



SYSTEMIC GAPS IN EDUCATION PROJECT

Report #3 : Disparities in Educational Opportunities in First Nations Education in Ontario

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Chiefs of Ontario systemic Gaps in Education Report #3 - Unequal Opportunities

The Chiefs of Ontario and the Systemic Gaps in Education Research Team would like to thank the busy educators who took the time to share information about their schools with us, and People for Education for sharing their data, the Systemic Gaps in Education Steering Committee and members of the Chiefs of Ontario Chiefs Technical Committee on Languages and Learning who provided feedback throughout the process provided feedback throughout the process.

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Introduction

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission put forward a vision – and a Call to Action – that First Nations and all levels of government **would work together, with sufficient funding, to “close educational gaps within a generation” (Call to Action #10)**. To support that work, the Commission called for annual reports to be prepared and published to compare educational attainment of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada compared with non-Aboriginal peoples (Call to Action #9). This data was meant to inform a strategy, jointly developed by government and Aboriginal groups, to eliminate gaps in outcomes (Call to Action #7) and gaps in funding (Call to Action #8) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

While there are high-level national and regional statistics on disparities in educational attainment available (Government of Canada, 2023), they lack the specificity to support effective strategies informed by the data.

The literature on overcoming educational inequality has always included a strong emphasis on *educational opportunities*, that is, the mix of simple and complex resources and supports that are likely to contribute to educational success (Coleman, 1966; Grubb, 2009; Guiton & Oakes, 1995). The concept is intuitive. Where students – particularly those who are already traditionally underserved – do not have access to the adequate resources to support their success, they are less likely to be in a position to achieve.

The concept is intuitive. Where students – particularly those who are already traditionally underserved – do not have access to the adequate resources to support their success, they are less likely to be in a position to achieve. All too often marginalized students, frequently experiencing greater academic challenges, have significantly lower educational opportunities as well.

It is extremely improbable that students can achieve faster-than-average gains in learning and well-being if they are forced to struggle with substandard resourcing for their educations.

The survey data in this report assesses the extent of disparities between the educational opportunities of two key groups of First Nations students, relative to provincial averages. We report on opportunities available to students attending First Nations schools, and on opportunities in the provincially-funded school boards where there is the highest First Nations enrollment.

The Chiefs of Ontario Reports on Systemic Gaps in Educational Outcomes and Opportunities

This is the third in a series of reports from the Chiefs of Ontario on systemic gaps in education, designed to fulfill the Calls to Action described above, and to monitor progress in educational outcomes and opportunities for First Nations students. It is hoped these reports will provide direction to support need-based funding for First Nations schools (i.e., the funds required to close gaps), and for First Nations students in provincially funded schools.

The Chiefs of Ontario is the coordinating body for the 133 First Nations in Ontario and supports First Nations in Ontario in advocacy efforts and negotiations with both federal and provincial governments on education.

The Chiefs have mandated the Ontario Technical Table on the Interim Funding Approach (OTTIFA) to ensure that federal funding for First Nations schools accurately reflect the specific and growing needs of First Nations students, schools and their communities.

OTTIFA, in turn, established a Systemic Gaps Task Team, which commissioned a research project, and designated a Steering Committee to oversee the research.

The Systemic Gaps in Education Project Team has adapted an evidence-based framework developed by a multi-disciplinary Commission on *Monitoring Educational Equity* under the direction of the US National Academies of Sciences (for a fuller discussion, see Systemic Gaps in Education Project Report #1).

The framework provides a set of indicators of educational equity, highlighting disparities in both outcomes and opportunities or resources, spanning the K-12 education system. The indicators are selected based on important, comparable, and widely-collected data that can be tracked over time.

Monitoring Educational Equity points to the ways in which carefully-chosen indicators of educational inequity “highlight disparities, provide a way to explore potential causes, and point towards possible improvements” (National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine, 2019, p. 1)

Educational Opportunities	Educational Outcomes
Equitable access to quality early education and care	Kindergarten readiness
Equitable access to high quality instruction • Teacher experience and access to diverse educators • Access to science-based reading instruction	K-12 learning and engagement • Achievement measures (normed) • Grades (holistic/contextual, teacher judgment) • Attendance • Self-reported well-being
Equitable access to high quality curriculum • Curricular breadth (availability of arts, science, physical & health education, etc) • Enrollment in courses that prepare for postsecondary	
Equitable access to supportive school and classroom environments • Available special education & mental health supports • Caring adults in school • Suspensions and expulsions	
Parents are able to participate in their children's education *Opportunities for well-being at school	Educational attainment • Graduation • Postsecondary access

The Systemic Gaps Research team has made a number of adaptations to the Monitoring Educational Equity framework.

1. We added student well-being as an outcome. This factor recognizes the strong, two-way interconnections between children's holistic health and schooling, and further, recognizes that both student achievement and well-being are the major objectives of the education system in Ontario's Education Act.

2. We added two "opportunity" factors:

- a. opportunities for parent involvement, a key Call to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and
- b. opportunities for well-being at school, in light of the new outcome.

3. We deleted the crucial contextual equity opportunity measure of degree of racial and economic segregation, in recognition that First Nations schools, as part of sovereign First Nations, will be overwhelmingly populated by First Nations students.

The deletion of the measure of racial and economic segregation makes it particularly important to acknowledge, however, the extent to which the community context of First Nations schools is characterized by much higher levels of concentrated poverty than provincial averages. In the 2016 Census, for example, median individual income in First Nation communities was \$18,092 compared to the Ontario average of \$33,630, or \$26,877 for the Aboriginal population across the province (Government of Canada, 2018).

The Community Well-being (CWB) Index is calculated by Indigenous Services Canada as a composite measure of community outcomes in education, labour force activity, housing and income. Scores range between zero and 100, with 100 representing greater socioeconomic well-being. In Ontario in 2021, the average CWB score for First Nations communities was 62.3, compared to the provincial average of 80 (a 17.7% gap). (Indigenous Services Canada, 2024, Table 4). The relatively low levels of community and social services in First Nations communities are well established (e.g., First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada et al. V. Attorney General of Canada (for the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada), 2016).

First Nations Students and First Nations Schools in Ontario

In the 2021 Census, there were 61,230 First Nations children of school age in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2021).

During that same time period (2021-22), 19,304 attended schools in First Nations communities.¹ There are 111 First Nations schools in Ontario. Seventy-four of them are elementary schools, seventeen are secondary and twenty schools are crossover schools serving both elementary and secondary students.

The remaining First Nations students – the majority, an estimated population of 41,926 – attend provincially funded schools, either because they live outside of their community, or through funding agreements between First Nations and local district school boards or authorities. In 2021, 34,583 students in Ontario’s provincially-funded schools self-identified as First Nations. There are First Nations students in virtually all Ontario schools. In 13 district school boards (which include, in total, 274 schools) ten percent or more students are First Nations.²

¹These figures include schools operated by First Nations, private schools, and federally-administered schools in First Nations community. They reflect summary Nominal Roll enrollment data provided to Chiefs of Ontario by Indigenous Services Canada under a data-sharing agreement. According to even more recent data, the number of children enrolled in First Nations students in 2022-23 had again increased to 20,221.

² We arrived at a 10% cut-off, starting from the proportion of Indigenous enrollment in the provincial funding formula which provides supplementary funding for schools with “high Indigenous enrollment” calculated at 15% or more of self-identified Indigenous students. **The Chiefs of Ontario reject the provincial pan-Indigenous approach to policy and funding.** According to the 2021 census, there were 61,230 First Nations students and 26,455 Metis and Inuit school-age children in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2021). When we subtract the approximately 19,000 students in First Nations schools, it is clear that just under two-thirds of the Indigenous students in provincially-funded schools self-identify as First Nations. We decided it was reasonable to use 10% – 2/3 of the provincial 15% figure – as the cut-off for high First Nations enrollment.

Data Methods in this Report

Unless specifically noted, data in this report comes from surveys of school principals across Ontario. People for Education (PFE), the non-profit educational research and advocacy organization, has conducted school surveys on an annual basis since 1998, asking principals from across Ontario about the opportunities and resources available in schools. The Chiefs of Ontario Systemic Gaps Research team developed a survey for First Nations school principals which mirrored questions in the People for Education Annual Ontario School Survey. People for Education generously shared their data with us (removing information that allowed individual schools to be identified), to provide a provincial baseline to assess resource gaps facing First Nations schools. To deepen the analysis, we extracted data from the PFE schools in high First Nations enrollment boards, in order to compare results for boards with high First Nations enrollment to provincial averages.

In the case of some survey items, there are slight wording differences between the survey administered to First Nations schools by Chiefs of Ontario (COO survey) and the one administered to provincially funded schools by People for Education (PFE survey). Any differences are noted when the data is discussed.

The First Nations School survey was conducted in Spring 2023, online using the Sogolytics platform. Team members completed some surveys through interview format where principals preferred. People for Education's provincial survey was conducted online using Survey Monkey earlier in the same school year, in Fall 2022 (i.e., the same 2022-23 school year as the COO survey). All PFE data, unless otherwise stated, comes from the 2022-23 survey (reported as 2023 for simplicity). There were a few questions People for Education asked in earlier administrations of the survey that were not asked in the 2023 survey (e.g., childcare was a part of the 2022 survey, and whether any staff self-identify as Indigenous was a part of the 2020 survey). When comparative statistics from years other than 2023 are used, it is noted in the text or a footnote.

Thirty-one of Ontario's 111 First Nations schools (28%) participated in the First Nations School Survey (19 elementary, 4 secondary and 8 elementary-secondary combined schools). This sample is robust. Although proportionate, it is less robust for sub-analyses, e.g., findings specific to secondary education (whether in separate high schools or combined schools). In 2022-23, 1044 schools across Ontario participated in People for Education's Annual School Survey (818 elementary, 174 secondary, 52 elementary-secondary combined schools), representing approximately 21% of Ontario schools. One third, or 90 (71 elementary, 15 secondary, 4 elementary-secondary) of the 274 schools in boards which reported high First Nations enrollment in 2021 participated in the 2023 PFE survey. In other years of the PFE survey that were used for this report, response rates were always at least one fifth: 20% overall and 22% of schools in high First Nations enrollment boards in 2021-22; and 24% overall and 28% of schools high First Nations enrollment boards in 2019-20. Note the schools in high First Nations enrollment boards (but not schools in First Nations) were **included** in the overall provincial calculations in all statistics presented in this report.

An important difference between the First Nations School Survey and People for Education's Annual Ontario School Survey is that the Systemic Gaps team asked about "First Nations" language and cultural programming, representation in teaching workforce etc., rather than "Indigenous" in the provincial survey. The effect of the inexact comparisons is likely to make our analysis of gaps more conservative. Nevertheless, it is our view that even these inexact comparisons provide important data which highlights a need for action to better support First Nations students.

The quantitative analyses used to prepare this report provide descriptive statistics. The primary objective of the descriptive analyses is to present numerical information in a format that is accessible to a broad public readership. All calculations have been rounded to the nearest whole number and may not total 100% in displays of disaggregated categories.

