

Indigenous education

It has been ten years since Ontario released its *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. The strategy called for improving achievement for Indigenous students, closing the gap in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and ensuring *all* students gain an understanding of Indigenous cultures, experiences, and perspectives.

Ten years along, People for Education's data show considerable gains on the last of those objectives. But the fundamental challenge of significantly raising achievement for Indigenous students remains (Ontario, 2018b).

Ensuring all young people learn about Indigenous cultures and experiences

There has been a significant increase in the percentage of schools who report providing Indigenous education opportunities. This increase reflects a broader societal awareness, deliberate policy efforts, and a substantial increase in the re-named Indigenous Education Grant (up \$54 million to \$66.3 million in the last ten years). It also reflects some of the goals laid out in *The Journey Together* (Government of Ontario, 2016), the provincial government's response to the *Calls for Action* from the 2015 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC; TRC, 2015, pp. 319-337).

This year, 74% of elementary and 84% of secondary schools report offering at least one Indigenous learning opportunity (professional development, cultural supports, guest speakers, community consultation, ceremonies, Indigenous Studies courses, or Indigenous language programs). This is a substantial increase from 2014, when only 34% of elementary and 61% of secondary schools reported offering any Indigenous learning opportunities (see Figure 5.1).

In their survey responses, principals describe a wide range of initiatives in their schools: school-wide recognition of Indigenous culture, medicine gardens or canoes built by students and elders, activities for Treaty Recognition Week or Orange Shirt Day (commemorating the history of residential schools), assemblies, field trips, land acknowledgements, and Indigenous national anthems.

Some schools report strong integration into the mainstream curriculum, including things like an entire grade 9 visual arts course taught through Indigenous themes, curricular support for all staff from a trained teacher-librarian, and a commitment to ensure Indigenous art and literature is available in all classrooms.

In 2018:

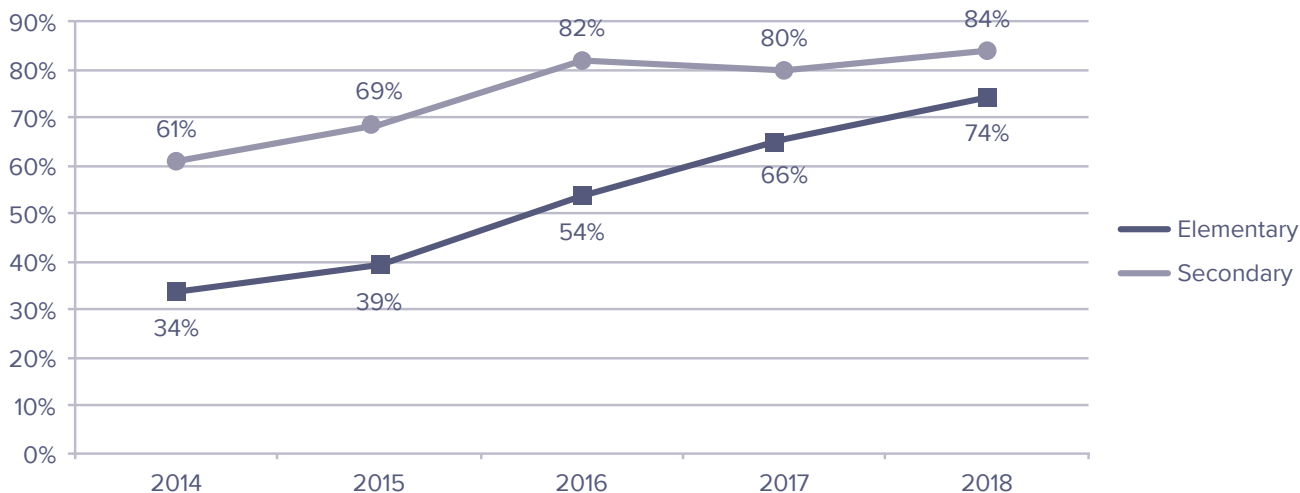
- 74% of elementary and 84% of secondary schools offer at least one Indigenous learning opportunity, compared to 34% and 61% respectively in 2014.
- 59% of elementary and 71% of secondary schools report providing professional development for teachers around Indigenous cultural issues.
- 21% of elementary schools and 46% of secondary schools report having a self-identified Indigenous person on staff.
- 87% of elementary schools with an Indigenous staff member have at least one Indigenous education opportunity, compared to 67% of those without an Indigenous staff member.

