

Regional Multicultural Youth Council



Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario

VOICES OF YOUTH 2023 PROJECT Lost, Forgotten, or Still Connected?

**Indigenous youths' perspectives on their education before
and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way forward!**

“Remember that hope is a powerful weapon even when all else is lost.” Nelson Mandela

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2023

*Mayor's Community Safety Award
The Outstanding Community Project Award*

is presented to

***Regional Multicultural Youth Council &
Nishnawbe Aski Nation Oshkqatisak Youth
Council***

for

their outstanding leadership, dedication and commitment to community safety and well-being, as demonstrated through their "Voices of Youth Project", which gathered and amplified the voices and experiences of youth through the COVID-19 pandemic, provided training for peer mentors, and created safer spaces for youth to build trusting relationships, counter negative peer pressure, and connect with supports to realize their full potential.

Ken Boshcoff

Mayor Ken Boshcoff



**CITY OF
Thunder Bay**
Superior by Nature

We dedicate the Voices of Youth Project to Dr. Goyce Kakegamic, an educator, Elder, and adult ally for all children and youth, committed to their education and training for a brighter future.

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PREAMBLE

Quotations:

(1) *“When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents, who are savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who has learned to read and write.”*

Sir John A. MacDonald, 1879

(2) *“ ... he legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today ... We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, that it created a void in many lives and communities... We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow... Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience.”*

Prime Minister Steven Harper, June 11, 2008

(3) *“Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can make for our children.”*

Chief Sittingbull

(4) *Aboriginal people often say, ‘Our children are our future.’ By extension, then, the future depends on the effectiveness of education. Education shapes the pathways of thinking, transmits values as well as facts, teaches language and social skills, helps release creative potential and determines productive capacities.*

(ROYAL COMMISSION ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLES, 1996A, P.82)

(5) *“Education will create knowledge and from knowledge will come understanding. From understanding will come respect – both self-respect for Indigenous people and mutual respect for all.”*

Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

(6) *“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”*

Nelson Mandela

(7) *“The battle for Indian children will be won in the classroom, not on the streets or on horses. The students of today are our warriors of tomorrow.”*

Wilma Mankiller, CHEROKEE

“The world is constantly changing. One of the strengths of Indian people has been our adaptability. In today’s world, education is what we need to survive. We need doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists. We can become these things and still live in a cultural way. We need to live in two worlds; the educated world and the Indian cultural world. Education will help protect our land, our people’s health, and provide knowledge for our people. We must teach reading, writing and arithmetic. Also, we must teach the language, the culture, the ceremony, and the tradition of our people”.

Statistics:

(1) Our high school dropout rate is 'ten times' higher than what Canadians expect. In Canada, high school drop-out rates average 5-14% and increase to 50% or more in low-income communities. Each year, thousands of students across Canada dropout of high school according to the 2016 Canadian Census. *Pathways to Education, September 2019*

(2) "The number of Aboriginal youth dropping out of high school has improved somewhat from 48% to 41%. However, this number is still appalling when you compare it to the overall Canadian dropout rate of 10%. On reserves, the dropout rate is 58%! Achievement in the Prairies and North-western Ontario was generally worse than the national average."

Toronto Star, Friday May 16, 2014

(3) "The Auditor General's report on Indigenous Education tells how far this issue has fallen off the national radar. The report made it clear the government has been constantly misrepresenting Indigenous rates...The government expresses Indigenous graduation rates as a percentage of those who started grade 12, producing a shockingly low rate of 45%. But the actual number should be a per-centage of those who start high school, a calculation that would produce a graduation rate of 25%".

Ken Coates, MacDonald-Laurier Institute/Canadian Research Chair, June, 2022

(4) "Indigenous students from some First Nations communities have a startlingly high dropout rate of 80%". "Educational Challenges for First Nation Children in Thunder Bay Schools – Let the Dreaming Begin."

John Hogson, Ph.D. and Nadine Hedican (2021)

(5) More than 80% of young offenders in the federal correctional system have below grade 10 education and 65% have less than grade 8.. It costs on average \$371.000 a day and \$115.00.00 a year to keep a prisoner in jail. *Statistics Canada and Correctional Service Canada*

(6) "Of all of the males in federal and state prisons, 80% do not have a high school diploma. There is a direct correlation with a lack of high school education and incarceration. One in ten male dropouts between the ages of 16 to 24 are either in prison or in juvenile detention. Rather than spending tax dollars on incarcerating these dropouts, funding should be focused on encouraging them to complete their high school education."

High school dropouts more likely to go to prison' by Izza Choudhry, Opinion Editor, March 19, 2018

(7) "98% of girls in Saskatchewan youth jails were Indigenous. Upwards of 70% of inmates in Manitoba jails were Indigenous. 50% of all women in federal are now Indigenous despite Indigenous women making only 2% of Canada's female population."

Corey Shefman, lawyer for Indigenous peoples, persons and organizations–Olthuis Kleer Townshend LLP

(8) "Up to 75% of victims of sex crimes in First Nations communities are females under the age of 18; 50% of those are under 14; and almost 25% of those are younger than seven years of age. The incidence of child sexual abuse in some First Nations communities is as high as 75-80% for girls under eight years old."

Melanie Goodchild, RMYC founding President & co-ordinator of Nishnawbe Aski Nation. Decade for Youth Development Office, Wawatay News, June 17, 2004

FOREWORD by NAN Deputy Grand Chief Bobby Narcisse

Last summer, Oshkaatisak (All Youth) Council and the Regional Multicultural Youth Council conducted a Voices of Youth Project to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) youth. My office wanted to hear youth voices on how school closures, online learning, and social isolation affected them.

We heard the stories. Many students had problems doing their school work at home due to inadequate technology and poor internet connection. Others struggled to hear, learn, and understand what was being taught virtually. Family members could not help them because they were not familiar with today's subjects and course materials. Consequently, many students did not get their full credits in a timely manner and will need assistance to catch up. In addition, the youth were unable to access guidance counselors in person to choose career paths, select professions, or decide on potential employment prospects.

Our First Nations children have been struggling in the mainstream education system for many years with disproportionate school drop-out rates. Indigenous students have the worst school drop-out rate in the country. About 80% of students in some First Nations communities do not complete high school. This is a serious problem because one needs a good education or get into a trade to participate in the modern economy.

Indigenous children can no longer live solely on hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering as their grandparents did. Today, they have to complete high school, go for post-secondary education, or get into trades training to develop professional skills and have good paying jobs to have successful futures. We need to have our own well-educated and qualified professionals to fill job vacancies in our short-staffed and under-serviced communities. This will help address poverty and improve the quality of life among Indigenous peoples.

It is a sad reality that more than 80% of young offenders in Canadian jails have less than grade 10 education and 65% have less than grade 8. The trend is that Indigenous youths who drop out of school end up in the correctional system as the following figures show:

- *Ninety per cent (98%) of girls in some jails in our region are Indigenous.*

- *Fifty percent (50%) -- that is half of all female prisoners in federal jails are Indigenous women when our female population in Canada is only 2 percent*
- *Seventy percent (70%) of inmates in our region's jails are Indigenous when we are just 5 percent of the Canadian population.*

We must be concerned that a majority of our students who struggled during the pandemic will give up and not complete their schooling. This is a problem we need to address now so that they do not dropout and add to the jail population. We must motivate and support our children to stay in school, encourage them to help each other to graduate and become professionals. Traumatic stories from Residential School survivors influence our perception of the education system and dull the appetite to attend school. However, today we are responsible for running our schools, and the lifestyle of the future requires completing at least high school. We must give hope to students who lost ground during the pandemic and those who quit school to continue on their educational journey and graduate.

The Voices of Youth Project came up with recommendations that include the following:

1. *Creating Student Ambassadors/Peer Mentors in our schools to engage other students and motivate them to attend school regularly; offer help to those who are struggling, lonely, being bullied, and losing hope; advocate for tutoring services, technological, and nutritional supports to help students realize their true learning potential and succeed at the same rate as others.*
 2. *Running summer school led by senior students providing peer support. Youth will be able to catch up on missing credits from the pandemic, improve their grades, and perform better in their classes.*
 3. *Having safe spaces for children and youth to spend time with positive role models and adult allies. Youth will receive advice, guidance, support, and leadership training to engage their peers to plan and organize activities to promote mental wellness, as well as reduce boredom, pressure to join gangs, misuse of substances, vandalism, etc.*
- *Oshkaatisak and the RMYC are committed to improving graduation rates, and reducing the numbers of Indigenous youths in jails, in care, committing suicide, and those caught in negative lifestyles. As the Deputy Grand Chief responsible for youth, education and social services, I want to work with NAN communities and community leaders to develop youth groups and train young leaders to work with peers to deal with the challenges NAN is dealing with. We must support and empower our children to break negative cycles, work together to create healthy communities, and give them hope for a brighter future.*

VOICES OF YOUTH 2023 PROJECT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Voices of Youth 2023 Project, overseen by the RMYC and in collaboration with the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Oshkaatisak (All Youth) Council, endeavoured to gather stories about the educational experiences of Indigenous students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indigenous youth leaders spearheaded the project and developed strategies to engage their peers to share their stories and give input on ways to improve their education.

The immersive approach aimed to foster meaningful connections with First Nations students in Northwestern Ontario and provide them opportunities to share personal experiences about their schooling and the education system. This was done through surveys, youth forums, focus groups and individual interviews. We also reviewed studies and reports on Indigenous education before the pandemic for reference. Simultaneously, insights were sought from urban-dwelling Indigenous youth and those who had relocated to the City of Thunder Bay from outlying reserves for high school education. Both groups had similar struggles in the mainstream education system.

A 2021 report by John Hogson and Nadine Hedican titled “Educational Challenges for First Nation Children in Thunder Bay Schools – Let the Dreaming Begin” revealed that Indigenous youths had a startlingly high dropout rate of 80%. From earlier Voices of Youth forums, we heard about the difficulties Indigenous students faced navigating the education system on and off reserves. In the light of school closures during the pandemic and the introduction of virtual classes, we wanted to get a clearer picture of how social isolation and online learning affected students who were already struggling to stay in school. Team leaders at the RMYC were able to empathize and relate to the struggles associated with online learning during the pandemic.

Excerpt by one of the RMYC Peer Mentors and Project Leaders:

“My name is Kamryn Woloschuk, a team leader with the RMYC. I am a post-secondary student from Thunder Bay. I studied psychology in University for two years, but took a hiatus during the pandemic because I found virtual classes to be less conducive to my learning style. That is to say, I totally relate to the students who struggled with learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since 2020, I have been actively involved as a peer mentor with the RMYC, where I oversee the summer work experience program that incorporates a summer school initiative we started for students who wanted to earn course credits. My responsibilities have included coaching students, providing guidance and sharing experiences to support them as they work on individual or group projects and pursue their educational goals. This entails substantial one-on-one mentoring sessions where we discuss their challenges, ambitions and aspirations for the future. Students who take summer courses work with their peers to get assignments done and receive guidance and tutoring from post-secondary students to navigate their coursework.

A significant proportion of the youth we work with are Indigenous. Through summer school and student job training, we have gathered information from Indigenous youths about their struggle with education. Their thoughts, observations and experiences included the under-funded lower standard of education on reserves with transient foreign teachers and under-qualified staff, dysfunctional home-life due to the impacts of residential schools, poor quality of life lacking basic social amenities such as clean drinking water and recreational facilities, the high cost of healthy food-stuffs, and their over-crowded third-world-like living conditions. I compiled this information in an earlier report the RMYC shared with the Ontario Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce and Premier Doug Ford for consideration.

This report combines what we heard and learned during the Voices of Youth 2023 project and the stories shared by Indigenous youths involved in earlier summer programs. We are presenting candid comments from conversations with the students about their problems, challenges and barriers to succeed in the education system. We have included their ideas on the changes they want to see, and the supports they need to succeed.”

The RMYC’s strategy to enhance the success of Indigenous students:

The RMYC believes that positive role models play a pivotal role in influencing and shaping the experiences of younger individuals. This can be a benevolent teacher who dedicates extra time to tutor and discuss social skills with their students, an older peer passionate about sharing culture to build self-esteem, or a dedicated family member offering unwavering support through challenging times. Role models serve as wellsprings of inspiration and motivation for students as they aspire to follow in their footsteps.

Having positive role models in Indigenous communities devastated by the impacts of residential schools is critical for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada Calls to Action. This is especially important in light of disheartening stories such as survivors sharing resentment from being taken away from home to attend school, discovery of unmarked graves of young Indigenous students, and Orange Shirt Days which serves as a reminder of the restrictions and controls imposed on Indigenous students.

Likewise, Indigenous families familiar with residential schools may not be reluctant see their children follow the same footsteps and leave home to attend school. Families may not encourage their children to seek support and stay in school if they are homesick, even if they are attending First Nations-run schools such as Dennis Franklin Cromarty (DFC) High School, Matawa Education and Care Centre (MECC) or Seventh Fire Junior High and Secondary School in Thunder Bay.

There is a need to amplify messages about Indigenous involvement and control of their education, and that sending students away for schooling today is not a repeat of what happened during the residential school era. Education provides knowledge and opens doors to career opportunities, better jobs, higher incomes and a better standard of living. Unfortunately, the deaths of Indigenous boarding students in Thunder Bay revived fear in First Nations communities about sending children away to school.

Evidently, more resources are needed to better prepare and support young Indigenous who are away from home. Adequate care is needed to ensure their safety and avoid situations that led to the Seven Youth Inquest. After testifying at the Seven Youth Coroner's Inquest, the Jury recommended funding for an After School Program at DFC, while MANWO covered the training costs, stipends and honoraria for the student Peer Mentors. With the help of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the RMYC was able to get Pathways to Education Canada to sponsor the Peer Mentor initiative and expand it to all high schools in Thunder Bay.

The RMYC's goal to support youths to stay in school and graduate was brought forth by the founding-president, Melanie Goodchild, a high school student from Pic River First Nation. She was aware of the struggles of Indigenous youths in the education system and that many were dropping out of school and ending up in a cycle of unemployment, poverty and despair.

The RMYC has since been engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in surveys, consultations, and discussions to understand the issues. This has enabled the youth council to gather information directly from students about their problems, the barriers they face and the supports they need to succeed in the education system. Indigenous youths want special programs, culturally appropriate services provided in a safe space and non-racist climate where they feel welcome, accepted, valued, are encouraged to thrive and empowered to deal with challenges of studying in a large city away from home.

With experience gained from working with new immigrant youths, the RMYC initiated a Reception and Orientation Program to welcome Indigenous students to urban schools, and reduce loneliness, culture shock, and boredom. This provided social activities to interact with students from different backgrounds, opportunities for peer support, study groups for academic assistance, and after school activities to enhance student safety and wellness in the city.

The RMYC's work with Indigenous youths has been endorsed by First Nations leaders seeking success stories comparable to newcomer youths involved with the youth council. Nishnawbe Aski Nation Chiefs-in-Assembly passed a unanimous resolution supporting the RMYC's initiatives with their students. The youth council uses a youth-to-youth approach to better connect with Indigenous students. Training young leaders and developing role models as positive influences is an effective way to promote good habits, positive behavior, and positive attitudes. Positive peer influences can improve school attendance, retention, and graduation rates among Indigenous students. This can help stop the inter-generational cycle created by the residential schools.

Additionally, the RMYC runs an After School Program at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School – a First Nations-run school for students from remote northern students who are billeted in boarding homes while attending school in the city of Thunder Bay. This provides the opportunity for RMYC members to first-hand learn about the challenges First Nations boarding students struggle with in order to engage the students to find solutions. Building on the successes of school initiatives such as Natural Helpers and Peer Helpers, the RMYC has been training Student Ambassadors/Peer Mentors to empower Indigenous students to support each other. This complements the After School Program to enhance the wellness, safety, graduation and achievement of the students.

