



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

OFIFC's Submission on the Ministry of Education's
Modernizing Public Education

March 2022

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 50s, 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 85 percent of Indigenous people live off-reserve, in cities, towns and rural communities.¹ 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.

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).

INTRODUCTION:

On November 4, 2021, the government released *2021 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review: Build Ontario*. The document included a commitment to modernize the education curriculum “to ensure all students, including young women, have the foundational and entrepreneurial skills they need in a rapidly changing world along with a renewed focus on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).” The ministry is seeking feedback on a variety of topics related to the modernization of the high school curriculum, including graduation requirements, modernized learning opportunities, course types and pathways, and the curriculum review cycle.

The OFIFC welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on modernizing the public education system. Through our extensive community consultation; program administration, data collection, and evaluation; and community-based research, the OFIFC has built considerable expertise in evidence-based policy development and community planning. The OFIFC’s submission will highlight key education priorities of our membership within the province’s areas of inquiry. Overall, the OFIFC supports a modern public education system that will support Indigenous student success, well-being, and engagement, and that will provide Indigenous students with progressive immersion in Indigenous knowledge by nurturing flexible and supportive pathways between the public school system and Indigenous education infrastructure.

FRIENDSHIP CENTRES AND PUBLIC EDUCATION:

Due to a historic and well-documented lack of recognition and, subsequent investment in Indigenous education infrastructure and capacity development outside of the Indigenous community,^{2,3} Indigenous systems for knowledge transfer have been strategically disrupted. From the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry (2019), improving Indigenous learning outcomes and the revitalization of Indigenous learning systems have been consistent and fundamental recommendations to confront colonial violence and systemic racism, repair our relationships, and resurge vibrant Indigenous communities in Ontario. It is from this point of consensus across these extensive inquiries and across decades of truth telling that OFIFC underwrites its responsibility to provide urban Indigenous communities with dynamic community learning hubs.

Friendship Centres are sites of learning that uphold urban Indigenous communities’ right to access culture-based education infrastructure. As sites of learning, Friendship Centres provide urban Indigenous communities with the space, resources, and relationships required to acquire Indigenous knowledge through Indigenous

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/first-nations-education-funding-gap-1.3487822>

³ <https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/indigenous-education-2016/>

pedagogies. This critical function supports the reproduction and advancement of Indigenous identities and social structures, and enables urban Indigenous communities to exercise their Indigenous rights. Yet, because of systemic racism and enduring colonial mentalities, school boards have tremendous difficulty recognizing Indigenous education infrastructure or ceding responsibility and resources to assist in building Indigenous education infrastructure.

Provincial policy is outdated and fails to account for the significant progress that Indigenous people and organizations have made to revitalize Indigenous knowledge and build dynamic education infrastructure. Despite delivering critical direct and indirect education programming, there remains tremendous untapped potential to harness the growing capacity and expertise of Friendship Centres to expand learning infrastructure to reach more Indigenous students and to improve learning outcomes for all students. It is a measure of ongoing colonialism and anti-Indigenous racism that impedes full recognition, support and investment into Indigenous education infrastructure. Friendship Centres continue to raise the lack of equitable funding to provide full implementation of Indigenous pedagogy and access to knowledge keepers, land-based teachings, ceremonies, events, and other activities as a primary barrier to growing Friendship Centre education capacity. The vast majority of investments enhance the public education system and expand its control over Indigenous knowledge and knowledge resources. This is an extension of colonial logic that simultaneously appropriates Indigenous knowledge while erasing and ignoring the Indigenous structures that support its creation and transmission.

The OFIFC continues to build the education infrastructure of Friendship Centres to serve urban Indigenous communities across Ontario as a focal point of its long range strategic plan. Over the past five years the OFIFC has worked with all levels of government to expand child care and early learning in 16 Friendship Centre communities; to expand and enhance the Alternative Secondary School Program in 15 sites; to implement the Cultural Resource Coordinator program in 28 Friendship Centres; began delivering food literacy programming in 9 Friendship Centres; and are launching Indigenous language revitalization programming in 8 Friendship Centres. This unprecedented growth in community education infrastructure has entrenched the role of Friendship Centres as sites of learning for urban Indigenous communities. Continued investment in urban Indigenous education infrastructure and a shift in the policy landscape toward mutual recognition of knowledge systems is a crucial step toward modernizing the public education system.

OFIFC's Education Vision:

The OFIFC envisions a locally-responsive, anti-colonial public education system that honours Indigenous ways of being and knowing and responds to the education priorities of Indigenous youth, families and communities. Institutional leaders will work with urban Indigenous communities to disrupt and dismantle colonial systems by supporting Indigenous education infrastructure, co-developing responsive public policy, and shifting public perceptions of Indigenous knowledge.

