

# **ENGAGING YOUTH -- MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

## **PROJECT REPORT**

**(Follow-up to Coming Together to Talk with Youth Forum)**

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## **ENGAGING YOUTH -- MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

*"It Takes a Village to Raise a Child"*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

This report covers the Regional Multicultural Youth Council's (RMYC) activities to follow up on issues covered during the *"Coming Together to Talk with Youth"* forum attended by 250 high school students at Lakehead University on April 30, 2019. The RMYC helped to organize the event, prepared a report and the recommendations. Under the supervision of the Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario (MANWO), the incorporated parent organization, a Project Co-ordinator was hired to monitor developments and assess progress on the actions taken.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were disrupted and in-class lessons were suspended. The RMYC could not hold in-person meetings and replaced them with virtual events, small focus groups and individual consultations. A breakthrough came during the summer when group-size restrictions were relaxed. MANWO was able to hire students under the summer experience program to work at the Multicultural Youth Centre. A total of forty two mostly high school students were recruited and worked in small groups in 5 different locations for social distancing. We later rented Vale Community Centre to have more meeting space for presentations and discussions when rules were relaxed. The diverse pool of students provided a large sample to gather information for the project. The youth also reached out to their peers for comments, input and feedback as needed.

### **PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS**

The Project Co-ordinator formed a project team to interview RMYC officers and members involved with the *"Coming Together to Talk with Youth"* forum, and preparing the report to follow up on the recommendations. They also consulted over forty summer students working at the youth centre about conditions in the city, the problems they were

facing and what they wanted to make their lives better for comparison with what was in the report.

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## **1. SAFE SPACES:**

Since the forum, the RMYC used every opportunity to advocate for safer spaces that are accepting, welcoming, warm and inclusive for children and youth to get together, have their voices heard and access programs, services and supports to enhance their wellness, develop their potential and foster achievement.

The on-going COVID-19 pandemic climate where social isolation was being promoted, schools and public facilities closed or are under restrictions limited the youth council's opportunities to create safer, or make more safe indoor spaces. Consequently there has been no progress in this regard at a time growing numbers of vulnerable children and youth are experiencing poverty, addictions, food security issues, and homelessness due to home-invasions, gangs, drug and sex traffickers, criminals, and so forth in the city.

The RMYC still believes that safer spaces with basic supports vulnerable children need are a proactive investment in prevention that will eliminate problems, avoid damages and cut costs in society over time. Therefore, the youth council will continue to advocate for more youth- friendly facilities where kids and teens have a voice, learn to get along, access services, supports and resources they need, gain valuable life-skills and knowledge to make wise choices and responsible decisions.

The RMYC will run the Multicultural Youth Centre as a model safe space in the community where children and youth are welcome, feel included, are accepted and gain a sense of belonging. The aim is to expose young people to the

experience of being in a space where they feel comfortable and safe so that they join the campaign to advocate for similar spaces in the community, at school and so forth. This should motivate them to speak up and ask school boards, municipal councils, and Band Councils to create such spaces and request provincial and federal governments to contribute financial resources and invest in next generations -- up-stream -- to break negative cycles and stop problems downstream.

## **2. ENGAGING THE YOUTH THROUGH PEER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:**

The RMYC uses a youth-to-youth approach to reach out and communicate with peers effectively. The youth council acknowledges that peer pressure has a powerful socializing effect, and positive influence can change bad habits, transform negative behaviours for good outcomes and make a difference in young lives.

The youth council is aware that as minors, young people lack lived experiences earned from doing things over time. To gain knowledge and wisdom, develop leadership and organizational skills and learn etiquette and poise, young people need training, teaching and guidance. The RMYC knows this quite well and grooms Executive Officers and Committee Chairs for their positions when they assume office to lead the group. Likewise, Peer Mentors, Student Ambassadors and Team Leaders are trained for their roles to work with others and serve as role models.

Possessing leadership, organizational and communication skills has been key to the survival and effectiveness of the RMYC. These skills have been gained through hands-on practice shared among peers. The on-going restrictions created by the pandemic have limited opportunities for in-person training and direct contact to teach through practical activities. This has affected peer role

modelling and the capacity of new recruits transitioning into office as youth council leaders, activity organizers, advocates, peer helpers and so forth.

