the provincial schools being used as comparators," he stated," the schools on reserve often have fewer students, are more remote, confront much worse socio-economic conditions, and have a particular language and culture." For many First Nations schools the funding level, even including all sources of AANDC funding, was found to be "well below" that being provided for comparable provincial schools, or at least below what most provinces would provide for a school facing similar costs and needs (Drummond and Rosenbuth 2013, 20).

Testifying before the Thunder Bay inquest in early March 2016, Jonathan Allen, a senior official with the federal department Indigenous Affairs, offered another interpretation of the funding gap when it came to the NNEC high schools. The federal and provincial funding formulas, he said, "don't align" and could not be compared in "the same way" and that contributed to "a perception of a gap." That explanation was rejected by Drummond in a CBC News report following Allen's testimony. "With all the numbers at hand, I thought it was within the vicinity of about a 30 per cent funding gap," the Queen's University economist said. "So for every dollar a province would spend, the First Nations schools were only getting 70 cents." The funding shortfall prevents First Nations officials from providing needed additional support to students who leave their remote communities to attend high school in the city. If you factor in the increased expenditures incurred from remote location and relatively small size, Drummond pointed out that the gap may be greater than 30 per cent. There was a direct correlation, he contended, between "education outcomes" and "standard of living," including "Health, happiness and community engagement." On the need of First Nations children in NAN and elsewhere for a better quality education, he was even more categorical: "They've been deprived of that for a long time and I think that needs to change" (Porter 2016e).

Thunder Bay inquest testimony by NNEC director Norman Kejick corroborated the conclusions reached by Drummond with respect to DFC and provincially-funded secondary schools. DFC's financial statements presented by Kejick showed that the First Nations-run school founded in 2000 was running an accumulated deficit of more than $1 million. Receiving some $2,000 less per student less that the Sioux Lookout public high school, she stated, "we're always spending more money than we have" to serve the students. To preserve funding for student services, salaries were frozen for all staff with the education council since 2007. The top salary for a teacher at DFC is $74,000, about 75 per cent of a public school counterpart, which is approximately $96,000. The federal government provides NNEC with about $6,600 per student living away from home to pay for room and board and transportation. Not all of the students at DFC are eligible for this funding, but the school provides equal services for all of its students. While flights to remote northern communities can cost up to $1,000 per person, and travel costs are only subsidized for the December break and the end of the school year. Since the school feels it's important to have a March break, the cost of travel is borne solely by the school. The tight budget means that DFC has no money for any kind of emergency fund. When student Daniel Levac was killed off school grounds in 2014, the NNEC spent thousands of dollars to send 39 students back to Sachigo Lake for the funeral, to host a memorial service, and to provide mental health counselling services (Porter 2016b).

Figure 6 – Average Per Student Funding, First Nations and Provincial Schools, 1996-2011
(AFN, Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012)



* Per-student funding is calculated using the following formula: Core Funding allocated by Federal Government for First Nation education (FN school OR provincial/private school) / nominal roll (FN school OR provincial/private school). Source: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Financial Information (1996-2011); Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Nominal roll statistics (1996-2011)

Kier Johnston, Pan-American Games kayak medalist, at NAN Summer Sports Festival, 2016
(Photo: Rick Garrick)

Athletics Prowess: First Nations Role Models and Youth Sports

By Paul W. Bennett and Rick Garrick

Athletics and sports play a formative role in the education of First Nations youth. The 2016 Nishnawbe Aski Nation Summer Sports Festival, held this past June, provided another living example.

International Pan-American kayak medalist Keir Johnston, born and raised among the Chippewa of the Thames, not only welcomed the high school athletes from all over NAN, but held them in rapt attention.

Surrounded by athletes and coaches, Johnston captured their attention with exciting tales from his kayaking experiences and personal lessons learned about demonstrating leadership in sports. "I've competed for Canada about eight times all over Europe and South America," he said, noting that he returned with "a couple of Pan-Am championship medals (from) down in Mexico and Puerto Rico."

Johnston told the audience it was "awesome" to participate in the two Pan-Am championships, where he won one silver and three bronze medals. "It's eye opening to see how many people are in the sport and how competitive it is," he noted. "It's great to see all the different countries, get to meet lots of new friends and travel the world. It's a great way to do it."

Like the great Six Nations Mohawk long-distance runner Tom Longboat of an earlier era, he provided living proof that athletics can set an example that can be transformative for First Nations children and youth. It was easy to see why he's now a roving ambassador for the Aboriginal Sports and Wellness Council of Ontario.