The After School Program and the Student Ambassadors have improved student retention and graduation rates at DFC. Despite the success story, there is no stable funding to train and sustain Student Ambassadors/Peer Mentors when older students graduate and move on. In 2022, Shkoday took over the Pathways Program as the lead Indigenous group and the RMYC lost the funding. Fortunately, the Students Commission of Canada Art of Work Project came to the rescue and sponsored some Peer Mentors. but lost others due to a lack of funds. On-going funding is needed to build resilience, and incentives such as pay, stipends and honoraria to retain trained young local talent working with their peers to make a difference. We risk of losing well trained and skilled peer mentors to other commercial enterprises. The lack of stable funding disrupts continuity of peer to peer recruitment and the passing down of skills and nuances gained through experience. Sharing abilities to connect with shy, unmotivated, at risk youth and developing a nurturing relationship to influence, inspire and guide them is critical for success. Thus, retaining skilled peer mentors until they graduate yields best results.

A call to action -- A collaborative approach:

This report endeavours to show how young people can engage their peers, work together to challenge the status-quo, and support each other to make a difference. Quotations in the Preamble provide the context of how education of Indigenous youths should be perceived, with rays of hope that it is seen as essential for a better and brighter future. Statistics that follow paint a dismal picture of how Indigenous youth are making out in mainstream schools, their social environments, and what happens if or when they drop-out. This information was compiled before COVID-19, and school attrition rate was already quite high. The Voices of Youth 2023 Project confirms that school closures and online learning had a devastating impact on the success of First Nations students in our region. Therefore, current problems experienced by Indigenous youths who lack a good education may be compounded, and the negative cycles will be perpetuated unless we intervene and start doing things differently.

According to Statistics Canada and Correctional Service Canada, more than 80% of young offenders in federal correctional system have below grade 10 education and 65% have less than grade 8. Northwestern Ontario is part of Corrections Canada Winnipeg District where upwards of 70% of inmates in jails are Indigenous. The Thunder Bay Parole Office is affiliated with the Prairie Region and reports to Saskatoon where 98% of girls in Saskatchewan youth jails are Indigenous. The region also has the largest number of youths affiliated with gangs.

At a November 2, 2023 press conference in Ottawa, Correctional Investigator Dr. Ivan Zinger acknowledged that Canadian prisons were disturbingly and unconsciously Indigenized and the problem is getting worse. He referred to the disproportionate and growing number of Indigenous individuals behind bars as among Canada's most pressing human rights issues. This has been featured prominently in all public reports issued by his office over the past decade. He went on to say that 50% of all women in federal prisons are now Indigenous despite Indigenous women making only 2% of Canada's female population. In 2013, this number was 25% and in 2018 it had risen to 43%. A majority of women offenders are survivors of physical and sexual abuse and trauma.

A study by RMYC founding president, Melanie Goodchild, on introducing a Girl Power Program in NAN communities revealed that "75% of victims of sex crimes in First Nations communities were females under the age of 18; 50% of those were under 14 years old; and almost 25% of those were younger than 7 years of age. Incidences of child sexual abuse in some First Nations communities were as high as 75 to 80% for girls under 8 years old." These numbers add to the high incidences of school drop-outs, incarceration, trauma, mental health, suicides, substance abuse, teen pregnancies, and kids in care.

A report by the Thunder Bay Teen Pregnancy Coalition (2001) stated that the provincial teen pregnancy rate was 44.9 per 1,000 girls aged 15-19, and was 54 per 1,000 girls in Thunder Bay. A study by the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres pointed out that "urban Indigenous girls as young as 11 years old were having sex, and the alarming rates of unwanted pregnancies were perpetuating the cycle of poverty and, despair".

Several reports revealed that "rampant sexual activity among teens was linked to drug and alcohol abuse, related to a past history of sexual abuse, peer pressure, and a lack of recreational programs." Many of the teens becoming pregnant were children of teen parents and lacked parenting skills contributing to poverty and cycles of social problems. Other reports indicate high numbers of newborns in Northwestern Ontario with preventable disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. Some were suffering from prenatal opioid and substance exposure causing drug-addiction withdrawal symptoms and baby apprehensions that were increasing the demand for foster homes.

According to the 2021 Census, 53.8% of Canadian children in foster care were Indigenous yet nationally, Indigenous children accounted for 7.7% of all children 14 years of age and younger. In Manitoba 91% of the children in care were Indigenous. Child welfare figures reveal that there are more Indigenous children in care today than those who went to residential schools. A shortage of local foster homes leads to children being relocated. Detachment issues among foster kids lure them to join gangs to belong to a family, and the crossover effect has been acknowledged when youth transition from care into the justice system and jails, than graduate from high school to pursue post-secondary education or training in trades.

The mandate of the RMYC and MANWO is to advance multiculturalism, promote social justice, and advocate for equal opportunities, equal access, and equal participation by all citizens in every aspect of Canadian society. Since the release of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, the “Calls to Action” have been incorporated in our plan of action to enhance the status of Indigenous peoples.

Crime and public safety invoke fear and create tensions that divide communities on racial, cultural or economic lines, and undermine efforts to build bridges of understanding, co-operation and respect. What people see, hear and experiences in the community and the eyesores in neighbourhood streets feed negative stereotypes that generate racist attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination. Anti-Indigenous racism restricts equality in education, housing, health, employment, business, and other services. Ignorance of Treaties, inherent rights, and the true history of Indigenous peoples reinforce systemic racism in our institutions. This undermines the upward mobility of Indigenous peoples. As the economic disparity widens, there are calls to be proactive by redirecting funds from costly services such as policing and invest in education and social programs that will uplift the less privileged from desperation.

After reading this report, we cannot pretend that we are not aware of the link between school dropouts and incarceration rates and how this is affecting Indigenous groups and our perception of them. A good education opens the mind and lays a strong foundation for social transformation to build a brighter future and a higher standard of living. We need to collaborate and support Indigenous youths to stay in school and re-engage those impacted by the pandemic to graduate. Otherwise, the over-representation of Indigenous people in prison will continue and they will be judged negatively and wallow in misery, despair, and hopelessness.

The TRC report provides a road-map to move forward. Calls to Action #66 states: “We call upon the federal government to establish multi-year funding for community-based youth organizations to deliver programs on reconciliation and establish a national network to share information and best practices.” All levels of government, institutions, and benevolent citizens should act accordingly and invest in the youth to create new beginnings.

This report covers stories we heard from First Nations youths and their ideas on what they need to succeed in the education system. For those not familiar with life on reserves, we have included information to highlight the Third-World-like living and social conditions that impact the learning potential of students (See Appendix “C”). We collected comments from parents and what First Nations Education Authorities are doing to support their students to stay in school and the gaps to be addressed to have more graduates.

A detailed description of the RMYC’s work with Indigenous youths is provided for reference. This is to show Indigenous communities what we have been doing and how we have done it working with Indigenous young leaders. The aim is encourage them to build the capacity of their youth and create peer leaders to work with children and youth in their communities. The RMYC’s initiatives have focused on providing communication skills, life skills, social- skills, urban-skills, learning skills, employment skills, as well as leadership and organizational development. Young leaders as role models have potential as positive pioneers to make a fresh start and empower their peers to act accordingly to enhance their wellness and improve the quality of life in their communities.

Indigenous groups cannot do this alone. Collaboration is critical to level the playing field for Indigenous children to have equal opportunity, equal access and equal participation in Canadian society. A good education is the passport to a prosperous future. New strategies are required to address the legacy of residential schools and heal from inter-generational trauma so that the current and future generations have better prospects in life. It is critical that children and youth are engaged as part of the solution to the problems they face. Young people are a dependent population with no financial resources to help themselves. All levels of government including Band Councils must invest in the education system for Indigenous children to succeed as other students. Training young leaders as school ambassadors and promoting them as positive role models will make a difference.

VOICES OF YOUTH 2023: PROJECT OUTREACH

The RMYC and the NAN Oshkaatisak (All Youth) Council made field trips to connect with the youth and engage them in the project. Visits to Neskantaga and Mishkeegogamang First Nations were joint ventures with NAN. In Neskantaga, we were joined by Deputy Grand Chief Bobby Narcisse, a founding member of the RMYC now responsible for the Education and Youth Portfolio on the NAN Executive. We participated in the community celebrations for National Indigenous People's Day on June 21 and talked about the impacts of the pandemic on students.

In July, we travelled to Mishkeegogamang to participate in a week-long youth conference. All activities were held at the community centre and included workshops, games, and a variety of cultural and recreational events. The impact of the pandemic was quite evident during our Voices of Youth presentation. We asked the youth to write something about themselves -- the challenges they were dealing with and the supports they needed to reach their full potential, be happy, and succeed in life. School closures were detrimental to the youth, as evidenced by a nine-year old who could not write because she never learned this in school.

Additionally, the RMYC visited Fort William and Gull Bay First Nations to attend community festivals and volunteer at the events. We had an information booth and talked with youth and their parents about the pandemic. We learned that some students were behind in their courses. One student said she should have graduated by now, but still needed fifteen credits she was unable to get due to the pandemic. She did not know how she was going to do it or how long it would take and contemplated quitting school.

Unfortunately, a joint trip to Marten Falls First Nation was postponed due to a death in the community. Oshkaatisak later made the visit alone and consulted with the youth to gather their input. Similarly, a visit to Eabametoong First Nation was cancelled when the community was evacuated to Thunder Bay after the water-treatment plant burned down. However, we were able to consult the residents during their month-long stay in the city. The youth talked about limited learning when schools were closed. They disliked online learning and social isolation affected their academic performance and their mental health suffered as a result.

Summer Work Experience and Summer School in Thunder Bay

During the summer holidays 49 students signed up for the RMYC's summer jobs skills development program and summer school. We rented Vale Community Centre to host employment skills development and summer school. Two-thirds of the youth were from 15 First Nations sponsored by Indigenous agencies and Band Councils to learn work skills. These youth, along with those hired from Round Lake and Sandy Lake First Nations, provided input for the for the Voices of Youth 2023 Project.

Twelve Indigenous students registered for summer school offered virtually through Wahsa Distance Education and the Lakehead District School Board. Some students worked on unfinished assignments to graduate and others took full courses to earn credits. We hired a peer mentor (studying to be a teacher) as a tutor to supervise the students and assist them with their course work. Summer school began at 10:00 a.m. and we provided breakfast to encourage students to attend classes on time. We also provided bus tickets for transportation and lunch for those staying for the afternoon session.

The Summer Jobs Program also started at 10:00 a.m. for senior students to plan activities and set up the work schedule for the day. First-time workers came at 1:00 p.m. and stayed until 5:00 p.m. Some youth were initially shy and scared to work in the city. However, they were able to shadow the older youth with more work experience. This mentorship helped the new workers learn to focus and complete various tasks. They were involved in planning social and cultural events, organizing recreational activities, and working in community gardens. There were presentations on work-place safety and workshops to build self-esteem and self-confidence as well as develop social skills, life-skills, and communication skills to recruit volunteers and encourage participation in RMYC's Girl Power and Band of Brothers.

A majority of Indigenous youth did not have a commercial work-ethic to thrive in an urban workplace. We taught them the importance of punctuality, to call in if they were going to be late for work, and to report if they were sick or going to be absent. We devised time sheets to enter arrival and departure times, and they recorded what they did each day so that we could monitor individual progress and keep track of skills they had mastered. We assisted them to open a bank account and learn how to budget and manage their finances.

A majority of Indigenous youths were very naive about employment and related it to attending school without realizing the differences in consequences. It is normal for teachers chase after students to attend school, and those who show up late or miss class periods can catch up on the assignments or do home work to complete the school work. Teachers also do their best to get truant students back in class. Employers on the other hand demand loyalty and employees are responsible to show-up on time, do their work diligently. Being late for work or not showing up at your place of employment on a regular basis without cause gets you dismissed. In addition employees are paid based on the hours worked. We had to explain to the students that their pay was not a flat daily or weekly rate. They expected the same amount of money on each paycheck regardless of the hours they worked, and were surprised to learn that the figures fluctuated based on when they showed up for work. Unfortunately, we had to let some youths go because of being constantly late and poor attendance.

We noticed that most of the youth were hooked on social media and struggled to stay off their phones. This distracted them from concentrating on their job and listening to presentations. To combat this, we devised rules to limit access to phones during work hours, and created a phone storage box to reduce the temptation.

We taught the students to write a cover letter to apply for employment, prepare a resume and conducted mock exercises to prepare for job interviews. We assisted them with donated clothes to dress appropriately for work. We organized activities to acquire workplace skills such as body language, attitude, team work, follow instructions, pay attention, take initiative, dependability, responsibility, and accountability. This would help the students survive, thrive, and excel in a highly competitive and performance-driven work world.

Our observations have enabled us to develop an Indigenous Peer Mentoring/Student Ambassador Program for urban students. Potential peer mentors with good character and charisma will be selected in collaboration with Band Councils, education authorities, schools, and social workers. To yield better outcomes, both high school and post-secondary students will be selected as peer mentors. These students will then be trained to build their capacity and resilience as leaders, develop self confidence, self discipline, communication, and net-working skills. These peer mentors will help make the youth-to-youth approach more effective in inspiring and motivation other students.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS, SURVEYS, AND CONSULTATIONS

1. RESPONSES FROM STUDENTS' INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

How were you affected by not going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Dropped out, quit studying, gave up school
- Kept me back a year, did not get the credits, lost years of school
- Did not do any schooling, missed my courses, did not have access to in-person school services, did not learn much online
- Lost motivation, struggled to learn independently, was unfocused, slept a lot
- Missed my friends, missed my school
- Felt down, bored, lazy, isolated, stressed
- Got hooked to video games, distracted by gaming

What problems or difficulties did you have with on-line learning?

- Struggled doing written work, it was hard to work alone, no teachers to help me
- Felt isolated being at home, down, and depressed
- Difficult home situation and family issues
- Problems with due-dates, missed deadlines, being online for online classes
- Problems focusing, unmotivated, apathy, difficulty concentrating
- Poor internet connectivity, no WiFi, no computer, problems operating a computer alone
- Have ADHD -- hard to understand information, difficult to follow instructions on line
- My schoolwork suffered, grades dropped
- Distractions at home, too much noise at home

If you struggled with virtual learning, what supports do you need to catch-up?

- Extra tutoring for assignments and written work, good tutor
- Safe place to study, better internet connection
- Access to school services, computer, teachers, tutors, food, gym
- Better mental health, need help to pay attention, support to stay focused
- Constant check-in from teachers, help from school/staff
- Summer school/courses
- One to one tutoring

2. COMMENTS FROM PARENTS AND CARE-GIVERS

We talked with parents to get their perspective on the pandemic and how it affected their children. It was a difficult time for parents because they were not used to students staying home for schooling and doing online courses. Many parents could not help their children with school work because they were not familiar with the subjects and course materials. Some were not computer-literate and could not assist their children to login.

Many parents did not supervise their children or check on their school work out of fear of creating tension in the home. They did not want to cause arguments by pressuring them to do school work when they were struggling and could not help them. The parents felt helpless when their children did not understand what they were learning online, there was poor internet connection, too many people living in the house, or younger siblings distracting older ones. Only a few parents said that they had their children on a study schedule to do their schoolwork for a given period during the day. Several did not ask how they were doing with their studies.

3. FEEDBACK FROM EDUCATION AUTHORITIES AND TRIBAL COUNCILS

Project leaders, Karlee Meekis and Summer Spade, contacted several Tribal Councils and Education Authorities by email and telephone for their input. Many were on holidays but Chapleau Cree, Constance Lake, Deer Lake, Eabametoong, Fort Albany, Fort William, Gull Bay, Kingfisher Lake, Moose Cree, Round Lake, and Sandy Lake responded.