Since the pandemic, the RMYC has been operating virtually and communicating with members on-line. Limited access to technology by some youths has affected potential to reach out and involve everyone and equitable access to leadership and mentoring training. The youth council is exploring new ways to build capacity and self confidence among youths as leaders empowering each other to speak up and be part of the solution to their problems. This strategy helps to amplify youth voices and mobilize kids and teens to create the changes they want for their future.

### **3. COMMUNITY STRATEGY: THUNDER BAY CHILDREN'S CHARTER**

There has been no movement to fill Thunder Bay Child Advocate's position and monitor the implementation of Thunder Bay City Children's Charter left vacant by the current City Council since it came to office in December 2018.

After the release of the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth Report*, the RMYC made a presentation to Diversity Thunder Bay and the City's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee soliciting support to convince City Council to fill the position. The youth council argued that children and youth need a voice at City Hall to enhance their status and invest in essential programs and services upstream to avoid serious consequences and higher costs downstream. As the saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

During the summer, the RMYC invited Mayor Bill Mauro, Councillors Brian Hamilton and Rebecca Johnson to continue discussions about the vacant Child Advocate post on City Council. The youth council referenced its work with the

past two Thunder Bay Children's Advocates, and collaboration with the Ontario Child and Youth Advocate now operating under the Ombudsman's Office to identify service gaps, connect dots to enhance supports for children to improve the child welfare system. The RMYC also talked about working with Senator Rosemary Moodie to establish an Office of a Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada. The youth saw this as an essential voice to improve the quality of life for children across the country. They felt that the benefits of the Office of the Children's Advocate provincially and nationally should be realized in the city also.

The Mayor was willing to have the position filled and wanted someone to volunteer to fill the position. Following the meeting, he sent an invitation to City Councillors to find anyone interested, but no one took the offer. Consequently there has been no movement on the matter and there is still no Child Advocate on City Council.

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Lack of interest by City Councillors to fill the post prompted the RMYC to organize the summer students into small focus groups to get input on ways to advance the cause. The consensus was to raise this issue throughout 2022, which is an election year for a new City Council. The youth were to be champions for their own cause and speak up about the need for the City to have a Child Advocate.

The strategy will include using social media to communicate the youth council's message to give children a voice at City Hall to improve their lives, and approach candidates running for City Council about their stand on the Thunder Bay Children's Charter and filling the Children's Advocate position. This will publicize the issue and rally the community to the cause of children and youth and influence community leaders and decision-makers responsible for their fate and wellbeing.

#### 4. **BOARDS OF EDUCATION:**

Constant disruptions of schooling due to the pandemic and with classes being on-line most of the year the RMYC did not have many formal opportunities to fully discuss with the boards of education what transpired at the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* forum and suggest follow-up plans.

Despite these challenges, the RMYC was able to negotiate a summer school arrangement with the Lakehead District School Board. Many of the students involved with the youth council complained about virtual classes and a majority of Indigenous students struggled to complete their courses. When the public school board advertised summer school, the youth council inquired whether there was interest among its members and volunteers. In spite of some students not being enrolled with the board, special arrangements were made to take those recommended by the RMYC. A total of twenty students were signed up by the deadline, and the youth council set up a summer school program with technological supports, tutors and other social supports.

The summer school initiative provided a great opportunity for the RMYC to observe and document the issues mentioned by the students at the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* forum about the challenges they face in the education system. The Engaging Youth Making a Difference Project Co-ordinator (Kamryn Woloschuck) took special interest in the summer school and monitored how everything went. She prepared a special report the RMYC has shared with the Minister of Education, the Premier, Members of Parliament, School Boards and other stakeholders.

The other area where there was progress with school boards involved the RMYC working with MANWO and Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) approaching the



Lakehead District School Board and the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board to launch a Thunder Bay Pathways to Education Program targeting Indigenous and disadvantaged students to stay in school and graduate.

