OFIFC
Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

Response to Community-Connected Experiential Learning

May 2016
About our Response

The OFIFC welcomes the Ministry of Education’s Community-Connected Experiential Learning (CCEL) initiative. We believe that increasing experiential learning opportunities is critical to the province’s goals of increasing equity, inclusion and student achievement in its education vision: *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. The OFIFC has long advocated for greater access for students to outdoor education, traditional and ceremonial opportunities, and overall experiential learning opportunities. If undertaken appropriately, CCEL can play a decisive role in meeting the pedagogical needs of urban Indigenous students and communities.

Experiential learning is a critical component of Indigenous pedagogies\(^1\) and is paramount to revitalizing Indigenous cultures and languages. It affords students the opportunity to learn *through* Indigenous worldviews, in relationship with knowledge holders, place, and the natural and spiritual world, rather than merely learning *about* Indigenous cultures in the classroom. At the same time, it is an opportunity to recognize the various and invaluable skills and knowledge that Indigenous student’s learn in community, which includes, *inter alia*: politics, ancestral knowledge, traditions and ceremonies, languages, and knowledge of the natural and spiritual world. These knowledges frame Indigenous worldviews and it is imperative that students have the opportunity to access Indigenous learning opportunities in urban Ontario and that they are credited for this knowledge in the public education system.

We believe that Friendship Centres are well-equipped to help the government achieve its policy objective to “increase experiential learning opportunities and identify people who can mentor students” and to ensure that experiential learning leads to the successful implementation of Achieving Excellence in urban Indigenous communities. When children and youth enter the doors of a Friendship Centre, when they participate in community events and ceremonies, when they are out on the land, and when they are under the guidance of Elders, they learn immeasurably. Yet for Indigenous children and youth, this learning has long gone unrecognized by the education system. Establishing a public education system that is inclusive of Indigenous pedagogical practices is imperative to ensure that state policy does not repeat the mistakes of the past by imposing educational systems on Indigenous communities that are contrary to their values, beliefs and culture. Given the significance of experiential learning in Indigenous pedagogies and the role that Friendship Centres play in facilitating experiential learning opportunities, it is important that the province seek out opportunities to meaningfully consult Friendship Centres throughout the development of the CCEL policy framework and its implementation in local district school boards (DSB).

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\(^1\)Marie Battiste, *Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in First Nations education: A literature review with recommendations* (Ottawa: Apamuwek Institute, 2002).
The OFIFC would like to take this opportunity to respond to the Ministry of Education’s Community-Connected Experiential Learning: A Policy Framework for Ontario Schools Kindergarten to Grade 12. Our response will look at the role of Friendship Centres in meeting the experiential learning needs of the urban Indigenous community, and discuss supportive policy to expand the possibilities for experiential learning for Indigenous students in Ontario.

**Friendship Centres as Sites of CCEL**

Friendship Centres have a unique role in supporting Indigenous students in Ontario’s public education system. Friendship Centres are vital to supporting healthy, strength-based, positive identity development for Indigenous children and youth. As one of the most sophisticated and expansive networks of community service providers in Ontario, Friendship Centre programming provides culturally appropriate education opportunities to urban Indigenous children and youth that support student success and well-being.

Friendship Centres can support the Ministry of Education’s CCEL initiative in three distinct ways:

1. Friendship Centres deliver key social services that provide learning opportunities and support public education;
2. Friendship Centres are hubs for the urban Indigenous community, which can improve students’ connection to community through cultural events, programs and everyday activities; and
3. Friendship Centres are innovative not-for-profit organisational models from which students may learn about sustainable Indigenous development, developing social economy, meeting community needs, and building effective community relations.