Note that, due to the relatively small number of First Nations schools in Ontario, overall, even representative samples are subject to considerable variance. Since the total sample ($n = 31$) was smaller than 100, percentages may convey a sense of precision that cannot be reached; thus, figures should be understood to be estimates. Interpretive caution is particularly important for questions concerning secondary education. Because the numbers are very small, we have reported them as fractions rather than percentages. In these cases, if a principal has not responded to a particular question, the numbers may be smaller than the overall sample.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using inductive analysis. Researchers read responses and coded emergent themes in each set of data (i.e., the responses to each of the survey's open-ended questions).

All survey responses and data are kept confidential and stored in multi-factor authenticated secure cloud storage. The aggregate data on First Nations Schools is owned and controlled by the Chiefs of Ontario in accordance with OCAP® Principles. Identifying information on particular schools are suppressed in the Chiefs of Ontario data set.

The Widely Variable Context of First Nations Schools

A key contextual factor that is essential to understand in presenting these results is the wide variability between First Nations schools across Ontario.

Different First Nations – each, sovereign – may have widely different goals and policies for their schools. Beyond these political and cultural differences, there are huge differences across the schools in our sample:

School Size and Structure

There are key differences in school size and structure that affect resources.

- The size of the school varies between 7 and 1400 students.
- The median school size of First Nation schools responding to our survey is 109; by contrast, across Ontario, the median school size of provincially funded schools responding to the People for Education survey is 330. In the provincially-funded system, the average school size in boards with high First Nations enrollment is 170.
- While the federal funding formula is not identical to the provincial one, enrollment is a key factor for each.

- Many of the combined elementary/secondary schools end in Grade 10. In twenty-four First Nation communities, students finishing Grade 10 are faced with the prospect of leaving their homes for a centralized high school, e.g., in Thunder Bay, or staying in the community. If these fourteen and fifteen-year old students wish to remain at home with their parents, options are either to leave formal education, participate in distance learning with different kinds of community-based supports, or join adult education programming at age 15. Different communities have different options.
- Several of the high schools in our survey explained they did not have fixed course offerings, instead, offering courses “as needed.”

These differences are fundamental aspects of the context of First Nations education, and need to be taken into account when reflecting on any of the following data.

First Nations Schools - Networking and Regional Organization

Unlike provincially-funded schools that receive support from – and face control by – school boards, most First Nations schools are often remote, and experience a mix of autonomy and lack of support. Just over a third of schools (38%) in our sample reported that they were part of a Provincial Territorial Organization (PTO) or Regional Education Association, such as the First Nations with Schools Collective or the Anishinabek Education System.

69% of principals report that they connect with other First Nations for a variety of reasons, including sharing resources such as curriculum and professional development (65%), support with day-to-day challenges (50%), and student activities from sports to ceremonies (45%). 31% of First Nations schools in our sample reported they do not connect with other First Nations.

Connections to Adult Education

Lifelong learning is a fundamental principle of First Nations education. Adult education has a particular significance in First Nations communities as it may represent the most accessible option for up-skilling and reskilling,

particularly if students have had difficult experiences in K-12, and given the low graduation rate (Government of Canada, 2022).

Adult education in First Nations communities can take many shapes – from high school upgrading to short-term and longer-term vocational and/or trades programs to remotely offered community and university programs. There are dedicated staff members in some communities who support students attending post-secondary programs outside of the community. Often, programs use a hybrid format with in-house support and some online Instructor Led Courses (ILC) courses. There generally is provision for transitional programming.

Most of the First Nations communities in the Chiefs of Ontario study (86%) offer adult education programming – either at their school or elsewhere in the community. 17% (5/29) of First Nations schools offer adult education programming within the school, and 43% report connections between K-12 programming and adult education.

At this point, the nature of these connections is very diverse.

A number of principals explained that the adult education programming allows adults to take missing credits towards ultimately getting an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) – including in some cases, as one principal noted, school staff. A few reported that adult education programs operate within the secondary school, and/or with shared leadership (principals doing multiple jobs) or instructors. A principal of a school that ended in Grade 10 explained that students who did not want to leave the fly-in community to go to the centralized secondary school – or who return – instead enrolled in the programming at the adult education centre, contributing significantly to the community graduation rate. Another principal commented that new coordination with adult education, including a visible presence in the school, allowed prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) for students missing some subjects, a positive contribution to schoolwide efforts to “develop pathways to success.” Educators have many ideas for stronger transitions and connections to facilitate access to PSE.

Access to Early Learning

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is widely recognized as a fundamental building block for students' lifelong learning and wellbeing (M. McCain & Mustard, 1999; M. N. McCain, 2020). In this report we highlight one distinct aspect of access to early childhood education and care – access to school-based ECEC. Onsite daycare services in school have been associated with higher quality, relative to community-based centers (Corter et al., 2012; Kaga et al., 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, John, 2010), and have been shown to support parent-school engagement (Patel & Corter, 2013).

First Nations elementary or elementary-secondary schools are less than half as likely to have on-site childcare as provincial averages (35% vs. 78%). Most elementary-serving schools that did not have onsite childcare reported that there was no other childcare in the community (9/16, or 56%). 28% of elementary-serving schools reported that they host some type of parent-drop-in program, although some principal comments suggest parent-child programming was not offered on a regularly scheduled basis in all schools.

Among provincially-funded schools, boards with high First Nations enrollment were also much less likely to have school-based childcare as the provincial average in 2022 (56% vs. 78%).

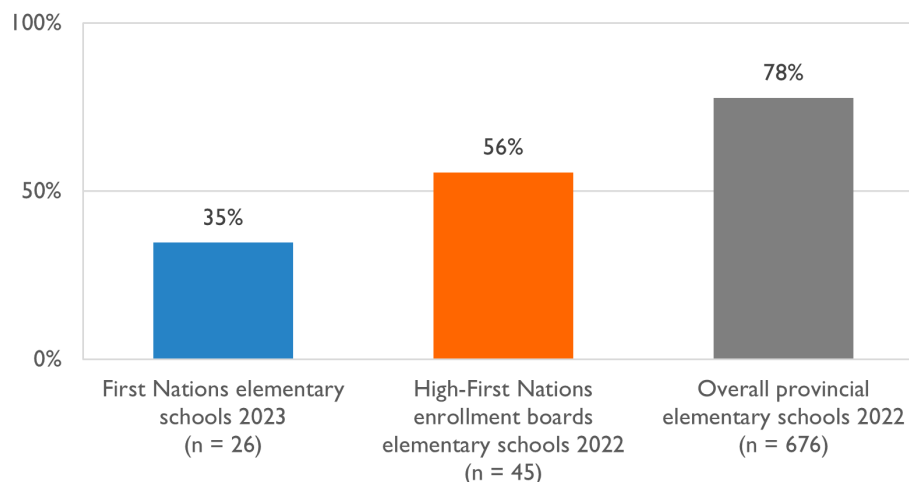
These gaps in service provision are particularly striking because serving a larger group of children by extending the age range of schools would seem to be an effective use of resources in smaller communities, and because there is such a strong emphasis on lifelong learning in First Nations communities, often starting with the youngest learners.

When asked to comment on any successes of challenges with early learning, First Nation school principals expressed considerable frustration. "You wish there were childcare in the community," wrote a principal.

They reported challenges with staffing, space and facilities. For example, one principal wrote, "[T]he building for Early Childhood Education lacked heating facility and therefore could not open this year. Trained staff are not available."

Principals also wrote about school-based initiatives to provide some kinds of childcare, ranging from starting the regular program at 3 years of age, to significant outreach to parents in the community by the kindergarten team, to a three-week "Ready for Kindergarten" program before students enter the school.

Schools offering childcare on school grounds



Equitable Access to High Quality Instruction

There is widespread agreement that teachers make an enormous difference in student learning – a great teacher can help inspire students to achieve more than they would have believed possible. Strong evidence shows that teachers are the most important in-school element contributing to student success on both long- and short-term measures of achievement and engagement (Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Chetty et al., 2011; Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; McCaffrey et al., 2004; Rivkin et al., 2005). However, there is limited consensus – let alone system-level measurement – about the elements of effective (or great) teaching.

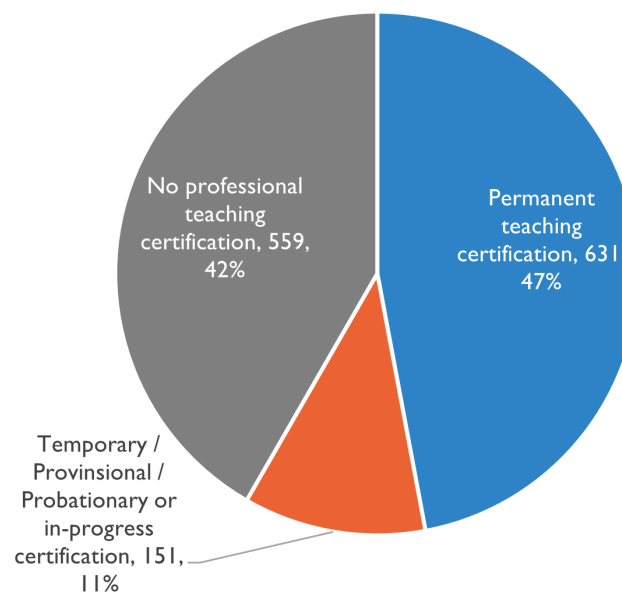
The Commission on *Monitoring Educational Equity* uses three proxies for quality teaching: teachers' years of experience; teacher diversity; and the extent to which teachers are certified/qualified for the subjects they teach (National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine, 2019, pp. 91–95). It was not feasible to ask principals about average years of teaching experience, however, when asked about staffing challenges generally, a few principals made comments suggesting their staff tend to be very junior. One wrote "Five of our teachers are new and due to COVID had no previous in-classroom experience." Several highlighted recruiting from Gakino'amaage/ Teach for Canada, which mostly matches new teachers with positions.

Lack of Certified Teachers

The broader research base on the importance or impact of professional teaching certification is inconclusive – and much of the experimental evidence on uncertified teachers examines alternative certification routes, such as Teach for America, which places graduates of elite colleges with limited teacher training in schools (Regional Educational Laboratory Program, 2019).

Indigenous Services Canada provided the Chiefs of Ontario with data on staffing across schools in First Nations communities from the 2022-23 school year (personal communication, on file with author). Of the 2,564 reported school staff, there were 1,341 teachers, of whom 631 held a permanent professional teaching certificate (ie., are certified by the Ontario College of Teachers). An additional 151 teachers held "in progress" or "temporary/provisional /probationary" certifications. **Fewer than half – approximately 47% of teachers in First Nations schools – have a permanent professional teaching certificate.** Indigenous Services Canada noted an additional 138 individuals in non-teaching roles – such as vice-principal or education director – held teaching certificates.

Teacher Certification in Schools from First Nations Communities
(2022-23)



By contrast, under the Education Act, s.262 “no person shall be employed in an elementary or secondary school to teach ... unless the person is a member of the Ontario College of Teachers.” There are a number of exceptions, including temporary or Transitional (2023) certificates. There are reports of principals frequently having to turn to non-certified teachers, particularly as substitutes (Ontario Principals’ Council, 2023), but neither the Ministry of Education nor the College of Teachers reports on the percentage of people employed by boards to teach without certificates, so we cannot provide a provincial comparison.

There are a number of contextual factors that may influence the number of teachers in First Nations communities. Many First Nations language and culture teachers are certified as language instructors, but not by the Ontario College of Teachers. Some communities may have a focus on training local educators to become fully certified. Many First Nations schools have student-teacher ratios somewhat better than the provincial average. (The average ratio of students: teachers in First Nations schools is 13:1. In 2019-20, the comparable provincial average ratio was 17:1). Nonetheless, the shortage of certified teachers is a very significant resource gap facing First Nations schools.

