FOR OUR CHILDREN

A REVIEW OF SYSTEMIC RACISM IN YUKON EDUCATION

Dedication

To the children and those yet to come,

May your stories be heard and your knowledge honoured.

Territorial Acknowledgement

This review and its proceedings are conducted, written, and shared on the traditional territories of the 14 Yukon First Nations. We acknowledge the role that education has played in the lives of Indigenous peoples both before and during colonization, and respectfully offer this work as a resource in the long journey of decolonizing Yukon's education system.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the members of the First Nations Education Commission (FNEC) for their guidance, mentorship, and stories over the course of this review. Melanie Bennett, Executive Director, Yukon First Nations Education Directorate (YFNED), and Annette King, Yukon Child and Youth Advocate, thank you for directing and trusting us with this important work. To Elders Annie Bernard and Roger Ellis, thank you for your wisdom and tireless efforts in advocating for Indigenous students. Your passion is infectious. To our contractors John Fingland, Alicia Staples, Juniper Redvers, and Reg McGinty, and to all our YFNED and Yukon Child & Youth Advocate Office (YCAO) colleagues, thank you for your hearts and hands. To Cole Pauls and Guná Jensen, thank you for helping this review come alive through your art and talent.

Finally, to the current and former students, Elders, parents and caretakers, families, educators, principals, workers, and community members who supported our community conversations and shared with us your resilience, your knowledge, and your hope - may this review spur action and accountability in a way that does your stories justice. Gunalchéesh, shäw níthän, mahsi cho, thank you.

The review team,

Anya Braeuner, Christopher Tse, John Postma,
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Content Warning

This review discusses sensitive topics including racism, discrimination, and the historical and ongoing impact of colonialism in the Yukon's education system. It mentions residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and the challenges faced by Indigenous and racialized communities in navigating systemic inequities. If you think the findings and discussions contained in this review could be distressing or triggering for you, please make sure you have supports and trusted people around you before reading.

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About FNEC

The First Nations Education Commission (FNEC) was re-established in April of 2013 by resolution from the Leadership of Yukon First Nations (CYFN). FNEC is made up of Education directors/staff representing all 14 Yukon First Nations. They provide technical support, advice and recommendations to the Government of Yukon with respect to education matters relating to Yukon First Nations citizens and communities. YFNED administers and chairs FNEC, who in turn direct YFNED to develop educational resources (e.g., First Nations Graduation Planner, Yukon First Nations K-12 Language Framework and Action Plan, Seasonal Rounds).

First Nations Education Commission (FNEC)

For decades, First Nations in the Yukon have been forced to fit into an education system designed to erase our identities, suppress our languages, and dismantle our ways of knowing. From the residential school era to the ongoing dominance of colonial policies, this system was never built to support Indigenous children—it was built to assimilate them.

The education system has long excluded our histories, reducing the rich and diverse cultures of Yukon First Nations to footnotes and stereotypes. Our languages, once spoken freely across our lands, were banned in classrooms. Our knowledge systems—rooted in land, relationships, and generations of wisdom—were dismissed in favour of Western models that do not reflect our realities.

Even as reconciliation efforts take shape, the foundation of education in the Yukon remains colonial. First Nations still have limited influence over the education of our own children, navigating a bureaucratic system that continues to prioritize government control over our right to self-determination.

Education must reflect the unique and diverse needs of each First Nation, not force us into a one-size-fits-all model. This means resourcing Indigenous-led education initiatives, embedding local stories and histories into every classroom, and ensuring First Nations governments have the authority to lead the changes their communities need.

True partnership is more than consultation. It means shared decision-making and ensuring every First Nation has a voice in shaping the education that serves our citizens. Our histories, languages, and ways of knowing must not be optional additions to the curriculum—they must be the foundation of it.

Our Final Agreements laid out a vision for a future where First Nations are true partners in governance, where our rights and responsibilities in education are upheld. Now is the time to turn commitments into real change—to do the hard work of decolonizing the system and building something that truly reflects the strength, knowledge, and priorities of Yukon First Nations.

The work ahead is not easy, but it is necessary. With commitment and courage, we can build an education system that honours, cares for, and uplifts every learner.

YUKON FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION COMMISSIONERS

About YFNED

Steered by the Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE), the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED) was launched in the summer of 2020 in response to the long-overdue need for unified control over First Nations education in the territory.

YFNED is dedicated to capacity-building, systems and resources development, second-level educational programs and services enhancement, and learner support. YFNED advances First Nations decision-making and aspirations for control over education, providing technical support, research and advice for Framework Agreement processes, and advocates for First Nation student success across the system.

Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED)

Education shapes the future of our children, our communities, and our First Nations. For too long, Indigenous students in the Yukon have faced barriers built by a system that was never designed for them. Systemic racism in education is real, and continues to harm our children's spirits, limit their opportunities, and deny them the respect, care, and knowledge they deserve.

This review is not just about identifying the harm—it is about taking responsibility, making changes, and ensuring that education reflects the values, cultures, and rights of Yukon First Nations and all Indigenous students living in our territory. We honour the voices of students, families, and educators who have stepped forward to share their experiences. Their truths guide us.

As Maya Angelou said, *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."* Now we know better, and we must act on that knowledge.

Now is the time for action. We must move beyond words to real, lasting change to truly decolonize education—ensuring that First Nations have a real seat at the table as equal partners in shaping the system. Education must honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being while providing wraparound support for learners from early childhood to post-secondary education, so every student has the best foundation to succeed.

We call on all leaders—government, educators, and community members—to walk with us in this work. The Yukon must be a place where First Nations students and students of colour no longer have to fight for fairness, respect, and belonging.

Education must honour our children and empower our First Nations. Our students deserve to see themselves reflected in their learning, to be respected for who they are, and to have opportunities that allow them to thrive.

Together, we will create a future where every student is supported, valued, and proud of who they are.

Melanie Bennett

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, YUKON FIRST NATION EDUCATION DIRECTORATE

About YCAO

The Yukon Child and Youth Advocate Office (YCAO) is an independent office of the Yukon Legislative Assembly mandated by the *Child and Youth Advocate Act* to represent the rights, views and preferences of children and youth who are eligible, or currently receiving government services and programs. The YCAO provides services to young people: under 18 years of age under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*; under 19 years of age under the Child & Family Services Act; under 21 years of age under the *Education Act*; and between the ages of 19 and 26 that are eligible or receiving services under section 17 and 18 of the *Child and Family Services Act*. They are a part of the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA) and operate from a children's rights framework as informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Yukon Child and Youth Advocate Office (YCAO)

This review is not about debating the existence of racism in our classrooms. We are already fully aware—from the Auditor General's reports in 2009 and 2019, the *Review of Inclusive and Special Education*, the *Review on School Attendance in the Yukon*, and more importantly, from the countless heartbreaking, infuriating stories we have heard from our territory's young people over 15 years of advocating on their behalf. No child should ever be made to feel unwelcome or less than in a school, least of all due to their skin colour, culture, or background.

Despite these structural barriers, we continue to see Indigenous students and students of colour succeed in the Yukon. We see leaders emerge, claiming their space and raising their voices. We have immense hope for the next generation, not because the system is improving, but because despite all the odds stacked against them, many students are still able to find their way—but why isn't everybody?

It is no coincidence that in so many of the stories we've heard through our advocacy work and conducting this review, the associations are with educators. When students feel belonging and safety, it's because of educators. When they feel disconnection from the school system, sadly it's also because of educators. It's often easier to see that than to identify systemic failures.

We believe in educators. We believe that they do what they do because they care about kids. We believe they want to do better. We call on the Yukon Government, the system, to empower its educators. Promises of decolonizing our schools go nowhere when the ones on the ground working with our students are not given the time, training, and resources to align these directives with their own classroom practices. We also call on the system to prioritize hiring new educators that reflect the faces and names of our students, so kids can see themselves in their classrooms and curriculum. Allyship is important, but perhaps more important is representation - those students then are more likely to become teachers, and the cycle continues.

Children have a right to education under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and they have a right to attain that education in a way that affirms, uplifts, and celebrates them for who they are.

As we have done the past 15 years, we will continue to stand up for the kids of this territory to have those rights upheld.

Annette King
YUKON CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCATE

INTRODUCTION

This review aims to examine the ways in which systemic racism has shaped and continues to impact the education system in the Yukon. The review focuses on data between 2014 and 2024, the period of the initial *Joint Education Action Plan (JEAP)*. The JEAP was created from a Tripartite Education Partnership agreement between the Government of Yukon, Government of Canada, all 14 Yukon First Nations governments, and the Council of Yukon First Nations. Its goal was to improve the landscape for Indigenous students in the Yukon by identifying and addressing systemic determinants of poor educational outcomes. This review was requested by the First Nations Education Commission (FNEC), with support from the Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE), to have a fuller view of the current educational landscape as the Yukon heads into the next decade under a newly revised JEAP. Currently in development, JEAP 2025-2035 will offer a clear implementation plan developed collaboratively with Yukon First Nations and the Government of Yukon. As such, while the Department of Education (EDU) data is from the past 10 years, this review includes stories and lived experiences that go well beyond that.

It is important to note that this review is not about reinventing the wheel, nor does it purport to uncover anything surprising. Over the years, various reports and investigations have already identified significant gaps in the education system. Notable examples include *Kwiya: Towards a New Partnership in Education* (1987), the *Auditor General of Canada's Report on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education in Yukon* (2019), the *Review of Inclusive and Special Education in the Yukon* (2021), and YCAO's *School Attendance Review* (2021). The findings of these reviews have all noted race-based discrimination as a key contributor to the disparities in educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

This review will focus specifically on systemic racism as the central factor driving these disparities. While earlier reports have acknowledged the impacts of racism, FNEC wanted to make it clear that systemic racism, embedded in the educational structures and practices of the Yukon, is a foundational determinant of poor educational outcomes for Indigenous students. This review will not rehash old findings or provide an overview of all gaps in the education system. Its purpose is to explicitly highlight systemic racism as a barrier that has been overlooked or inadequately addressed in past discussions. While the review's contents primarily investigate anti-Indigenous racism in the education system, it is vital that the experiences of other people of colour do not go ignored, especially as Yukon students and communities grow increasingly more diverse. We believe that challenging anti-Indigenous racism addresses the same root causes of racism that affect other people of colour as well.

We recognize the efforts that EDU has made to create a more inclusive education system, including fulsome responses to recommendations in the Auditor General's reports in 2009 and 2019 and the *School Attendance Review*, the establishment of Communities of Inquiry in response to the *Review of Inclusive and Special Education in the Yukon*, support for the creation of the First Nation School Board (FNSB), and expressing a commitment to improve the outlook for Yukon students. We are hopeful at the recent announcement of the new Student Outcomes Strategy, a

recommendation from the Auditor General's report. We appreciate the support of Minister Jeanie McLean, who has helmed Education over the last tumultuous four years. It cannot be easy to be an Indigenous woman in leadership in a colonial government, and we commend your efforts to create change in a department that has harmed Indigenous students. Gunalchéesh, shäw níthän, mahsi cho, thank you.

While EDU and the Minister's actions are significant, this review focuses on the challenges and trends seen over the past 10 years. It does not predict future outcomes from ongoing efforts to address systemic racism within the education system.

It is important to provide the blueprint below so that the reader understands the context from which this review was conducted and written. Our hope is that by sharing these pieces, a more comprehensive picture of this review will take shape.

1. **It's not a blame game:** We recognize a review on systemic racism can evoke a strong reaction. This review isn't meant to point the finger at any individual person, but to highlight how at a systems level, something like racism can become so deeply rooted that it operates seemingly without anyone in the driver's seat. Fixing that takes all of us.

2. **Racism affects everyone:** This review investigates not only the experiences of Indigenous students and students of colour, but also educators and education staff as well. While the focus is on students, we also try to represent the challenges of being a racialized educator working in the system.

3. **Anti-racism benefits everyone:** In the same way a colonial system harms all of us, so does a racist one. Working towards communities that are more diverse, more equitable, and more welcoming will ultimately be to everyone's benefit, both people of colour and White people.

4. **Action is key:** This review is meant to be a tool so we've tried to make it useful. Each main section ends with suggestions for individual actions educators, education professionals, and virtually anyone can reflect on and/or implement towards becoming anti-racist. The goal, as always, will be to apply this to action so we can truly see change.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this review. In it, we amplify the voices and stories of so many current and former students who have felt the impacts of systemic racism in education. These are mostly difficult, heartbreaking stories. They are also stories full of courage, full of rage, full of pride, and full of hope. We hold these stories, and their tellers, up. We thank them for gifting us with their knowledge and experiences. We are committed and motivated to fight even harder for every child, every student who has ever felt left behind by the system. We see you, you matter, and there is a place for you to thrive.

Disclaimers

Data

It is important to note that the data analysis conducted for this review was made more challenging due to inadequacies in EDU's data system. Gaps in information and inconsistent input and tracking processes means this review's findings, especially as they pertain to quantitative data, will not represent the full extent of systemic racism in Yukon education. These limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings. This issue was also highlighted in the Auditor General's Report in 2019. EDU has acknowledged the need for better data practices and has committed to addressing these gaps moving forward. We appreciate the work and cooperation from their Performance and Analytics team on this project.

Anonymity

To protect privacy, we have removed names and identifying information connected to the individuals who spoke with us. Where privacy was not a concern, we have left in more detail, including the names of schools and communities. With this approach, we wanted to ensure personal information was protected while preserving relevant information about schools and communities where appropriate.

We will use the following identifiers to provide context for our quotes:

- **Alumni:** Anyone who was enrolled in a Yukon school, but has since left—graduated or dropped out
- **First Nation Education Worker:** An employee of a First Nation government or a First Nation organization
- **YG Education Worker:** A Yukon government employee working in EDU or in a school
- **Educator:** A Yukon government employee certified as a teacher working in a school
- **Elder:** A First Nation citizen formally recognized as an Elder by their community
- **Family:** Family of a student or alumni
- **Student:** Anyone who was enrolled in a Yukon school when they spoke with us

All speakers will be identified as Indigenous, Racialized, or White. Where relevant, speakers will be categorized by their school affiliation—Whitehorse, rural, or both.

How to Cite

Yukon Child and Youth Advocate Office & Yukon First Nation Education Directorate. (2025). *For Our Children: Review of Systemic Racism in Yukon's Education System.*

Acronym Guide

Departments and Organizations

- Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE)
- Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon (CSFY)
- Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN)
- Yukon government Department of Education (EDU)
- First Nations Education Commission (FNEC)
- First Nation School Board (FNSB)
- Yukon Bureau of Statistics (YBS)
- Yukon Child and Youth Advocate Office (YCAO)
- Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED)
- Yukon government (YG)

Other

- Community Liaison Education Coordinator (CELC)
- Education Support Worker (ESW)
- First Nation Education Advocate (FNEA)
- Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Joint Education Action Plan (JEAP)
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Yukon First Nations (YFN)

- Carcross/Tagish First Nation (CTFN)
- Champagne and Aishihik First Nations (CAFN)
- First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun (FNNND)
- Kluane First Nation (KFN)
- Kwanlin Dün First Nation (KDFN)
- Liard First Nation (LFN)
- Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation (LSCFN)
- Ross River Dena Council (RRDC)
- Selkirk First Nation (SFN)
- Ta'an Kwäch'än Council (TKC)
- Teslin Tlingit Council (TTC)
- Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in (TH)
- Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN)
- White River First Nation (WRFN)

Glossary

BIPOC: A term that stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour. It is an inclusive term used to refer to non-White or racialized people while highlighting the specific experiences and struggles that Black and Indigenous communities have faced under colonialism. This term is frequently used in anti-racism discussions and social justice movements.

Colonialism: The system of control, rooted in an ideology of domination, through which colonizing forces justify actions of violence, coercion, and economic and political subjugation. These actions comprise the process of colonization.

Colonization: The actions through which a nation or people establish control over other nations and/or peoples. Frequently this comprises acts of political and physical violence, economic pressure, and taking possession of land and resources by force.

"Colourblindness": Something that people say to indicate they don't see race, but is actually deeply problematic. While it sounds positive, subscribing to "colourblindness" actually communicates that one is ignorant to the unique realities and experiences of people of colour.

Decolonization: The process of challenging, dismantling, and potentially reimagining and rebuilding oppressive social systems that are informed by colonial values.

Dominant culture (Western and colonial): The culture of the most powerful and influential group in a given society. This culture becomes the standard and its values, beliefs, and practices tend to become entrenched as the norm over time. In a Canadian context, the dominant culture has historically and continues to reflect Eurocentric values, despite an increasingly diverse population.

Eurocentrism: A worldview that centers European and Western values. In a Canadian context, this primarily refers to cultures, histories, and ideas that reflect settlers of European origin. Centering these perspectives leads to the idea, often subconsciously, that European experiences and values are the universal standard.

Indigenous: In a Canadian context, the original inhabitants of the land now known as Canada. Indigenous Canadians are not a monolith but rather comprise many different cultures, language groups, traditions, and belief systems. In a Yukon context, there are 14 distinct First Nations in the territory: Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Kluane First Nation, Kwanlin Dün First Nation, Liard First Nation, Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation, Ross River Dena Council, Selkirk First Nation, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, Teslin Tlingit Council, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, and White River First Nation.

Race: A social construct that categorizes people into groups based on physical characteristics. One's race is determined through a racialization process (how people categorize you). It is important to note that while race is socially constructed, its impacts can be very real.

Racialized: A term that is commonly used to refer to people who aren't White. It comes from the process by which BIPOC people (or people of colour) get categorized as non-White.

Racism: A belief that there is a racial hierarchy with some races being superior to others, leading to unequal treatment of people based on race and/or ethnicity. Racism can happen on different levels—from individual actions rooted in prejudice and hatred up to systems where practices, laws, and social norms can result in marginalization and oppression on the basis of race.

Reverse Racism: A belief that BIPOC people can be racist towards White people, which is untrue. While BIPOC people can be prejudiced towards White people, their prejudice is backed up by systemic power and therefore cannot be called racism.

Systemic Racism: The specific level of racism in which discrimination occurs at institutional levels. This can look like policies, practices, laws, and more, which are normalized and embedded in the functioning of major societal institutions such as education, healthcare, and the justice system. Systemic racism is often harder to identify as it operates through processes and structures rather than through individuals. Its impacts, however, are deeply consequential for people of colour.

White Supremacy: A belief that White people and Eurocentric values are superior and should therefore be afforded more power in society. In the context of dominant cultures (in Canada, Eurocentrism) becoming seen as the norm over time, White Supremacy often operates insidiously and is not immediately obvious, or even intentional. The ideology of White Supremacy can be held by anyone, including non-White people.

Worldview: The perspective and philosophy an individual or group uses to see and understand the world around them. It comprises one's values and beliefs and is usually informed by one's culture.

WHAT IS RACISM?

"Racism is easier to metabolize when it's overt and in your face. It's easier to heal faster from those acts of racism rather than when you don't know, which is what systems are great at doing. The systems perpetuate people gaslighting themselves by thinking, "I don't know if that's racism or not."

Meenakshi Verma-Agrawal, Director of Harvard University's Center for Race, Inequality, and Social Equity Studies

When people hear the word "racism," often they respond with defensiveness or denial. It makes sense—most people have learned or heard enough about racism to know that it has been the cause of some of the most violent and traumatic experiences in history: slavery, ethnic cleansing and genocide, colonization, and the list goes on. Explicit racism today is just as scary, and can look like physical violence, White Supremacist demonstrations, venomous stereotyping and hate-filled tirades, and more. But what about when the racism is less blatant, and harder to see? Is it as dangerous?

Racism operates at three levels: direct, cultural, and systemic/structural. These levels are interconnected and often build on top of each other. Using the Triangle of Violence framework from Johan Galtung (1969), these three levels can be explained as follows:

- **Direct racism** comprises actions that reflect racial prejudice and target someone based on their race and/or ethnicity. This can look like racist jokes, slurs, vandalism, harassment, social exclusion, and physical violence.

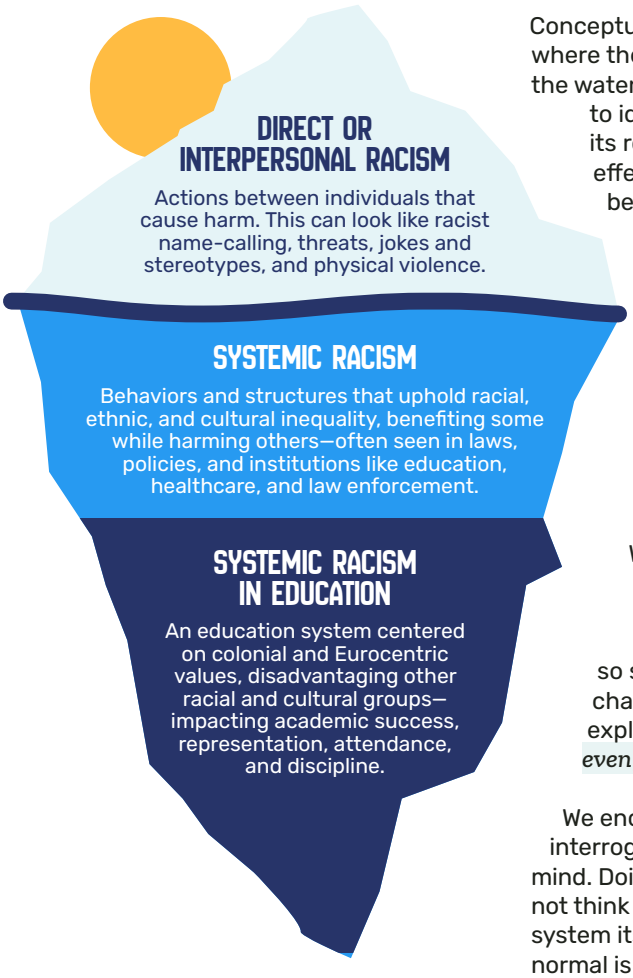
Example: *An educator or administrator makes a racist joke or comment to a student.*

- **Cultural racism** refers to the ways in which societal norms and values have evolved to legitimize racist beliefs and biases. This can look like broad stereotyping (often upheld by media portrayals), cultural appropriation, and widespread cultural narratives that become entrenched in societal discourse.

Example: *An administrator believing that a group of students are more likely to misbehave in class. This can reflect an explicit belief, or an implicit bias.*

- **Systemic/structural racism** is the way that social structures and institutions disadvantage certain racial groups through policy, laws, and discriminatory practices. This mostly manifests in areas like education, healthcare, housing, criminal justice, employment, and more.

Example: *More funding is provided to one school over another based on geographical location. Racial demographics of the school are often informed by geography (due to both historical and contemporary factors).*



Conceptualizing these three levels of racism using the iceberg analogy, where the tip of the iceberg is visible and explicit and everything under the waterline is less visible, cultural and systemic racism is much harder to identify as racism, therefore making it much harder to address at its root. Direct racism is easy to address because of its cause and effect—easy to spot the perpetrator, the victim, and the intention behind the harm caused. If a student calls another student a slur and pushes them to the ground, everything is obvious and therefore addressable. The problem with cultural and systemic racism, on the other hand, is that it's hard to point the finger at one particular person, and because it's hard to find blame, it's hard to find intention. To identify systemic racism, it's important to focus on consequences rather than intentions, with the unfortunate alternative being that only looking at explicit actions *"keeps our attention focused on one kind of [racism], allowing the other, more pervasive kind to go unnoticed"* (Afzaal, 2012).

Why is it necessary to address what's under the waterline? It's because cultures normalize and promote value systems and beliefs, therefore informing the way systems operate. When beliefs are normalized, they become much harder to challenge, so systems built on those beliefs become much harder to challenge. As Galtung (1990, as cited in Paulson and Tikly, 2022) explains, *"cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right, [or] at least not wrong"* (p. 291).

We encourage all readers to approach this review, or even everyday interrogations of racism, with the submerged part of the iceberg in mind. Doing so will remind us that everything is value-laden. You might not think that you are doing something racist or colonial, or that the system itself is racist or colonial, but in fact, everything that is seen as normal is informed by values and beliefs that made it so. Even if curriculum, student discipline policies, School Growth Plans, or the *Education Act* don't explicitly name racism in their foundation, they still reflect the values of the society from which they were created. In a colonial society, everything is colonial. Indigenous people and people of colour have always known and felt this, and continue to know it and feel it today. For people who have never considered the origins of how and why the system works the way it does, consider the words of the poet Andrea Gibson who explains that *"privilege is never having to think about it."*

LITERATURE REVIEW: IMPACTS OF SYSTEMIC RACISM ON BIPOC YOUTH IN EDUCATION

Background

This literature review was conducted to support the development of the Review of Systemic Racism in Education in the Yukon. A search for peer-reviewed articles recent to the last 10 years (2003 was used as the cut off year) was completed centering around the keywords "psychological impacts of racism on BIPOC youth", "Education", and "Canada". A summary document was completed of the most relevant articles and 15 of the highest quality of these articles were then selected to review in detail, including looking for shared themes and recommendations. The aim was to look at the breadth of academic literature on this topic in Canada in order to inform the Yukon findings and data analysis.

Introduction

According to a 2013 Government of Canada survey, *"visible minority and Indigenous youth make up approximately 30 per cent of the Canadian population under the age of 25"*. This population has significantly increased in the last 10 years and Indigenous youth are now the fastest growing demographic of young people right now in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022). Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) also experience the highest rates of socio-economic challenges (such as addiction, violence, homelessness, etc.) compared to their White peers. It was clear from the articles selected around this topic, that the socio-economic challenges these young people may experience are exacerbated by their experiences in the Canadian schooling system, which is ripe with systemic barriers, inequity, and various forms of racism that perpetuate a cycle of poor overall health, wellbeing and livelihood that continues into adulthood. Gajaria et al. (2021) clearly summarize this concept by stating that *"racial discrimination is a proven public health determinant, with social and structural antecedents that [have] been impacting children and adolescents in Canada for many years"* (p.132), and it is clear from the literature reviewed that it will continue to do so unless the education system implements critical change at the systemic and interpersonal levels.

In this current scan of the literature on the impacts of racism on BIPOC students in the education system, there were common themes across the experiences of both racialized and Indigenous young people. This review aims to highlight the key themes identified as they pertain to the realities and corresponding impacts in Canada, as well as draw attention to the best practices revealed when it comes to making structural and interpersonal change in the schooling system. The 15 articles reviewed span various Canadian provinces with four focused on the BIPOC experience in Canada, 10 specific to the Indigenous experience across Canada with one focused on colonial countries more broadly, and one focused on Canadian teacher education programs.

The literature reminded us that it is important to highlight systemic racism, which can be defined as *"the systems and structures within society that reinforce and promote discrimination on the basis of racial*

> "[The racism I faced] is still a huge challenge, one of my biggest challenges today. A lot of people who experience these types of things when they're kids, it's not like, 'Ok, it's fixed." I think it'll be a lifelong thing for me. I won't ever get to a point where it's like, 'This is perfect.'"
>
> **Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools**

identity not simply enacted by individuals" (Gajaria et al., 2021, p.134), and it is equally important to note how personal biases, assumptions and stereotyping can lend themselves to the upholding of these systems at the student and staffing levels. "*Inequity itself is produced and maintained through structural and interpersonal oppression often involving violence, abuse, exploitation, exclusion, and humiliation*" (qtd. in Sanders, 2024, p.1132).

In the literature reviewed, differing forms of racism were identified, all of which have impacts on youth wellness. Covert forms of racism are "*ambiguous and/or unintentional to perpetrators but have significant impacts on targets*" (qtd. in Uink et al., 2022, p.487), such as microaggressions and stereotyping. As well, Gillies (2023, p.70) describes deficit racism "*as the unconscious, ongoing belief that Indigenous students, Black students, and students of colour are genetically and culturally distinct from White people and that poor academic performance is the result of their inability to excel within Western institutions, rather than systemic inequities.*" Ultimately, racialization in the education system shows up in the totality of systemic, covert and overt ways whereby "*the real, perceived, or ascribed differences among individuals or groups produces hierarchies of power and privilege among races*" (Gillies, 2023, p.69).

Broader Youth Experience and Psychological Impacts

"*Racism's effects on children's self-esteem and self-worth start as early as the age of four*" (qtd. in Gagaria, 2021, p.133). Considering this age is pre-kindergarten, the accumulation of experiences with various forms of racism across thirteen years of a student's life is incredibly concerning. From across the articles reviewed the most common examples of racism experienced across various racialized students include: peer bullying; lack of teacher support and understanding; lower academic expectations and continuing education support due to deficit-racism; lack of representation in curriculum and school staff; and exclusionary over-discipline. The socio-emotional impacts of these experiences include maladaptive coping behaviours; social and extracurricular withdrawal; low sense of self, and poor mental and physical health.

At the systemic level, curriculum that centers White-Eurocentric worldview and experiences combined with the lack of BIPOC teachers has created environments where BIPOC students do not see or feel their respective worlds represented. In fact, "*White educators are estimated to make up between 71 and 96 per cent of teachers across Canada*" (qtd. in Wager et al., 2022, p.240). One of the most prominent examples of this inequity of staff representation and worldview is seen in the severe lack of understanding and acknowledgment of the systemic adversity BIPOC young people experience inside and outside the school. This adversity relates to adverse childhood experiences, aka ACEs (Sanders, 2024), socio-economic inequalities (housing issues, poverty) as mentioned earlier, trauma histories rooted in historical oppression, and peer violence and bullying. Given that school professionals are less likely to recognize

> "A lot of students of colour [in the Yukon] need therapy immediately, like yesterday. They need to have a space to talk about this … I would've loved to have a counsellor who understood what was happening, to talk to me about all these things that were happening that I couldn't make sense of. Most kids discover their traumas when they're adults."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

adverse experiences for students of colour, *"when adversity is unacknowledged, access to appropriate resources is limited, reinforcing for students that they must cope independently, [and] further blocking connection"* (Sanders, 2024, p.1205), with the adults meant to support them. Similarly, when social identities are imposed on certain students, this influences how they are viewed, approached, and supported within systems such as education (Sanders, 2024).

This lack of understanding and acknowledgement surrounding experiences of adversity lends itself to the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsions for example). *"Exclusionary discipline disproportionately impacts students who are Black, Indigenous, mixed race or Middle Eastern, male, have special education needs, or are from lower income households, and these groups are more likely to be suspended, suspended for longer, or expelled than White students"* (qtd. in Sanders, 2024, p.1192). As highlighted by Gillies (2023)'s concept of deficit racism, is the tendency for non-BIPOC teachers to overlook the academic potential of BIPOC students. For example, *"black students are more likely to be pushed into non-academic streams and away from STEM subjects"*, a phenomenon quoted in Cameron et al. (2021, p.12) which is referred to as *"second-generation segregation."* According to Statistics Canada in 2020, *"despite 94 per cent of Black youth in Canada reporting that they would like to obtain a bachelor's degree (or higher), only 60 per cent reported thinking it was attainable"* (qtd. in Cameron et al., p.12). A number of the articles reviewed highlighted the lack of attention, support and resources provided to racialized students to succeed academically, as they are defaulted into less academic streams and overlooked for post-secondary studies. This would also be the case in the Yukon.

When it comes to peer victimization which is defined in Okoye et al. (2023, p.3500) as *"aggressive interpersonal behaviour among young people including direct physical and verbal acts, as well as relational encounters such as bullying or social exclusion,"* racially and culturally diverse students surveyed across southern Ontario felt that schools rarely addressed bullying and school violence as adversity (Sanders, 2024, p.1200). In Feng et al.'s 2024 study pertaining to the experiences of Asian students in the Greater Toronto Area, youth identified being mistaken for someone else, having a name mispronounced or misspelled, having to use a different name to accommodate western pronunciation, and having to avoid bringing cultural lunch meals to schools for fear of being bullied. These instances commonly occurred as early as elementary school and *"have led these students to come to expect and endure this reality as part of the landscape of their daily life"* (Fang et al., 2024, p.1301).

In relation to the psychological impacts of these experiences, it has become evident that *"repeated and persistent exposure to the effects of systemic racism at crucial developmental stages is a form of chronic stress throughout the life of racialized young people, which contributes to adverse health outcomes"* (qtd. in Gajaria et al., 2021, p.133). In Okoye et al. (2023)' study of African Canadian students, *"perceived racism has been linked to psychosocial stressors in the school including perceptions of lower sense of school connectedness and safety, and greater odds of peer victimization"*

(p3501). In the same study, *"those who reported racism were 120 per cent more likely to report extreme sadness and hopelessness, and had a higher likelihood of rating their mental health as poor"* (p.3503). *"Hearing negative views about oneself or cultural group via racist acts can have detrimental long-term impacts on adolescent development, identity and self concept through maladaptive coping mechanisms"* (qtd. in Uink et al., 2022, p.489). Discrimination in adolescents has found to have been correlated to *"cigarette use, high-conduct disorder, later onset alcohol use disorder, suicide risk and self-sabotaging behaviour"* (qtd. in Uink et al., 2022, p.493).

Extracurricular activities can make up an important aspect of an adolescent's school life and are meant to foster a sense of purpose and community, however it has been shown that withdrawal and isolation are common self-protective strategies among BIPOC students (Okoye, 2024). *"Those who have experienced racism showed higher odds of skipping class due to poor mental health issues, and not participating in group activities because of fear of bullying, or experiencing anxiety and depression"* (Okoye et al., 2021, p.3503-3501). With clear links between racial discrimination and low engagement, poor academic outcomes and mental health among BIPOC young people more broadly, it appears important to acknowledge the specific adversities that these students face and the need to build protective factors into the education system in order to see positive change. While the experiences and impacts of all BIPOC youth in the schooling system should still be further understood, below will outline a more thorough review of the literature specific to the Indigenous student experience.

Indigenous Youth Experiences

Within the Indigenous student experience more specifically, experiences with racism can be understood at the historical, systemic, educator, and peer levels. Firstly, one cannot understand the extent of anti-Indigenous racism without acknowledging the long history of the education system in Canada. After Confederation in 1867, the first Indian Act was passed and the Department of Indian affairs established, where the objective of the Residential school system, stated by an unknown government official, was to *"kill the Indian in the child"* (Gebhard, 2013, p.2). *"The nature of settler nationalism and the Catholic/Christian religion has undertowed schools for over a century, as within these Indian Residential Schools"* (Wager et al., 2022, p.239) and the 150,000 Indigenous young people forced to attend them. These are the foundational roots of racism from which the education system has been founded on, and continues to be perpetuated today.

When it comes to the knowledge of this context and history at the systemic school level, *"it has been demonstrated that there continues to be sentiments of entitlement, resistance to change, emotions of anger and denial, and defensive reactions when settler teacher candidates are confronted by their intergenerational entanglements with a settler colonial system and its anti-Indigenous racisms"* (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022, p.18-

19). When school systems and educators are unwilling and resistant to understanding and acknowledging the violent history and reality of Canadian education and Indigenous peoples, the trickle-down creates present environments where Indigenous students do not feel safe or supported. In a study highlighted by Gebhard (2013) of inner-city Winnipeg high school youth, *"when students were asked if they feel that teachers at their school understand Indigenous students, over three in four said 'no', and expressed the impossibility of their teachers understanding their lives"* (p.4). This is only exacerbated by how few Indigenous educators are hired within schooling systems. *"Low expectations of Indigenous students, the invisibility of Indigenous perspectives in school contexts, and primitive stereotyping"* (qtd. in Uink, 2022, p.488) thus permeates the Indigenous student's school experience. *"The prevalence of Eurocentrism as the endorsed settler colonial worldview across the school curriculum continues to exclude diverse histories, contemporary issues, perspectives, knowledges, and contributions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples"* (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022, p.16).

This exclusion in schooling contexts is further seen in the lower expectations of Indigenous students, withholding of academic opportunities, inequitable academic outcomes, and absence of support from educators (Wager et al., 2022). In their interviews with Vancouver-based Indigenous youth speaking to their educational experiences in Canadian schools, Wager et al. (2022) noted a young person stating how *"as a student with a learning disability, an Indigenous youth was assumed to be unable to proceed to higher education and was frequently passed through courses despite not achieving the learning goals of the course, as opposed to being provided proper accommodations"* (p.236). In Louie & Prince's (2023) example from youth in Northern BC, an Indigenous student reported that *"if she didn't hand in her work, her teacher would say, 'Oh, that's so typical'"* (p.19). In Gillies (2023) interviews with Métis students in Saskatchewan, *"none of the participants, regardless of skin tone, gender, or class, received information about funded and other post-secondary education opportunities for Indigenous students when attending high school"* (p.76). One student who applied to post-secondary reported finding out *"he didn't get accepted because he was short one class"* (p.76)—something that wasn't communicated or advised by his teachers/counsellor.

Even with the lack of historic and cultural knowledge that exists at the systemic level, the racist assumption that Indigenous people cannot learn or benefit from Western knowledge can also exist, which gives educators reason not to put energy into supporting Indigenous student's academic success and growth (Gillies, 2023). The literature points to the reality that many Indigenous students *"may receive little encouragement from education heads to apply for resources like scholarships because of preconceived assumptions that they will be incapable of handling the demands of higher study despite getting good grades"* (Shankar et al., 2013, p.3911). And in Gillies (2023) study, *"each of the 13 Indigenous participants cited observations of widespread low expectations of Indigenous students' intellectual abilities"* (p.73).

When it comes to actually engaging with education content, Reddington et al. (2021) highlight that as a part of their study with 45 cross-Canada Indigenous youth, students shared accounts of instances when they *"were bullied, isolated, misunderstood, negatively stereotyped, and felt disconnected from the teachings in their schools as they were based on White colonial histories and perspectives"* (p.4). These perspectives coupled with educators' lack of understanding and empathy for colonial-induced adversity creates a breeding ground for race-based bullying and peer victimization. In fact, higher levels of both bullying and discrimination were reported by Indigenous students (Uink et al., 2022). Most reported cases of overt racism (name calling, violence, or direct statements denigrating culture) involved peers, such as the experience of an Indigenous student who was told, *"They should just go back to residential school again"* (Louie & Prince, 2023, p.18). In the same research, Louie & Prince (2013) find evidence of teachers and students living in what seem to be different worlds, with school professionals downplaying and actively not engaging in remedying acts of race-based bullying in school. *"65.22 per cent of teachers were either unsure or disagreed that racism is a barrier for Indigenous student success, in contrast to the 81.8 per cent of Indigenous students who reported being the victims of overt acts of racism"* (p.18).

Indigenous youth have also reported, across the literature, a severe lack of cultural and mental health support and resources within the school, which appears all the more pressing given the level of adversity many of them experience both inside and outside of the school system. Rather than being resourced and provided support for their challenges, teachers have *"over-disciplined Indigenous children and youth for supposed poor behaviour"* (Gillies, 2023, p.75). And students have *"identified schools as behaviourally punitive, in relation to issues of detention, suspension, and expulsion, which reinforces the exclusion of Indigenous students via disengagement, push-out, and exits from formal school systems"* (Wager et al., 2022, p237). The historical, systemic, and interpersonal (educator-student and peer-to-peer) exclusion, lack of respect and support, bias-related barriers for academic opportunities, race-based victimization and discipline creates deep impacts on the academic, physical and mental-emotional health of Indigenous adolescents.

SYSTEMIC RACISM IN EDUCATION CAN HAVE SERIOUS AND LONG-LASTING IMPACTS ON INDIGENOUS AND OTHER RACIALIZED STUDENTS' SENSE OF SELF, CONFIDENCE, AND WORTH. THIS CAN LEAD TO NEGATIVE OUTCOMES DOWN THE ROAD.

Impacts on Indigenous Youth

Disengagement seems to be one of the core impacts of racism experienced by Indigenous youth. *"Racism experienced during adolescence is associated with poor academic achievement and internalizing and externalizing symptoms"* (Uink et al., 2022, p.496). This can be seen in *"systemic low expectations leading to inaccurate assessments of Indigenous students' academic abilities, and thus disproportionate numbers of Indigenous students designated as modified learners"* (Gillies, 2023, p.75). Rather than being provided with the attention, care and encouragement of educators, Indigenous youth feel disregarded in their abilities and potential, which can lead to feelings of low self worth and hopelessness. This *"internalization of negative*

stereotyping impedes an adolescents' self esteem by reinforcing a belief that Indigeneity equates to 'less than' others" (qtd. in Uink et al., 2022, p.497). Withdrawal from school, both due to self-protection and discipline is apparent across research. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada (2016) reported that *"40 per cent of 20-to 24-year-old Indigenous youth had not completed secondary school compared to the 89 per cent graduation rate of the rest of the Canadian population"* (qtd. in Wager et al., 2022, p.239). This is significant given *"reports show that educational attainment is a strong predictor of long-term health and quality of life"* (Shankar et al., 2013, p.3909). This can be seen in educated individuals who tend to make better-informed health related decisions for themselves and their families; experience lower rates of unemployment; have greater perceived personal control; and higher relative social standing and increased social support, all of which are associated with better physical and mental health (Shankar et al., 2013).

Uink et al. (2022) also note that *"some Indigenous adolescents may actively disengage with cultural communities and activities in order to avoid racism"* (p. 497). This is particularly concerning as ethnic, or cultural, identification seems to decrease as a protective factor across development due to the wearing down of one's sense of self as a result of social stereotyping (Uink et al., 2022). This wearing down of one's sense of self has been expressed by moments where Indigenous students felt *"intimidated"*, *"useless"* and *"worthless,"* and *"ultimately leading to silence, alienate and position them on the periphery in Canadian schools"* (Reddington et. al, 2021, p.4). Interestingly, Louie & Prince (2023) found *"teachers often interpreted Indigenous students' discomfort in the education system or the silencing they have experienced as an innate quietness (particularly apparent in Indigenous girls)"* (p.21), opposed to the adverse environment or the disengagement they are experiencing as a result of it.

In regards to the exclusionary discipline noted, *"scholars have documented school-based practices that increase the likelihood of future incarceration for students, which include said disciplinary measures, alternative education and streaming programs, and the shaping of select youth as needing surveillance and containment"* (qtd. in Gebhard, 2013, p.1) due to their Indigenous identity. In addition to the increased rates of substance abuse, suicide risk, and maladaptive behaviour-related coping resulting from racism and low sense of self-worth, Shankar et al. point to the *"additional chronic stress due to ongoing racial oppression as disrupting critical psychological and physiological pathways … Persistent distress on the adrenal system—the body's stress handling system—can lead to chronic physical and mental health problems like cardiovascular disease, increased hypertension, asthma, diabetes, depression, anxiety and obesity"* (p.3920). Corresponding symptoms include *"migraines, extreme fatigue and flashbacks of trauma, inability to concentrate in class, appetite disturbances, and difficulties with memory"* (p.3920). As succinctly highlighted by a student in Reddington et al.'s (2021) research, *"We cannot learn if we are mentally ill, and if we had resources, our lives could improve in all aspects"* (p.6).