**Friendship Centres as Wholistic, Wraparound Service Providers**

Students learn critical skills in Friendship Centre programming that support their learning in the public education system. Friendship Centres provide a suite of wrap around services aimed at supporting healthy urban Indigenous communities and which support the learning of urban Indigenous youth and their families. Children and youth programming in Friendship Centres not only provides many families and their children with a place to go, it provides them with a sense of self, a social connection and more importantly, a cultural awareness they may not have had the opportunity to obtain before. Friendship Centre children and youth programming includes supports for youth to discuss issues that are creating barriers for their success and ability to make sound choices, increases the opportunity to utilize resources that foster lifelong learning, facilitates support circles and peer counseling opportunities, and increases access to healthy and safe activities to ensure that urban Indigenous youth have access to choices that promote healthy lifestyles. Additionally, clients learn how to read and write, manage unhealthy behaviour and improve their social skills.
In addition to a suite of services and programs for children and youth, the Alternative Secondary School Program is delivered in ten Friendship Centres and one delivery site. The purpose of the ASSP is to address the needs of disengaged urban Aboriginal students and help them complete their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). The ASSP aims to incorporate cultural teachings and learning approaches as they prepare students for workplace readiness, skills development and training, or for transitions to mainstream high schools or postsecondary education institutions. For most students, the schools provide an essential cultural component and a supportive, flexible environment that is more relevant to their learning needs and to who they are as Indigenous people. They incorporate community-driven experiential learning opportunities into students’ education to ensure that students develop knowledge of community issues and a sense of pride in community identity.

Friendship Centres offer programming, workshops, and activities that support and develop culturally appropriate parenting skills, which in turn promotes optimal student success and family well-being. Friendship Centres support parents through programs such as the Community Action program for Children (CAPC) and the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP). CAPC, for example, “assists vulnerable families to increase both adult and child health, develop problem-solving skills and social networks, and to engage in their communities.” Indigenous parenting is grounded in cultural approaches that emphasize the whole community responsibility for children and the broader concept of family and is, therefore, a natural fit for CCEL.

Friendship Centres as Community Hubs

Beyond service delivery, Friendship Centres are the cultural and social gathering place for urban Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Ontario. The community-based cultural spaces that students can access in Friendship Centres are invaluable tools for cultural reclamation and reconciliation. Friendship Centres play a key role in facilitating opportunities for cultural practice in urban environments by providing access to Elders and other traditional people, and hosting traditional events and activities. Friendship Centres provide opportunities for children and youth to participate in traditional harvesting activities such as hunting, trapping and fishing; learn about and use traditional medicines; and learn other traditional activities such as drumming, dancing, beadwork, etc. Friendship Centres have extensive knowledge of local communities, Indigenous community development, and serve as a hub for the urban Indigenous community. Consequently, they are able to provide children and youth with unique opportunities in community that will reinforce their cultural identities and build a sense of belonging. Aside from supporting Indigenous community members develop a sense of pride and confidence in their identity, Friendship Centres also play a key role in engaging non-Indigenous community members and organisations in Indigenous cultural practices. This promotes greater understanding and respect between communities and provides a framework for social inclusion and reconciliation.
Community Organisation Management and Entrepreneurial Skills

Friendship Centres afford opportunities to students to gain valuable knowledge and skills in social economy and not-for-profit management. Friendship Centres are locally-driven and meaningfully engage their local urban Indigenous community by involving parents, caregivers and children in culture-based programs and services that are Indigenous designed, developed, delivered and evaluated. The Friendship Centre model of integrated service delivery is flexible and responsive to community needs while building capacity for self-determination at an individual and community level. This unique model has proven effective in narrowing the socio-economic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Investment in Indigenous community infrastructure and programming between 1985 and 2007 has been proven to be a critical factor in significantly addressing poverty in urban Indigenous communities. Friendship Centers can provide students with incredible insight into innovative Indigenous solutions to issues in Indigenous communities.

The majority of Friendship Centres currently operate or have in the past operated some form of revenue generating activity, and as such Friendship Centres are active members in the social economy. From operating daycares, space rentals, fitness centres, catering services, facilitation services, and craft stores, Friendship Centres are utilising earned income strategies that not only provide services to the community but also subsidise revenues for programming. Additionally, Friendship Centres are economic drivers in their communities, large employers and consumers of locally sold goods and services. These opportunities provide Indigenous students with entrepreneurial skills in which giving back to community is a key value.