Young athletes in NAN are emerging to follow in his footsteps. Fort Albany's Keifer Scott is one of many First Nations high school students from across northern Ontario who are finding different ways to excel in sports.

"I had an instinct telling me I should be running," says Scott, who attends Peetabeck Academy in Fort Albany. "I'm really active at sports and I'm really good at sports."

He came home from the 2016 Summer Sports Festival with seven medals in four races, the high jump and the canoe and kayak races, held at four different sports venues in Thunder Bay. "It was a great experience meeting new people and friends," Scott reported. "I did track and field, I did running, high jump, I did almost all of the running events."

Sachigo Lake's Darr McKay and Eabametoong's Alyssa Lentz, who both attend high school in Thunder Bay, have also found success in sports.

McKay, a Superior Collegiate and Vocational Institute student, won the 1,500 metre race and four other medals at the NAN Summer Sports Festival."I pushed through it to get the win," McKay says. "Just push yourself, just keep pushing until you get to the finish line."

Lentz, a Pope John Paul II School student, won the 400 metre race and four other medals at the most recent festival. "When I run, I keep a slow pace at first, like just a medium pace, and then right at the end when everyone is done sprinting and they are getting tired, I sprint as hard as I possibly can," Lentz says. "And that usually gives me a little bit of an advantage."

Keir Johnston's organization, the Aboriginal Sports and Wellness Council of Ontario (ASWCO), plays an instrumental role in supporting First Nations student athletes. The Council entered two teams in the Native American Basketball Invitational Tournament, held from June 26 to July 2, 2016, involving 112 teams and attracting more than 1,200 Indigenous players from across the United States and Canada.

Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School basketball player Keelan Meekis, a student from Deer Lake, and Beaver Brae Secondary School basketball player Daniel Cameron, a student from Dalles, are two recent beneficiaries.

"It was great ball," Meekis told Anishinabek News. "It was awesome playing against all those teams." Fellow basketballer Cameron was especially impressed with the caliber of play on the court. "It was a big experience and an eye opener for me," he said. "Just to see the skill levels and the pace of the game compared to my high school, it's so much faster and it's so much more intense and more aggressive."

With such raised aspirations, it may not be too long before NAN produces its own Keir Johnston making his mark in the world of international amateur athletics.

Dr. Paul W. Bennett is a Fellow in Education Policy at the Northern Policy Institute and Rick Garrick is a Thunder Bay-based news reporter.

Building Resilience

Student Life, Bridges and Transitions

Public inquests and police investigations tend to focus on tragic outcomes rather than shed light on signs of success in First Nations education. When looking for future policy direction, it is wise to go to the source, tapping into the hopes and aspirations of the rising generation of First Nations youth. In the case of the Nishnawbe Aski First Nations, the February 2014 Feathers of Hope report provides a far more productive route forward. Funded by the Ontario Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, that report was generated out of meetings held in 2013 involving more than 160 Aboriginal youth from 64 different communities. It took a much broader perspective, centred on shedding the legacy of residential schools, but exploring youth concerns such as cultural survival, youth suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and physical and mental health (Ontario Child Youth Advocate 2014).

Over about 19 months, including a five-day Thunder Bay Youth Forum, a three-day First Nations gathering in Kashechewan and Fort Albany, NAN youth leaders reaffirmed their commitment to Jordan's Principle, a child-first principle named after Jordan River Anderson, a four-year-old Anishnawbe boy who died in hospital in 2003 while government parties wrangled over who would pay for his treatment (Law 2016). Citing the Jordan Anderson case, they called upon governments to "ensure that First Nations children have access to the same level of care and services as all children in Canada." More than anything else, Feathers of Hope was a clarion call for governments at all levels to make northern remote and fly-in First Nations communities safer and healthier. Lac Seul First Nation youth Meaghan Masakeyash, one of the report's drafters, put it best: "Things need to change," she stated. "Our youth need hope and they need to know that they're not alone, and there's a future out there" (CBC News 2014).