The Pathways Program aims to address problems identified by Indigenous youths and documented in a study by Dr. John Hodson and Nadine Hedican titled *“Educational Challenges for First Nations Children in Thunder Bay Schools – Let the Dreams Begin”*. John and Nadine’s research revealed a dropout rate as high as eighty per cent (80%) among First Nations students in local schools.

The RMYC is pleased that both boards agreed to run the youth council’s After School Program in all their high schools. This will be an expansion of a successful initiative the RMYC started at Dennis Franklin Cromarty (DFC) High School. The RMYC will use Cultural Rooms in the schools and provide tutors to assist students academically. Peer Mentors, the equivalent of Student Ambassadors at DFC will help to recruit students for the program, offer peer support for encouragement and motivation to attend school regularly and succeed. Meals and snacks will be available for students remaining at school after classes to participate in the extra- curricular activities offered by the program. There will also be free rides to ensure that students staying late get home safely.

The Pathways Program will also reach out to parents, guardians and caregivers with incentives to encourage their children to attend school regularly and access the various resources available to help them graduate. The RMYC will provide on-going peer support to make friends, cope with racism and related stresses and peer pressure youth face. The youth council will liaise with social service agencies and Indigenous groups for extra-curricular activities, cultural teachings, lifeskills, social skills, workskills and so forth youths need to thrive and succeed in

society.

## 5. DIVERSITY THUNDER BAY

The RMYC made presentations to Diversity Thunder Bay (DTB) requesting support to amplify youth voices and action to advance their cause. DTB co-ordinated the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* event where many issues were raised, stories shared and recommendations made to move forward. The youth council counted on DTB as an ally and advocate for action to address problems prioritized by the youth. Working with schools was strategic because of key roles they play to educate the nation, eliminate ignorance, and open doors to greater opportunities, progress and prosperity. Schools also have a transforming effect on individuals and society through enlightenment by challenging old beliefs and biases, thereby eliminating cultural stereotypes, racial prejudice, religious intolerance, hate and discrimination due to ignorance.

The RMYC is aware of Statistics Canada and Correctional Service Canada reports that reveal that eighty-nine percent (89%) of young offenders in the federal correctional system have below grade 10 education and 65% less than grade 8. The high numbers of school drop-outs make youths vulnerable and susceptible to a life of poverty and crime. They end up in the justice system which is costly to society and feeds negative stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination which in turn perpetuate poverty and threatens our safety and security. All these are issues brought up during the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* discussions.

Plans for DTB to work with the Lakehead District School Board to organize Youth Embracing Diversity in Education (YEDE) Student Leaders events as a follow-up to the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* event were put on hold by the pandemic. The idea to host them virtually was shelved due to logistics. The

RMYC will revive the dialogue once opportunities arise to work with schools to organize forums for students to create accepting, inclusive and anti-racist learning environments. The goal is equity for all students to realize their true potential to reach their goals.

## **6. THE RMYC / YOUTH-LED INITIATIVES:**

The RMYC felt very honoured to be part of the organizing committee for the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* forum. Leading the workshops, taking notes and preparing the final report were highlights. Alone, the youth council lacked the financial resources to host the event. Youth are a dependent population with no financial capital to organize their own activities. But collaboration with adults did it!

The RMYC has relied on sponsors and grants to work on issues the youth want addressed. This can disrupt continuity and successful youth engagement when funds are not available. Even though racism is a major concern to Indigenous and racialized students, the RMYC could not carry out this project alone. Earlier efforts to seek funds from the City had been unsuccessful in spite of Thunder Bay been labelled the most racist city in Canada. The City did not have funding dedicated to combating racism, eliminating discrimination and enhancing reconciliation.

Following the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* forum, the RMYC was inspired to make a presentation to City Council requesting funding criteria for initiatives to address racism. The youth council's voice was heard and the City responded accordingly. The RMYC applied and got the funding to carry out this project which has enabled the youth council to run this project and engage youth into action, give them a voice and inspire them to be part of the solution their problems.

