

Brief on

Improving Graduation Rates and Successful Outcomes for Indigenous Students

Submitted by:

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**Mzhiikenh Toulouse Brief on
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Aanii. My name is Mzhiikenh Rodney Toulouse. I am a registered member of the Sagamok Anishnawbek which is located on the North Shore of Lake Huron in Northeastern Ontario and the Robinson Huron Treaty Territory. I live in the City of Greater Sudbury in Ontario. I am submitting this brief because my mother told me that you might be interested in hearing from an Indigenous student.

I am 19 years old. Since I started high school in September 2019, I have completed 21 of the 30 credits that I need to earn my Ontario Secondary School Diploma. I have dreams of graduating from high school and from post-secondary, but I am struggling to make those dreams happen. It's taking me longer to finish high school due to issues that I've been living with.

Since I started Grade 9, I have been struggling with my mental health. Since before then, I've been struggling with health issues which, I've been told, relates to my premature birth. The physical trauma that I experienced as a newborn have contributed to physical health challenges and mental health challenges.

I live with anxiety and depression, and I have difficulty sleeping at night. It's really affected my ability to attend school and to achieve my dreams. I have felt paralyzed with anxiety when trying to leave my house to go to school. I found it difficult to attend classes in a normal high school where there was a lot of noise and an overwhelming amount of people in the hallways & classrooms. I didn't feel safe at my high school. I've also experienced racism at my school where people would look at me, and I would see fear in their eyes. I feel that they were worried about whether I would do something to them even though they didn't know me.

Now that I am over the age of 18, I have switched over to an adult education program. It has helped me, in some respects, because there aren't large groups of students around me.

Classrooms in my adult education program are quieter because there are less people. The teachers have more time to spend with me when I need help. I also can set my own time to attend classes because I don't need to stick to a strict schedule like in a regular high school.

However, I still struggle to make it to school some days due to my anxiety.

I feel that more needs to be done for Indigenous students to help us to deal with the mental health issues that we live with. We need help to cope and to learn how to continue our studies while

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managing our daily lives with depression, anxiety, neurodivergence, or other issues we are dealing with.

I feel that I need a safe place to learn. This include smaller classrooms with less students. It also includes access to workers who I can trust to help me learn ways to manage the issues that I live with. I need people who are there regularly, who I can count on to be there. In the past, I have participated in programs, but the workers changed frequently. I felt like I couldn't trust them because they weren't going to be around for a while. When I saw a mental health person at the high school, I was worried that whatever I shared was going to be shared with the school administration.

In the City of Greater Sudbury, medical services are accessible. Before I turned 18, it was very difficult to access services for my mental health. Really, the only place to get guaranteed service was at the hospital. My mother wanted services to help me before I needed to go to a hospital. I wasn't thinking about it at all. Special mental health services are needed for students to support us right away when we need help. We also need supportive teachers and parents who can help us.

Learning about my Indigenous language, culture and spirituality is important because it helps me to feel better, to connect with my culture, and to earn credits in subjects that I can relate to. When I attended Lasalle Secondary School, I was able to take 2 Indigenous studies courses. It wasn't enough. More courses are needed so that we can learn more detailed information about our language, culture, and spirituality. I wish that I could have spent more time out of the classroom and on the land, where I could have connected with the environment. I have a passion for the environment, and I may study it in post-secondary. Spending more time out on the land might have given me a better space to learn, away from the noise and unsafe school environment.

Teachers should have leniency granted when it comes to practicing Indigenous teachings and other practices. For example, at my high school, teachers were unable to smudge indoors. Some teachers aren't as knowledgeable on the Indigenous topics they are trying to teach. There should be opportunity to bring in people who have the knowledge to share their teachings.

I learn differently than the way students are taught in classrooms. I need to hear lessons in a different way. Reading texts is difficult, but listening to somebody talk about the course material

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is helpful. Working on active projects that have me moving or experimenting makes it easier to learn than listening to a teacher.

I hope that the Committee that is studying how to improve graduation outcomes can make changes to:

- improve the way that Indigenous students access mental health services to help us stay in school and achieve our dreams,
- allow schools to teach subjects in smaller classrooms,
- to increase the Indigenous language and culture that is taught and provide flexibility in the delivery of Indigenous knowledge, and
- use my land-based and hands-on exercises for students to learn more effectively.

I believe that it will help not only me, but it will help many other students.