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Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

Response to the Development of an Accessibility Standard for Education

July 2017

ABOUT THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIGENOUS FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

About the OFIFC

Founded in 1971, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) works to support, advocate for, and build the capacity of member Friendship Centres across Ontario.

Emerging from a nation-wide, grass-roots movement dating back to the 1950's, Friendship Centres are community hubs where Indigenous people living in towns, cities, and urban centres can access culturally-based and culturally-appropriate programs and services every day. Today, Friendship Centres are dynamic hubs of economic and social convergence that create space for Indigenous communities to thrive. Friendship Centres are idea incubators for young Indigenous people attaining their education and employment goals, they are sites of cultural resurgence for Indigenous families who want to raise their children to be proud of who they are, and they are safe havens for Indigenous community members requiring supports.

In Ontario more than 84 per cent of Indigenous people live in urban communities. The OFIFC is the largest urban Indigenous service network in the province supporting this vibrant, diverse, and quickly-growing population through programs and initiatives that span justice, health, family support, long-term care, healing and wellness, employment and training, education, research, and more.

Friendship Centres receive their mandate from their communities, and they are inclusive of all Indigenous people – First Nation, Status/Non-Status, Métis, Inuit, and those who self-identify as Indigenous.

Learn more about the work the OFIFC does to support Friendship Centres at www.ofifc.org.

KEY FACTS:

- *84.1 percent of Indigenous people in Ontario live off-reserve.*
  (Statistics Canada. (2011) National Household Survey.)

- *Between 2006 and 2011, Ontario's Indigenous population grew five times faster than the non-Indigenous population, increasing 24.3 percent compared to 4.8 percent.*
  (Ministry of Finance. (2013) *2011 National Household Survey Highlights: Factsheet 3*)

- *36 percent of off-reserve Indigenous children under the age of 6 live in poverty compared to 19 percent of non-Indigenous children.*
  (Statistics Canada. (2008). *Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006: Supporting Data Tables.*)

- *Representing a network of 28 member Friendship Centres in Ontario, the OFIFC is Ontario's largest off-reserve Indigenous service delivery structure.*
  (Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres. (2015). *OFIFC Leave Behind*)

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INTRODUCTION

Being an accessibility leader will require Ontario to respond to the needs of Indigenous people with disabilities, including filling gaps for culturally-specific supports that can increase the participation of Indigenous people in the education system. Enhancing education to employment continuum supports is a priority issue for urban Indigenous communities, and we are interested in exploring ways in which Friendship Centres can be engaged in a meaningful way.

The purpose of this submission is to increase the effective participation of urban Indigenous people in the public education system and to demonstrate the necessity of establishing additional accessibility standards in education to address the unique socio-historical barriers of Indigenous communities. Our response to the development of an accessibility standard for education is framed by the notion that improving education accessibility for Indigenous students requires greater Indigenous involvement and control over education in Indigenous communities, greater accountability to our communities, relevant performance measurements, and systems change.

ACCESSIBILITY, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE URBAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

Situating Indigenous Students in Accessibility Standards for Education

In 2005, the Ontario Government unanimously passed the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities* Act (AODA), which committed to making Ontario barrier free by 2025. Increasing educational accessibility is an important dimension of meeting this commitment. The Ministry of Education identified five education-related themes that will support the province's commitment to accessibility:

1. Accessibility Awareness and Training
2. Awareness of Accessibility Accommodations – Policies, Processes, and Programs/Supports
3. Information, Communication, and Inclusive Decision-Making
4. Transition Planning
5. Inclusive and Accessible Learning Spaces

It is critical that these areas of education accessibility reflect the specific needs of urban Indigenous communities and recognize the role of Friendship Centres in coordinating wholistic, culture-based supports for urban Indigenous students and their families.