“We have one third of our students/families who self-identify and are very supportive of providing input and guidance around our work. We also have very strong staff leadership in this area of wellness and student belonging.”

Elementary school,
Algonquin and Lakeshore DSB

Figure 5.1

Percentage of schools offering Indigenous education opportunities



“We know we have some students who identified as Indigenous in our last student climate survey, however they have yet to identify themselves to us.”

Elementary school,
York Region DSB

“I would like the board to mandate Indigenous education training and offer workshops much like they do for Numeracy and Literacy and for We Rise Together supporting black male youth at high school. The board has not mandated Indigenous training, I think they should.”

Elementary school,
Peel DSB

Supporting teachers’ learning

In its Calls to Action, the TRC specifically called for supports to help teachers learn how to teach Indigenous content. One of the most important recent changes in the school system is a revision of the curriculum in all subjects and all grades. This revision, developed collaboratively with Indigenous partners, includes “mandatory learning about the impact of colonialism and the rights and responsibilities of all people in Canada with respect to understanding the shared history and building the collective future in the spirit of reconciliation” (Ontario, 2018b, p. 17).

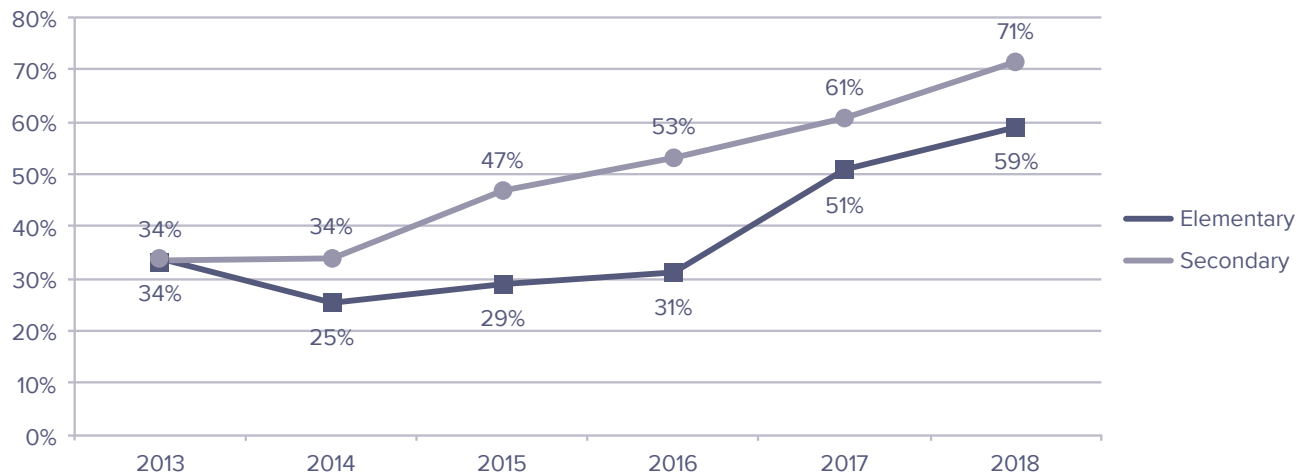
In this year’s survey, 59% of elementary and 71% of secondary schools report professional development (PD) for teachers around Indigenous cultural issues, up from 34% in both elementary and secondary in 2013 (see Figure 5.2). Since the requirement for Indigenous content in teacher education is relatively recent (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013), ongoing PD is the most effective way to ensure *all* teachers are developing the required knowledge and confidence to teach in this area (e.g. Craven, Yeung, & Han, 2014; Nardozi & Mashford-Pringle, 2014).

Professional development matters since, in the words of one principal, “there are few resources for staff who themselves are still learning about the Indigenous struggle.”⁸ PD may also help teachers understand why Indigenous education is important for all students, as a significant number of principals still comment on limited interest or even resistance to prioritizing this learning in their schools.