Overview of Best Practices

While the literature thoroughly summarizes BIPOC young people's adverse experiences with various forms of racism in the education system and the significant correlating impacts, it also highlights a number of best practices to combat and break the cycle of systemic school racism. Across the broad needs of BIPOC students, and more specifically Indigenous students, the following has been identified through this review: the need to feel safely connected to adults; cultural competency; seeing themselves represented in curriculum and within school staff; the acknowledgement of adverse experiences; restorative (vs. punitive) discipline, and the incorporation of youth voices at a systemic level. Direct quotes from the articles are provided.

"Indigenous students pointed to peer racism as the prevailing manifestation of oppression, making it vital to use prevention education from the earliest ages to curtail and challenge racist attitudes and unconscious bias" (qtd. in Louie & Prince, 2023, p.22-23). *"Education must be appropriately resourced to support educators, particularly early career educators, with trauma-informed training and ongoing support to critically understand how students and staff are shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts"* (qtd. in Sanders, 2024, p.1206). Related to the need for school staff to acknowledge and protect against peer race-based violence is the deep desire for racialized youth to feel supported and cared for by their educators. Wager et al. (2022) highlight *"how positive experiences in these systems and structures are almost always linked to positive relational experiences with staff in schools who show care for the young people … characterized by mutual care, respect and support"* (p.240). In Sanders (2024)'s findings, Indigenous students in Southern Ontario wanted staff *"to try harder to get to know them, to connect with them, and to care if they were attending and doing work … When connection was blocked, students stopped talking to people about the adversity they were experiencing, which ultimately leads to feelings of isolation and lack of safety"* (p.1203).

In addition to an increase in positive adult-student connections, youth across articles spoke to the dire need for increased mental health support in school. As a youth notes in the study by Reddington et al. (2021), *"I think there should be more counsellors, life skill classes, hands-on learning and Anti-bullying"* (p.7). *"At the elementary level, attending a school with at least one guidance counsellor actually reduces the odds of being suspended by 22 per cent"* (qtd. in Sanders, 2024, p.1194). Given the complex and traumatic punitive history of the Residential School system, Gebhard (2023) claims that *"schools must become places of resistance to a punitive society"* (p.7). An example of this can be seen in the *"removal of zero tolerance from Ontario legislation in 2008, and the instituting of progressive discipline, restorative practices, and school based mental health,"* which decreased the rate of suspension from *"5.49 per cent of students in 2007 to 2.67 per cent in 2017,"* and decreased expulsion from *"0.09 per cent, to 0.02 per cent"* (qtd. in Sanders, 2024, p1193). Wager et al. (2022) argue for the *"reframing of 'dropping out of school' as resulting from structural violence and systemic inequities oppression which create a forceful exclusion of Indigenous students from the education system, rather than the individual failings of students"* (p.232).

When it comes to cultural competency and Indigenous students seeing themselves represented within their education experience: *"adults should have a basic knowledge of issues impacting Indigenous communities and urban Indigenous youth"* (Ealey, 2020, p.180). *"Decolonizing means challenging the single Western viewpoint, story, or perspective that defines and interprets knowledge, ways of being, and people,"* and *"should disrupt the belief that Western culture is the standard with which every other culture does or should align their ways of being and knowing"* (Louie & Prince, 2023, p.6). Indigenous students have indicated the importance of having *"Elders, Indigenous teachers and counsellors/advisors in all Canadian public schools"* given the challenges they face *"stem from a lack of mandatory education about Indigenous culture and history"* (Reddington et al., 2021, p.4). Louie & Prince (2023) even highlight their findings that *"an anti-oppressive, decolonizing, and diversity course is deemed necessary at the earliest stages of high school"* (p.24). Another opportunity as presented by Uink et al. (2022) is the potential for youth activist programs to provide a positive context to uplift Indigenous adolescents' cultural identity and increase their resilience against racism. All of these examples and recommendations outlined across the literature are summarized by the desire and importance of uplifting BIPOC, and specifically Indigenous, youth voices across discussions and tables shaping their educational experiences.

A final gap to be noted, is the need for race-conscious training in teacher education programs and development. *"Teachers cannot challenge what they cannot see and do not understand"*, and *"if left unexamined, unconscious deficit racist beliefs and implicit biases make it impossible to counter racialized academic practices"* (Gillies, 2023, p.80). *"Scholars have consistently found that Canadian teachers feel a sense of uncertainty about how to bring Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing into the classroom"* (qtd. in Danyluk, 2023, p.388). In a 2020 study of Alberta teachers' perspectives on moving reconciliation forward, teachers described not having time to digest the resources, fear of making mistakes, and limited support from administration, as all reasons why they were not moving ahead with this work. Additionally, in teacher education programming, teachers identify the lack of time given to engage in Indigenous understandings and knowledge, as well as the lack of dedicated funding in teacher programs (due to lack of priority) to even have development courses on race-based and Indigenous ways of being (Danyluk, 2023). And *"classroom environments that do not provide the opportunity to discuss racism, prejudice and privilege can be disadvantageous to all students"* (Shankar et al., 2013, p.3923). However, when teachers acquire a solid understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in their teacher education programs, *"this knowledge is very likely to be passed onto their future students and shared in family settings, creating the potential to positively impact society at a broader level and ultimately serving as an impediment to anti-Indigenous racism"* (Danyluk, 2023, p.398).

Conclusion

Educational practices for BIPOC young people *"have always been rooted within colonial epistemes and continue to enact various forms of structural violence,"* (Wager et al., 2022, p.231) and the broader experience and impacts of this are highly evident across this literature review. *"Addressing racism with a structural lens promotes a greater understanding of how systemic racial discrimination continues to be consciously or unconsciously enacted upon racialized populations"* (Gajaria et al., 2021, p.133) and is imperative to begin to break the cycle of racism within the education system. Understanding the relationship between well-documented historical structures and tools of colonial oppression, and that of the contemporary public schooling system, is central in interpreting the negative effects of colonialism, as well as understanding the resilience and resistance in which BIPOC young people have participated in order to navigate their way through and survive these systems (Wager et al., 2022).

Throughout this review it has become clear that while acknowledgement of the adverse reality of BIPOC youth is the first step, action is necessary in order to: challenge racist and implicitly-biased assumptions at the educator and peer level; overcome the low and deficit-based expectations of BIPOC students; incorporate a diversity of experiences and knowledge within school curriculums; increase BIPOC diversity at the system level; increase pathways of care and support; and move away from exclusionary forms of discipline that targets racialized students.

Given the prevalent links between *"racism, psychosocial stress, and adverse health outcomes"* (Okoye et al., 2023, p.3501), carrying out the actions required for change can create conduits for higher academic and extracurricular engagement; a stronger sense of ethnic and cultural self; lower rates of poor mental health such as anxiety, depression, substance use, maladaptive behaviours, and suicidality; safer and more connected school environments; and greater rates of graduation and continuing education (and thus employment, socio-economic stability, and adult wellness), as is highlighted across the literature here. Critically and thoughtfully addressing racism in schools has the clear potential to help create a healthy, thriving and socially connected community of educated young people for many generations into the future.

HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN THE YUKON

Education Timeline

1964

Master Tuition Agreement

Government of Canada transfers responsibility for education of Yukon First Nations children to Government of Yukon, no consultation.

1973

Together Today For Our Children Tomorrow

Report demands that Yukon First Nations share authority over public education, integrating language and culture.

1987

The Kwiya Report

Highlights that successive governments have failed to support First Nations learners.

1990

Yukon *Education Act*

Weakly identifies role for Yukon First Nations to play in public education.

1993-2006

Umbrella Final Agreement and Self-Government Agreements

Yukon First Nations negotiate modern treaties including Sections 17 and 24 that enable them to direct and co-manage their local education.

2000

Auditor General's Report on Education

Identifies widening educational gap due to systemic failures.

2003

Two Trails One Vision

Report from Na-Cho Nyak Dun assesses the school in Mayo and determines racism, bias, and alienation lead to poor student outcomes.

2008

Education Reform Report

A 3-year review of the *Education Act*, identifies education gap between First Nations as key priority.

2009

Auditor General's Report on Education

Report finds that Yukon's education system is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students.

2014

Joint Education Action Plan

14 Yukon First Nations and the governments of Yukon and Canada sign a tripartite agreement to close the achievement gap by increasing First Nations authority, bolstering language and culture, providing more supports and improving data collection. The agreement has never been funded or implemented.

2015

Truth and Reconciliation Final Report

Highlights need for shift in mindset to repair damage of colonization and residential school system.

2019

Auditor General's Report on Education

Finds that Yukon Education has not followed recommendations of 2009 report and has failed to change the outcomes of Indigenous students.

2019

Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE) established

In response to a 3rd scathing Auditor General's Report, Yukon First Nations chiefs unite to push for changes to the education system.

2020

Yukon First Nation Education Directorate established

CCOE creates an NGO to provide immediate supports for Yukon First Nations learners and work toward improving Yukon's education system for all students

2021

First Nation School Board established

CCOE creates a school system allowing Yukon First Nations to co-manage public schools with the Government of Yukon

> "Unless changes are made by the Indian people themselves, it will have the same results; a one hundred per cent dropout rate … much of this is due to curriculum irrelevancy, alienation of Yukon First Nation students, need for more First Nation teachers in the schools, textbooks used to reflect the traditional approaches to the environment, language in all schools, communities to be involved in the delivery of these programs."
>
> ***Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* (1973)**

Education has always been a priority for Yukon First Nations. For generations, however, the education system in the Yukon has been shaped by colonial policies that harmed and continue to harm Indigenous students, families, and communities—undermining First Nations languages, cultures, and ways of life.

The legacy of residential schools—which operated in the Yukon until the 1960s—continues to cast a long shadow. These institutions removed children from homes and communities, forbade the use of Indigenous languages, and inflicted lasting harm on individuals and Nations. After the residential school era, First Nations students were integrated into the colonial public school system, but systemic barriers, racism, and culturally irrelevant education persisted. Despite promises of equal opportunity, outcomes for Indigenous students have consistently lagged behind those of non-Indigenous students.

Shifting Control

The history of education in Yukon has been shaped by important agreements aimed at improving education for Indigenous peoples and shifting educational control from the federal government to the territorial government. One of these key agreements was the *Master Tuition Agreement*. Signed in 1964, the agreement changed how education was managed in the Yukon. It allowed Indigenous students to stay in the territory and attend local public schools, giving Indigenous communities some opportunity for influence over their education. It also provided funding and resources to improve schools, granting the Yukon government the authority to take charge of the education of Indigenous learners.

However, the consultation process for the Master Tuition Agreement has been criticized for being limited and not involving enough Indigenous leadership. It has been reported that only seven Indigenous people were consulted, and these individuals were federal government employees, not leaders from First Nations communities.

Realizing a Vision

For over five decades, Yukon First Nations have called for meaningful change. *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* (1973) laid out a vision for an education system that nurtures First Nations children, strengthens communities, and builds future leaders.

This vision laid the groundwork for later agreements, including the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA) signed in 1993. The UFA was a significant milestone, creating a framework that allowed Yukon First Nations to negotiate their own Final and Self-Government Agreements.

For Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, education was a key priority during land claim negotiations. The negotiators believed education was the backbone of a strong society and worked hard to secure shared responsibility for education in their Final and Self-Government Agreements.

Section 17.7 of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Self-Government Agreement addresses the long-standing issue of education governance by granting it shared authority over education. This partnership with the Yukon government allows Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in to co-govern education in their traditional territory, including making decisions on curriculum, school operations, teacher hiring, and ensuring education reflects the culture, values, and needs of the First Nation—an important step toward Indigenous control over education in Yukon.

Recently, five other Yukon First Nations—Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Selkirk First Nation, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, and Ta'an Kwäch'än Council—amended their Self-Government Agreements to include the 17.7 clause.

Efforts for Reform

Since *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* (1973), reports such as the *Kwiya Report* (1987), the *Education Reform Report* (2008), the *Joint Education Action Plan* (JEAP) (2014–2024), and audits by the Auditor General of Canada (2009, 2019) have documented both the challenges and opportunities for reform. Each report highlights ongoing concerns: poor outcomes for Indigenous students, a lack of culturally relevant curriculum, inadequate funding, and limited Indigenous authority over education.

These reports have underscored the need for systemic changes in the educational framework to ensure that it better serves Indigenous communities, respects cultural knowledge, and supports the development of future leaders.

Step Toward Self-determination

A significant step toward self-determination occurred in 2022 with the creation of the Yukon First Nation School Board (FNSB). For the first time, 11 Yukon schools are now governed by a First Nations-led board and First Nations-led Community Committees for each school, with authority to shape policies and budgets, hire educators, and prioritize language and culture in curriculum. This marks major progress toward realizing the education vision outlined in *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*.

Despite this advancement, many systemic barriers remain.

Ongoing Challenges in Yukon First Nations Education

The challenges facing First Nations education in the Yukon are long-standing and deeply rooted in colonial policies and practices. Significant achievement gaps exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, with higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates for First Nations learners. Schools continue to lack culturally relevant curriculum, Indigenous language programming, and sufficient support for transitions to post-secondary education. These barriers are compounded by the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and systemic neglect (*Kwiya Report*, 1987; *Education Reform Report*, 2008; Auditor General Reports, 2009, 2019).

Funding inequities further exacerbate these challenges. Unstable and inadequate funding limits access to consistent programming, particularly in rural and remote communities. These limitations make it difficult to deliver high-quality, culturally grounded education. Disparities in per-student funding persist, despite repeated calls for improved financial arrangements between governments (*Education Reform Report*, 2008; JEAP, 2014–2024).

Additionally, government responses to these challenges have often been slow, partial, or deferred. Successive reports—*Kwiya* (1987), *Education Reform* (2008), *JEAP* (2014–2024), and the Auditor General's reviews—note delays in decision-making and implementation. Studies and committees have frequently been used to postpone action. Yukon First Nations continue to call for increased respect for Indigenous authority in education, yet structural barriers limit participation in governance and decision-making. Data-sharing agreements have been resisted, and Indigenous models of educational governance have not been fully recognized (*Together Today*, 1973; *Kwiya Report*, 1987; *Education Reform Report*, 2008).

At the legislative level, the outdated *Education Act* remains a significant obstacle to systemic change. The Act does not align with Yukon First Nations' self-government agreements, and despite clear recommendations, key amendments have not been made (*Education Reform Report*, 2008; *JEAP*, 2014–2024).

Common Themes in Yukon Education Reports	Together Today for our Children Tomorrow (1973)	Kwiya Report (1987)	Education Reform Report (2008)	Auditor General Report (2009)	JEAP (2014-2024)	Auditor General Report (2019)
Funding Discrepancies and Shortfalls		✕	✕	✕	✕	
Legislative and Policy Stagnation	✕	✕	✕		✕	
Neglect of Indigenous Student Needs	✕	✕	✕	✕		✕
Delays and Deflections in Decision-Making		✕	✕		✕	
Lack of Respect for First Nations Authority	✕		✕	✕		✕

Decades of reports presented to the Government of Yukon have echoed the same issues in Yukon Education—funding shortfalls, legislative stagnation, disregard for First Nations authority, and neglect of Indigenous students—yet progress continues to fall short.

Progress Made, Systemic Change Still Needed

Despite some important advancements, systemic change remains elusive. The creation of the FNSB in 2022 and the introduction of cultural learning initiatives—such as land-based education, cultural camps, and a revised K-9 curriculum that incorporates Yukon First Nations perspectives—have improved classroom experiences in some schools. However, implementation has been uneven, with ongoing shortages of Indigenous teachers and cultural instructors. Additionally, there are no clear accountability mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of cultural programming (*Education Reform Report*, 2008; *JEAP*, 2014–2024; *Auditor General Report*, 2019).

Special education services and student assessments represent another area of concern. While more specialized assessments and behavioural support plans are now available, only 5 per cent of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) show evidence of being fully implemented. Many rural schools continue to face significant resource shortages, and there is no comprehensive strategic plan to ensure sustainable, inclusive education services (*Auditor General Report*, 2019).

The establishment of the FNSB marked an important shift toward First Nations-led governance. However, challenges remain regarding sustainable, long-term funding, amendments to the *Education Act*, and coordination between FNSB and non-FNSB schools (*JEAP*, 2014–2024; *Auditor General Report*, 2019). Without addressing these governance and funding issues, the transformative potential of the FNSB may be limited.

Meanwhile, new performance tracking frameworks have been introduced to monitor Indigenous student outcomes. Despite these efforts, persistent achievement gaps remain unaddressed. There is no comprehensive root-cause analysis or targeted intervention strategy to close disparities in literacy, graduation rates, and overall educational success (*Auditor General Report*, 2019).

Yukon First Nations have worked tirelessly for decades to create an education system that respects Indigenous cultures, values, and governance. While important progress has been made—such as the creation of the FNSB and expanded cultural programming—many of the systemic issues identified in reports since the 1970s remain unresolved. Without significant legislative reform, sustainable funding, and full recognition of Indigenous authority in education, the cycle of incremental progress without transformative change is likely to continue.

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING OF EDUCATION IN THE YUKON

The Yukon has a unique system for governing schools, with decision-making shared between different authorities. While the Government of Yukon operates most public schools, Yukon First Nations play an important role in managing schools.

Two advisory committees ensure that Yukon First Nations have a strong voice in education. The Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE) brings together leaders from most Yukon First Nations and provides advice to the Government of Yukon on education matters.

Historically, governments attempted to divide First Nations using a "divide and conquer" strategy, encouraging competition for limited resources. However, First Nations have a long tradition of working together for the common good. The CCOE was established to build on that strength, helping leaders collaborate to support Indigenous students. While the CCOE works at the political level, it does not prevent First Nations from negotiating resources to meet the unique needs of their communities. Instead, it holds the government accountable for closing the education gap for all Indigenous students in the Yukon.

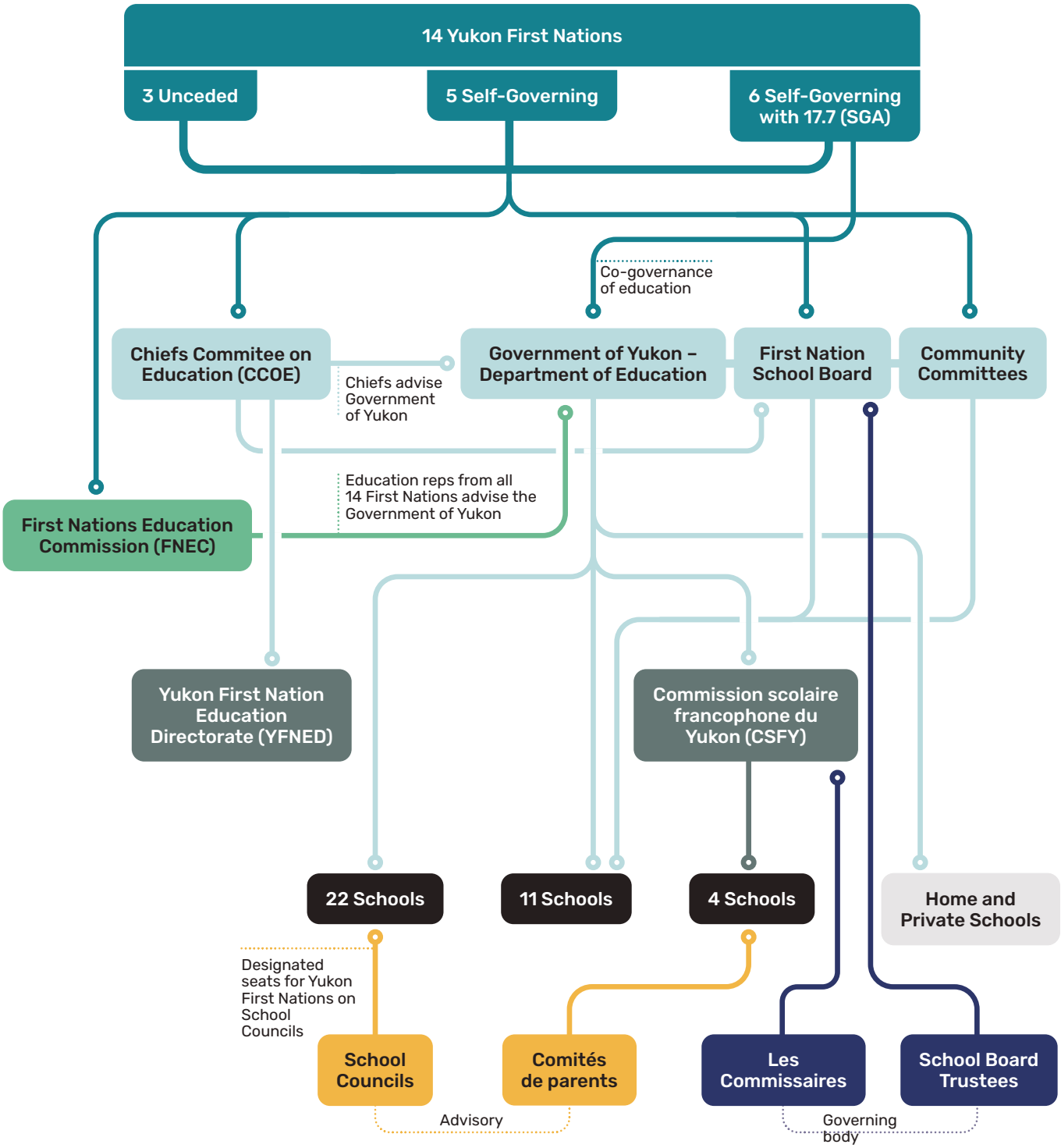
In addition to the CCOE, the First Nation Education Commission (FNEC) is a technical group that brings together staff from all 14 Yukon First Nation education departments. FNEC collaborates on projects, shares best practices, and offers support, while providing advice to the staff at the Department of Education in the Yukon government.

Public schools operated by the Department of Education have School Councils, and Yukon First Nations have designated seats on these councils to help guide how schools are run. The Yukon First Nation School Board (FNSB) operates 11 schools, where Community Committees work alongside FNSB Trustees to set policies, programs, and curricula. These committees share decision-making power with Yukon First Nations.

The Yukon also has a French school board, managed by the Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon (CSFY), which operates four schools for French-speaking students. Private schools, homeschooling, and alternative programs also contribute to the education system.

Together, these bodies work to ensure all students receive a fair education that respects First Nations cultures, languages, and traditions.

Governance ecosystem of K-12 education in the Yukon



Education Funding in the Yukon

Funding for education in the Yukon comes from three primary sources: Government of Yukon, Government of Canada, and Yukon First Nations.

The Government of Yukon receives transfer payments from Canada, a portion of which is allocated to the Yukon's overall education budget. In addition to this funding, the Government of Canada directly supports specific education programs in the territory. For example, the Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon (CSFY) receives federal funding from Canadian Heritage to deliver French-language education programs. The Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED) also receives federal funding through initiatives such as Jordan's Principle, a human rights principle that ensures First Nations children do not face gaps, delays, or denials in accessing government services because of their identity as First Nations children, as well as funding for post-secondary education programs.

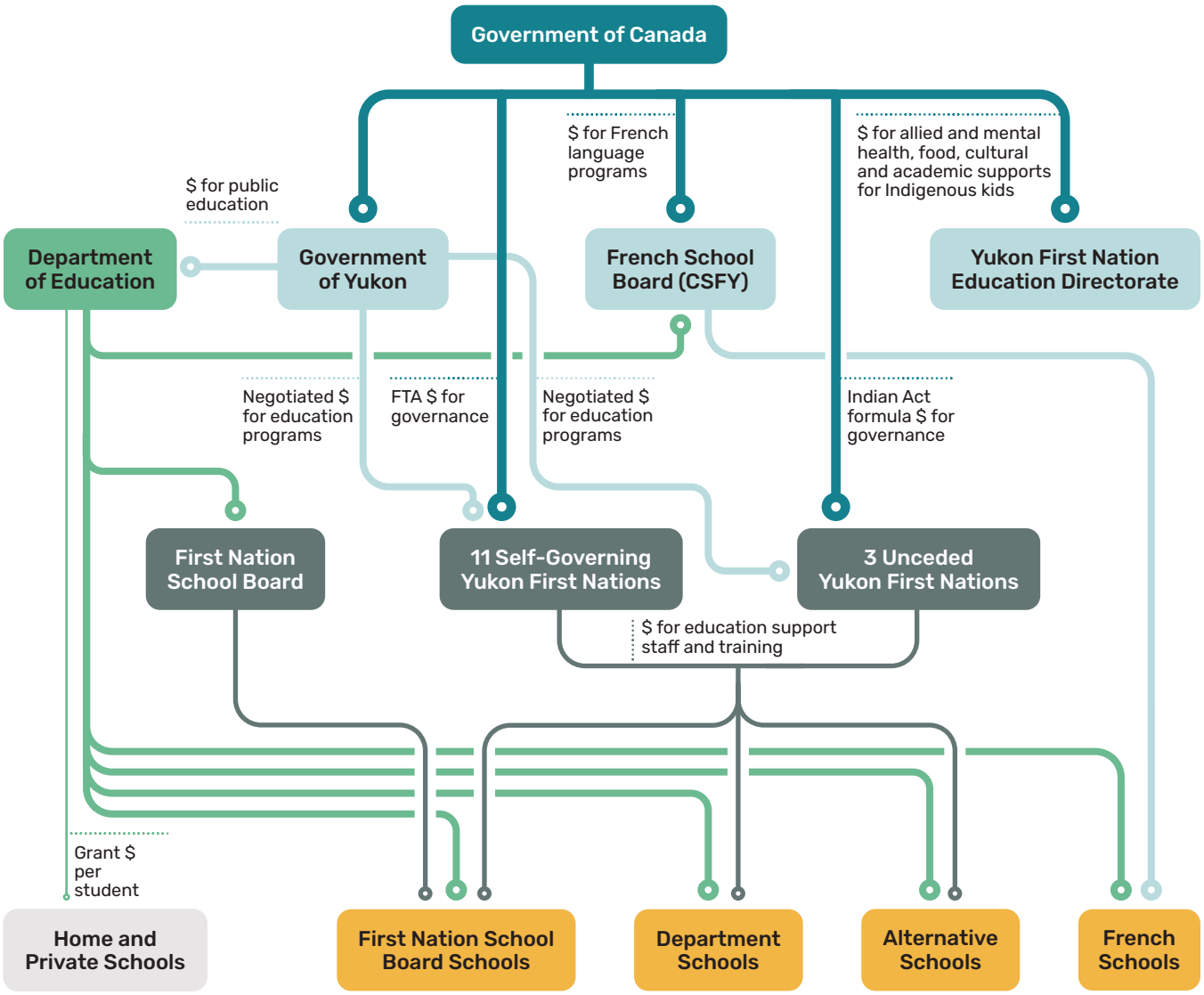
The Yukon government uses its education budget to fund public schools, including staffing, programming, and facilities. The majority of Yukon's overall education budget for public schools includes federal funding specific to Indigenous students. Despite generations of requests from Yukon First Nations leaders, neither Yukon nor Canada has ever shared this dollar amount with Yukon First Nations and remains unknown.

Yukon First Nations also receive education funding from both Canada and the Yukon to offer education-related programming for their citizens—for education departments, cultural programming and services for school-age children, and funding for students to upgrade high school courses to meet post-secondary requirements.

A portion of First Nations' education funding pays for specialized school-based staff who provide direct support to First Nation students. These include Community Education Liaison Coordinators (CELCs), Education Support Workers (ESWs), Education Support Coordinators (ESCs), and First Nation Education Advocates (FNEAs). These roles help ensure that First Nation students feel supported, culturally connected, and positioned for success in school. Not all Yukon First Nations have enough funding to support these positions.

In addition, families who choose to homeschool their children or enrol them in private schools are eligible for government refunds. These refunds help offset the cost of withdrawing children from government-run schools, but are not of high value.

Financial ecosystem of K-12 education in the Yukon



Yukon First Nation Education Ecosystem

A network of organizations, committees, and initiatives work together to enhance educational outcomes for Indigenous learners in Yukon, with a shared goal of closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These groups provide culturally responsive, student-centred services and wraparound support, ensuring that Indigenous students have equitable opportunities to succeed.

Key contributors include the Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE), the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN), the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED), and the First Nation School Board (FNSB), along with education departments and community committees. Government agencies, non-profits, and advocacy organizations also play a vital role by offering expertise in areas such as language preservation, special education, youth development, and family services.

By aligning efforts and resources, these organizations create an inclusive and nurturing educational environment where Indigenous students can thrive academically, culturally, and socially.

SETTING THE STAGE: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT OUTCOMES

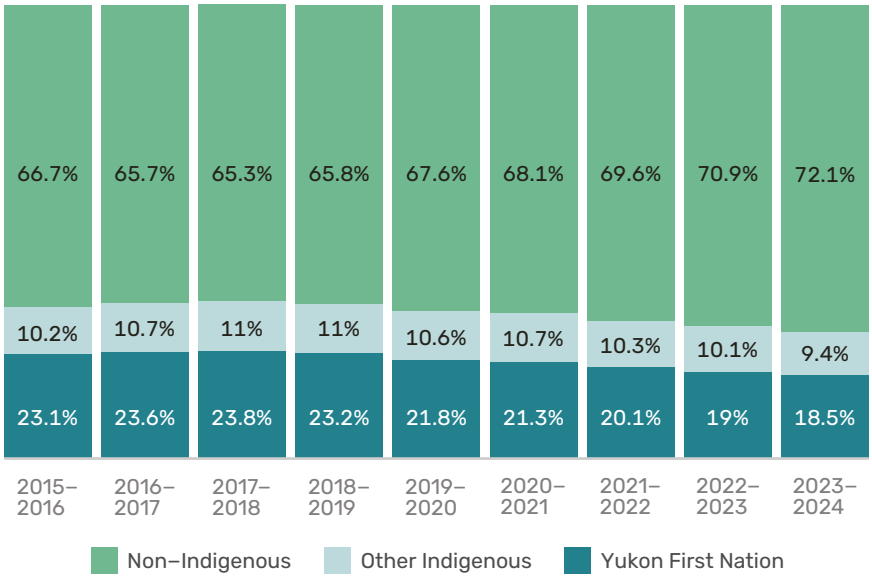
Yukon Student Demographics

The Yukon education system is becoming increasingly diverse, and Yukon First Nations students have long made up a significant portion of the enrolment. However, data from 2015 to 2024 shows some changes in these numbers. Information from the Government of Yukon's Aspen database shows that Non-Indigenous students are still the majority, but the percentage of both Yukon First Nations and Other Indigenous students has gone down.

In 2015–2016, Yukon First Nation students made up 23.1 per cent of the student body, Other Indigenous students were 10.2 per cent, and Non-Indigenous students were 66.7 per cent. By 2023–2024, Yukon First Nation students dropped to 18.5 per cent, Other Indigenous students to 9.4 per cent, and Non-Indigenous students increased to 72.1 per cent **(Figure 1)**. These changes reflect broader population trends in the territory, with more people moving to urban areas. Between 2016 and 2021, Yukon's population grew by 12.1 per cent.

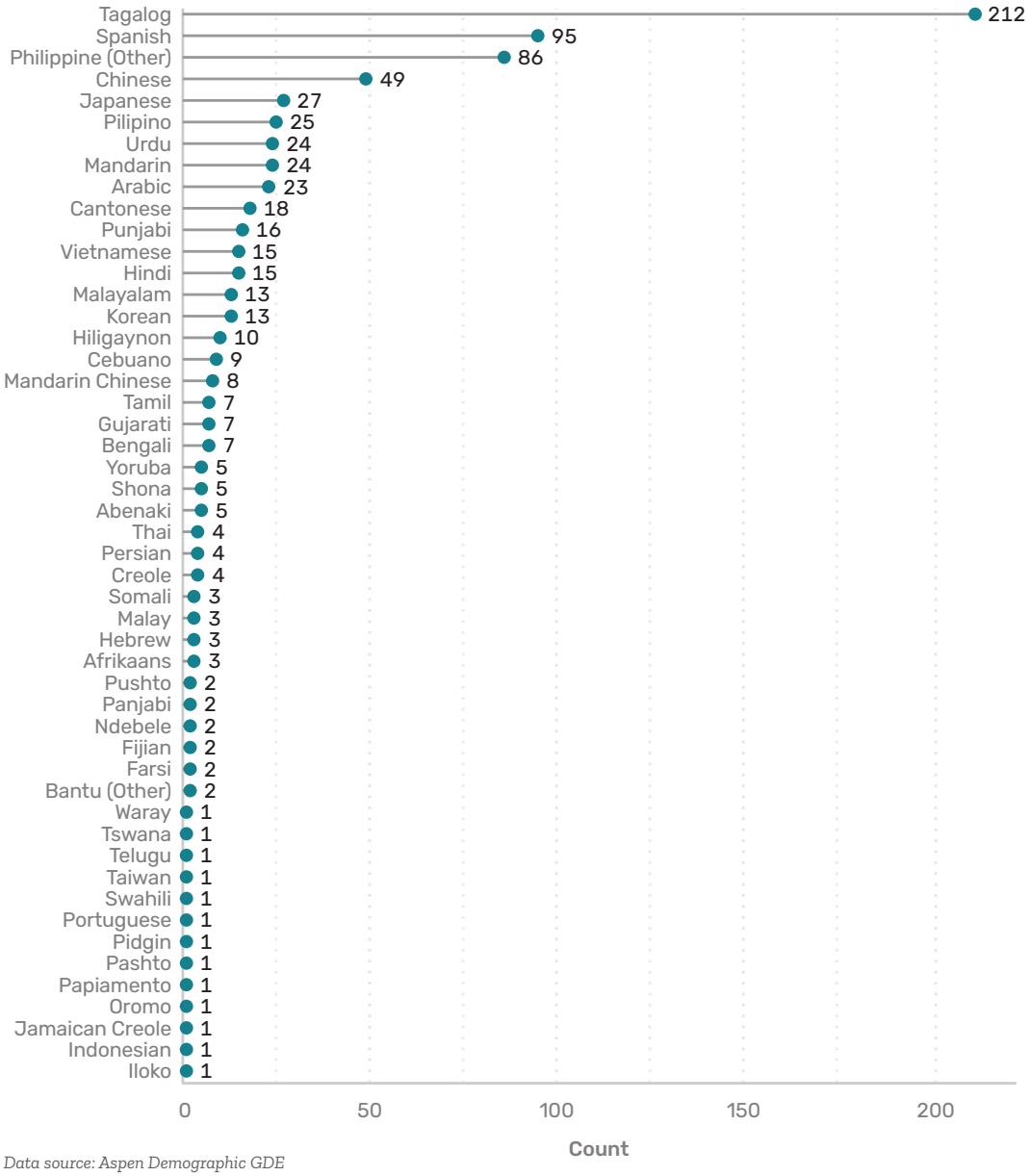
Along with the population growth, there is also more diversity in the languages spoken by students in Yukon. Data from Aspen shows that while the majority of students speak English (11,840) or French (534) at home, there is a growing number of other primary languages being spoken in homes across the Yukon **(Figure 2)**.

FIGURE 1 · Student demographics



Self Identification of student population over the years
Source: Aspen Course Selections GDE
n = 52764

FIGURE 2 · Selected home languages of Yukon students



Data source: Aspen Demographic GDE
Number of students speaking English at home – 11840
Number of students speaking French at home – 534
Number of students without a recorded home language – 1548

The list of languages shows how diverse the Yukon student population is. Tagalog is the most common (212 students), followed by Spanish (95 students), Philippine (Other) (86 students), and Chinese (49 students). Other languages spoken by students include Japanese, Pilipino, Arabic, Mandarin, Urdu, Punjabi, Vietnamese, Hindi, Korean, and Tamil. This shows that more people from different cultures are moving to Yukon. These language trends reflect bigger changes in the population, as immigration (both within Canada and globally) continues to shift the demographics of the Yukon, especially in Whitehorse.

For schools, this increased diversity in languages means there will be challenges, but also opportunities to improve educational outcomes. The Yukon education system needs to be flexible and inclusive to meet the needs of all students. By welcoming and supporting students from different cultures and backgrounds, the education system can help ensure everyone has a fair chance to succeed.

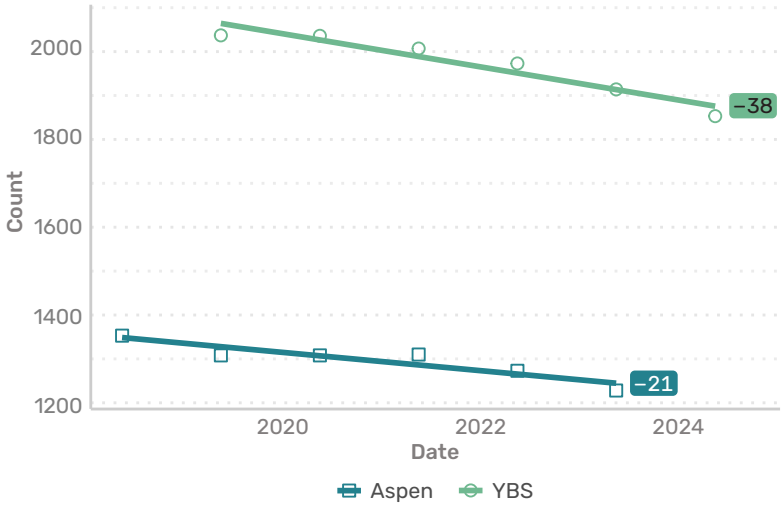
Yukon Bureau of Statistics (YBS)

Throughout the review, families shared the struggles they face when deciding whether to identify their child as Indigenous. Many believe their child would have a better chance and be treated more fairly in Whitehorse schools if they weren't identified as Indigenous.

This concern is backed by the data. According to census data from the Yukon Bureau of Statistics (YBS), there have been about 2,200 Indigenous school-aged children in the Yukon over the last 10 years. However, only about 1,800 Indigenous students are officially registered or enrolled in school, based on data from the Government of Yukon's Aspen and How Are We Doing (HAWD) reports. Over the past 10 years, families of 400 students have chosen not to identify their child as Indigenous. This decision reflects an 18.18 per cent gap, suggesting that many families are withholding their child's Indigenous identity, likely as a protective measure in response to concerns about bias or discrimination in the educational system **(Figure 3)**.

The data supports the stories shared by families, who worry about the accuracy of enrolment numbers and the need to hide their child's Indigenous identity. By not identifying their child as Indigenous, families hope to protect them from potential bias, discrimination, and unfair treatment in the education system. This pattern reflects systemic racism, where families believe that acknowledging their child's Indigenous heritage could lead to negative consequences, such as fewer opportunities or unfair treatment in the classroom. The choice to hide a child's identity highlights the ongoing barriers Indigenous students face in the school system.

FIGURE 3 · Comparison of the school-aged Indigenous population aged 4-15



Source: Yukon Bureau of Statistics custom data table, Population Report, Q2 2024 and ASPEN Demographic GDE

Yukon Bureau of Statistics (YBS) data are estimates while ASPEN data are counts

Slope labels are in count per year

Similar line slopes shows Indigenous students in school are changing at roughly the same rate as the population

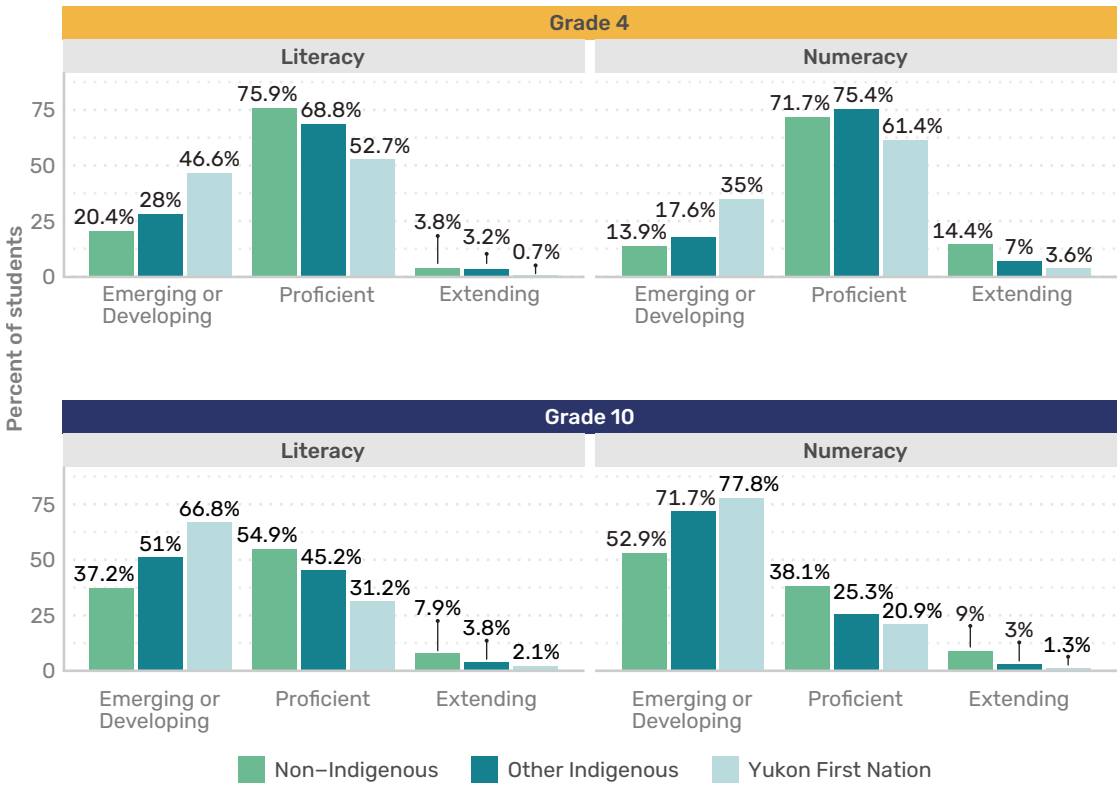
There is a persistent discrepancy between ASPEN and YBS data that may be related to self-identification

INDIGENOUS CULTURE IS NOT A MONOLITH. EDUCATORS NEED TO DO THEIR HOMEWORK AND LEARN THE HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF WHAT IS LOCAL AND RELEVANT FOR DIFFERENT STUDENTS AND DIFFERENT PLACES.

