



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

A Response to
the Ministry of Education's Discussion Paper:
A New Vision for Student Transportation in
Ontario

April 2018

Introduction

Over the 60 past years, Friendship Centres have been increasingly vocal about a central issue in their communities affecting their ability to provide essential programming to their urban Indigenous community: access to affordable, adequate transportation.

The Ministry of Education's (EDU) new vision for student transportation presents a crucial opportunity to address the transportation needs of Indigenous students and youth in Ontario. We are pleased to submit our response to the Student Transportation Consultation Discussion Paper.

About the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

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 85 per cent of Indigenous people live in urban or rural communities¹. 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.

Urban Indigenous Communities and Transportation: Understanding the Context

Ontario is home to 28 Friendship Centres² that serve large, rapidly growing, and highly mobile urban Indigenous communities. Given the critical role that Friendship Centres play in the provision of culture-based programs and services in Ontario, it is essential that public policy development that affects Friendship Centre communities consider the

¹ Statistics Canada, *Census 2016 Results, Data Table: Aboriginal Identity (9), Dwelling Condition (4), Registered or Treaty Indian Status (3), Residence by Aboriginal Geography (10), Age (12) and Sex (3) for the Population in Private Households* (Catalogue number 98-400-X2016164)

² For a map of Friendship Centres, see Appendix I.

historical, social, and economic context in which urban Indigenous communities are situated.

The Friendship Centre movement has grown significantly since the 1950s when Indigenous community centres were established in Kenora, Thunder Bay, and Toronto, propelled by the growing Indigenous population and the migration of Indigenous people to cities and towns across Ontario. Many urban Indigenous communities still face unacceptable service gaps across areas such as health, education, child care, and housing, and face daunting barriers that get in the way of achieving a quality of life that residents of Ontario should expect. The lack or complete absence of affordable, reliable, and efficient transportation options often exacerbates these service gaps, and only worsens urban Indigenous people's socioeconomic challenges. That and the legacy of colonialism continues to threaten the well-being of urban Indigenous communities. As Premier Kathleen Wynne discusses in *Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous People*, Canadian policies based on racism and deceit have been disempowering and devastating for Indigenous communities.

This context shapes the need for all people in Ontario to take meaningful steps toward reconciliation. Reconciliation looks like meaningful policy change that involves Indigenous people from the start, and building partnerships based on mutual respect and shared benefits – we need to continue to build momentum around this work through initiatives designed to bring meaningful change to the lives of Indigenous people and communities. As new policies for student transportation are being developed, it is imperative that reconciliation through respectful relationship-building with urban Indigenous communities remains a driving principle.

A Note on Terminology

While many members of Friendship Centre communities have close ties to, or may have migrated from First Nation reserves, people in urban Indigenous communities have unique needs and priorities as a result of living in towns, cities, or other urban areas in Ontario. Recognition of the similarities (including shared historical and social context) and differences between urban Indigenous communities and on-reserve First Nation communities is important. The appropriate use of terminology – not using First Nation as a catch-all term for all Indigenous communities in northern Ontario—is an important step towards reconciliation that should remain a central tenet in the way MTO interacts with Friendship Centre communities. Ideally, culturally specific terms such as Anishinaabe, Mohawk, Métis, etc. should be used whenever possible.

The Role of Friendship Centres in Education

The province has signaled that it is moving toward a broader, more wholistic approach to education. There are a number of Ministry of Education (EDU) policy initiatives including the establishment of the Transformation Steering Committee; the development of policies such as the *Ontario Well-Being Strategy for Students, Community-Connected, Experiential Learning Framework, and Indigenous Language Revitalization*

Strategy; and the development of Indigenous specific indicators of student success and well-being. These initiatives present the ministry and its partners with a policy window to advance a more culturally responsive public school system for urban Indigenous communities. Moving the province toward a model of well-being inclusive of Indigenous perspectives hinges on recognising Friendship Centres as vital, yet often hidden, student supports and a major component of urban Indigenous student well-being. Greater integration with Indigenous community organizations such as Friendship Centres aligns with ministry goals of achieving excellence, promoting well-being, ensuring equity and enhancing public confidence in the education system. However this opportunity will be lost if improvements are not made to transportation, in order to facilitate access to services.

Community-Based Learning

Schools must proliferate community-based learning opportunities in Indigenous communities. Community-based learning affords students the opportunity to learn through Indigenous worldviews, 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 community³. Community organizations like the Friendship Centres are ideally positioned to coordinate community-experiential learning opportunities, and can complement learning with wholistic wraparound supports in community. The Friendship Centres can support student access to the public school system and ease their transitions throughout the education to employment continuum. In addition to the learning opportunities in the centres themselves, they have extensive relationship networks in community that can be leveraged to facilitate culture-based learning opportunities. However, Friendship Centres need increased resources and supports to increase their capacity to deliver educational programming and coordination, which must include transportation.