When the TVO show The Agenda, hosted by Steve Paikin, visited Thunder Bay on March 8, 2015, Red Rock First Nation's Samantha Crowe, once again, shattered the popular perception with a call to focus on the "amazing and wonderful things" First Nations youth are achieving in 'breaking the cycle.' "Despite all the hardships and the struggles that young First Nations people face, there is a growing movement of empowerment, of wanting to have their voice heard, of creating awesome and powerful changes in their communities but also within the urban communities as well," stated the 21-year-old Lakehead University social work student and youth amplifier for the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. "We want to always

make sure that we acknowledge all the positive stories and all the successful stories because that is what is going to bring people forward. To see other people are doing great things, you can realize that you don't have to be stuck and that you are not powerless and that you can move forward and do greater things for your community" (Garrick 2015).

The flagship current events TVO program focused on the changing demographics in Thunder Bay, where the Aboriginal population has almost doubled to varied estimates of 10-20 per cent over the last generation, and what that means for First Nations students attending high school in Thunder Bay and towns like Sioux Lookout. "Having the initial discussions regarding race relations (and) growing up Aboriginal in the urban setting is fantastic," Crowe commented, referring to the TVO broadcast. "They are much needed to have and to understand the realities that young people have to face. It's a great first step in moving towards a better future for a healthier, safer community for everyone." Lakehead University Aboriginal Initiatives vice- provost, Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, originally from Georgina Island First Nation, explained why it was critical to make Thunder Bay a more welcoming and accepting place for First Nations university and high school students. "It's not necessarily a preference (for students and families)," she noted. "I think in many instances it's a necessity because there are not the jobs available in the (First Nations) communities and education levels are going up." Pointing to rising numbers of Aboriginal students entering university, she added: "That is why they are coming because they need to find the work to support their family" (Garrick 2015).

Supporting children and youth making that transition at DFC and elsewhere should be a higher priority than it is in the Ontario North. The federal government has not only failed to provide equitable funding for education on reserves, but it also severely rations funding for child welfare services, First Nations advocate Cindy Blackstock told the Thunder Bay inquiry. In reporting her March 30, 2016 testimony, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) termed it as a concrete example of "the First Nations education crisis." "What I've seen in the evidence, in education, is the same pattern we saw in child welfare, which is for many years and in fact decades, the federal government has known that it underfunds First Nations education," the President of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society testified. "That underfunding of First Nations education is directly linked to poor outcomes for First Nations students that get in the way of the lives they wish to have" (APTN 2016).

Many First Nations education advocates like Blackstock point to the inspirational example of Shannen Koostachin and her struggle for a new school in Attawapiskat (Bennett 2016). "When you send 13-year olds off to school hundreds of miles away because they are denied an equitable education," she testified, "there's something wrong with that. That's setting them up for a lot of risk." Nor is Blackstock completely satisfied with the Justin Trudeau government's March 2016 budget commitment of $2.6 billion over the next five years for primary and secondary schooling. "When you think about it," she noted, "if you have a child in Grade 8 right now, they're not going to see the money until they graduate from high school." (APTN 2016). First Nations leaders such as NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler are not only more optimistic than Blackstock, but far more pragmatic in their outlook. "For the most part, you don't have a choice but to go to high school…whether it is in Sioux Lookout or Timmins or Thunder Bay," he said in a 2016 interview. He knows that first-hand. "I was one of those kids," he added, demonstrating that it can be done with perseverance, dedication and steely commitment (APTN 2016). The immediate challenge, he reminded us, was to provide the transitional support to make it happen for more First Nations youth in the North.

Facing the transition issues squarely means learning from the real life experiences of First Nations youth who "made it" off the reserve and continue to advocate for change. Two members of the Ontario First Nations Young People's Council, Tristen Schneider and Quinn Meawasige, were stirred into action by their own painful school experiences (Porter 2016f). After attending from a two-room school on Shawanaga First Nation in Parry Sound District, Schneider experienced "culture shock" at an off-reserve school and survived "a lot of racism." Without access to a local elementary school in Serpent River First Nation, she found herself the only "Native kid" in her class and was called "dirty" to the point where "I went home crying trying to wash the dirt off me." Meawasige became so despondent that she "started into drugs and alcohol early" and was convinced she would "end up being a drunk." After entering a treatment program utilizing First Nations teachings, Maewasige went back to high school determined to "create a safe space for Anishinawbe students." By the age of 18, she stood for office and became the youngest person ever elected to the Serpent River First Nation band council. Based upon a recent survey of over 100 First Nations youth, Schneider and Meawasige testified at the Thunder Bay hearing that students needed to be "better prepared" for the transition so they would not feel like "an outcast" in a white person's world. Students attending schools of-reserve expressed support for a "community house" to live in while away from home at school, preferably with other members of their community (Porter 2016f).