This project was an opportunity for the RMYC to gather information and monitor developments after the forum and assess progress. Discussions with the summer students revealed that conditions had worsened when schools were closed due to the pandemic. This took away supervised activities with peers, breakfast and lunch programs, caring teachers, access to counselling and support services for growing numbers of students in dysfunctional homes, struggling families, foster care and high high-risk neighbourhoods. Social isolation, a lack of healthy alternatives and limited opportunities for positive influence were having an impact on mental health.

Tasked to identify current issues of concern, their interests and what they wanted to see done, the students came up with a list that included the following:

- Peer Mentoring/Peer Support Training, Capacity development
- Eliminating violence, bullying, gangs, assaults, cyber-bullying, threats
- Mental health, wellbeing, Counselling for guidance, stress, trauma and suicides
- Anti-racism – dealing with racial slurs, religious intolerance, discrimination
- Substance abuse, addictions, Treatment and Aftercare
- Being safe in the city, access to transportation/transit, avoiding risky areas
- Poverty, food security, homelessness, access to new technology
- Computer literacy, identity theft, phishing, online security, Too much gaming
- Financial literacy, banking, budgeting, paying taxes, credit cards
- Business etiquette, employment, summer jobs, resumes, interviews

- Human trafficking awareness, dating violence, abuse, exploitation
- Homophobia, 2-Spirit gender issues, Pronouns
- Physical fitness, sports, recreation, fun, hobbies, healthy lifestyles
- Cultural sensitivity, Competence training for Systemic discrimination
- Safer and inclusive spaces at schools and in the community
- Personal hygiene, access to feminine sanitary products
- Youth empowerment, leadership/organizational training, communication skills
- Advocacy – youth voices and adult allies, social consciousness

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- The environment, climate change/global warming
- Education, staying in school, careers, After School Activities, Tutoring
- Parenting skills, sexuality, relationships, foster care
- Time Management, Goal Setting, Success and Achievement
- Foster care, Adoption, Transitioning out of care, Independent living
- Volunteering, empathy, civic pride and community participation
- Work-skills, cooking skills, driving skills, home-care skills
- Self-esteem, Self-confidence, Culture, Identity, Spirituality, Faith, Hope, Beliefs
- Land-based learning, Traditional Teachings, alterative education, Trades

- Reconciliation, Colonization, Residential Schools
- Studying away from home, and living in boarding homes
- Arts and Crafts

The information above confirms complex youth needs. Human resources and financial investment together with commitments by political leaders and decision makers are required to address social problems and improve the lives of growing numbers vulnerable children and at-risk youths. Otherwise the criminals, gangs and child exploiters will win.

## **PROJECT OUTCOMES**

The RMYC is pleased that the project accomplished the following:

- \* Reviewing the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* forum report to see what action has been taken in order to assess progress, and examine the status of the six recommendations to change the status-quo and map the way forward.
  - \* Getting a youth perspective on what has been happening in the community to deal with problems identified by the students at the forum, found the gaps in programs, services and supports, and refreshed the call for more safer spaces for children and youth to enhance their wellbeing, as well as advocate for the Thunder Bay Children's Charter to amplify youth voices.
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- \* The project covered pressing issues affecting youths and how the RMYC is working with City Council, Diversity Thunder Bay, the Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee, school boards, Indigenous groups and other stakeholders to present a youth perspective. Problems of racism, systemic discrimination, poverty, crime, violence, stereotyping and so forth were still rampant and need to be addressed to enhance the wellness, safety and achievement of children and

youth.

- \* The project revived youth voices from the *Coming Together to Talk with Youth* forum, and the need to act on the recommendations. Consequently, more people are now aware of the status of the Thunder Bay Children's Charter and the absence of the Children's Advocate on City Council, as well as the plight of children and youth that deserves a advocate at City Hall.
- \* The project engaged the youth and invited them to speak up about their concerns, fears, interests and desires. The summer students and the project team talked about the vision of the kind of community they liked to live in. This was featured in a video titled "The Thunder I Want" the RMYC circulated on-line and via social media - <https://youtu.be/uEWWSOcddzA> The RMYC also shared the video with Thunder Bay City Council and senior staff, members of Diversity Thunder Bay, the Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee, and other stakeholders to promote the vision the youth have for the community.

