

For immediate release

Answering the Call: First Nations-Led Summer Enrichment Program Prepares Teachers for Life, Learning, and Relationships in Northern First Nations

July 10, 2026 – Thunder Bay, ON – In First Nations education, relationships are at the heart of learning. Yet across northern and remote First Nations, recruiting and retaining qualified teachers remains one of the greatest challenges facing First Nations education. While many educators answer the call to teach in the North, too often they arrive without the preparation needed to build lasting relationships, learn from the community, and remain beyond their first year.

For more than a decade, Gakino'amaage's First Nations-led [Summer Enrichment Program](#) has helped address that challenge by preparing certified teachers before they enter the classroom. From July 19–25, educators preparing to teach in northern First Nations will gather on the traditional territory of Fort William First Nation to learn through sessions led by Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and experts in First Nations education, with learning shaped by the voices and priorities of the [First Nations](#) Gakino'amaage serves.

Since 2015, more than 300 certified teachers have completed the Program. A decade of [Gakino'amaage](#) data shows this culturally grounded preparation is one of the strongest predictors of teacher retention, contributing to a 96% first-year teacher retention rate, with many teachers choosing to remain in community well beyond their initial commitment.

This year, Gakino'amaage has expanded online learning opportunities that allow teachers to explore topics such as community governance, language learning, literacy, wellbeing, counselling, and supporting diverse learners at their own pace. By the time they arrive, participants are better prepared to learn, connect, and contribute, while the flexible format extends access to these teachings beyond the in-person cohort.

The Summer Enrichment Program continues to evolve, deepening land-based learning, centring First Nations knowledge and leadership, and laying the foundation for ongoing mentorship and support throughout participants' first two years in the North.

Program Highlights: Culture, Classroom, and Community

Throughout the week, participants engage in learning centred around three interconnected themes.

Culture: Participants engage with First Nations knowledge, histories, languages, and land-based learning opportunities that foster deeper understanding and reflection.

Classroom: Through sessions on literacy, student wellbeing, trauma-informed practice, and supporting diverse learners, participants strengthen their practice for teaching in northern First Nations.

Community: Participants join a national network of educators committed to strengthening First Nations education, with access to mentorship, professional learning, and peer connections that continue well beyond the week.

For the First Nations schools welcoming educators this fall, preparation is about more than professional readiness. As Stephan Doyon, Principal of Deer Lake First Nation School, explains:

"Some teachers, even with 10 or 15 years of experience, may feel like they know everything, but in a new place, this can never be the case. [Teachers] need to use [their] experience, listen, ask a lot of questions, and support local community understandings." — **Stephan Doyon, Principal, Deer Lake First Nation School**

"For more than a decade, First Nations have guided the evolution of the Summer Enrichment Program, ensuring educators arrive ready to listen, build relationships, and learn alongside the Nations they serve. What makes the Summer Enrichment Program unique isn't just what teachers learn—it's who they learn from. That First Nations-led approach has shaped the Program from the very beginning. When teachers arrive with that foundation, they're more likely to remain in community, contribute their own gifts, and build relationships that support student success."
— **Deanna Matthews, President, Gakino'amaage**

Summer Enrichment Program alum often describe the Program as filling the gaps left by traditional teacher education. Beyond preparing teachers for the classroom, they say it helped them better understand community life.

"From the beginning, I felt welcomed by both the staff and community members... [The Summer Enrichment Program] reminded me of the importance of connecting learning to culture, community, and the land in ways that are meaningful for students... [The traditional hide tanning session] reminded me how powerful community-based learning can be in building relationships and fostering a sense of belonging."

— Andrea Cameron-Plante, Gakino'amaage Teacher and 2025 Summer Enrichment Program Participant

The Gakino'amaage team looks forward to welcoming this year's Summer Enrichment Program Cohort to Thunder Bay as excitement builds for new journeys in northern First Nations this fall.

Media Opportunities

Interview opportunities are available with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous language speakers, education experts, members of Gakino'amaage's Board of Directors and staff, and teachers preparing to teach in northern First Nations this fall.

About [Gakino'amaage](#)

Gakino'amaage is a national non-profit organization that partners with northern First Nations to recruit, prepare, and support exceptional, committed teachers. Through First Nations-led teacher preparation and ongoing support, Gakino'amaage helps educators build meaningful careers in northern First Nations while contributing to student success, as defined by First Nations. Learn more at teachforcanada.ca.

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Contact: Meredith Stapon
Senior Director of Communications
meredith@teachforcanada.ca
416-562-4402