Students at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School have been actively supporting a movement to establish much improved residential facilities. Being scattered throughout Thunder Bay in small boarding homes only compounds their transition problems leaving some 100 home-stay students isolated from one another, often a transit bus ride or two away from school (Kakegamic 2015, Porter 2016f). An initial plan, initiated

Figure 7: Sachigo Lake First Nations Walkers, March 2016. Shown in photo: Barb Barkman (Sachigo FN), mother of 3 students attending DFC, Adam Beardy (former DFC Student from Sachigo FN) Robert Barkman (Sachigo FN), NAN Deputy Grand Chief Derek Fox, Darlene Barkman (Sachigo FN) (Lake Superior News)

in December 2012 by First Nations venture capital firm Wasaya Group in collaboration with Confederation College, called for the construction of a $15-million DFC Student Living Centre, to be built on the city's community college campus. It was unveiled with great fanfare and produced an impressive design plan to accommodate 150 students in a planned complex with recreation facilities (CBC News 2012). On March 27, 2013, Wawatay News carried a feature story, complete with the architectural design, intended to kick-off a community fundraising campaign. "It's important for students to have a safe place, a comfortable place to reside when they are away from home," said NNEC director Norma Kejick. "NNEC's motto is 'we provide a home away from home,' and I don't think it is really happening right now. With this residence we are building, it takes a whole village to raise a child and everybody working together will only be positive for students" (Garrick, 2013).

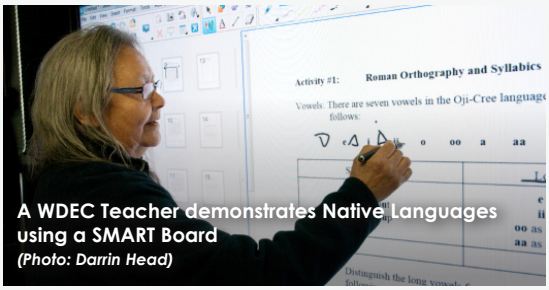
The DFC Student Living Centre proposal inspired students to take action themselves. In April 2013, a dozen students and adult supporters staged a marathon fundraising Walk from Sachigo Lake First Nation, some 1,200 km. away, across northwestern Ontario to Thunder Bay. Inspired by the project and motivated by the death of a former DFC student, they dubbed the Walk "Journey to New Beginnings," and raised about $73,000 intended as an initial donation to get the venture off the ground (Murray 2013). Two more fundraising Sachigo Lake Walks were held over that remarkable distance, most recently in February and March 2016 and culminating at the Thunder Bay Courthouse to commemorate the seven NAN youth who died from 2000 to 2011 while attending school in Thunder Bay (Lake Superior News 2016). When the Wasaya Group dissolved and the original plan fell through, the Sachigo Lake Walkers remained undeterred and kept up their grassroots fundraising campaign. While the initial $73,000 was lost in the company liquidation, the NNEC continued to push on with a Gala fundraiser and a scaled-down version of the ambitious Wasaya-Confederation College plan. In spite of the tremendous hurdles, NNEC's Norma Kejick testified at the Thunder Bay inquest that new plans were in the works to build a smaller facility with 50 rooms, accommodating 100 students, at the back of the DFC school grounds (Kejick 2016). In the wake of the public inquest, building such a student life centre has become even more critical to DFC's future.

Scarcity and underfunding has forced DFC to be more resourceful and adventuresome than most schools, on reserve or in the provincial school system. One of the flagship projects, initiated by former Prime Minister Paul Martin's Aboriginal Education Initiative, is the Aboriginal Youth Apprenticeship Program. The nation-wide program began as a pilot project in 2007, with the support of the Grand Chief and Council of the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation, for a group of students attending DFC. The very first program was taught by a teacher originally from Tataskwayak First

Nation in northern Manitoba. The two credit Ministry of Education-approved program, developed by First Nations leaders, local business and educators, has expanded from DFC to more than 48 secondary schools right across Canada (MAEI 2016). Keeping Indigenous languages like OjiCree alive is also a priority for DFC and teacher Sara Johnson, a native of Weagamow Lake First Nation. She devotes her time and energy to reviving and teaching a vitally important part of the students' identity; the Oji-Cree language. In stark contrast to the earlier residential schools, DFC teaches the traditional languages. Upon arrival her students are surveyed and most come to DFC with very little knowledge of the language. "There are some who understand what is said, but cannot speak it," she reports. "It seems language is not valued, especially by young parents – and the elders are slowly dying." In Johnson's DFC classes, students are taught a powerful life lesson: "If you erase the language, you erase the culture" (White 2015).