Staffing Shortages Generally

The low level of certified teachers is part of a picture of overall staffing shortages in First Nations schools. Only half of First Nations schools reported that they were fully staffed in 2022-23.

3 In its 2023-24 Annual School Survey, People for Education asked more detailed – and not directly comparable – questions about staffing shortages, and found that 24% of elementary and 35% of secondary schools report facing daily shortages in teaching staff, and 42% of elementary and 46% of secondary schools report facing daily shortages in educational support staff (e.g., educational assistants) (Kidder & Corso, 2024).

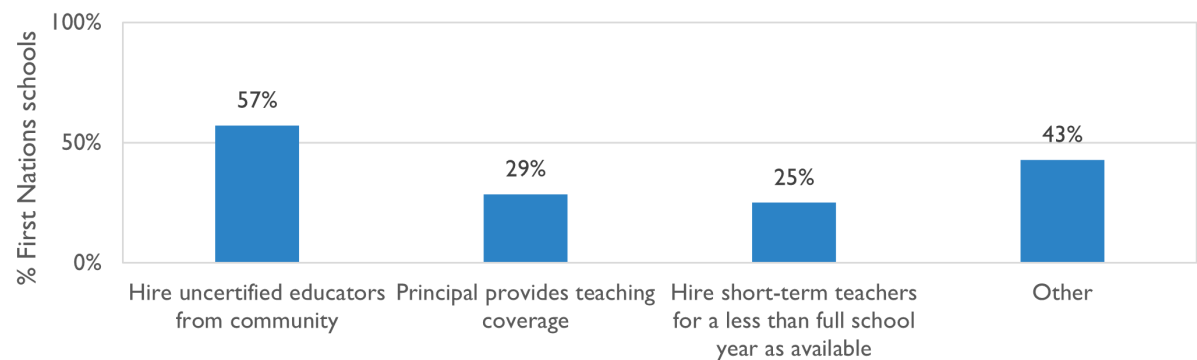
¹More than a quarter (29%) of principals reported that they themselves were teaching, and one commented that they needed to combine classes mid-year. In the majority of schools (57%), principals reported hiring uncertified teachers from the community to fill in for missing positions. Some acknowledged significant challenges for student learning and behaviour. For example, one principal of a combined elementary-secondary school wrote that facing chronic teacher shortages, “we mostly move in paraprofessionals, but they struggle to deliver curriculum. So we wind up pulling Grade 7 teachers to high school, and putting paraprofessionals in middle school. Very difficult.”

In their comments, *many* principals report they struggle with recruitment. Key recurring factors were remoteness and housing shortages, especially if schools need to hire outside the community.

Several principals highlighted issues relating to compensation; their schools were paying less than teachers could make elsewhere or did not contribute to the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan. A few principals noted that they were competing with local, provincially-funded schools for hiring. An earlier report for Chiefs of Ontario based on exit interviews of teachers leaving First Nations schools highlighted access to the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan, lack of adequate housing, and lack of access to professional development as key factors driving departures (Kerr, on file with author).

Several principals talked about the challenges of finding teachers with specialized knowledge and skills – particularly, special education training and language and culture skills. A few principals talked about their schools’ strength of having a core of long-term teachers – but they were definitely in the minority.

Strategies for Handling Staffing Issues
(n = 28)



In addition to challenges of having classrooms covered by uncertified adults, there is growing research available on the impacts of high teacher turnover on student learning, school community and teachers' work (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). It was notable that a number of the principals in our study highlighted the particular difficulties of having teachers leave mid-year.

In addition to ongoing shortages, a number of principals highlighted issues of absenteeism. One noted:

We almost always have someone gone. Some would be there more if there were better daycare supports in the community. Some staff bring their kids to work – 2-3 year olds – which is too young for kindergarten. This is a concern across the community, not just at the school. When staff have medical appointments, they're gone for a minimum of 3 days because it's fly-in.

Many principals highlighted challenges in finding supply staff, in terms of both teachers and supporting roles.

Presence of First Nations Educators

There is a growing body of literature that suggests access to teachers who are racially matched to the students they teach has positive effects on short-and long-term outcomes for students, including test scores, graduation, attitudes towards schooling, engagement, attendance and school discipline (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2016, 2022; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Holt & Gershenson, 2019; Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

There are various theories for why these effects hold true: the availability of positive, own-race role models, increased sense of belonging or positive school climate, and/or racialized students may face less implicit bias and higher expectations.

Most of this large-scale research has been conducted in the context of Black students in the US. While there is a need for more research specific to the First Nations context, research by Canadian and international scholars highlights ways in which Indigenous teachers provide distinctive support for Indigenous learners through an interconnected range of classroom practices (e.g., Andrews, 2022; Santoro et al., 2011), strong student and community relationships (Grace & Trudgett, 2012; Keddie, 2014) and proactive work to challenge colonialism and centre Indigenous knowledge (Battiste, 2013; Santoro et al., 2011). While data on the impacts of culturally matched teachers for Indigenous children is limited there are some intriguing studies: for example, in early childhood, Indigenous preschoolers were likely to use a wider range of vocabulary with culturally matched early childhood educators (Webb & Williams, 2019).

A considerable **asset** for First Nations schools is the very high percentage of educators who are of First Nations background. All First Nations schools have at least some First Nations teachers, with a range of 20%-100% of teaching staff being First Nations.

More than half of schools in the survey (56%) reported that the majority of their teachers were First Nations. Even higher percentages of non-teaching staff were First Nations. On average across First Nations schools, 55% of teachers and 81% of teaching staff self-identify as First Nations. Culturally matched non-teaching staff are often recognized by equity advocates and in some large-scale research (Blazar & Lagos, 2021) as important assets for marginalized students.

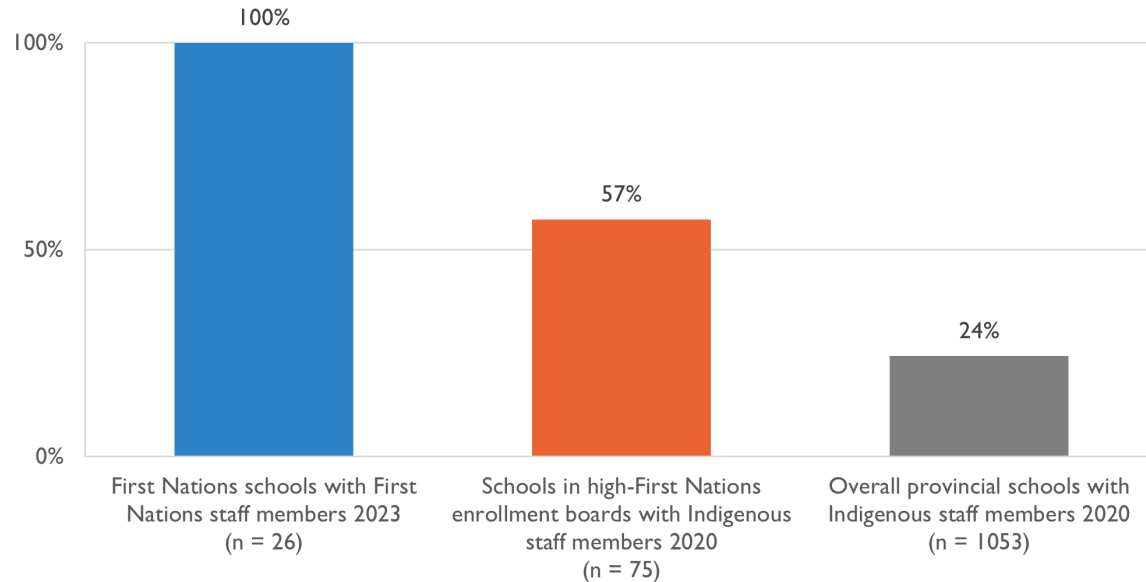
We used People for Education data to compare the percentage of schools with any First Nations staff in First Nations schools, to the percentage of schools with any self-identified Indigenous staff in provincially-funded schools and provincially-funded schools with high First Nations enrollment. While 100% of First Nations schools had First Nations staff, in 2020 across Ontario only 57% of schools in boards with high First Nations enrollment had *any* Indigenous staff; and only a quarter of schools across the provincially-funded system had any⁴.

4 Note: in the COO survey, principals were asked whether any staff were First Nations; in the PFE survey, the question was in reference to Indigenous identity, rather than First Nations, specifically.

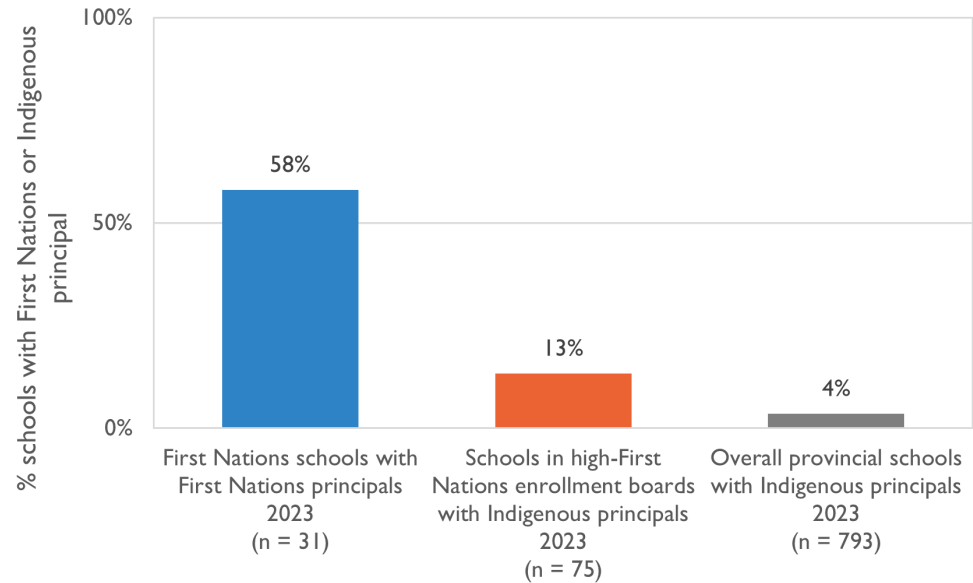
Principals have a key role to play in setting direction and establishing priorities for schools – indeed, after teachers, research suggests the principal is one of the most important factors for student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). There is evidence to suggest that same-race principals are more likely to hire and retain same-race teachers, indirectly contributing to improved achievement (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023).

We compared the percentage of schools led by First Nations principals to the percentage of schools led by Indigenous principals across the province. The majority of First Nations schools (58%) have principals from First Nations, compared to 13% of provincial schools with high First Nations enrollment and 4% of schools across the province who have principals who identify as Indigenous.

Schools With **Any** Indigenous Staff Members



First Nations or Indigenous Principals



Access to a Broad, Rigorous Curriculum

As the US National Academies of Sciences wrote, “Students’ exposure to a rich and broad curriculum, challenging coursework, and inspired teaching is ... vital for their learning and development.” (National Academies, 2017, p. 89). They acknowledge that there is no research-based consensus on exactly which elements of curriculum are most important – but that it is also clear, looking at the United States, that “these core elements are not distributed in an equitable way – in relation to either proportionality or need.” (ibid, p. 91).

