

Statement Addressing Teacher Shortages in First Nations Schools

November 7th, 2023

On November 2nd, 2023, the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) released a statement regarding staff shortages in Ontario Schools, describing it as a "crisis [that] must be addressed immediately".

Teach For Canada–Gakinaamaage, an Indigenous-led organization partnered with 27 First Nations in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, echoes this statement, and calls on all governments and education stakeholders to recognize that this crisis is being felt even more acutely in First Nations schools. We must all act immediately to address it.

In their statement, the OPC indicated that shortages are occurring daily, some staff positions are unfilled every day, most schools have as many or more staff shortages than they had a year ago, classes are being cancelled or combined, schools are using unqualified adults and parent volunteers, and EAs are being moved into classrooms.

When it comes to First Nations Schools, and especially in the remote communities served by Teach For Canada-Gakinaamaage, these issues exist, and the crisis is even more severe.

- Shortages are occurring daily, and *schools are being closed* because there are not enough teachers to staff the classrooms
- In May 2023, there were 98 midyear vacancies in the 26 First Nations served by Teach For Canada–Gakinaamaage, impacting thousands of students. That is an average of almost 4 teachers per school, and *in many communities that is the majority of teachers*
- As of October 2023, Teach For Canada–Gakinaamaage's Community Partner Job Board has a minimum of 51 job postings for the ongoing school year, meaning that less than half the vacancies from the end of the previous school year were filled
- As a whole, while the number of First Nations schools is equivalent to less than 4% of all public schools in Canada, they accounted for 21% of unfilled teaching positions on Education Canada and ApplyToEducation websites at the end of the 2023 school year

Teach For Canada–Gakinaamaage partners with First Nations to recruit, prepare and support educators in northern communities through selection, practicums, secondments and by working with local teachers and teaching assistants. The organization supports educators personally and professionally through their commitment to remote First Nations schools. But competing with the public school system for a shrinking pool of educators is deeply impacted by layers of systemic barriers, economies of scale in teacher hiring and job security, and lack of awareness of the scale of the crisis. This, coupled with the remote location of communities relative to large urban centres, has made the situation untenable.

If Ontario's public schools, with their sizeable resources and stakeholder influence, are facing a shortage, governments and stakeholders must recognize the disproportionate impact of this crisis on First Nations. But while the public system is governed by the provincial Ministry of Education, the acute problem in Indigenous schools is split between an interconnected web of system stakeholders that must work together to solve it.

Teach For Canada–Gakinaamaage is calling on federal and provincial governments, faculties of education, and education stakeholders to immediately address this issue by taking the following steps:

Recruitment

- Return to a one-year Teacher College degree and increase the number of teachers being granted certification
- Allow fast-track certification for recent teacher graduates and for qualified foreign-trained teachers to work in First Nations
- Increase application and graduation rates in faculties of education
- Create secondment opportunities for public school teachers to go north



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- Create opportunities for retired teachers to teach in northern schools
- Allow educators to move between school boards and First Nations without an impact on their seniority
- Recognize the reciprocal benefits of a cultural and pedagogical exchange with public school educators going north

Supports

- Partner with Teach For Canada–Gakinaamaage to support northern educators and provide preparation for working in the north through the Summer Enrichment Program
- Ensure job security, pension and benefits security, and equitable salary levels for teachers that wish to go north
- Raise awareness among public school educators of these opportunities, and encourage the benefits of that reciprocal pedagogical exchange

Incentives

- Provide student loan forgiveness for teachers going north, in the same way as governments have done for healthcare professionals
- Create degree programs and additional qualifications for practicum placements in First Nation schools
- Offer increased compensation or incentives in First Nations experiencing shortages

Collaborative Discourse

- Recognize that this crisis is a matter of reconciliation, where the solutions are meaningful and actionable
- Recognize that it will take a collaborative approach by multiple levels of government and stakeholders
- Recognize the shared need for increased teacher supply beyond the public system, and the reciprocal benefits of shared learning
- Recognize that the small size and remote locations of many First Nations make it impossible to compete for educators on an equal playing field with public systems
- Recognize that these imbalances in system resources and size should never impact the educational opportunities for any child

Murray Sinclair, as Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, made it clear that education is a matter of reconciliation.

“It is clear to us all now that many of our challenges today stem from what was done to us in the past. Education is what got us here and education is what will get us out.”

Teach For Canada–Gakinaamaage is guided by First Nations community leadership, and will continue to partner with them and work tirelessly to address the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action related to education. We call upon governments, faculties and stakeholders to do the same. We know that working together, in partnership, can help bring down these barriers and address the current teacher shortage crisis facing First Nations schools, and the broader public education system in Ontario.

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