Indigenous students want to work in and for Indigenous communities. A recent study by Indspire shows that of employed students graduating from PSE with Indspire funding, 84 percent report that they are serving Indigenous people in their current role. Friendship Centres afford Indigenous students the opportunity to learn from Indigenous organisational models and to explore viable career paths working for their community.

The experiential learning opportunities in Friendship Centres are limitless. However, additional Ministry supports can enable Friendship Centres to expand and more effectively deliver such opportunities to students in Ontario’s public education system.

Ministry of Education Support for CCEL in Friendship Centres

Overall, the OFIFC is pleased that the Ministry of Education is developing the CCEL. The principle of equity in education, as outlined in Achieving Excellence, must afford Indigenous students experiential learning opportunities in their communities and,

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furthermore, attending community programming, events and ceremony must be recognized by DSBs as fulfilling Experiential Learning Assessment Recognition (ELAR) standards. Yet the initial draft of CCEL policy framework for public consultation is void of policy that speaks to the specific needs of Indigenous students.

The OFIFC would like to propose a number of opportunities where the Ministry can align CCEL with broader policy objectives outlined in Achieving Excellence, the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, and other provincial objectives. We believe with relatively minimal investments in policy and resource support, the province can expand CCEL opportunities in Friendship Centres, strengthen CCEL for all students, and meet the socio-cultural needs of Indigenous students.

Culturally Competent Teachers

Since teachers are required to participate in all stages of the ELAR process (pre-approval, participation, and recognition), they must necessarily make value judgements about what is and what is not a valid knowledge and skill. It is essential that teachers have a degree of cultural competency in order to mitigate potential discrimination of Indigenous knowledge, and so that teachers are better placed to work with community stakeholders throughout the ELAR process.

The OFIFC recommends that all teacher candidates be required to take a minimum of one course in order to attain certification. Practicing teachers involved in CCEL should be required to take cultural competency training prior to participating in the ELAR process.

Protocols

DSBs must understand and follow protocols for establishing respectful relationships with Indigenous communities and traditional people. Proper protocols ensure that Indigenous knowledge and ontologies are respected while also promoting cultural sustainability. The most effective way to develop supportive policy locally around proper protocols is via Aboriginal Education Councils (AEC) and by community outreach to Indigenous organisations like Friendship Centres.

Community Hubs Policy

The provincial government must recognize the role Friendship Centres play as the hub for urban Indigenous community and develop supportive policy that affirms and expands the role of Friendship Centres. Provincial policy and strategic frameworks must be developed that would support increased co-location of education, health and social services in Friendship Centres recognizing their strategic position to reach marginalized populations and facilitate shared space in schools where Friendships Centres can offer culturally-appropriate opportunities to Indigenous youth. The number of options for Friendship Centres and other not-for profit corporations to access public and private
funding to support infrastructure needs must be increased. Provincial exemptions and/or local and regional set asides for Friendship Centres must be made as new funding streams become available, recognizing that they are well-established, low-risk organisations with dedicated infrastructure to support their hub function. The creation of responsive community hubs policy will enable Friendship Centres to offer more dynamic learning experiences to public school students.

Assessment Policy

The OFIFC supports the Ministry’s CCEL policy that “success criteria should be co-constructed by the student, teacher, and community mentor.” Friendships Centres, community Elders and traditional people should play a pivotal role in defining the goals and indicators for successful student learning. However, there is also a wider need for the Ministry to develop indicators of well-being and student success, as committed in the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Implementation Plan. In March 2016, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommended that “The Ministry provide the Committee with an update on its discussions with Indigenous partners and other education stakeholders aimed at setting measurable student achievement targets.” To date, there has been minimal work conducted by the Ministry to achieve this objective.

The development of indicators of student success and well-being, in a process led by Indigenous organisations and community members, should frame how Ministry and DSB initiatives and activities, such as CCEL, will meet the learning needs of the Indigenous students.