Community apathy, a lack of parental support on and off reserves, as well as attitude towards education were common barriers to student success. Mental wellness, homesickness, trauma, addiction, and grief due to suicide and loss were common problems among students sent home for being a risk to themselves and others. Others dropped out for failing their courses due to increased social media use and online gaming. This became a major problem after the pandemic and distracted students not only from doing their school work but also from being engaged in physical and other social activities.

Education Authorities in Fort Albany and Moose Cree reported that their numbers of graduates were improving, but more work had to be done to increase the overall student success rate. m

The numbers of students struggling academically grew during the pandemic but there were measures in place to help their students. However, none had a formal summer school program to help them to catch up. Communities of Sandy Lake and Fort Albany ran literacy and writing camps for younger kids but not for high school students. Chapleau Cree had tutors to help students pass their courses and Constance Lake offered online courses as an option for credit recovery for students falling behind in their classes.

Communities such as Eabametoong needed more tutors to work with students and improve their academic performance and lay a stronger foundation for learning because the level of education on reserves was lower. They organized information sessions and invited past high school graduates and secondary school students to share with their younger peers their experiences about learning in larger urban schools. All the First Nations Education Authorities we contacted had incentives such as gifts, bursaries laptops, phones tablets, and so forth to reward graduates and inspire others to follow. However, the graduates needed more guidance, support and encouragement to transition successfully into post secondary education or into trades and learn to live independently to become part of Canada's professional workforce.

Chapleau Cree and Eabametoong organized exercises for students to prepare for high school in the city. Deer Lake arranged trips for graduating students to visit urban schools they would be attending and familiarize themselves with the city. All agreed that more needs to be done to better prepare their students to leave home and study in urban centres. They wanted a formal program for young students transitioning from living on a reserve to attend urban schools, including a dialogue on alcohol and drug abuse. This was very important because substances in urban centres were more potent and students who self-medicated to deal with trauma or pain were at risk of blackouts or overdose. Dependency on alcohol and drugs were common problems that caused many students to be sent home.

They all complained about inadequate resources and supports such as counseling and tutoring services to help their students do well academically on and off their communities. The priorities included mental health specialists in schools, help for students with disabilities including ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and treatment programs for addictions. They wanted parents to be engaged and communities to be more involved in supporting children to attend school regularly and reduce the high attrition on reserves.

Safer spaces for children and youth were critical for respite, wellness, safety, remedial supports, and after school programs. Land-based learning and activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, arts, and crafts were popular among students, and helped to improve school attendance and engaged them in their culture, language and traditions. The outdoors and cultural teachings had other side benefits to disengage the youth from the screen and the lure of algorithms which make electronics very appealing and distract students from focusing on their school work and concentrating on their studies.

The Education Authorities liked the idea of having peer mentors starting early in elementary school both on and off reserves. For students in urban centres, they wanted a youth-friendly resource guide with emergency numbers and key services to access for help, information, or support while studying far away from home. They recommended more opportunities for First Nations youths to volunteer and meet friendly people to teach them life-skills, social skills, and work-skills they are not used to on remote isolated reserves. They encouraged their students to attend career fairs and job exhibitions for exposure to new employment prospects for the future. Growing up in small reserves, the youth were shy and scared of the city, and need to participate in safe inclusive groups like the RMYC to feel accepted and gain self confidence.

PRIORITY ISSUES AND ANALYZING WHAT WE LEARNED

The following is a summary of what we heard from students in school, those who dropped out, and those sent home for a variety of reasons. While the pandemic was the theme of the project, other factors that had an impact on the youth were also brought up.

Learning:

All the Indigenous youth we consulted told us that it was difficult to learn. Their education suffered when schools were closed due to the pandemic and they had to move to virtual learning. They struggled to adapt to this mode of schooling even though Wahsa Distance Education and Keewatinook Internet High School existed in the region long before the pandemic. Virtual learning was more popular with adults who did not want to leave home or workplace to attend school. Younger students preferred in-class instruction and said that they learned better when they had direct help from teachers and school staff.

Learning on reserves revealed a host of social and technological barriers. Overcrowding in many homes was disruptive and not conducive to the peace and quiet students need to focus on school work. When the youth were not doing school work as expected, parents and caregivers were afraid to intervene because they did not want tension in the house. Students struggling with lack of motivation became more disengaged because they found it hard to participate in virtual classes and pay attention. Those who often skipped school acknowledged sleeping in more and missing their lessons. With no plan to make up for missed school work, they did not get the credits and some dropped out.

The youth mentioned having problems logging in for their classes due to poor internet service. It was difficult to do school work and complete their assignments when they could not properly hear words and comments over the computer. Other barriers included limited access to technological equipment and service repair. Students were not used to long detailed online lectures and many admitted to being distracted during classes and would end-up scrolling fun sites, playing games, texting, or chatting instead. Teachers and staff were caught off-guard and had to quickly adjust to teaching and communicating with students virtually. This was a problem on reserves where a majority of the teachers are not local, and come from large urban centres. Some speak with accents students find hard to understand creating communication and cultural barriers. The teacher turn-over is high as many move on to greener pastures elsewhere without getting accustomed to the social environment and bonding with the students.

On the other hand students felt that teachers were not helping them enough in their learning struggles online when they encountered difficulties to complete assignments at home alone. When they asked for help, they were met with long delays ranging from a few hours to days, or no response at all. Many students said they thrive with in-person learning and prefer having a mentor guiding and supervising their course work. A classroom setting enables them to get help instantly and focus of learning. Consequently, they did not do well at all with virtual instruction and remote support.

Mental Health:

Students felt that mental illnesses and overall poor mental health were prevalent among Indigenous children and youth.

Family health history, inter-generational trauma, home-life, a lack of healthy coping methods for stress, limited awareness about mental wellness, and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships all contribute to mental health issues. There is a serious shortage of professional community-based support and this allows mental health struggles to fester, worsen, and spread. When students come forward with mental health concerns, they are often met with long waiting times and they feel lost or forgotten.

The youth want mental health counsellors to be easily accessible on and off reserves. Indigenous youths need support and tools to cope with trauma and overcome very difficult social and economic realities including anti-Indigenous racism they regularly face. Wrap-around supports are needed from teachers, friends, mental health professionals, Elders, and families to give them hope, reinforce that they matter, and can achieve much more than what stereotypes make them up to be. Peer support groups can also alleviate loneliness.

First Nations communities in the region are losing their youth to suicide and many engage in self-harm and addictions. To prevent these deaths, youth want more talks on suicide awareness at school and in the community. Teachers, parents, care-givers, and students should all learn the signs of depression and crippling mental health problems. We should coach the youth to feel comfortable to ask for help, and train peer helpers to know that it is okay to tell adults if they are worried about a friend's mental health.

Substance Abuse:

An overwhelming majority of Indigenous youth we met were exposed to substance abuse at an early age from family members, peers, and other acquaintances. They saw adults drinking to cope with misery or drown their sorrow, to unwind after work or celebrate, and learned this coping strategy from them. Growing up surrounded by these behaviors, they adopted the lifestyle. Many used drugs and alcohol due to peer pressure or to numb pain of trauma, loss, rape, abuse, neglect, and so forth. Therefore, drinking alcohol, smoking, or abusing drugs from a young age are common habits and unfortunately, unsurprising. A majority of the youth we consulted did not take seriously the risks of being under the influence or the long-term consequences of addiction. The legalization of marijuana sent a message that cannabis was okay and the dangers to young developing brains were often overlooked.

Alcohol and drugs affect behaviour and character, and distract youth from concentrating on their education. The youth knew friends who got into trouble under the influence or were involved in criminal activities because of drugs and alcohol. Some joined gangs to get a job, sold drugs, or bootlegged alcohol to minors.

Schools are tackling the problem through presentations, in-school counseling services, and referrals to treatment programs. However, these services ceased when schools closed during the pandemic. As a result, many students relapsed, and substance abuse and addictions were worse during social isolation. Overwhelmed by trauma, poverty, and food insecurity, there were spikes in substance abuse and overdoses, and some babies were born with traces of drugs while others had substance withdrawal symptoms.

The youth want more substance prevention campaigns to reduce alcohol and drug abuse. Continuous education and messages on the dangers of experimenting with substances and warnings about dependence as the consequence of self medicating to cope should be targeted at minors. They should learn how alcohol, drugs, and prescription pills affect the brain and can lead to permanent damage to a young developing mind. Creating peer role models who use positive influence to promote healthy lifestyles, and social and recreation programs will help break the cycle of addiction devastating Indigenous communities.

Teen Pregnancy and Foster Care:

The youth we consulted were familiar with child welfare services by knowing someone who was or had been in care, or were themselves at one time wardens of the crown. They were aware of the stigma around foster care, and knew of peers they identify with who fell pregnant and had their babies apprehended. Being pregnant disrupted their education and even with the support of parents, having a child while in school is overwhelming and delays graduation.

Those who lose a child to foster care often struggle with the shame of having failed as a parent. Young women in particular often struggle to raise their children alone, and face the blame of failing to nurture and care for their babies. They self-medicate to numb the pain and indulge in negative lifestyles to cope with the apprehension which further reduces the chances of getting their baby or children back. This further raises the risk of them conceiving other babies with symptoms of addictions and other preventable diseases.

The rate of teenage pregnancy among Indigenous youths in the region is high and many lack parenting skills due to the legacy of residential schools. They fail to be responsible care-givers for their babies and do not have the mental capacity or financial resources to raise their children and many end up in care. A majority of foster kids in Canada are Indigenous and in Manitoba they make up 91%. Current figures reveal that there are more Indigenous kids in care today than all the children who went to residential schools. This has led to a constant demand for ideal foster homes by Indigenous child welfare agencies.

Proactive strategies are needed to break this trend. Schools and Indigenous communities should have more sex education, teach pregnancy prevention, and parenting skills to stop the cycle of child apprehensions and reduce the demand for foster homes. Schools should aim to accommodate teen mothers or set up programs with adequate resources to help them continue their schooling. The RMYC and Oshkaatisak should promote the Girl Power and Band of Brothers programs to engage boys and girls and support them to get a good education. Staying in school can delay early parenting, reduce the risks of child apprehension, human trafficking, poverty, spousal abuse, and the high incarceration rate of Indigenous women. A good education opens doors to better paying jobs and a better quality of life. In addition, women will be safer by not staying in abusive relationships for financial reasons.

Family Problems

Home and family life are very important because parents directly impact every facet of a child's life, including health, well-being, education and vision of success. Many indigenous youth lived in broken homes and with toxic family environments that caused mental health problems.

When the family is suffering from the effects of colonization and the inter-generational impacts of residential schools, how are the children supposed to become fully functional youths and responsible adults? Who is their example to know that going to school can be a positive experience for them to learn skills, respect, responsibility, and proper behaviour? If the family has drop-outs, addicts, abusers, and gang members who is there to teach the children that education is important and a passport to better jobs and a more successful future? If parents are struggling with low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence, who will be there to help the children believe they are a valuable human being and someone special, or that they can rise above that which they experience daily?

Indigenous children are growing up under colonization and in dysfunctional impoverished home environments damaged by the inter-generational impacts of residential schools, the 60's Scoop, and anti-Indigenous racism. The Government of Canada apologized for the harm done by Indian Residential Schools to Indigenous children and families which continues to affect them today (Appendix "C"). They struggle just to get a grasp on how to be successful at living a normal livelihood. The possibility of an extraordinary life is above their realm of thought, and opportunities for a better and brighter future are bleak. Over-crowding in homes where youth go out or stay up unsupervised at night so that working parents can sleep deprives them of opportunities to interact, get guidance, and learn from ideal adults. And sleeping during the day disrupts their schooling and prospects for future employment.

While family problems do not always mean being abusive or toxic, they may imply a lack of encouragement, motivation, and guidance to nurture and inspire children. For residential school survivors, sending children away for school to cities such as Thunder Bay is a scary thought that almost every parent living on the reserve has to deal with. It is therefore understandable that when their child expresses that they are struggling and lonely and want to come back home, parents do not fight this decision. The students dropout and return to their impoverished homes with limited opportunities to pursue higher education. This adds to the high statistics of school drop-outs and the over-representation of Indigenous peoples in jails.

Disconnection from Culture:

During the project we noticed that a lot of Indigenous youth did not feel connected enough to their culture. This disconnect can be attributed to colonization when Indigenous traditions were banned and the residential school influences by churches. Growing up on a reserve that has strong Christian beliefs or being raised in religious ways limited exposure to traditions. Access to new technology also played a role as they were immersed in mainstream lifestyles, saw how others were living and wanted to belong.

Many First Nations youths did not speak or understand their native languages, but there is growing interest to learn about their culture and heritage. Land acknowledgements, cultural rooms in schools, pow wows, drumming, land-based learning, ribbon shirts and skirts help to promote Indigenous pride among the youth. Schools are also offering Indigenous languages together with other subjects to promote Indigenous culture and preserve native languages.

Cultural workshops and activities such as ribbon skirt-making, beading, art, sewing regalia, and having traditional ceremonies can engage Indigenous youth and can be one of the catalysts that inspire them to participate and stay in school. Visits to Mishkeegogamang and Neskantaga during the project made us realize that the youth wanted their own ribbon skirts, regalia, etc. but lacked the resources and knowledge to make them. The appetite for Indigenous attire indicates pride in wearing traditional clothing to school or in public as do other cultural and religious groups such as Muslim, Sikh, African, and so forth. This is a positive turn around because not too long ago, many were embarrassed about their identity and ashamed to be associated with anything representing their culture and heritage. Schools can capitalize on promoting Indigenous culture to encourage student retention.

Isolation:

The pandemic caused restrictions to in-person contact and limited opportunities for normal face-to-face interaction. Students could not converse with classmates, teachers, friends, Elders, and so forth, which further isolated them from their social company. A lack of opportunities to hang out with friends and socialize in person affected their mental health. Those set to finish high school struggled to complete their community hours to graduate. Students who were looking forward to their graduation ceremonies were disappointed when the events were done virtually. They could not celebrate their accomplishments with family and friends in attendance.

Growing up on a reserve often creates lower social expectations, poor communication skills, and shyness among many youths. When students have to relocate to the city for high school, they are isolated from family, friends and their community. Moving to a large multicultural urban environment is scary and brings culture shock, fear, and anxiety. Young students tend to stay in their comfort zone, are shy, quiet, and afraid to mix with strangers. Limited interaction with city people delays the integration process. They retain the same habits and manners learned from their reserves and this lifestyle becomes a barrier that can isolate them from social networking and accessing the help they need in the city to thrive away from home.

School closures deprived potential graduates the opportunities to participate in career fairs and get in-person counselling or guidance on professions, trade options, or other career paths to pursue after high school. This left many not knowing what to do after high school.

Online interaction flourished during the pandemic. The internet enabled students to explore the world-wide web where they encountered online marketing, scams, and pranks they had to deal with in isolation. Some youths paid for items online that did not arrive and could not trace the dealers for refunds. Access to the internet also exposed students to cyber-bullying, gaming, chatting, and a host of social media sites that distracted them from doing school work and focusing on their education. Some students acknowledged making bets and gambling online, visiting porn sites and chat sites to alleviate boredom, pass time, and stay connected to socialize with other people. Youths involved with the RMYC said they missed attending youth council meetings and functions and hanging out with their peers. All these factors had an impact on their mental health, happiness, and potential to succeed in school.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In the context of all the above factors, we feel that the education system should reengage youths who became disengaged during the pandemic. From the students' wish list, the priorities included: access to more tutoring to catch-up, and formal and informal after-school extra-curricular activities to enhance their wellness, safety, and achievement. They need long-term commitment to on-going wrap-around supports with consistent funding. These supports usually only last for a limited period of time before funding for the services is lost and youth go back to experience the same previous struggles.