Student Outcome Gap

Analysis of standardized test results in Grade 4 and Grade 10 literacy and numeracy shows a significant and persistent gap between Yukon First Nation, Other Indigenous, and Non-Indigenous students (Figure 4). Proficiency levels are measured in three categories: Emerging or Developing, Proficient, and Extending. Students in the Emerging or Developing category are still building their skills and have not yet met grade-level expectations. Those who are Proficient meet the expected standards, while Extending refers to students who exceed those standards and demonstrate advanced skills.

FIGURE 4 · Proficiency levels in grade 4 and grade 10



Includes only students that wrote assessments in grades 4 and 10
Number of unique students for Literacy: YFN – 292; OI – 157; NI –1040
Number of unique students for Numeracy: YFN – 276; OI – 142; NI –1011
Date range: 2008-2009 to 2023-2024

"You could see that in all the schools they would always support the non-Indigenous students, but not the Indigenous ones. You know, what about us, how come we don't get that? But you see, the teacher, that one that was helping me, ignored what they were supposed to do and did what they wanted to. And they seen me struggling so they helped me. And that's what I tell the schools now, I say, 'You know, support can go a long way! It makes a big difference'."

Elder

This gap is concerning because literacy and numeracy skills are the foundation for academic success within the current system. The data shows that Yukon First Nations students face more challenges in reaching proficiency compared to their Other Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peers. More Yukon First Nations students remain in the Emerging or Developing category, and fewer achieve advanced levels of learning. As they progress to higher grades, their progress often slows down or even declines, suggesting that the supports they are getting may not be what they need to help them succeed.

Literacy results from the Grade 4 standardized test shows that Yukon First Nations students face greater challenges in developing literacy skills, with 46.6 per cent in the "emerging or developing" category compared to 28 per cent of Other Indigenous students and 20.4 per cent of Non-Indigenous students. While 52.7 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are proficient in literacy, this is much lower than Other Indigenous students (68.8 per cent) and Non-Indigenous students (75.9 per cent). Only 0.7 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are exceeding proficiency, compared to 3.2 per cent of Other Indigenous and 3.8 per cent of Non-Indigenous students.

Grade 4 numeracy test results show that Yukon First Nations students also have a higher percentage in the "emerging or developing" stage (35 per cent) compared to Other Indigenous (17.6 per cent) and Non-Indigenous (13.9 per cent) students. About 61.4 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are proficient, but this is still lower than Other Indigenous students (75.4 per cent) and Non-Indigenous students (71.7 per cent). Only 3.6 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are extending their numeracy skills, compared to 7 per cent of Other Indigenous and 14.4 per cent of Non-Indigenous students.

Grade 10 literacy results show that the gap between Yukon First Nations students and their peers gets even bigger over time—66.8 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are still at the "emerging or developing" level, compared to 51 per cent of Other Indigenous students and 37.2 per cent of Non-Indigenous students. Only 31.2 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are proficient in literacy, while Other Indigenous students are at 45.2 per cent and Non-Indigenous students at 54.9 per cent. Just 2.1 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are extending their skills, compared to 3.8 per cent of Other Indigenous and 7.9 per cent of Non-Indigenous students.

The gap is even wider in Grade 10 numeracy. About 77.8 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are still "emerging or developing," compared to 71.7 per cent of Other Indigenous students and 52.9 per cent of Non-Indigenous students. Only 20.9 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are proficient, which is lower than Other Indigenous students (25.3 per cent) and Non-Indigenous students (38.1 per cent). Just 1.3 per cent of Yukon First Nations students are extending their skills, while 3 per cent of Other Indigenous and 9 per cent of Non-Indigenous students are doing so.

> "Think of all those kids who walk in that door on the first day of Kindergarten, excited and it's the best day of their lives. By the time those kids walk out at the end of that year, half of them will have lost that excitement. They will have received messages, quiet messages, that they're not the ones who are meant to be there."
>
> **First Nation education worker**

Overall, Yukon First Nations students are making progress, but their results are still much lower than those of Other Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students. The fact that very few Yukon First Nations students are reaching the "extending" level shows they are missing out on chances to go beyond basic skills.

The achievement gap between Yukon First Nations, Other Indigenous, and Non-Indigenous students shows that there are deeper problems that need to be fixed. Even though some Yukon First Nations students are making progress, many are still falling behind, especially as they move into higher grades. Problems such as inadequate supports, not having enough culturally relevant learning, and unfair systems are all making it harder for them to succeed.

This gap doesn't just affect how well students do now—it also affects their future opportunities. Students who don't reach proficiency are less likely to be ready for college, jobs, or other opportunities later in life. If nothing changes, these gaps will keep causing problems for future generations.

To close the gaps, schools need to offer programs that meet the needs of each student and work with Yukon First Nations communities to create better learning opportunities. Without real change, the disparities will keep growing, and Yukon First Nations students will continue to be left behind.

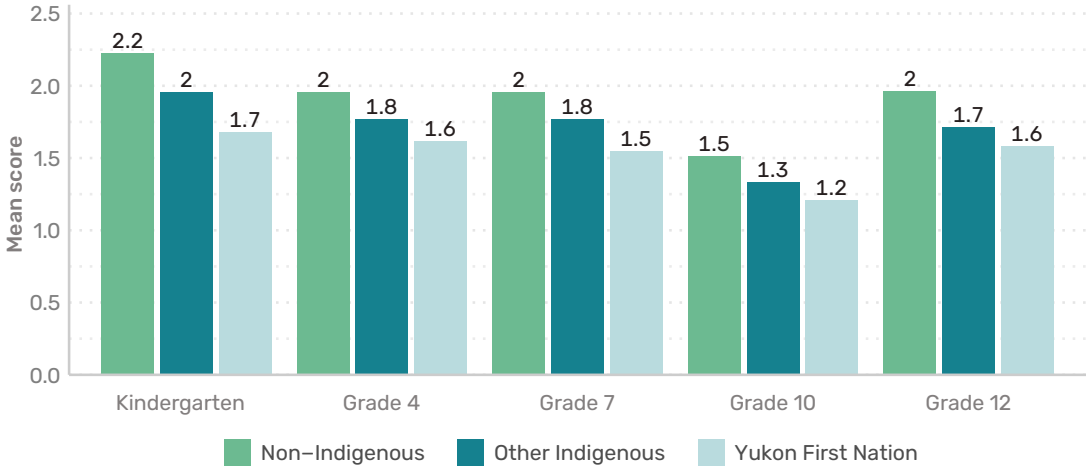
The broader implications of this gap point to a critical need for early intervention.

Early Gaps, Lasting Impact

Achievement Trends reveals that Indigenous students tend to start and finish their academic journey with lower achievement levels. Standardized test results from grades 4 to 10 show that about 80 per cent of students either remain at the same level or see a decline in proficiency as they advance through the grades **(Figure 5)**. This trend is concerning, as it suggests that the fundamental challenges students face may not be properly addressed during the early years of education for Indigenous students. Research highlights the need for comprehensive, culturally specific early learning programs designed for Indigenous families.

To better support Indigenous students in their early years, further research is needed to identify existing gaps. Once these gaps are understood, comprehensive wraparound services should be developed to support Indigenous students, parents, and families, ensuring they have the resources and opportunities needed to succeed.

FIGURE 5 · Proficiency levels on standardized tests



Assessment outcomes mapped to a 3-point scale: 3 - Exceeding; 2 - Proficient; 1 - Developing, Emerging or Not proficient
Kindergarten assessment: Boehm
Grades 4 and 7 assessments: FSA Reading, FSA Writing, FSA Literacy, FSA Numeracy
Grade 10 assessments: Graduation Literacy, Graduation Numeracy
Grade 12 assessment: Graduation Literacy
In grade order, the Yukon First Nation student counts are: 552, 859, 902, 535, 158
In grade order, the Other Indigenous student counts are: 270, 507, 478, 279, 97
In grade order, the Non-Indigenous student counts are: 2139, 3100, 2919, 2021, 751
Date range: 2015-2016 to 2023-2024

Graduation Rates

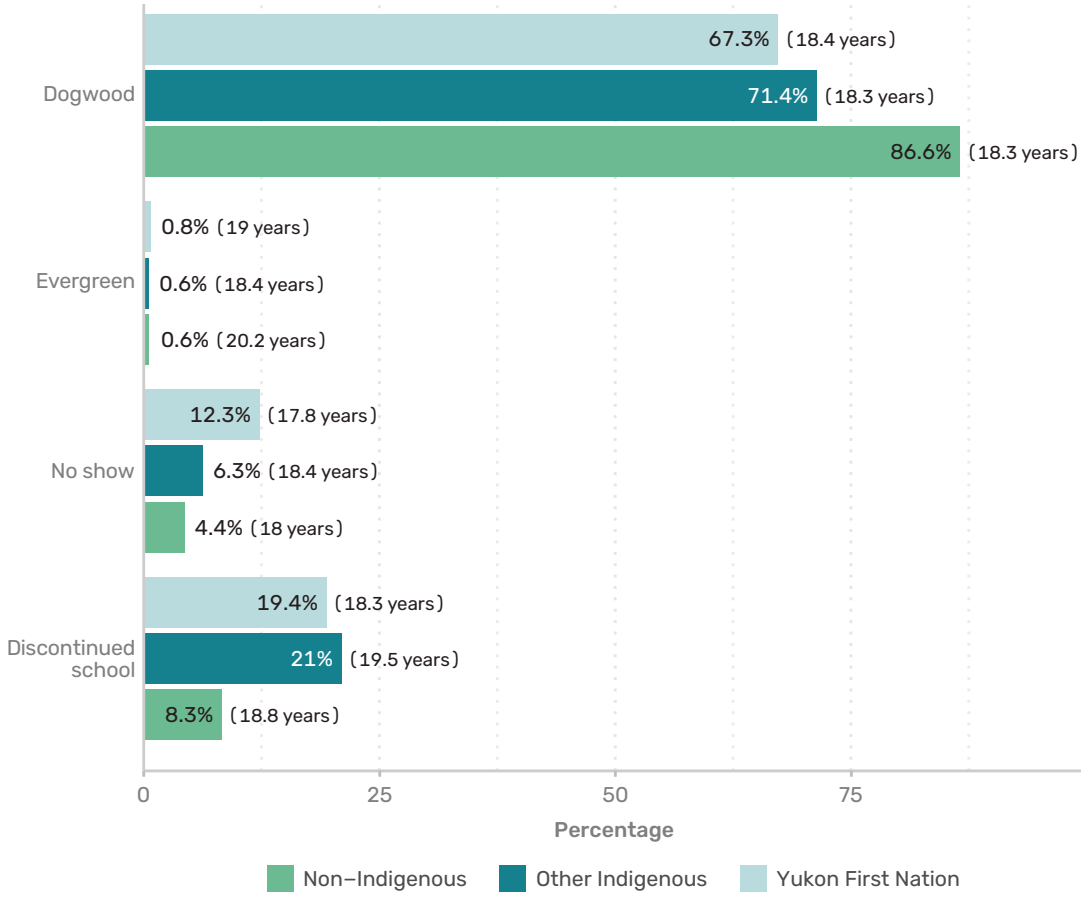
Graduation and dropout rates in the Yukon show significant disparities among demographic groups, exposing systemic inequities within the education system—a concerning reality in a region where nearly 25 per cent of the population is First Nations **(Figure 6)**. The majority of students who graduate earn a Dogwood Diploma, but the rates vary significantly: 86.6 per cent of Non-Indigenous students graduate with a Dogwood, compared to 71.4 per cent of Other Indigenous students and only 67.3 per cent of Yukon First Nations students.

A Dogwood Diploma is needed for post-secondary education, so Indigenous students, especially those from Yukon First Nations, are less likely to finish high school with the qualifications to continue their education. The lower graduation rates for Other Indigenous and Yukon First Nations students show that they face more challenges than Non-Indigenous students.

In contrast, less than 1 per cent of students in each demographic leave secondary school with an Evergreen Diploma—a credential for students in adapted education programs that do not meet the Dogwood standards. The rates are nearly identical across groups: 0.6 per cent for Non-Indigenous and Other Indigenous students, and 0.8 per cent for Yukon First Nations students.

While the low percentage of Evergreen Diplomas may seem promising, it doesn't change the fact that a significant proportion of Indigenous students are not earning the standard diploma, limiting their future opportunities and their transition to post-secondary education.

FIGURE 6 · Reasons for leaving school with median ages



Data source: Aspen Admission and Withdrawal GDEs
Student counts: NI – 2128; OI – 315; YFN – 732
Time frame: 2015-2016 to 2023-2024
Percentages based on the number of students in the data set for the specified time frame
Numbers in brackets show median age in years
Analysis does not consider all reasons for leaving school that are listed in Aspen

Urban vs Rural

Further breakdown by urban and rural settings reveals even starker contrasts. In urban areas, Non-Indigenous students have the highest graduation rates, with 87.1 per cent earning a Dogwood Diploma **(Figure 7)**. Graduation rates in urban areas for Other Indigenous students is 72.4 per cent, while Yukon First Nations students have the lowest rate in urban areas at 68.6 per cent—though still above their rural counterparts. The data shows that Evergreen graduation rates are minimal, with Yukon First Nations students in urban areas at 1.1 per cent, slightly higher than their Non-Indigenous and Other Indigenous peers at 0.6 per cent and 0.4 per cent, respectively.

Graduation rates for Indigenous students in rural areas drop significantly. Non-Indigenous students in rural areas have a Dogwood graduation rate of 81 per cent, a noticeable decrease from urban areas. Other Indigenous students in rural areas graduate with a Dogwood Diploma at 62.5 per cent, and Yukon First Nations students graduate at 65.4 per cent. In rural areas there is an increase in Evergreen Diplomas, with Other Indigenous students at 3.1 per cent. The data shows that rural Indigenous students face even greater challenges in earning a Dogwood Diploma compared to their urban peers, likely due to limited access to educational resources and support.

These disparities highlight that urban areas provide better educational outcomes for all groups, likely due to greater access to resources, specialized support, and more stable educational environments. Rural areas, however, lack these resources, which disproportionately affects Indigenous students. The higher rates of Evergreen Diplomas in rural areas further suggests that these students face greater academic challenges and may not be receiving the necessary support to meet the Dogwood standards.

"My son has lost his will to try because of the school system. He's given up. He used to love being on the land, had a lot of knowledge and skills from his grandpa, but he's lost his will."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse schools

Student Dropout: Trends, Disparities, and Systemic Barriers

Dropout rates in the Yukon make the challenges Indigenous students face even clearer. Indigenous students, especially Yukon First Nations, leave school at much higher rates than Non-Indigenous students **(Figure 6)**.

Because of poorly captured and incomplete data, it is unclear which students have dropped out of school or moved out of territory. For this analysis, we've chosen to consider all students who are identified as "discontinued school," "no show," or "unknown" in Aspen as dropouts. This approach provides a consistent, though somewhat conservative or inaccurate, estimation of dropout rates. While it's not perfect, it helps to ensure that the analysis reflects a broad range of students who may have faced barriers to completing their education and address the incomplete data, providing a more comprehensive view of student disengagement in the Yukon.

Overall, the data shows the dropout rate in the Yukon is 12.7 per cent for Non-Indigenous students, 27.3 per cent for Other Indigenous students, and 31.7 per cent for Yukon First Nations students. These groups are over-represented in withdrawals compared to their population sizes.

The higher dropout rates among Indigenous students show the urgent need for targeted support to address the unique challenges they face. Without these interventions, the gap in education between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students will likely grow, limiting future opportunities for Indigenous youth.

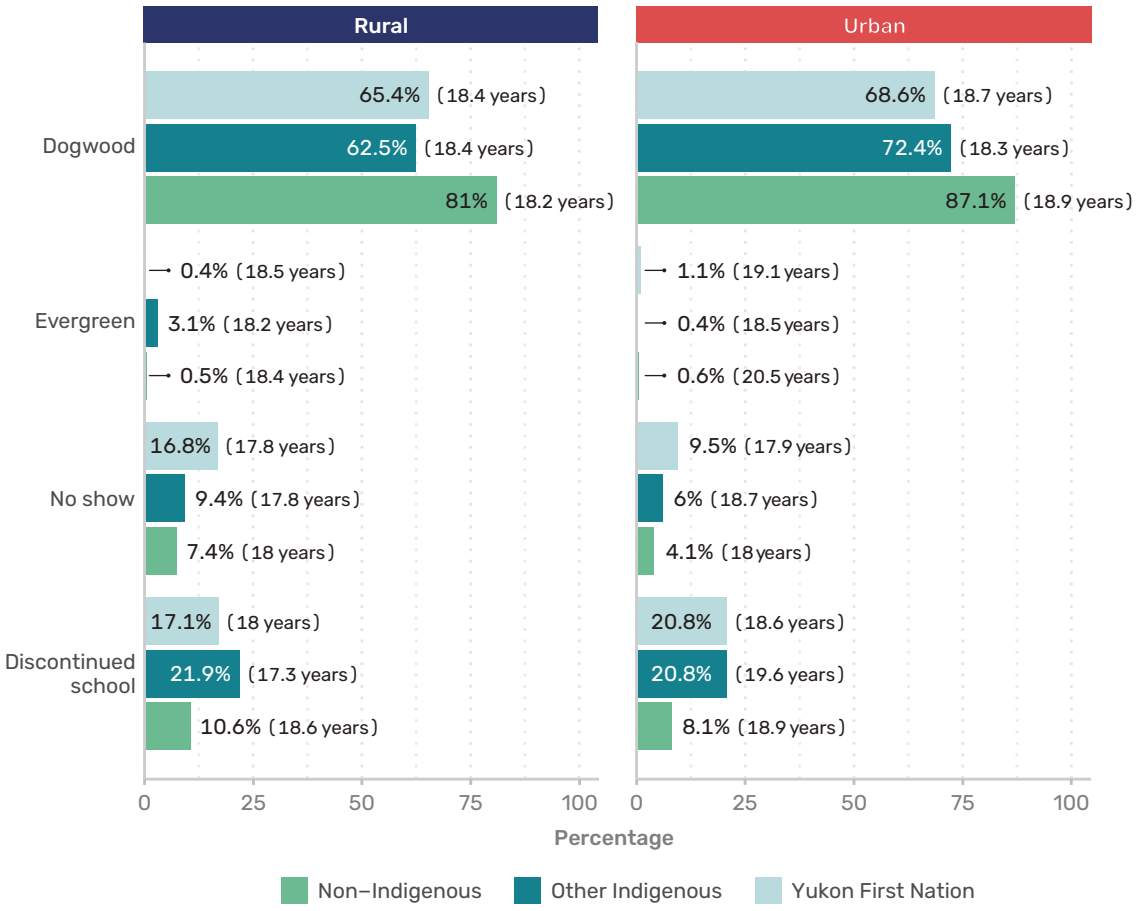
Urban vs Rural

Dropout rates in the Yukon show big differences between Non-Indigenous and Indigenous students, and these gaps are even wider in rural areas **(Figure 7)**.

In urban areas, 12.2 per cent of Non-Indigenous students drop out, compared to 26.8 per cent of Other Indigenous students and 30.3 per cent of Yukon First Nations students. The situation is worse in rural areas, where 18 per cent of Non-Indigenous students drop out, but the rates increase to 31.3 per cent for Other Indigenous students and 33.9 per cent for Yukon First Nations students.

These numbers show that Indigenous students face more challenges in completing school, with the highest dropout rates among Yukon First Nations students in rural areas. Rural students seem to have fewer resources and support, which makes it harder for them to stay in school. Even though dropout rates are lower in urban areas, Indigenous students there still experience higher rates than their Non-Indigenous peers. In urban areas, Other Indigenous students drop out at about 2.2 times the rate of Non-Indigenous students, while Yukon First Nations students drop out at about 2.5 times the rate.

FIGURE 7 · Reasons for leaving school with median ages



Data source: Aspen Admission and Withdrawal GDEs
Student counts: NI – 2128; OI – 315; YFN – 732
Time frame: 2015-2016 to 2023-2024
Percentages based on the number of students in the data set for the specified time frame
Numbers in brackets show median age in years
Analysis does not consider all reasons for leaving school that are listed in Aspen

This highlights the need for better support systems, culturally relevant programs, and more Indigenous representation in education. Without these changes, Indigenous students will continue to face challenges that prevent them from succeeding in school.

An Incomplete Picture

Inaccurate and incomplete data makes it difficult to understand the full scope of student disengagement, particularly for Indigenous students. Without reliable data, systemic issues may be underestimated, and effective solutions may be delayed or misdirected. Addressing data gaps and ensuring accurate tracking of student outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups, is essential for developing targeted interventions.

The significant disparity between dropout rates for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students suggests that Indigenous students, especially those from Yukon First Nations, face barriers that push them out of the education system. However, having an incomplete understanding of the true dropout rate prevents the education system from addressing the root causes effectively. Improving tracking mechanisms and distinguishing between different types of school leavers could provide more nuanced insights into dropout patterns and help create more targeted responses to these issues.

The high rate of "no show" students among Indigenous groups, 6.3 per cent Other Indigenous and 12.3 per cent Yukon First Nations, suggests that many students disengage from school before officially dropping out **(Figure 6)**. This indicates that Indigenous students may experience alienation or disengagement early in their educational journey, signalling the need for early intervention to keep them connected to school.

In order to close the dropout gap, the education system must address systemic racism and better understand the contributing factors of disengagement for Indigenous students.

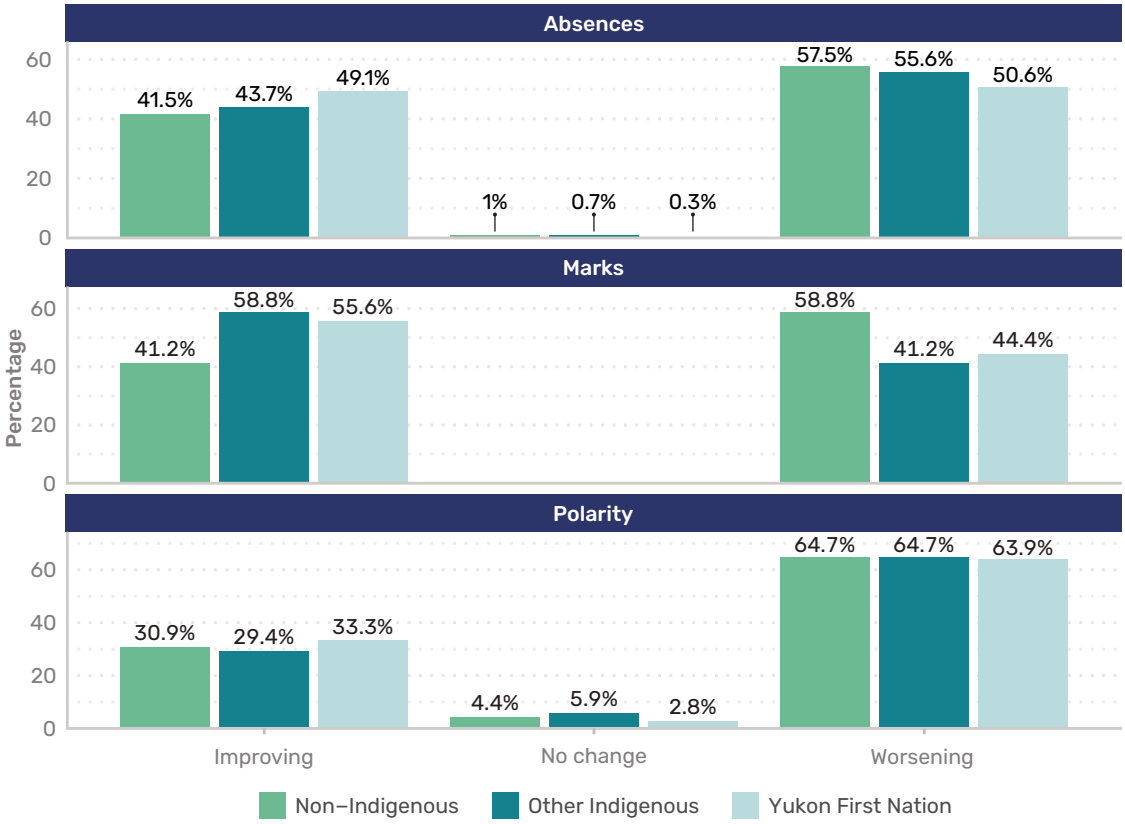
Before Students Drop out

While it's not always clear why students leave Yukon schools, data leading up to their departure highlights some key trends and disparities **(Figure 8)**.

The data shows that Non-Indigenous and Other Indigenous students have an increase in absences before they leave school. Non-Indigenous students have the highest rate of worsening absences at 57.5 per cent, followed by Other Indigenous students at 55.6 per cent. Yukon First Nations students, while still struggling with attendance, show a slightly better trend, with 50.6 per cent having worsening absences. On a positive note, improvements in attendance can be seen across all groups, particularly for Yukon First Nations students at 49.1 per cent, although the overall data remains concerning.

These trends suggest that absenteeism could be an early indicator leading to school withdrawal, especially for Non-Indigenous and Other Indigenous students. By closely monitoring attendance and providing targeted support, schools can help keep students engaged and motivated before they leave.

FIGURE 8 · Pre-withdrawal trends before the first withdrawal from school



Data source: Aspen Admission and Withdrawal GDEs
School years considered: 2015-2016 to 2023-2024
Percentages based on total numbers in each self-identification group
Reasons for withdrawal considered: Discontinued school, No show, Reason unknown
Improving absences means fewer absences; Worsening absences means more absences
Withdrawal counts – NI: 500; OI: 151; YFN: 342
Withdrawal ratio – NI : YFN : OI = 1 : 0.684 : 0.302
Student ratio – NI : YFN : OI = 1 : 0.321 : 0.149
YFN and OI students are over-represented in withdrawals

In terms of grades, Indigenous students (both Yukon First Nations and Other Indigenous) are performing better than Non-Indigenous students before withdrawing. Other Indigenous students have the highest percentage of improvement in marks at 58.8 per cent, followed by Yukon First Nations students at 55.6 per cent. In contrast, only 41.2 per cent of Non-Indigenous students are showing improvement. This suggests that Indigenous students may not be dropping out due to academic struggles, but rather due to other life pressures or stresses.

The data shows that Non-Indigenous students not only have the lowest improvement in marks but also the highest percentage of worsening marks at 58.8 per cent, indicating they are struggling the most and may be at risk of withdrawal. Among students whose marks are worsening, Non-Indigenous students make up the largest group at 58.8 per cent, followed by Yukon First Nations students at 44.4 per cent, and Other Indigenous students at 41.2 per cent. This suggests that Non-Indigenous students face significant academic challenges, which could lead to disengagement and eventual withdrawal if not addressed. Yukon First Nations and Other Indigenous students are doing better academically, meaning they may benefit from additional support, community resources, or wraparound services to help with outside life factors affecting their education.

METHODOLOGY

This review employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect a diversity of stories, experiences, and data from a wide range of Yukoners. The education system has impacted so many people at various points of their lives, for better or for worse, and the respondent demographic bore this out. While the overall review spanned from October 2023 to April 2025, the data collection phase itself ran from March 2024 to December 2024. During this time, we heard from current and former students, Elders, parents/caretakers, family members, educators, community members, and people working in the education field.

Data collection included individual and group interviews, focus groups, sharing circles, facilitated town hall meetings, and engagement activities at public community events. We also conducted document and literature reviews to supplement primary data. Quantitative data was analyzed from the Department of Education (EDU), Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED), and Yukon Child and Youth Advocate Office (YCAO). We worked closely with EDU's Performance and Analytics team to analyze trends between 2014 and 2024. We reviewed records from Aspen (Yukon Student Database), Student Support Services, Education Finance and Administration Unit, Gadzoosdaa Student Residence, Our School Survey/Tell Them from Me surveys, and How Are We Doing? reports, as well as school handbooks, school and EDU policies, school councils minutes, administrative processes, Curriculum and Assessments processes, *Education Act* and Regulations, and internal documentations regarding EDU work plans and strategies.

We notified the Chiefs and executive directors of all 14 Yukon First Nations to inform them of the review and request their participation in the engagement process. We heard from citizens of all 14 Yukon First Nations, along with formal engagement with 8 Yukon First Nations. Formal engagement means that collaborative engagement activities took place. In these instances, we followed the guidance of the responding First Nation in order to determine the best approaches for hosting conversations on this sensitive topic. Local contractors were instrumental in helping to navigate community needs, set up engagements, and facilitate the individual conversations and sharing circles. Throughout the process we collaborated closely with YFNED to ensure the review was aligned with community perspectives and needs.

An online survey through Survey Monkey was made available for 10 months and served as a key tool for gathering quantitative and qualitative data. Information about the review more broadly was communicated by EDU to its employees. We also participated in public events including the Territorial Youth Summit, EDU Welcome Week, FNSB Education Camp, CYFN General Assembly, YAEP conference, two YFNED conferences, and community events across Yukon First Nations.

In total, we engaged with over 300 participants across all methods. Participants of in-person, phone, or video conversations who were speaking outside the scope of their professional role were offered gift cards and self-care resources, including smudge kits for Indigenous participants. Participants in the online survey had a chance to win a gift

card. Participants were informed they could withdraw from the interview process at any time, or skip survey questions they weren't comfortable answering. Throughout the process, we provided regular updates to the First Nations Education Commission (FNEC) and EDU, ensuring transparency and ongoing input from the community.

Quarterly updates were provided to FNEC in order to ensure alignment with their objectives for the review.

Tools used in the review include physical recorders and Sonix for transcription. Data analysis was done through Microsoft Excel, Acrobat Reader Pro, R, and natural language processors such as the sentiment lexicon Jockers, NRC, AFFIN, and Bing.

Review timeline

JUNE 2023

YFNED and YCAO begin discussions on review of systemic racism in education

OCTOBER 2023

YCAO receives formal request from FNEC to undertake the review

DECEMBER 15, 2023

Notification of systemic review to EDU

FEBRUARY 2024

Review launched at FNEC meeting

MARCH 2024

- Terms of Reference finalized
- Notification to Yukon First Nations Chiefs and Executive Directors about review
- Review launched at 5th annual YFNED conference

MARCH 2024 - DECEMBER 2024

Data collection through online survey, individual interviews, focus groups and sharing circles, public engagement at community events, facilitated town hall meetings

MARCH 2024 - FEBRUARY 2025

Quarterly updates to FNEC

MAY 2024
Records requested from EDU

AUGUST 2024
Access to EDU data

AUGUST 2024 - MARCH 2025
Data analysis

SEPTEMBER 2024 - JANUARY 2025
Monthly meetings with EDU for data and fact checking

DECEMBER 2024
Records request to Yukon Bureau of Statistics and access to data

FEBRUARY 2025
Interim findings: updates to FNEC, EDU, and the public during the 6th annual YFNED conference

MARCH 2025 - APRIL 2025
Review drafting, editing, and designing

MAY 2025
Tabling of the final report to the Legislative Assembly

FINDING 1: PHILOSOPHICAL

> "An education which provides our students all the tools they need to succeed has not only been our request, but our right. Successful students who are confident, culturally enriched and positive contributors to our communities and Canada are fundamental for the future success of Yukon First Nations people. Our future cultural, economic and social well-being is dependent upon each generation achieving their educational goals and needs. Currently, this is not happening."
>
> **Chief Ruth Massie, former CYFN Grand Chief to Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples in 2011**

The first theme from the review's findings is titled **Philosophical**, which is where we explore the worldview of an education system. An educational philosophy is integral to any education system because it is the foundation upon which everything else is built. It goes beyond classrooms, educators, and curriculum and gets to the heart of what that system believes education itself even is and how it should be approached. This worldview can vary dramatically depending on cultural values and beliefs.

In a Western colonial educational philosophy, the approach is decidedly top-down. Teachers, administrators, and the institution hold authority, while students are expected to absorb and follow instructions **(SEE FINDING 2: PEDAGOGICAL, PAGE 81)**. This framework reduces the child to their role as a learner or student—someone who is defined primarily by their academic performance and ability to conform to convention. In thisview, the child's emotional, social, and cultural needs are often overlooked in favour of meeting academic standards. Knowledge is seen as something that is given by the teacher expert, rather than something that emerges through the lived experiences and relationships of the child. As we have seen and heard in our conversations with current and former students and their families, students often feel unable to fully explore or express who they are outside of academic contexts. School then becomes a place where they don't feel welcomed to be themselves. Education in this sense, becomes less about developing well-rounded individuals and more about shaping students to fit into a particular mold.

What happens when the student does not fit the mold? According to a colonial philosophy, any behavioural deviation from the norm is seen as deviance, meriting punitive responses that are aimed more at protecting the status quo (and the students following it) than supporting the deviant student. Measures such as suspensions and exclusions emphasize compliance and control. What has happened at Jack Hulland Elementary is a prime example of this. Punitive disciplinary measures create environments where students are in fear—of punishment from the school, of ridicule and social exclusion from their peers, and of making mistakes. It is not a coincidence that an education system operating from a fear-based approach to maintaining discipline feels unwelcoming, especially for students who are already experiencing other forms of exclusion and isolation in their personal lives.

In contrast, Indigenous ways and models of education emphasize relationship, process, experiential learning, and the holistic development of the student, or "making a human being" (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder as cited in Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2014, p.11). Students who are educated in such a way evolve in and through identity and culture, developing into valued and contributing members of their communities. Young people in Yukon schools should be able to access education in ways that challenge and grow them academically, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Further, they have the right to do this learning in spaces that are safe and affirming of their unique identities, cultures, and personhood (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989, art. 14, 23, 28, 29, 30). This runs in direct contrast to the prescriptive and narrow colonial learning environments present in most Yukon public schools,

> "You know, a lot of teachers never addressed that the kids were coming to school with no food. You know, not realizing it, that families are poor. If the kids were tired and hungry, they just tell them, "Go lay down in the corner," "Go to sleep," that's what they would tell them. Yeah, it was pretty horrible. Elders were always saying we need to find out why, what the problem is. Now we know what the problem is. It's not the students' fault, it's the system failing them."
>
> **Elder**

which an EDU senior level administrator, within the last two years, described as a place where kids should come to learn academically, not to have their social and psychological needs met.

These sorts of attitudes are not only outdated, but deeply harmful. They absolve the school system of its responsibility to consider the whole child, and further, ignore the present reality that the school environment is often one of the very places where students are experiencing social and psychological harm. Imagine the wonderful potential if students are empowered to feel a part of their school communities in ways that acknowledge them for their full selves—not only their strengths, talents, and aptitudes, but also their struggles, their fears, their "bad days," and their challenges. Would these kinds of supportive spaces lead to safer and more effective learning environments?

Ultimately, the key distinction between these two worldviews lies in how the child is seen and treated within the educational context. A colonial educational philosophy reduces the child to a set of classroom expectations and behavioural norms, while an Indigenous philosophy emphasizes personal growth and collective responsibility. A decolonized approach to education offers a worldview of learning that is not just about academic success, but about nurturing well-rounded, connected, and empowered individuals who are capable of contributing meaningfully to their communities.

Below, we will highlight three core findings in the Philosophical section:

1. Top-Down Hierarchical Approach
2. Punitive and Excluding Culture
3. Siloing

We will finish with practical strategies for shifting the philosophical approach to education towards one that is more in line with Indigenous values and ways of knowing, learning, and teaching, as informed by our conversations with students, educators, Elders, First Nations education workers, and community members. There will also be reflection questions for readers to consider.

"You can make change without them [EDU] realizing you're making changes. The disconnect is so wide. Two currents [EDU and schools] running in different directions."

White educator, Whitehorse school

"I have no idea what the mission, vision or purpose of EDU is because they are producing nothing, other than responding to crises of frontline schools. No one has a sense of urgency for anything. In high school, it's only a 4-year window to reach the students, but EDU's philosophy is 'It's ok, we have tomorrow, enough time to assess.' The disconnect between EDU and the ground is huge and real."

White educator, Whitehorse school

Top-Down Hierarchical Approach

School Administration and Accountability

The structure and process of decision-making within the Yukon education system is convoluted and frankly, not working. In theory, the *Education Act* gives school councils and school boards flexibility to tailor their policies to the specific cultural, social, and academic needs of their communities and students. In practice, however, a lack of oversight and direction from EDU has led to massive gaps in accountability and schools feeling unsupported. A decentralized approach still requires guidance and collaboration, and frequently, schools shared that they feel like they've been left to fend for themselves.

An example of this is with School Growth Plans (SGP). Every Yukon school is required to develop an SGP which outlines their intentions to engage the community and identify ways to improve outcomes for students. Plans are reviewed by an Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM), approved by school councils, and funding is allocated to schools based on what's requested in a plan. An oversight process consisting of an external review team that conducts evaluations of SGP progress and provides recommendations for improvements was discontinued in 2016 due to funding cuts. These teams were an essential component of the system and without them, there is little to no oversight of how schools are progressing toward their goals, leaving administrators without the support and guidance they need to make meaningful changes. This contributes to a sense of isolation among school leaders, who often feel as though they are working in a vacuum without adequate support or resources.

Compounding this issue is the lack of an effective system for tracking the efficacy of various school initiatives. When asked about policies, protocols, and guidelines for tracking the effectiveness of measures related to student attendance or disciplinary actions, the response from the EDU was telling: no such tracking exists. This lack of accountability is a significant concern, especially when it comes to addressing systemic racism, which can and does manifest in disciplinary actions and attendance policies. Currently, EDU has no way of evaluating whether any of its schools' approaches are contributing to positive change or perpetuating inequalities.

The disconnect between the EDU and schools has grown exponentially since 2012, when the department shifted its role from one of support to one of central management. This shift has resulted in school administrators shouldering much of the responsibility for meeting departmental mandates. Many administrators report feeling unsupported by EDU, and this isolation often leads to decision-making that is reactive rather than proactive.

Systemic racism is perpetuated in this reactivity. When school administrators are left to navigate complex and compounding challenges on their own without adequate guidance or support, the status quo remains unchallenged. In many cases, the prevailing culture

"Every kid of colour lives a Hannah Montana lifestyle where you end up being this segmented version of yourself. For students of colour, it absolutely affects their education. You're focused more on just surviving that education."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

"When kids approach you with issues and you don't respond, that sends a huge message to that kid that they aren't safe culturally in your class or school, and they'll take that lesson with them and think that way about the world."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

of schools, rooted in colonial worldviews and Western educational philosophies, remains unchanged. Students from marginalized communities are left to cope with a system that fails to recognize and respond to their unique needs.

Culpability here does not lie with any particular individual (though it is important to note that individuals can drive change, as some educators and administrators have demonstrated). Rather, EDU needs to proactively and creatively solve its issues, rather than merely respond with the same measures that perpetuate the same inequities. This requires collective buy-in, and subsequent guidance and resourcing, towards accountability measures that are supported and implemented consistently.

School Culture

School culture plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of students and staff alike. This culture is often determined by the school leadership—administrators and team leaders—and as such, can change according to the arrival or departure of these key individuals. Consistent experiences about specific schools shared with us both prior to and during the 2014-2024 period demonstrate this phenomenon clearly.

In some instances, school cultures were positive—there were concerted efforts to create inclusive environments where students felt encouraged to express their identities and engage with their own cultures in meaningful ways. These schools prioritized caring and compassionate relationships, collaborative and authentic partnership with the parents, families, and communities of their students, and intentional efforts to honour and respect Indigenous protocols at every level of school management and service delivery. Examples of this include building smoke shacks and fire pits, having signs in Yukon First Nations languages, hosting events like land-based camps and hand games tournaments, or having school announcements and greetings in Yukon First Nations languages.

Example: *Several schools in Whitehorse have changed their bell to say "Come in" in Southern Tutchone.*

While inclusion of cultural elements is an important first step, it absolutely must be done with intention, guidance from knowledge keepers, and respect and longevity/sustainability in mind. Simply offering these pieces without careful consideration of how they fit into the larger context—as more than just add-ons—reduces Indigenous and other non-Western elements to token representations of culture. It's been shared that, in some instances, schools have exoticized and tokenized First Nations cultural programming, with lip service paid to the importance of inclusion and reconciliation without meaningful changes to actual integration within the school environment.

This extends to the physical layout of the school building itself. In multiple schools, First Nations Language or Cultural spaces are located in non-evident areas, including but not limited to: the end of a hallway

> "They brought in some people to host a hand games tournament in the gym. It was pretty sick to have that environment in the school. I really wanted to go to the tournament and play or just watch but my teacher said if I did, I would miss a really important lesson. He said I could go if I wanted to but that I might fall behind in class. I ended up staying for the lesson but I shouldn't have to choose between my culture and doing well at school."
>
> **Indigenous student, rural and Whitehorse schools**

near a low-traffic area, a closet, a prefab extension, a space shared with multiple external professionals, a corner of the indoor playground, or in areas that don't make sense for the intended usage. In most cases, the designated areas are decided without consultation with the appropriate First Nation, or even the students.

Example: *The new firepit for sacred fires and ceremony at F.H. Collins is located at the back of the school property, close to what one Elder described as "a wind tunnel." He said First Nations cultural workers were not asked where an appropriate location for the firepit would be.*

Example: *Robert Service School in Dawson City hosts a full team of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation Education staff in its building. These workers, whose roles range from Education Advocates to Support Workers to Education Manager, have offices in central locations throughout the school, including a Cultural Room in the high school where students can go to hang out.*

Other schools were described as having cultures rooted in rigidity of expectations coupled with punitive disciplinary measures **(SEE PUNITIVE AND EXCLUDING CULTURE, PAGE 67)**. Relying on suspensions or dismissals as responses to student behavioural challenges is not aligned with an Indigenous educational worldview that allows room for mistakes and sees them as learning opportunities. Schools with rigid cultures have shown a propensity to brand students, especially Indigenous students, as unable to succeed within the mainstream system. Multiple people shared situations and examples where Indigenous students were told to stay home and/or off of school grounds, and eventually encouraged to leave the school and enrol in Aurora Virtual School (AVS) or the Individual Learning Centre (ILC). These alternative programs, along with the Department of Health and Social Services' Youth Achievement Centre (YAC), are increasingly being used as easy outlets for schools to get rid of students they no longer want to deal with: *"The Youth Achievement Centre has become the dumping ground for Yukon Education. It's a place where issues that are not addressed at school, the kids somehow get dropped off at the Youth Achievement Centre and like, they're supposed to be continuing with their education … You might care about the kids and want to see them succeed but the environment is so [expletive]. Why would the kids want to come and try hard, you know?"* **- First Nation education worker.**

One of the consequences of this rigid school culture is the explicit promotion of the idea that going to school is a favour made to the student. Access to education through school is a right, not a favour. Students and their families do not owe gratitude for being "allowed" to attend school, nor are they required to comply with unilateral and unfair decisions regarding their status and future in education. The expectation that students and families will fit the expectations of a school, rather than working together to find collaborative solutions that work for all parties, is a clear example of a colonial educational philosophy that positions the school as infallible and the ultimate authority. This approach fails to recognize the broader context in which students are struggling, such as personal or family issues, mental health challenges, or substance abuse. It also does little to address the underlying issues of inequality and discrimination that may contribute to students' difficulties.