8. Comment from an elementary school in Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB

Figure 5.2

Percentage of schools with professional development around Indigenous cultural issues



Learning *from* Indigenous people in Ontario schools

One of the key performance measures identified in the *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Framework* is a “significant increase in the number of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit teaching and non-teaching staff in school boards across Ontario” (Ontario, 2007b, p. 11). However, the province does not require boards to collect the data needed to assess progress on this measure (Ontario, 2018b, p. 56).

This year, for the first time, People for Education asked schools if they have staff who self-identify as Indigenous:

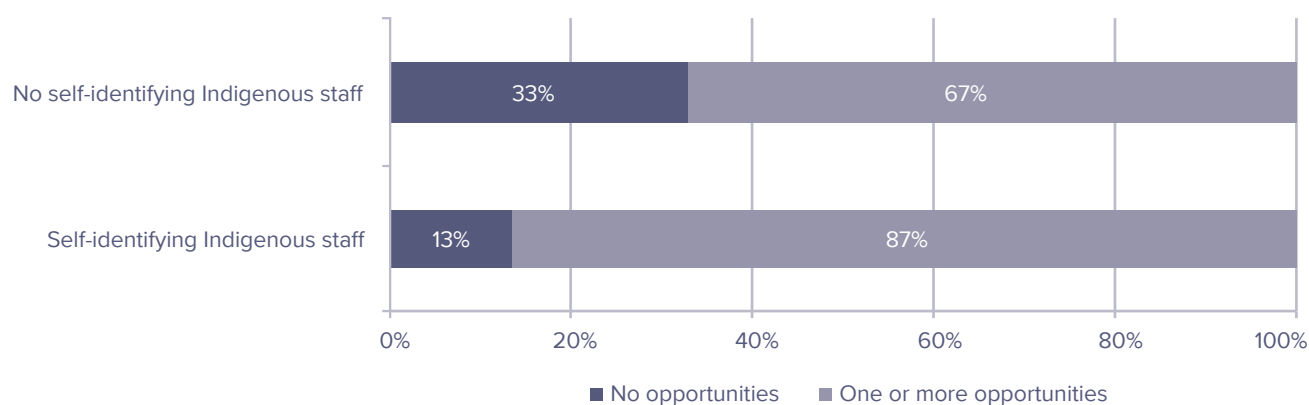
- 21% of elementary schools report having self-identified Indigenous staff.
- 40% of elementary schools in Northern Ontario have Indigenous staff, compared to only 14% of schools in the Greater Toronto Area.
- 46% of secondary schools—which generally have larger staffs, and thus a greater likelihood of diversity—report a self-identified Indigenous person on-staff.

It is evident from the survey results that having Indigenous staff has an impact on the number of Indigenous education opportunities offered in schools (see Figure 5.3). However, it is important to recognize that being the only, or one of a few, Indigenous teachers in the school community can put added pressures on these educators, and they may experience additional barriers of racism and oppression in the school space (Kholi & Pizzaro, 2016).

“We are incredibly non-diverse, so it’s a challenge to have teachers embrace the need for Indigenous education. With so many demands...teachers have to be passionate about this issue for it to happen.”
Elementary school,
Waterloo Region DSB

Figure 5.3

Impact of self-identified Indigenous staff on Indigenous education opportunities



“Currently we are focusing our school based character education around The Seven Grandfather Teachings. We don’t have an Indigenous staff member, so this presents a challenge, since we are concerned about presenting the Indigenous teachings in an authentic way.”

Elementary school,
Limestone DSB

Effective partnerships with local Indigenous organizations can also play a critical role. These types of partnerships can include things like sharing resources or space, co-planning, or providing community support for students.

In 2018:

- 3% of elementary schools report they “often” connect or work with Indigenous organizations, compared to 14% of secondary schools.
- 53% of elementary, and 65% of secondary schools report that they “sometimes” connect or work together.
- 90% of elementary and 79% of secondary schools report that Indigenous organizations were “fairly” or “very” accessible to them.