The RMYC and Oskatisak will present this report to Nishnawbe Aski Nation to share with Tribal Councils, Band Councils, and Education Authorities. Copies will also be sent to the Ministry of Indigenous Services, Ministry of Education, Lakehead District School Board, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board, Shkoday, and other stakeholders.

The recommendations from the Voices of Youth 2023 Project should be implemented and success stories in the report should be copied, supported, and sustained for change to happen. Indigenous children deserve every opportunity to pursue education and succeed. The status-quo is not working in their favour as evidenced by such disproportionately high student dropout rates creating hopelessness, misery, and stifling their upward mobility. Adults cannot transform the education system alone. Young people must be engaged in shaping their destiny. They can become peer mentors helping each other to stay in school, offer support to address problems youth face, and work together to make a difference.

RECOMMENDATIONS – A PLAN OF ACTION

The following are our ideas and recommendations to re-engage Indigenous youth in the education system post the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. *Dialogue with the youth (one-on-one or group discussions) on the following:*

- The value of education as the passport to a better life and brighter future and the supports available to be re-engaged and catch up in their school work.
- Involving parents to ease homesickness among young students attending school away from home and encouragement to focus on careers, trades, and training.
- Encouraging students to stick together for safety and avoid unsafe spaces.
- Promoting volunteering and resources available to help students such as counseling, tutoring, and involvement with proactive inclusive groups like the RMYC.
- Familiarization with city transit, on call services, where to get ID's, etc.
- Boarding home wellness and being able to come forward when problems arise.
- Reiterate risks and consequences of acting unsafe while out for school such as being sent home after multiple incidents or losing opportunities to graduate.
- Speak with youth about racism, mental health, safe use of social media, role modeling, peer mentoring, healthy coping skills without abusing drugs and alcohol.
- Teaching youth how to look out for gangs and peer pressure (It's okay to say no).
- Time management, jobs, addictions, crime, homelessness, urban lifeskills, etc.

2. *Better preparation for Indigenous youth going away for high school:*

More work should be done to prepare students before they leave home for school in towns. They need to be taught what to expect and how to thrive in an urban environment. Band Councils should develop an Orientation Program for students leaving the community to board with 'strangers' while attending school elsewhere. They should recruit Peer Mentors already attending high school or in post secondary institutions as role models to share their personal experiences with young students and inspire them to follow in their footsteps.

Older students familiar with the community and known among local families and students can organize one-to one meetings and group discussions over the summer as part of orientation to get them ready to leave home and survive in the city.

The older students will need training as mentors to connect with individuals or groups of peers. Developing a trusting relationship is important to share information and provide guidance to help young students cope alone away from home. This will also ease the fears of parents and caregivers who are anxious to send their children away to school. A formal orientation at home in the community will help in the transition to access higher education off the reserve.

3. *Summer School*

All the students we interviewed felt that summer school can enable those who fell behind in their courses during the pandemic to catch up. They preferred a class-like environment where a supervisor watches over them to make sure they are doing their work. Studying from home had many distractions caused by family, friends, pets, or the internet. These distractions and feelings of boredom led to procrastination on school work. Having designated rooms for summer school will help students to focus and stay on track with their school work. Discussing guidelines for safe use of the internet will help them avoid distraction.

The RMYC initiated a Summer School Program during the pandemic for students who struggled with virtual learning. We recruited post secondary students to assist and supervise high school students. We rented a community centre with WiFi that was easy to access by city transit and created a safe space for studying. The students liked the classroom-like set-up with computers. We provided incentives such as food and bus-tickets to improve attendance, punctuality, and participation. A majority of the summer school students were able to complete their courses and we feel that the peer support and constant encouragement we provided motivated them to work harder.

None of the First Nation education authorities we contacted were running summer school. However, they were all interested to provide the service to improve the graduation rate of their students. Our suggestion is to hire post secondary or senior DFC and Pelican Falls high school students to promote and run summer school. Since their school-year ends early, they can be trained to coordinate the program and how to supervise and support students with the assistance of the local education authority. Summer school can be different from community to community. Classes can run a few hours a day on alternate days of the week. Afternoon classes can begin with lunch (students can help to prepare) and last a couple of hours. Evening classes with supper are also an option for cooler weather on hot summer days.

Students failing their courses or needing extra help to improve literacy and numeracy skills as well as those who skipped many classes can be recommended to take summer school. Using older students in senior grades or post-secondary institutions as peer mentors makes them role models to engage their peers in education and inspire them to appreciate learning. As mentioned earlier many school principals and teachers on reserves are not Indigenous and communicating with local children is often a challenge. Developing a trusting relationship is even harder when students are not sure how long their teachers will stay in the community. Some students commended that they had anxiety each time their teachers took books home for the weekend because they did not know if they would be returning to school on Monday.

Using local students to run summer school will have many benefits to the youth and the community at large. Older students can be groomed as educator-assistant mentoring and tutoring their younger peers to address the barriers they face. Working with familiar faces and being mentored and supported by local peers who understand the social conditions on the reserve should improve student success rates that are the worst in the country. Working with Indigenous students in a summer school setting and supporting them to realize their learning potential in a peer-to-peer setting provides opportunities to engage and influence them to develop a passion for education.

Last but not least, summer school can provide structured activities for children and youth to do when regular classes are over. Youth without a summer job to occupy them or chores to keep them busy when school is out should also be encouraged to attend -- rather than be bored and risk getting into trouble. According to Statistics Canada, the rate of juvenile crime on reserves is more than three times higher than the rest of Canada. Summer school can help reduce crime rates among youth while helping them succeed in school for a better future.

4. Incentives to motivate students to stay in school and graduate:

Tribal councils and First Nations educational authorities -- Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, Keewatinook Okimakanak Board of Education, Matawa, Shibogama, Windigo, Wabun, Mushkegowuk -- and Band Councils provide incentives such as trips and passes to special events for students doing well in classes, those with high grades, good attendance and so forth. Such gestures are needed to inspire students to stay in school and work hard to be recognized and be rewarded for their efforts and achievements.

Many communities give their students gifts (money, phones, laptops, tablets, etc.) when they graduate. These rewards should be promoted early on during high school to motivate students to aim for post-secondary education or enter into trades. These incentives and recognition lead to positive outcomes because students feel their accomplishments matter and are acknowledged. This helps convey positive messages about education which helps to reduce the negative feelings about residential schools that are still prevalent.

5. *Providing urban work-skills and workshops to promote careers and job skills:*

On reserves, young people learn from traditional teachings and participate in cultural activities (hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, etc). They know how to get around on the land and lakes without a compass. Moving to urban centres results in culture shock and young students need special skills to live and integrate into city life. They need to develop work-skills, learn social skills, adopt urban life-skills, acquire communication skills, and be familiar with work-place safety requirements to participate in the urban economy.

Band Councils should discuss employment prospects on reserves and encourage the youth to get the education, qualifications, and skills needed to fill jobs and improve the quality of life in the community. They need educators, health-care workers, trades-people, new-technology technicians, hairdressers, carpenters and so forth and this will reduce the high unemployment on reserves. Communities should prioritize their manpower needs and provide incentives to train their own teachers, nurses, carpenters, police officers, plumbers, water and computer technicians and so forth to meet local needs.

Indigenous educational institutions such as DFC, Pelican Falls First Nations High School, Matawa Education, and Care Centre can do more to address the skills shortage and staffing needs on reserves. Oshki-Pimache-O-Win: The Wenjack Education Institute is helping to meet skills development, educational up-grading, employment training, and the professional academic certification of Indigenous people. Confederation College and Lakehead University have created Indigenous Access Programs for Indigenous students transitioning from high school. Indigenous students in these institutions can serve as role models and trail-blazers who convince younger students to follow in their footsteps and acquire skills required to fill vacant jobs and provide essential services to improve the quality of life on reserves.

Employment agencies such as Service Canada, YES Employment Services, Sioux Look-out Aboriginal Area Management Board, Kiikenomaga Kikenjigewen Employment, and Training Services can do more to collaborate with schools and connect with students to promote opportunities available for on-the-job training, career orientation, and employment. But more financial resources are needed for academic up-grading and longer training periods for Indigenous youths to develop an urban work-ethic, learn work-place etiquette, and build self-confidence for employment.

Children growing up in homes with unemployed family members can't participate in 'Take Our Kids to Work Day' and will need more time and patience to develop self confidence, self-esteem, and willpower to work. From the RMYC's experience with student jobs programs, more than one summer is required to develop the capacity of many First Nations youths from reserves to develop a work ethic and rid the shyness and fear to workforce in the city. More part time jobs and volunteer opportunities are needed to build skills and self-confidence.

Racialized and minority youth face similar barriers like racism as Indigenous youth, but often get motivational messages from families – that life in Canada is better than where they came from and they should take advantage of the opportunities here to improve their lives. Indigenous youths, on the other hand, are surrounded by colonial experiences and constantly hear negative talk. They do not get much encouragement to succeed in the non-Indigenous world. They need special training programs lasting a long time to learn the skills, gain experience and earn the qualifications for mainstream jobs. Using empathetic highly motivated racialized peers with similar challenges to groom and support unmotivated Indigenous youths will build their confidence to join the workforce.

Staff or peer mentors training them should be patient and resourceful to instill self-discipline, willpower and self-control to turn off the thrill, excitement and addiction to social media in order to concentrate on the work to be done. Job shadowing under peers can break the ice and get Indigenous youth to copy them and build their self esteem to believe they can do the work. This has worked well with the environment we have at RMYC, but may be hard to practice when the pressure of production that is prioritized in the highly competitive commercial business enterprises is applied.

Getting the youth to volunteer helps them to explore their passions and career options. This can generate interest to enter trades for employment and get contacts for references when seeking jobs. Attending job fairs will expose the youth to what is out there, inspire them to stay in school and get the necessary qualifications to pursue careers and the employment they want. Awareness of employment standards and workplace safety is critical as well as skills on preparing a resume, applying for a job, and participating in an interview.

6. Students orientation:

To reduce culture shock for Indigenous youths to feel comfortable in urban schools larger than their reserve, the RMYC initiated a Reception and Orientation Project to welcome First Nations students from remote communities so that they can realize their learning potential to succeed in the city. We ran orientation sessions in all towns across the region that billeted First Nations students. The feedback and outcomes were positive but there was no funding to continue after the project ended. We are pleased that after the Seven Youth Inquest, Nishnawbe Aski Nation started to host the Orientation sessions with wider community support that now incorporates various events to welcome Indigenous students to the city including DFC's Wake the Giant.

The receptions and orientation sessions are a success story. They bring together agencies working with Indigenous students and promote services available to help them. A common request and wish is for participating agencies to provide volunteer opportunities for students to develop their talents, learn social skills, explore career options and build self confidence to work in the city while earning community hours to graduate. This will complement the career counseling they get to follow their passions and help to facilitate the transition to post secondary education, pursue trades or venture into self-employment and the work world.

Best outcomes can be achieved if Indigenous students received preliminary orientation before leaving home to attend school off the reserve. Special sessions should be organized on the reserve with participation mandatory to raise awareness of the challenges of studying in large urban centres away from family and familiar surroundings. Students who have endured the experience of living in boarding homes with strangers and thrived city life in large should be invited to lead the orientation sessions. Some screening process should be in place with a check list to select students who were ready to leave home and study in the city.

7. Safer spaces for children and youth:

There is a significant population of children living in dysfunctional, abusive, and violent homes. They need safer places to hang out, participate in healthy activities, access information, advice, and guidance to enable them to make good decisions. Safe spaces in urban centres provide opportunities for Indigenous boarding students to socialize in a non-racist environment, relax, unwind, and be themselves. These spaces are critical for mental wellness, and ideal for doing homework with peer support while mixing with other students to share experiences and support each other. In urban centres safe spaces allow youths from diverse backgrounds and sexual orientations to hang out together without the fear of homophobia, racism and discrimination.

On reserves, Band Councils should invest in safe paces (youth centres) with information, programs and supports to help with school/home work, nutrition, entertainment, recreation, social activities, and social events. They need to be well supervised and offer structured activities to teach discipline and respect, foster teamwork, and prepare youth for the adult world. Such spaces allow the community to meet with young people “on their own turf”, hear them out, and engage them to discuss their interests, problems, and concerns. This will engage the youth to gather their ideas about the community they want to live in and can be a strategy to prevent suicide.

8. Independent living skills:

The RMYC initiated a Transitional Housing Project where we rent houses and sub-let them to First Nation students and youth-in-care involved with the youth council so that they have a safe place to stay while attending school in the city. It is very difficult for Indigenous youth to find a safe and decent place to rent and live by themselves. The homes help the youth to transition to independent living while getting support their studies. The students learn to live in the city without parental supervision, abide by the rules they help to make, pay rent and be responsible tenants. They require guidance and supervision to avoid risks that make them vulnerable to eviction and homelessness. We have house rules and expectations to hold meetings about sharing space with others, not drinking in the house or coming home under the influence, not bringing rowdy friends to stay overnight, and doing chores to keep the space clean. We also have safety orientation for fire alarms, carbon monoxide detectors, fire extinguishers, etc.

We trained the students to learn to cook, wash their dishes and clean up after themselves. Other chores included laundry, vacuuming the house, taking turns to take out garbage, and cleaning around the house. We talked about managing finances, opening a bank account, budgeting, and prioritizing expenses. Saving money for rent was a priority, and we advised them not loan funds earmarked for shelter to destitute friends because, if they failed to pay back, it meant serious trouble with the landlord.

We have ten students and had to put restrictions for those addicted to gaming to limit the time they can spent playing games. They needed time management skills to do their school work, clean their room, prepare meals, and so forth. They had to learn to look for bargains, shop for groceries, cook healthy meals, and avoid ordering fast food and paying for expensive food delivery services. This was draining their living allowance resulting in defaults to pay rent. We have helped students to learn budgeting and live within their means.

9. Youth leadership and organizational development:

Indigenous communities face the inter-generational impacts of residential schools and the cycle continues today. A strategy to stop the cycle is investing in children and youth to create new beginnings. Peer pressure is very strong among young people because they hang out together, want to fit in and belong. Recruiting and training youths to be leaders and role models to vulnerable individuals and disillusioned peers and use positive influence to guide, inspire and give them hope will help to make a difference in their lives. This is an effective way to engage the next generation and promote healthy lifestyles, build self esteem and self confidence to break negative cycles surrounding them.

Youth have the energy and enthusiasm to work on issues they are passionate about but lack the financial resources and experience to accomplish their dreams. They also lack the knowledge and practical experience Elders/Knowledge Keepers, professionals and educators have about life. Engaging adult allies to work with young leaders and provide the life-skills, social skills, and fortitude to build their capacity as change makers will enable them to intervene and stop the negative cycles that plague their lives. We should train pools of resourceful and resilient young leaders to advance social transformation among the young generation in our communities for a better future.

In spite of the successes and benefits of the youth-to-youth approach to engage peers and use positive peer influence to make a difference, there is no stable funding to sustain the Peer Mentoring Program. This maintains the status-quo -- children from well-to-do families excel more than their underprivileged peers. The gap between privileged youth and those from struggling families has been widening due to a system that does not provide opportunities and supports for poor and marginalized youths. Consequently many Indigenous and racialized youths wallow in a cycle of despair and hopelessness.