There are some who understand what is said, but cannot speak it...
If you erase the language, **you erase the culture.**

A WDEC Tutor and her Students
(Photo: Darrin Head)



A WDEC Teacher demonstrates Native Languages using a SMART Board
(Photo: Darrin Head)

School of the Airwaves:
Wahsa Distance Education- from Radio to Social Media

By Paul W. Bennett
and Rick Garrick

Over the past twenty-five years, Wahsa Distance Education Centre (WDEC), has pushed at the limits of technology in the Northern education frontier. Since his arrival as Principal in 1995, Darrin Head has seen WDEC through a succession of dramatic technological changes in the delivery of its programs – from comparatively crude instructional radio to SMART board technology and social media.

Twenty years ago, it was essentially a radio high school on the Wawatay Communications network accustomed to flying teaching modules in and out of remote First Nations communities. Today Wahsa's Sioux Lookout broadcast headquarters is the nerve centre for a multi-platform distance learning network, combining SMART technology online instruction, radio broadcast lessons, and social media chat room discussion.

Operated by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) since 2000, Wahsa now enrolls some 850 students, registered in 21 different Nishnawbe Aski Nation communities. With a teaching staff of ten, Principal Head provides continuous year-round learning, serving an older population than its Fort William First Nation counterpart, KiHS. Over the past five years, the number of registered students has grown from 650 to between 850 and 1,000 with the advance of Internet connectivity in the North.

Almost all of the Wahsa students are adult learners seeking to complete high school in their remote communities. The Centre serves two types of adult learners: students with no high school credits and those seeking completion credits. It is financed by an Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)-funded grant support ranging from $1,500 to $5,000 per student.

Like most distance learning programs, Wahsa faces the challenge of increasing its course completion and graduation rates. About one out of four adult students perseveres through independent study and finishes a high school course, taking up to a year.

"All of our students returning to complete high school would be considered 'at-risk,' Head says. "One violent death sends shock waves through a community disrupting people's lives and lasting for months."

Given the formidable obstacles, Wahsa Distance Education Centre is proud of the 440 adult learners who graduated through the program from 1990 to 2015. Depending upon the year, the numbers of graduates has hovered between 17 and 33 per year.

Adopting SMART technology and software has produced a real breakthrough in terms of variety and quality of online instruction. Since 2012, Head and his team of teachers have been utilizing a SMART Board interactive whiteboard and Brigit conferencing software to provide lessons to students accessing Wahsa programs on desktop computers or iPads.

Students working individually or in small groups in the 21 different school locations can see everything that's being taught online and can even write over the content to highlight concepts or exchange ideas. Learning support is provided by NNEC staff to assist students in connecting and by responding to their questions.

One of the remaining obstacles facing Head and his teachers is the reliability of Internet communications lines. Out of the 21 community schools served by WDEC, most if not all are now connected with Fibre Op installed by Bell Canada. Internet interruptions and broadband issues are less common, but still hit on a weekly basis. A few of the most remote schools experience daily problems with connectivity and rely more on radio delivered lessons.

All Wahsa teachers and support staff now use social media to communicate regularly with their registered students and to help keep them on task. "We've learned," Head says, "that social media such as Facebook and Twitter are critical in communicating with today's students. Students that cannot be reached by phone respond immediately on social media."

Teaching and learning have also changed dramatically in Wahsa Distance Learning programs. One-way analog radio communications of daily lessons on Wahsa Radio 91.1 FM are no longer the only delivery model. SMART Board conferencing and social media exchanges are now part of the teaching and learning repertoire.

Flexibility is the order of the day in today's technological world and especially so in far-flung First Nations schools. "Learning in schools is uncomfortable for all our young adult learners," Darrin Head notes. "So we need to respond in ways that reach them. Social media is now one of our best engagement tools."