"I mean, I'm pretty loud and I spoke out all the time in class. Never got in trouble, but my First Nations classmates always did."

White alumni, rural and Whitehorse schools

"These kids coming from KDFN, they don't stand a chance [at PCSS]. The stigma is too much … tons of kids say they don't wanna have anything to do with [PCSS] because of how racist it is."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse schools

BIPOC STUDENTS COME TO SCHOOLS WHERE THEIR CULTURES ARE NOT REFLECTED. HOW CAN SCHOOLS PROMOTE AND ENGAGE WITH THE THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO THEIR STUDENTS?

A more restorative, trauma-informed approach, which focuses on understanding and addressing the root causes of student behaviour, is clearly needed.

Punitive and Excluding Culture

Punitive Approaches

A consequence of a colonial educational worldview is that punitive responses to disciplinary issues become the norm. This normalization is rooted in the philosophical belief that within a school environment, students and educators play distinctive, prescribed roles. Any student that deviates from this norm is categorized as deviant and needs to be either realigned to the norm, or removed from the system completely. This includes preemptively designating certain students as potentially deviant and therefore more likely to misbehave, warranting increased scrutiny and surveillance. Many of these beliefs that might cause educators and administrators to monitor some students more closely than others are a result of implicit biases and prejudice against Indigenous and other racialized students. The prevalence of surveillance of non-White people is not a new phenomenon; it exists at every institution and age, from law enforcement all the way to early childhood education. A study conducted by Yale University revealed that preschool teachers were more likely to focus their attention on Black students than White students when expecting challenging behaviour. The investigation concluded that implicit racial bias plays a significant role in shaping how educators interact with students, and this can have broader impacts on educational outcomes for students of colour (Gilliam et al., 2016, p.15).

The same seems to hold true in the Yukon. Indigenous students report frequently feeling targeted in school. We have heard many stories of students being singled out by teachers and staff, followed when walking around the school, constantly called to the office or sent to the office, or just told to sit quietly without work or an activity to do.

They have also been required to sit in the hallway or been physically dragged to "confinement spaces" or "isolation spaces" where they were restrained (Hong, 2021, 2022, 2024). Indigenous students also report not being listened to, believed, given a chance to explain themselves, or have a voice regarding what they could do to repair harm if they were at fault. As a result, these students felt unwelcome at school and even pushed out, and some expressed not being supported to work through challenges they were experiencing in regards to the situation that led them to being disciplined in the first place. The Department of Education (EDU) has said that tracking of the efficacy of disciplinary measures used in its schools does not exist, despite commitments to evaluation and accountability (Yukon Department of Education, 2015). This raises the important question of whether the measures applied are truly serving students or are instead reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and marginalization.

"It kind of got to the point in like grade 9 and 10 where I just realized that this is what my life in school was like, where I would go to the office all the time and I would always be in trouble. And teachers didn't like me, and the principal didn't like me because I was a pain in the ass and blah, blah, blah. So, then I would start coming late because I didn't really care and I didn't want to do my work. And then it just made me feel like really, really discouraged."

Indigenous student, rural school

Data consistently shows that Indigenous students are disproportionately represented in recorded incidents in Aspen, EDU's student and school management system. Additionally, the consequences applied to these incidents are not consistent across the board. For instance, while more non-Indigenous students may have bullying or harassment incidents recorded, Indigenous students are suspended more frequently for these same incidents. Similarly, while the number of fighting/aggression incidents are relatively similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students are suspended or dismissed more often. In some cases, consequences are only recorded for Indigenous students, and some consequence types only exist for Indigenous students. Regarding suspensions overall, in-school suspensions are mainly applied to non-Indigenous students while out-of-school suspensions are applied to Indigenous students, meaning they have fewer opportunities to remain connected to the school environment.

Moreover, Indigenous students are more likely to have their families contacted following an incident at school—in stark contrast to their non-Indigenous peers (81 per cent for Indigenous students versus 19 per cent for non-Indigenous students.) This results in a higher rate of negative interactions between the school and Indigenous families, which has already been frequently discussed as a point of contention **(SEE FINDING 3: RELATIONAL, PAGE 95)**. This disproportionately high level of communication between schools and Indigenous families can reinforce the perception that Indigenous students have more behavioural issues, even when their actions may not warrant such a response.

Another critical issue is the lack of restorative practices in place of punitive measures. For all students, but particularly for Indigenous students, suspensions remain the most common forms of discipline, with very few instances of restorative practices being implemented. Restorative practices are designed to allow students to reflect on their actions, repair harm, and reintegrate into the school community in a positive way. Their absence in favour of punitive measures highlights a failure to adopt disciplinary approaches, informed by Indigenous philosophies on justice and collectivism, that could address the root causes of behaviour while fostering a supportive school environment.

The current punitive disciplinary approach is not working, and the amount of repeat offences for ongoing behavioural issues bears that out. Many Workplace Risk Assessments (WRAs) and Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRAs) are attached to repeat students. The assessments in both cases are supposed to evaluate the patterns, respond to the risk or threats being made, and support strategies to address them. If this were effective, the majority of students with WRAs wouldn't have more than one occurrence on their file. We can infer that whatever intervention was in place did not support positive change. Consider that JHES was applying hold-and-restraint measures as an approved intervention when a student was seen as problematic. If disciplinary measures were truly having the desired impact, we would see decreasing repeat numbers over the course of 10 years. In fact, it is the opposite.

"I was taught not to tell people I was First Nations if you could get away with it, because then you were going to get put into different classes … I had multiple teachers put me in the dumb classes … because I was from a community and I was First Nation. So we never had a choice about what classes to do. It was just like, oh, you're from a community. … I was never offered any advanced like physics, chemistry, biology. I was automatically put into applications math."

Indigenous alumni, Whitehorse and rural schools

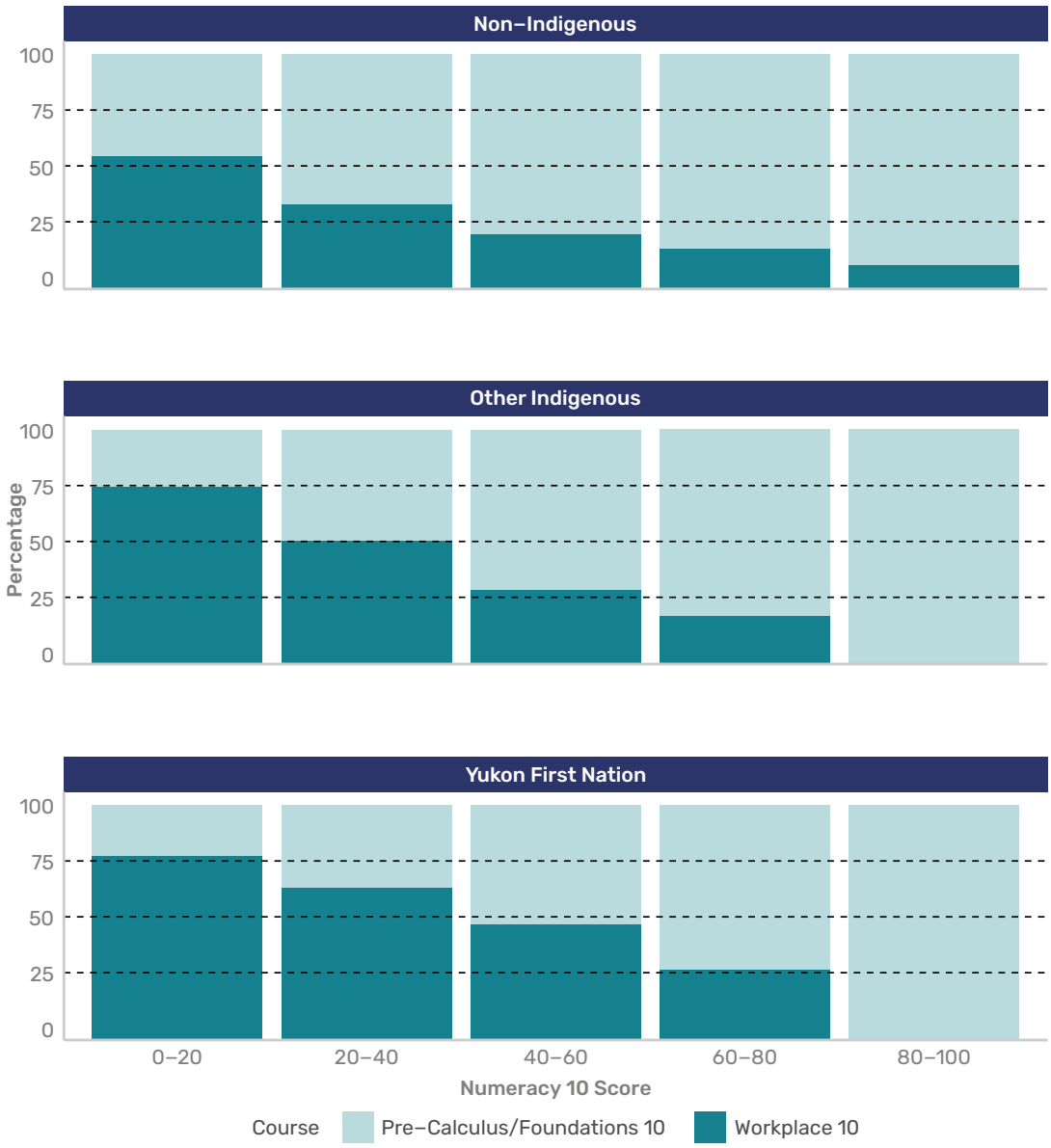
Streams of Exclusion in Schools

Exclusionary practices within the school system can contribute significantly to feelings of isolation and marginalization, especially for Indigenous students. Navigating course selection and program offerings in the Yukon, especially at the secondary school level, is complex and layered, with various streams and multiple options nested within different streams. Exclusion can happen relative to what "stream" students find themselves in—the main academic program, specialized arts, sports, or experiential programs, remedial or "least restrictive" programs. Given the explicit differences between what programs and resources are offered at urban schools versus rural community schools, we assert that the primary two streams are urban and rural.

The main academic program is the dominant educational pathway in which most students, particularly those who align with the expected academic and social standards, are enrolled. These students generally meet the expected levels of literacy and numeracy, and their academic success is measured through standardized assessments. Within the main academic program, there is an unofficial hierarchy once students reach high school. English 8 and 9, Math 8 and 9, and Science 8 and 9 have both mainstream offerings, or Fundamentals offerings for students with a lower level in literacy or numeracy. Math 10 splits into two options: Precalculus and Foundations, which both allow for post-secondary enrolment, and Workplace Math which will require future upgrading for post-secondary.

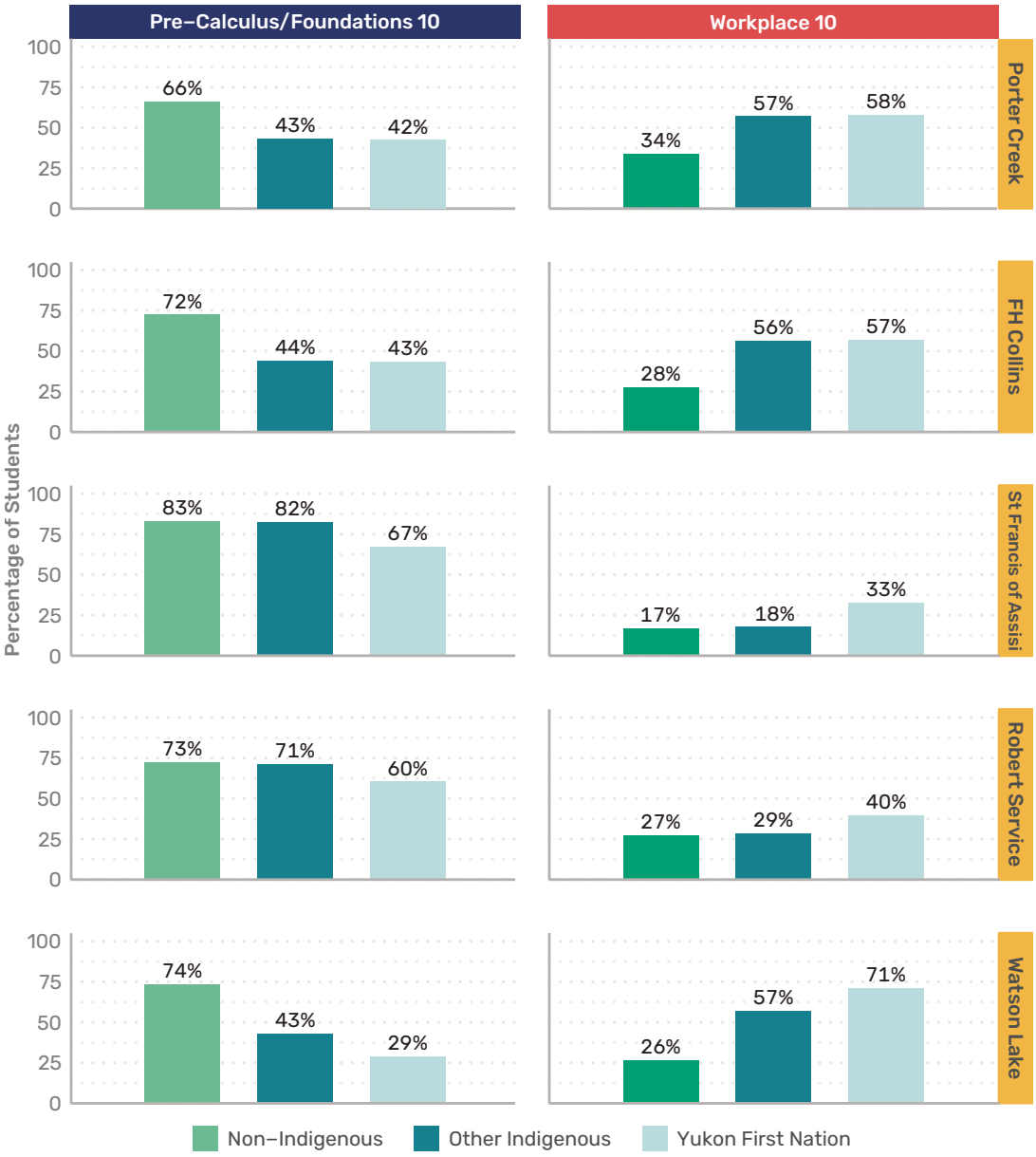
Indigenous enrolment is consistently higher in English 8 and 9 Fundamentals and Workplace Math 10, even after adjusting for individual Numeracy and Literacy assessment scores **(Figure 9)**. This indicates that Indigenous students are either streamed more frequently into lower level academic courses despite there being no scores to support this decision, or there are major gaps in supporting Indigenous students as they transition to secondary school. These early streaming decisions will inform the courses students enrol in as they go through high school **(Figures 10 & 11)**.

FIGURE 9 · Percentage of students in first-time Math 10 course by Numeracy 10 score



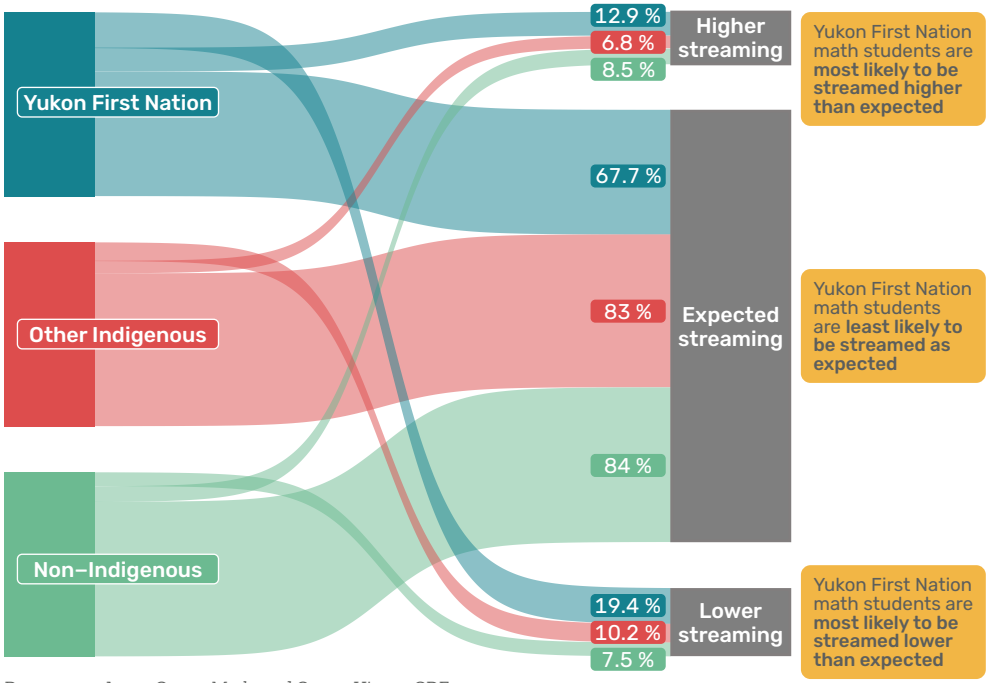
First-time Math 10 Enrollment in courses based on Numeracy 10 score and self-identification
Source: Aspen Course Selections GDE and Raw Numeracy 10 Scores
n = 3612 Students

FIGURE 10 · Per cent enrollment by course, school, and self-identification



Enrollment in each Math 10 Course. Percent of each self-identification group at each school.
Source: Aspen Course Selections GDE
n = 3560

FIGURE 11 · Streaming in grades 10, 11, and 12 mathematics courses



Data source: Aspen Course Marks and Course History GDEs
Dates range from 2001-01-25 to 2024-06-30 with majority between 2010-2011 to 2013-2014 and 2018-2019 to 2022-2023
Number of unique students: 2141 - YFN: 342 - OI: 162 - NI: 1637
Levels considered: Workplace, Foundations/Pre-calculus, Foundations, and Pre-calculus

> "… the smoke pit at [high school] … you know, like there's so many people, there would be rednecks there. There will be gay people there. There'll be Indigenous people there. There'll be everybody from different backgrounds. And I think that's kind of, I mean, it's great, but that's kind of sad that in a school full of 800 kids, the only place where it's actually collaborative and you feel comfortable is the smoke pit."
>
> **Racialized student, Whitehorse school**

Beyond the main academic program, there are multiple specialized programs offered in Yukon Education. Of particular note for this review are the experiential programs at Wood Street Centre **(SEE FINDING 4: OPERATIONAL, PAGE 126)** and inclusive education programs at various schools. The latter includes HOPE and A.B.E.L. at Porter Creek Secondary, FLEX and the Multiple Needs Program at F.H. Collins Secondary, and Room 1 at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Secondary (SFA, formerly Vanier) and formerly Riverfront under SFA. In rural high schools, these programs look like individual accommodations or individual learning centres, with students working on different academic content from the rest of their cohort, or through online courses. At the elementary level, an equivalent is the PASS Program (formerly Grove Street School) at Jack Hulland Elementary. The programs listed above are for students who struggle in mainstream academic programs and have multiple learning considerations. The students are deemed as not fitting the behavioural, physical, intellectual, and/or social-emotional standard, or are designated as "street smart" by some school staff. The programs are extremely flexible, with no official attendance tracking or report cards. Academic credits are only provided if the student is enrolled in a mainstream academic course. Otherwise, the emphasis of the programs is on life skills. There are specific entrance criteria to be enrolled in these programs and a process to exit it. Most of the students in these programs have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and are enrolled in the Evergreen Graduation Program, also called the School Completion Certificate Program, instead of the Dogwood Graduation Program.

Two things are important to note here: the first, having an IEP does not preclude a student from graduating with a Dogwood. Secondly, and more importantly in this circumstance, the Evergreen Certificate is not an official graduation credential, but rather *"represents the completion of personal learning goals"* for students who achieve it (Yukon Government, 2025). The question remains: who is responsible for establishing the "personal learning goals" for and with students, and are they letting students know if they are not on track to graduation?

This academic segregation creates a school hierarchy, where the mainstream program is seen as the standard and students in the specialized programs are often perceived as less capable or even less deserving of academic success. Indigenous students, in particular, are relegated to these programs, which are sometimes viewed by both students and teachers as "trash classes" or "dumb classes." They report not being taught in these programs but instead given worksheets or other low-level tasks that do not challenge them academically. Students enrolled in these programs often feel like they do not belong in the school community. From there, self-excluding, or skipping class, is a natural byproduct.

Example: *Some educators and administrators have changed the schedules of specialized programs so students can't be on break together, the rationale being that there will be distraction to arrive late. On the contrary, these students just stop going to school altogether. When they already feel excluded from the broader school community, being separated from their friends removes the primary motivation to attend in the first place.*

> "The FLEX program is a joke to me. It has nothing to do with the teacher … it's the system … They get funneled into [this program] which is really not meant for the [student] who's just struggling to adapt. They feel humiliated because they're paired with other kids who have true disabilities and so they don't want to do work. They don't want to show pride in themselves, which is totally normal. Then that reinforces their so-called learning disability, which is really nonexistent in the first place."
>
> **First Nation education worker**

This self-exclusion is a direct response to the school culture that tells Indigenous students, both implicitly and explicitly, that they do not belong. They internalize the message that their academic and cultural differences are not valued or supported within the mainstream system. This not only damages their self-esteem but also limits their opportunities for success, as they are not given the tools or support they need to thrive academically. The lack of meaningful engagement with Indigenous culture and history in the classroom, coupled with the overrepresentation of Indigenous students in lower academic streams, perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and marginalization.

Where some of the streaming often begins is a matter of geography—students beginning their school journeys in the communities. Many rural students, particularly Indigenous students, report that they are ill-prepared for the move to Whitehorse and that even those with excellent marks in rural schools sometimes are barely able to pass in Whitehorse or outside.

This disconnect is exacerbated by the lack of resources and support in rural schools, which are often described by students, families, and educational professionals as being "50 years behind" urban schools. In these schools, teachers, often over capacity in their roles and under resourced by EDU, deliver lessons through videos or online quizzes, which was noted by many students who shared they weren't taught in rural schools. Rural schools also face significant operational challenges, such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and a lack of access to extracurricular activities. These issues disproportionately affect Indigenous students, who make up the majority of the student population in rural areas. The absence of a fair and responsive system to address these challenges means that rural students are denied the same education as their urban counterparts, leading to many rural students, with our without their families, relocating to Whitehorse to seek these opportunities.

"We're not pausing and asking ourselves, what is truly going on with these kids? Why are they struggling? … In order to be successful in school, you need stable housing. A lot of these kids don't have that. You need nutrition. And then you need to take care of the human being, you need to be connected, too."

First Nation education worker

SUPPORTING STUDENT WELLBEING GOES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM… ENRICHING MINDS AND STOMACHS!

Siloing

Seeing and Responding to the Whole Child

As previously discussed, education through a colonial worldview positions the child within the context of their school as a student. While this is obviously their primary role in the learning environment, the child should not cease to be a human being, with needs and rights, as soon as they enter a school building at 8:30, only to have their humanity resume only when the bell rings at the end of the day. While perhaps a dramatic hypothetical scenario, this is unfortunately how a colonial education system views the student's role—to be a vessel into which knowledge is transmitted within the confines of a rigid academic structure. The rhythm of a school day, scheduling of a school year, and pacing of lessons per the curriculum move with expectations that are frequently disconnected from students' reality. The implicit message is if they can't keep up, get off the train. Students' life events can create a situation where they end up compiling delays in their learning to the point of being led to an Adult Graduation Program—bare minimum in academics and a challenging pathway to post-secondary without upgrading.

Of course, we know the student has other needs. An Indigenous educational philosophy sees the student as a whole person, requiring enrichment and care not only academically but also physically, social-emotionally, and psychologically. This perspective acknowledges that students come from diverse backgrounds, and their life experiences and cultural contexts must be taken into account for education to be meaningful and effective. For many Indigenous students and students of colour in the Yukon, this approach is more than just an ideal, it is a necessity.

A colonial system of any kind is built around dominant understandings of normativity, the nuclear family, and what constitutes a functional society (Pace-Crosschild in Rosen & Twamley, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2021). This is no exception in its approach to education. Schooling structures, from operating times and vacation schedules down to registration and safety guidelines, are designed to center the middle-class child from a well-regulated (heterosexual) two-parent home, with various supports available including but not limited to accessible childcare, household incomes well above the poverty-line, and availability of food, technology, transportation means and extracurricular activities. This standard reflects the archetype of the student that is celebrated in colonial educational settings: precocious and social, respectful, predictably participatory, and most importantly, with all other needs met so they can show up in the classroom "ready to learn." Unfortunately, this is simply not the reality for many Yukon students.

In the Yukon, it is not uncommon for students to experience grief more than three times a year due to the loss of a loved one (Braeuner, 2021). The concept of family has to go beyond the Eurocentric nuclear family ideal made up of a home with children and two parents (Tam et al., 2016). Yukon First Nations clans and moieties systems form a tight web of close relationships across the territory and beyond. This means that when

> "The kid isn't actually here to do math, that's the side product. They're coming so we can help them with housing first, then to eat a meal. Then we can look at math."
>
> **Elder and educator**

> ""We tell them we're a relationship school first–we can't teach you until we have a relationship with you; grade 8 and 9 should just be relationship building if you want to keep them at a usual high school."
>
> **White educator, Individual Learning Centre**

someone passes away, individuals and communities across the whole Yukon are impacted and often will be involved in the duties required for the potlatches and celebration of life ceremonies. This can look like days, if not weeks, away from work and school. In addition to the grieving process and cultural obligations, Indigenous students return to school curriculum and scheduling in a way akin to trying to jump on a fast-moving train. Often, they find it hard to catch up, and the feeling that mistakes will not be forgiven is an intimidating prospect.

One Model of Success

The Individual Learning Centre (ILC) for students aged 16-21 has been held up as an example of how education can look different and be more responsive to the needs of students. Its flexible and accommodating approach stands in stark contrast to the rigidity of the mainstream school system. Students are not bound by strict schedules or timelines; they can attend when it works for their lives, and staff emphasize relationships above all. Students say they see their educators continuously undergoing learning and training to better understand the students' realities, cultures, and challenges. Further, holistic needs are considered and wraparound supports are provided—there are hot meals, laundry machines, a free store, and places to nap or take a shower. The ILC has been able to recognize and respond to the fact that some students don't have the same stability and supports at home as those students for whom the mainstream education system appears to be designed.

As a result, Indigenous student enrolment at the ILC has steadily increased, representing more than half of the students who have attended the program in the past decade. Enrolment at the ILC increased from the low twenties to over sixty students between 2014 and 2019—and continued to grow in the years that followed, indicating a shift in how education is being perceived by students and their families. Numerous students shared about dropping out of their high school in grades 8 or 9 and waiting until their 16th birthday to register at the ILC. For many Indigenous students, this is the first time they have felt seen and valued within the education system. This relational connection can make a significant difference in a student's ability to pursue educational goals.

However, staff stress that the ILC is not, and should not be seen as, the ideal alternative for everyone and that instead of encouraging "at-risk" and "problem" students to transfer to the ILC (we heard multiple accounts of this specific to PCSS), every effort should be made to keep students at their respective high schools. The flexible nature of the program means students are often moving much slower towards an end goal of a Dogwood, Adult Grad, or Evergreen. Further, while the environment is touted for being a safe and responsive learning space, there is a loss of normalcy and camaraderie being separated from the mainstream system that can lead to students feeling further marginalized.

The broader trend of increasing enrolment in alternative educational programs like the ILC raises concerns about EDU's commitments to improving student outcomes and sense of belonging in schools. If

> "It's Whitehorse, the big city, and they don't have their family, they don't have their peers, they don't have their community with them. So, they have a hard time adapting … It's a big shock to the system. "

First Nation education worker

COMING TO WHITEHORSE FROM THE COMMUNITIES FOR SCHOOL CAN BE A BIG TRANSITION. MORE EMPATHY AND SUPPORT FROM SCHOOLS CAN MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE FOR STUDENTS WHO MIGHT BE STRUGGLING.

strategies are effective, then why is there such a steady increase in demand for alternative programs? If the education system is dedicated to reconciliation and decolonizing education, then why are Indigenous students disproportionately represented in these programs?

Rural-to-Urban Transitions

As highlighted earlier, many students from rural communities in the Yukon come to Whitehorse for high school, whether to participate in a specific program, complete a few semesters, or with the intention of finishing their schooling. While there are clear benefits to studying in Whitehorse, these students face a multitude of challenges that can hinder their success. The transition from a close-knit rural community to a larger urban environment presents significant adjustments, particularly when it comes to being away from their family and community support systems.

One of the primary challenges these students face is the emotional strain of living away from home. In rural communities, families often maintain close relationships, and the sense of belonging and support is crucial for young people. In Whitehorse, many students find themselves feeling severed from these connections, making the adjustment more difficult. Additionally, the larger, more impersonal nature of a Whitehorse high school with a student population that is sometimes bigger than their entire home community can feel overwhelming and lonely. Beyond the emotional adjustment, these students also face practical challenges. Adapting to a different and more independent lifestyle is tough—navigating transportation, managing personal finances, or dealing with the pace and scale of a larger city can be difficult for students who are used to a slower, more familiar rhythm in their rural communities.

One of the programs available for rural students is the Gadzoosdaa student dorms in Whitehorse, whose mission is "bringing together rural students to pursue educational opportunities" (Yukon Education, 2025). While the dorm is an important resource and provides a structured environment for many students, some students have shared that there are uncomfortable parallels with a live-in educational program where most students are First Nations: "We have come to [staff] at least five times in these past two years being like, 'We need more staff of colour. Not a bunch of White Christian people taking care of a bunch of Native kids" (Indigenous student, Gadzoosdaa resident sometime between 2014-2024*). This speaks to the importance of representation among staff who work in education spaces with students from diversity of backgrounds, as non-diverse teams tend to entrench narrow perspectives rather than challenge them (SEE FINDING 4: OPERATIONAL, PAGE 126). The very wording in the *Gadzoosdaa Student Residence 2024-2025 Student Handbook* indicates bias on the part of residence staff in preemptively communicating a low expectation of potential residents: "However, for some members of our GSR community this is a difficult

* Dates of residency not specified to protect student identity.

> "Kids are far away from home, they're far from parents' supervision … Who's watching out for the young person's well-being, making sure they come home to a safe place at night? … It doesn't have to be a parent, but it's gutting me. At the school level, it's a failure to recognize these parts of the puzzle are missing and then they're jumping right to, "Oh, this kid's failing his classes, he's failing because he's in the hallway and therefore, they make this decision to boot them out. I've seen a lot of [those decisions] at the Department of Education level."
>
> **Former YG education worker**

undertaking, and they will need clear understanding of what is expected from our dorm community and potential consequences of their actions" (*Gadzoosdaa Student Residence*, 2024, p.11). Looking through the accounts of Gadzoosdaa residents on their experiences, there is a mixed outlook on the dorms for a variety of different reasons, many of which are less relevant for the purposes of this review. However, students generally responded favourably regarding the majority of staff's efforts to be responsive to students' needs and cultural experiences.

Wraparound supports are critical for ensuring that students from the communities, whether living in the dorms or not, make a successful transition from the communities to Whitehorse—not only academically, but physically and social-emotionally as well. These supports must necessarily include strong relationships with trusted mentors and adults. Ensuring these students have access to culturally relevant resources and a strong network of support can help ease the transition and allow them to engage with education in more intentional and positive ways.

Calls to Action

1. Circularize the top-down hierarchy so students, educators, and First Nations have a voice in decisions made about them and for them.

   Example: The FNSB organizational chart models the rings of a tree, with Learners at the center and "all other entities radiating outward in wraparound rings of mutual support" (First Nation School Board, 2024). See Appendix C.

2. Commit to having every School Growth Plan include a section on its Anti-Racism policy that is aligned with EDU and contextually relevant with the local community.

3. Track efficacy of measures applied by schools and conduct regular and publicly available evaluations of School Growth Plans.

4. Create procedural guidelines (three step-process) for educators to deal with incidents of racism that occur on school grounds.

5. Establish a soft target on representation for Wood Street and meet them. Require the Wood Street team, in consultation with community leaders, to develop a comprehensive outreach plan that prioritizes Indigenous students and students of colour.

6. Make local, culturally relevant, and experiential education mandatory across all grade levels, with a focus on trades, hands-on technology, and ADST skill-building. Establish clear learning milestones from K-12 and align outcomes with local workforce needs.

7. Conduct a review of Early Childhood Education to better understand the gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students entering school.

8. Conduct a jurisdictional scan of other school districts that have effectively adopted a restorative justice approach to discipline.

   - Where disciplinary measures are addressed by schools, the student in question must be present and a part of that conversation. Every attempt should be made to include an advocate so the student feels adequately represented and supported.

Educator Reflection

- Why did I become an educator? Do I feel like my current job allows me to fulfill those values?
- Do I think the educator plays a role in creating anti-racist schools? Why or why not?
- Do I think students' culture or background is important in the classroom? Why or why not?
- Do I consider race and racial equity in my personal education philosophy? Why or why not?
    - If so, what are some actions I can take to incorporate these into the classroom?
    - If not, why do I think this would be important moving forward?
- What do I know about race, racism and anti-racism? What do I need to learn more about to be a better role model to my students and advocate against racism in my school?
- How can I reconsider the way I approach discipline in the classroom?
- What are the policies and practices of my school that enforce the status quo? How can I challenge or push back? How can I ensure that anti-racism is included in my school's School Growth Plan?

FINDING 2: PEDAGOGICAL

> "I would like to see students learn about the sacrifices required to be decolonial. I would teach kids about the uncomfortable and sacrificial parts of decolonization."
>
> **Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools**

The next finding in this review is categorized as **Pedagogical**. Pedagogy refers to the methods through which education is delivered. This doesn't necessarily have to look like a teaching-learning division. In fact, even believing education must follow a one-way process—where teachers impart knowledge and students passively receive it—is itself a reflection of the intrinsic connection between *how* we learn and *what* we learn. As outlined in the Philosophical section (SEE PAGE 61), the Yukon's education system is firmly entrenched in a colonial, Western society and as such, reflects colonial and Western values. These values in turn inform a hierarchical power dynamic in the classroom and teaching-learning approach rather than a reciprocal model of learning. Delivery of education takes place in fairly prescribed ways; mostly in indoor classrooms, and emphasizing a rote adherence to pre-determined learning outcomes. Using technology such as smartboards, iPads, and online learning modules doesn't actually change the content being taught, only the manner in which it is delivered. In many cases, the incorporation of educational technology can even further the relational chasm between students themselves, and between students and their teachers (Garcia, 2023). Models of assessment based on standardized testing results and accreditation schedules that reflect a prioritization of colonial pedagogies and curricula are further indications of a narrow and prescriptive educational outlook.

In contrast, Indigenous pedagogy emphasizes wholeness of the student and learning within relevant contexts, including the land as an equal and active partner, not just a token setting. The belief that "the whole Yukon is our school" has not changed over decades (*Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*, 1973, p.21). Experiential education in natural environments where students are empowered to learn by observing, doing, and responding to and recovering from mistakes are an integral part of Indigenous pedagogy. Even in recognition of this, however, colonial pedagogy continues to consider these methods as "alternative education," as is the case with Yukon's Wood Street Centre School or Porter Creek Secondary's WILD or SASE courses. These programs are celebrated as examples of EDU's commitment to experiential education while at the same time marginalized as alternatives to the mainstream, colonial delivery of education. Experiential education on the land continues to be seen as an addition, rather than a foundation.

In addition to dictating how education is delivered, colonial values heavily inform what is delivered as well. Although much progress has been made over recent years to indigenize and localize Yukon's curriculum—with changes both big and small that should be recognized and celebrated—the curriculum remains a deeply colonial canon, built on Eurocentric histories and values, and promoting siloed approaches to subjects. Indigenous content, where it does appear, is frequently marginalized or ignored altogether.

Challenging dominant colonial pedagogical beliefs and approaches is not an easy task. Generations of talented and well-intentioned educators, both here in the Yukon and throughout Canada, have been taught to teach in this way with these strategies, on these subjects and topics, and using these assessment tools. There are professional development

"Kindergarten is the bootcamp for school. It's all about learning how to be in the education system, how to line up, put your hand up, do as you're told. How to be creative enough to show you've got something to give but not so creative that you break out of the mold. Encourage and empower students only so much that they don't step out of line."

First Nation education worker, rural schools

"The expectation is that a student puts their hand up and asks for help or to speak. It's colonial to fight for your time to share your voice. The First Nations way is that everybody has a voice."

First Nation education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

shortcomings where the Yukon has failed to properly equip and resource its educators to practice in a more culturally safe way and in line with its mandate to decolonize education.

In this section, we will highlight three core findings under Pedagogical: Delivery and Assessment, Training and Professional Development, and Indigenous Content and Curriculum. In the final "Calls to Action" we offer practical strategies for decolonizing delivery methods and curriculum, as informed by our conversations with students, educators, Elders, First Nations education workers, and community members. There will also be reflection questions for readers to engage with.

Delivery & Assessment

The educational landscape continues to operate within the constraints of a one-size-fits-all framework, despite EDU's commitment to providing inclusive education that meets the needs of all students (Yukon Government, 2025). From the perspectives of current and former students, families, education workers, and educators, the approach used in most classrooms remains largely inflexible, emphasizing a rigid structure that prioritizes behavioural order and conventional academic achievement over the holistic development of students. This system uses narrow methods of assessment to gauge student proficiency, neglecting important aspects of social-emotional development and leading to significant gaps in how different students experience education.

At the heart of this educational model lies what is known as a transmission model of education—a concept that positions the teacher as the expert, and students as passive recipients of knowledge. This model thrives on rote learning, and a hierarchical environment where the teacher imparts knowledge to the students, who absorb it without necessarily engaging with it critically or creatively. This approach to teaching was born out of colonial educational practices that sought to control the way knowledge was transmitted, and it continues to influence classrooms today. From Early Years Education, students are taught a specific way to conform to this one-size-fits-all mold in a way that will benefit them as they move through their education journey up to graduation. Indigenous scholars and Elders argue that this model largely ignores the diverse ways that learners absorb and process information, leading to alienation for those whose learning styles do not align with this narrow framework (Battiste, 2005; Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019; Chrona, 2022).

Indigenous pedagogies emphasize a process of learning that is dynamic, participatory, and rooted in real-world experiences. Indigenous approaches to education advocate for learning through doing—engaging students in a discovery process where critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration are central. For Indigenous communities, learning is not solely about the transmission of content, but about the process of understanding and interacting with the surrounding world. Students are encouraged to observe, engage in meaningful dialogue with Elders and

> "Learning takes patience and time. The entire structure and setup of these high schools is about efficiency, expediency, transactions, reactivity. There's very little emphasis on relationship or being proactive. There's no systems of support."

First Nation education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

community members, and embrace experiential learning. This approach celebrates the interconnectivity between knowledge and the environment, allowing students to see themselves as active participants in their own education.

Colonial education systems, on the other hand, have long relied on rigidity in both environment and process, which extends to the classroom layout, the organization of timetables and bell schedules, and the way students are expected to engage with content. The structure of the classroom, often designed with rows of desks facing the teacher or the smartboard or screen, is a physical representation of the power dynamics inherent in this approach. This setup reinforces the belief that knowledge flows in one direction: from the teacher to the student.

Where learning does take place outside the conventional classroom, those experiences are frequently framed as *Indigenous* or *traditional knowledge*, implicitly reinforcing the notion that mainstream (colonial) educational values and worldviews are the default. The very framing of outdoor learning or culturally significant knowledge as "Indigenous" further marginalizes these pedagogies by suggesting that they are separate or secondary to what is seen as mainstream education. This emphasizes the colonial roots of the system, where education is positioned as neutral and universally applicable, and Indigenous knowledge is categorized as alternative and sidelined as an add-on, or non-essential.

The *transmission model of education* aligns closely with EDU's assessment methods, which continue to be narrow and reductive in nature. Standardized testing, long critiqued for its racist underpinnings (Rosales and Walker, 2021), remains a central tool in Yukon education for gauging student proficiency. The question is, again, whose definition of proficiency is served? What gets lost in the process? With tools such as the Boehm-3, Early Years Evaluation Survey, Grades 4 and 7 Foundation Skills Assessments, and high school Numeracy (Grade 10) and Literacy Assessments (Grades 10 and 12), the educational system continues to center an extremely narrow understanding of student ability—one that emphasizes memorization and conformity over creative thinking or individualized learning. Standardized tests rely on a fixed set of criteria to determine success, to the detriment of students, learning styles, and educational worldviews that deviate from a colonial norm (Holden, 2024).

This system of assessment ignores critical aspects of a student's development and the wholeness of the student. It reduces learners to a series of numbers or letters, reinforcing to educators, schools, families, and the students themselves that prescribed academic proficiency is the ultimate measure of their worth. As one educational professional remarked, *"How can we use assessments that are more comprehensive of who students are as people? A 67 per cent just means you've memorized 67 per cent of the content."*

In response to criticisms of traditional grading systems, there has been a move toward de-emphasizing numerical scores and letter grades (as seen with the British Columbia Proficiency Scale, which the Yukon has also adopted.) This shift is intended to make the educational process

AN INDIGENOUS EDUCATIONAL WORLDVIEW EMPHASIZES HANDS-ON AND EXPERIENTIAL FORMS OF LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT. THIS IS REWARDING FOR BOTH LEARNERS AND EDUCATORS... AND IT'S SO FUN!

> "For many Indigenous cultures, our communication is visual, calm, gestures. Why do we need to have 50,000 words by age whatever? It's just go, go, go, and some kids can get it but others can't."