Indigenous languages and Indigenous Studies

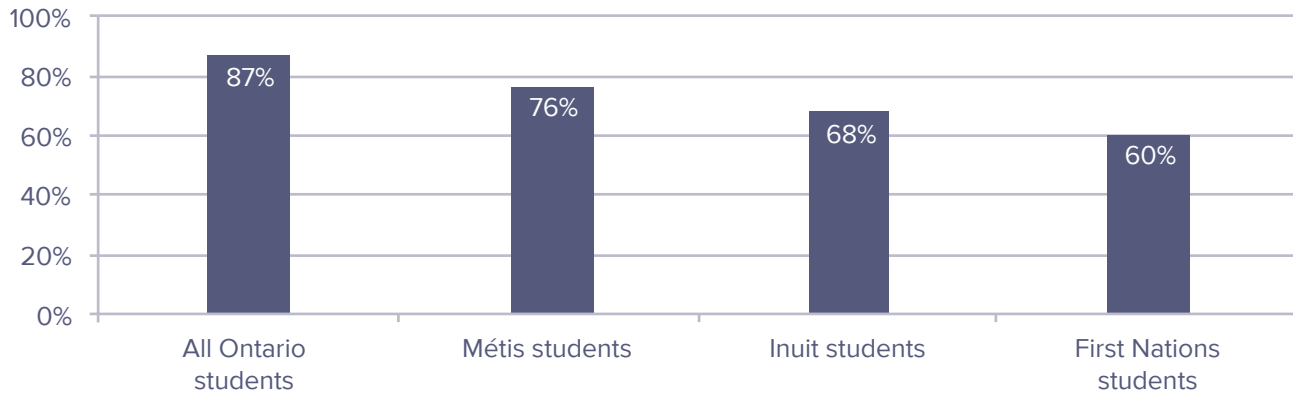
Provincial data show considerable growth in the number of students enrolled in Indigenous language programs – from 4,302 students in 2006/07 to 7,795 students in 2015/16. Over the same time period, the number of students enrolled in Indigenous Studies⁹ courses has skyrocketed, from 1,134 course enrolments to 22,195 (Ontario, 2018b, p. 27). These courses are now offered in 56% of secondary schools across the province.

Funding for both Indigenous language programs and Indigenous Studies is based on an average class size of 12 students, to allow the classes to exist even when enrolment is low. Funding is provided according to demand, and, in the case of Indigenous Studies, funding has grown from \$1.4 million in 2007/08 (Ontario, 2007a, p. 45) to a projected \$33.5 million for 2018/19 (Ontario, 2018a, p. 54).

9. Since we released the survey, the name of Native Studies has been changed to Indigenous Studies.

Figure 5.4

Graduation rates for students after five years of secondary school



Time for a broader strategy on outcomes

Ten years ago, the province committed to closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2016. Unfortunately, the gap persists, and improvements on test scores in literacy and numeracy have been marginal.

This year, for the first time, the province reported on graduation rates: among students who started high school in 2011/12, the graduation rate for First Nations students is 27 percentage points below the Ontario average (Ontario, 2018b, p. 70; see Figure 5.4).

In 2018, the Ministry of Education committed to renewing the framework for Indigenous education (Ontario, 2018b, p. 79) to include a broader base of partnerships and support for schools across the province.

Recommendations

Many Indigenous organizations have pushed for a broader definition and different measures of educational success—to include a more holistic vision for education (e.g. Toulouse, 2016). In order to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in terms of overall success in schools, there needs to be adequate and culturally relevant supports available to Indigenous students, their families, and their communities, as well as a fundamental shift in the definition of success to one that includes strong academic performance, but goes well beyond it.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education committed to work with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit partners and key education stakeholders to “explore and identify additional indicators of student achievement...well-being and self-esteem.”

People for Education recommends that the province:

- Act on its 2014 commitment and work with Indigenous leaders and scholars to establish a new set of relevant indicators of student success that are more congruent with the interests, needs, and motivation of Indigenous communities, and vital for all students’ success in school and life.
- Continue to support the Education Equity Secretariat in collecting data about self-identified Indigenous staff and students in school boards across the province (Ontario, 2017e).