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Summary and Recommendations

Since the appearance of our September 2014 Northern Policy Institute research report, Picking Up the Pieces (Bennett and Anuik 2014), much has changed on the Indigenous and Northern Affairs front. The election of the Justin Trudeau Liberal Government in October 2015, generated what National Chief Perry Bellegarde aptly described as "a warm wind" that has blown across Canada, particularly when it comes to First Nations policy issues. A recent Chiefs of Ontario Education Symposium in Thunder Bay November 17-19, 2015 had a remarkably different tone. Instead of railing at Prime Minister Stephen Harper or reliving the horrors of Indian residential schools, the focus was on Neegahnee daa (let's walk together) in "charting a new path forward." Under the watchful eye of Grand Chief Gord Peters and Regional Chief Isadore Day, some 180 First Nations educators, councillors and Elders gathered at the Victoria Inn to discuss in-depth a set of proposals for a new framework for genuine First Nations control of education on and off the reserves (Bennett 2015). The two federal emissaries, former Prime Minister Paul Martin and newly-installed Indigenous and Northern Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett, both struck a positive chord Lundmark 2015). Martin described the present juncture as "a magical period," referring to the Liberal ascendancy in Ottawa and at Queen's Park. Dr. Bennett was more restrained and more nuanced in her declarations. "Paternalism," she told the delegates, "has been a disaster" and the way forward involves "the new Three R's — recognition, rights and respect." She also shows a willingness to be patient. "Educators talk," she quipped. "That's because you do your homework" (Bennett 2015). Peeling away the rhetoric, this much was clear: Improving the funding levels is imperative and so is ensuring that those funds actually reach students in the schools.

First Nations children in Nishnawbe Aski Nation are still facing long odds and with few if any bridges to a healthier, happier, more fulfilling life. The latest C.D. Howe Institute commentary, Students in Jeopardy (January 2016) written by Barry Anderson and John Richards, gives cold comfort to those working on the ground to rebuild struggling, underfunded First Nations schools. With clinical precision, the two authors document, once again, the abysmal First Nations graduation rates and the apparent 'failures' of what are termed "Band-Operated Schools." Looking at those all-too familiar C.D. Howe Institute bar graphs showing 2011 First Nations High School Certification rates of 48.9 per cent for Ontario, compared to well over 80 per cent province-wide, cannot possibly convey all the "burdens" borne by those First Nations students who "fall out" of the system (Anderson and

Richards 2016). It also gives short shrift to the recent successes in raising graduation rates of both the Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw schools and the NNEC high schools. The C.D. Howe Institute report "seven step" strategy is presented with the declaratory certainty of the "policy-wonk" at a safe distance from the unfolding crisis among First Nations youth. Their recommendations cover mostly old policy ground: close the funding gap; focus on improved student results; clarify who's responsible for what, improve Region and 'Band' competencies; seek incremental improvements; target program funding; and improve second-level support services. Such an approach may produce marginal improvement and help to restore the credibility of INAC policy initiatives. It does not really get at the root of the problem and does precious little to empower First Nations people themselves (Bennett 2016).

With a new Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and more generosity of spirit abroad in the land, the time for social reconstruction from the ground-up has arrived. Supporting traditional industries, creating sustainable employment, refurbishing housing, and embracing First Nations community-based schooling is a much better 'whole of government' approach. In that respect, our earlier Northern Policy Institute report, Picking Up the Pieces co-authored with Jonathan Anuik (2014), offers a much sounder point of departure. Respecting First Nations traditions and ways of knowing is only the first step. More funding is going to be a real help, but it is going to take a generation to rebuild broken trust, foster cross-cultural reconciliation, and engage First Nations themselves in this vitally important work (Galloway 2016a). Fixing the problems threatening the very existence of the NNEC First Nations high schools would be a good place to start. Building upon our research and studying the fresh lessons learned at the Thunder Bay public inquest (Ontario Coroner 2016, Porter 2016f), it is an opportune time to consider concrete actions. After the healing, this report proposes an action plan to ensure that First Nations teens attending NNEC high schools not only return home alive, but prepared to lead more satisfying, healthier and fulfilling lives with a real sense of pride in their own identity and traditions.

Recommendations

More needs to be done to improve the quality of education and student life for First Nations students attending the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council high schools. This research report, like the September 2014 NPI policy paper, supports the full transition to First Nations control of education through Community-School Based Management vested in Indigenous education authorities such as Northern Nishnawbe Education Council. Investing in NNEC high schools remains the best way to capture the true "Learning Spirit," to embrace a more holistic, community-based philosophy of lifelong learning, to raise student performance levels, and prepare graduates for healthier, more satisfying and productive lives (Bennett and Anuik 2014). Closing the funding gap is imperative if we are ever to achieve equity in education and better outcomes for First Nations students. The Thunder Bay inquiry into the seven student deaths at DFC has created a greater sense of urgency demanding immediate and co-ordinated action on the part of the INAC, NNEC, the province of Ontario, the City of Thunder Bay, and local police services. The Corner's Jury June 2016 plan, encompassing 145 recommendations, takes on a whole range of issues in Indigenous education (Ontario Coroner 2016). This report focuses more explicitly on addressing the needs of students making the transition to high school in Thunder Bay, Sioux Lookout, and other northern Ontario towns and cities.