Most First Nations have identified the critical importance of education for cultural survival – in bringing up young people to be empowered members of their communities, in support of long-term goals of sovereignty and work to improve community life (e.g., National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). Across societies it is a goal of education to support students in learning to be informed, active citizens and community members and there is a clear relationship between access to a wide array of courses – from art, history, technology, sciences, languages and physical and health education – contribute to students’ well-rounded development.

In *Monitoring Educational Equity*, the National concluded, “While it is not known which specific combination of courses is best for students’ long-term outcomes, any educational system that differentially deprives students of exposure to a broad range of subjects is inequitable.” (National Academies, p. 101). Maintaining a focus on curricular breadth is particularly important in light of evidence that many schools which face pressure to improve test scores are more likely to emphasize a few subjects – mathematics and literacy – at the expense of a broader range of subjects, and heavily emphasize test preparation in terms of teaching, assessment and school organization (ibid, p. 101). Acknowledging, however, that there is no consensus on appropriate measures of curricular breadth at this point, the National Academies suggest that measures should be developed locally (p. 102).

The emphasis on locally-developed measures of curricular breadth recognizes the risk of cultural bias in terms of one-size-fits-all measures. Although labels may differ, students may get exposure to important areas of curriculum in different ways. For example, schools with strong First Nations culture programs may not have Art teachers, but will often engage students in creative learning and cultural transmission from songs and drumming to beading and storytelling.

Land-based programming – while not labelled Physical and Health Education or Science – offers opportunities for physical activity and social-emotional learning, as well as integrated lessons in problem-solving, and scientific observation and methods. These offerings may also be more likely to incorporate experiential learning which many educators in First Nations contexts have observed is particularly important for building engagement and a sense of success.

Indicators of Curricular Breadth: First Nations Learning Opportunities

First Nations schools are leading the way in one important area of curricular breadth. It is logical that with the importance of education for sovereignty and cultural survival that there is a strong emphasis on curricular supports for learning about and through First Nations culture and Knowledge Keepers/Elders. First Nations schools are more likely to offer First Nations guest speakers, opportunities to participate in ceremonies and land-based learning, cultural support programs and language programs.⁵

Principals' comments on this area of programming reflect pride in accomplishment, and ongoing challenges. Many principals talked about land-based opportunities at their schools. For example, one wrote, "They have snowshoes, sleds, ice-fishing rods and huts, birch tapping equipment, canoes, ordered snowmobiles. Each day a different class will be out on the land for the first half of the day." Another school described a wide range of activities, including running a sugar bush and reducing the sap, setting nets, and harvesting fish, deer and moose; students learned to process fish and game – filet fish,

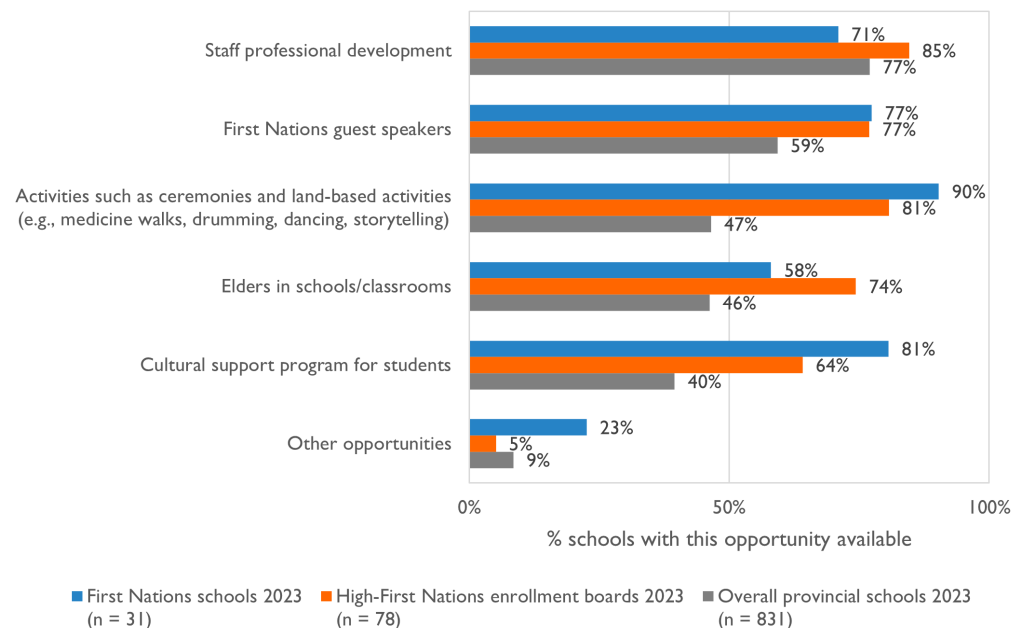
clean skins, create tools and instruments – and provided food to Elders. Another school provided examples of how a common activity, ice fishing, would be integrated with the curriculum in different ways depending on the age of the students: "in Kindergarten, they count the fish; in Grade 3 they weigh them, and in Grade 7 we work it into learning about ecosystems."

Some principals commented on the need to more effectively integrate academic learning with these opportunities and the need for resources to build and adapt the curriculum to support teachers in maximizing the learning that can take place. Linking cultural activities to curriculum outcomes is key.

First Nations schools invest in providing these opportunities through staffing. 75% of First Nations schools have full- or part-time language specialists on staff; 43% have a Knowledge Keeper/Elder on staff, and 39% have a land-based learning specialist. Overall, 90% of First Nations schools have at least a part-time staff member focused on language or cultural support. In 79% of schools, these staff total at least one full-time position. A number of principals – while celebrating gains in this area – expressed concern about hiring and retaining staff to support this learning.

⁵ In the graph on this page, the percentage of schools that indicated they provided each type of Indigenous education opportunity is presented. Note that the wording shown is what was included in the COO survey. On the PFE survey, the term "Indigenous" was used instead of "First Nations". Also, note that on the PFE survey, the option of "Elders in schools/classrooms" was instead written as "Opportunities to speak with Indigenous Elders and/or knowledge keepers." The survey item "Activities such as ceremonies and land-based activities (e.g., medicine walks, drumming, dancing, storytelling)" was on the PFE survey; on the COO survey, 74% of schools said they held "Ceremonies" and 84% of schools said they offered "Land-Based Learning" opportunities. Between the two items, 90% of First Nations schools offered either Ceremonies or Land-Based Learning.

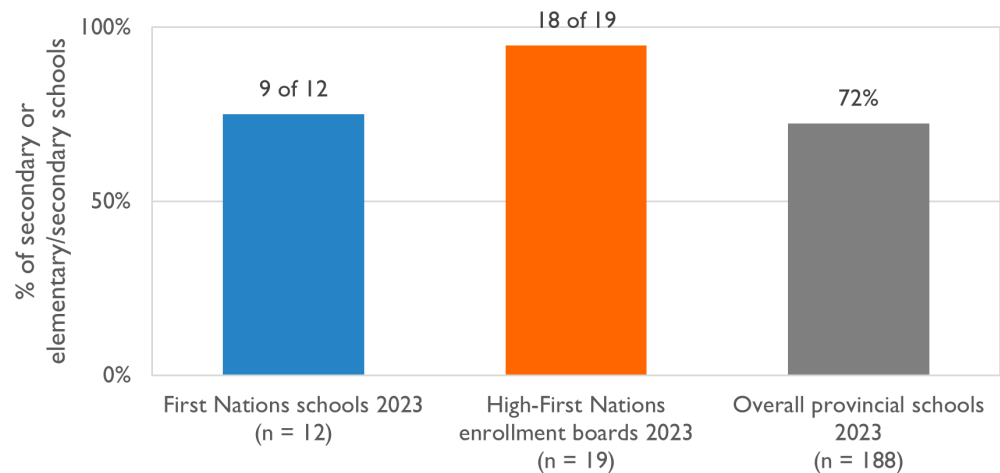
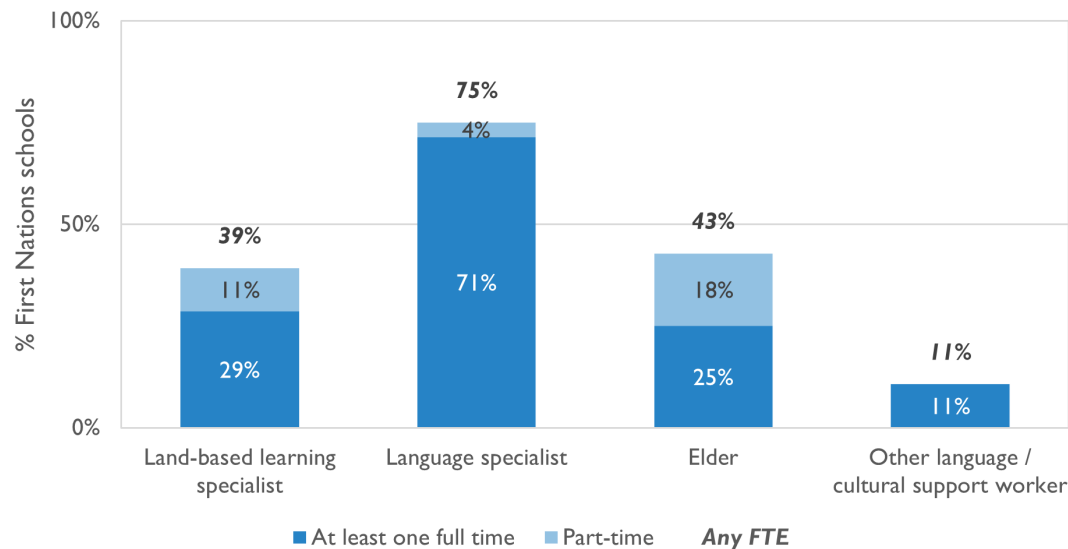
Indigenous Education Opportunities



In secondary school, the Ontario curriculum includes “Senior First Nations Métis Inuit Studies Courses.” Different schools may use somewhat different names for them. In our datasets, these courses are widely offered, both across Ontario (72% of secondary schools) and in First Nations schools (100% of secondary-only schools; 75% of schools with secondary programming). ⁶Only 72% of provincially-funded schools with a high percentage of First Nations students offer these highly relevant courses.

We also asked First Nations schools whether their students had a chance to participate in community governance activities: 39% did, an extraordinary opportunity for experiential civics learning. There is no comparable provincial data.

Language and Cultural Support Workers in Schools
(n = 28)



6 Note: In the graph below regarding First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies course offerings, as well as several graphs later in this report that refer to secondary-focused resources the statistics presented are from secondary-serving schools, which includes secondary and elementary-secondary schools. In the case where the total number of respondents is less than 20, we have changed the labels to indicate the fraction of schools, rather than the percentage. The bars' heights still indicate the percentages.