YG education worker

> "I think the biggest reality is that the way teaching is set up as a profession in general, it doesn't really allow for opportunities to be critical—you're kind of just in survival mode. I've got to plan this lesson for tomorrow and I've got an hour before I go to bed."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

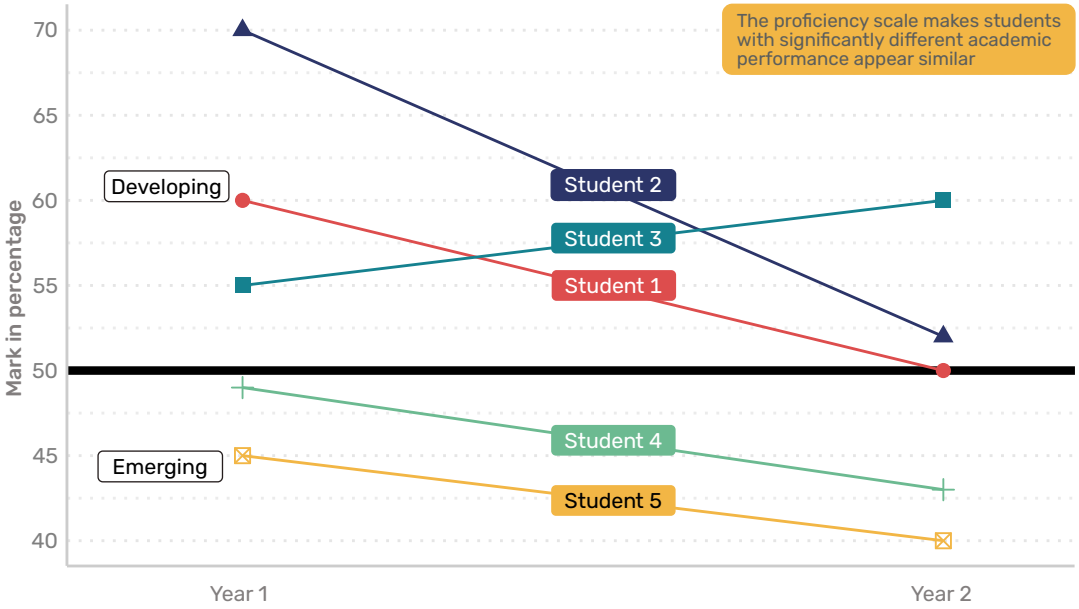
more inclusive, focusing on competencies and continuous growth rather than a fixed, finite measure of achievement. The BC Proficiency Scale categorizes students into four broad categories: Emerging, Developing, Proficient, and Extending. Though it aims to be more inclusive and reflective of students' ongoing learning, the system has significant issues. EDU's grade conversion guide places students into these four categories, but the ranges for each category vary (40-49 per cent for Emerging, 50-72 per cent for Developing, 73-85 per cent for Proficient, and 86-100 per cent for Extending). This uneven distribution of grade ranges makes it difficult to accurately assess students' progress and leaves many students in a grey space, unable to clearly see where they stand. For example, if a student were to have 49 per cent one year and 40 per cent the next, their academic performance is clearly declining, yet the decline would not necessarily be captured under the umbrella term of Emerging.

The difference between a student with a score of 72 per cent and one with a score of 50 per cent is significant—what may have previously been considered the difference between a B and a D **(Figure 12)**. Unfortunately, both of these are captured within the Developing range. This lack of granularity makes it challenging for both students and educators to track growth or pinpoint areas of difficulty. This allows for concerning trends to be hidden (presumably unintentionally, though we cannot prove either way) within the broad parameters of the categories.

Indigenous education workers and Elders shared in our conversations that these forms of assessment such as standardized tests and grading on the proficiency scale simply don't align with Indigenous values. Instead, they emphasized the importance of building relationships with students to understand how they culturally learn. The Transmission Model of Education, which prioritizes rote memorization and the passive absorption of facts, conflicts with Indigenous ways of knowing that value connection, observation, and experiential learning. Indigenous learners often find themselves alienated by systems that prioritize speed, competition, and quantifiable outcomes over collaboration, reflection, and growth. The "bombarding," as one educator describes, of students with concepts and facts means that when it's time for assessments, some students blank out in a trauma response that can impact their abilities to perform at full capacity (Tatter, 2019). These assessments can not only have emotional and psychological consequences for students (Eizadirad, 2019 as cited in Holden, 2023, p.2), but indeed can follow them throughout their school career, even impacting post-secondary aspirations.

Instead of relying on summative assessments that produce a fixed grade or score, Indigenous education workers call for a more formative approach to assessment that emphasizes observation, mentorship, and learning from mistakes. It focuses on student development and provides ongoing feedback that helps students grow, rather than penalizing them for their mistakes.

FIGURE 12 · Shortcomings of the proficiency scale



Does not allow the tracking of progress through time: Students 1, 2, and 3 are all Developing; 4 and 5 Emerging
Does not show that student performance is becoming poorer: Students 1, 2, 4, and 5 all experienced declines in marks
Students 4 and 5 are not emerging, they are failing and getting worse

This approach, grounded in respect for students as whole people, creates a safer space for learning and nurtures the development of skills that will support lifelong success.

The adoption of formative assessment models would require a fundamental shift in how the Yukon views education. It would demand that we see students not as passive recipients, but as active participants in their own learning journeys—learners whose successes and struggles must be understood within the context of their identities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Creating an education system that truly serves all students requires us to acknowledge that the one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. Instead, there is an urgent need to move towards a more flexible and holistic approach that centers around the needs and aspirations of each learner.

"We're pretty blue in the face when talking about why things need to be mandatory. There's still a lot of work to be done in that building [Department of Education] on recognizing and acknowledging systemic racism."

YG education worker

Training and Professional Development

Educators face a complex and multi-faceted set of challenges when it comes to teaching within the Yukon's context. Adding significant barriers to this, many teachers are hired from southern Canada with a lack of understanding about the territory's socio-political landscape, Yukon First Nations people and culture, and the region's specific nuances. Teachers often arrive with minimal knowledge of the Yukon's unique cultural dynamics, especially those related to self-governing First Nations. This lack of preparation is further compounded by the tendency to conflate the history and experiences of Yukon First Nations with those of Indigenous peoples in Southern Canada, which can lead to severely misinformed and misguided teaching practices.

Example: *Several students currently in a Whitehorse secondary school spoke of having had a local Elder or Knowledge Keeper come into their class twice while in elementary school, and that no local First Nations content has been taught in their classes since. The only Indigenous-specific topic has been learning of a First Nation in Quebec. Some former students shared that prior to 2014, they had only learned about British Columbia Indigenous peoples.*

In light of these challenges, there is an urgent need for mandatory training for educators and administrators to ensure they are adequately equipped to work with students, families, and communities in Yukon schools. Currently, the only mandatory course for teachers working in the Yukon is the *Yukon First Nations 101* course, which is offered through Yukon University. However, this course has faced significant issues, including limited instructor capacity and incredibly long waitlists. For example, in 2025, the course is only being offered twice—once in July and once in December—with only 13 and 20 seats available for each session to be shared with other public servants and community members. These one-day courses run from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, a format that absolutely cannot provide the depth of understanding needed to work respectfully and cross-culturally with First Nations communities. The alternative is a self-paced online course, which can be even less fulsome and engaging than the in-person offerings.

Compounding these challenges is the fact that there is seemingly no tracking mechanism at the human resources level to ensure that educators actually complete the course. This lack of oversight, combined with the Yukon-wide shortage of teachers and substitutes that necessitates getting educators into classrooms as quickly as possible, means that teachers can potentially work for years without receiving any formal training in local history and context. This creates an environment where educators, despite their best efforts, may unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes or misunderstandings due to their lack of local knowledge.

Beyond this, there are no mandatory professional development requirements in anti-racism, cultural safety, or decolonizing education, which are critical areas of focus for educators working in the Yukon's increasingly diverse community. While there is a New Educator Orientation Day training led by local Indigenous facilitators that focuses

INDIGENOUS CURRICULUM IS MORE THAN JUST RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS OR ON-THE-LAND LEARNING - IT CAN BE SCIENCE, HISTORY, LANGUAGE, MATH, LEADERSHIP, PE, AND MORE!

> "When I went to ask about taking [Yukon First Nations 101], I was told that it wouldn't be covered. Like, the cost of the course wouldn't be covered and that it wasn't being offered by the department currently and that … it was technically a requirement to be hired, but nobody would check up on that. So, I wanted to take it but it was like several kind of "no"'s about actually accessing it, so that was kind of disappointing. But also, it's like, I can't remember how many days the course is but really like, how much do you actually get out of a few days?"
>
> **White educator, Whitehorse school**

on relationship-building and the importance of place, it has been reduced from a two-day training to just one. Moreover, it remains unclear whether this orientation is mandatory for all new educators. The most recent EDU Welcome Week did not instil confidence—the package provided to educators included a document on First Nations culture from 2016, credited to FNEC and the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN) Education Department, the latter of which has not existed since 2020. KDFN and TKC, while asked to support the new educator orientation days, had little to no inclusion during the main 2-day conference beyond being asked to provide food.

Professional development opportunities in these areas do exist but are optional. The Yukon Department of Education's Curriculum and Assessment Branch offers various opportunities to engage in learning on Indigenous education and decolonizing practices, but these initiatives are often not prioritized in the professional development days organized by the department or individual schools. This results in a lack of participation and, in many cases, a lack of enthusiasm among educators. Some teachers, especially those who already feel overwhelmed with the demands of their roles, are not convinced of the importance of these learning opportunities or may feel they are already doing enough. The prioritization of other types of training—such as literacy, numeracy, and classroom management—often takes precedence over culturally relevant professional development, leaving critical gaps in educators' training. This lack of engagement with optional training is obvious; as one YG education worker noted, *"When we offer professional development (PD) to teachers, we get such low enrolment. Out of 500 teachers, we might get 10 to attend a session on anti-racism or decolonization."*

Additionally, administrative barriers also hinder access to these opportunities. For example, educators who are interested to attend workshops on Indigenous curriculum, hosted by the First Nations Curriculum Consultants, are sometimes unable to do so because their school administration cannot arrange adequate teacher-on-call (TOC) coverage. This extends even to mandatory trainings at times. For example, there is a requirement for any educator teaching grade 5 or 10 Social Studies curriculum units on residential school content to take a 3-day training with the team to ensure that they are approaching the content sensitively and appropriately. However, the French school board teachers weren't able to attend this mandatory training for the 2024-25 school year because there were no TOCs available. As of January 2025, translation of the new curriculum unit to French was not complete.

Despite these challenges, there have been some positive developments. One such initiative is a learning network created by the First Nations Curriculum Consultants, which brings together a group of 12 educators who have self-selected to meet regularly to explore how their own biases and prejudices affect their work with BIPOC students. This network, which focuses on unlearning harmful beliefs and building more inclusive teaching practices, has received highly positive feedback from participants. Such an initiative illustrates the powerful potential of fostering a community of educators committed to self-reflection and

> "There's very little communication from the department. It comes down to individual educators. What are they passionate about? What do they want to see happen? What do they want to pass on to students? Like that just becomes clearer and clearer to me."

White educator, Whitehorse school

> "Personally, I don't think we can blame the curriculum for lack of diversity and justice-oriented content. The barrier is more so the resources available and individual teachers' comfort levels."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

prioritizing anti-racism and decolonization in their classrooms. Imagine if all educators in the Yukon were empowered to feel similarly engaged.

Ultimately, the lack of sufficient training and professional development opportunities for educators working in the Yukon undermines their ability to effectively serve Indigenous students, their communities, and other minority students. Educators require more comprehensive, culturally relevant, and mandatory training to equip them with the tools to work effectively in the unique Northern context. Without such training, both teachers and students will continue to face significant challenges in bridging the cultural divide and fostering an environment of respect, understanding, and inclusion in the Yukon's classrooms.

Indigenous Content and Curriculum

Colonial values have long shaped what is taught in classrooms across Canada. Yukon Education follows the curriculum of British Columbia, which, despite efforts and successes to indigenize and localize its content, remains deeply rooted in colonial frameworks. However, there is a high degree of flexibility within the curriculum that would allow for more critical perspectives if educators desired to go there.

Considerable progress has been made in the Yukon to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, culture, language, and history into the curriculum, largely due to the work and self-advocacy of several First Nations governments and/or organizations themselves.

Example: *Champagne and Aishihik First Nations launched a Southern Tutchone Bi-Cultural Program for Kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 students at St. Elias Community School in Haines Junction. This program has since been integrated in curriculum delivery, with Southern Tutchone teachers at primary, intermediate, and high school levels.*

Educator Capacity to Localize and Decolonize Curriculum

Within the schools, much of this progress has been driven by individual educators rather than by departmental expectations or requirements. These efforts, which include building relationships with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community leaders, as well as creating space for and facilitating hands-on learning experiences, are vital. However, they often rely on the passion, dedication, and personal initiative of teachers, rather than being part of a cohesive, institutionalized approach to decolonizing curriculum. This reliance on individual educators to take the lead raises important questions: Are these educators empowered and supported by their administration, colleagues, and school-based teams? Are they given the resources needed to compensate Elders and cultural resource people fairly for their time and expertise? To that point, why are these efforts requiring educators to put in extra time and energy that they frequently don't have?

> "Individual teachers have to take it on. I don't see departmental organization on pushing these topics forward. There is just not real coordinated [efforts]. There's zero critical resources that are shared. It's all kind of done through personal connections and personal interest."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schoolsl

> "It's this two-week window where you're just like, 'Ok guys, we're going to talk about residential school now.' It needs to be embedded in K-12 of learning about land and place and where we are and where we belong. It more starts with identity and belonging."

First Nation education worker

There are many educators who recognize the importance of localizing their curriculum and facilitating opportunities for their students to learn from experts, cultural leaders, and community members with lived experience. Many of the educators we spoke to desperately want to do this, and do it well and with intention. At the same time, they are juggling the demands of a constantly shifting education landscape while trying to address the very real impacts that things like COVID-19 and frequent social media use has had on their students' mental health and psychological development (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Capacity is a very real concern for educators who frequently report burnout and low job satisfaction (Government of Yukon, 2024). In this context, the desire to go beyond the prescribed curriculum and engage with local communities, Elders, and cultural leaders often leads to teachers putting in extra hours—something that is not always feasible or sustainable. Alternatively, many educators see local culture integration as exclusively the First Nation's responsibility. In truth, changing this colonial system is only made possible by working together.

Narrow Representations of Indigenous "Content"

When Indigenous content is incorporated into the curriculum, it is often narrow and limited in scope. The only mandatory Indigenous content in Yukon appears in Social Studies courses: in grade 5, students are introduced to Yukon First Nations governance, citizenship, and the history of residential schools, and in grade 10, a unit entitled "Our Stories of Residential Schools in Yukon and Canada: Seeking Understanding, Finding Our Way Together" focuses on the impacts of residential schools and intergenerational trauma. While it is essential to teach all students about the historical and ongoing injustices of colonization, emphasizing residential schools as the primary context for Indigenous curriculum runs the risk of reducing Indigenous peoples and culture to a narrative of trauma and victimhood. This singular focus fails to recognize the diversity, resilience, and agency of Indigenous peoples.

There have been attempts to address this concern by teaching about Indigenous culture through art, environmental stewardship, and prowess in outdoor skills like hunting, trapping, and medicine-making. These initiatives aim to present a more positive view of Indigeneity by highlighting resourcefulness, resilience, and connection to the land. While these efforts are well-meaning, they often cross over into tokenism, reducing Indigenous identity in similar ways to narrow stereotypes and overlooking the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their experiences. In either case, educating on "Indigeneity" in such a narrow way reinforces the dominant binary representation of Indigenous peoples: either they are the noble savage and ecological Indian (Legal Aid Saskatchewan, 2024) or the perpetual victim of colonial oppression (Loppie, Reading, & de Leeuw, 2014, p.2 & 4). Both narratives are problematic because they fail to capture the full complexity and diversity of Indigenous experiences, histories, and worldviews.

"If I don't learn my language, it's colonialism winning. If I don't read and write it, it's colonialism winning."

Racialized student, Whitehorse schools

"Our university still questions [English] First Peoples 12 as a real English course. So if that's on your transcript, they automatically make you take an assessment. And who's more likely to take First People 12? First Nations kids."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse school

Challenging the Colonial Foundation of Education

The root of these issues lies in the structure of the education system itself. While courses such as Ancestral Technology, English First Peoples, and Yukon First Nations Studies 12 exist, they remain exceptions to the rule. From a systemic perspective, the solution is not simply to add more courses that contain Indigenous knowledge and history. Rather, the issue is that Indigenous content is often treated as an "add-on" or "special interest" area, rather than being integrated into the broader curriculum. This reflects one of the markers of systemic racism: the dominant culture's values and worldviews have become so entrenched in educational practices that they are universally accepted as the norm, while anything outside of that norm is spotlighted, tokenized, or both. The creation of Indigenous courses highlights the fact that Indigenous culture is not foundational to the "mainstream" curriculum, reinforcing the idea that it is separate and different.

Example: *Offering a course called Yukon First Nations Studies 12 implies that Yukon First Nations culture can be distilled down to a single course. The course itself is not the issue; it is the fact that a course called Eurocentric Perspectives 12 would never exist because it doesn't have to—it is already the foundation of the system.*

This divide is explicitly demonstrated in the categorization and treatment of First Nations language teachers, who are excluded in the *Education Act* from an official "teacher" designation. As such, they are not entitled to the same salary recognition including professional development or advancement, curriculum supports, prep time, and leave allowances. This is despite s.52(4) of the Act, which stipulates that "an aboriginal language teacher when providing aboriginal language instruction shall be deemed to be a teacher for the purposes of section 166 of this Act," with s.166 pertaining to Teacher Qualifications (Yukon Government, 2002). In other words, the territory's legislation specifies that First Nations language teachers have the same responsibilities other teachers but are not considered to be teachers when outlining their rights or treatment. This aligns with what some Yukon First Nation language teachers shared with us, with one employed at a rural school saying: *"Even with an Education degree, Language Teachers still get discriminated [against]. They can't apply for positions like Vice-Principal or Principal, because they are not recognized as a teacher. They also don't have the right to prep time under the Education Act."*

This segregation of Indigenous content from the rest of the curriculum is a clear indication that the educational system is still grounded in a colonial framework. In a truly decolonized education system, Indigenous knowledge and perspectives would be embedded throughout all subjects and grade levels, rather than relegated to isolated courses. Decolonizing education requires challenging the foundational worldviews upon which the system is built, questioning the implicit and explicit ways in which it reflects the values of the dominant culture, and actively working to rebuild the system in a way that is more reflective of Indigenous and other diverse cultural perspectives.

"Our socials textbooks are just like the history of Canada as soon as settlers arrived. All the history from their perspective, then we have soup and bannock and call it a day. The way that the education system thinks they're decolonial is stuff that they're comfortable [with] - picking berries or making bannock is comfortable and it benefits us."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM NEEDS TO BE MORE INTENTIONAL IN THE WAY IT EQUIPS ITS TEACHERS TO WORK IN THE YUKON. THIS MEANS CONSISTENT, RELEVANT, AND UPDATED TRAINING ON LOCAL FIRST NATIONS CONTEXTS AND REALITIES.

Towards a Decolonized Curriculum

A decolonized curriculum does not simply add Indigenous content on top of what already exists, like a band-aid. Instead, it would fundamentally reimagine how knowledge is constructed, taught, and understood. One key aspect of this reimagining would be recognizing the importance of relationship-building with local Indigenous communities. Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and cultural leaders should not be seen as external figures brought in to supplement the curriculum, but rather as partners in the educational process. Another part of reimagining is shifting departmental and school-level obligations towards a goal of decolonizing what is taught in their classrooms. Educators should be directed and supported to be creative in their curricular choices, and they should be given the resources and time necessary to enact these choices effectively. The result of engaging with Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in a more comprehensive way is that students will be equipped to question dominant narratives of both the historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous Canada. It also produces a learning environment where all students feel more empowered to explore and acknowledge their own cultural heritage and histories within the broader context of being on Indigenous land.

Calls to Action

1. Create a Curriculum Assessment Committee to explore how Indigenous values, culture and knowledge can be mandatory and integrated into the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). This should be done in collaboration with the expertise of FNEC, YFNED, FNSB and Yukon First Nations.

2. Support pathways to teacher accreditation for Yukon First Nations Citizens and expand definition of teacher—keeping local teachers local and empowering knowledge keepers and language speakers to become teachers.

3. Honour Section 166 of *Education Act* and recognize First Nations Language Teachers as equals with other teachers. Remove the explicit exclusion of First Nation Language Teachers from the definitions of "teacher" in territorial education legislation.

4. Review the use of standardized assessments and create an alternative assessment model, with viable post-secondary pathways, that students and families can opt into.

5. Develop an EDU-wide outdoor experiential education program and hire the requisite EDU-based team to offer these programs to schools who may not have the in-house staffing capacity and expertise.

Educator Reflection

- How do I avoid reducing Indigenous culture into trauma or tradition?
- Do my students feel represented and heard, celebrated for who they are in my classroom? Why or why not? How can it be improved?
- Do the teaching materials I use in my classroom represent a diversity of faces, values and cultures? Why is this important? How can I diversify my teaching materials?
- How do I ensure my assessment approach takes into account more than the academic abilities of the student?
- Am I confident teaching about race, racism, and anti-racism? Am I confident Indigenizing my curriculum? If yes, why? If no, what are the resources available to me that could build my confidence?
- Is my teaching approach rooted in a transmission model? How could I change my practices to be more aligned with collaborative models of teaching and learning?

FINDING 3: RELATIONAL

> "I honestly don't think this will happen with our current government because in my opinion they're very performative. It's actually a very difficult thing to implement into our education system. But decolonization for white people means buying moccasins and hanging Indigenous art, not screaming Land Back."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

The third finding of this review is **Relational**. Education is built on relationships. The way we learn and find our place in the world is shaped by the connections we make. A strong sense of belonging is essentially for students to feel seen and respected and to develop the confidence to engage and learn at school. Positive relationships create a foundation for success and support students as they navigate challenges and discover their strengths.

For Indigenous students, this sense of belonging is even more crucial. Indigenous pedagogy promotes learning as a collective experience, shared through collective knowledge, stories, and responsibilities. A relationship-centred approach helps students feel grounded in their identity and nurtures their curiosity and learning spirit. When education is rooted in connection, students not only absorb information but also develop a sense of purpose and responsibility to their community.

Past wrongs have created deep mistrust, particularly when relationships were built on power and fear instead of mutual respect. For generations, Indigenous children were forced into schools that stripped them of their languages, cultures, and connections to family. These harmful dynamics have left lasting scars, making many Indigenous students and families feel marginalized and unsafe within the education system. Schools cannot erase this painful history, but they can work to rebuild trust. To do this, they must listen, honour local histories and cultures, and create environments where students, families, and communities feel welcomed and affirmed.

Meaningful change happens when people feel seen and acknowledged. Schools must take an active role in repairing relationships by prioritizing cultural understanding and making space for Indigenous voices. This means not only including Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum but also ensuring that Indigenous students feel valued for who they are. It means recognizing the strengths they bring to the classroom and supporting their learning in ways that honour their identity.

Learning is a lifelong process, woven into everyday life, grounded in connection, belonging, and the strength of community. Traditionally in Yukon First Nations cultures, learning extends beyond the classroom. The world itself is a classroom. Knowledge is passed down through stories from Elders, lessons on the land with aunts and uncles, and everyday teachings from families. These teachings are not separate from formal education—they are a vital part of it. Indigenous students thrive when their schools recognize and respect these ways of learning.

In rural and remote communities like those in the Yukon, relationships play an even larger role in education. The connections between teachers, students, families, and the broader community shape a system that reflects the needs and values of the people it serves. Educators who build strong relationships with their students and families help create a learning environment where students feel safe, supported, and motivated to succeed. When schools work in partnership with the community, education becomes more than just a classroom experience—it becomes a shared responsibility.

> "I've always seen education as a tool for change but it's largely just used to perpetuate the current status quo."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

> "The relationship between the Department of Education and us wasn't as great as it is now. It definitely takes time to build those relationships … trying to work with school staff and teachers and let them know, this is who we are, this is what we can do."

First Nation education worker

This shared responsibility also extends to the wider community. In many Indigenous cultures, raising and teaching children is not the job of one person alone. It involves the collective efforts of family members, Elders, and community members. Schools that recognize and embrace this approach create a more supportive learning environment for Indigenous students. When children see their culture, language, and traditions reflected in their education, they develop a deeper understanding of who they are and where they come from. This strengthens their sense of belonging and builds confidence, allowing them to succeed in all areas of life.

For educators in Yukon First Nations communities, recognizing and respecting these relationships is crucial. Building trust with students, families, and the community creates an environment where Indigenous students feel seen, respected, and understood. By honouring Indigenous knowledge and fostering meaningful connections, educators can bridge the gap between traditional and formal education, allowing all students to feel that their knowledge and identity are valued. This approach benefits not only Indigenous students but the entire school community, creating a richer, more inclusive learning experience for all.

In this section, we'll explore how relationships—founded on respect, trust, and open communication—are key to creating strong, supportive learning environments. We'll also examine the impact of systemic racism and colonial history on these relationships and discuss how educators can break down barriers. By cultivating genuine connections and ensuring Indigenous students see themselves reflected in their learning, we can help build an education system that nurtures and uplifts all learners. Below we will highlight three core findings in the **Relational** section:

1. **Relationship to Self:** Recognizing Bias and Responsibility;
2. **Relationship with Students:** The Impact of Expectations and Representation;
3. **Relationship with Families and Communities:** Building Trust and Working Together.

We will finish with practical strategies for developing and nurturing a relational approach to education, as informed by our conversations with students, educators, Elders, First Nations education workers, and community members. There will also be reflection questions for readers to engage with.

"It definitely helps in having a school administration that's on board and willing to work together in all capacities. I think that's been a huge movement forward. Like, that's often sometimes a barrier for other First Nations working with the school administration or administrators, and here, it's not a barrier at all."

First Nation education worker

Addressing Bias, Expectations, and Trust

Education is not only shaped by what happens inside the classroom but also by the broader historical and systemic forces that inform how students are perceived, taught, and supported. These forces—rooted in history, institutional practices, and personal beliefs—contribute to biases that affect the educational experiences of students, especially those from marginalized groups, such as Indigenous students. These biases are often ingrained and unexamined, shaping how educators interact with students, set expectations, and collaborate with families. Whether conscious or unconscious, biases influence decisions about who is given opportunities, who is expected to succeed, and who is seen as capable of academic achievement.

Bias in education is not just about individual actions; it is embedded in the larger educational system. It manifests in various ways—how students are assessed, how teachers engage with them, and how curricula are structured. This bias can shape how teachers see their students and, in turn, how students perceive themselves. When educators hold unconscious biases about students' abilities or potential based on their background, race, or identity, it affects the way they interact with those students.

For example, Indigenous students may be subject to lowered expectations, with their abilities underestimated or their achievements downplayed in comparison to non-Indigenous students. This can result in fewer academic opportunities, less positive feedback, and a lack of support, which can lead to disengagement and lower academic performance.

The expectations that educators set for their students play a critical role in shaping student outcomes. When teachers hold high expectations for all students, regardless of their background, it can inspire those students to rise to the challenge. However, when educators' expectations are influenced by bias, they may unintentionally steer students into lower-level courses, provide less support, or fail to recognize students' potential.

These lowered expectations often reflect broader societal stereotypes about marginalized groups, including Indigenous peoples, and can result in systemic inequities within the education system. Students, in turn, internalize these expectations, which can affect their academic self-esteem, motivation, and future aspirations.

Trust is a critical element in the educational success of Indigenous students. Historical injustices, such as the residential school system, have created deep mistrust between Indigenous communities and educational institutions. For educators, building trust is essential to fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Building trust requires transparent communication and respect for Indigenous knowledge. Teachers and administrators must recognize that creating spaces where Indigenous students and families feel respected and heard is essential to this process.

> "This [stuff] is happening, ongoing, and it has to stop. The unexamined racism is so unbelievably damaging. Kids know what you think about them. They are intuitive, smart, little beings. They can feel how we feel about them."
>
> **White educator, Whitehorse school**

WORKING IN A NORTHERN CONTEXT COMES WITH DIFFERENT RESPONSIBILITIES. ONE OF THOSE MEANS RECOGNIZING YOUR ROLE AS A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNITY, AND SHOWING UP WITH INTENTION AND HUMILITY.

Active engagement with Indigenous communities, incorporating their perspectives into curricula, and ensuring families have a say in decisions all contribute to trust. It's through consistent actions—listening, learning, and collaborating—that trust is earned over time. As one First Nation education worker noted, *"We are very cohesive and trying to get to the point of being, we're all school staff–it doesn't matter who you're working for, other than on paper … We're all here with the same goal to support students and families. A lot of our staff here are pretty willing and wanting that."* This sense of shared purpose demonstrates that when schools and communities work as equal partners, student success becomes a collective goal.

Relationship with Self: Recognizing Bias and Responsibility

Bias in education influences how teachers teach, discipline, and support students. Often, teachers may not even be aware of their own biases. These biases can lead to lowered expectations for Indigenous students and other students of colour, creating significant barriers to their success.

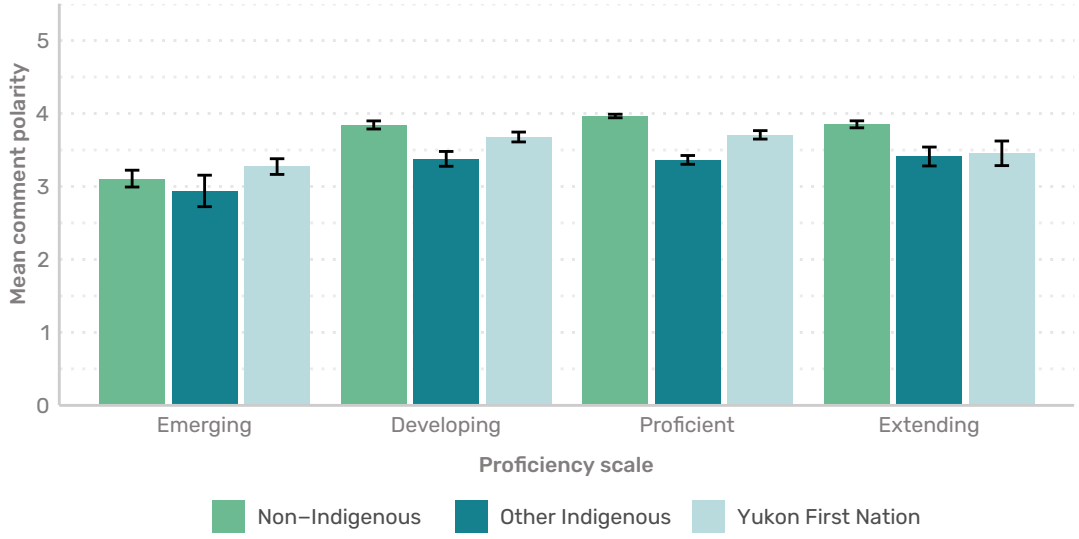
Data clearly illustrates these disparities. Between 2010 and 2024, an analysis of Yukon student report card comments revealed patterns of unequal treatment. Indigenous students frequently received less positive feedback compared to their Non-Indigenous peers, even when their grades were identical. For example, from 2015–2016 to 2016–2017, higher-performing Yukon First Nations and Other Indigenous students were described as having weaker "study habits" than their equally performing Non-Indigenous counterparts, despite achieving similar results **(Figure 13)**. Additionally, from 2019–2020 to 2023–2024, Indigenous students in grades K–9 consistently received less positive feedback on the new proficiency scale (Developing, Proficient, and Extending), even when their performance met or exceeded that of their Non-Indigenous classmates **(Figure 14)**.

When Indigenous students struggled with their work, the comments often appeared more critical, highlighting their challenges in a way that was harsher than the feedback given to Non-Indigenous students. This trend was especially pronounced in secondary grades (10–12) from 2014–2015 to 2023–2024, where students with marks under 50 per cent received disproportionately less positive comments. However, an unexpected trend emerged: when numerical marks hovered around 50 per cent, Indigenous students received more positive comments than their Non-Indigenous peers **(Figure 15)**. While this may seem encouraging, it reflects a form of overcompensation rooted in the same bias. Teachers may have been attempting to encourage struggling Indigenous students, but this differential treatment could inadvertently reinforce lower expectations and harmful stereotypes about Indigenous students' abilities.

FIGURE 13 · Per cent distribution by study habit for each proficiency level (all courses)

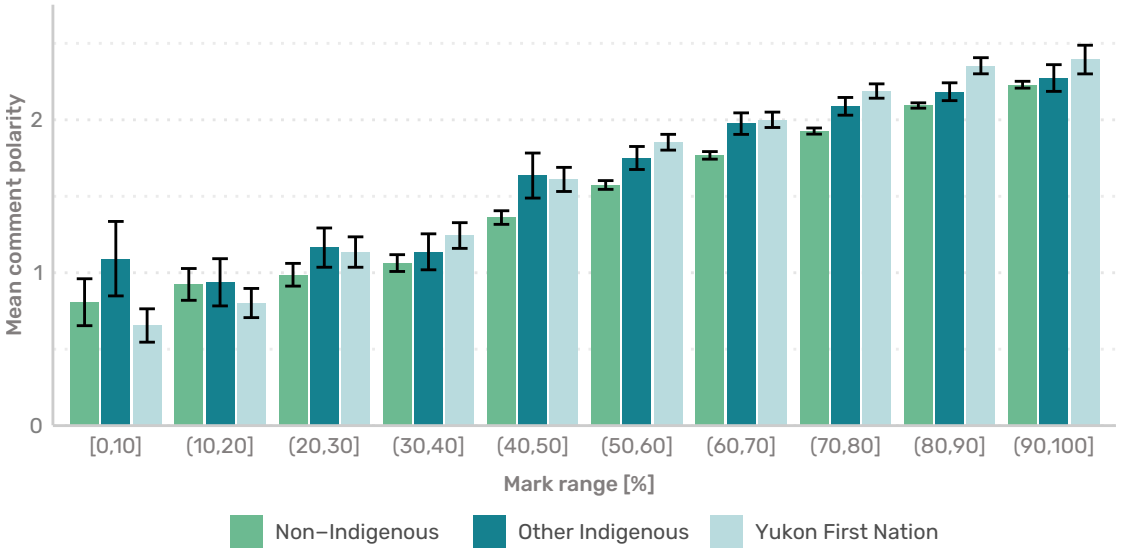
Assigned Study Habit by Proficiency level and self-identification for all courses.
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
n = 40292

FIGURE 14 · Outcomes and report card comment sentiments based on the proficiency scale



Data source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Positive polarity implies positive comments; negative polarity implies negative comments
Error bars (black vertical lines) represent the 95% confidence margin of error; non-overlapping error bars indicate results with meaningful differences.
Includes data for 6407 unique students
Analysis based on the JOCKERS lexicon

FIGURE 15 · Outcomes and report card comment sentiments based on numerical scores



Data source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Positive polarity implies positive comments; negative polarity implies negative comments
Error bars (black vertical lines) represent the 95% confidence margin of error; non-overlapping error bars indicate results with meaningful differences.
Includes data for 5250 unique students
Analysis based on the JOCKERS lexicon

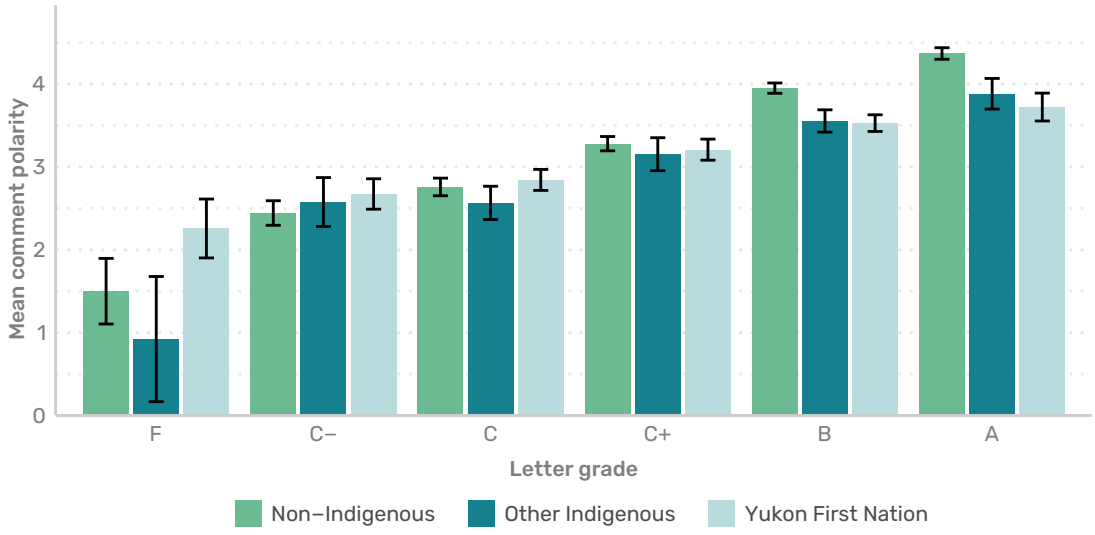
"I get assumed I'm an Educational Assistant a lot which I think is 100 per cent race-based. They're not used to seeing racialized teachers so they're just like, you must be an EA."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

A different pattern appeared when analyzing letter grades. For students earning A and B grades, particularly in grades 4–7 between 2015–2017, comments for Indigenous students were noticeably less positive than those for their Non-Indigenous peers (Figure 16). This reinforces systemic racism, where high-performing Indigenous students did not receive the same positive reinforcement as non-Indigenous students.

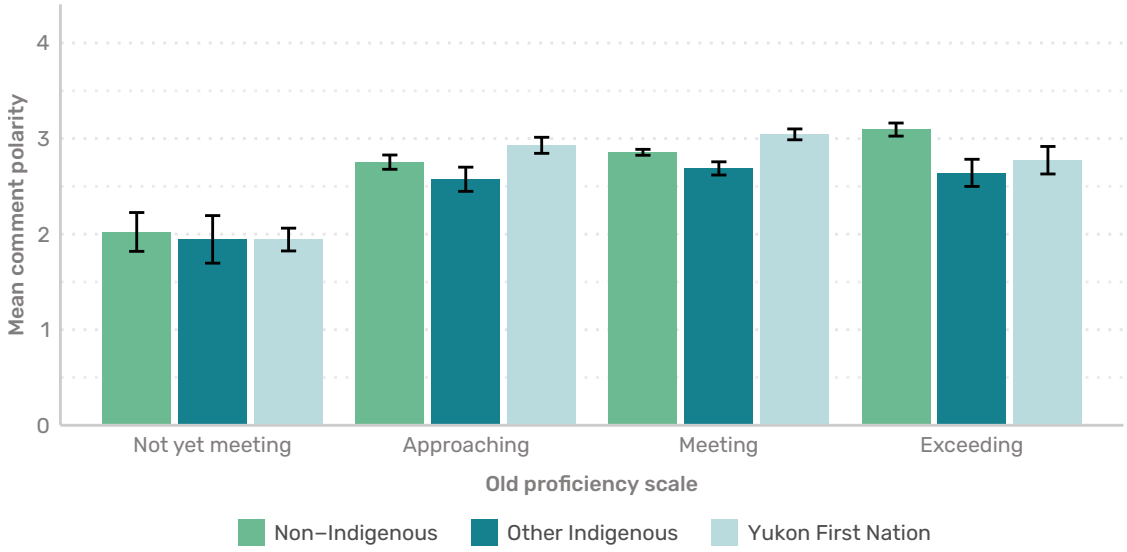
Similar trends emerged with proficiency scales. On the old proficiency scale (2017–2019, grades K–9), comments for Indigenous students with Approaching and Meeting outcomes were more positive, suggesting another form of unexpected bias (Figure 17). However, comments for students who were Exceeding were less positive for Indigenous students, following the expected pattern of systemic racism. The same pattern continued with the new proficiency scale (2019–2024), where Indigenous students in grades K–9 again received fewer positive comments for Developing, Proficient, and Extending outcomes (Figure 14).

FIGURE 16 · Outcomes and report card comment sentiments based on letter grades



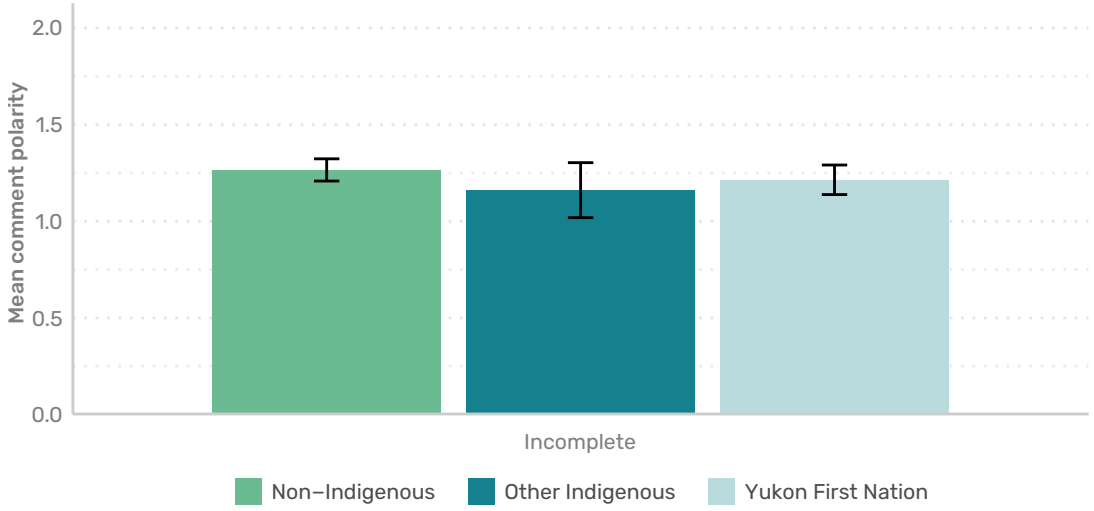
Data source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Positive polarity implies positive comments; negative polarity implies negative comments
Error bars (black vertical lines) represent the 95% confidence margin of error; non-overlapping error bars indicate results with meaningful differences.
Includes data for 2473 unique students
Analysis based on the JOCKERS lexicon

FIGURE 17 · Outcomes and report card comment sentiments based on the old proficiency scale



Data source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Positive polarity implies positive comments; negative polarity implies negative comments
Error bars (black vertical lines) represent the 95% confidence margin of error; non-overlapping error bars indicate results with meaningful differences.
Includes data for 4477 unique students
Analysis based on the JOCKERS lexicon

FIGURE 18 · Outcomes and report card comment sentiments for students that did not complete



Data source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Positive polarity implies positive comments; negative polarity implies negative comments
Error bars (black vertical lines) represent the 95% confidence margin of error; non-overlapping error bars indicate results with meaningful differences.
Includes data for 1696 unique students
Analysis based on the JOCKERS lexicon

FIGURE 19 · Per cent distribution by study habit for each proficiency level (core courses)

Assigned Study Habit by Proficiency level and self-identification for core courses (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies).
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
n = 8078

> "It's still an environment where [Indigenous staff] very, very likely will be the only person so it doesn't matter how well they're equipped. Going into an environment where they have to do their job while also looking after themselves as well, right? What's the solution there?"
>
> **First Nation education worker**

In cases where students received an Incomplete, the feedback was more equitable, with no noticeable differences between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students **(Figure 18)**. This suggests that, in these instances, teachers provided more consistent feedback. However, Indigenous students who performed well were still more likely to be described as having poorer "study habits" compared to their equally performing non-Indigenous peers, reflecting implicit biases that undermine their efforts and achievements **(Figures 13 & 19)**.