The RMYC will build on this project to advance the issues that need to be addressed and mobilize the youth not give up. The challenge will continue to be securing adequate funding for youth-led activities that are effective at reaching out to peers. Plans are to work with adult allies committed to the cause, and convincing citizens to use their vote as political pressure to get community leaders to be more proactive and invest in prevention. The youth council believes that supporting policies and practices that reduce risk factors among kids, and adequately funding programs for children and youth will break negative cycles and stop more kids from becoming troubled and dysfunctional parents. According to Frederick Douglass "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS – SYSTEMIC ISSUES**

Reports on file and stories passed down among the RMYC members reveal an

impressive history and track record of youth-led activism in race relations, anti-racism, and social justice. This has been widely acknowledged locally, regionally, provincially, regionally and nationally with special awards, while individual members of the youth council have recognized for outstanding leadership to mobilize their peers to act accordingly.

In spite of notable accomplishments, the RMYC continues to struggle competing for funds and grants with seasoned adults for the success stories of proactive youth engagement. Dry spells between projects reduces youths to mere spectators, rather than actors and key peer drivers. This was evident in initiatives such as the Multicultural Bows of black, red, red and yellow ribbons intertwined to symbolize the beauty of the human race united in harmony. The RMYC started making the bows manually to involve children and youth in something practical and significant to commemorate March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This annual campaign which involves making and distributing the bows is often been disrupted due to a lack of funds to purchase ribbons.

Likewise, the March 21 Community Breakfast and the Race Relations Image Awards the RMYC initiated to involve the wider community in racism awareness, and to acknowledge and celebrate local champions working to eliminate racial discrimination have both been taken over by adult groups that have access to more resources to organize and host the events. While this has helped to sustain the message, the ability to engage more youths has been greatly diminished. This undermines the benefits of building anti-racism capacity in future generations by sowing seeds of creativity and activism among children and youth in early ages so that they grow up as life-long advocates and promoters of racial harmony.

Giving kids and teens resources to come up with their own ideas about getting along, and supports to act accordingly provides a timely learning process to internalize values. The experience is empowering and has potential to transform perceptions for lasting



change.

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Being young, RMYC members feel that they learn more from actually doing things and being actively involved than by being told what to do. This is especially true where racism is involved and physical interaction does more to dispel stereotypes, falsehoods and myths that fuel racial discrimination. Racism is a major concern in our community, and it is important for the city to acknowledge the importance of engaging youths to be actively involved in planning their own activities that celebrate diversity and promote acceptance.

For this project, the RMYC applied for the maximum \$10,000.00 under the Anti-Racism and Reconciliation Funding category, but received \$8,000.00 because the city does not cover 100% of project expenses. This level of funding for something as hurtful, divisive and generational as racism is grossly inadequate. Despite remarkable anti-Indigenous racism work that earned the RMYC a unanimous resolution of support from NAN Chiefs in Assembly, the youth group continues to devote valuable time competing for funds with privileged adult organizations -- rather than focus their energies working with peers to combat racism, stay in school, promote healthy lifestyles, share lifeskills and so forth.

News on social media and police reports reveal many social problems in our city. Crime, addictions, gangs, racism and poverty are rampant, threatening our safety and security. We cannot address problems by focusing on harm-reduction when growing numbers of children in broken homes and foster care need a fresh start. We should be proactive and fund prevention oriented initiatives to save children from becoming another generation at risk who will become damaged parents that multiply and perpetuate the same problems.

If we are serious about making our community safer, combating racism, and enhance prosperity by improving the quality of life for children and youth, we must invest in

creating safe accessible spaces for kids and teens to flourish, offer public facilities at affordable rates for youth and grassroots groups working on local priorities and high-risk issues, and adopt recommendations about the Thunder Bay Children's Charter presented to City Council by the last Child Advocate, Councillor Frank Pullia on December 18, 2017. This will be an effective and winning strategy to engage the youth and make a difference.