Indicators of Curricular Breadth: First Nations Languages

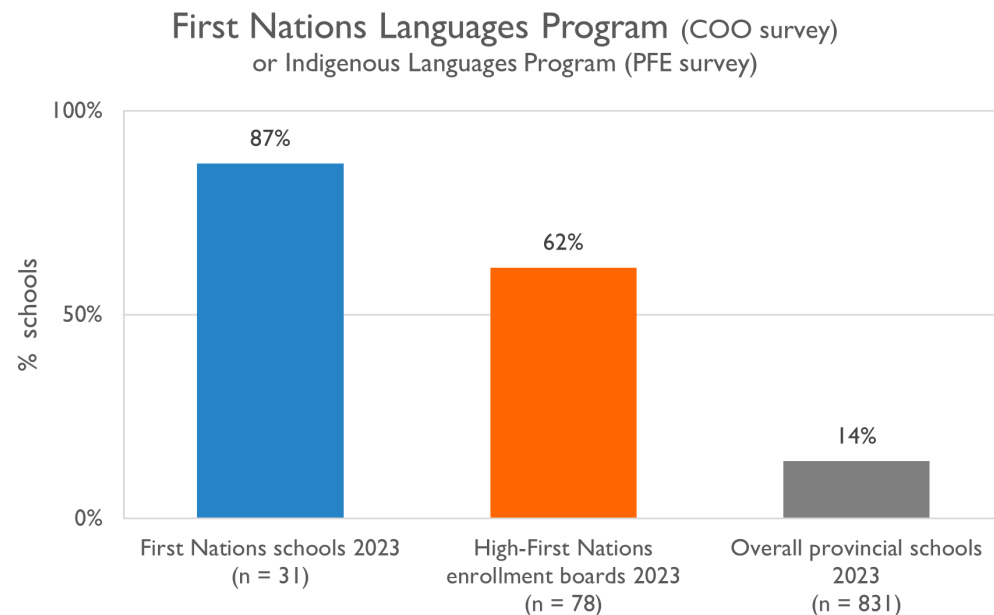
Active preservation and transmission of First Nations languages is a key priority for cultural survival and a right under Article 13 of the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007). The number of Indigenous language speakers – particularly those who speak Indigenous languages as a first language – has been on a steady decline (Statistics Canada, 2023). While those learning First Nations languages in other settings is on the increase, these gains do not offset the losses as communities lose Elders and other fluent speakers.

A strong majority of First Nations schools (87%) have robust opportunities for First Nations language instruction. In 85% of First Nations schools offering language instruction, students have a chance to learn the language four to five times a week. Fifteen percent of schools in our sample (4/27) reported offering First Nations language immersion programs.

More than a third of provincially-funded schools in Boards with high First Nations enrollment do not offer instruction in First Nation languages. There are earmarked funds available for First Nations language instruction. Lack of curricular resources to teach these languages is a key deficit for First Nation languages teachers. It is important to better understand – and tackle – the barriers to implementation.

A few principals highlighted the need for resources for curriculum development or adaptation in order to develop clearer expectations and benchmarks for language curriculum. The current Ministry of Education Native Languages curriculum is from 1999, which makes it by far the most outdated curriculum document, as it has not gone through the review and revision process for over two decades. For example, one principal noted:

We have an immersion program and an enhanced language program with no formulated plan yet for understanding and reporting on community driven expectations for language acquisition. It would be very beneficial to have a language learning continuum developed by and for our community that outlines where our community would like to see our children's learning goals for each age group.



Indicators of Curricular Breadth: Libraries and Librarians

Libraries and librarians are clearly linked to reading enjoyment and, international evidence suggests, academic performance and attitudes towards reading (e.g., Klinger et al., 2011; Lonsdale, 2003; Oberg, 2012; Todd et al., 2011). Where there are no school libraries, it limits students' ability to gain rich literacy experiences and their exposure to a wide selection of different text genres matched to interests and reading levels.

Among the First Nations schools we surveyed, almost half – 45% (14/31) – had no library at all, neither physical nor virtual. And perhaps more disturbingly, 67% (8/12) of schools with secondary programming reported no libraries. Where libraries existed, they were physical libraries with study space and books. There was no comparable Ontario data because the presence of at least a basic school library has been largely a taken-for-granted norm in provincially-funded Ontario schools.

People for Education has tracked the declining presence of librarians among provincially funded schools, which dropped from 80% of elementary schools in 1998 to 54% in 2019 (People for Education, 2019b). It is then, perhaps, not surprising that First Nations Schools are far less likely to report the presence of a teacher librarian than the provincial average.

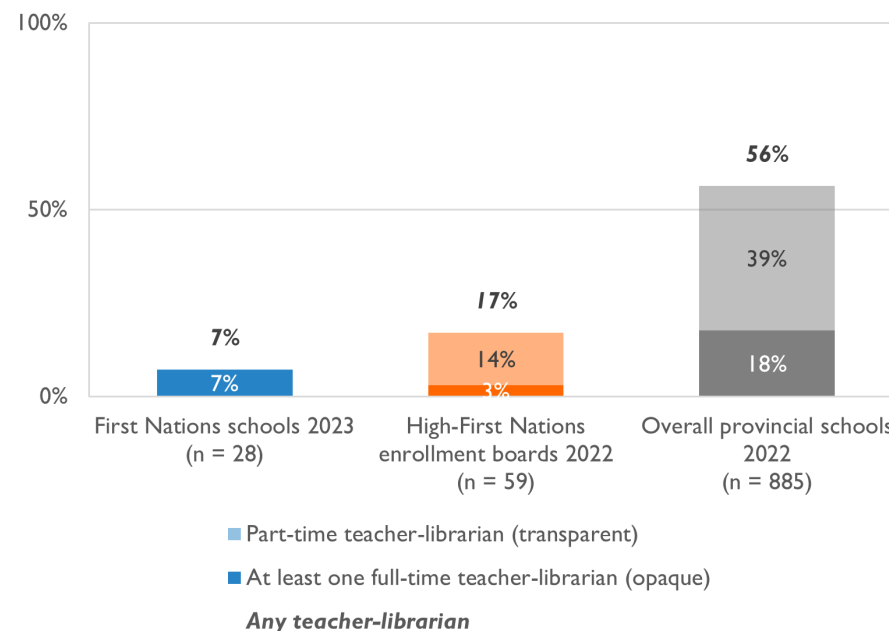
While more than half (56% in 2022) of provincially-funded Ontario schools have at least a part-time teacher-librarian on staff, only 17% of schools in boards with high First Nations enrollment and only 7% of First Nations schools (2 out of 28 schools in 2023 – both with full-time teacher-librarians).

There was no significant gap in terms of the number of library technicians on staff as Ontario schools

generally: 36% in 2023 among First Nations schools vs. a provincial average of 37% in 2022. Provincially funded schools in Boards with high First Nations enrollment were slightly more likely to have library technicians on staff: 43% in 2022.

The absence of libraries and expert library staff represents a significant opportunity gap disproportionately affecting First Nations communities.

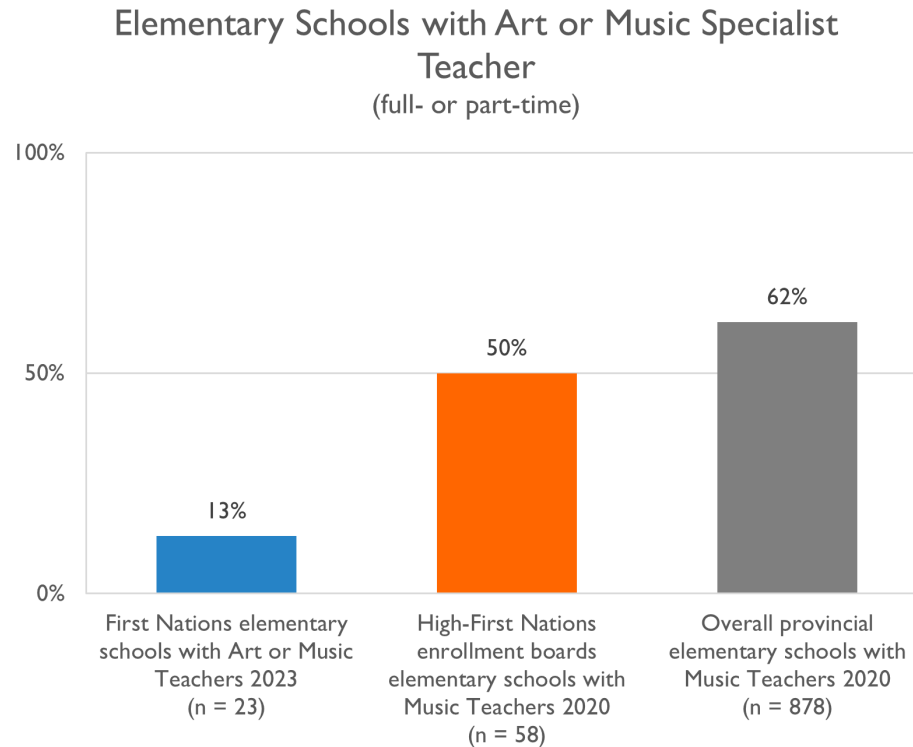
Schools With Teacher Librarians



Indicators of Curricular Breadth: Arts Education

People for Education (PFE) has monitored students' access to specialists in arts education, due to the demonstrated connection between arts education and engagement, academic learning, social emotional skills development and support for creativity (e.g., Deasy, 2002; Hetland & Winner, 2001; Hunter, 2005).

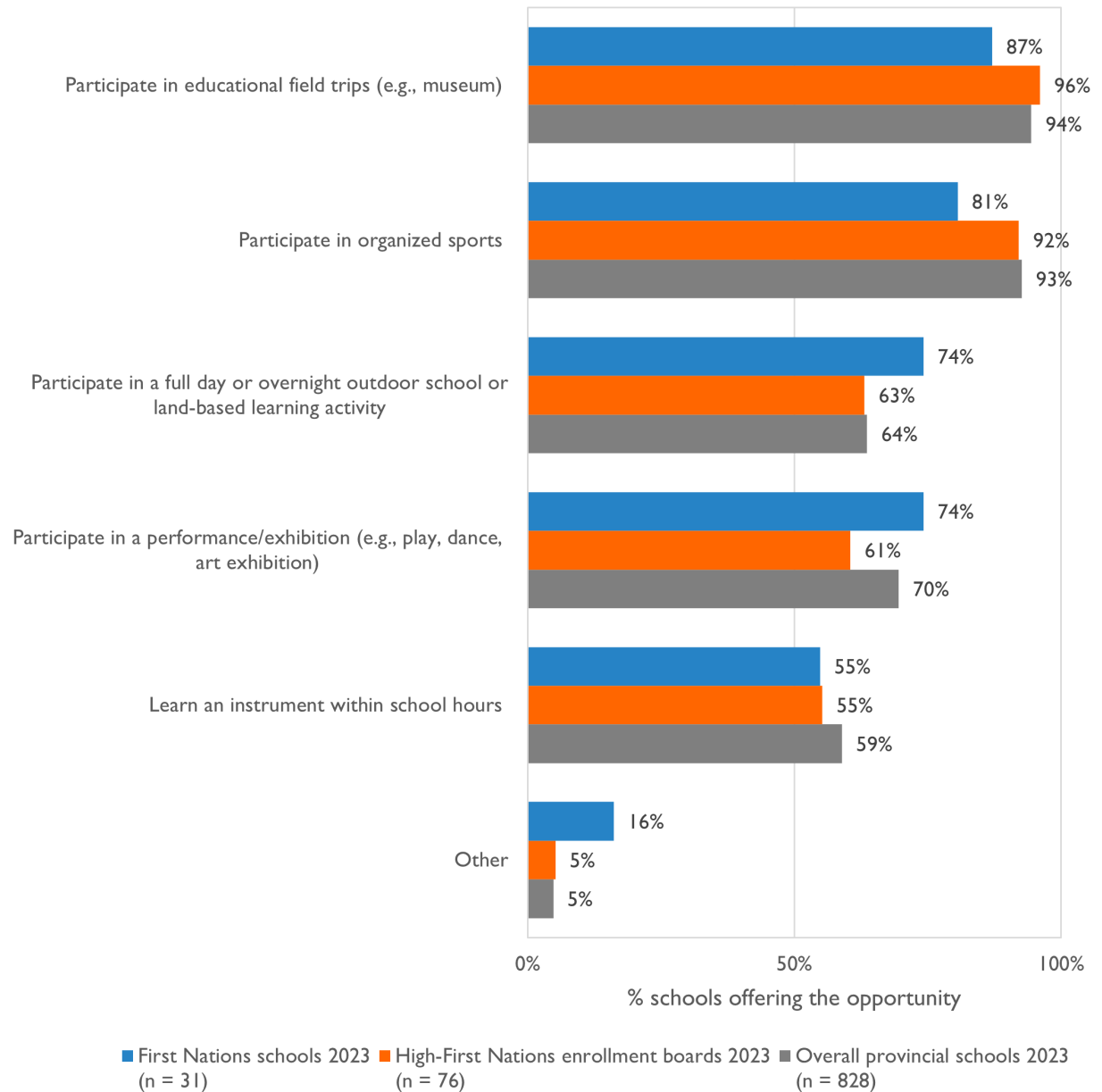
First Nations schools (13%) – and schools in Boards with high First Nations enrollment (50%) – are far less likely to have access to Arts specialist teachers than the overall provincially-funded Ontario schools (62%). The most recent People for Education data is from 2020, when they asked whether schools had Music Specialists, in particular. In our survey, we asked whether First Nations schools had either Arts or Music specialists. As noted above, many students (and educators) may not frame some of the work they do in First Nations language and culture classes as “Arts Education” but there are often rich opportunities for arts learning integrated into these curricula.