These patterns can negatively impact students' confidence and motivation. When Indigenous students repeatedly receive less positive or more critical feedback, even when their performance is strong, they may start to doubt their abilities. Over time, this can affect how they view themselves as learners and limit their engagement with their education. Recognizing these patterns is crucial to ensuring all students receive fair and equitable treatment.

The further issue that frequently goes unaddressed is the impacts that working in colonial settings with majority White colleagues can have on Indigenous educators and other educators of colour. Interrogating the racism of the education system extends to recognizing that many of the same issues that impact Indigenous students and students of colour also impact BIPOC educators and school staff themselves. Indigenous and racialized educators shared with us stories of feeling isolated, tokenized, and often burdened with expectations (both internal and external) that they would educate their colleagues on things pertaining to indigeneity, race, or culture. While EDU was unable to provide conclusive data on how many Indigenous and racialized teachers and administrators are currently working in Yukon schools, extensive anecdotal evidence from current and former students and current and former educators indicates that the racial demographics of Yukon educators remain significantly disproportionate relative to the racial demographics of Yukon students. In attending several Yukon-wide professional development conferences for the purposes of conducting educator engagement for this review, the eye test reflects a similarly unbalanced reality. This suggests significant challenges at both the recruitment and retention level, but more needs to be done to create safe and inclusive working environments for BIPOC educators and staff. At an individual level, that starts with self-reflection and intentionally engaging with one's own journey of unlearning internalized racism. For all educators, that means doing deep reflective work on implicit biases and actively seeking to disrupt harmful narratives about students from different backgrounds. For White educators, it's imperative to extend that reflection into considering how our actions, words, and decisions might be impacting our colleagues or making them feel singled out. Engaging in this sort of reflection is difficult and necessary work in moving towards a more supportive and equitable education system.

"I meet a lot of educators who think they're being responsive when they're like, 'Well, we have coffee and kids are allowed to nap so it's okay," and it's like, that's not okay. You're not doing these kids some favour by not expecting anything from them. Flexibility is key, but so is accountability."

White educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

WE SHOULD CHALLENGE OUR STUDENTS TO DO THEIR BEST... AND WATCH THEM EXCEED OUR EXPECTATIONS!

The Racism of Low Expectations

Sometimes, without realizing it, schools steer students toward different academic paths based on assumptions rather than ability. This is called course streaming—placing students in higher or lower-level classes based on their perceived potential. While meant to match students with the right level of challenge, Yukon schools show a troubling pattern: Indigenous students, especially those from Yukon First Nations, are far more likely to be placed in lower-level courses, even when their skills suggest they could succeed in more advanced ones. *"Pushback comes from a misconception of what society thinks about Indigenous people and culture. It all comes down to education. There's been a surge of denialism and that's very tough and shows that the work of TRC will need to go beyond my lifetime and that of my kids,"* noted a YG education worker. This denialism is reflected in the systemic biases that shape course placement, limiting opportunities for Indigenous students.

At first glance, course placement might seem neutral, but a closer look reveals a clear trend. Yukon First Nations students are the least likely to follow standard course streaming and the most likely to be placed either above or below expected levels (**Figure 11**, **PAGE 72**). While some receive advanced opportunities, many more are directed into courses that limit future options. Even when Indigenous students achieve similar Numeracy 10 scores as their Non-Indigenous peers, they are more often placed in Workplace 10—severely reducing post-graduation opportunities for students (**Figure 9**, **PAGE 70**). If they eventually decide they want to pursue post-secondary studies, they are forced to upgrade—another barrier.

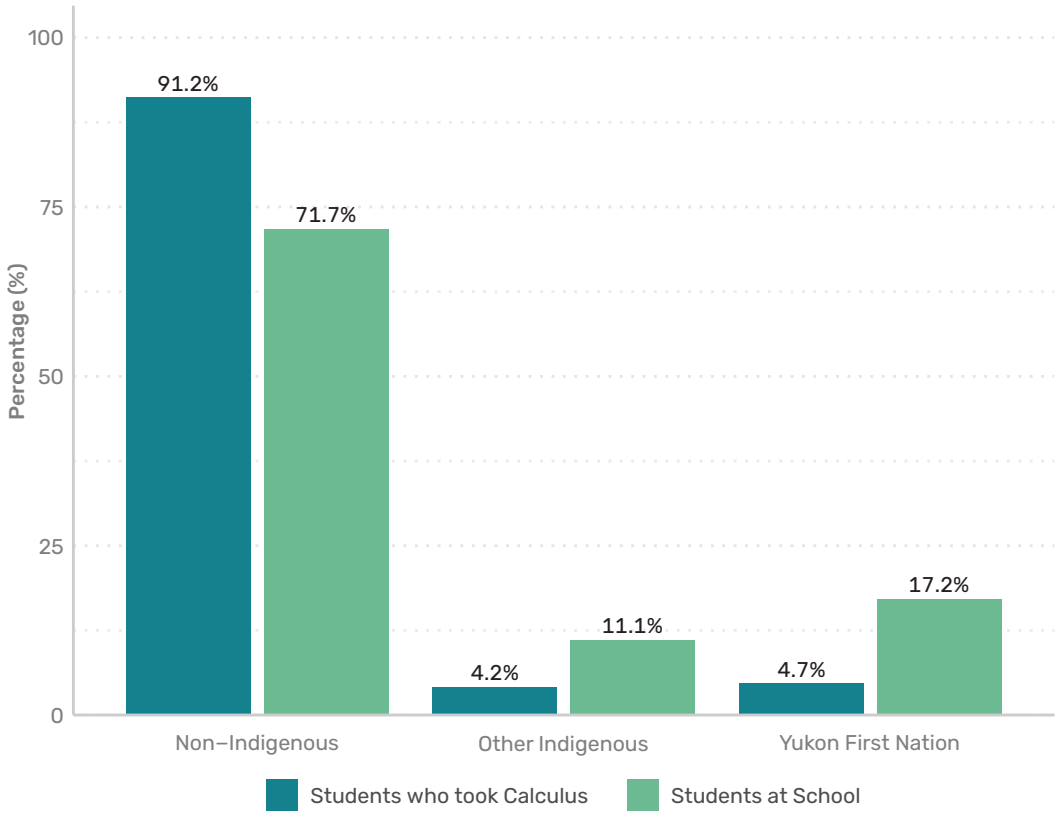
This is the racism of low expectations in action. When teachers and administrators assume Indigenous students won't excel in higher-level courses, they are less likely to recommend them for academic paths that lead to careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Even at the same Math 9 proficiency level, Indigenous students are still more likely to be placed in Workplace 10 rather than Pre-Calculus **(Figure 20)**. This isn't about ability—it's about perception. Over time, these decisions shape students' futures, limiting their options before they even get the chance to try.

Of course, not all streaming decisions come from teachers. Some students may opt for lower-level courses due to social pressures, wanting to stay with friends, or not seeing themselves as "math people." These choices are shaped by the messages they receive early on—messages that can reinforce self-doubt and discourage them from pushing themselves academically. However, it's the responsibility of staff, particularly teachers and guidance counsellors, to encourage students to challenge themselves rather than self-select into less rigorous courses. If students consistently choose lower tracks, schools should ask why and work to build a culture where Indigenous students feel supported in aiming high.

FIGURE 20 · Per cent distribution by Math 10 course for each Math 9 proficiency level

Selected Math 10 course for each Math 9 Proficiency level by self-identification
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
n = 2201

FIGURE 21 · Demographics of students who took calculus (Whitehorse schools)



Indigenous students are less likely to take Calculus at these schools. All Urban Schools offer Calculus
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
n = 408 in Calculus • n = 5837 in Schools

> "There's so much they could do for First Nations kids at those schools but they just don't … I've got kids who are 15 who they already call an Adult Dogwood kid and I say, that's pretty early to make that call! They're just waiting until this kid is 16 so they can ship them off to ILC or AVS and get them out of their school."

First Nation education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

BUILDING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS MEANS RECOGNIZING COLONIZATION'S LEGACY AND WORKING TO REBUILD TRUST AND RESPECT BETWEEN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

The long-term impact of these biases is clear. Indigenous students are significantly underrepresented in Calculus classes, a key requirement for many post-secondary programs **(Figure 21)**. This means fewer Indigenous graduates have the qualifications needed to pursue competitive fields. This isn't just about ability or preference—when students are consistently placed in lower tracks and not encouraged to stretch their potential, they are less likely to see themselves as capable of excelling in advanced subjects.

Streaming should be based on a student's goals and abilities, not unconscious bias or outdated assumptions. When Indigenous students are placed in lower-level courses despite having the skills to succeed in higher ones, it sends a harmful message: that they are not expected to reach their full potential. Schools need to recognize these patterns and take action to ensure all students have the opportunity to rise to the challenge—not just those who are assumed to be capable. This means not only addressing bias in streaming decisions but also fostering an environment where Indigenous students feel encouraged, supported, and confident in taking on academic challenges.

Breaking this cycle starts with awareness. Teachers must examine their own biases, reflect on how they treat students, and commit to recognizing strengths in every learner. High expectations matter—when students know their teachers believe in them, they rise to meet the challenge.

Another key step is expanding beyond a Eurocentric lens. Many teacher training programs focus on colonial ways of thinking, leaving out Indigenous knowledge. This creates gaps in understanding and makes it harder for educators to connect with Indigenous students. Indigenous cultures are diverse, with different languages, histories, and ways of learning. When teachers take the time to listen, learn, and incorporate these perspectives, classrooms become places where all students feel seen, valued, and capable of success.

"It is the very heart of the job of being an educator to help learners see, believe in, and realize their potential, to believe in their own capacity and their immense and unique skill sets. This is what we sign up to do. Our job is to nurture the learners we spend our days with. It is absolutely heartbreakingly backwards that some educators, wittingly or no, do the opposite. No learner should be made to feel less intelligent or less capable than any other. We are the … adults in the picture. As educators, we have to remember we hold a crap tonne of power and influence in the dynamic. At all times."

White educator, Whitehorse school

Relationship with Students: The Impact of Expectations and Representation

Expectations Shape Outcomes

Students are deeply aware of how they are treated. When teachers expect less from them—whether in grading, discipline, or daily interactions—those expectations influence how students see themselves. Over time, students internalize these messages, shaping their confidence, motivation, and sense of belonging in the classroom.

Indigenous students often face lower expectations rooted in stereotypes and systemic bias. They may receive less academic encouragement, fewer leadership opportunities, and more disciplinary actions compared to their peers. They might also be seen as less capable, even when they demonstrate strong potential. These experiences send a powerful and harmful message: that their success is not expected or valued. This pattern can limit their educational outcomes, reinforce feelings of disconnection, and create barriers to future opportunities. As one YG education worker noted, *"Something needs to happen for kids to feel no sense of belonging in their school."*

Further, Indigenous students who act out due to trauma, stress, or systemic challenges often face harsher consequences than their non-Indigenous peers. One First Nation education worker shared a powerful example that illustrates this reality: *"The young person had an anger outburst, as anyone would, child or adult, if you lost your home. And then the young person became homeless in Whitehorse, began to try and live in [their community] and go to school in Whitehorse which lasted a few months and then gave up. It was too difficult … No supports, no transition, nothing. Just one day to the next, you're kicked out … if Education followed their own program and read the IEPs, they would see that this youth has never hurt anyone, but he has anger outbursts."*

When young people are penalized for reacting to overwhelming circumstances, it perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and reinforces the perception that they do not belong.

Relationships are at the heart of learning. When students feel seen, heard, and valued, they engage more deeply. Educators who show genuine interest in their students' cultures and experiences create classrooms where all students can feel safe and capable.

Respect in education must be understood as a two-way street—earned and given by both students and adults. When respect is only expected from students towards adults without being reciprocated, it can become a power trip that undermines genuine relationships. Students, especially those from marginalized communities, are highly sensitive and responsive to the authenticity of respect. When adults fail to demonstrate respect or only demand it, it reinforces systemic power imbalances and perpetuates exclusion, mistrust, and disengagement.

> "At Elijah Smith [Elementary School] I had a lot of Indigenous teachers … it's probably one of my fave schools I've ever been to. In high school it wasn't like that. Even our First Nations Studies class was a White teacher."
>
> **Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools**

A strong sense of belonging grows when students trust that their voices matter. When teachers listen, recognize the strengths of their students, they create a space where learning becomes meaningful. Students feel confident to speak, participate, and take on challenges when they feel included. That sense of connection fuels their success.

Friendship and a genuine willingness to learn play a vital role in breaking down systemic bias. A simple conversation, an interest in a student's story, or a willingness to learn from their experiences can shift the entire dynamic. Friendship in education is not about favouritism; it is about trust, mutual respect, and recognizing the brilliance within every student. The best learning happens when students and educators walk the path together, honouring each other's knowledge and experiences.

Representation Matters

Students are more engaged when they see themselves in what they learn. Representation in curriculum—through Indigenous languages, history, and worldviews—helps students feel valued and proud of their identity. When Indigenous perspectives are included, it challenges harmful narratives and creates a more truthful, inclusive understanding of history. It also helps all students, not just Indigenous students, develop respect for diverse cultures and knowledge systems.

But representation is not just about books and lesson plans—it's also about the people leading the classroom. Many Indigenous students report that they have rarely, if ever, been taught by an Indigenous or BIPOC teacher. The absence of diverse educators reinforces the idea that leadership and expertise are reserved for a select few. When students do not see people like themselves in positions of authority, it can be harder to envision those paths for their own future.

When racialized educators are present, they build connections with students that extend beyond the curriculum, helping them feel understood and supported in ways that are often missed in traditional classrooms.

Seeing Indigenous educators, administrators, and professionals in leadership roles transforms what students believe is possible for their own futures. We cannot become what we do not see, and when Indigenous students have role models who reflect their identity, it expands their sense of possibility.

Mentorship is a powerful force in shaping students' confidence and aspirations. When Indigenous students have mentors who share their background and experiences, they see firsthand that success is possible. A teacher, counsellor, or community leader who understands their journey can provide guidance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. These relationships help students navigate challenges and recognize their strengths.

IT'S IMPORTANT FOR STUDENTS TO FEEL SEEN AND UNDERSTOOD BY THEIR TEACHERS. HAVING ADULTS FROM SIMILAR BACKGROUNDS OR CULTURES CAN BE CRUCIAL TO A STUDENT'S BELONGING AND SUCCESS.

"He's [School admin] like, 'you're never gonna make it in there.' Because I was suspended and I was trying to go grab my stuff from my locker, and he followed me. He's like, what are you doing? Get back to class. I was like, I'm grabbing my [stuff] and I'm leaving. And he was like, no, you're not. Get back to class. And I tried to tell him that I was suspended, and he followed me all the way to my locker and then to the front door. And then when I was leaving, he was like, 'You're never going to make it in life.'"

Indigenous student, Whitehorse school

Representation in leadership creates a cycle of empowerment, where students are not only supported but are inspired to become future educators, advocates, and change-makers themselves. By fostering mentorship and ensuring Indigenous voices are present at every level of education, we build stronger, more inclusive learning environments where all students can succeed.

Equity in Expectations and Student Voice

Students do best when they are held to high expectations and given a voice. When teachers listen, respect students' ideas, and offer encouragement, students are more likely to engage in learning.

When student's concerns are dismissed or minimized by those in positions of authority, it reveals a lack of awareness and sensitivity towards the experiences of marginalized students and their families. Such interactions can perpetuate distrust, reinforce power imbalances, and hinder meaningful relationships between schools, families, and students.

> **Example:** *A White school staff reported that some students have a pattern of saying "you're racist" or "you show favouritism" to the teacher. The staff said, "But it's the student's behaviour that is problematic. At home they have the same discourses [that the school staff is racist or shows favouritism], so we [staff] tell them [the parents] that we treat everyone the same way with that kind of behaviour. We also see the parents' pattern who bring up their child being "bullied" (Staff used air quotes), but they're not being bullied, they are in grade 4, and the other kid is a grade 2, it's just socialization. The kid will repeat what the parents said, that they're being targeted."*

The school staff's response demonstrates a dismissive and oppressive approach to building relationships with families and students. By labeling the child as "problematic" and categorizing parents' concerns about bullying or racism as mere socialization issues, the school staff fails to recognize or validate the lived experiences of the students and their families. Using phrases like "we treat everyone the same way with that kind of behaviour" as a blanket response to accusations of racism or favouritism ignores the possibility of genuine harm and denies the specific contexts and identities of those involved. This approach reflects a refusal to engage with concerns meaningfully and reinforces systemic power imbalances by positioning the school's perspective as objective and authoritative while dismissing the voices of parents and students as misguided or exaggerated.

Unfortunately, data indicates that Indigenous students often do not experience the same level of support. They tend to receive more negative feedback, face higher discipline rates, and have a greater likelihood of dropping out. Schools with larger Indigenous populations report lower graduation rates, suggesting the system is not equally supporting these students.

> "Because during this time in [teacher name] class, it wasn't just the First Nations children that were like [that] because [teacher name] was just, I don't know, he was not a good teacher. And it wasn't just the First Nations children that were asking questions and that were like, I don't see the point in this. Like, why, why are we doing this? It wasn't just us, but we were the only ones who would get in trouble, and be sent out."
>
> **Indigenous student, rural school**

Further analysis of incident data reveals disparities in how disciplinary actions are handled across different student groups. While the sample sizes are small, patterns suggest that Indigenous students face harsher consequences for minor infractions such as defiance. In contrast, Non-Indigenous students tend to receive stricter discipline for more serious infractions like fighting or aggression. It is unclear whether these differences are due to the severity of the infractions or subjective decision-making by school staff **(Figure 22)**.

These trends reflect broader patterns across regions and schools. Yukon First Nations students in urban schools are three times more likely to have a reported disciplinary incident than their Non-Indigenous peers. Over the past 10 years, 1 in 4 Yukon First Nations students and 1 in 6 Other Indigenous students in urban schools faced disciplinary action, compared to 1 in 12 Non-Indigenous students.

Additionally, schools with higher Indigenous populations, such as Porter Creek Secondary and F.H. Collins Secondary, report some of the highest overall incident counts **(Figure 23)**. If Yukon First Nations students face more severe consequences for minor infractions, it could contribute to higher discipline rates, disengagement, and lower graduation rates.

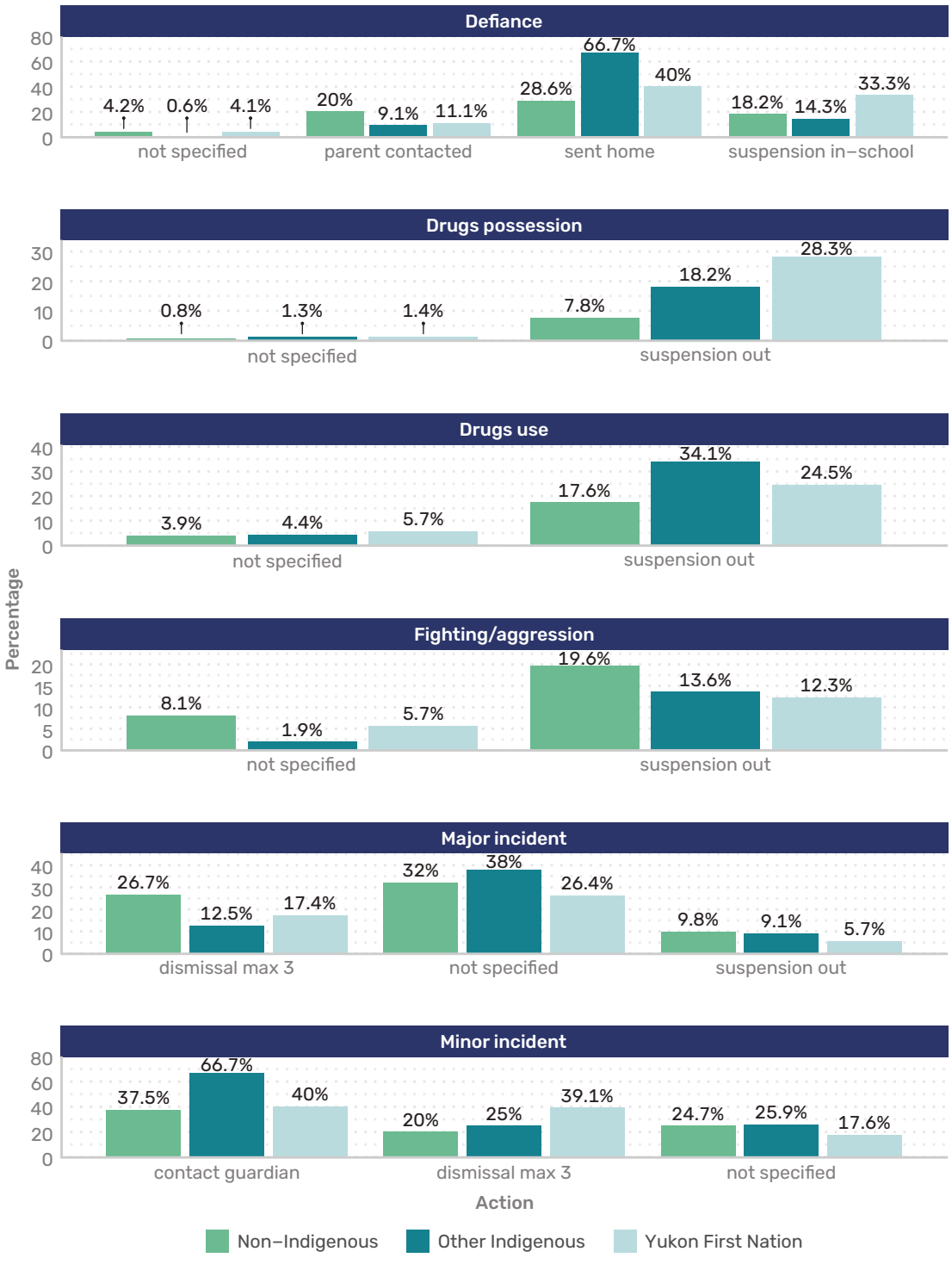
In rural schools, the overall rates of reported disciplinary incidents are significantly lower across all groups. 1 in 26 Yukon First Nations students and 1 in 31 Other Indigenous students in rural schools had a reported incident, whereas only 1 in 500 Non-Indigenous rural students did. **(Figure 24)**.

Some disciplinary actions were not recorded and were labeled as "Not Specified" for both Non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. This makes it hard to compare and track incidents and related consequences. Looking at the incidents in the "Not Specified" category reveals clear differences between the two groups.

For Non-Indigenous students, a major difference is that incidents of cheating are clearly documented, but the consequences are not. This leaves no record of accountability or whether the issue was properly addressed. Even more concerning is that Workplace Risk Assessment (WRA) incidents are only listed for Indigenous students. Without documented consequences in Aspen, it's unclear whether these risks are truly being addressed or if the administration is simply following a procedure without taking real action.

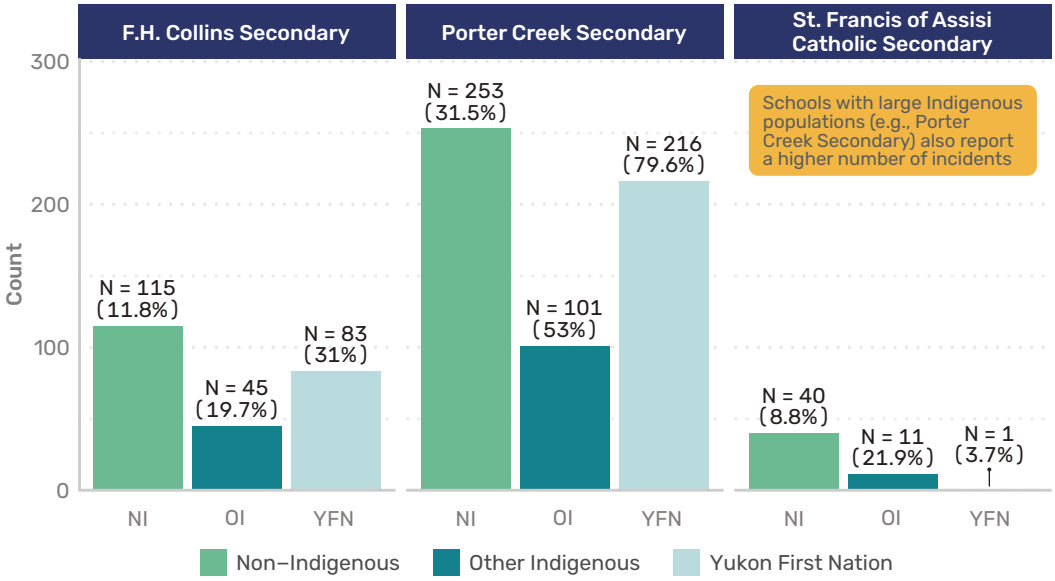
When comparing incidents that led to strict disciplinary actions, like detention, removal from class, or suspension, a significant imbalance appears between Non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. Indigenous students have a wider range of behaviours recorded as infractions, including both minor and serious incidents. Minor behaviours, like "horseplay" and "property misuse," are formally tracked for Indigenous students, while serious incidents, such as "VTRA incidents" (Violence Threat Risk Assessments), are recorded in Aspen only for Indigenous students. This shows a higher sensitivity to perceived threats or violence involving Indigenous students, whether or not those concerns

FIGURE 22 · Incidents and resulting actions by self-identification



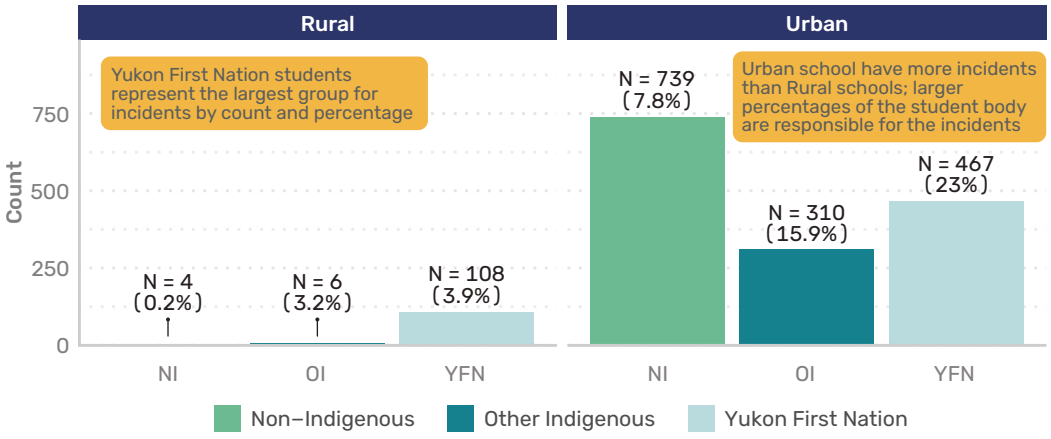
Percentages are relative to incidents by self identification

FIGURE 23 · Number of incidents by selected schools and self-identification



Percentages are relative to the total number of students in each group

FIGURE 24 · Number of incidents by region and self-identification



Percentages are relative to the total number of students in each group

"I fought because the teachers weren't doing nothing about kids picking on me. So, I just had to basically fight for myself. Stand up. Then I got kicked out."

Indigenous student, Whitehorse school

"I kind of feel a bit hopeless or basically just, like, existing. Not really there. … voiceless"

Indigenous student, Whitehorse school

are justified. It suggests that Indigenous students may face more scrutiny, even for actions that might not need formal documentation, such as horseplay.

The data also shows that Indigenous students are often labeled with subjective terms like "non-compliance" or "instigation." These labels rely on the perception of authority figures rather than clear rules. This suggests potential bias, where behaviours seen as defiant or provocative may be more often blamed on Indigenous students, possibly due to unconscious biases. There is an uneven application of standards—terms like "non-compliance" and "instigation" are used only for Indigenous students, while Non-Indigenous students are not categorized in the same way. The inclusion of "VTRA incidents" for Indigenous students, but not for Non-Indigenous students, highlights the extra scrutiny and reflects broader societal biases that may unfairly link Indigenous students with disruptive or violent behaviour.

Using subjective labels like "non-compliance" and "instigation" makes the unequal treatment worse. These terms are more open to interpretation compared to the clearer label of "dangerous behaviour" used for Non-Indigenous students. This increases the chance of disciplinary actions being based on perception, not objective facts, which can lead to unfair consequences for Indigenous students. The bias in these labels may make the gap in discipline between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students even wider.

With Indigenous students already facing a higher likelihood of disciplinary incidents, gaps in disciplinary data raise further concerns about transparency. To improve data transparency, YG should ensure that every action is properly and consistently documented.

When Indigenous students face disproportionately harsh discipline for minor infractions, they may feel unfairly targeted, eroding trust in the school system. Without a sense of respect and fairness, students are less likely to engage in learning, increasing the risk of dropout and lower graduation rates. Schools must ensure that expectations are equitable and disciplinary actions are applied consistently across all student backgrounds. Without these measures, Indigenous students will continue to face barriers that hinder their academic success and engagement.

To promote equity in expectations and student voice, schools must prioritize culturally responsive discipline policies, transparent incident reporting, and supportive learning environments. When students feel respected, heard, and treated fairly, they are more likely to remain engaged, meet high expectations, and succeed academically.

"When we asked to be part of the meetings, they told us no. How can we help our kids if we're not included? We know what's happening at home, but they never ask us."

First Nation education worker

Relationship with Families and Communities: Building Trust and Working Together

Education is more than what happens inside a classroom—it is a shared responsibility that thrives on strong relationships between schools, families, and communities. In rural and remote areas, these connections are even more essential. Teachers and school staff are not just educators; they are members of the community, and the strength of their relationships directly impacts student success.

When schools fail to include Indigenous families in decision-making or disregard local perspectives, trust erodes. Once broken, trust is difficult to rebuild. Schools must move beyond surface-level engagement and take meaningful action to create real partnerships. This requires more than consultation—it demands collaboration, shared leadership, and a deep respect for Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning.

Example: *A racialized student reported differential treatment based on race regarding consequences applied for serious incidents. This was observed and supported by families of all parties. The communication back from the school administration was as follows: "... There was no differential treatment based on race, ethnicity or cultural background. [School] happens to have an excellent reputation for inclusion across the intersectionality of difference. Our staff recently spent several hours [at a training] examining privilege, equity vs. equality, and intersectionality, amongst other topics. Our staff are exceptionally sensitive to differences and the impact that it can have on students' school experiences, as well as the supportive factors that can be put in place to support and include students in our diverse school community. We continue to listen to students' and families' experiences and adjust our practice accordingly. ... If you or others involved feel that debunking their [student and family] perception around racism for these incidents could be effective, I am happy to do that. This is sometimes helpful."*

This response is egregious on multiple levels, beginning with a conclusive statement invalidating the student's experience which denotes the school's belief that its internal investigation was conducted from a value-neutral perspective. Speaking of the school's excellent reputation is inaccurate and indicates a highly concerning ignorance of public perception of the school. Putting forward "several hours" of training on deeply complex social justice concepts as proof that school staff are now anti-racist is at best naive and at worst, intentionally misleading. Touting the school's track record of listening and responding to students' and families' experiences, in explaining why the school is not responding to a student's experience, is gaslighting. Finally, offering to help debunk the student and family's "perception around racism" is deeply insulting and indicative of this administrator's depth of unawareness of how racism operates at both systemic and interpersonal levels. This communication remains one of the most unacceptable examples of school-family exchanges that we have seen throughout this review.

> "I feel like that would make me feel more comfortable … just having somebody who understands my culture … who can connect with me."

Indigenous student

> "In [the community], we were engaged in community, we were going out to feasts, you know? In Whitehorse, people have their circles. If we're talking about how to make change, you need people in relationship with each other whereas here we just have our circles."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

True partnership means working alongside Indigenous families, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers to shape both what students learn and how they learn it. It also means showing up—not just in classrooms, but in the broader community. Attending local events, listening to community voices, and honouring traditional teaching methods demonstrate a commitment to building trust. Schools must also examine assumptions about who parents are, how they will behave, and what their values about education should be. Similar to how students who diverge from school norms are labeled as deviant, parents and caretakers who do not conform to these expectations are often seen as "negligent," "confrontational," or "lacking credibility." When educators take these steps, students feel more valued, supported, and connected to their education.

Representation and Trust

Trust is strengthened when Indigenous families see themselves reflected in the education system. Indigenous students thrive when they have role models—teachers, principals, and decision-makers—who understand their culture, values, and lived experiences. Schools must actively create spaces for Indigenous voices to influence policies, curriculum, and leadership. Representation is not just about visibility; it is about ensuring Indigenous perspectives shape the education system in meaningful ways.

For non-Indigenous educators, earning trust requires humility and a recognition that they are guests in the community. This means listening more than speaking, acknowledging the strengths of Indigenous knowledge systems, and respecting local ways of learning and decision-making. Trust is not given automatically—it is built through consistent, respectful actions over time.

When educators invest in building relationships beyond the school walls, they demonstrate that they value the community and its traditions. These relationships foster an environment where Indigenous families feel heard, respected, and included.

"Communication has to be more than sending a letter home. Come to our events. Meet with us where we feel comfortable. Then we'll talk."

Indigenous parent

"... if I tell the principal I want a meeting, it almost always goes my way. But if my sister goes or my sister-in-law ... they railroad her so fast. And so I find that because they now know that I know the education system, and I can advocate, that power shift has happened."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse

Fostering Ongoing Communication

Strong relationships rely on open, honest, and ongoing communication. Schools must respect diverse ways of engaging with families and be flexible in how they connect. Some families may prefer face-to-face conversations with Elders, while others may engage through community gatherings, ceremonies, or informal check-ins. Adapting to these preferences shows a willingness to listen and demonstrates genuine respect.

When families feel excluded from their child's education, students often struggle. Schools that actively welcome families into learning spaces, seek their input, and recognize their role in education create stronger, more effective partnerships. When families feel valued, students are more confident, engaged, and motivated to succeed.

Building meaningful relationships with Indigenous families and communities is not an extra step—it is essential to creating schools that reflect the strengths, history, and values of the people they serve. When educators commit to this work, they help shape an education system where all students feel seen, respected, and empowered.

Moving Toward Change

Creating a fair and equitable education system requires more than recognizing the biases that affect Indigenous students—it demands meaningful action. Teachers, schools, and communities must work together to break down systemic barriers, foster trust, and ensure that every student is treated with respect and dignity. By addressing bias, setting high expectations, and amplifying Indigenous voices, we can create an environment where all students have an equal chance to succeed.

One key step is committing to self-reflection and professional development for educators. Schools must prioritize anti-bias training and culturally responsive teaching practices to ensure that Indigenous students are not subjected to the racism of low expectations. Recognizing and challenging implicit bias can transform how educators interact with students, shaping a more supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Another essential shift is ensuring Indigenous representation at all levels of education. Indigenous students must see themselves reflected in their curriculum, teachers, and leadership. Representation fosters belonging, motivation, and pride, reinforcing the idea that Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning are valuable and integral to education. Schools must actively recruit, support, and retain Indigenous educators and administrators, ensuring that decision-making includes those with lived experience and cultural understanding.

Trust is the foundation of strong relationships between schools and Indigenous families. Schools must go beyond superficial engagement

> "We are very cohesive and trying to get to the point of being, we're all school staff—it doesn't matter who you're working for, other than on paper … We're all here with the same goal to support students and families."
>
> **First Nation education worker**

> "Teachers are doing the best that they can, depending on where they are."
>
> **First Nation education worker**

and foster genuine partnerships with Indigenous communities. This means listening, adapting, and creating spaces where families feel valued as equal partners in their children's education. Schools that embrace Indigenous ways of knowing and learning create more inclusive environments where all students thrive.

Education should be a tool for empowerment, not exclusion. When Indigenous students receive fair treatment, high expectations, and meaningful support, they can reach their full potential. Breaking cycles of systemic bias requires collective effort, but the rewards—a more just and inclusive education system—benefit everyone. Only through sustained commitment and action can we create schools where Indigenous students feel valued, capable, and supported in their educational journeys.

Calls to Action

1. Develop annual, mandatory anti-racism training specific to education and hire and or contract the requisite facilitator.
2. Commit to making cultural safety training mandatory and ongoing for all educators working in Yukon schools.
3. Commit to developing a departmental YFN 101 course for educators and hiring the requisite facilitator to deliver the course and enforce the mandatory requirement that all educators working in Yukon schools take YFN 101, or a local First Nation 101 course if available in the community.
4. Update procedures to ensure annual and mandatory evaluations of school administrators, team leaders, teachers and EAs. Add students, families and First Nations' input during the evaluation process.

Educator Reflection

- How do I address and challenge racist stereotypes, jokes, or incidents that may arise in my classroom, and workplace in general? Why or why not? How could I be better equipped to address these incidents?
- If I'm a White teacher, do I feel like I'm an ally to my BIPOC students and colleagues? Why or why not? What could I do to improve how I show up as an ally? If I'm a BIPOC teacher, how do I show up as an ally and/or someone who may have had similar experiences?
- Do my student's family members feel comfortable coming to school? Why or why not? Do I feel comfortable talking to my student's family members? Why or why not?
- What's one implicit bias that I hold? How did I come to hold that bias? What can I do to counteract it?
- We've heard that when it comes to strong relationships with students, families and communities, teachers need to go the extra mile, how do I feel about this? Why?
- Do I have strong relationships and cultural connections with community members?
    - If not, what steps can I take to build those relationships?
    - If so, how can I share that knowledge with other educators? What should teachers learning to do this for the first time be aware of?

EXPERIENCES OF RACIALIZED STUDENTS

> "There was a book with clear instances that were Islamophobic and the teacher said it wasn't a big deal and the principal just said it was [my] issue."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

> "There is a genuine concern on the part of teachers of how do we address this? I'm not sure the skillset is coherent among all teachers. We had anti-racism [training] but there was no real visible tangible next steps. I think it might be a capacity issue of the administration—that support would be coming from Education and I'm under the impression that there's not much capacity from Education right now."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

While this review's contents primarily investigate anti-Indigenous racism in the education system, it is vital that the experiences of other people of colour do not go ignored. This is especially crucial within the context of a rapidly growing and diversifying Yukon population, both in Whitehorse and the communities. Challenging anti-Indigenous racism in education addresses the same root causes of racism that impact other people of colour as well—colonial legacies and ongoing colonial mentality, White Supremacy, and Eurocentrism in the education system. Being able to identify and draw connections between experiences is an important step to building cross-racial solidarities rooted in ethics of empathy, commonality, and accountability.

As mentioned, major gaps in EDU's data and record-keeping processes have presented significant issues in this review, and that extends to reliable records about racialized students' experiences in the education system. Unlike Indigenous students, who are often affiliated with a First Nation and/or have the opportunity to self-identify as Indigenous, there is no similar system in place to track students of colour. The demographic data available is based on imperfect categories such as home language, citizenship status, and religious or cultural accommodations **(Figure 2)**. These categories fail to capture the diverse experiences of students of colour as they do not necessarily represent the realities of students of colour who come from families thst are multi-generationally Canadian, or even multi-generationally Yukoner. This lack of proper data collection means that many students of colour in the Yukon are left without the support structures they need. Their experiences are too often overlooked or misunderstood. For example, students from refugee backgrounds may require trauma-informed care and wraparound supports, along with experiencing the same acculturation challenges that recently arrived immigrant children are adapting to. Meanwhile, racialized students who are native-born or whose families have been in Canada for generations may experience a different form of racism—one that is more subtle and often linked to identity issues. These students may feel disconnected from both their cultural heritage and their Canadian identity, as they are neither fully recognized by their cultural community nor integrated into the broader society.

Conversations with non-Indigenous students and educators of colour reveal a recurring theme of isolation and tokenization. Similar to their Indigenous peers, many of these students struggle to find representation within the curriculum and their teachers. Further, there is often both explicit and internalized pressure to assimilate to "being Canadian" that leads many racialized youth to believe that suppressing their cultural expression is key to effective acculturation and fitting in (Kaufmann, 2021, p.53). This feeling of needing to assimilate is even more pronounced when they are a small minority in their class, grade, or school, which is true of all Yukon schools outside of SFA, which has a substantial Filipino population.

In response to these challenges, it is crucial that educators are equipped to support racialized students in meaningful ways. Educators must be trained to understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students and respond to their needs with respect and empathy. Students should

> "When I was a kid, I didn't have the vocabulary for why life was harder. It was a lot of fitting into boxes and not realizing who I was because I was trying to fit into all these boxes to appease and fit in … How can I use my uniqueness, my culture to please the White people? Like I would put on a brown accent everywhere I went and people loved it, they ate that [expletive] up … teachers would ask me to put on my 'brown' accent … I didn't realize how problematic it was."
>
> **Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school**

feel seen and celebrated for their unique identities and cultures. Furthermore, educators must be vigilant in recognizing and confronting racism when it occurs, both between students and from staff to student. We heard multiple disturbing accounts of racism towards racialized students from staff that are blatantly unacceptable. This not only reflects ignorance on the part of individual educators, but school cultures where this behaviour is tolerated, then normalized, by the silence of other educators who may not feel comfortable to call out their colleagues.

Educators and students shared of commonly witnessing instances of racism in their schools but not feeling comfortable or capable of addressing it. This is highly concerning given educators' roles of maintaining school environments that are safe and inclusive for all students. Establishing school cultures with zero tolerance of racism, and training and equipping educators to feel confident in calling out, should be a priority for EDU moving forward.

A nuanced understanding of how immigration fits in with Indigenous ethics and sovereignty efforts is an ongoing conversation that Indigenous and racialized scholars have been discussing for decades (Lawrence and Dua, 2005; Sharma and Wright, 2008; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Dhamoon, 2015). Within the context of the Yukon, these considerations are perhaps even more urgent and necessary. Newcomer students joining the school system presents an important and crucial opportunity to educate them on Yukon First Nations history in a way that avoids oversimplified narratives of trauma and tradition. Instead, the curriculum should also include pre-contact history, self-government agreements, and the relationship with the land. This approach allows newcomer students to build a more meaningful understanding of Indigenous cultures beyond the narrow perspectives currently taught in Canadian education and immigration systems. Perhaps most importantly, learning through this lens helps racialized students develop a clearer understanding of Canadian history and empowers them to become allies to their classmates, friends, and community members in the efforts toward decolonization.