The AODA and the accessibility standards for education are framed around the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Guidelines on Accessibility and Policy* and *Guidelines on Disability and the Duty to Accommodate*, which conceptualize the term disability as: physical disability; mental impairment or development disability; a learning disability; a mental disorder, or an injury. The issue of education accessibility is much broader for Indigenous communities than the current scope of the AODA. Since the AODA

emphasizes a very narrow medical view of accessibility, it fails to connect the high prevalence of disabilities within Indigenous communities to the unique historical, socio-economic, and cultural barriers that underpin and exacerbate the disabilities of many urban Indigenous community members.

Successful Indigenous accessibility planning must consider the ongoing impacts of colonialism and subsequent intergenerational trauma that have affected Indigenous communities for well over a century and which are a principle barrier to full Indigenous participation in the education system. Colonial structures such as the *Indian Act*, the reserve system, and residential schools were erected with the explicit purpose of assimilating Indigenous peoples into mainstream society. The subsequent devaluation of women's communal roles; violence against Indigenous women; prohibition of Indigenous ceremonies; theft and destruction of lands, resources, and sacred items; deliberate policies of starvation; and other routine colonial state violence fragmented communities and inflicted trauma on community members, which ultimately disrupted the development pathways of Indigenous nations across Canada. Moreover, a loss of trust and a sense of hopelessness reinforce a severely damaged relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state, its representatives, and its institutions.

In school, Indigenous students continue to face racism and a general ignorance of their cultures among education staff and students. Anxiety, alienation, distrust, low self-confidence, and culture shock are just a few of the symptom that can occur when Indigenous students are placed in an education system that has been slow to respond to their needs and where they may struggle to see themselves and their values reflected in the pedagogy, curriculum, and in the overall structure of Ontario's education system. These conditions make learning a difficult, even painful experience, which can cause students to disengage. Public surveys show that Indigenous people are more likely than their non-Indigenous Canadian counterparts to identify racism and historic trauma as causes for mental health issues.[1]

Increasing Culturally Appropriate Mental Health and Accessibility Services

There has not been a systematic look into the accessibility needs of Indigenous students in Ontario's public schools. Mental health statistics on urban Indigenous people are hard to come by, as research initiatives gloss over and generally do not seek to identify (and thus appropriately address) urban Indigenous populations.[2] However, the most recent data shows that Indigenous communities have nearly twice the rate of disabilities as non-Indigenous communities.[3] In Ontario, more than 500,000 children and youth are estimated to live with at least one diagnosable mental health disorder.

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[1] Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (2007), as cited in Davis, Simon. (2014). Community Mental Health in Canada: Theory, Policy, and Practice. Toronto, ON: UBC Press. P. 124.
[2] National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. (2013). Setting the Context: An Overview of Aboriginal Health in Canada. P. 3
[3] Government of Canada (1994). 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey: Disability and Housing. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

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The Aboriginal Health Survey, the Ontario First Nations Regional Health Survey, and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People indicate that Indigenous people experience higher rates of mental illness, major depression and suicide, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder,[4] prescription and illegal drug use, alcoholism, gambling addiction, and are overrepresented in numerous high risk factors. Friendship Centres have reported that undiagnosed mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, FASD, and attention deficit disorder have been increasing within the urban Indigenous community in Ontario. Without culturally appropriate, wholistic approaches to support Indigenous accessibility, urban Indigenous children and youth are at risk of not completing their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The dropout rate of off-reserve Indigenous students is 22.6% compared to 8.5% for non-Indigenous youth in Canada.[5]

The current systems that are in place to respond to Indigenous mental health issues are fragmented and often inconsistent with Indigenous approaches to building and sustaining good mental health and responding to mental distress, resulting in Indigenous people receiving inadequate and/or inappropriate care. There is limited availability of specialized mental health supports, diagnostic services, and clinical services, all of which contribute to long wait times. Limited access to diagnostic and assessment services is particularly detrimental to Indigenous children and youth who may require additional supports and considerations in the school system to improve their education access.