We need the federal, provincial, and municipal governments to invest in programs such as Peer Mentoring to motivate and support Indigenous youth to succeed in the education system at the same rate as other students. Training young Indigenous leaders to work with their peers to change common bad habits such as staying up at night and sleeping all day will improve school attendance and academic performance. Using positive peer influence to counter negative lifestyles and inspire students to stay in school and graduate gives Indigenous children and youth hope and opens doors to a more prosperous future. It will also provide them the tools to reverse the climate that has caused much pain, suffering and anguish in their lives, their families, and their communities.

Band Councils should be encouraged to establish youth councils and help to identify young leaders to be trained as role models to mentor children and youth in the community. They can work through their tribal councils to provide localized leadership and organizational training to develop skills to work with Choose Life and Jordan's Principle and co-ordinate activities and events that will engage their peers to enhance their wellness, promote safety, adopt healthy lifestyles, stay in school and achieve their academic and career goals.

10. Collaborating to enhance reconciliation:

Student surveys and youth forums organized by the RMYC have identified racism as a priority issue and barrier among Indigenous youths leaving reserves to acquire higher education for a better life. This also came up during the Seven Youth Inquest into the deaths of First Nations students from northern communities who were attending school in Thunder Bay. A *“Coming Together to Talk with Youth”* forum attended by 250 high school students in 2019 at Lakehead University exposed the nature of racism in the community and ways to combat it.

It is widely acknowledged that a good education is the key to enabling Indigenous people to develop the capacity to create their own programs, deliver culturally appropriate services, and manage their own affairs to make a difference. Not much will change if Indigenous children continue to face barriers to access higher education and drop out of school in high numbers. The status-quo maintains the current high rates in youth suicides, the over-represented of children in foster-care, high numbers of Indigenous peoples in jails and the perpetual cycle of poverty, crime, misery and hopelessness rampant in their communities.

According to the Voices of Youth, a transforming strategy demands a commitment by our governments to invest in the creation of young Indigenous leaders and role models to break the legacy of residential schools for future generations. To better support children and youth to stay in school and graduate we need proactive youth groups, not gangs and safe spaces to hang out and support each other to become they best they can be. Youth centres are critical for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youths to mix and learn to get along. But, young people do not have the financial resources to train themselves and fund activities, forums, and programs to advance multiculturalism, combat racism, promote respect, understanding, and promote racial harmony. Furthermore, as a group in transition that ages-out, it is necessary to sustain the development of diverse peer mentors working continuously for our collective prosperity.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action provides a road-map to right the wrongs that have defined our relations with the original inhabitants of this land and created cultural stereotypes, anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination. Calls to Action #66 states: "We call upon the federal government to establish multi-year funding for community-based youth organizations to deliver programs on reconciliation and establish a national network to share information and best practices."

All levels of governments including Band Councils should support local youth groups and inclusive youth councils such as the RMYC to work with national youth-led organizations such as the Students Commission of Canada, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Youth Centres Canada and link with Indigenous youth councils such as Oshkaatisak and Assembly of First Nations National Youth Council to engage Indigenous, non-Indigenous -- racialized, new-immigrant, refugee, 2-SLGBTQIA youth people in proactive initiatives that enhance reconciliation.

OSHKAATISAK COUNCIL (OC): WORKPLAN TO MOVE FORWARD

by Janine Frogg

The Oshkaatisak Council (OC), representing the youth of Nishnawbe Aski Nation's (NAN) forty-nine (49) communities, is dedicated to fostering youth empowerment and involvement to enhance the well-being and prospects of all NAN children and youth. Collaborating with the RMYC on the Voices of Youth 2023 Project, The OC aims to assess the pandemic's impact on NAN youth and utilize the findings to improve the wellness, safety, and academic achievement of NAN students.

The OC will play a lead role in developing young leaders who can serve as positive influencers, working within their communities to uplift children and youth, and supporting them to break negative cycles. Additionally, the OC will work with the RMYC to establish peer mentors supporting students in urban centers, promote the Girl Power Program to empower young women to follow their passion, and implement the Band of Brothers Program to guide young men to fulfil their social roles appropriately.

Utilizing the report's insights, The OC will focus on increasing student graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, addressing youth suicides, addictions, and other social issues affecting the quality of life for children and youth in NAN territory. The council will collaborate with NAN communities and schools to identify potential young leaders, provide coaching, guidance and support for students studying away from home in Thunder Bay and other urban centres to enhance their capacity to plan and organize activities that will improve school attendance, retention, and graduation rates among their peers.

We will conduct ongoing reviews of the Voices of Youth 2023 recommendations to monitor progress and assess areas where changes are required and improvements needed. We will liaise with the NAN executive and engage Band Councils, Tribal Councils, Education Authorities, schools, and other local structures for support. The OC plans to build alliances with stakeholders and potential collaborators to seek funding and other resources, and form partnerships to train young leaders to run youth groups, create safe spaces and advocate for new beginnings to advance their goals and aspirations for a better brighter future.

The Oshkaatisak Council Plan of Action to follow-up on the Voices of Youth Project:

- The OC holds monthly meetings to discuss issues affecting children and youth in the NAN territory and will monitor progress on their education and schooling.
- The OC will engage NAN youth regularly to review on-going concerns and interests and work with them to create plans to address problems and fulfill their wishes.
- The OC will work with NAN communities and schools to identify young leaders/role models for training to plan and organize activities for children, youth, and families.
- The OC will liaise with the NAN Executive to advocate for financial resources and other supports to assist the youth to form youth groups and create safe spaces.
- The OC will work with the RMYC to develop resource materials for training young leaders to run youth-led programs such as Girl Power and Band of Brothers, and develop peer leaders to advance wellness, safety and improve the quality of life.
- The OC will work with the RMYC and Education Authorities to enhance the wellness, safety, and graduation of NAN students attending school in urban centres.
- The OC will form partnerships to provide social skills, communication skills, life skills, work skills, parenting skills, studying skills, and so forth, and will liaise with the RMYC to train, coach young leaders (Junior Chief and Council) to work with children and youth in their communities. They will link youth with local supports such as Choose Life and Jordan's Principle, and provide safe spaces to promote mental wellness, suicide prevention, recreation, food security, study groups, arts and crafts, etc.

The OC will work with the RMYC and other stakeholders to organize conferences, workshops, and meetings to discuss issues such as racism, discrimination, poverty, homelessness, etc, and advocate for implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada Calls to Action (particularly #66), and recommendations from the Seven Youth inquest, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, etc.

OTHER ISSUES THAT AFFECT THE SUCCESS OF INDIGENOUS YOUTHS

The following are additional areas we feel require action to improve the lives of Indigenous youths. We have included our ideas and some suggestions on strategies for action. The RMYC and Oskaatisak will collaborate with other partners and link students with the supports they need to cope, assist them to access resources to develop urban life skills, learn social skills, and assist them to build self-esteem, confidence, and resilience to break bad habits, and realize their potential to transform themselves and succeed in life.

(a) Transportation

A major barrier identified by Indigenous students in the city is safe transportation to participate in after school activities, attend meetings and events, go to the library or hospital, go grocery shopping, access food banks, etc. There are also transit safety concerns, particularly in the evenings. Frequent incidents of assaults involving the youth, especially young females, present risks and make the youth anxious. Unsafe streets and neighbourhoods and racist encounters prevent the youth from attending study groups, sports, or participating in extracurricular activities after school.

** We will advocate for subsidized transportation for youths and free or discount bus passes for those registered and participating in after school programs. The city should work with policing services to improve community safety for youth to travel around freely. We will encourage more schools to provide bus passes for their students during the school year.*

(b) Finances and Budgeting:

Many students lack money-management skills. Those we have hired under summer jobs programs are often keen to spend money without budgeting. They buy trivial items without setting expenditure limits. Bombarded by advertisements, they purchase expensive brand items and designer fashions too expensive for their level of income. Others indulge in food delivery services too often or go on mindless shopping sprees. A significant number do not have bank accounts and use Money-Mart and Cash-Money outlets regularly to cash-in their pay-cheques, and are charged high fees for the service.

Youth who have been in care seem to be more vulnerable in this respect. Living in several different homes, they tend to be detached to learn and benefit from their foster parents.

Our transition home program is addressing these gaps and provides the social skills, life skills and financial literacy skills they need to live independently and thrive.

** It is prudent to teach youths financial literacy, help them open a bank account, teach them how to use credit cards, the importance of setting priorities, and distinguishing needs from wants.*

(c) Unsafe and Unhealthy Living Environments

The home environment has a great impact on the well-being, quality of life, and future of young people. Indigenous youth migrating to the city alone face major hurdles to secure safe affordable places to stay. Students who drop out of school or those aging out of care lose the supports they get when they are in the system, and face challenges trying to navigate the systems and access urban services. With no money for rent, work-skills, or experience to get jobs to sustain themselves, they end up couch-surfing in overcrowded, unhealthy and compromising living conditions, or becoming homeless.

The RMYC is aware of young people living in homes with drug-dealers, sharing space with gang members, and addicts which put them at risk. Some youths have witnessed traumatic home invasions. Some youth are vulnerable to being recruited as “entrepreneurs” to do unsafe jobs just to have a place to stay or something to eat. This includes delivering or selling drugs as a business to earn cash. Early introduction to criminal activities make them susceptible to sexual exploitation, human trafficking, or a life in the justice system.

** More safe affordable places to live with adequate supports such as the RMYC Transition Homes are needed for students to complete their education and learn independent living skills. This will reduce the numbers of youths living on the streets, turning into juvenile offenders or becoming teen parents. Keeping youth out of correctional facilities will stop them from being acquainted with jail as a lifestyle -- a safer place than the street place with three meals a day, and access to caring staff who give them attention they miss at home.*

(d) Body Image Issues:

There is pressure on youth to look a certain way which affects their self-esteem and self-confidence. Negative messaging about weight, appearance, clothes, and constant comparison to other people can have a damaging impact on youth. This affects their mental health, academic performance, pride, and happiness. Social media, TV shows, movies, magazines, and talk shows bombard youth with cosmetics, designer outfits, and body image messages. Celebrities and important people in their lives, including peers, talk about certain standards of beauty. This includes physical appearance, who is pretty, and popular likeable images. While this can involve all genders, it seems to affect females and 2S-LGBTQIA youth the most. Some young people have quit school, harmed themselves, or committed suicide due to stress, depression, or the impact on their mental health.

** Peer support groups and sharing circles can provide safe places for youths to talk about their concerns, interests and share experiences about issues that matter to them without being judged. Topics such as body image are part of the RMYC Girl Power Program.*

(e) Racism, Sexism, Ableism, Homophobia, and Transphobia:

Bigotry impacts every teenager. We are aware that racism, sexism, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, ableism, transphobia, homophobia/2-spirit, and Islamophobia exist in schools, community, and society. Many students feel that educational institutions are not doing enough to teach them about internalized hate and systemic racism. From the *Coming Together to Talk* project, Indigenous and other racialized groups feel they face the full brunt of the hatred and are often penalized and suffer the consequences when they retaliate in self defense.

Indigenous youth impacted by colonization, residential schools, the 60's Scoop, and inter-generational trauma are vulnerable to stereotypes and racist comments. They are exposed to poor parenting, dysfunctional families, broken homes, and surrounded by school drop-outs, poverty, addictions, crime, violence, suicides, diabetes, and so forth. Over-representation in jails and child welfare apprehensions flood the news and homelessness creates eye-sores on the streets. Systemic racism is a factor and affects the perception Indigenous youth have about themselves, which is overwhelmingly negative. This creates many social barriers they have to deal with and adversely affects their mental health

** We must create safer places for Indigenous students to hang out with racialized peers who have experienced cultural stereotypes, prejudice, bigotry, racism and discrimination. Black youths who encounter anti-Black racism, Muslim youth who face Islamophobia, Jewish students who fear anti-Semitism, and Asian youth experiencing the backlash of COVID-19 pandemic can work together with Indigenous youths to combat discrimination. This will make them see that they are not the only ones dealing with racism. Awareness of the Multiculturalism Act and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action can empower the youth to address anti-Indigenous racism and enhance reconciliation.*

(f) Lack of Positive Role Models in Communities:

Indigenous youth commonly indicate an absence of positive role model for them to look up to. Residential schools destroyed Indigenous families and deprived children of parents or older siblings to look up to for guidance and advice. There are no adult allies telling them “I care about you” or “I love you”.

Unfortunately, this is how toxic or abusive relationships, bad friends, and gangs recruit teenagers desperate for connection and affection. Indigenous students involved with the RMYC often confess to harming themselves, having suicidal thoughts, and contemplated killing themselves due to trauma. Abusing substances, being intoxicated, and getting high are common forms of escapism.

In the absence of positive role model adults, the RMYC feels that creating Peer Mentors as positive influencers is a practical alternative. A youth-to-youth approach using peer role models can help to fill the void when loving parents or siblings are absent. Young leaders trained to provide one-on-one support can be a shoulder to cry on, accompany their peers to appointments and healing activities such as sharing circles, ceremonies, and workshops, and can provide on-going supports and care.

** We need a well funded Peer Mentoring Program linked to Elders for wisdom and spiritual comfort, social service agencies for advice and professionals for guidance. Connecting youth with peer role models engaged in positive activities can help break negative cycles attributed to inter-generational trauma.*

(g) Bullying, Cyber Bullying, and Violence:

The internet is here to stay and the need to be connected during the pandemic made its use prolific. Many young people we work with are now hooked to social media and misuse has become. Cyber-bullying via social media has become a major concern and things became worse during the pandemic. People hide their identity when they bully others, say hurtful things such as racial slurs, homophobic taunts, two-spirit comments, or spread falsehoods. Confidential information can be shared and threats to publish private stories or pictures to exhort favours, blackmail, or seek ransom are now common.

Youth are exposed to violence via games on social media, television, and movie screens. Sports such as hockey which many young people enjoy show fights making violence seem normal. Children who grow up exposed to violence in the home and on the media are liable to behave likewise. They lash out, fight, or resort to violence to get their way, settle scores, seek revenge, or resolve arguments. Violence encompasses the urge to win.

** Youths must be taught proper and respectful way to use social media. Youth groups such as the RMYC and Oshkaatisak should advance a youth-to-youth approach to involve children the youth in dialogue about bullying, cyber-bullying, violence, and advance peer mediation to settle arguments and resolve conflict amicably. The RMYC's Student Working Group will assist schools to promote and implement Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act passed to create a welcoming, accepting, and safe climate for all students (including Indigenous) to realize their full leaning potential and succeed.*

(h) Food Security / Insecurity:

From the RMYC's experience, food attracts youths to events, gives them energy, relieves anxiety and gets them to socialize and relax. For the After School Program, feeding students is an incentive for them to stay and hang around in a safe space after classes and be involved in extracurricular activities. This enables them to participate in sports and recreational events, study groups, and healthy social functions that keep them from being involved in risky behaviours. Youth from disadvantaged and low-income families showed up regularly for our meetings and study sessions where we provided free meals. They often asked to take any left-over food home for their siblings and parents.

The issue of food insecurity was very prominent during the pandemic when schools were closed. Students who relied on breakfast clubs and other feeding programs had nowhere to turn, which made them vulnerable to exploitation and being taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals. Some turned to shoplifting, and shared stories of being banned from shops after being caught stealing food.

** The high cost of healthy food makes food insecurity a crisis. Hungry youths are vulnerable to indulge in criminal activities, and at risk of being lured into gangs or exploited for favours. Canada needs a national breakfast and lunch program in schools and after school extracurricular program with snacks. Community gardens should be promoted to produce fresh food locally and students from northern communities can build greenhouses to grow fresh vegetables at affordable prices and reduce the high cases of diabetes.*

(i) Jobs and Employment:

Working with diverse youths at the Multicultural Youth Centre made us realize the barriers youths from different backgrounds face to be employed. Observing the behaviour and work habits of Indigenous, racialized, and privileged mainstream youths has enabled us to compare the social values and perception about employment between Indigenous and immigrant youths. While both groups of youth face racism and have similar experiences about discrimination, their attitude towards work and their work ethic are vastly different.