Indicators of Curricular Breadth: Beyond the Classroom

Students' learning – and engagement in learning – benefits from the chance to do activities within the school community that go beyond typical classroom learning. The vast majority (87%) of First Nations schools report that students participate in field trips; this proportion is slightly lower than that of provincially-funded schools with a high percentage of First Nations students (96%), and the overall provincially-funded Ontario schools (94%). Four out of five (81%) First Nations schools also report that students participate in organized sports; this proportion is somewhat lower than that of provincially-funded schools (93%) – perhaps due to challenges of remoteness. Regarding overnight “outdoor schools or land-based activities” and performances or exhibitions to share their creative work, three quarters (74%) of First Nations schools report their student participation in each of those activities; this proportion is higher than that of the overall provincially-funded Ontario schools (64% for full-day or overnight activities, and 70% for performances, respectively), and somewhat higher than those provincially-funded schools with a high proportion of First Nation students (63% participate in outdoor/land-based overnights, and 61% in performances).

Broader Learning Opportunities

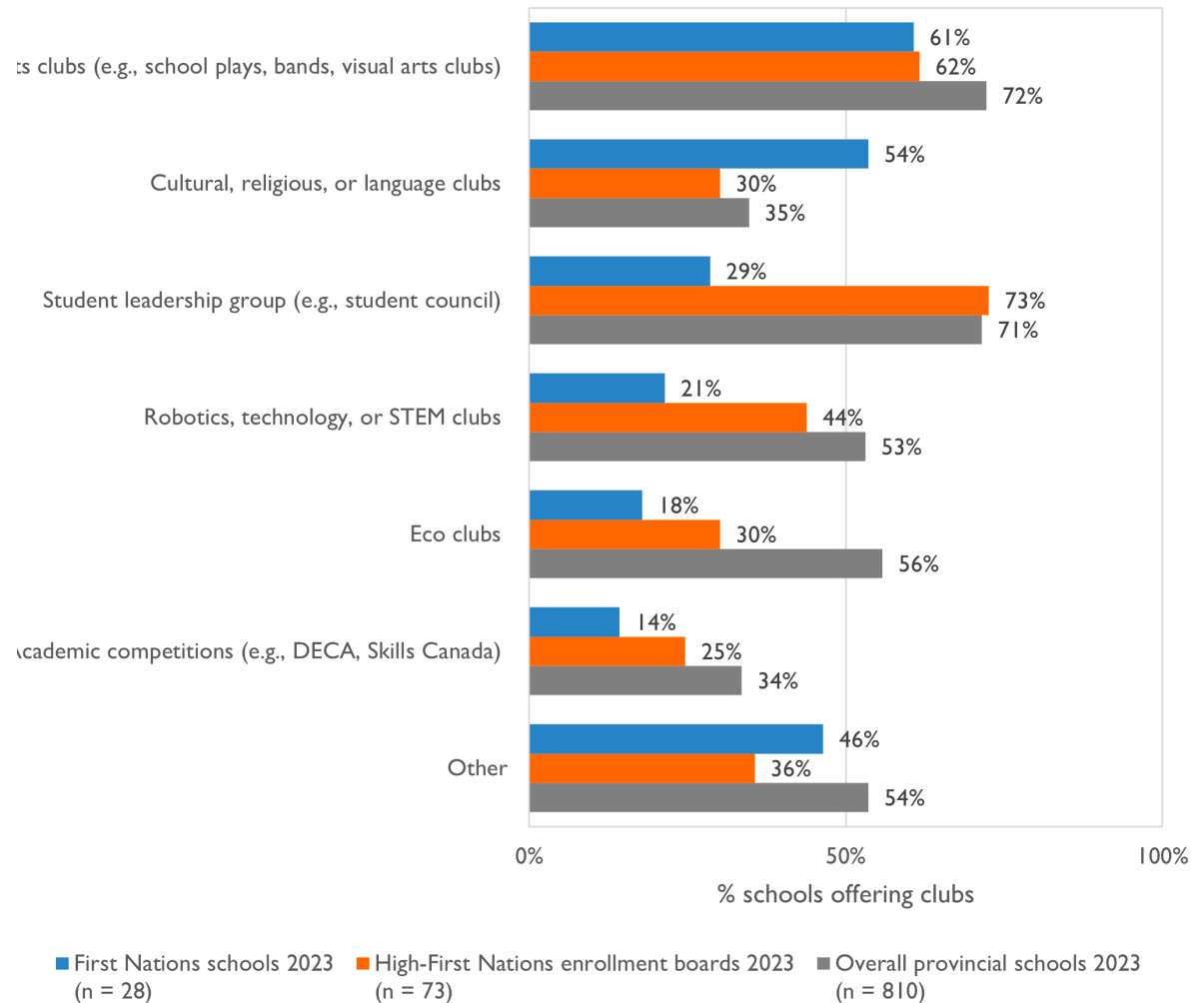


Indicators of Curricular Breadth: Out of School Time

Extracurricular activities give students a chance to develop their interests in a fun and engaging way. They are highly associated with “school connectedness,” a concept associated with a number of major positive impacts on well-being: “higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower rates of substance use and violence, participation in fewer risk-taking behaviours, increased likelihood of completing secondary school, and greater feelings of positive mental health.” (Dove et al., 2020, p. 10). They are also directly associated with improved educational outcomes and well-being (Alhadeff, 2019; Oberle et al., 2020). The operation of clubs and extracurriculars is dependent on teachers’ unpaid work; when the staff is smaller, or facing other challenges to meet student needs, such as running nutrition programs, it can be difficult to ensure a wide spectrum of extracurriculars within regular staffing.

On the whole, First Nations schools are strikingly less likely to report that students have access to clubs and extracurricular activities, with the exception of “cultural, religious or language clubs.” Provincially-funded schools in high First Nations enrollment boards are also less likely than the provincial average to report the presence of clubs.

Clubs Offered at School



Conclusion and Caution Regarding Curricular Breadth

The data above shows that many First Nations schools are leading the way in delivering culturally-driven breadth in curriculum, which offer rich opportunities for student engagement. However, they also point to relatively low levels of key opportunities that are highly associated with engagement and enjoyment of learning (i.e., library resources, arts education and extracurriculars). First Nations schools largely have fewer of these opportunities than Ontario averages, and provincially funded schools with high First Nations enrollment have fewer than other publicly funded schools.

This data needs to be interpreted in light of a key contextual factor. Many of the First Nations schools we surveyed are extremely small. There is an inevitable tension between small school size and the possibility of wide course offerings, specialist staff and plentiful extracurriculars. It is important to highlight that in some schools, students get remarkable opportunities to develop their interests through highly personalized teaching and programming.

At the same time – particularly given the staffing and socio-economic challenges noted above – the data points to the need to go beyond the conventional funding formula to ensure additional staffing resources are present in First Nations schools. With very limited staff, educators are too often required to choose between, for example, running a breakfast program and running a club or a team. It is hardly surprising that staff may decide to prioritize “survival” needs such as food. Keeping these realities in the foreground, it is reasonable to expect public systems to provide sufficient support for schools with high percentages of First Nations students to enjoy access to enrichment activities at least at the provincial level (whether funded by the federal or the provincial government). Additional supports are clearly required so students get to experience broad, engaging and enriched learning if governments are serious about eliminating educational achievement gaps within a generation (as per Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action 7 and 10).

Indicators of Curricular Rigour: Post-secondary Preparation

In *Monitoring Educational Equity* (2019) there are a number of indicators focused on the end of high school: graduation, postsecondary readiness, and access to rigorous curriculum. The emphasis on postsecondary preparation recognizes that in the twenty-first century, not just high school graduation but postsecondary access makes an enormous difference in increasing the chances people will live longer and healthier lives (Balaj et al., 2024; Chief Public Health Officer, 2008). Those who proceed to post-secondary earn more (Statistics Canada, 2017), report more active civic engagement (Turcotte, 2015) and are more likely to report that they are flourishing (Jongbloed, 2018). Thus the National Academies Committee argues that a strong system for monitoring equity should address access to rigorous curriculum:

Advanced course taking in high school is a strong indicator of opportunity to learn because it reflects both systematic differences in the availability of these courses and in who participates in them. As such, improving access to high-quality advanced coursework across several disciplines represents a potential lever for reducing group disparities in educational attainment. (p. 97)

Unfortunately – while numbers are very low – our survey results suggest that students in First Nations schools, and First Nations students in provincially-funded schools,

have more limited access to courses that are more likely to prepare students for postsecondary education.

We focused on academic courses (Math, English, Sciences, History, Geography, and Business) in the upper years of high school to assess postsecondary preparedness. Under the Ontario curriculum, most students in Grade 11 or 12 choose between “University” or “College” academic courses. These choices – as well as earlier decisions about academic vs. applied courses – have considerable long-term consequences. It requires staffing to ensure students are knowledgeable about the implications of course choices, or able to take advantage of remote learning options.

Among First Nations schools, our sample is quite low (8 schools), partly reflecting the low numbers of First Nations schools with secondary programming that goes to Grade 12. Findings should be treated with caution, but they point to issues of serious concern in terms of postsecondary preparation. None of the First Nations schools we surveyed offered “University” courses in distinct sections; five of eight offered mixed sections where educators would have to juggle two curricula and different learning expectations, and three offered “College” courses only. Students wanting the courses which more robustly prepare them for postsecondary are often forced to turn to online options.