Generally, there is a lack of culturally-appropriate or culturally-driven mental health services and supports. Friendship Centres across Ontario report that there are few options available for individuals seeking culturally-driven or traditional mental health services and supports, which leads to long wait times and may prevent some individuals from accessing services until they are in a state of crisis. Several Friendship Centres report that mental health issues are often not mentioned until the individual is in a state of crisis. Friendship Centre workers throughout Ontario feel that they could better help community members waiting to access specialized or clinical mental health services and supports if they had the training and resources to do so safely and effectively.

The issues surrounding Indigenous education accessibility are socially and historically complex, and require appropriate, culturally informed responses. It has been shown that health interventions rooted in the culture of a specific target group are up to four times more effective than general mainstream interventions.[6] Student well-being and achievement require safe, trauma-informed education spaces that are fully integrated

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[4] The prevalence of FASD is estimated to be as high as 20 percent among Indigenous children according to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services report *A Shared Responsibility – Ontario's Policy Framework for Child and Youth Mental Health*.

[5] Jennifer Lawrence, The New Face of Aboriginal Education, 2013 Retrieved from: http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/march_2013/features/index.html

[6] Derek Griner, and Timothy B. Smith. (2006). *Culturally adapted mental health interventions: A meta-analytic review*. (Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training. 43(4), 531-548).

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into, and leverage the strength, expertise and resilience of, Indigenous communities.

Reducing Mental Health Stigma

There is significant stigma toward mental health and learning disabilities both within the Indigenous community and the wider school community. Stigmatization impacts education accessibility and may contribute to undiagnosed mental health conditions and learning disabilities since families may not wish to label their child with a disability, which could then lead to lifelong discrimination. Strategies to reduce the stigmatization of mental health and learning disabilities and incorporate trauma informed practices must be put in place as part of the provinces plan to meet AODA compliance. These should include: implementing Individual Education Plans (IEP) for all students,[7] improved anti-bullying policies and initiatives in schools, parent/community outreach, curriculum about ongoing impacts of colonialism and Indigenous responses to health and healing, and more inclusive and coordinated mental health supports school-wide that incorporate school-community integration.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES TO IMPROVING EDUCATION ACCESSIBILITY

School-Community Integration

Given the barriers to education accessibility experienced by Indigenous communities discussed above, we can surmise that supporting accessibility and student well-being involves a dynamic, multilayered, and integrative approach. Indigenous approaches to learning are wholistic and fundamentally rooted in community relationships and experiential learning.[8] Implementing Indigenous ways of knowing and being is paramount not only to revitalizing Indigenous culture but to alleviating the impacts of intergenerational trauma and improving Indigenous access to education.

The OFIFC believes that Indigenous accessibility and student well-being require an education system that is fully integrated into the community. Breaking down barriers between the school and community is key to creating space in the mainstream school system for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. School-community integration requires three levels of support centred on strong partnerships with Indigenous communities and organisations:

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[7] In Ontario, IEPs often have a negative inference defining students with high needs or poor performance and, as a result, may actually contribute to student anxiety and trauma. However, the practice of IEPs can be a strength-based, trauma-informed approach by empowering students and families to determine, in collaboration with mental health and education experts, the education goals, and the types of skills and knowledge students want to achieve. If all students have an IEP, it not only breaks down the stigma of this important planning tool but reinforces the strengths of students in defining their education goals.

[8] Marie Battiste, Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in First Nations education: A literature review with recommendations (Ottawa: Apamuwek Institute, 2002).

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1. Increased school system responsiveness

Generally, the education system lacks the cultural competency to respond to the needs and identities of the urban Indigenous community. This first level of support is aimed at increasing the cultural competency of all school staff and students irrespective of identity so that the school environment reflects Indigenous histories and cultures. Indigenous students need to see themselves and their cultures reflected in the school system. Increasing the visibility of Indigenous cultures and histories in schools should include: curriculum and learning resources; Indigenous teachers, administrators; cultural activities and events; and the promotion and presence of Indigenous art, music, sport and other cultural expressions. The development of responsive school systems must be led by Indigenous community members and organisations.