We learned from Knowledge Keepers that colonization and the Indian Act allowed the government to control Indigenous lives -- what they did, where they lived and so forth. Consequently, they lost their sovereignty, self-determination, and pride. They were this country's original labour pool, but as European immigrants came to settle in Canada, Indigenous workers were sent to settle on reserves and given subsistence allowance creating dependence on the state. While this opened jobs for the newcomers, it excluded Indigenous people from commercial employment in the mainstream economy. This lifestyle has been passed onto the children and many Indigenous people today are used to surviving on handouts. Stereotypes abound about laziness and not wanting to work. However, traditionally, Indigenous people worked hard in hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering under difficult conditions and a harsh climate.

Rather than be proud of their resilience to endure colonization and the inter-generational impacts of residential schools, Indigenous youth struggle about their identity and face challenges integrating into Canadian society. They are not familiar with urban life and need help to develop a mainstream work ethic and support to learn commercial workplace norms and etiquette such as punctuality, dress, work-performance under pressure, etc.

** Adequate investment is needed to expand programs to train and support Indigenous youth to acquire employment skills. Proper orientation is required to prepare them for an evolving and diverse workplace. Service Canada Summer Jobs Program and Art of Work by the Students Commission of Canada have enabled the RMYC hire and train youths for the work-world. This is a success story to be continued and expanded. All levels of government must work with institutions and organizations to provide more opportunities for Indigenous youths to get the education and skills they need to join the workforce.*

(j) Boredom:

The problem of boredom among youths includes access, affordability, safety, and whether incentives such as food are provided to get them to attend and participate in extracurricular activities. Privileged children with financial resources have many choices of what to do and where to go to alleviate boredom. For Indigenous youth, the social climate where activities and programs take place are important because of racism, stereotypes, and discrimination that exists around them. Calls to Action #66 is about funding safe spaces where Indigenous and non-Indigenous youths can get together to socialize, participate in activities, get to know each other better, support each other, and learn to get along. This will reduce the numbers of at-risk youth wanting to join gangs for excitement and acceptance.

** Safe spaces to hang out are critical for engaging Indigenous youths to tap on their talents and creativity and provide opportunities for them to plan and organize activities that alleviate boredom and reduce the risk of getting into trouble. Investing in recreation and other prevention-oriented programs up-stream will keep youth busy. Using peer mentors to promote healthy lifestyles will reduce juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, and the over-representation of Indigenous children in care and the criminal justice system.*

(k) Shame:

Self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-identity are all important for young people to be well grounded and achieve their goals. On the other hand, shame, embarrassment, and shyness can get in the way for them to realize their true potential. Indigenous students moving to urban centres encounter the diversity they are not used to in homogeneous reserves. They have to deal with cultural stereotypes, racial prejudice, and cope with discrimination. This all influences how they see themselves and how they act.

Shame is an abuse we learn and inflict upon ourselves. Pressure to be accepted, fit in, and belong is extraordinarily strong whether it is from friends, classmates, workmates, or society. Fear of being shunned, avoided, or excluded because of looks, appearance, clothes, language/accent, belief, culture, or race affects our well-being, mental health and sense of belonging. Social media adds to the problem when there are portrayals of who is pretty, likeable, or acceptable. Historical comments such as statements by Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald regarding Indigenous people as 'savages' (see quotation in Preamble), misinformation highlighted in the TRC's Calls to Action, and negative comments about Indigenous people feed the anti-Indigenous racism that make Indigenous youth feel ashamed of who they are and embarrassed about their background.

In spite of the strides made since the release of the TRC report and recommendations such as the introduction of land acknowledgements and the promotion of events such as pow-wows and ceremonies, there are still students who are shy or uncomfortable to self-identify as Indigenous or First Nations. Some are ashamed of using their Status Cards in shops and others try to change their hair appearance and how they look to hide their ancestry. Frequent name-calling, teasing, joking, put-downs, and bullying targeting Indigenous students in schools with impunity causes some students to miss classes or quit school altogether.

** The TRC's Calls to Action should serve as a blue-print for understanding the truth about Indigenous people and changing the narrative. Canada's Multiculturalism Act lays the foundations for acceptance and respect of all citizens. Schools should teach our true history and everyone passing through the education system should learn about equity and not be racist to Indigenous peoples.*

(l) Conflict Resolution, Peer Mediation, and Restorative Practices:

Increasing incidents of assaults and lateral violence require that we engage young people in mediation and restorative practices to prevent anger boiling over and problems escalating. Youths must learn to talk things out and settle arguments without using force or violence. Having peers to help mediate conflicts can help diffuse tension and explore the root of the problem. This will help fully resolve the issue, prevent grudges, and the need for revenge.

** We should teach the youth to manage anger, to listen, communicate and learn to mediate disputes to resolve conflict without resorting to violence and allow healing to avoid retaliation.*

(m) Mistrust – “Forked Tongue”:

“Being young right now is hard. It feels like we’re constantly being reminded that nobody cares about our futures: not our government, not the generations that came before us, and definitely not our political system.”

(Rayne, age 18)

UNICEF Report Card 16, which measures the state of children and youth under age 18 in wealthy countries, ranks Canada 30th out of 38 nations on the most recently available data from just before the COVID-19 pandemic. The status of Indigenous children and youth in Canada today is deplorable and continues to get worse. From the statistics, what we have been doing (or not doing) has resulted in these situations affecting the fastest growing population in the country. These numbers will continue to grow negatively unless we start doing things differently to enable more Indigenous people to move up the system and succeed in the education system at the same rate as other Canadians.

The main aim of this report is to convey that youth are the most valuable human resource for the future. They should be involved as stakeholders on matters that affect them, and play an active role in creating the society they want to live in. They need unwavering support from the community to believe that they matter and belong. Children can’t vote but they have a voice. They want our elected political leaders to invest in them to stop negative cycles being passed on to them. Involving peers as influencers engages them as empathetic and caring change-makers mobilizing others to create a better future.

Focusing on the kids and teens makes new beginnings possible. Addressing problems upstream stops the damage expanding downstream and becoming more serious and costly to fix. However, adequately funding prevention-oriented youth-led initiatives to improve the lives of vulnerable children and at-risk youths has not been a priority for all levels of government. Consequently, the privileged ones move forward while Indigenous, racialized, minority, impoverished and other marginalized groups that are struggling slide backwards and the disparity continues to widen.

Statements such as “It takes a village to raise a child” and “Children are society’s greatest human resource” are hollow when there is no concerted effort to level the playing field for all youth to have equal access, equal opportunity, and equal participation in every aspect of Canadian society. From an Indigenous youth’s perspective, stop-gap measures are often applied to their issues to appease voters and silence criticism about inaction. What is done often benefit politicians campaigning for power more than the victims and clients.

Indigenous youth feel the system treats them as second-class citizens and governments speak with a “forked tongue” because actions do not match the words. Their issues are not seen as priorities. Treaty Rights, providing clean drinking water, fire suppression, and under-funding their education and health services on reserves take years to resolve. Meanwhile, some international matters get millions of dollars (from natural resources on traditional lands) in months. The youth also see discrimination and injustice when there are many appeals against settling a Human Rights Tribunal ruling to fund the First Nations Child and Family Services Program equitably - while a generation of Indigenous children suffered in poverty.

The province has not fared any better at funding and sustaining youth services. The Ontario Child Advocate Office was closed (to save money) taking away the voices of vulnerable children and youth. Funding for the After School Program is inadequate and excludes at-risk youth not in school. There is no stable funding to support and sustain youth centres and train young leaders to work with and support their peers. However, a lot of money is spent to keep them in jail with no safer spaces to go once released -- creating a revolving door syndrome of repeat young offenders. This has resulted in a growing gang population among marginalized Indigenous, racialized, and other vulnerable groups.

Municipalities are at the front-line of delivering services in the community and often claim they do not have the funds to support youth projects. Often times, when the budget is tight, youth programs are the first to be cut. The RMYC has first-hand experience on the matter. The youth council used to rely on fundraising bingos for operational funding. A casino opened downtown and bingo halls closed as a result. The City of Thunder Bay kept all the gaming windfall proceeds supposed to be shared with charitable groups impacted by the casino, and our Multicultural Youth Centre had to close. With the support of Nishnawbe Aski Nation Chiefs unanimous resolution, the RMYC was able to relocate the After School Program to Dennis Franklin Cromarty (First Nations) High School to serve Indigenous boarding students

The City of Thunder Bay adopted a Children's Charter in 2004 to ensure that the beliefs and values enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children are maintained at the municipal level. No funding was allocated for this at the time. A detailed report with youth input was prepared by the Thunder Bay Children's Advocate on City Council recommending that funding should be provided to support the Children's Charter. This was presented to City Council before the municipal elections in December 2018. The document was not approved, and the Thunder Bay Children's Advocate post has not been filled since then, creating doubt on the City Council's commitment to the quality of life for children and youth in our community -- especially vulnerable and at-risk youth.

Thunder Bay hosted the Seven Youth Inquest (SYI) into the deaths of First Nations students from northern reserves while they were attending high school in the city. In spite of being invited, no City Councillors showed up during the months of testimonials to the jury, raising questions as to whether the lives of Indigenous youths and the pain of the parents mattered to City Hall. Subsequent recommendations by the jury were directed at several stakeholders including all three levels of governments. The fact that all the 'no-show' Councillors were re-elected reflects indifference to the plight of First Nations communities and follows similar actions by federal and provincial governments when dealing with Indigenous people.

While City Hall praises the work of the RMYC with Indigenous students that has the unanimous support of NAN Chiefs, the City has not contributed any financial resources to the youth council's initiatives that complement the Seven Youth Inquest recommendations.

Both the RMYC and the City of Thunder Bay are Seven Youth Inquest stakeholders mentioned in the recommendations, but there has been no collaboration to enhance the wellness, safety and success of Indigenous students studying in the city. First Nations leaders fully support the RMYC's activities for their children and youth and have provided funding, the City of Thunder Bay has not reciprocated in this regards. For example, while acknowledging the youth council's work to combat racism with the City of Thunder Bay Respect Award, City Hall went on to put the RMYC Youth Centre for sale for failing to pay property taxes -- not minding that this would deprive diverse youths their safe place to hang out and learn to get along.

Recently, despite getting an Outstanding Community Project Award for this Voices of Youth Project with the NAN Oshkaatisak Youth Council, the city rejected the RMYC's proposal for the guns and gangs funding to implement the work-plan in the report. SYI Recommendation #101 about the RMYC, and #s 75, 105, 106, 112 and 120 directed at the City of Thunder Bay to work with stakeholders should have created a partnership to implement the recommendations aimed at enhancing the wellness, safety, and achievement of First Nations students coming to study in the city. This has not happened as the city has failed to live up to its obligations under Recommendation #120, and assist the RMYC to secure funding for its best practices with First Nations students. Filling the vacant position of the Thunder Bay Child Advocate will re-engage City Hall to work with the RMYC to implement the Seven Youth Inquest recommendations with the youth council as the catalyst bringing the City and NAN together to welcome Indigenous youths coming to our city for higher education, support them to graduate and serve as role models for their pees on reserves so that many more will follow in their foot-steps.

Indigenous youths have complained about how they are mistreated by local institutions such as education, health and policing. Incidents of racism and discrimination have also been leveled at staff providing housing, employment, recreation and business services. The education system which is the main focus of this report had a black-eye when the last Lakehead District School Board director of education to retire was found guilty of professional misconduct by the Ontario College of Teachers, and had his college certificate suspended for four months as a result. This leader who ran the school board had a history of making offensive and negative comments about Indigenous people but still rose up the ranks of teacher, school principal, superintendent, and finally director of education.

Despite such a demeaning attitude on Indigenous people, he wanted to run as a school board trustee in the last civic elections but backed down when a complaint was made to the Ontario College of Teachers and could not proceed with the case pending.

Another incident relating to the education system involves former Senator Lynn Beyak from this region. She was forced to resign from the Senate for disagreeing with the TRC findings and arguing that residential schools did a lot of good for Indigenous children and posted derogatory letters about Indigenous people on her website. Prior to joining the Senate, she was a trustee of the Fort Frances Rainy River Board of Education serving First Nations reserves in the area. With such views, her decisions affected the well-being of the students. Having people who despise Indigenous people and minimize the impacts of residential schools running the education system with many Indigenous students undermines faith and trust that our schools are doing their best to help them to succeed.

The Seven Youth Inquest together with the Coming Together to Talk with Youth project exposed inherent biases in the Thunder Bay Police Service that prevented officers from properly investigating the deaths of the First Nations students in the City. This was confirmed in three subsequent reports including the Office of the Independent Police Review Director – *“Broken Trust: Indigenous People and the Thunder Bay Police Service”* that recommended the botched investigations be redone. These developments reveal the bias and incompetence some police officers have about Indigenous people. This taints the whole police service and reinforces the negative perception the youth have on policing that makes them distrust in the system. Unfortunately this builds on the trauma Indigenous people experienced when the police came to remove children away to attend residential schools. It will take time to heal.

Canada’s apology (Appendix “C”) for the role played by residential schools in destroying Indigenous families requires collective action to fill the voids affecting children and youth. A lack of parents as role models and dysfunctional homes has led to an emergence of gangs as family for youths who feel neglected and want to be accepted and feel they belong. This has contributed to many social problems among vulnerable youths, and a fresh start is needed with adequate funding to sustain new beginnings for a long time. Education is the best way out of poverty and misery, and Indigenous youth need all it takes to get them to succeed in school.

The Seven Youth Inquest recognized the need to “*provide peer leaders and mentors with the capacity, communication skills, and self-confidence they need to apply positive peer influence on other students*”. SYI Recommendation #75 calls for Canada, Ontario and Thunder Bay to collaborate and the City to “*act as a resource to identify community partners who could support and provide funding in order to create and sustain peer leaders*”.