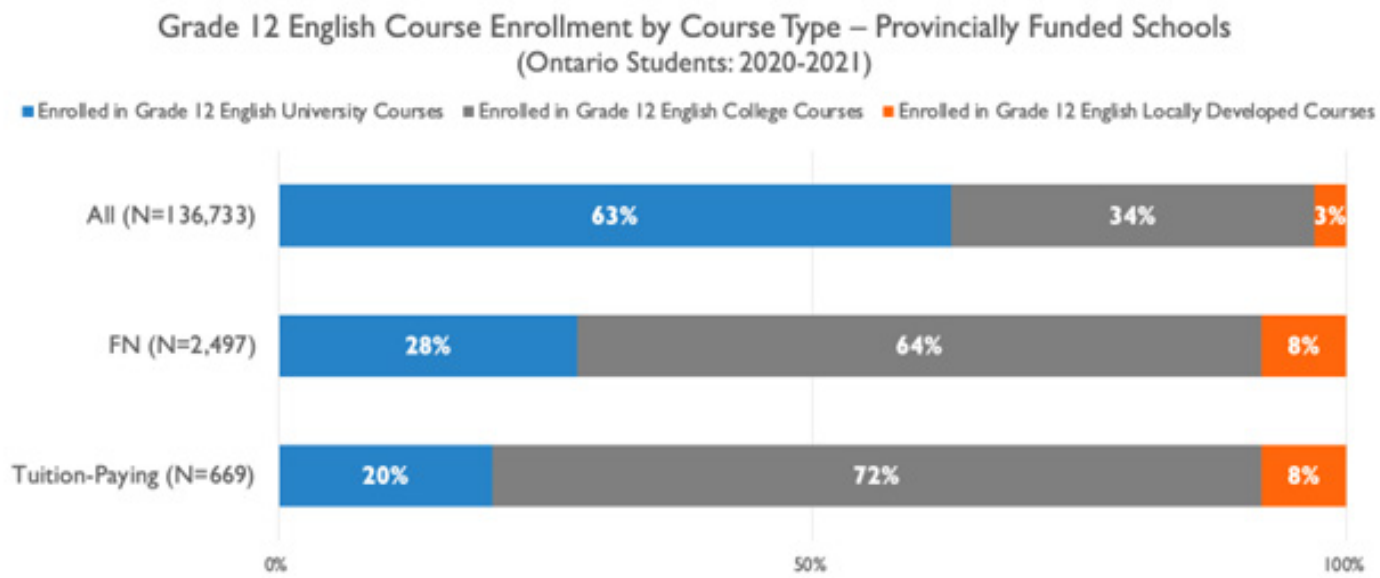
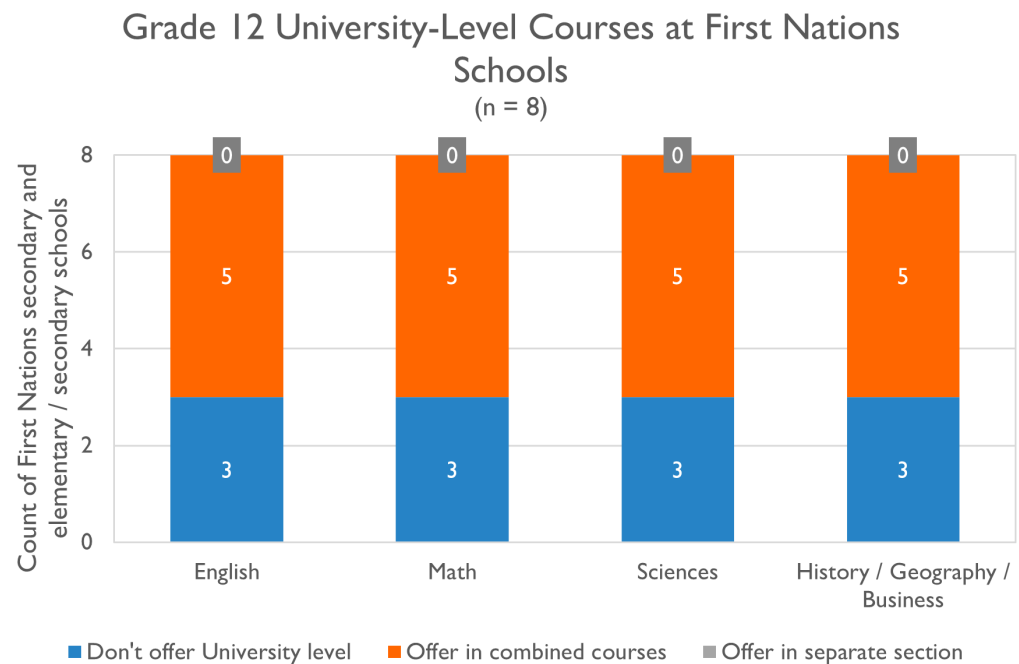
Almost all provincially-funded schools offer both College and University courses, although in very small communities, schools may offer only combined “U”/ “C” sections.

To more fully understand how First Nations students are being prepared for post-secondary in the provincially funded system, we used individual-level data obtained through an Ontario government data request (for a detailed discussion of the data sources and methods, please see Chiefs of Ontario Systemic Gaps in Education Report #1, [Outcomes in Provincial Schools](#)).

All Ontario students are required to take English at the Grade 12 level. As depicted below, First Nations students in provincially-funded schools are at least twice as likely to be enrolled in “College” English than provincial averages, and more than twice as likely to be enrolled in Workplace courses which are explicitly not expected to lead to post-secondary. Results for Mathematics show the same trends, though more complex to visualize, as Math is not a required course in Grade 12.

Unfortunately, recent work by a group of researchers, including some authors of this report suggest that “College” courses may be mislabeled (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023).

Drawing on a sample that tracked postsecondary destinations for 156,580 Toronto District School Board students, we found that among students who took exclusively “College” courses, 71% did not go to postsecondary at all. The majority of those who went to college took at least one “University” course. Mathematics was even more strongly associated with post-secondary access.



Access to Technical Education and Co-Op in High School

A key element of post-secondary preparation is access to skills training that prepare students for well-paying apprenticeships and workplace experience. Frequently, apprenticeships – where students learn primarily on the job – are touted as the alternative to College or University that offers access to valuable work and secure livelihoods. It seems logical that exposure to work in the trades in high school,

and support getting into apprenticeship pathways, is a valuable educational opportunity, especially in communities with relatively low rates of post-secondary access. Barely more than half (5/9) of First Nations schools with secondary programming offer access to technical education or pre-apprenticeship programming. In very small schools, it is especially difficult to provide the facilities and expertise to deliver this important training. Two-thirds of schools have programs that expose students to aspects of creative industries (6/9), such as courses in the arts, design, music and/or digital media.

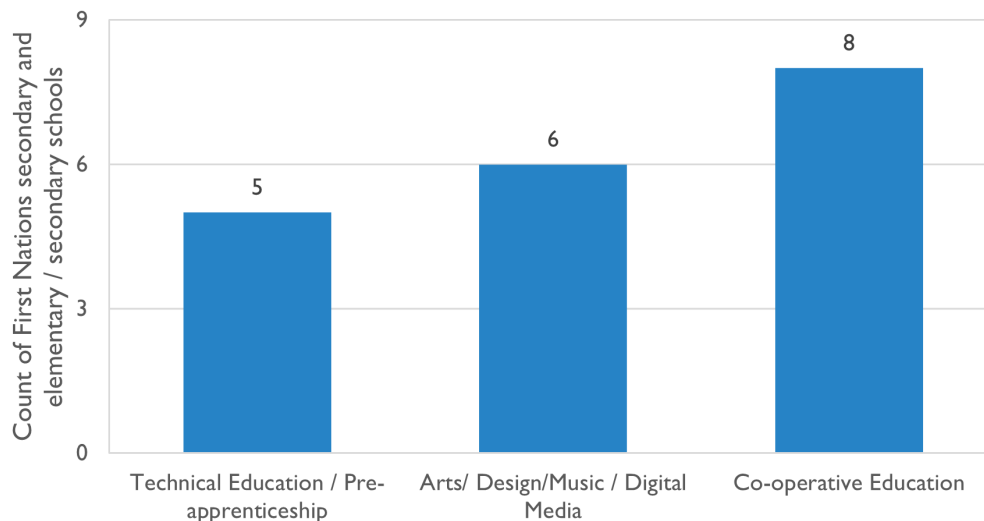
Most First Nations schools (8/9) offer co-op placements which allow students to get academic credit for learning in potential workplaces.

We do not have baseline data about the availability of these courses/programs in provincially funded schools.⁷

There are reasons for some skepticism about the current promise of the apprenticeship pathway – notably, considerable variation in wages depending on which trade, persistent barriers to accessing well-paid apprenticeships for women, racialized and Indigenous people, very low completion rates for apprenticeship training (see e.g., Chatoor & Brumwell, 2020). The average age for an apprentice in Ontario is 29 years (Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Skills Development, 2022). Furthermore, it does not appear that most apprentices actually take technical programs in high school: data from the 2015 National Apprenticeship Survey suggests that, for most trades, only a minority of Ontario apprentices had taken part in the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and technical/vocational courses; between one and two-thirds of apprentices had taken co-op (Chatoor & Kaufman, 2020, p. 14).

The results above raise serious questions about the extent to which First Nations students are getting equitable access to the courses that best prepare students for post-secondary.

Access to Technical Education and Co-op
in Grade 12
(n = 9)



⁷ A data request to access a provincial database of course offerings has not, as of this writing, received a response although we were able to identify it through the Ontario Open Access portal. Despite major recent policy announcements in the area, repeated inquiries have not yet located any policy documents or background reports on current technical education offerings in Ontario schools.

Equitable Access to Academic Supports

In the words of *Monitoring Educational Equity*, “[i]t is crucial that schools provide supports to address students’ academic, linguistic, and special education needs. There is a risk, however, that students might be identified for services that they do not need and that could result in reduced access to high-quality, appropriate instruction for those students.” In the context of First Nations students’ educational opportunity, we have focused on special education, tutoring, guidance and graduation coaches.

Special Education

Appropriate and adequate special education supports are a key element of an equitable learning environment for students. In the words of the Supreme Court of Canada, “Special education ... is the ramp that provides access to the statutory commitment to education made to all children.” (Moore v. British Columbia, 2012 SCC 61 CANLii). While many educators and people with disabilities struggle with the processes and even language of special education (Lewis, 2022; Underwood, 2009) it is clear some students require additional supports to be fully included in the classroom and educators need expertise and resources to ensure students can reach their potential.

Some First Nations schools, exercising their rights of sovereignty, do not use the language of special education at all. Among First Nations schools, the range of students reported receiving special education supports was between 0% and 100%.

Overall, the mean percentage of students receiving special education supports was 37%. By contrast, in 2021, 17% of the Ontario student population relied on special education programs or services (Government of Ontario, 2022).

The needs of these students identified with special education needs are complex and span a broad spectrum: many require only minor accommodations, while others would not be able to attend school at all without fulltime assistance. We note in particular that decades of research point to striking over-representation of Black, Indigenous and Latin American young people – as well as those with low incomes and some groups of immigrants – in special education placements. Those groups are also more likely to be identified with particular special education attributes (e.g., with developmental disabilities not autism) as well as experience differential access to supports. The processes of special education are a part of legacies of colonialism, racism and ableism (Brown et al., 2021; Brown & Parekh, 2013; De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; James & Taylor, 2023; Losen & Orfield, 2002)

While the percentage of disabled students in First Nations students is higher than average, the resources available to provide in-school supports is lower. While virtually all provincially-funded schools have a special education teacher (98%), only 77% of First Nations schools report having one. Special education teachers usually have specialized training and experience to support adapting instruction and the classroom environment to support students with diverse learning needs.