2. Creation and expansion of space in school for Indigenous students and culture

Schools must establish inclusive, trauma informed spaces that are responsive to Indigenous culture and ways of being and doing. Indigenous students should be able to easily access cultural supports such as Elders, knowledge keepers, and mentors, and to engage in spiritual and ceremonial practices. Formal partnerships with Indigenous organisations should be developed to provide on-site wholistic education supports and share information on community programming, events, and other opportunities. These spaces should also serve as safe spaces where students may work through their challenges; a space where they can go to self-regulate.

3. Community-based learning opportunities

Schools must proliferate community-based learning opportunities. Community-based learning affords students the opportunity to learn through Indigenous worldviews, in relationship with knowledge holders, 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 students learn in community, which includes, *inter alia*: roles and responsibilities, governance and leadership, 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. Additionally, community organisations can complement learning with wholistic wraparound supports and services in community, which support their access to the public school system and ease their transitions throughout the education to employment continuum.

Friendship Centres' role in supporting student transitions is multi-layered and takes place at each of these levels. This role must be recognized, resourced, and expanded to mitigate the impact of systemic racism and discrimination on Indigenous student access to the school system, which can cause or aggravate mental health issues.

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The Role of Friendship Centres: Supporting Indigenous Student Access

Friendship Centres are status-blind community hubs that strive to improve the quality of life of urban Indigenous people at all stages of the life cycle. Friendship Centres are deeply embedded in local communities, are experts in 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, critical elements for education success. Friendship Centres also play a key role in engaging non-Indigenous community members and organisations in dialogue, collaboration, and partnership, leading to greater understanding and respect between communities and providing a framework for social inclusion and reconciliation.

It is for this reason that Friendship Centres have a pivotal role to play in Indigenous student accessibility. Friendship Centres are as old as the urban Indigenous community itself. Born out of necessity, Friendship Centres not only respond to significant challenges associated with the socio-economic histories of colonial relations with innovative community development initiatives, they seek to carve out spaces to revitalize urban Indigenous identities and have made inroads towards Indigenous self-determination. A significant aspect of that work is ensuring that Indigenous peoples have access to educational opportunities consistent with their cultural values that will promote a wholistic framework for achieving a good life.

Friendship Centres are ideally situated to both prepare Indigenous students to transition into new education environments as well as to prepare new education environments to respond to the needs of Indigenous students. The OFIFC and Friendship Centres deliver cultural competency training that fosters professional development in the education system and participate on numerous advisory committees within school boards and at the Ministry of Education which cultivates significant, sustained dialogue between the Indigenous community and provincial education representatives. There must be increased partnerships between schools and Indigenous organisations, which formally recognizes the role of Indigenous organisations in cultivating culturally competent learning environments and supporting student well-being, and to formally recognize community-based learning. An accessibility strategy must place resources in communities to coordinate the supports to guide urban Indigenous students toward their learning goals.

Friendship Centres use a wholistic service delivery model that coordinates services such as physical and mental health services, family engagement, mentoring and tutoring, etc. in order to advance the overall well-being of urban Indigenous students. Currently, the OFIFC administers several programs in the areas of family support, children and youth, justice, education and employment, and health and healing that work together to improve education accessibility and outcomes for Indigenous students in Ontario's public school system.

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The Alternative Secondary School Program (ASSP) is a key program that increases Indigenous student access to the public education system and should be expanded. Currently offered in 11 communities in Ontario, the purpose of the ASSP is to address the needs of disengaged urban Indigenous students and help them complete their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The program aims to increase enrollment, achievement, and well-being of urban Indigenous students. This culture-based program meets a significant need in that the majority of these students would have been pushed out of the mainstream system and would otherwise become entirely disconnected from education. In the past four academic years, the ASSPs have reported an average enrollment of 600 students a year. As demand is very high in Friendship Centre communities across Ontario, the program is in need of an expansion. Further, the province must work with Friendship Centres to ensure that all ASSPs maintain AODA standards.