FINDING 4: OPERATIONAL

> "Why wasn't this dealt with years ago? You know it's better late than never, but it's all political stuff … You could really see and hear from stories of Indigenous students saying they aren't being treated equally, and that was also what the Elders were saying since 1960. That's when we were allowed back in the public school system. Ever since then, we have been treated lower than normal. We were never given the support needed … When I see that the students are still struggling, it's really hard to see that."
>
> **Elder**

The final finding of the review is **Operational**. The persistence of systemic racism in education continues to shape the experiences of Indigenous students and students of colour. Despite efforts to create equitable educational opportunities, significant operational challenges remain, particularly in areas where there is a disconnect between the mandate of education policies and their actual implementation on the ground. These challenges are further compounded by disparities in funding, resources, and access, which disproportionately affect Indigenous students, and students in rural community schools.

At the core of these issues lies a colonial framework that informs the education system, influencing governance policies and practices in ways that continue to undermine Indigenous self-determination. The ongoing gap between what is promised in policy and the lived realities of Indigenous students and students of colour underscores the need for systemic change. In addition, financial disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students—fuelled by rural-urban divides—create further barriers to achieving an equitable education system. These operational gaps prevent meaningful access to quality education for many Indigenous students, leaving them vulnerable to higher rates of educational disengagement and academic underachievement.

Structural Barriers

This section examines how systemic racism permeates the governance, policies, and practices within the education system, with a particular focus on Indigenous education. It explores critical operational issues, specifically the misalignment between education mandates and operations and the financial inequities that continue to marginalize Indigenous students.

Colonial Governance

Racism in education continues to harm students in the Yukon. Challenges like colonial structures, Western and colonially informed assessments, lack of meaningful cultural inclusion, limited resources and professional development for teachers, and a broader resistance to change (at times subconscious, at times explicit) have combined to sustain an education system that is deeply entrenched in colonial and racist ways of thinking and doing.

One of the core issues identified when talking to YG education workers is the way that the education system is governed. This system is characterized by a paternalistic, top-down approach to decision-making, which mirrors the legacy of residential schools and the contemporary reality of colonial governments. As one YG education worker shared, "The government still holds all the power. Even when they say they are working with First Nations, it's always under their terms." This reflects a significant barrier to decolonizing education, implementing Indigenous-led initiatives, and empowering Indigenous self-determination. Truly

> "Our next progress is to build a school too. An Indigenous school, like the French people have. Why not an Indigenous one? How do [the French] get a school and we don't? You know, [EDU] seems to support them more than us."
>
> **Elder**

> "The department two years ago makes this big announcement about how … attendance is going to look different for First Nation kids. You're not going to be penalized for going hunting … that's been in the [*Education Act*] for 30 years. Don't tell me that's brand new. You just got called on it."
>
> **Indigenous parent, Whitehorse school**

creating an anti-racist education system requires an "arms-length" separation from government control to allow for Indigenous-led education initiatives to flourish.

Despite the establishment of the First Nations School Board (FNSB), which represents a step toward more localized autonomy, structural limitations within the territorial governance system remain. While mechanisms exist to support First Nations self-governance, they do not always provide Indigenous communities with the full authority to shape educational experiences in ways that align with their priorities. These constraints reflect ongoing challenges in shifting away from colonial governance practices toward a model that fully recognizes Indigenous self-determination in education.

Inclusivity Through a Deficit-based Lens

Section 15 of the *Education Act* (s.15 (1)) lays out the conditions under which students needing accommodations with their education can receive those supports in the public school system. The educational goals for these students are determined through collaboration between the school team, professionals from the EDU Student Support Services (SSS) unit, the family and, if respectful of the "best interest of the child" and "respect for children views" of the UNCRC (Articles 3, 12), the students themselves. Officially, these goals are recorded in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Student Support Services is the EDU unit responsible for supporting these students through Educational Assistant (EA) funding and allocating and providing free consultant-based services to referred students, including educational psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, positive behaviour intervention specialists, physiotherapists, school community consultants, and more. There is a waitlist to access the services and an informal priority process (e.g., An elementary student would be considered before a grade 12 student.) Information from *How Are We Doing?* Reports show that, over the years, the representation of Yukon First Nations students and other Indigenous students with IEPs are consistently 2 to 3 times higher than non-Indigenous students.

Due to the high wait time, EDU sometimes refers Indigenous families to private specialists or NGOs funded through Jordan's Principle to access specialists' assessments or services. This deflects EDU's responsibility to provide the services that students and families are entitled to access, and it is a misuse of Jordan's Principles funding, which exists to fill gaps in public services for Indigenous children. Its function is not meant to compensate for mismanagement of an already existing public service.

> "And their [school team] immediate reaction is he's First Nation, he needs an IEP. … Of the 15 [nieces and nephews] that live in Whitehorse, I don't have any that haven't been offered an IEP. None … [EDU's] answer for IEPs is EAs. I don't want to devalue EAs in that entire process. But it's broken. It doesn't work. There's never ever going to be enough EAs for any school. So, why we continue to tie IEPs to student supports is baffling to me."
>
> **Indigenous parent, Whitehorse school**

Expecting Indigenous families and organizations to cover services for assessments of "deficit" according to colonial and Eurocentric standards of development, behaviour, and skills is deeply problematic. EDU and school administrations are responsible for ensuring that infrastructure and pedagogical practices adapt to the needs of their students, and not the other way around. This exemplifies systemic issues and responses over individualizing issues and responses.

Curriculum and Educator Training Gaps

(SEE FINDING 2: PEDAGOGICAL, PAGE 81)

Integrating Yukon First Nations perspectives into the curriculum is essential for fostering a more inclusive and accurate educational experience—one that reflects the culture and worldviews of Indigenous communities (see Pedagogical section). The Yukon government has committed to this goal, emphasizing the need to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being into education. This commitment is outlined in the Yukon First Nation Joint Education Action Plan (JEAP) 2014–2024, which states: *"The integration of First Nation languages, cultures, histories, and worldviews into all aspects of education is fundamental to improving educational outcomes for Yukon First Nation students and fostering a greater understanding for all learners"* (JEAP, 2014, p. 3).

Despite these assurances, the reality in Yukon classrooms often falls short. First Nation perspectives are frequently treated as an "add-on" rather than an integral part of the learning experience. One First Nation education worker noted: *"We have a few lessons on First Nation perspectives, but they're often at the end of the year when there's time. It's not woven throughout the year in a way that makes it part of everyday learning."*

This marginalization reinforces colonial narratives, with Indigenous knowledge largely absent from core subjects. While curriculum updates have introduced some Indigenous content, it remains largely confined to social studies or specific courses, rather than being embedded across subjects in a meaningful way. Teachers, expected to incorporate Indigenous perspectives independently, often struggle without sufficient guidance or culturally responsive resources. As another education worker pointed out: *"There are two people [at the Department of Education] who have been separated as YFN curriculum people, as if it shouldn't be incorporated into the broader Yukon curriculum—they're missing the boat."*

Compounding this challenge is the restrictive nature of collective agreements within the education system, which limits teachers' ability to access necessary professional development. One YG education worker observed, "The collective agreement is so restrictive that it doesn't allow for that." Without flexibility in these agreements, teachers lack opportunities for ongoing training and support to effectively teach Indigenous students and integrate Indigenous knowledge into their classrooms. The absence of comprehensive educator training on

> "Teacher didn't help me until I got an 80 per cent. Until then I was a lesser than. it's only after that he started to talk to me. The students are picked at the beginning of the school year. We were 5 to go in the special classroom—only 2 are alive now."

Indigenous alumni, urban school

COLONIAL EDUCATION SIDELINES CULTURAL EDUCATORS SUCH AS ELDERS AND KNOWLEDGE KEEPERS AS ADD-ONS, RATHER THAN INTEGRAL MEMBERS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

Indigenous cultures, histories, and teaching methodologies remains a significant barrier to meaningful reform.

While there is broad consensus on the importance of decolonizing education, the path forward remains unclear. As one YG education worker observed, *"Everyone's talking about decolonizing education, but no one can tell you exactly what that looks like in a classroom."* Without concrete action plans, systemic integration, and adequate professional development, efforts to Indigenize education risk remaining superficial—failing to create the transformative change needed for true educational equity.

Community-Centered Learning

A key insight from a First Nation education worker challenges the conventional view that schools are the primary source of education. They asserted, *"School isn't the only place where learning happens—our communities are our classrooms."* This statement underscores the importance of community-based learning, which includes land-based education and the sharing of intergenerational knowledge. The current education system, with its emphasis on formal schooling, is not well-equipped to support these holistic forms of learning.

A shift in perspective requires a reimagining of how education is delivered. Localized education, which connects students to their culture and the land, must become a core component of the educational experience. However, logistical, infrastructural, and resource barriers remain a significant challenge. As one YG education worker noted, *"The logistical pieces aren't in place to just facilitate it with ease. You know, it's a barrier like the current system isn't supportive enough to get classes out on the land as much as we would like."*

Disconnect Between Mandate and Operations

The disconnect between the mandate of inclusive education programs and their actual operations is a significant issue in attempts to reshape the Yukon education system to be more inclusive, and highlights broader systemic issues. These structural barriers are not only reflective of a system that often fails to address the needs of Indigenous students but also reinforce the inequities perpetuated by a colonial government. The systems in place tend to prioritize Western values, assessment methods, and ways of learning, leaving Indigenous students and communities at a disadvantage. While educational mandates may aim to bridge equity gaps, they are often disconnected from the realities of what it will take to actually put them into action.

Wood Street Centre School: A Case Study

Wood Street Centre School serves as a concrete example of this disconnect. It was originally designed to provide alternative pathways for students who struggled within Western education models, and still serves as a hub for programs that engage students through experiential learning. The original program dates back to 1988 with the Achievement, Challenge, Environment, and Stewardship program (ACES) created for grade 10 students. ACES was designed to engage Yukon First Nation students through positive peer modelling and environmental stewardship. Educators Bob Sharp, Bob Jickling, and Joe Jack were instrumental in developing this pioneering program, which laid the foundation for the diverse offerings now available at Wood Street Centre (woodstreetcentre.yukonschools.ca).

Over the years, the school has expanded its curriculum to include a variety of programs that cater to different student interests and needs. Among these is the Community, Heritage, Adventure, Outdoors, and Skills program (CHAOS) program, which is offered to students in grades 10 and 11. Developed in collaboration with the First Nations Programs and Partnerships Unit at the Department of Education, CHAOS integrates academic studies with outdoor expeditions to foster connection to community and heritage.

The school offers a range of specialized programs designed to cater to diverse student needs, as outlined in the table, opposite. These programs center experiential learning, academic enrichment, vocational and skills training, and First Nations cultural integration.

The origins of Wood Street Centre School are clear. The intention was always to provide alternative forms of education for students, primarily First Nations students, who struggled in the mainstream system. However, the programs became so successful and popular that more and more students were applying. Over time, the school's admissions requirements have shifted to favour high-achieving students who are already well-positioned within the existing system, inadvertently excluding the very students it was meant to support. This clearly indicates that even in programs such as Wood Street's that are meant to be an alternative for marginalized students, without proper accountability practices the standards will always bend towards serving the mainstream instead.

Program	Credits	
ACES/FACES *Achievement, Challenge, Environment, and Stewardship* is a Grade 10 course offered in English and French. The program focuses on outdoor education.	**ACES** • Physical & Health Education 10 • Science 10 • Social Studies 10 • Climate Change -Local Climate	**FACES** • Education Physique 10 • Science 10 • Science Humaines 10 • Outdoor Education 10 • Arts Mediatiques
CHAOS *Community, Heritage, Adventure, Outdoors, and Skills* is a program for Grades 10 and 11 with a strong First Nations focus. It was developed in collaboration with the First Nations Programs and Partnerships Unit.	**CHAOS 10** • EFP Literary Studies 10 • Physical & Health Education 10 • Spoken Language 10 • Social Studies 10 • Ancestral Technology 10	**CHAOS 11** • Outdoor Education 11 • Photography 11 • EFP Literary Studies and Spoken Language 11 • YT Ancestral Technology 11 • Exploration in Social Studies 11
ES *Experiential Science* is a Grade 11 course that emphasizes hands-on and self-directed learning.	**ES 11** • Life Science • Chemistry 11 • Visual Arts: Media Arts 11 (2 Credits) • Active Living 11 • Physical Geography 12 • Field Studies 12 (2 Credits)	
MAD *Music, Art and Design* is offered in Grades 9-12, providing students with experiences in arts related subjects.	**MAD 9** • Drama 9 • English 9 • Physical & Health Education 9 • Social Studies 9	**MAD 10** • Creative Writing 10 • Spoken Language 10 • Drama 10 • Physical & Health Education 10 • Social Studies 10
	MAD 11 • Creative Writing 11 • Drama 11 • Dance Technique & Performance 11 • Social Justice 12	**MAD 12** • Creative Writing 12 • Drama 12 • Dance Technique & Performance 12 • Social Justice 12
OPES/PASE *Outdoor Pursuits and Experiential Science* is a Grade 9 program available in English (OPES) and French (PASE). It integrates outdoor activities with active living.	**OPES 9** • Physical & Health Education 9 • Science 9 • Social Studies • Outdoor Pursuits 9	**PASE 9** • Education Physique Et Sante 9 • Science 9 • Science Humaines 9 • Outdoor Pursuits

> "[Those] programs were created for First Nations kids who do better in out-of-classroom learning environments, but now it's so competitive that First Nations kids aren't getting in. The application process is so biased towards them."
>
> **First Nation education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools**

Barriers Before you Begin

The data indicates that the selection process for these programs strongly favours students who demonstrate academic motivation and an interest in experiential learning—a complete departure from the program's intended purpose. As application rates surpass program capacity, admission remains highly competitive, creating a significant accessibility gap for students and limiting the opportunities for Indigenous students to participate.

The systemic barriers can begin at the start with a cumbersome application process that may lead Indigenous students to self-select out before even applying.

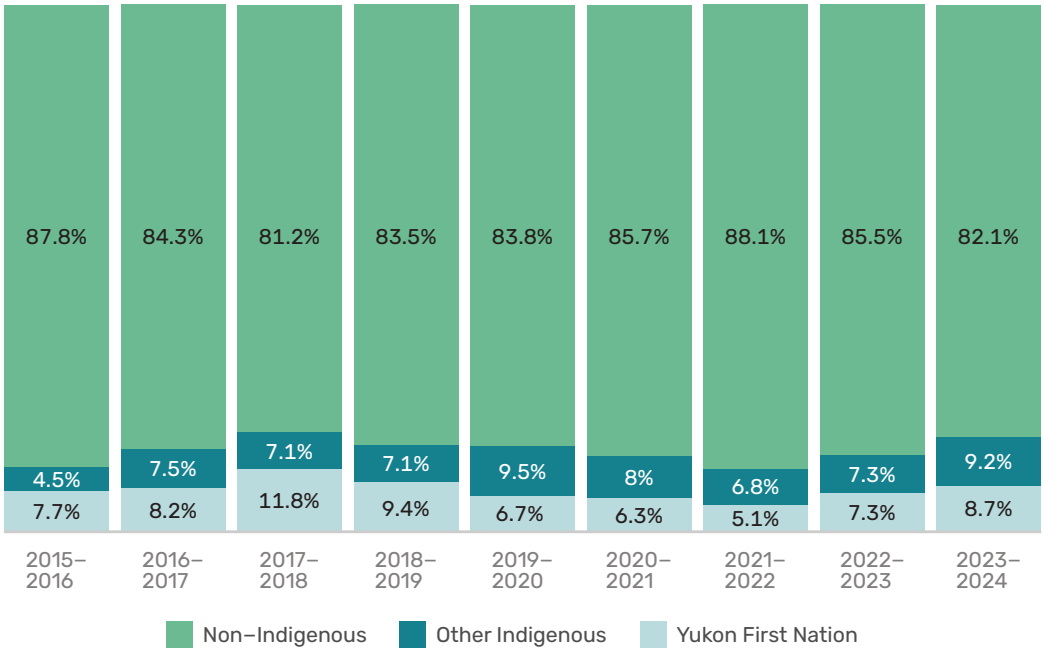
The requirement for one academic and one personal reference in the Experiential Science (ES) 11 application could pose a challenge for an Indigenous student in rural Yukon, given the restriction that relatives and family friends are not appropriate references. The colonial undertones of this application restriction are striking. In rural communities, family networks and close personal connections play a vital role in everyday life. Elders, extended family, and community leaders often provide guidance and help raise youth, yet these individuals are disqualified under the current criteria. Furthermore, in underfunded rural schools with high teacher turnover, Indigenous students may not have access to long-term academic mentors, making it difficult to secure references who are both eligible and familiar with their abilities. This policy fails to acknowledge the reality of rural life and Indigenous ways of being, where relationships are interconnected, and professional networks are limited.

Beyond logistical challenges, the application process reflects a broader cultural misalignment between Western and Indigenous ways of evaluating skills and leadership. The emphasis on individual competition through interviews and academic comparison does not align with Indigenous priorities of community contributions and collaborative achievement. The existing assessment structure may not effectively recognize Indigenous students' strengths, as it rewards communication styles and leadership traits rooted in Western frameworks. This approach marks a real shift from the program's original intentions, which were to address a need for alternative education for students left behind by the system.

Enrolment Disparities and Missed Opportunities

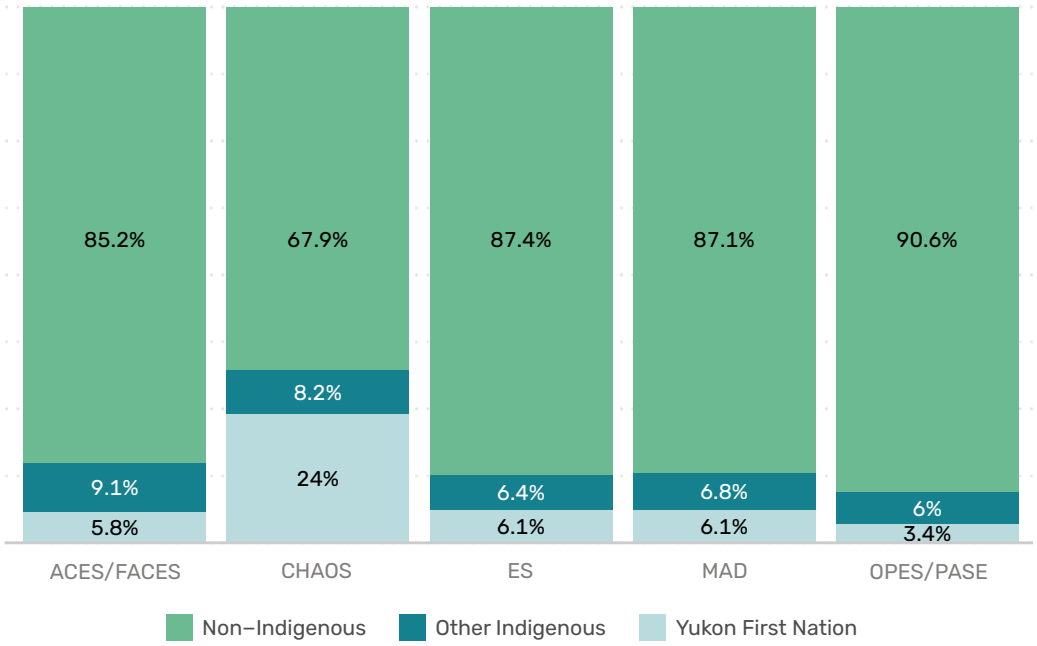
Figure 25 showcases program enrolment distribution, showing significantly higher participation for non-Indigenous over Indigenous students in Wood Street programs (~85 per cent to ~15 per cent between 2015-2024). This is compared to Figure 2 (see Setting the Stage section), a total demographic breakdown of ~68 per cent non-Indigenous to ~32 per cent Indigenous students in the Yukon between 2015-2024. Figure 26, meanwhile, drills down into enrolment per program in Wood Street, demonstrating that apart from the First Nations-focused CHAOS program (~68 per cent non-Indigenous to ~32 per cent Indigenous), the other Wood Street programs actually average closer to ~88 per cent non-Indigenous to ~12 per cent Indigenous. This indicates the troubling

FIGURE 25 · Wood Street School demographics



Self Identification of admitted Wood Street School student over the years
Non-Indigenous student make up the vast majority of the Wood Street School student body
Source: Aspen Course Selections GDE
n = 1523

FIGURE 26 · Wood Street School program demographics



Self-identification of students in each Wood Street School program over the 10-year period.
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
n = 1465

"The students we tend to see apply are students whose families value being on the land and have the capacity to take students out on the land, or there's students who are part of elementary schools that have emphasized skill development and outdoor experiences … There's a clear progression from like grades 4, 5, 6, 7, where they slowly build up skills and comfort to be on the land."

Educator, Wood Street Centre School.

extent to which Wood Street School programs are now serving a heavily non-Indigenous student demographic despite its original goals.

There are several factors behind this, beyond the cumbersome application process outlined above. Wood Street Centre programs have developed a reputation over time as being meant for students already passionate about and experienced in the outdoors. This can be intimidating for prospective students who might not feel like their skills, knowledge, or even their equipment is "good enough" to apply or attend. The racial implications of this are well-documented; in Canada and the United States, the outdoor recreation landscape and industry has long been dominated by middle to upper class White people (Gosalvez, 2020), and representation (or lack thereof) of people of colour has been a barrier that has only recently been called to account (Martin, 2017). These demographic implications reflect in the three elementary schools anecdotally reported to have the most robust outdoor education programming: Golden Horn Elementary, École Émilie Tremblay, and Hidden Valley Elementary.

Re-centering Indigenous Voices

A Wood Street alumni shared that while participating in the Music Art and Drama (MAD) program, the limited Indigenous content focused primarily on trauma—listening to an Elder speak about Residential School experiences and participating in the MMIWG walk.

"Looking back, I wish we had explored more of our culture. Learning about history and trauma is important, but it's what was done to us—it's not our culture. I feel like we missed out on studying our stories and sharing them with the class. It would've been amazing to experience that side too—because there's so much more to the culture than the pain."

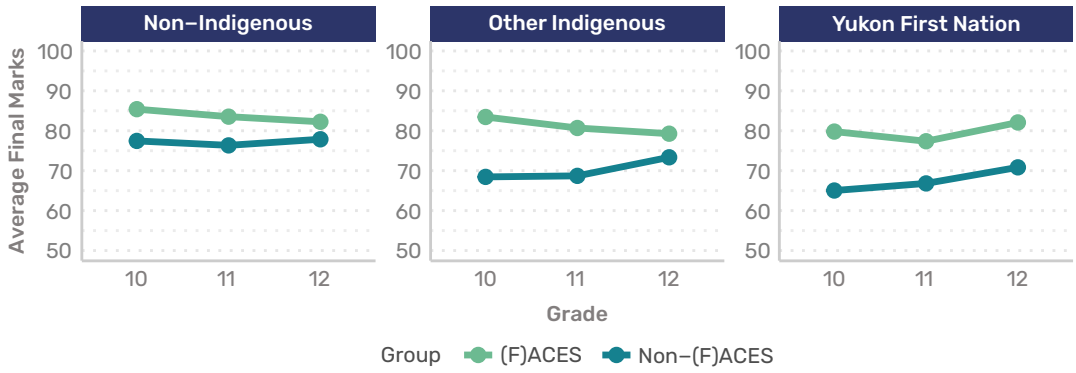
Indigenous Wood Street alumni

Data in **Figures 27-30** compares the average marks of Wood Street students, by demographic. The data shows that all students attending an experiential learning program perform better than their mainstream peers both before and after their involvement at Wood Street. Overall, the graphs show that Wood Street students are at the top academically and continue to excel once in the program, illustrating that the program works well and could benefit students struggling in the traditional school system.

These insights highlight both the strengths of Wood Street School and areas for improvement in ensuring equitable access and success for all students. To address systemic barriers to accessing Wood Street programs and field cohorts that are more representative of both the Yukon's population and the mandate of Wood Street Centre School, it is essential that programs become accessible to all students, not just as an optional offering or subject to a selection process. Steps must also be taken to ensure Indigenous students are not disadvantaged by their cultural and geographic circumstances. Additionally, reference eligibility for ES11 should be expanded to include respected community members, such as Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

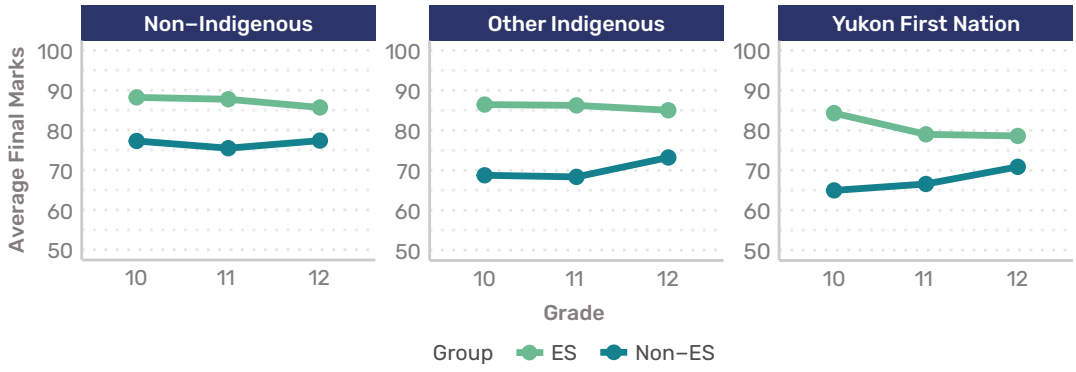
Strengthening First Nations programming by involving Indigenous educators and community leaders in curriculum development and delivery will further enhance the learning experience. Additionally, implementing targeted recruitment strategies can increase Indigenous and other students of colour participation in the programs. Taking these steps will not only support Indigenous students and other students of colour but also benefit the overall learning environment with more diverse perspectives, ideas, and worldviews.

FIGURE 27 · Average final Marks by grade and group (F)ACES vs Non-(F)ACES



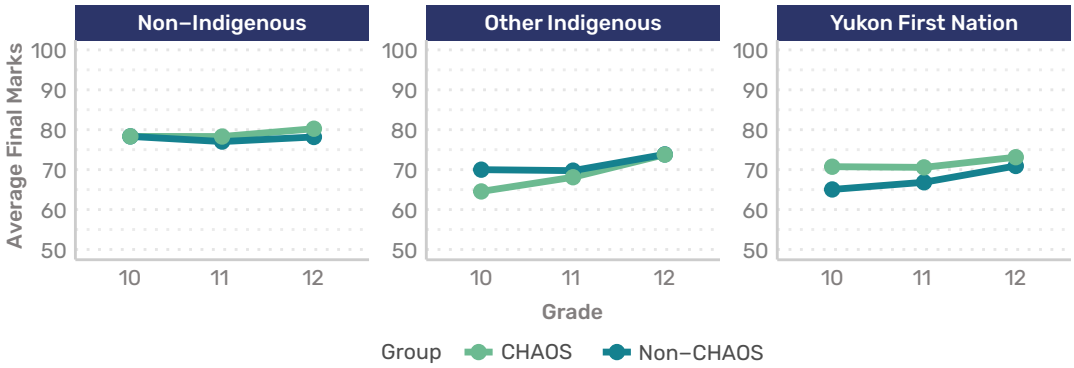
ACES marks by self-identification. ACES classes are run in Grade 10.
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Non-Indigenous = 281 • Other Indigenous = 30 • Yukon First Nation = 19

FIGURE 28 · Average final marks by grade and group ES vs Non-ES



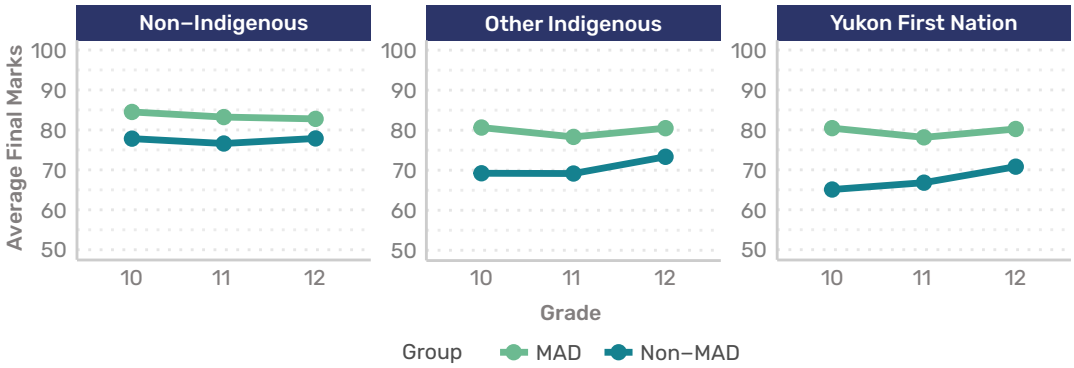
ES marks by self-identification. ES classes are run in Grade 11.
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Non-Indigenous = 285 • Other Indigenous = 21 • Yukon First Nation = 20

FIGURE 29 · Average final marks by grade and group CHAOS vs Non-CHAOS



CHAOS marks by self-identification. CHAOS classes are run in Grades 10 and 11.
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Non-Indigenous = 133 • Other Indigenous = 16 • Yukon First Nation = 47

FIGURE 30 · Average final marks by grade and group MAD vs Non-MAD



MAD marks by self-identification. MAD classes are run in Grades 9–12.
Source: Aspen Course Marks GDE
Non-Indigenous = 256 • Other Indigenous = 20 • Yukon First Nation = 18

"Teachers aren't educated to come in our area. When you move in, they [the community] watch you for years. 1st year they watch you, 2nd year they say hello, 3rd year you're in. Students have the hardest time with no consistent teacher. Not everybody has the capacity to understand, adjust to the shift of new teachers and new methods."

Indigenous educator, rural school

Beyond Wood Street

Unfortunately, the challenges faced at Wood Street school appear to be a trend in the Yukon rather than an anomaly.

Other programs created to help close the equity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, such as the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program (YNTEP) face similar concerns. Indigenous enrolment and participation in the program remain disproportionately low, highlighting the persistence of systemic barriers that prevent Indigenous students from fully accessing and benefiting from these opportunities. While inclusivity is important, the unintended consequence is that these programs often drift away from their original purpose. When the focus shifts, Indigenous students may no longer feel that these spaces are truly meant for them, leading to feelings of exclusion and disconnection from programs that were originally created to address systemic inequities.

YNTEP is aimed at increasing the number of Indigenous educators and incorporating Indigenous knowledge into Yukon classrooms that has struggled to maintain strong Indigenous enrolment. This year, 0 of 21 (0 per cent) of students enrolled in the 2-year BEAD program are Indigenous, while 9 of 35 (26 per cent) of students enrolled in the 4-year YNTEP program are Indigenous. Of note is that the BEAD program is the only Yukon-based pathway to being qualified to teach high school. The low participation rates among Indigenous students undermine the program's goal of fostering a representative teaching workforce that reflects the diversity of Yukon communities. Without sustained and targeted efforts to recruit and retain Indigenous students, these programs risk losing their effectiveness in addressing historical and ongoing disparities.

When programs designed to empower Indigenous learners no longer feel like safe or welcoming spaces, the original intent of addressing systemic inequities becomes compromised. To truly foster equity and inclusivity, it is essential to re-center these programs around the needs, voices, and experiences of Indigenous students, ensuring they feel a sense of belonging and ownership in the spaces meant to support their success.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS OF YUKON EDUCATION BUDGETS

A review of the Yukon's school budgets over the past decade reveals concerning trends in funding distribution, Indigenous student representation, and support structures within the education system. The analysis highlights important patterns, showing that while some schools benefit from higher budgets and enhanced support, others—particularly those with a higher proportion of Indigenous students—receive fewer resources. These findings present an opportunity to address discrepancies and promote equity across Yukon's schools.

Disparities in Budget Allocation

One of the most striking findings is the correlation between budget size and Indigenous student representation as seen in the comparative analysis of financial budgets from EDU between 2014-2024. The EDU Finance Department provided ten annual budgets, Site-Based Budgets Main, which were used to compare budgetary allocation and disparities across the territory. Schools with the highest budgets tend to have the lowest Indigenous student representation, while schools with the lowest budgets are those serving a higher proportion of Indigenous students, as evidenced by How Are We Doing (HAWD) reports. Interestingly, the schools with the highest budgets also tend to have the most paraprofessionals, including Educational Assistants (EAs) and Learning Assistant Teachers (LATs) allocations. This suggests that higher funding may be tied to the provision of additional support services. However, despite the allocation of these resources, the number of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) does not always correlate with the higher number of paraprofessionals, indicating that budget allocations aren't necessarily considering students' needs.

Enrolment vs Budget

A closer look at the relationship between school size, based on students' enrolment, and budget allocation reinforces the idea that larger schools often receive higher budgets. The five highest-budgeted schools in Yukon are large urban institutions, including three secondary schools that draw students from multiple elementary feeder schools, as well as two sizeable elementary schools. However, Robert Service School (RSS) in Dawson deviates from this pattern. Despite having fewer students than most urban schools, RSS maintains a higher budget than all the other rural and urban institutions. The factors leading to this exception are unclear when comparing with all schools' situations.

Budget Disparities in Rural Schools

When comparing similarly sized rural schools, additional disparities become evident. Del Van Gorder School (DVGS) in Faro, which serves the lowest proportion of Indigenous students among its rural counterparts, receives a slightly higher budget than Ghùch Tlâ Community School (GTCS) in Carcross, Ross River School (RRS) in Ross River, and Khàtìnas.àxh Community School (KCS) in Teslin, which all have at least twice as many Indigenous students as DVGS.

In contrast, three other small rural schools—Chief Zzeh Gittlit School (CZGS) in Old Crow, Eliza Van Bibber School (EVBS) in Pelly Crossing, and J.V. Clark School (JVCS) in Mayo—receive slightly higher budgets than DVGS, and they have significantly higher Indigenous student representation. The disparities in funding schools suggests a lack of coherence and potential unfairness regarding students' needs' considerations in schools budgets.

Of all the small rural schools listed above, RRS, CZGS, KCS, GTS, EVBS, JVCS, and DVG, the percentage of students with an IEP have been quite high considering the low number of students enrolled. Rural community schools, which have a higher representation of Indigenous students, also have a higher representation of Indigenous students with IEPs than urban schools. Some years, over the last 10 years, have seen more than 50 per cent of students with an IEP, in one rural school. The disparities in school budgets seen through the lens of students' needs (IEPs) and Indigenous representation is telling of an ingrained systemic racism.

Urban-Rural Budget Comparisons

Comparing St. Elias Community School (SECS) in Haines Junction with urban elementary schools offers another layer of insight. SECS serves fewer students than three urban elementary schools combined—Golden Horn Elementary School (GHES), Holy Family Elementary School (HFES), and Hidden Valley Elementary School (HVES)—yet has a higher budget than HFES and HVES. SECS also serves a higher proportion of Indigenous students than these urban schools, indicating that factors related to Indigenous representation and rural community needs may play a role in its funding model. Interestingly, SECS reports fewer students with IEPs than GHES, HFES, and HVES, reinforcing the observation that the reality and costs of students requiring specialized support aren't really taken into consideration in overall school budgets allocations.

"With the school board thing, we will keep it separate from YTG under the education part of it. [EDU] said, "If you guys have meetings, let us know." We said, "Yeah, you can come but you won't have a voice there." Yeah, they don't like that. They say, "We have been running the school system for years." I say, "Yeah, that's the problem."

Elder

"I don't think schools understand their role in nation building. I don't think the department understands their role in nation building, let alone reconciliation."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse school

Unique Funding Model of Wood Street Centre

Wood Street Centre operates under a unique funding structure, where a total amount is allocated annually, with additional funding directed toward specific programs. This model results in Wood Street's budget being higher than most rural schools and even surpassing that of some urban schools, with the exception of RSS. The specialized programs offered at Wood Street Centre require a different funding approach, reflecting the centre's distinct educational offerings and consideration for student needs in an experiential program, even though enrolment of students with IEPs at Wood Street Centre is very low.

Opportunities for Equity through Section 17.7 and FNSB

Looking ahead, more Yukon First Nations drawing down Section 17.7 under their Final Agreements and the establishment of the First Nations School Board (FNSB) provide promising avenues for addressing the inconsistencies highlighted in this analysis. These opportunities hold the potential to foster a more equitable distribution of resources, ensuring that schools serving a higher proportion of Indigenous students receive the support they need. By aligning funding with community needs and prioritizing Indigenous representation, these agreements could create a fairer and more inclusive education system in Yukon.

Moving Toward a More Equitable Future

This analysis highlights significant disparities in Yukon's school budgets, where schools with fewer Indigenous students and larger student populations tend to receive higher funding. While factors such as paraprofessional allocations, specialized programming, and geographic considerations might contribute to these patterns, the discrepancies between similar-sized schools and those serving Indigenous populations underscore the need for a more balanced approach. As Yukon moves forward with 17.7 and the FNSB, there is a clear opportunity to address these gaps and ensure that funding is aligned with the diverse needs of Yukon's students. By embracing these changes, the education system can better serve all communities and create a foundation for long-term success and equity.

"It's one thing to work under someone else's authority and have them throw you a few bones, but unless you're determining the direction of where it's going to go, it's going to be hard to get anything going."

First Nation education worker

"Your role as an ally is to make space for the Indigenous worldview, not to teach it. And we haven't even got that far. And the [*Education Act*] … has said up to 30 per cent local curriculum. We never met that. We never … enacted none of those things. And the department loves MOUs. I think MOUs are [expletive]. There's no point. They might as well give me a hallmark card."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse school

Co-Governance and First Nation Authority

In the Joint Education Action Plan (JEAP) 2014-2024, the Yukon Department of Education publicly affirmed its commitment to co-governance in education, recognizing the inherent authority of Yukon First Nations. In the document, the department states that it "works collaboratively with Yukon First Nations to advance self-determined education."

This signals a step toward reconciliation and partnership. However, while the intent is positive, systemic challenges continue to limit the full realization of this commitment. Decision-making power remains largely centralized at the territorial level, and while consultation occurs, First Nations' input is not always reflected in policy outcomes.

Six Yukon First Nations have adopted Section 17.7 in their Self-Government Agreements, granting them authority to co-govern education as an equal partner with the Government of Yukon, ensuring that the values, traditions, and knowledge systems of First Nations are taught within their Traditional Territories.

The provision aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action by empowering the First Nation to educate learners in a way that honours and reflects its unique culture, traditions and local history.

Despite its promise, however, implementing a co-governance model under 17.7 or recognizing First Nation Authority of education has not been without its challenges, which can undermine its effectiveness.

As one First Nation education worker reflects, "We participated in the development of the [cultural credit] policy and we had a lot to share, but it wasn't taken into account." This positioning of First Nations as advisors rather than co-leaders impedes meaningful change and limits the transformative potential of co-governance.

Achieving true co-governance requires a shift from consultation to genuine decision-making authority for First Nations. Strengthening the implementation of Section 17.7, coupled with clearer guidelines and accountability mechanisms, will ensure that First Nations have real authority over education rather than being treated as an optional addition.

By shifting toward true co-governance, the Yukon education system can create an equitable and culturally relevant learning environment that fully supports First Nation students and advances reconciliation for all Yukoners.

Calls to Action

1. Compensate anyone in a teaching role (e.g., Elders and Knowledge Keepers) on a fee schedule consistent with educators with Western certifications.
2. Expand the localizing curriculum team and support existing team with local First Nation education department and knowledge keepers.
3. Apply commitments in YG's *Breaking Trail: An inclusive Yukon Public Service* to hiring of new educators and administrators.
4. Apply a local hiring quota for community school positions.
5. Develop and apply a Departmental Anti-Racism Strategy.
6. Commit to and implement a full-scale review of data management and practices as recommended by the AG Report.

RECAP OF CALLS TO ACTION

Calls to Action for this Review

1. Commit to tabling this report in the Legislative Assembly in Spring 2025 and release it publicly.

2. Provide an initial response by June 30 and follow up with a public response by Dec. 1, 2025 and annually henceforth, outlining progress made toward addressing the calls to action.

Philosophical

3. Circularize the top-down hierarchy so students, educators, and First Nations have a voice in decisions made about them and for them

> **Example:** *The FNSB organizational chart models the rings of a tree, with Learners at the center and "all other entities radiating outward in wraparound rings of mutual support" (First Nation School Board, 2024).*

4. Commit to having every School Growth Plan include a section on its Anti-Racism policy that is aligned with EDU and contextually relevant with the local community.

5. Track efficacy of measures applied by schools and conduct regular and publicly available evaluations of School Growth Plans.

6. Create procedural guidelines (3-step process) for educators to deal with incidents of racism that occur on school grounds.

7. Establish a soft target on representation at Wood Street and meet it. Require the Wood Street team in consultation with community leaders to develop a comprehensive outreach plan that prioritizes Indigenous students and students of colour.

8. Make local, culturally relevant, and experiential education mandatory across all grade levels, with a focus on trades, hands-on technology, and ADST skill-building. Establish clear learning milestones from K-12 and align outcomes with local workforce needs.

9. Conduct a review of Early Childhood Education to better understand the gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students entering school.

10. Conduct a jurisdictional scan of other school districts that have effectively adopted a restorative justice approach to discipline.

    - Where disciplinary measures are addressed by schools, the student in question must be present and a part of that conversation. Every attempt should be made to include an advocate so the student feels adequately represented and supported.

Pedagogical

11. Create a Curriculum Assessment Committee to explore how Indigenous values, culture and knowledge can be mandatory and integrated into the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). This should be done in collaboration with the expertise of FNEC, YFNED, FNSB and Yukon First Nations.

12. Support pathways to teacher accreditation for Yukon First Nations Citizens and expand definition of teacher—keeping local teachers local and empowering knowledge keepers and language speakers to become teachers.

13. Honour Section 166 of *Education Act* and recognize First Nations Language Teachers as equals with other teachers. Remove the explicit exclusion of First Nation Language Teachers from the definitions of "teacher" in territorial education legislation.

14. Review the use of standardized assessments and create an alternative assessment model, with viable post-secondary pathways, that students and families can opt into.

15. Develop an EDU-wide outdoor experiential education program and hire the requisite EDU-based team to offer these programs to schools who may not have the in-house staff

Relational

16. Develop annual, mandatory anti-racism training specific to education and hire and or contract the requisite facilitator.