Alternative Secondary School Program (ASSP)

The Alternative Secondary School Program (ASSP) is a key program at the Friendship Centres that increases Indigenous student access to the public education system. 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

³ Like political agency, ancestral knowledge, traditions and ceremonies, languages, and knowledge of the natural and spiritual world

province must work with Friendship Centres to ensure that all students enrolled in ASSPs have access to reliable, affordable and accessible transportation to and from their programming.

Transportation in Urban Indigenous Communities

Improving Local Transportation: What we've heard from Friendship Centres

The Friendship Centres have participated in several engagements over the past two years to provide advice and share their lived experiences with transportation issues in local communities.⁴ The following are some key highlights and priorities expressed by Friendship Centres across Ontario around transportation needs:

- **Equity and Access for Urban Indigenous People:** There should be equitable access to transportation regardless of geographic location and economic circumstances; equity should be a key driver in the goals of transportation initiatives.
- **Building Local Capacity:** There is a lack of support and resources for community-based transportation needs. Friendship Centres fill in the gaps when accessible transportation is lacking, stretching program resources, staff time, and organizational capacity. Transportation policy should build on existing community transportation initiatives, and recognize the important role of Friendship Centres as providers of transportation to critical social services.
- **Local Partnership Development:** Lack of support for the development of transportation partnerships, including a need for long-term funding once a pilot project has ended. This impacts Friendship Centre service-user consistency in access to programs in the Friendship Centre over time.
- **Transportation and Safety:** Poor access to transportation impacts *Ontario Human Rights Code*-protected groups (disabled persons, women, youth, Indigenous people, etc.) at a greater and disproportionate rate than the general population. Women and youth particularly may hitchhike to attend important appointments or visit family and friends, which is often a major threat to their safety.
- **Public Transportation:** The complete absence of any public transportation, particularly in Northern and rural communities. This exacerbates Indigenous people's access to urban centres and necessary services, particularly if they live in remote First Nation communities.
- **Services for People with Disabilities:** Volunteers at Friendship Centres are using their personal time to assist community members with disabilities to get to appointments and other important places to be, due to insufficient transportation accessibility services for people with disabilities.

⁴ Engagements have been conducted by the Ministry of Transportation, including the Friendship Centres, regarding: community transportation in Northern and Southern Ontario; intercommunity bus modernization; the Greater Golden Horseshoe Transportation Plan; and the Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy.

- **Road/Highway Infrastructure:** The lack of roads in some areas in Northern Ontario can lead to dangerous situations, sometimes including terrifying encounters with wildlife – with no assistance available to call on.

Transportation as Social Infrastructure

Transportation is crucial social infrastructure for urban Indigenous communities across Ontario. Social infrastructure is a type of infrastructure that embodies or accommodates access to social services, such as housing, government social services, and not-for-profit organizations like the Friendship Centres.⁵ In many Friendship Centre communities, public transportation is not available locally or within the region, is unreliable, or unaffordable, which exacerbates the barriers experienced by Indigenous people in accessing crucial services. This is exacerbated in Northern and rural Friendship Centre communities, which often do not have public transportation services. A wholistic approach to student transportation is required, one which considers how transportation generally, and transportation of children and youth specifically, is a form of social infrastructure that determines whether urban Indigenous communities have access to vital services and programs for their economic and personal wellbeing – including but not limited to education.

The impact of transportation on Indigenous children and youth is particularly prevalent in inhibiting access to child care, employment, and education. Lack of transportation services also creates barriers to programs that promote access to culture; these services are especially meaningful for low-income people, people with disabilities, young families, and youth. For example, the lack of adequate transportation plays an often overlooked role in limiting access between urban Indigenous families and child developmental programs or child care. This is particularly an issue at the Fort Frances United Native Friendship Centre, as Fort Frances sprawled out and lacks public transportation.

Transportation particularly impacts the ability of urban Indigenous people to participate fully in the labour market. This is troubling for the new generation of Indigenous youth, as recent 2016 Census results demonstrate in Ontario, almost half (42%) of Indigenous people are under the age of 25.⁶ To facilitate and prepare urban Indigenous youth to enter the labour market, there needs to be more accessible, reliable, and affordable transportation systems in their community that facilitates access to jobs and also job assistance programs. The Government of Ontario must appropriately respond with initiatives and investments to reduce labour market barriers facing urban Indigenous communities, or the province risks not adequately supporting the next generation of

⁵ New Zealand Social Infrastructure Fund, "What is Social Infrastructure?", New Zealand Social Infrastructure Fund Limited, 2009. <http://www.nzsif.co.nz/Social-Infrastructure/What-is-Social-Infrastructure>

⁶ Statistics Canada, "Aboriginal Peoples: Fact Sheet for Ontario," Statistics Canada Website, March 14, 2016. URL: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-656-x/89-656-x2016007-eng.htm>.

urban Indigenous youth who are poised to make up an even larger proportion of Ontario's population.