Recognition of Parenting as CCEL

The CCEL policy framework is an opportunity to recognize the unique experiences and skills that young parents learn in their development as parents. Indigenous people, in particular, are far more likely than the average population to have children prior to completion of high school. Over a quarter of Indigenous women cited that they left school as a result of either a pregnancy or to take care of their children.\(^4\) Recognizing the knowledge and skills that parents develop will help reengage Indigenous mothers in the public education system, reinforce the status of women, and aligns with other provincial priorities such as closing the gender wage gap and ending violence against Indigenous women. The OFIFC recommends that the Ministry of Education recognise Friendship Centre parenting programming as CCEL and work with Friendship Centres to credit student learning through the ELAR process.

Increasing Friendship Centre Capacity

The Ministry must be mindful that some of the best places for students to engage in CCEL have numerous existing roles and priorities in their community. Expanding CCEL opportunities in Friendship Centres will require additional time and resources and place additional burden on staff in order to fully participate in the ELAR process and mentor students in community-based programming.

Several Friendship Centres have expressed a need for a position focusing on education – kindergarten through to PSE, including apprenticeship. Such a position could inform Friendship Centre programming, sustain relationships with educational institutions, support learners through their transitions and the difficulties that arise therein, and build Friendship Centre’s capacity through the education to employment continuum. This position could coordinate experiential learning opportunities with schools and would mitigate the burden that taking on student volunteers and experiential learners can have for resource-stretched Friendship Centres. Increasing Friendship Centre capacity is vital to increasing Indigenous student access to experiential learning opportunities in these dynamic learning environments.

Legislating AECs

Community accountable AECs are a significant opportunity to effectively coordinate CCEL in Indigenous communities. The establishment of high functioning AECs with the capacity to articulate their community’s education concerns and aspirations, identify barriers and goals, and build a strategic plan to meet the education needs of their community is imperative to exploring, planning and implementing local CCEL opportunities. Effective partnerships between DSBs and Friendship Centres are essential to imagine, create, and implement opportunities for Indigenous students. AECs are a conduit to supporting relationships and creating space for Indigenous community members to ensure that DSBs and schools are responsive to the learning needs of Indigenous students.

We strongly urge the Ontario Government to legislate AECs in all DSBs. We believe that legislation developed and approved by the Minister’s Advisory Council can vest the appropriate authority to AECs so that they may carry out their vital function as mechanisms for accountability, engagement, and collaboration to the Indigenous community.

Expanding ASSP

The ASSP is a key program from which students are able to access numerous cultural resources, wraparound services, and a connection to urban Indigenous communities. Increasing investment to ASSPs and expanding ASSPs to all Friendship Centres that demonstrate both the need and the capacity will no doubt play a significant role in
increasing Indigenous student access to culture-based experiential learning opportunities.

**Indigenous Languages**

Integrating Indigenous languages into CCEL is critical to the well-being of Indigenous communities. Indigenous languages play an important protective role in reducing behavioral risk factors, enhancing educational opportunities, building resilience and maintaining healthy, violence-free communities. There are numerous Calls to Action in the *TRC Final Report* that prioritize the preservation of Indigenous languages. The report states, for example, that: “Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.” It further cautioned, however: “The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.”

The OFIFC recommends that DSBs connect students to community-based language immersion programs through CCEL. Investments in integrating community-based Indigenous language programs in Friendship Centres’ early years programming, before- and after-school programming, and summer programming will encourage the next generation of language teachers and promote the sustainable growth of Indigenous languages.

**Conclusion**

The OFIFC believes that CCEL is an opportunity to create culturally appropriate spaces for Indigenous education practices and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge in the public school system. Friendship Centres are the ideal spaces for urban Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous students to engage in CCEL since they have long served as the cultural and community hubs of the urban Indigenous community. The OFIFC looks forward to working with the Ministry of Education in drafting an inclusive policy that represents the needs and interests of urban Indigenous students and that will support Friendship Centres with the implementation of CCEL.

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7 Ibid.