



Raised Voices: Carriers of Hope

A Youth Education Policy Forum

FINAL REPORT

February 1 to February 4, 2019

Algonquin Territory, Ottawa, ON

Convened by the Assembly of First Nations



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between February 1 and 4, 2019, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) together with Three Things Consulting, hosted *Raised Voices: Carriers of Hope, A Youth Policy Forum on First Nations Education*. The Forum gathered 36 First Nations youth from across Canada between the ages of 13 and 18 years old on Algonquin territory in Ottawa, Ontario for a weekend of ceremony, insight and change-making.

The first ever gathering of this kind sought to engage and mobilize First Nations young people to voice their experiences and opinions on First Nations education systems and make recommendations to advance positive change. The youth participants, the Carriers of Hope, engaged in dialogue with decision-makers and those interested and active in First Nations Education policy.

The Carriers were selected from each of the ten AFN regions both off and on-reserve across Canada, each with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The selected Carriers were honoured for their contributions in their communities and for their courage in working together with leadership to create change in First Nations education policy.

The gathering was designed to allow for youth to be emotionally, mentally, spiritually and physically supported while learning about the past, sharing about their present and communicating their ideas and vision for the future of First Nations education.

Over the first three days, working in three Councils (or teams), the 36 First Nations youth used a Circle-based consensus model to process through many ideas and recommendations for education policy. On the fourth day, the youth presented their findings by way of five Calls to Action aimed at all levels of governments (including First Nations governments), First Nations and Indigenous organizations, education partners and average Canadians. The Calls to Action are based on personal experiences and realities shared among the youth and are focused on advancing student success in education by addressing long-standing shortcomings in First Nations Education Policy and supports.



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RAISED VOICES GATHERING

Recruitment and Selection Process

First Nations youth aged 13-18 from each of the ten AFN regions were encouraged to apply to be a Carrier of Hope through an online promotional video. The selection process ensured diversity in age, lived experiences and region to allow for broad discussion. Applicants completed a form with five key questions, and an essay or video component. By the deadline, there were 105 applications received. 36 individuals were selected.

Logistics and Participant Engagement

The event was held in downtown Ottawa, Ontario, where many would have to travel by airplane from remote communities. Adults traveled with the youth and acted as chaperones. Youth and families received personalized itineraries, a Travel Information Booklet for Families and the Expectations (rules) to prepare them for their travels and to ensure their families had as much information as possible as to where participants were going and who was there to support them.



The Carriers of Hope: Ariana, Chase, Sophia, Hailey, Denee, Ernestine B., Helena, Marie-Livia, Jaron, Evan, Sean, Regan, Memphis, Shenise, Dylan, Dede, Branden, Ernestine M., Kailey, Tehatsistahawi, Mindy, Kyle, Chloe, Harmony, Lahela, Cody, Jo, Lacey, Jacinda, Chante, Pierre, Joey, Nikeda, Patience, Macy and Jaden



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Opening the Circle: Establishing Community

The focus of the first day was to set priorities, including creating a safe space through ceremony and community building.

Elder Bernard Nelson of Eabametoong First Nation and Grandmother Kathy Brant of Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory opened with prayers and Ohen:ton Karihwaterkwén (Words Before All Else). During the Opening of the Circle of Hope, the Carriers were offered tobacco as a sign of respect and honour for their courage and leadership.

The AFN Director of Education, Janice Ciavaglia, shared opening remarks with the group and welcomed them into the Circle of Hope.



Calling of the Councils

A critical moment in the development of the space, Calling of the Council involves participants being arranged in different Councils (groups). Each Council was called to answer an invitation that mattered, where their knowledge and lived experiences were important. With the beat and call from the Grandfather Drum, each facilitator called out the names of their Council Members. That evening, each Council spent time connecting with one another and began to build their community.

Web of Strength: Community Building

Day 2 opened with Ceremony and the Circle of Hope coming together in a community-building activity aimed at connecting participants. The Web of Strength was created as participants threw bundled rope to one another while sharing their stories. The rope created a web representing the interconnectedness of their ideas and stories.

“The more we are together, the more we are heard.”



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Learning and Sharing: Guest Presentations

Three facilitators each led a session for the Circle of Hope. The sessions included:

Our Past:

How the Indian Act and Residential Schools Caused Harm for First Nations Education:

Facilitator - Kimberley Debassige

Our Present:

Resistance and Resilience through Connection to Language and Land:

Facilitator - Quinn Meawasige

Our Future:

How Do We Chart Our Own Future for First Nations Education?

Facilitator - Zoey Roy

Following each presentation by facilitator, the Councils met and discussed key questions. These discussions inspired ideas and potential recommendations that would be used to shape the outcomes of the gathering or the Calls to Action. Ceremony and medicines were offered throughout the day, providing safety and healing as the discussions became personal and challenging. On breaks in-between sessions, youth participants naturally came to the Grandfather Drum with the Elder and offered songs. As the day progressed, those young people who had not had much exposure to the Drum came to sit with those who had been traditionally connected for most of their lives.

Youth Feedback: *How we see the Future of First Nations Education*

In discussing the future of First Nations Education, participants advocated for: schools to have more resource rooms and staff to support indigenous students, increased and improved Indigenous language immersion programs, better accommodations for ceremony, supportive programs to address addiction and mental health and for school staff and educators to be trained in cultural sensitivity.



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Consensus Building

Following Ceremony on Day 3, the Councils took time to reflect on discussions from the previous day. The youth then began to explore the ideas to move forward for discussion in the Circle of Hope.

