



**ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION**

Leading Education's Advocates

Ontario Public School Boards' Association

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Carolyn Bennett - Honourable Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs
Room 173, East Block
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

David Zimmer – Honourable Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
Suite 400
160 Bloor Street East
Toronto, ON M7A 2E6

Dear Honourable Ministers Bennett and Zimmer:

On behalf of the Ontario Public School Boards Association's (OPSBA) Indigenous Trustees' Council (ITC), comprising appointed and elected Indigenous trustees sitting on public school boards across Ontario, I would like to express our concern at the ongoing challenges and safety concerns faced by Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) students who leave their families and communities on reserve to attend school, ideally in a safe environment. The ITC supports the Northern Ontario Chiefs' efforts to draw attention to these challenges facing Indigenous students, youth and families and we applaud the recent [NAN action plan](#) developed to help address those very same challenges. We also acknowledge and are encouraged by the very recent [announcement by the provincial government](#) outlining actions to address First Nations youth health and safety crisis in coordination with First Nations communities as well as additional federal funding to help improve health care access.

OPSBA represents 31 public district school boards and 10 school authorities across Ontario which together serve more than 1.2 million public elementary and secondary students. OPSBA believes:

- that improving student achievement and student engagement is directly linked to ensuring that we work collaboratively for the social, emotional, mental and physical well-being of all children and youth; and
- that through education we can move towards a Canada where the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians is founded on mutual respect and OPSBA, therefore, supports the Calls to Action of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

In the context of these beliefs, and in light of the recent high-profile crisis in Thunder Bay, the ITC urges both the provincial and federal governments to continue to work together to provide Indigenous students who attend schools off reserve with the resources required to help ensure their well-being, health and safety while successfully integrating into their new communities.

Academic achievement for Indigenous students lags far behind that of other students in school, and while this gap may be slowly narrowing, progress is insufficient. The recommendations of the inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students in Thunder Bay, Ont., highlight the resources needed to

ensure that students in those specific circumstances are supported. Regardless of their community, however, all Indigenous students need to be able to benefit from these kinds of supports.

School boards are doing good work in assisting Indigenous students who attend school off reserve. However, support for specific practices known to help these students is not yet systemic, and needs to be increased so that all Indigenous students attending school off reserve have equitable access to sufficient supports to ensure their success, such as:

- enabling students to return home on a more regular basis
- enabling the families of students to visit them more regularly when they are attending school
- providing resources that enable families that wish to live off reserve while their children attend school to do so thus keeping their families intact
- ensuring adequate social services are provided to these students and their families, especially in areas that require development in our province as a whole, such as children and youth mental health
- guaranteeing equal access to special education services for Indigenous students that require special education assistance

There have been frequent recommendations to address these issues. Unfortunately, consistent and sustained action remains infrequent. The ITC recognizes that these are complex issues requiring multifaceted solutions developed by First Nations partners, organizations, and support agencies with collaboration, cooperation and coordination of efforts from the federal and provincial governments spanning health, education and child and youth services.

The ITC believes more action is needed in the short term, by both levels of government to help address the issues facing Indigenous students in Thunder Bay. The recent announcement of additional funding and resources by the provincial and federal governments is an encouraging first step. Hopefully, it will be the first of many more steps as part of a sustained, long term approach to help support these students in their academic pursuits.

Sincerely,



Chief Elaine Johnston
Chair, Indigenous Trustees' Council (ITC)
Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA)

cc: Jane Philpott – Federal Minister of Health
Eric Hoskins – Ontario Minister of Health and Long Term Care
Michael Coteau – Ontario Minister of Child and Youth Service
Mitzi Hunter – Ontario Minister of Education
Alvin Fiddler, Grand Chief – Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN)
Perry Bellegarde, National Chief – Assembly of First Nations (AFN)
Kris Rushowy – Toronto Star, Queen's Park Bureau
Andrea Gordon – Toronto Star
Caroline Alphonso – Globe and Mail