Therefore:

1. *The federal government should play a leading role in the implementation of all Calls to Action #66, and support youth-led initiatives as part of inclusive community grassroots interventions to train young leaders, nurture, guide and support Indigenous peer mentors to work with other youths to stop negative cycles plaguing their lives, families, and communities, and usher new beginnings through collaboration to enhance reconciliation.*
- *The government of Canada should support Bill S-282: a National Strategy for Children and Youth Act tabled in the Senate by Senator Rosemary Moodie in November 2023 to address the gaps created by a patchwork of well-intentioned programs, services, and supports that have resulted in the poor outcomes of today, and contributed to more Indigenous children in care, high drop-out rates in schools, addictions, violence, suicide epidemics, and at-risk kids becoming gang members and young offenders.*
 - *The federal government should provide adequate resources for the National Strategy for Children and Youth to link with provincial Child Advocates, Children’s Aid Societies, Social Service Agencies, Band Councils, schools and other stakeholders to monitor the status of children, gather information and youth voices to hear what they need, and engage them to give them hope that they can have good life and a better future.*
 - *Federal government should invest in peer mentoring to improve school retention and reduce the numbers of Indigenous youths dropping out of school; support summer school to engage at risk youth, keep them busy; and provide more youths on reserves with opportunities to get into trades, careers and professions to fill the shortage of skilled workers, qualified employees and professional staff in their communities. This will also address the shortage of culturally competent teachers to support vulnerable students.*

2. *Ontario should partner with the federal government to implement the TRC's Calls to Action #66 (along the same lines as happened with affordable Day Care) and support inclusive safe spaces such as youth centres for grassroots community groups to collaborate in delivering services, running programs, and teaching culture, respect, and social qualities collectively to Indigenous children and youths as well as provide supports to address the inter-generational damage done by residential schools.*
 - *The Ontario government should have a Child Advocate to amplify the voices of children and youth across the province and monitor developments on the status of Indigenous kids and teens to prevent the backward slide we have now.*
 - *The Ontario government should expand the After School Program and include school drop-outs so that they can be re-engaged in the education system and supported by their peers to pursue higher education or enter into trades training. This will provide students struggling in school with opportunities to hang out in safer spaces (instead of being on the streets) and be influenced by positive peers instead of gangs.*
 - *The provincial government should regularly monitor Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act to ensure that all boards of education and schools are implementing policies to address anti-Indigenous racism and make their learning environment more accepting and welcoming to enhance the wellness, safety and achievement of all students so that they realize their full potential to succeed.*
 - *Ontario should fund peer mentoring initiatives to engage Indigenous, Black and other vulnerable groups to complement school retention programs and engage their peers at risk of dropping out of school to stay and succeed. This will be a better investment than dealing with growing numbers of young offenders, gangs and building more jails*
3. *The City of Thunder Bay should use the Thunder Bay Children's Charter to complement the SYI and fill the position of Thunder Bay Child Advocate to act as City Hall's lead on the SYI Recommendations (particularly #119 -- to ensure the voices of children and youth including Indigenous boarding students are heard at City Hall to improve their reception in the community and enhance their wellness, safety and potential to graduate.*

- *The City's Child Advocate should be responsible for over-seeing implementation of the Seven Youth Inquest recommendations, especially SYI Recommendation #120 "to discuss funding requirements or additional resources necessary to assist the City in implementing and supporting recommendations aimed at supporting Indigenous youth travelling to the City in order to access a secondary school program."*
 - *The child Advocate should liaise with agencies working with children and youth to create safe spaces and support Youth Centres (Recommendation #106) in the community for Indigenous students and other vulnerable youths to go and interact with positive role models (away from gangs), learn from role models and peer mentors and be coached by significant others and adult allies to follow the right path, stay on course and receive on-going support and referrals to reduce relapses.*
 - *The City should work with youth-led multicultural and inclusive groups such as the RMYC that involve diverse youths to develop peer leaders and mentors (SYI Recommendation #75) and gather information on what is really happening among their generation, solicit their input on the interventions, resources, and supports they need to create a city and community they want. Working with diverse peer leaders and through positive role models plants seeds of empathy, caring, kindness, and understanding in the next generation to enhance reconciliation, reduce racial tension and achieve harmony.*
 - *The City should liaise with the Thunder Bay Anti-Racism & Equity Advisory Committee, Diversity Thunder Bay, the Community Safety and Well-being Council, the Thunder Bay Police Services Board, school boards and the Lakehead Social Planning Council 211 for input and feedback on issues related to racially motivated crimes and racist incidents -- especially those involving Indigenous children and youth -- SYI Recommendation #112.*
4. *School boards should regularly review how their policies to implement "Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act" are being applied to ensure that all students are welcome, accepted and feel safe. They should monitor incidents of racism (especially those involving Indigenous students) and engage student councils, school councils, cultural clubs and LGBTQIA2-S student groups for input to create a racism-free and non-discriminatory learning climate.*

- *Schools should support the RMYC's peer mentoring initiatives and the Student Working Group made up of student representatives from Thunder Bay high schools to monitor incidents of racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and discrimination and make a difference.*
- 5, *The RMYC sits on committees and advisory boards and should continue to provide youth voices for programs, services, supports, and advocate for resources to level the playing field so that all children and youth benefit. The RMYC and Oshkaatisak should promote changes to enhance the wellness, safety, and graduation of Indigenous students to widen the pool of resilient peer leaders and role models who will spread positive influence.*
- *The RMYC should work with institutions such as school boards, police services, health, and community organizations to have meaningful youth representation on committees and not tokenism to ensure that issues such as school attrition, police youth relations, youth treatment in health where Indigenous, racialized, and other minority youths face barriers are addressed. Transparency and benchmarks are required to assess progress and accountability for equal access, equal opportunity and equal participation so that all children can see themselves represented and feel included in our diverse society.*

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: A Call to Action – Thinking outside the Box

Indigenous children and youths deserve the same opportunities to grow, thrive, and flourish as other Canadians. They are the fastest growing population in the country, yet despite Canada ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child with specific provisions for Indigenous children, they remain under-served by current government policies, programs, and practices developed without their input by non-Indigenous culturally incompetent bureaucrats.

The programs, services and benefits, although well-intentioned, fail to consider the whole child and how they are affected by the inter-generational impacts of residential schools, colonization, the 60's Scoop, trauma and so forth. They perpetuate a system where the children's voices, issues and experiences fall by the wayside. Consequently, as things stand, Indigenous children and youth continue to struggle to fit in and belong, and fail to reach their full potential as healthy capable as successful individuals.

The RMYC and Oshkaatisak feel that the TRC's Calls to Action #66 and the National Strategy for Children and Youth Act (NSCYA) recently tabled in the Senate offer a way forward that is different from the status quo. We have to think outside the box! Calls to Action #66 asks our government to take the lead and establish multi-year for community-based youth organizations to deliver programs on reconciliation and establish a national network to share information and best practices. The NSCYA aims to gather the voices of children and youth, compile data and use the information for appropriate action. The SYI has recommendations to enhance the wellness, safety and achievement of Indigenous students. And the Voices of Youth provide us with practical strategies to engage the youth and make them part of the solution.

Indigenous youth need safer places away from street gang influence, dysfunctional lifestyles and impoverished social; environments to heal and thrive. Growing up under the colonial system, they are familiar with programs provided under the Indian Act. This includes the nature of service delivery which is often impersonal like the detached transactions between cashiers serving customers with artificial interaction than mutual, respectful and nurturing relationships among equal sovereign peoples governed by Treaties. Indigenous youths want to feel they matter and belong. Discourteous encounters, demeaning experiences, and put-downs early in life affect their self esteem and confidence to believe they can succeed as everyone else.

The RMYC Peer Mentoring initiative is acknowledged in SYI Recommendation #75. The youth-to-youth approach is a best practise commonly used by gang ring-leaders successfully to recruit members. Training youth leaders and developing role models who use positive peer influence to reach out, inspire, motivate and give hope to Indigenous youths -- that they can achieve more than they have been led to believe -- is making a difference. Listening to youth voices about their priorities and how their services, programs and supports are delivered to improve mental health, reduce school dropouts, youth in-care, crime, suicide, addictions and so forth requires changing the status-quo and investing in young leaders and peer mentors.

The mentor and mentee relationship we are promoting has the potential to create a generation that is more kind, empathetic, generous, sympathetic, and caring for our collective wellbeing than what we have now. We must invest in creating peer leaders from diverse backgrounds who understand and support Indigenous children and youth to enhance reconciliation.

APPENDIX “A”

Student Feedback: A summary list of the highlights we gathered from the youth:

BARRIERS:

- Mental Health
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Lack of motivation
 - Lack of social skills
 - Lack of communication skills
 - Stress for not finishing their work on time
- Connectivity
 - Slow/Buggy WIFI (sometimes lack thereof)
 - Issues connecting to zoom meetings
 - Power outages in reserves
- Resources
 - Laptops
 - tutoring system
 - Student hotlines

INCENTIVES: (Including Scholarships, bursaries, trips, awards etc)

Recreational Activities:

- Sports (volleyball, basketball, hockey, badminton, etc.)
- Artistic opportunities for creativity (art club, sewing, beading, etc.)
- Camping trips / Outdoor activities
- / Outdoor activities / Hunting, fishing, gathering

Cultural Activities:

- Medicine picking
- Drum making/drum circles
- Ribbon skirt/shirt making
- Rattle making
- Regalia making

SERVICES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS: (Good accommodation / Safe boarding homes)

- Licensed faculty dealing with health and counselling
 - Licensed therapists and nurses
 - Addiction specialists
 - Suicide prevention workers
 - Tutors, graduation coaches, and other student supports
- Background checks of boarding homes + parents
- Mental wellness check-ins (especially with boarding students) Tutors
- Graduation coaches + College/University peer mentors.
- Accommodations for young parents

- Access to day-cares for young mothers
- Emergency aid/supplies (pampers, formula, baby clothes, etc)
- Parenting classes
- Food security and Financial literacy / budgeting

Mental health and addiction: why youth suffer from mental health and addictions

There are a number of factors that cause youth to suffer from mental illness and/or addiction. Examples include toxic relationships (family, romantic partners, friends, etc.), a lack of support for their education, lack of support for young parents, falling into the wrong group of friends (peer pressure to use substances), bullying and harassment, inter-generational trauma, health, and other personal reasons.

How can we help the students?

- Better access to mental health and addiction counselors in and out of reserve.
- Frequent mental health check-ins with students arranged by the schools.
- Accommodation and guiding resources to young parents in high school.
- Graduation coaches and University/College student peer mentoring (Available during and after school hours in a safe space and a special designated room).
- More opportunities for addiction specialists (Less wait time and prioritize youth).
 - Continue school in treatment

Resources and Information for Youth with Visible & Invisible Disabilities

Supports should be accessible to the youth themselves, and also to parents, boarding parents and staff members. By doing this, the youth will feel more welcome and the people around will know how to care for them.

Recreational activities

Access to more recreation -- sports, games, arts and crafts, as well as other extracurricular activities to keep students occupied. This will help them to stay away from the wrong crowd, alcohol, and other substances, as well as give them better outlets during a bad mental health day.

→ *Activities for after school hours*

- Open-gym, games and sports (volleyball, basketball, badminton, hockey, etc)
- Life skills workshops/presentations on cooking, budgeting, shopping, etc.
- Tutors -- school days and weekend to help students if they fall behind
 - ◆ Hobbies: (art club, sewing, beading, music, cooking, etc)

Cultural activities

By having more resources in culture activities, youth are able to learn about their own culture and participate in events (pow-wows, ceremonies, etc) to reconnect. In our project and in personal experiences, youth want ribbon skirts/shirts, regalia for pow wows — but there are not a lot of workshops with these skills.

→ *Activities*

- ◆ Medicine picking
- ◆ Drum making/drum circles
- ◆ Ribbon skirt/shirt making
- ◆ Rattle making
- ◆ Regalia making
- ◆ Hunting, fishing, trapping, etc
- ◆ Preparing traditional meals
- ◆ Camping and Outdoor survival

Overlapping cultural activities & curriculum

- Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School has courses that include cultural activities, which can be beneficial for students in other schools if also implemented there.
- There are art courses that include moccasin making with elders in the curriculum. Instead of the regular gym class – students have the option to participate in a class that overlaps with their culture. Students in this course go camping, learn to put up teepees (as well as the teachings behind it), and go medicine picking.
- Matawa Education and Care Centre has a leadership development courses for students to learn leadership skills. This should be promoted and can complement the running of the Student Chief and Council members in schools.
- There are art courses that include moccasin making with Elders in the curriculum.

School Exchanges and School Visits to enhance Reconciliation:

First Nations students attending Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School and Matawa Education and Care Centre in Thunder Bay are isolated from mixing with non-Indigenous students attending other schools. With the exception of participating in sports competitions and game tournaments, Indigenous students attending these First Nations-run schools do not have many formal chances to interact and get to know each other better.

We know that there are security concerns in schools but we feel that something can be worked out to organize open-houses and student exchanges to allow Indigenous boarding students at the schools to get to know their peers from other schools and vice versa to provide opportunities for cross cultural understanding and enhance reconciliation.

APPENDIX: “B”**INDIGENOUS YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON CANADA 150 (2017)**

1. In 2017, Canada celebrated 150 years of confederation. ‘Settler’ Canadians have benefited from traditional lands and prospered while Indigenous people have been devastated by colonization and residential schools. They are at the bottom of the social and economic ladders, and systemic barriers continue to exist for them to progress.
2. Colonization resulted in Indigenous people losing their independence, right to self government and self-determination. The government of Canada is responsible for the governance and well-being of Indigenous people and has not always acted diligently.
3. Indigenous people were sent to Indian Residential Schools to be assimilated into European culture. Children as young as five years old were forcibly removed from their parents and communities to attend church and government-run schools far away. They were forbidden to speak their language, practice their culture, and punished for doing so. Many were physically, mentally, emotionally and sexually abused, and some died at school. The legacy of residential schools haunts survivors and the inter-generational impacts have traumatic effects on Indigenous people and their communities today.
4. 60’s Scoop took thousands of Indigenous children from their parents and put them in foster homes or had them adopted away from their communities. This broke families, created an identity crisis and caused attachment problems we see in society today.
5. The fate of Indigenous people is determined by the Canadian government. Treaties and Land Rights take a long time to be resolved through a very costly legal system, and Indigenous groups are often short-changed in their dealings with governments and corporations seeking to exploit natural resources on traditional lands.
6. The Federal Government is responsible for First Nations’ education and the level of funding provided for Indigenous students is much less than what all other students in provincially-run schools get.
7. On-reserve First Nations children get 38% less funding compared to all other children elsewhere. In 2007, child welfare advocate Dr. Cindy Blackstock took the federal government to court. In 2016 the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled in her favour, and there were appeals by the government to delay settlement.

8. Murder, violence, and social problems are high among Indigenous groups as confirmed by the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.
9. Many First Nations reserves are under-serviced with living conditions comparable to Third World countries. They lack basic services such as clean drinking water, high schools, adequate housing, good health-care, recreational facilities and so forth.
10. There are remote reserves are only accessible by air or winter roads. Flying in basic supplies such as food makes livelihood very expensive. This has an impact on health, education standards, quality of life, and life expectancy among Indigenous people.
11. Indigenous suicide rates are the highest in Canada. Immigrants and refugees flock here because of opportunities and the potential to prosper while Indigenous children have lost hope and are 'killing' themselves to 'exit' a country others see as "paradise".
12. High school drop-out rates and poor social conditions lead to the over-represented of Indigenous people in jails. In Northwestern Ontario, 75-90% of offenders in the Criminal Justice System are Indigenous while their population in Canada is only 5%.
13. Indigenous languages and culture are tied to the land and need protection. All groups that have migrated here have their traditions rooted and preserved in their countries of origin. Loss of Indigenous languages and traditions in Canada will make them extinct.
14. High poverty rates in a rich country and marginalization from the mainstream are realities among Indigenous people since colonization. The over-representation in numbers of school drop-outs, unemployment, homelessness, mental health, addictions, preventable diseases and so forth make Indigenous groups vulnerable and put them at greater risk compared to other Canadians. There is a lack of commitment and willingness to invest in addressing the economic and social disparities while we profit from the natural resources on their lands.
15. Indigenous people face racism and discrimination in their own country. Since colonization, Euro-centric values of superiority and privilege have presented Indigenous groups negatively in spite of their contributions to the development of Canada. Their stories are not in the school curriculum, and our history is biased from a colonial point of view. The media and movies promoted stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes that exist to this day. Governments have been reluctant to address the inequities were it not of the pressure from the United Nations, Human Rights and Supreme Court rulings.

APPENDIX “C”:**RECONCILIATION: PRIME MINISTER STEPHEN HARPER’S FULL APOLOGY ON BEHALF OF CANADIANS FOR THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM**

“The treatment of children in Indian Residential Schools is a sad chapter in our history. For more than a century, Indian Residential Schools separated over 150,000 Aboriginal children from their families and communities. In the 1870's, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate Aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Two primary objectives of the Residential Schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child". Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.

One hundred and thirty-two federally-supported schools were located in every province and territory, except Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Most schools were operated as “joint ventures” with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United Churches. The Government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities. Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed.

All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities. First Nations, Inuit and Metis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools. Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home.