Learning and Refining Ideas

The youth learned about consensus methods and how they are important processes used by many First Nations for decision-making. The Councils then spent their day building on their discussions to inform ideas for change.

Participants were tasked with sharing their Councils' Calls to Action. They added context to support their calls and help clarify their intent. Each Council then had time to review the others' work.

Each Carrier was instructed to prioritize the Calls to Action using "Dotmocracy". Each Council gained insight into how others responded to their Calls and identify any repetition between Councils. Each Council determined what decisions they would be carrying forward, which Calls they felt were most important and should be considered and discussed by all. Each Council then reduced their number of Calls to Action and identified three spokespeople who would act as Carriers of the message and represent their Council in the Supported Consensus Circle.



"I want a safe (non-threatening, friendly) environment for Indigenous youth to feel comfortable being who they are. I want youth to be open" –Carrier of Hope



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Decision-making

The Carriers used a Supported Consensus Circle to ensure respectful engagement among each other and to be able to come to a decision that everyone could support. Those in the Outer Circle passed notes among each other to express their opinions and to minimize the time it could take to make such important decisions. Those in the Inner Circle discussed the merits of each Call presented, merging several together to determine a key understanding, and one that would become the backbone of the Calls: **that the mental health and wellness of First Nations youth matters.**

The Carriers identified that the healthier youth were, the greater chance of success they would have in their education pursuits. The final Calls would be rooted in this understanding. After two hours, the group had come to a consensus and had five Calls to Action.

During the evening, the youth finalized their Calls to Action and prepared to present their outcomes to First Nations leadership, technicians, the federal government, and national partners. While preparing, the youth shared a meal and showcased their traditions and talents through dancing, singing and poetry.

Closing

On the final day of the policy forum, First Nations leadership, technicians, the federal government, and national partners, were invited to listen and speak to the youth about First Nations Education. A number of First Nations Chiefs and Councilors from across Canada were in attendance to receive the Calls to Action, as well as AFN National Chief Perry Bellegarde and more than half of the AFN Regional Chiefs, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett, a number of Deputy Ministers, Opposition Critic Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Cathy McLeod, members of the AFN National Youth Council, Apple Canada, Executive Director of National Association of Friendship Centres, the Chair of EdCan Network, the Executive Director of Students Commission of Canada, and the President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Pathways to Education Canada.

Arianna Roberts, a First Nations youth and member of Roseau River First Nation, and Brennan Googoo, a youth leader for Three Things Consulting, from Millbrook First Nation, hosted the day. They invited Elder Bernard Nelson from Eabametoong First Nation and Grandmother Kathy Brant from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory to open the day with offerings and good words. Other speakers included AFN CEO Dr. Paulette Tremblay, AFN Ontario Regional Chief RoseAnne Archibald and AFN Yukon Regional Chief Kluane Adamek. The speakers welcomed everyone to the space and Elder Nelson invited adults to the Grandfather Drum to welcome each of the Councils as they entered the room. The youth then presented their Calls to Action.



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OUTCOMES: CALLS TO ACTION

We are the Carriers of Hope, ages 13 – 18 years old and representing the ten Assembly of First Nations Regions: please, hear our voices.

When First Nations youth mental health and wellness are supported, we will achieve more. Our Calls to Action are here to address and support the mental, spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing of all First Nations youth.

These are our Calls:

1. We call upon all levels of government to increase funding for education to have male, female and Two-Spirit Elders have a significant role in schools; as counsellors or teaching traditional ways, which will support the mental, spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing of First Nations youth in every school in Canada.
2. We appreciate the significant investment in land and cultural programming announced by the Assembly of First Nations and the Government of Canada. This commitment matters to First Nations youth because culture and being on the land keeps our traditions alive while connecting us to ourselves, families, Nations and Ancestors. However, we call for the expansion of this current funding to all First Nations students to include the North, and those living off reserve. This becomes another resource to support their wellbeing and success.
3. We call for increased funding for Early Childhood Development (ECD), increased daycare options, and lowering the age requirement for First Nations children to access ECD programs. This will ensure there will be a safe and secure space for our children and sustain young First Nations parents' education.
4. We call for equitably funded Kindergarten to grade 12 schools with a sufficient amount of resources, supports, and culturally aware faculty for First Nations students in every Nation across the country.
5. We call on the Assembly of First Nations, Federal Government, and national organizations to encourage the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to influence and advocate for the inclusion of our shared history and First Nation knowledge into curricula.



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Additional Youth Recommendations

1. **Be an influencer.** Share the Carriers of Hope Calls to Action on First Nations Education on your website and in social media.
2. **Be an advocate.** Provide copies or a link to the Calls to Action to your coworkers, colleagues and leadership within your organization, system or First Nation.
3. **Be a role model.** Offer a written response that can be shared with the Carriers of Hope with your commitments.
4. **Be an ally.** Engage the Carriers of Hope in helping move forward the Calls to Action. If you attended the presentation, reach out and sustain the relationships that were developed in Ottawa.
5. **Be a champion.** Invite Carriers of Hope from your region to present their Calls to Action at upcoming education related meetings, Council meetings or conferences. Help them share their message.

Responses from Leadership

AFN National Chief Perry Bellegarde welcomed and supported the Calls to Action, commending the courage, resilience and leadership of the Carriers.

Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett shared with the youth reinforcing a commitment of First Nations control over First Nations education. She talked about her role as an ally and the need for other allies to support the young people.

Other speakers included Chiefs, government representatives, First Nation educators, the NIB Trust Fund and the AFN Director of Education, who committed to planning more gatherings to promote youth voices.