A more effective public policy response, outlined in this NPI Action Plan, proposes fewer and more immediate concrete actions to ensure a brighter future for First Nations students attending First Nations band-operated high schools:

Recommendation 1:
Close the funding gap for NNEC and NAN Schools

- Proceed immediately to address the funding gap facing First Nations schools and contributing to the severe financial challenges facing the two NNEC high schools in Thunder Bay and Sioux Lookout.

- Lift the 2 per cent cap on First Nations funding and raise the funding for NNEC "instructional services" to match the current provincial school levels. This will mean increasing grant levels to NNEC to at least $12,800 per FTE.

- Provide special grants for remote First Nations schools to help subsidize transportation costs for students and staff from fly-in communities in the case of personal emergencies or extreme events.

Recommendation 2:
Design, fund and build a DFC Student Living Centre

- Support an application from the NNEC and the Dennis Franklin Cromarty Memorial Fund for a capital grant of $10 to $15 million in infrastructure funding to enable the NNEC and DFC act on their plan to build a Student Living Centre adjacent to the school grounds

in Thunder Bay.

- Help facilitate funding partnerships with three levels of government, federal, provincial, and city, to provide at least 95 per cent of the cost of the new facilities. Proceed to build a NAN Student Learning Centre combining meeting and physical activity space with student accommodations.

- Consider the possibilities of designing a unique NAN community 'Gathering Place' with four or five cottage-sized lodges accommodating up to 100 or 150 students.

Recommendation 3:
Rebuild and expand Student Support Services

- Build upon the current NNEC/DFC model with its "prime worker" team to develop Schools Plus integrated social service delivery sites at DFCHS, PFFNHS and other schools.

- Fully embrace the philosophy of "wrap-around" student support services by establishing a Social Services function on campus with counselling, medical, dental, mental health services.

- Improve DFCHS and PFFNHS Admissions Outreach and Transition Services by hiring NNEC school-liaison officers trained in guidance, counselling, and social work.

- Properly train Prime Workers to be House Masters in the Student Living Centre lodges and ensure that all NNEC employees have filed a criminal reference check with the school administration.

Recommendation 4:
Establish a Race Relations Commissioner and City Offices

- Recruit and appoint a Race Relations Commissioner and Officers in cities and larger towns with sizable populations of First Nations youth and students.

- Start with the City of Thunder Bay and then add Officers in Timmins, Sioux Lookout, Kenora, and Sault Ste. Marie, and Sudbury, in places where student numbers warrant action.

- Train and hire more Indigenous police officers in cities and towns throughout NAN.

- Establish an Aboriginal Police Training program in the Ontario North to encourage more youth to enter community policing.

- Build stronger ongoing partnerships between Aboriginal Friendship Centres and youth in the schools.

Recommendation 5:
Expand and fortify 'Student Success' Curriculum Initiatives

- Fully develop and expand the NNEC high school curriculum based upon the First Nations Holistic Learning Framework (CCoL,2010, Toulouse 2016) and require all students to complete graduation credit courses in Aboriginal cultural studies and native (Oji-Cree) languages.

- Partner with Teach for Canada to tap into their Initial Teacher Training Summer program focusing on Indigenous education based at Lakehead University.

- Expand the online course offerings of the Wahsa Distance Education Centre to allow more Grade 9 to 12 students to complete credit courses not offered in day school programs.

- Integrate the NAN Elders into the regular curriculum, utilizing team teaching, and transform the Elders Room into a welcoming Student-Elders Lounge.

- Expand the Martin Education Initiative's Aboriginal Youth Apprenticeship Program (AYEP) to Pelican Falls First Nations High School and utilize the AYEP as a means of developing co-op learning and service learning opportunities for NAN students after school hours.

- Continue to raise NNEC student graduation rates through a clear, consistent and supportive academic program and a unique First Nations Education diploma recognizing the full range of learning competencies and attributes rooted in First Nations culture and traditions.

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