Friendship Centres will be recognized as rich ecologies in which urban Indigenous people engage with, negotiate, and cultivate healthy Indigenous identities. Furthermore, Friendship Centres will build their education infrastructure to serve urban Indigenous communities and to connect students to their community, to traditional knowledge keepers, to wraparound learning supports, and to Indigenous approaches to knowing and being. Strengthened pathways between public schools and Friendship Centres will create multiple access points for students to wholistic, place-based learning opportunities and student well-being supports, and reach Indigenous students throughout Friendship Centre communities.

FEEDBACK ON MODERNIZATION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION:

Graduation Requirements:

Indigenous Knowledge and Languages

- Graduation requirements must reflect the rights of Indigenous students to Indigenous knowledge, particularly the rights that have been articulated under Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* and the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
 - The province must establish a process with Indigenous partners to co-develop supportive policy, curriculum, and infrastructure to uphold these rights.
- Indigenous languages and First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies must be available in group 2 and group 3 options to allow Indigenous students to deepen their engagement with Indigenous knowledge. These credits must be offered in partnership with Indigenous partners, including Friendship Centres which have extensive infrastructure, resource and expertise (albeit drastically underfunded and under-recognized) to support learning. Expanding compulsory credits in Indigenous knowledge subject areas will open new opportunities to engage, sustain and expand Indigenous education infrastructure.
 - The province must support Indigenous partners to design and deliver compulsory and elective courses.
 - Locally-developed courses on history and place-based knowledge should be prioritized and developed in partnership with local Indigenous organizations. These courses should be a progression within First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies to allow students to deepen their Indigenous knowledge.
- The *Indigenous Languages Act, 2019* affirms that rights affirmed under Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* include Indigenous language rights. The province must work with Indigenous partners to review policy and funding frameworks to increase access to Indigenous languages and uphold the rights of Indigenous students.

Digital Media Literacy

- Online learning credits should not be compulsory: The pandemic has demonstrated that in-class learning is imperative to the health and well-being of learners. It is inconceivable to continue to move forward with the province's compulsory online learning.
 - There has been extensive coverage of the mental health impacts of online learning on student well-being.⁴
 - ASSP Coordinators have reiterated throughout the pandemic that online learning has compounded an already existing mental health crises amongst Indigenous youth.
- A compulsory credit on digital media literacy should be added to OSSD requirements. The entrenchment of on screen time in everyday living and the rapid pace of technological changes is detrimental to student success and well-being without adequate media literacy. It is imperative that students are prepared to safely navigate new media to address screen addiction; to understand the social implications and impact of new media on physiology, social cohesion, and well-being; to better address cyberbullying and other violence; to support critical thinking on trustworthy, fact-based information sources; and to support students to learn healthy on-screen behaviours.

Modernizing Learning Opportunities:

- Establish community-connected, experiential learning opportunities in partnership with Indigenous communities: 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.
 - Land-based learning is critical to balance the trend toward increased virtual experiences. Students must be encouraged to learn to have a relationship with the natural world.
- Increase opportunities for student voice: According to Ministry of Education reporting, only 26 percent of Indigenous students in Ontario's public schools agreed that their teachers value their point of view.⁵ According to OFIFC's Indigenous student well-being research, Indigenous students are demanding more space in decision-making processes that impact their lives. Public schools must employ a range of activities to collect student feedback and incorporate student voice into board-wide planning, and into the class environment, aesthetics; to tailor curriculum to the unique experiences of the student, and to promote and build Indigenous leadership skills systemwide.

⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/children-youth-mental-health-1.6312681>

⁵ Ministry of Education, *Strengthening our Learning Journey: Third Progress Report on the Implementation of the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, 2018), 29.

Course Types and Pathways:

- Establish pathways to Indigenous learning in community-based Indigenous education infrastructure: The ministry must work with Friendship Centres to establish a new Indigenous immersion course type for urban Indigenous students. This may be developed through a specialist high school major (SHSM) or another mechanism.
 - Locally developed curriculum based on Indigenous, place-based histories and relationships are vitally important to revitalizing Indigenous knowledge.
 - Locally developed curriculum must be developed in partnership with Indigenous communities and open opportunities to all education pathways, not just its current trajectory to the workplace.
- Limit the streaming of students: Streaming is a part of a two-tiered public education system and have had a historically detrimental impact on marginalized students. Streaming should be eliminated, where possible, in consultation with Indigenous and other marginalized communities.
 - Create more dynamic learning pathways: Students must have the ability to change their minds and seamlessly transition to another learning pathway. No student should ever feel like it is too late make changes to their education and career trajectories. The ministry should conduct a thorough review of learning pathways and remove barriers to transitioning across streams.