A New Vision for Student Transportation: Discussion Questions Responses

To guide responses and feedback on student transportation, the EDU released a Discussion Paper on a New Vision for Student Transportation in Ontario.⁷ This discussion paper included an overview of the current state of student transportation in Ontario, and starting points and categories for public feedback. The Ministry provided the below categories and guiding questions, organized into pillars, to prompt discussion. Below is the OFIFC's responses to the Responsiveness, Equity, and Safety Pillars.

Responsiveness – service levels

1. *Do you think that Ontario students are well-served in the current system? What's not working?*

Adequate transportation between schools, homes and community programming is necessary to move toward improving access to culturally-relevant education through school-community integration. Through various engagements with Friendship Centres over the last several 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 impeding access to a range of crucial services. Friendship Centre clients, many of whom are youth, consistently cite transportation as a barrier to accessing Friendship Centre programming.

Therefore, the current system of student transportation is not a responsive system for urban Indigenous students. The current model is not nuanced, and sees student transportation as the act of transporting students to and from school only. Providing student transportation to community-connected learning (through before and after-school programming and access to urban Indigenous organizations) is necessary. A lack of transportation options is a detriment to the spiritual and social well-being of students, as they are unable to access Indigenous community hubs like the Friendship Centres, which offer a sense of belonging and access to cultural teachers and spaces.

2. *How can we improve service by focusing on innovations and partnerships that will help us create a more responsive transportation system?*

Friendship Centre staff often volunteer their time, resources and vehicles to transport children and youth to and from their programming. This service reduces barriers to programming, promote access to culture, and facilitates economic activity. The EDU should recognize and support the Friendship Centres' contributions to fill transportation

⁷ Put the link here.

gaps in their communities, while being cognizant of risking offloading responsibility for transportation from municipalities and onto community organizations. Friendship Centres often only have a limited number of vehicles for their programming, vehicles that are already barely meeting the demands of this programming. Partnerships with Friendship Centres, given their critical role in accessibility and well-being in the education system, would create transportation options that are responsive to the need for community-connected learning opportunities. Providing community student transportation investments and support to the Friendship Centres will have a range of positive effects locally, not limited to providing students with more equitable access to transportation options to and from education, community-learning opportunities, and other social services.

In order to track the responsiveness of student transportation policy, the EDU and the school boards need to better track and record data about Indigenous students utilizing publically-funded student transportation. This can and should include the number of Indigenous students taking buses or other publicly funded modes of transportation to school every day; the experiences of Indigenous students using student transportation (i.e. reports of bullying, harassment, discrimination); and other indicators that track the success and gaps in student transportation. This data, if already collected, needs to be shared with urban Indigenous organizations such as the OFIFC and the Friendship Centres.

Equity – Accessibility

1. *Do you think that all Ontario students are receiving the transportation services that they need?*

Urban Indigenous students are not receiving the transportation services they need. This is happening on two levels: the current transportation system does not employ a wholistic understanding of transportation as social infrastructure; and urban Indigenous students who are pursuing alternative education models outside of the mainstream schools do not have adequate access to student transportation.

2. *Does the student transportation system adequately take into account the diverse needs of different types of students?*

The current student transportation system does not adequately take into account the diverse needs of urban Indigenous students. An understanding of the urban Indigenous historical context must be employed in order to understand how inadequate transportation only compounds and exacerbates barriers to accessing employment, education, child care and housing, amongst other necessary services.

3. *Do you have any specific examples of situations that show that there is an equity issue that needs to be addressed?*

The lack of affordable, reliable and accessible transportation continue to disproportionately affect urban Indigenous communities in Ontario and their ability to

access healthcare. For example, in Fort Erie which lacks public transportation, Indigenous patients have to rely on more costly methods of transportation, like taxis, in order to access health services. Long commutes combined with a referral for treatment, diagnostics, or assessments creates additional burdens to accessing health services that can jeopardize receiving health care for urban Indigenous communities. Ongoing medical services, such as dialysis, require regular transportation several times per week.

The lack of equitable access to transportation is demonstrated in urban Indigenous access to education as well. In OFIFC's EDU-funded research project on Indigenous student well-being, initial findings suggest that Indigenous students in Parry Sound and Geraldton can spend up to 3 hours on their commute to and from school each day in some communities, particularly if they are commuting from nearby First Nations. This is a detriment to physical and mental health of students since long commutes are spent sitting idle and often sleeping, negatively impacting energy, mental alertness and retention of information, in addition to consuming time that students could use towards other activities.