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language. While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities.

The legacy of Indian Residential Schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today.

It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered. It is a testament to their resilience as individuals and to the strength of their cultures. Regrettably, many former students are not with us today and died never having received a full apology from the Government of Canada.

The government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation. Therefore, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this Chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian Residential Schools system.

To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, far too often, these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and we apologize for failing to protect you. Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry.

The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a Government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly”.

*The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada
House of Parliament, Ottawa
Wednesday, June 11, 2008*

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RESOLUTION 03/30 NISHNAWBE ASKI NATION SUPPORTS THE REGIONAL YOUTH CENTRE

WHEREAS the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre provides many Nishnawbe Aski Nation Youth who reside in Thunder Bay while attending Dennis Cromarty High School and other secondary schools in the city with safe, healthy, and culturally appropriate services;

WHEREAS the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Decade for Youth Council strongly supports the work of the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre;

WHEREAS the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre provides youth programming for many members of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, both on and off-reserve;

WHEREAS the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre empowers young people by developing leadership skills through social, cultural and recreational activities that are conceived, developed and executed by the youth themselves;

WHEREAS the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre receives no core funding from any level of government;

WHEREAS in the past the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre had successfully raised all of its operational money for faxes, telephone etc through bingos;

WHEREAS the opening of the Thunder Bay Charity Casino caused a dramatic decline in bingo revenues for the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre;

WHEREAS the Ontario Government and the City of Thunder Bay have failed to financially compensate the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre for the loss of its bingo revenues;

WHEREAS the loss of the bingo revenues has forced the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre to substantially reduce the level of service and programming to its members, including a large number of NAN Youth;

WHEREAS without these services and programs, youth may have nowhere to go after school but the streets, where they will be exposed to drugs, alcohol and violence;

Resolution 03/30 (continued)

2

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that Nishnawbe Aski Nation Chiefs-in-Assembly mandate the Executive Council to continue its work to assist the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre lobby all levels of government to adequately fund this worthwhile youth organization;

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that Nishnawbe Aski Nations Chiefs-in-Assembly recommend that each member First Nation send in resolutions or letters of support for the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre;


FINALLY BE IT RESOLVED that Nishnawbe Aski Chiefs-in-Assembly recommend that each member First Nation donate a small sum of money to the Multicultural Regional Youth Centre to continue its work providing services and programming to urban youth, including those NAN members attending Dennis Cromarty High School and other secondary schools in Thunder Bay.


DATED AT THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO, THIS 27TH DAY OF FEBRUARY, 2003.

MOVED BY: Chief Glenn Nolan
Mississauga Cree First Nation

SECONDED BY: Proxy Wally McKay
Whitewater First Nation

CARRIED.


Grand Chief


Deputy Grand Chief



August 21, 2020

Mayor Bill Mauro and Council, City of Thunder Bay, Ontario

Dear Sirs and Madams:

Re: Regional Multicultural Centre

Further to the above-mentioned topic, I would like to bring to your attention an issue affecting the Regional Multicultural Youth Council. The RMYC is a vital organization in our City of Thunder Bay. It engages children and youth and gives them a voice to be part of the solution to challenges affecting them. The Youth Council embraces and empowers youths of all races and cultural backgrounds, including new immigrants and foreign students to flourish and experience rewarding Canadian mosaic in our city. The real world is a diverse mix of people, and this is what the RMYC reflects to improve cultural relations in our city and promote racial harmony.

Our city currently is dealing with coronavirus crisis that is affecting all of us locally and everyone globally. I had an opportunity to address members of the RMYC a few weeks ago and was very impressed with the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the summer students working together as they discussed serious issues affecting children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students were reaching out to each other as peers across the city to gather information on the social challenges in our community and how they can be resolved.

The pandemic has caused significant negative social and economic impacts across the city, and the youth acknowledged experiencing stress and anxiety resulting in mental health breakdowns. We are all aware that Thunder Bay has become a center of drug and human trafficking from all directions which compounds poverty, abuse, racism and violence. This is very painful and traumatic to young people and many wonder what the future holds for them and begin to lose hope.

I am sure that we as citizens all acknowledge and applaud the work of the front-line health workers and the generosity of some of our churches and organizations such as the Salvation Army, Grace Place, Food Banks, the Regional Food Distribution Association, the Shelter House, Detox Centre, Dew Drop Inn, Urban Abbey, Redwood Park Food Bank and other groups all stepping in to help and fill the gaps. Some of these groups have received funding from various sources and some have not sought external funding. All these groups and charitable organizations have been strained financially by the current crisis, and the RMYC has been struggling to compete for the limited funding available to meet a growing demand for the peer-to-peer services they provide to help and empower each other.

I met with Mr. Moffat Makuto, the well known and respected director of RMYC in the city and throughout the region. Mr. Makudo graciously offers his services on a completely volunteer basis for the well being of our youth. He highlighted the need for more, safer spaces for the youth to get together, openly talk about the problems they face and on-going challenges when parents are struggling to make ends meet, and families are dysfunctional. Being confined in homes that are not healthy due to addictions because of the COVID-19 restrictions just makes things worse. The RMYC believes that more peer role models who can use positive peer influence need to be trained and supported to counter the growing influence of gangs and negative social pressures in our community.

Having worked with and supported the RMYC for many years, I feel that this is one youth group the city needs and should invest in as a practical example of multicultural collaboration and racial harmony. For many years, Nishnawbe Aski Nation and other First Nation Council/Groups have done their part to sustain the RMYC including offering them free space to run the after-school program for First Nations boarding students at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School to keep them safe

But the youth council needs a multicultural youth centre as a base to work with diverse youths and celebrate diversity. A safe space where they are welcome and feel comfortable to go hang out after hours. A place to connect with positive peers, access information, resources, services, programs, and support and participate in activities that enhance their safety, wellness, and achievement

Some other of the activities the RMYC have initiated for youth are:

- Volunteering – youth who volunteer have opportunities to meet new people from diverse backgrounds, learn, gain life skills and valuable work experience.
- Peer mentoring – establishing a peer leader program as an investment in the future because of the effectiveness of the youth – to – youth approach.
- Job-search and work skills development for students looking for part time work, preparing resumes, going to interviews, developing a positive work ethic for a positive self esteem.

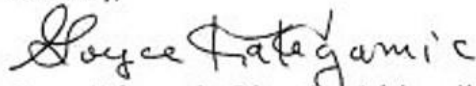
The Keewatinook Okimakanak Board of Education I work for is planning fundraising events to assist with operational costs of the youth centre as a safe space. We also want to host a dinner to support the youth-to-youth, peer mentoring programs the RMYC offers to help our students to stay in school and graduate. I am aware that various Indigenous groups have been the lifeline of the RMYC to encourage youth to embrace life

A way for the City to demonstrate support and strongly tackle the racism that has given us such a negative image across the country, is to waive the 2020 property taxes so that the RMYC has the space to continue doing exemplary work to promote racial harmony.

We are asking the City to ensure that the entity of the RMYC is maintained to show our community and the broader public that children and youth from all ethical backgrounds can engage each other to collaborate together to promote respect and acceptance of each other.

This is one sure way to show that the city can engage the next generation to fight social challenges in Thunder Bay.

Sincerely,



Goyce Kakegamic, Education Advisor, K. O. Board of Education

Cc. Mr. Moffat Makuto, Executive Director and Board
Regional Multicultural Youth Council

Education

RMYC research project holds youth conference in Mishkeegogamang

Rick Garrick
Wawatay News

A group of Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) youth recently met with youth in Mishkeegogamang during a youth conference in early July as part of their Voices of Youth research project.

"We mostly interacted with the students such as participating in games, events (and Mofit Mafato, youth advisor and summer programs coordinator at RMYC and executive director at Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario) did a little workshop too with the youth to see where they were academic wise and what challenges they face," says Summer Spade, a leader with the Voices of Youth project at RMYC. "Kids need role models in their lives, especially older youth as us just so they know they can be like us at some point. They don't have to be adults to do this, they can be young teenagers or people just starting in their early 20s."

Lucas Sinoway, who is involved with the Voices of Youth project at RMYC, says the trip to Mishkeegogamang was an opportunity to give the youth a voice.

"And to show them you don't need alcohol and drugs in order to cope with residential schools and (issues) like that," Sinoway says. "There are healthy ways to cope such as going out in nature and moving your body."



A group of Regional Multicultural Youth Council youth, pictured on Aseeki Wajih in Fort William, are working on a Voices of Youth research project.

Julia Beady, who is involved with the Voices of Youth project at RMYC, highlighted the importance of being involved with RMYC, noting that he also enjoyed the trip to Mishkeegogamang.

"It's important training for

our future learning how to do this, how to show kids that they're not alone and have role models to look up to," Beady says.

Karlee Meekis, a leader with the Voice of Youth project at RMYC, says youth need role models in their lives.

"Especially older youth as us just so they know they can be like us at some point, they don't have to be adults to do this, they can be young teenagers, they can be older teenagers or people just starting in their early 20s," Meekis says, noting

that she is planning to study Business Accounting at Centennial College in Toronto this fall. "So Moffat usually tells us as we've involved in this program to kind of share our story and be role models for the younger students."

Spade says the Voices of Youth project, which is being done in partnership with Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), is aimed at reengaging students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to get back into their education and helping them succeed in their endeavours.

"There was a drastic rise in dropout rates because students suffered with social anxiety with the drastic change in environment and we want to reconnect them with their education," Spade says, noting that they also asked questions about the issue to youth during a trip to Nekeanaga and to some youth from Deer Lake. "They think that helping them reengage and stay in school is to reinforce more specialized therapists and school nurses they can meet daily just for check ins ... and they also had ideas for more recreational activities."

Meekis says they travelled with NAN staff for the trip to Nekeanaga.

"We helped plan community events along with them like a breakfast and games for them," Meekis says.

Spade says they also asked questions about the issue to youth in Thunder Bay.

"It's pretty easy to connect with the youth, especially with our RMYC," Spade says. "We were also talking with Matawa students here. Most of the students brought up recreational things such as more things would interest them like beading, art (and) that kind of thing instead of just sports."

Rick Garrick/Wawatay News

Community

13th annual Mayor's Awards recognize NAN youth council

Rick Gerrick
Wawatay News

A group of youth from the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) and Nishnawbe Aski Nation Oshkwaistik Youth Council were recognized at Thunder Bay's 13th Annual Mayor's Community Safety Awards.

Winner McGuire, a Singswi Neysashi Anishinabek youth and co-president at the RMYC, was recognized with the Young Leader Award, and the Voices of Youth Project by the RMYC in partnership with the Oshkwaistik Youth Council was recognized with one of four Outstanding Community Project awards.

"Migweeth and congratulations to these young leaders for their outstanding work to improve the lives of young people across the region," says Deputy Grand Chief Bobby Narcisse. "The leadership they have demonstrated is an inspiration to young people across our nation. Voices of Youth is an inspiring project that allows young people to express their concerns and needs. (It is) encouraging to see young people come together to support each other, and we join with municipal officials to celebrate their accomplishments."

The Voices of Youth project was a joint effort by the RMYC and the Oshkwaistik Youth Council to rethink young people's passion for learning and to combat the disruptive impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had on young people's educa-

tion. "Congratulations to our award winners and thank you to all the nominees for all you do in our community," says Acting Mayor Dominic Pasquino. "City Council is proud to recognize and highlight the impact you continue to make in our city."

McGuire says she was honoured to receive the Young Leader Award. She helps immigrants, Indigenous youth and people of colour navigate societal and institutional barriers and guides them towards a successful future.

"I've been trying to get my voice out there for a long time and now I've overcome the challenges that I needed to in order to get my voice out there and make an impact on the youth," McGuire says. "The project I've been working on is Girl Power/Youth Power. We would gather young kids and we would teach them lessons that they need to know through skills and just storytelling."

McGuire says she is also working to open a Black Youth Group for African and Caribbean youth in Thunder Bay.

"That's going to be a place where we can openly share experiences and learn to overcome them together," McGuire says.

McGuire says it has been a great experience working with all the youth.

"It's a very diverse environment, you're learning something new every day and you learn to co-exist peacefully with all these other cultures," McGuire says.



A group of youth from the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) and Nishnawbe Aski Nation Oshkwaistik Youth Council were among those recognized with awards at Thunder Bay's 13th Annual Mayor's Community Safety Awards.

Danika-Lee Banning, a Fort William youth who runs the social media and coordinates volunteers at RMYC, says it felt really good to be recognized with the Outstanding Community Project award.

"As the RMYC we put in a lot of work to make the community a better place and to keep youth off the streets and help them feel more involved in their community and be more connected to who they see as a person," Banning says. "We did Voices of Youth so that we could hear from the youth and see their perspective on things and try to better understand

how they feel it."

Teagan Fraser, a Thunder Bay youth and co-president at the RMYC, says it felt good to be recognized with the Outstanding Community Project award.

"We went to different communities to ask youth how COVID impacted their schooling," Fraser says. "And we are working to make it better, so we do peer mentoring in high school."

Fraser says they helped with the street fair during their trip to Kiashtke Zaaging Anishinabek.

"I talked to a few youth

about peer mentoring, told them to reach out to me," Fraser says.

Kohen Chisdi, a member of the Oshkwaistik Youth Council, says they were grateful to be recognized with the Outstanding Community Project award.

"We're just really happy to be supporting the RMYC and helping the youth overcome barriers with attending secondary school and finding strategies how we can help them succeed better," Chisdi says. "We're just really grateful to be supporting the youth and receiving this award to push initiatives like this."

The 13th Annual Mayor's Community Safety Awards also included the Community Hero award which was presented to Jon Green, an active team member of Elzevir NWO, and three other Outstanding Community Project awards which were presented to the Expressive Arts Program, People with Lived Experience Advisory Committee and Poverty-Free Thunder Bay. Information about the awards is posted online at www.thunderbay.ca/en/city-services/13th-annual-mayor-s-community-safety-awards.aspx.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Voices of Youth 2023 Project Sponsors:

- * Pathways to Education Canada
- * Nishnawbe Aski Nation
- * Urban Programming for Indigenous Peoples
- * Sioux Lookout Area Aboriginal Management Board
- * The Carrick Family (Food Security & ROOTS Clothing Incentives)
- * Evelyn Shape (RMYC Summer School)

RMYC Project Team:

- * Kamryn Woloschuk - *Team Leader*
- * Karlee Meekis and Summer Spade - *Project Leads*
- * Tisha Duncan, Saffron Fiddler, Julian Beardy, Eternity Neekan, Jayda Jeremiah, Eternity Neekan, Atlas Kiishatay Waite, Lucas Sinoway -- *Researchers*
- * Jady Bellavance, Danika-Lee Banning, Cody Kenequanash, Allan Okeese, Zoya Rehman, Jona Valkyrie, Kamryn Woloschuk, Wendy Wang – *Report Writing & Editing*

Nishnawbe Aski Nation Oshkaatisak (All-Youth) Council Project Team:

- * Ashley Bach, Savanna Boucher, Kohen Chiesel, Janine Frogg Tehya Quachegan,

Special thanks to:

- * Nishnawbe Aski Nation Deputy Grand Chief Bobby Narcisse
- * Joseph Carew, NAN Youth Engagement Manager
- * Bryan Achneepineskum, NAN Education Jurisdiction Manager
- * Cheyanne Dindial, NAN Youth Initiatives Co-ordinator
- * Moffat Makuto, Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario
- * Wendy Wang, RMYC Past President

Key References:

- * Verdict of the Coroner's Jury –The Seven First Nations Youth Inquest -- 2016
- * The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada – Calls to Action –
- * Coming Together to Talk with Youth -- 2020

For more information about the project or Inquiries about this report, please contact: T

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