Early Learning Supports:

- Recognition that streaming starts in the early years: All students must receive adequate supports in the early years, including targeted, evidence-based approaches to literacy and foundational learning skills.
- The OHRC's Right to Read report (2022) sounds the alarm on an encroaching two-tiered education system, which describes a system where families are left to make up the gap in early reading interventions through privatized supports that further alienate marginalized students whose families are unable to afford private support.
- The consequences of failing students' right to read are detrimental to student success and well-being, which can lead to low self-confidence, low confidence in the education system, and a withdrawal of student engagement.
- OFIFC's Akwe:go Wholistic Longitudinal Study, which is a study researching the long-term impacts of OFIFC's Akwe:go program for urban Indigenous children ages 7-12, found that public schools were a "significant source of stress" on many urban Indigenous children with a high number reporting that they "did not feel good about themselves" at school.⁶
- Teachers must have the tools and capacity to identify and support early reading difficulties. Comprehensive early intervention is a moral imperative must include culture-based support in Friendship Centres.

⁶ OFIFC, *Akwe:go Wholistic Longitudinal Study* (Toronto: OFIFC, 2014).

Curriculum Review:

- Invest in curriculum development in Indigenous education systems: The OFIFC supports an anti-colonial approach to curriculum development that will enhance curriculum for all students while revitalizing Indigenous knowledge and promoting Indigenous control of knowledge transmission. An anti-colonial approach to curriculum will take a multi-pronged strategy that both supports the ongoing capacity development of Indigenous systems while promoting connections between public schools and Indigenous community-based education infrastructure.
- Build community curriculum capacity: The ministry continually requests that Indigenous expertise and capacity is brought to bear on the public system, which significantly diverts resources and support from community-based education systems where far fewer resources are made available to sustain and grow its infrastructure. The OFIFC envisions a curriculum development process that is actively decolonizing education space by investing in Indigenous educational capacity to support a more responsive and dynamic public systems for Indigenous students, and which simultaneously supports curriculum development and general maintenance needs of Indigenous education infrastructure in communities.
- Establish transparent, accountable curriculum review processes: We appreciate the work that the province has completed with Indigenous partners to establish a process for Indigenous-focused curriculum revisions. However, it should be acknowledged that this work has suffered from the absence of a consistent structure to working with partners, which has resulted in significant process-related challenges including inconsistency of meetings with Indigenous partners, uneven representation of perspectives on the curriculum, lack of accountability to Indigenous partners, and curriculum development that is not visibly tethered to a larger shared vision for Indigenous education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The future of reconciliation and meeting Indigenous education rights lies in the full recognition and support of Indigenous knowledge systems, which operate outside of, but in connection with, the public education system. Friendship Centre infrastructure provides the province with a unique opportunity to create a dynamic, modern education system that serves Indigenous communities. The OFIFC recommends that the ministry take a leadership role on Indigenous education policy by:

- Recognizing Indigenous rights as a foundation to revise Indigenous education policy and to modernize the public education system more broadly; and
- Providing support to concretize those rights by resourcing urban Indigenous communities to expand and enhance self-determined education infrastructure, capacities, and activities.

In order to successfully modernize the education system for urban Indigenous communities, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education:

Early-term:

- Engage Indigenous partners in ongoing dialogue to co-develop and align provincial policy with the education priorities of Indigenous communities and Indigenous-specific notions of student engagement, success, and well-being.
 - Review all policies with an anti-colonial and anti-racism lens that centres Indigenous education infrastructure.
- Increase opportunities for student voice in curriculum, assessment, school environment, and public policy.
- Prioritize early learning supports and interventions, and provide teachers with the tools and resources to identify and support early learning struggles and disabilities.

Mid-term:

- Support the expansion and enhancement of Friendship Centre education infrastructure.
 - Develop anticolonial curriculum that promotes pathways to Indigenous community-based infrastructure and knowledge holders.
 - Invest in community-based curriculum development that enhances urban Indigenous learning infrastructure.
- Build multiple pathways between public schools and Friendship Centres that connect students to their community, to traditional knowledge keepers, to wraparound learning supports, and to Indigenous approaches to knowing and being.
- Formally recognize Friendship Centre learning in provincial policy.
- Invest in culture-based early learning support, including a focus on reading support and Indigenous language learning.

Long-term:

- Build recognition and awareness of Indigenous, community-based learning infrastructure into public education.
- Consolidate Indigenous resources in community rather than schools and support Indigenous control of education in urban Indigenous communities.
- Establish equitable funding models to support Indigenous education infrastructure.