Transportation has been consistently raised as a major issue for ASSP students in Friendship Centres. In Fort Frances for example, ASSP students have challenges fulfilling their required hours at school due to a lack of regular and reliable transportation, particularly for students living outside of Fort Frances. ASSP students who depend on the district school board's bus system in Fort Frances are further impeded from completing their hours ahead of graduation, as these bus routes are long and cumbersome. This issue is likely not limited only to ASSP students, but to other Indigenous children and youth looking to access alternative education models that are more culturally appropriate and outside the mainstream school boards.

4. *What sort of innovations and partnerships could help us create a more equitable and accessible transportation system?*

The EDU needs to consider the continued inequities experienced by urban Indigenous communities as a barrier to address in the policy development process. The EDU needs to think of student transportation more holistically and as social infrastructure that does not only facilitate Indigenous youth access to education, but also to culturally appropriate programming, early years programming, housing and homelessness prevention services, and other services needed for improved well-being.

The EDU should develop specific student transportation options that boost linkages between youth, community programming, education, and employers. In the spirit of reconciliation, this must entail a partnership approach with community urban Indigenous organizations, such as Friendship Centres, in developing culturally- and locally-driven solutions for gaps in transportation services.

Safety and Well-being – safe and respectful transportation environment

1. *Do you believe that Ontario is doing enough to support the safety and well-being of students, staff and drivers?*

Ontario is not doing enough to support the safety of students, particularly urban Indigenous students; this is especially the case in Northern and rural Ontario.

2. *Do you have any specific examples of situations where safety and well-being is being compromised? What is the biggest risk to safety and well-being?*

Many Friendship Centres have reported that their clients – many of whom are women and youth – have to hitchhike due to a lack of reliable, affordable transportation in many urban Indigenous communities. This is especially disturbing given the high incidence of violence against Indigenous women and girls⁸. Community members have also shared concerns about bus stops located in isolated areas, along with a lack of amenities and staff in and around bus shelters, which increases the level of threat perceived and experienced by Indigenous women and girls. EDU must prioritise the safety of vulnerable communities, recognizing barriers to safe travel and respond to this need through concrete action.

3. *How can we enhance safety and well-being in the transportation environment to ensure that it supports students' preparedness for learning during the school day?*

The EDU needs to first recognize and carefully consider the implications of the historical, social, and economic context in which urban Indigenous communities are situated as they develop student transportation policy. This understanding will further illuminate how transportation can place urban Indigenous people in very precarious and unsafe positions, whether through creating barriers in accessing necessary social services like health and justice programs, or more evidently by placing Indigenous women and girls in isolating and precarious situations.

The EDU also needs to work with the Friendship Centre to expand and improve student transportation infrastructure in rural and Northern communities where roads and highways are not available or accessible. By providing more reliable and accessible student transportation options in more isolated communities, urban Indigenous youth can more safely attend community programming and access education.

Conclusion

Ontario is home to a strong and vibrant network of Friendship Centres that serve Indigenous community members who experience significant challenges in accessing services and opportunities due in large part to a lack of responsive and equitable transportation options. Student transportation planning must meaningfully respond to

⁸ Native Women's Association of Canada, *What Their Stories Tell Us: Research findings from the Sisters In Spirit initiative* (Ottawa, ON: Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010), 7.

the context and needs of urban Indigenous communities in the region. Transportation policy development must recognize relationships and culture as foundational requirements for policy and program development. The EDU should be doing this work by understanding not just the transportation context unique to urban Indigenous communities, but by also adopting a more nuanced lens in order to see transportation as a type of social infrastructure that either facilitates or restricts urban Indigenous access to necessary services, particularly education. With improved student and community transportation, urban Indigenous community members will have greater access to employment services and education, creating a clearer path to economic security and social inclusion.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the EDU:

1. Centre the continued inequities experienced by urban Indigenous communities as a barrier that needs to be addressed in the education and transportation policy development processes.
2. Recognize the role of the Friendship Centres as providers of culturally appropriate education opportunities, and amplify this impact by including the Friendship Centres in student transportation planning.
3. Recognize transportation as a form of social infrastructure, and develop student transportation initiatives that recognize transportation as a tool to access necessary services.
4. Provide sustainable and flexible funding and investment in the Friendship Centres' community transportation initiatives.
5. Provide student transportation options to and from before- and after-school programming, in order to facilitate greater access to community-based learning opportunities for urban Indigenous children and youth.
6. Create more flexible transportation hours and options for students to allow them to participate in Friendship Centre programming, which support this overall well-being and educational outcomes.
7. Collect data regarding the number of urban Indigenous students that use publically-funded student transportation options, and share this data with urban Indigenous organizations, such as the OFIFC.
8. Engage with urban Indigenous communities and Friendship Centres throughout the development of student transportation options.

Appendix I – Map of the Friendship Centres in Ontario (see attached)