17. Commit to making cultural safety training mandatory and ongoing for all educators working in Yukon schools.

18. Commit to developing a departmental YFN 101 course for educators and hiring the requisite facilitator to deliver the course and enforce the mandatory requirement that all educators working in Yukon schools take YFN 101, or a local First Nation 101 course if available in the community.

19. Update procedures to ensure annual and mandatory evaluations of school administrators, team leaders, teachers and EAs. Add students, families and First Nations' input during the evaluation process.

Operational

20. Compensate anyone in a teaching role (ex. Elders and Knowledge Keepers) on a fee schedule consistent with educators with Western certifications.

21. Expand the localizing curriculum team and support existing team with local First Nation education department and knowledge keepers.

22. Apply commitments in YG's *Breaking Trail: An inclusive Yukon Public Service* to hiring of new educators and administrators.

23. Apply a local hiring quota for community school positions.

24. Develop and apply a Departmental Anti-Racism Strategy.

25. Commit to and implement a full scale review of data management and practices as recommended by the AG Report.

CLOSING THOUGHTS FROM ELDER ROGER ELLIS

> “We’ve got to be careful with our words and how we treat people. Because when you approach a student with kindness and respect, when you acknowledge them by name and show them they matter, that’s when real learning happens. That’s what builds a better system—not just for First Nations students, but for everyone.”

We need an education system that listens and learns from past mistakes. Too often, we’re dealing with rules and policies that were made without considering the impacts of residential schools or the realities of what our students are going through today. There’s a big gap. And if we’re not working to close it, then we’re just repeating the same mistakes.

A teacher’s job is to teach, sure, but it goes beyond that. If students aren’t learning, that’s everyone’s problem. It’s not enough to just stick to the book. You have to be aware of what students are bringing with them into the classroom—the pain, the history, the lived experiences that most of those rules and regulations were never built to understand.

Too many people don’t understand our students’ realities because they were never trained for it. That’s what I’ve told teachers and counsellors. You can’t help someone if you don’t understand what they’re going through. And the harm that comes from saying the wrong thing or not recognizing someone’s pain—that’s real. It’s why the training, the conversations, the understanding—it all matters.

We’ve got to be careful with our words and how we treat people. Because when you approach a student with kindness and respect, when you acknowledge them by name and show them they matter, that’s when real learning happens. That’s what builds a better system—not just for First Nations students, but for everyone.

It’s not just about fixing things for one group. It’s about making sure nobody is pushed aside or made to feel like they don’t belong. That means taking a hard look at the racism and ignorance that still exists and deciding we’re going to do something about it.

I want to see every First Nations kid graduate, to see less pain and more success. And that means hiring the right people, training them the right way, and making sure they’re prepared to help, not hurt.

We are seeing some progress, but there’s so much more to do. It’s not enough to just keep saying things need to change. We need to do the work. We need to bring in the teachings, the understanding, the empathy that’s been missing for so long.

We have to build a future where education is a place of healing, where students feel safe enough to speak up and to ask for help. A place where they know they matter.

It’s not going to be easy. But it’s possible. And it’s necessary.

ROGER ELLIS, TR’ONDËK HWËCH’IN ELDER

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APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL QUOTES FROM OUR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Finding 1: Philosophical

Top-Down Hierarchical Approach – School Culture

"They have a room dedicated to it, but they haven't been able to keep a teacher around. And I think if I had to take a guess, I feel like it's probably because of ... the atmosphere of the faculty ... Obviously I don't know that for certain, but based on what I've observed, I guess."

Indigenous student, rural and Whitehorse schools

"It was just a choice of where we're not going to segregate. Our cultural programming is for everybody. All of our office spaces welcome anyone in."

First Nation education worker

"There's a lot of teachers that just don't get it. F.H. has no idea—they have no First Nations culture, they just put it in a corner. The culture is not in the class. And only First Nations kids are taking First Nations classes, why not the White kids?"

YG education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"If [the ILC] didn't exist, some of these students could stay in the regular system. Why are they not accommodating them there? It's faster, it's healthy... Kids want to go to school, they want to be normal, they want to learn. I believe that."

White educator, Whitehorse school

Punitive and Excluding Culture – Punitive Approaches

"Me and some of the other First Nations kids... would get so fed up... like if we're going to be sent to the office anyway, who cares? Like we're just going to sit here and not do our work because we don't want to. And then it got to the point where the teachers and all of the EAs...they would actively ignore us, wouldn't look at us."

Indigenous student, rural school

"Did you ever find the guts to call [school administration] out on it?
Like, why are you following me?
"Yeah."
"What was the response?"
"I got suspended."

Indigenous student, Whitehorse school

"... I was bringing her lunch and [the school administrator] thought I was selling her weed. So he called the cops on me and said if I ever go back on school property, then I'll get charged. Because I brought my little sister lunch."

Indigenous student, Whitehorse school

"You keep saying it's for students' safety, but whose safety are they talking about? Who are you trying to protect?"

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse schools

"You have one foot in two canoes. One foot is your culture and the other one is the dominant culture and you can never catch your footing."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

"We met a lot of students especially coming from Porter Creek that have talked about racism from the teachers and just feeling like they were constantly getting kicked out of class for a variety of things, from swearing to wandering in the hallways to like not taking off hats and just feeling really targeted... And there wasn't a lot of understanding from teachers there."

White educator, Whitehorse school

Punitive and Excluding Culture – Streams of Exclusion in Schools

"When I left here I had really high grades and everything. And then when I went to [province redacted] I was almost failing Math 11. And then I wrote a letter to [the school], telling them like, 'Hey...I left your school with 90s. I go to a different school and I can't even get a 50. Like something's wrong.' And they didn't respond to me."

Indigenous Student, rural school

"You cannot get Physics, Chemistry, Biology 12 from a certified face-to-face teacher in your community. So how are we getting our kids in engineering? How are we getting our kids into biology, nursing, all of these pieces? It does me no good if Yukon University reserves ten seats in nursing, if none of my students have Bio 12."

Indigenous parent, rural school

"We're definitely seeing more families choose to move to Whitehorse for different school programs, sports, maybe just family circumstances... the students who stay are impacted by that. The more students who leave, the less students you have left that are engaged and want to be part of sports and things. Like you can only do so much with the [smaller] class size, so you have to combine and be creative."

First Nation education worker

"Best example of discrimination in front of your eyeballs, walk into the [community] school. You wanna talk about systemic inequality? 90 per cent of the issues in the [community] school would've closed the doors of any Whitehorse school."

First Nation education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

Siloing – Seeing and Responding to the Whole Child

"[Staff name] has grown up in a very privileged White family, and it's like he doesn't get how 90 per cent of the kids who live here grew up. And it's crazy. Like, I swear, like, every week he asked me and was like, have you figured out what you want to do after school? Like, have you figured it out? I'm like, no. ... I am not going to be spending thousands and thousands of dollars to go do something I probably won't want to do. ... Like, I want to get out of here and like, travel."

White student, rural and Whitehorse schools

"A lot of students who fail in courses purely because it's like, yeah, I could spend my weekend doing my precalc homework, or I could do a shift and my parents can worry less about rent this week."

Racialized student, Whitehorse school

"Dad, I guess, he would, because most of the kids were like, because we were in poverty. Third world here in [place name]. Right? We had the school here. My dad would cook lunch every day for all the kids. Right? Because we had lots of the people in the community, all the kids never had money for lunch or nothing, they would starve."

Indigenous alumni, rural school

"I could see how the system and the days set up were challenging for our citizens. Our First Nations families needing to go and grieve for an auntie that wasn't a blood relative, that wasn't a first cousin...what explanation you could use to take leave and then you only have one day bereavement or two day bereavement for a person that's just your sibling or your direct family. And so even that process was completely inaccessible to people because our grieving looks differently or coming together for more than just your immediate family. Our definition of family is a lot bigger."

Yukon First Nation language teacher, rural school

"This kid might have dropped off their sister at school and that's why they're late. This kid might have come from an overnight shift. This kid might have eaten cereal for every meal this week. We have no idea what these students are going through to even get in the doors at school, and then we want to give them crap for having their hood up?"

White educator, Whitehorse schools

"I also had a lot of people pass away, like a lot of family members pass away ..., that's not a uniquely Indigenous issue. Like, I know a lot of people who are non-Indigenous who've had that same experience. And so, in my experience, the people with the toughest times are not often, like if you put a bunch of—this is crude wording—but a bunch of White kids and a bunch of native kids 50/50 in the same classroom, there might be more native kids having a tough time, but in my experience, it's not because of the culture. it's because more native kids per capita will be below the poverty line."

Racialized student, Whitehorse school

"A huge area of systemic discrimination is the massive reliance on tech platforms or Google Classroom. We took a poll and so many of our kids didn't have devices [beyond phones] or internet at home, so they couldn't access education."

First Nation education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"In my experience, what you're looking for when it comes to your exterior identity, the biggest issue is often like there are kids who have to work, which is what it is, economically speaking. I wish that wasn't the case, but it is, and that often was not super well responded to. it's like I had some students who were like, I got to leave this class early and she's like, you're not allowed to do it, you can't do it. And the student would be like, it's fourth semester or fourth period. We're in a reading period. I can read on a bus and I like have to pay rent. And so I think stuff like that often isn't respected by teachers, because there's this perspective of you should be in like a nuclear family and everything should be good, and you should be at every class and the full period every time. that's something that was a big thing in high school. But in my experience, the success of an individual was not necessarily based on their culture as much as their financial circumstance and their mental well-being."

Racialized student, Whitehorse school

"Like 30 per cent of my friends are dead now. And that started quite early."

Indigenous alumni, Whitehorse school

Siloing – One Model of Success

"You either have to provide way more alternatives or every school takes what's working at these alternative programs and just incorporates it in their school... We're not doing anything that anyone else can't do. You just gotta sit down with that kid and ask them what they need."

White Educator, Individual Learning Centre

Siloing – Rural to Urban Transitions

"I would say coming down to Whitehorse felt more negative than positive for students. I say that as someone who's concerned for them. We all want to belong and for students, the big school in Whitehorse is not a place they feel they belong. Where they do feel belonging is with family, friends, and older cousins... unfortunately Whitehorse became a place where students were exposed to more things than perhaps they should be and they don't have their families there."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"The White colonial person in me says every one of these kids should be connected to a counselor when they arrive in Whitehorse but like, mental well-being and counseling can take many forms. It can happen through Elder mentorship and it doesn't have to be as narrow as I imagine it."

First Nation education worker

"There's this very unclear kind of communication protocol at upper levels. The end result is that especially rural Indigenous children don't get the immediate access to resources that is required for them to go from grade three to grade four properly. So, you're always like working at a deficit."

Indigenous parent, rural school

Finding 2: Pedagogical

Delivery and Assessment

"If you're grounded in relationships and accountability ... and that's the worldview that you're coming from, then a building that is very individualistic and there isn't this strong sense of community in the building, then you're going to see it very subtly, where kids are actually going to self-select out of spaces, too. And that's indicative of a toxic environment, especially for Indigenous students."

White educator, Whitehorse school

"There's students listening and they're there but not speaking up but that doesn't mean they're not engaged or understanding."

YG education worker

"Indigenous worldview is all about formative assessment—observing, learning alongside, mentoring and learning from mistakes, rather than a big red X, you're done."

YG education worker

"The single biggest predictor of success later in life is your sense of belonging in a school. So, if we're not prioritizing that piece, then it doesn't matter to me [about] the standardized testing and other supports... Then I think [about] the shift for the wellness of the child, and I am deeply concerned about how we do that in a system that is meant to prioritize regurgitation of information, not critical thinking."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse and rural schools

"It's working out good now. Because they ask if there is any cultural stuff you want to do out on the land, let us know and we can get the kids to get involved. I said yes, that is exactly why we are there. Because they learn on the land better than they do in school ... Out in the bush we are away from cell phone service, you have no choice but to listen."

Elder

"How can we balance bringing up their skill level, their age, their confidence? They're so ahead in so many other ways of their lives in terms of empathy, relationship, community. I'm hoping their confidence allows them to be lifelong learners."

White educator, Whitehorse school

"... during Covid, when the department made the choice to switch to online learning, which I totally understand. At no point in time did they have a plan to address the most vulnerable kids, which in my world are the kids who don't have a device at home, who don't have an internet package at home...So they made assumptions based on privilege that we'll feel for the next two generations... I hold that up as a very recent example of how the department was unable to acknowledge their own privilege and racist, like the discriminatory practices that came out there were horrific."

Indigenous parents, Whitehorse and rural schools

Training and Professional Development

"There are so many teachers that want to work on indigenizing their curriculum and pulling in more language and Yukon First Nations culture, but they don't know where to start. And they're nervous of messing things up."

YG education worker

"You can't just say, 'Here's some curriculum, start using it.' There needs to be support for educators to implement it. As soon as we say mandatory, people's backs get up. Where are the lesson plans, where are the supports?"

YG education worker

"Roughly 10 per cent of teachers a year will ask for support. It's mostly the same teachers."

YG education worker

"Let's teach teachers to be curious and how to be curious. Make sure you're curious in a respectful way, not putting the burden of education on the kid but putting it on yourself like, "Oh, I need to educate myself about this kid's culture," so I'm not just asking them to do all the work."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

Indigenous Content and Curriculum

"The whole point that [Section] 17.7 exists in our agreements is because of [authority]. It's one thing to work under someone else's authority and have them throw you a few bones, but unless you're determining the direction of where it's going to go, it's going to be hard to get anything going."

First Nation education worker

Indigenous Content and Curriculum – Educator Capacity to Localize and Decolonize Curriculum

"Teaching is such a funny thing because it's so easy to lose perspective on the bigger picture. It's just so busy and full on and especially as a newer teacher, it's so overwhelming that you just end up clinging to these rules because you're just trying to get through the day. And sometimes I would end a day and be like, 'Oh, I'm completely going away from everything that I believe in because I'm so stressed out.'"

White educator, Whitehorse school

"I'm really grateful I went to Elijah Smith [Elementary School]. You're surrounded by culture there...It's treated like normal everyday stuff. It's not like, "Oh, now this is your First Nations studies class" and you just learn about their trauma. Here it was like you learn about it every day...when it's normalized rather than this out of reach thing that you really only talk about when you're talking politics."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

Indigenous Content and Curriculum – Narrow Narrow Representations of Indigenous "Content"

"It was 11th grade pre-calculus ... [My teacher] was like, 'We just need to put the Indigenous part in now.' ... So she just gave us a paper, [and said,] 'Here's a template to make a box, make a box.' And then, I don't know, calculate volume or something to make it math and then draw First Nations art on the box, which she did say 'First Nations art,' which obviously is problematic in general. Like, you know, First Nations art is so vague that could mean anything ... she printed out examples of form line ... [that's] a very specialized [thing,] like it's not something you can just start drawing ... And she just kind of left us be. And then at the end of the class, after we folded our boxes and taped it and drew our 'First Nations art,' there was like these two girls ... they're like, 'So we drew a girl and you can see she's First Nations because she's holding a spear and has a feather in her hair' ... The teacher was like, 'Oh, that's great.' Which is like crazy ... I remember looking around the classroom and being like, 'Is anyone going to say anything?'"

Indigenous student, rural and Whitehorse schools

"Why can't [Indigenous content] go beyond electives? Why can't it be embedded in cores like math, science, socials? And why is it all separate? You can teach this together rather than in siloes."

YG education worker

"We bring in Elders, we do a camp, we try and make it so it's just like, we're going to sit in class and talk about this for the next couple of days. We're trying to do it in a good way, but having [Indigenous content] in just those two grades is tricky."

First Nation education worker

"The way that teachings are rooted in the land and place that we are needs to be integrated Kindergarten to Grade 12. Those are important lessons and it is continual learning that is important, not just like this one thing or subject."

First Nation education worker

"There should be a First Nations Studies class every year that goes deeper than just the basics. I often think about in 100 years, if Israel took Palestine and was offering a Palestine 101 course, how much of a slap in the face for those people it would be."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

"I often do hear from some of our citizens, like they say, 'I'm sick and tired of talking about residential school. Like, why do we have to keep talking about it'? It is hard for everybody, but I think it's particularly hard for Indigenous students. It needs to be integrated and talked about through, not just on Orange Shirt Day."

First Nation education worker

Indigenous Content and Curriculum – Challenging the Colonial Foundation of Education

"I told [the school] they couldn't teach my kids French in gym and other classes if they couldn't do it in Southern Tutchone... So, in those blocks they're supposed to be getting Southern Tutchone, but there's no Southern Tutchone teacher... So my kids use that to catch up on other things. So they've never had a French credit. And I have had to use the Education Act to force that to happen with every principal, every new superintendent."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse

"And I remember after like political studies class or whatever, a student after class [asked] about self-governance was like, 'I don't want my tax dollars going towards that.' ...And then I had to sit there and explain, like self-governing in the Yukon to them."

Indigenous student, rural and Whitehorse schools

Indigenous Content and Curriculum – Towards a Decolonized Curriculum

"I would like to have more cultural things and learning about other cultures.... I think that would be amazing because I think a lot of people are just kind of in their own bubbles. They don't really think about other cultures and other things. So, I think it would like expand people's minds."

White student, Whitehorse school

"Other kids say, 'I want my heritage and culture seen as well.' They also have a voice. So, I think it's approaching it like, 'This is the land we're on, so we're going to value and recognize this land and nation's ways of knowing and doing, but also embrace other cultures and traditions.'"

First Nation education worker, rural school

Finding 3: Relational

Relationship with Self: Recognizing Bias and Responsibility

"I feel very conscious of the fact that I'm not White when I'm at teachers' conferences. In Whitehorse there's a lot of well-meaning liberal White people. There's so much well-meaning, there's just so much blindness."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

Relationship with Self: Recognizing Bias and Responsibility – The Racism of Low Expectations

"I also found a lot of like a lot of assignments and stuff was like very, very easy for me. So, she would like challenge me by giving me like more things to do, which was really great. But then it was like it also happened a little bit in like grades eight and nine with [teacher name] because he was my English teacher and I found all the assignments, like, very, very easy. So, I would also like ask why. Like I remember just doing really, really silly things. And I was like, this is not beneficial to anybody. Like, I don't know why we're doing this. We were like looking at, like a feelings wheel or something. I was like, isn't this English class? Like, what are we doing? But I would ask why a lot. And when I asked why, he would just get frustrated and send me to the office where I would again sit for like the rest of the afternoon."

Indigenous student, rural school

"There's different types of people. Like you gotta find the people that are respectful and actually give you the respect you deserve, you know."

Racialized student, rural and urban schools

"Every kid who comes here just says, 'That school's so [expletive] racist.' Teachers don't expect anything from them or are super condescending to them. They patronize them because of their skin colour. Students who aren't visibly native talk about [stuff] that teachers say when they think native kids aren't around."

First Nation education worker and White former educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"And they're [staff] like, yeah, but just, you know, you have to ask us and ask for permission [it's a] respect thing. it's not like this really, really terrible place necessarily. But there's just like, you know, those random things where it's like, oh, you're power tripping me because I'm a young person and you're not."

Racialized student, urban school

"In Community, it's like a big family, everybody tries to be respectful to each other. And that's the big thing they teach us in communities too is like especially growing up First Nations. You learn about lots of respect for people and for everything, the land."

Racialized student, rural and Whitehorse schools

"And they were all like, not necessarily self-help books, but help books that she thought personally might help me. And moments like that, this is a teacher care and they like, sees me where I'm at and meets me there. That sort of stuff matters to me I think it's more than way more than a teacher's background or ... culture of the school setting, just having teachers where there's empathy and compassion and they meet you where you're at is that's like the coolest thing to have. And that's something that I've found to help a lot with not only my ability to work in a school setting, but my ability to work on myself and continue to operate as an individual."

Racialized student, Whitehorse school

"I got sent to the office that morning, they would just keep me for the whole day because they didn't want me to participate [to a whole school event] because I think they thought it would, like, reward me."

Indigenous student, rural school

Relationship with Self: Recognizing Bias and Responsibility – Representation Matters

"I personally felt that not being White was helpful for me [in the community]. I was able to have conversations with students, they were curious and they could ask questions about my culture or even talk about colonization in less academic ways."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"A start would be to not hire just one First Nation individual to work... but so that they feel represented as a team and their opinions matter when they're in a meeting. But even just getting there, the interview process, the job application would have to be rethought so that we could even get to the point where we can provide these opportunities of good paying government jobs to Indigenous applicants."

First Nation education worker

"They need to get teachers who actually have a connection to the content. You can't just read a book and be able to teach [Indigenous topics.] If you're not Native and teach this, try to learn."

Indigenous student, rural and Whitehorse schools

"[EDU] is not a diverse institution. If we want to advocate for the needs of all students of all races—First Nations, Filipino, European—then in the management of it, we need diversity, right? Which is not the case with Education. A lot of people that have been there for a long time, they've been moved around or promoted over the years and so, I don't know that [they] truly have a growth mindset and a diverse leadership."

First Nation education worker

"Even though Whitehorse is diverse now, it's not diverse in terms of who holds power. Who's pulling the strings here? Mainly White people, and when you're a kid seeing that, it's gonna be in your subconscious mind."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

"It's really hard to understand what a person of colour feels like if you're not a person of colour... It's hard for me to say, "Oh, they can do this and this," when there's one issue here and it's a lack of representation. There's only so much you can teach a person about being culturally safe but they will make mistakes and it will cause harm to students. Elijah Smith felt like a safe space because there were brown people teaching me. For kids it's a subconscious thing where it's this feeling of familiarity."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

Relationship with Self: Recognizing Bias and Responsibility – Equity in Expectations and Student Voice

"But I found like a lot of the teachers were like, "Oh, my God, you're so lucky to be learning this. I didn't even know about this. Like, I just found out about residential schools five years ago." it's kind of not fun to be hearing about that in like the ninth grade and the 10th grade when my mom pulled me aside when I was six and was like, 'This is what happened at residential school.' Being in an environment where it's like baby's first introduction to residential schools every year nonstop until grade 12."

Indigenous alumni, rural and Whitehorse schools

"I think it's really hard to change people who don't want to be changed...Like if you have multiple students telling you you're not doing a good job, at one point I would feel like you would try to better yourself or to see how you can communicate better...so if you don't find that within yourself and you can't Google search anything, then like how would you improve a person like that? You know what I mean?"

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

Relationship with Families and Communities: Building Trust and Working Together – Fostering Ongoing Communication

"I always felt like my teachers didn't know where I was coming from, like they couldn't understand what my family was going through. It would've been different if they actually talked to us."

Indigenous alumni

"I asked ...for my daughter to have an Ed psych because I think she has a similar learning disability that I have with math. And I had zero response until this year when her teacher reached out and said, hey, what's the update on [child name]? You know, where is she at?... And then all of a sudden I get elevated to one of the directors at Student Support Services, and I'm like, "Well, where have you been the last year?" And the response that I get is go to YFNED."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse school

"I remember I read this article about how a lot of Indigenous families don't feel safe at the schools because of residential schools, and how the schools haven't made any effort to create relationships with the communities in any way. Like, it's just this separate body that you're sending your kids to. They don't really know what's happening there."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

"When kids that you have very low expectations for struggle, there is a real, and it's not even perceived, it's a real pattern to dealing with that...You're looking at the child as coming with baggage. You're making a bunch of assumptions about that child. You know, if anybody had asked about that child... the assumptions is, you know, Indigenous, struggling, probably struggling family, you know, like problems, nutrition, you know, things."

Indigenous parent, rural school

Experiences of Racialized Students

"[It's] about 1 in 4 people [in school], mostly kids are making racist comments or jokes ... teachers are clueless ... I don't know if they don't want to see. I just think they just don't hear. it's even in class. They just yell things ... and the whole class hears, the teacher definitely hears her, but they just don't do anything. Basically just ignore."

Racialized student, Whitehorse school

"I've had experiences where a White teacher comes to me to go talk to their students because their students are perpetuating racist jokes...the care is there and the acknowledgement that it's not right, but you shouldn't be coming to me. That speaks to a capacity issue."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"I love so much of what I got growing up here, being able to empathize with people who don't look like me ... and understanding Indigenous struggle, culture, history, pride, I learned that here. I would've loved it if it was more diverse, to be able to learn about myself while learning about all these other things ... I hope every [BIPOC] kid who grew up in Whitehorse can go and see that there's people out there who look like you, talk like you, act like you."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

"I've had experiences where a White teacher comes to me to go talk to their students because their students are perpetuating racist jokes...the care is there and the acknowledgement that it's not right, but you shouldn't be coming to me. That speaks to a capacity issue."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"It was just isolating... it's like no kids looked like me or thought like me or had the same experiences as me or things like that. I think in societies where there's not as much diversity, it usually centers the White experience a bit more."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

"...I think because there hasn't been a lot of diversity, the kids here are more ignorant... a lot of the times they use racial slurs, especially for black people and things like that which made it extremely uncomfortable. And I think it was always this weird juxtaposition I was in because a racial slur for Indigenous people is Indian. And then like, ethnically people assume I'm Indian. So it was just like this weird place to be in."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

"I remember one time I was in gym class, and these kids threw these origami bombs at me, and then they, like, yelled terrorist or something. So that day was especially bad."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

"Whenever I approached a principal or a teacher saying I felt uncomfortable with a situation, it wasn't treated the way I hoped it would be treated. Creating a safe space for kids to approach you with those sorts of things is crucial. When you're surrounded by people who don't look like you, you're already gaslighting yourself and when that happens to you, it validates your feelings and your belief that your personhood doesn't matter as much as White kids."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

"...if we have things that have to do with culture, it's usually like food from different places. And people could bring something from where they come from."

Racialized student, Whitehorse school

"Christmas is a big thing for kids obviously, so to make me feel included, my teachers every year would ask me to do a presentation on Eid, and I would make a presentation to the whole school. The effort was great but it wasn't placed in the right spot, to have a kid who already feels othered, make them further other themselves."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse schools

"It was like a lot of stereotypical comments I started to get at that point. They were like, 'Oh, I really love Indian food. Oh, you must study really hard... oh, I love Indian culture. But I'm not Indian."

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

"I've thought about how I can broaden this unit because by grade 10, I think they get residential schools but then it's like, can we talk about ... the Indian Act, but when I try to do that, there's the students who have just rolled in who literally are like, 'What is residential school?' So then I have to do the basics again."

Racialized educator, rural and Whitehorse schools

"I think one of the best learning experiences I had, I got to learn more about Indigenous cultures from youth who were the same age as me. And it was really cool because then we had one night where we were just like exchanging folklore...and I think it was a really cool learning experience because it was nice to connect my own cultural background with theirs and then them telling me more and more about what to expect in the Arctic and what has been tradition, because all mythology is there for a reason, right?"

Racialized alumni, Whitehorse school

Finding 4: Operational

"I think they need to rethink the system here, and especially when it comes to Indigenous learners...They need to look at statistics instead of pretending like everything's fine. I think they're pretty okay with the status quo personally and why is that?"

White alumni, Whitehorse school

Structural Barriers – Colonial Governance

"I think the FNSB is doing a good job. They're focusing on doing their work. I think it has to be Indigenous led. It cannot be led by non-Indigenous people. We have to be at the heartbeat of it. It makes no sense to take over things and then just give it back to the same government people who leave their jobs and then come over to work for First Nations."

Indigenous educator, former First Nation education worker

Structural Barriers – Inclusivity through a deficit-based lens

"He was having significant behavioural issues, understandably. And we were [by EDU] told to go to YFNED. There was no supports in the school system."

Indigenous parent, Whitehorse school

Disconnect Between Mandate and Operations – Enrolment Disparities and Missed Opportunities

"I had an interesting meeting last year with Kwanlin Dün...to discuss why are there not more Kwanlin Dün students at Wood Street programs? And so we started talking and it turned out... So Elijah Smith School has most KDFN students that are in Whitehorse... what I was told is most of those students go to Porter Creek Secondary and very few of those students are even making it past grade eight before students are dropping out or being expelled... they're not even getting to the point where they're applying because they're either leaving school or being forced out of school in grade eight"

Educator, Wood Street Centre School

Disconnect Between Mandate and Operations – Re-centering Indigenous voices

"I fought like tooth and nail to get him into a Wood Street program so he could be into CHAOS. I'm a huge supporter of CHAOS, and I think it's an example of the systemic racism in the system, in that CHAOS constantly has to defend itself but MAD program doesn't. Those programs were created for at risk youth and are now full and highly sought after programs."

Indigenous parent, rural and urban schools

APPENDIX B: CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD


1
-18
DEFINITION OF A CHILD
2
NO DISCRIMINATION
3
BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD
4
MAKING RIGHTS REAL
5
FAMILY GUIDANCE AS CHILDREN DEVELOP
6
LIFE, SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT
7
NAME AND NATIONALITY
8
IDENTITY
9
KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER
10
CONTACT WITH PARENTS ACROSS COUNTRIES
11
PROTECTION FROM KIDNAPPING
12
RESPECT FOR CHILDREN'S VIEWS
13
SHARING THOUGHTS FREELY
14
FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND RELIGION
15
SETTING UP OR JOINING GROUPS
16
PROTECTION OF PRIVACY
17
ACCESS TO INFORMATION
18
RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS
19
PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE
20
CHILDREN WITHOUT FAMILIES
21
CHILDREN WHO ARE ADOPTED
22
REFUGEE CHILDREN
23
CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES
24
HEALTH, WATER, FOOD, ENVIRONMENT
25
REVIEW OF A CHILD'S PLACEMENT
26
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HELP
27
FOOD, CLOTHING, A SAFE HOME
28
ACCESS TO EDUCATION
29
AIMS OF EDUCATION
30
MINORITY CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION
31
REST, PLAY, CULTURE, ARTS
32
PROTECTION FROM HARMFUL WORK
33
PROTECTION FROM HARMFUL DRUGS
34
PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL ABUSE
35
PREVENTION OF SALE AND TRAFFICKING
36
PROTECTION FROM EXPLOITATION
37
CHILDREN IN DETENTION
38
PROTECTION IN WAR
39
RECOVERY AND REINTEGRATION
40
CHILDREN WHO BREAK THE LAW
41
BEST LAW FOR CHILDREN APPLIES
42
EVERYONE MUST KNOW CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
43-54
HOW THE CONVENTION WORKS
CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD
In child-friendly language
unicef CANADA
ONE YOUTH

If you are under age 18, you have these rights. **1**

All children have all these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what language they speak, what their religion is, what they think, what they look like, what their gender is, if they have a disability, if they are rich or poor, and no matter who their parents or families are or what their parents or families believe or do. No child should be treated unfairly for any reason. **2**

When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect you. All adults should do what is best for children. Governments should help the people and places responsible for looking after children. **3**

Governments must do all they can to make sure that you can enjoy all the rights in this Convention. This includes making laws to protect your rights and making sure decision-makers and young people know these rights. **4**

Governments should let families and communities guide and support you to learn how to use your rights as you grow up. The older you get, the less guidance you will need. **5**

You have the right to be alive. Governments must do everything they can so that every child has the chance to grow up in the best possible way. **6**

You have the right to a name which is officially recognized by the government. You have the right to a nationality (to belong to a country). Governments must ensure these to help you stay with your family and have the rights of citizenship in your country. **7**

You have the right to your own identity – an official record of who you are. This includes your name, nationality and family relations. No one should take this away from you, but if this happens, governments must help to quickly get your identity back. **8**

You have the right to be cared for by your parents unless they cannot take care of you. If your parents don't live together you have the right to stay in contact with both unless it isn't best for you. **9**

If you live in a different country than your parents, governments must let you stay in contact and be together. **10**

Governments must stop children being taken out of the country when this is against the law – for example, being kidnapped by someone or held abroad by a parent when the other parent does not agree. **11**

You have the right to give your opinions freely on issues that affect you. Adults should listen and take your views seriously. **12**

You have the right to share freely with others what you learn, think and feel, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms other people. **13**

You have the right to choose your own thoughts, opinions and religion, but this should not stop other people from enjoying their rights. Parents can guide children so that as they grow up, they learn to use this right in positive ways. **14**

You have the right to choose your friends, meet with others and join or set up groups, as long as it isn't harmful to you or others. **15**

You have the right to privacy. The law must protect your identity, information about you, your communications and your reputation from any attack or misuse. **16**

You have the right to get information from the Internet, radio, television, newspapers, books and other sources. Adults should make sure the information is not harmful. Governments should make sure you can get information from lots of different sources, in a language that you understand. **17**

You have the right to be raised by your parent(s) or a guardian. All your parents or guardians should always consider what is best for you. Governments should help them when needed. **18**

You have the right to protection from being hurt or mistreated, in body or mind. **19**

If you cannot be looked after by your own family, you have the right to be looked after by people who respect your religion, culture, language and other aspects of your life. **20**

When children might be adopted, the most important thing is to do what is best for them. If a child cannot be looked after in their own country – for example by living with another family – then they might be adopted in another country. **21**

If you move from your home country to another country as a refugee (because it was not safe to stay there) you have the right to help and protection and have the same rights as children born in that country. **22**

If you have a disability you have all the rights in this Convention as well as special care and education so that you can live a full life. **23**

You have the right to the best health care possible, clean water to drink, healthy food and a healthy and safe environment to live in. All adults and children should have information about how to stay safe and healthy. **24**

If you live in a place where you are being cared for away from your home, you have the right to have these arrangements checked regularly to see if everything is going well and if this is the best place for you to be. **25**

Governments should provide money or other support to help children and their families meet their needs and participate in society. **26**

You have the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live, and opportunities to do what others can. The government should help families and children who cannot afford this. **27**

You have the right to a good quality education. Primary education should be free. Secondary and higher education should be available to every child. You should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level possible. Discipline in schools should respect your rights and never use violence. **28**

You have the right to education that helps you fully develop your talents and abilities. It should help you learn about your rights and how to respect other people's rights, cultures and differences. It should help you learn how to live peacefully and protect the environment. **29**

You have the right to your language, culture and religion. Indigenous and minority groups are entitled to special protections to enjoy these rights. **30**

You have the right to rest, relax, play and take part in cultural and creative activities. **31**

You have the right to be protected from doing work that is dangerous or unhealthy, or gets in the way of your education, rest and time for leisure. If you work, you have the right to be paid fairly. **32**

You have the right to protection from taking, making, carrying or selling harmful drugs. **33**

You have the right to be protected from sexual exploitation (being taken advantage of) and sexual abuse. **34**

Governments must make sure that children are not kidnapped or sold, or taken to other countries or places to be exploited (taken advantage of). **35**

You have the right to protection from any kind of exploitation (being taken advantage of), even if these are not specifically mentioned in this Convention. **36**

No one is allowed to punish you in a cruel or harmful way. For young people charged with a crime, prison should always be the last choice and only for the shortest possible time. Young people in prison should never be placed with adults. They should have legal help and be able to stay in contact with their family. **37**

You have the right to be protected during war. No child under age 15 can join the army or take part in war. **38**

You have the right to get help if you have been hurt, neglected, treated badly or affected by war. **39**

If you are accused of a crime, you have the right to know and understand what you are accused of. You have the right to legal help, to protection of privacy and to be treated fairly by the justice system based on your age. The aim should be to help you find a positive way to continue your life, with prison only a last choice. **40**

If the laws of your country protect your rights better than this Convention, then those laws should be used. **41**

You have the right to know your rights. Adults should know these rights and help you to learn about them. **42**

These articles explain how governments should make sure all children enjoy all their rights. The United Nations – including the Committee on the Rights of Child and UNICEF – and other organizations should help governments and others fulfil their responsibilities for children's rights. **43-54**

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Child-Friendly Language

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important agreement by countries including Canada who have promised to ensure children's human rights. These rights are what you should have or be able to do to grow up, with the best your country has to offer. All of these rights are connected and equally important. You are born with these rights and they cannot be taken away.

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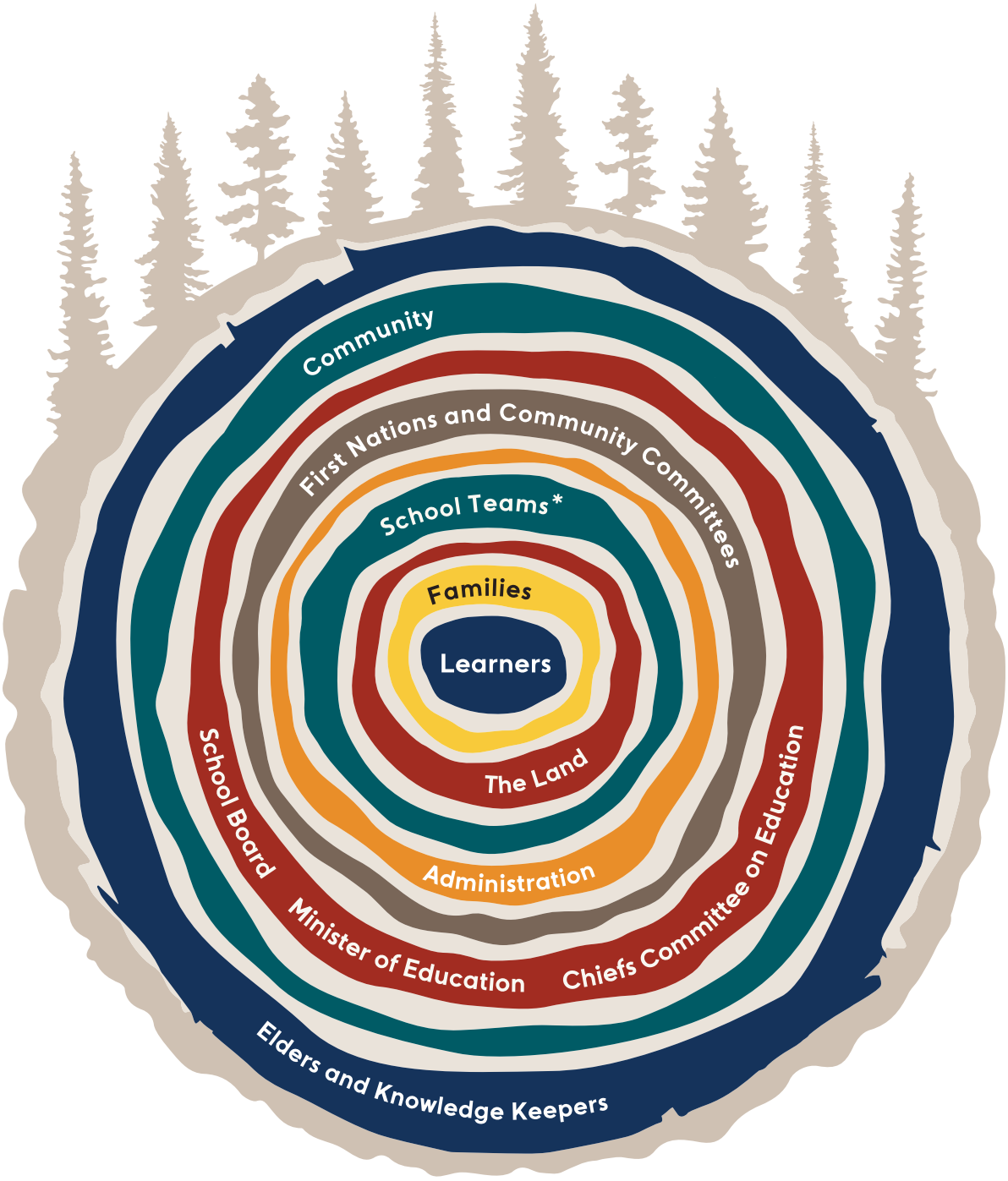
www.unicef.ca/crc

APPENDIX C: FNSB ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

FIRST NATION SCHOOL BOARD
ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



* Teachers, Learning Assistance Teachers, Educational Assistants, School Staff, and First Nation Education Staff

ARTIST STATEMENTS

Guná Jensen

The grey figures you see at the bottom are depicted upside down with their eyes closed. This symbolizes colonial systems being laid to rest—systems that have caused harm to our people historically and in the present. It also represents the systems that must be dismantled—or, to be more direct, put to rest permanently. A line of cedar runs between the blue and grey figures. In this work, cedar represents protection. I chose cedar intentionally: it is something deeply connected to us, and it carries meanings of both protection and healing. The large central figure has cedar emerging from their hands, symbolizing growth and care. Within this larger figure is a child, nested inside. Both the larger figure and the child have ears extending from their heads, and within one ear, there is an eye. This detail represents the deep receptivity of knowledge that our children possess, and it speaks to our responsibility to nurture and protect that learning. There is also a smaller, light blue figure positioned between the large hands and the grey formline. These blue figures represent our ancestors, offering protection and shielding us from the ongoing influence of systemic, racist, colonial structures that continue to assert power and supremacy. As a whole, this design speaks to the resilience of our communities. It is a declaration of our ongoing commitment to create culturally safe spaces for learning—and a promise that we will never stop working toward this vision, no matter what it takes.

Guná is of Dakhká Tlingit/Tagish Khwáan ancestry from the Dahk'laweidi Clan. She honors her ancestral Tlingit art form while merging formline into a bold contemporary vision. Trained by masters such as William Wasden and Mike Dangeli and educated at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, she channels her culture into art that challenges and confronts, shaping her unique approach to visual storytelling. Her work, which has been recognized with awards such as the William and Meredith Sanderson Prize for Emerging Canadian Artists, has been exhibited in galleries across Canada. Guná has shared her knowledge through lectures and workshops at institutions such as Princeton, Emily Carr, and Stellenbosch, where she explores themes of cultural theft, decolonization, and healing. For Guná, art is activism—a call to respect, protect, and empower. She is committed to utilizing her art as a powerful voice for Tlingit sovereignty, thereby inviting audiences to honor Indigenous resilience.

Cole Pauls

I was excited to have the chance to illustrate authentic scenarios that affect real people. Racism within the education system can cripple any student's learning, and Indigenous students especially. The Yukon education system and all Canadian school systems need to understand that incorporating First Nations traditions and teachings will benefit the entire school community. I would like to see more arts and community-based projects within the education system. Our youth are so creative and they deserve to express themselves in the classroom.

Cole Pauls is a Champagne and Aishihik First Nations Citizen and Tahltan comic artist, illustrator & printmaker hailing from Haines Junction, Yukon, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration from Emily Carr University. Residing in Vancouver, Pauls has created three graphic novels: Dakwäkãda Warriors (2019), Pizza Punks (2021) and Kwändür (2022). In 2017, Pauls won Broken Pencil Magazine's Best Comic and Best Zine of the Year Award for Dakwäkãda Warriors II. In 2020, Dakwäkãda Warriors won Best Work in an Indigenous Language from the Indigenous Voices Awards and was nominated for two Doug Wright Award categories: The Egghead and The Nipper.

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