Transportation between schools and community programming is necessary to move toward school-community integration. Through various engagement methods with Friendship Centres over the past years, the OFIFC has heard a significant amount of first-hand evidence regarding the lack of adequate, reliable, affordable transportation services in urban Indigenous communities, and the role that this plays in accessing a range of crucial services. Given the critical role of community organisations such as Friendship Centres play in accessibility and well-being in the education system, transportation efforts need to be connected to these community hubs to increase effect and maximize outreach.

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 cultures.

Increasing Accountability to Urban Indigenous Communities

There is lack of representation of Indigenous decision makers, administrators, and teachers in the school system, which presents a major challenge to the accountability of the education system to Indigenous communities. Indigenous students, families, and community members must be informed and engaged members of the education system with the capacity to represent and make decisions in the interest of their communities. Increasing accountability to Indigenous communities can be achieved in a number of ways including: legislating Indigenous Education Councils (IEC), mandating urban Indigenous Trustees, and increasing parent and community engagement.

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The capacity of IECs across the province varies widely, but generally Indigenous communities have an advisory role without decision-making power. The establishment of high-functioning community-driven IECs 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 a key to increasing Indigenous voice and overall accountability to Indigenous communities. Furthermore, 82 percent of Indigenous students in Ontario attend public schools,[9] yet the vast majority are not represented by Indigenous Trustees. *Ontario Regulation 462/97: First Nations Representation on Boards* mandates First Nations representation on school boards that have tuition agreements. We strongly urge the Ontario Government to legislate IECs as well as urban Indigenous Trustees to represent urban Indigenous community interests in all school boards.

Community and family engagement and capacity building is imperative to improving access for urban Indigenous children and youth. Community engagement, including the engagement of parents, caregivers, and community members is a key dimension of supporting the academic success and overall well-being of Indigenous children and ensuring that programming and services are coordinated to support urban Indigenous families throughout the healing continuum. Numerous policy and research documents have surfaced in recent years that stress the importance of community and parent engagement in educating Indigenous children and youth.[10] "When parents are involved with their children at home and school, [the children] are more successful at school, they stay in school longer, and the school climate improves."[11]

There is a need in Friendship Centre communities for programming to build the capacity of community and parents to navigate the education system, build trust, and repair relationships (both within families and between schools and community), and make informed choices on behalf of urban Indigenous children and youth. Furthermore, schools and school staff must meet Indigenous parents where they are. As a way to accommodate Indigenous students and families who may not feel safe attending meetings in the schools and to help build relationships between schools and Indigenous communities, schools may consider holding parent-teacher-interviews at Friendship Centres.

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[9] Mary Gallagher-MacKay, Annie Kidder, and Suzanne Merthot, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education: Overcoming Gaps in Provincially Funded Schools (Toronto: People for Education, 2013), 4.

[10] Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework and Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Implementation Plan; The Listening Stone: Learning From the Ontario Ministry of Education's First Nations, Métis and Inuit–Focused Collaborative Inquiry 2013-2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action; OFIFC's Trauma-Informed Schools (TIS) Project; UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People; and various other research sources.

[11] C. Jordan & V. Rodriguez, Family and community connections with schools…why bother? *Orbit*, 34(3), 3-6, 2004.

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Conclusion

Friendship Centres are vital, yet often overlooked, student supports and a major component of urban Indigenous student well-being. Friendship Centres must be acknowledged for their key support in the lifelong learning of Indigenous students and smoothing the transitions of Indigenous students throughout the learning continuum. Additionally, the role of Friendship Centres in the education of Indigenous students is underutilized and must be expanded. There are a number of provincial policy initiatives including the development of the *Ontario Well-Being Strategy for Students, Community-Connected, Experiential Learning Framework, Indigenous Language Revitalization Strategy*, and the development of an accessibility standard for education that must be leveraged to create a more inclusive, accessible, and culturally responsive public school system for urban Indigenous communities. Friendship Centres need to be resourced as community hubs that provide essential education opportunities and education support to Indigenous students in order to improve student well-being and success, and increase Indigenous student accessibility in the education system.

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