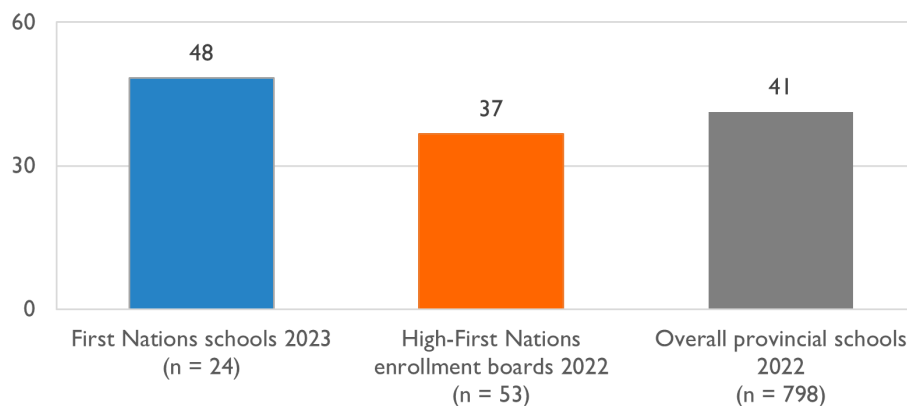
Not only do a significant number of schools have no special education teacher on staff, but in schools where there are special education teachers, they are on average serving many more students than the provincial average: on average, a special education teacher in a First Nation school serves 48 students compared to a provincial average of 41 students (and 37 students in high First Nations enrollment boards).

Fewer First Nations schools report having Educational Assistants (EAs) on staff (83%, compared to 94% provincially), but among the schools that do have EAs, each serves many students. Some First Nations schools report having a very high number of EAs. In First Nations schools, on average each EA serves 14 students; provincially, on average, each serves 28. In school boards with high-First Nations enrollment, each serves 10.

In addition to the work of classroom and special education teachers and educational assistants, specialist professionals are an important part of the system to support success for students with disabilities. Their interventions are associated with positive outcomes for students, and school is a particularly convenient setting to make sure that students get this kind of help. Our data – looking at some of the most common specialists, Psychologists, Speech-Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists and Physical Therapists, show that access to these specialists – particularly regularly-scheduled access – in First Nations schools is better than provincial averages.

Overall, First Nations schools (and students in high-First Nations enrollment boards within the provincially-funded system) are slightly more likely than provincial schools to have virtual, as opposed to in-person access for regularly scheduled services. However, access to professional specialists is an important area where there are no opportunity gaps; indeed First Nations schools are better served. Funding accessed through Jordan's Principal may be an important factor here. At the same time, full value of these professionals' support depends on teachers' ability to fully implement the various accommodations and modifications to support students' special education needs. Teachers with greater training and experience may be better positioned to incorporate professionals' recommendations, into their classroom practice.

Average Ratio of Students with Special Education Needs to Special Education Teachers
(among those with Special Education Teachers)



		First Nations schools 2023 (n = 26)	High-First Nations enrollment boards 2023 (n = 79)	Overall provincial schools 2023 (n = 870)
Psychologist	Regularly scheduled OR regularly scheduled and on-call (either in-person or virtually)	35%	13%	28%
	Only available on-call (either in-person or virtually)	54%	37%	47%
	Not available (neither in-person nor virtually)	12%	51%	25%
Speech-Language Pathologist	Regularly scheduled OR regularly scheduled and on-call (either in-person or virtually)	80%	48%	50%
	Only available on-call (either in-person or virtually)	10%	41%	45%
	Not available (neither in-person nor virtually)	10%	11%	6%
Occupational Therapist	Regularly scheduled OR regularly scheduled and on-call (either in-person or virtually)	76%	40%	29%
	Only available on-call (either in-person or virtually)	10%	40%	55%
	Not available (neither in-person nor virtually)	14%	20%	17%
Physical Therapist	Regularly scheduled OR regularly scheduled and on-call (either in-person or virtually)	40%	25%	13%
	Only available on-call (either in-person or virtually)	16%	38%	49%
	Not available (neither in-person nor virtually)	44%	37%	38%

Tutoring

Tutoring is not usually part of special education processes. Tutoring is typically defined as one-on-one (1:1) or small group (up to 1:5) instruction that compliments the work of classroom teachers. As a supplement to classroom teaching, tutoring enhances the possibility of customized instruction and detailed, timely feedback, as well as deeply personalized engagement and closer-to-peer mentoring.

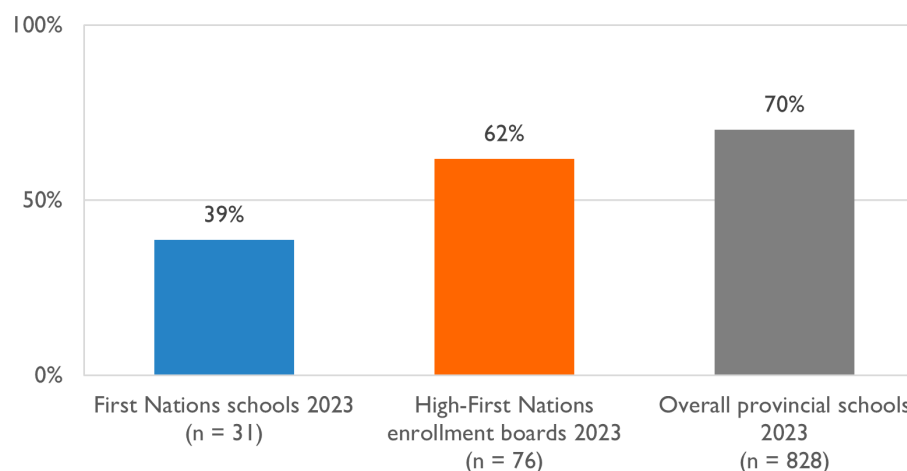
A strong body of research points to absolute and relative effectiveness of tutoring and its benefits for both students and tutors. High-dose tutoring (tutoring offered several times a week, usually linked to classroom instruction), has a substantial and consistent positive impact on academic achievement for all students (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Nickow et al., 2020; Robinson & Loeb, 2021). These results are particularly true for those facing serious academic difficulties.

While the strongest effects are associated with teacher-delivered tutoring, very positive outcomes are also associated with tutoring by trained educational assistants or post-secondary students (ibid). The effectiveness of tutoring equals or exceeds many other educational interventions – including early childhood education, after-school and summer programs, curriculum reforms, and counselling (Deitrichson et al., 2017; Fryer, 2017; Hattie, 2009).

Most of the research focuses on the development of skills in literacy and numeracy. Given its high effectiveness, even with relatively high cost (Kraft & Falken, 2020), it is considered to be cost effective (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Harris, 2009). There are also strong results for peer-tutoring programs – where students are paired with more advanced students (Alegre-Anstuátegui et al., 2018; Alzahrani & Leko, 2018; Bowman-Perrot et al., 2014; Clearinghouse, 2012).

Across Ontario, the most effective forms of tutoring – high dose, curriculum-aligned – do not appear to be widely implemented nor required by policy (Gallagher-Mackay, 2022; Teotonio, 2022). Results from our surveys, however, make it clear that any form tutoring is much less likely to be available in First Nations schools than it is in provincially-funded schools across Ontario: 39% of First Nations schools compared to a provincial average of 70%. Tutoring is also less likely to be available in school boards with high First Nations student enrollments (62%). Unlike issues of curricular breadth, school size seems much less likely to be a factor in the availability of tutoring.

Schools with the Opportunity to Participate in Tutoring or Peer-Tutoring Programs



Guidance Counsellors

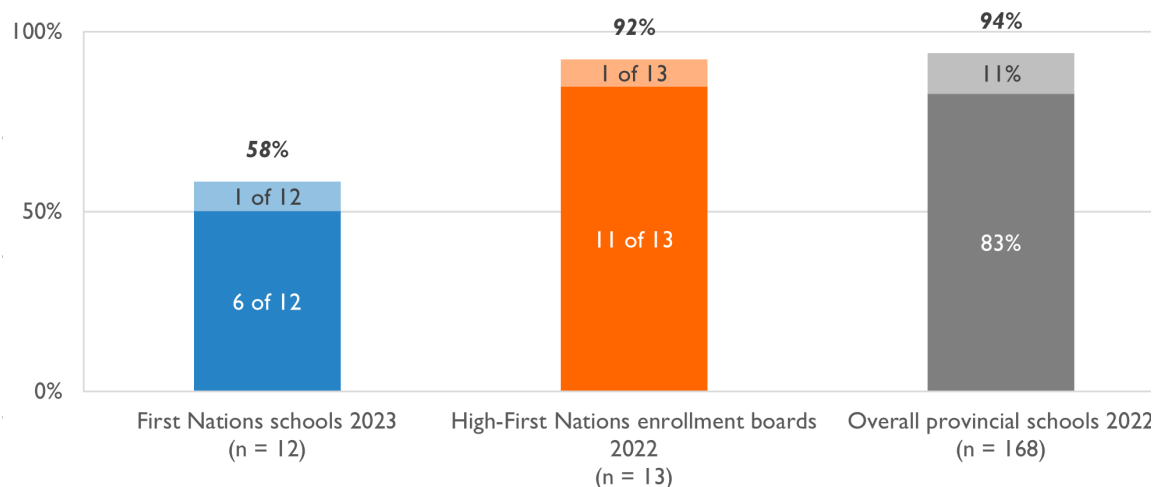
Guidance counsellors play multiple roles in supporting student success, including helping students map pathways through school and into postsecondary, supporting mental health through counselling and referral, supporting behaviour management, and coordination of enriched programming such as co-op or high skills majors (Ontario School Counselors' Association, 2019; People for Education, 2019a).

Improved access to guidance counsellors has been associated with improved post-secondary progress and reduced school discipline (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014; Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Perna et al., 2008). A large US study showed that “effective” counselors had an impact comparable to that of effective teachers on the chances students will attend postsecondary (Mulhern, 2020). Guidance counselors can have a particularly powerful impact for students in challenging circumstances because they can provide access to “social resources” that affect postsecondary access – expectations, information, and support with navigation and management of the many administrative hurdles (Mulhern, 2020; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013).

The vast majority of provincially-funded schools have guidance counsellors, either full- or part-time: 94% of secondary schools, and 92% of secondary schools in boards with high First Nations enrollment (12/13 schools). By contrast, only 58% of First Nations schools (7/12) with secondary programming have guidance counsellors. Note that the statistic was slightly higher among secondary-only schools: 3 of 4 (75%) of secondary-only schools had a full-time guidance counselor.

If one goal to close systemic gaps is to improve access to post-secondary, one important solution might be to ensure the equitable distribution of staff who can marshal key social resources to help shape expectations and to aide in navigating the path to post-secondary. It is clear that this is not currently the case.

Guidance Counselors in Schools with Secondary Programming



■ At least one full-time guidance counsellor (opaque) ■ Part-time guidance counsellor (transparent)

Any guidance counsellor

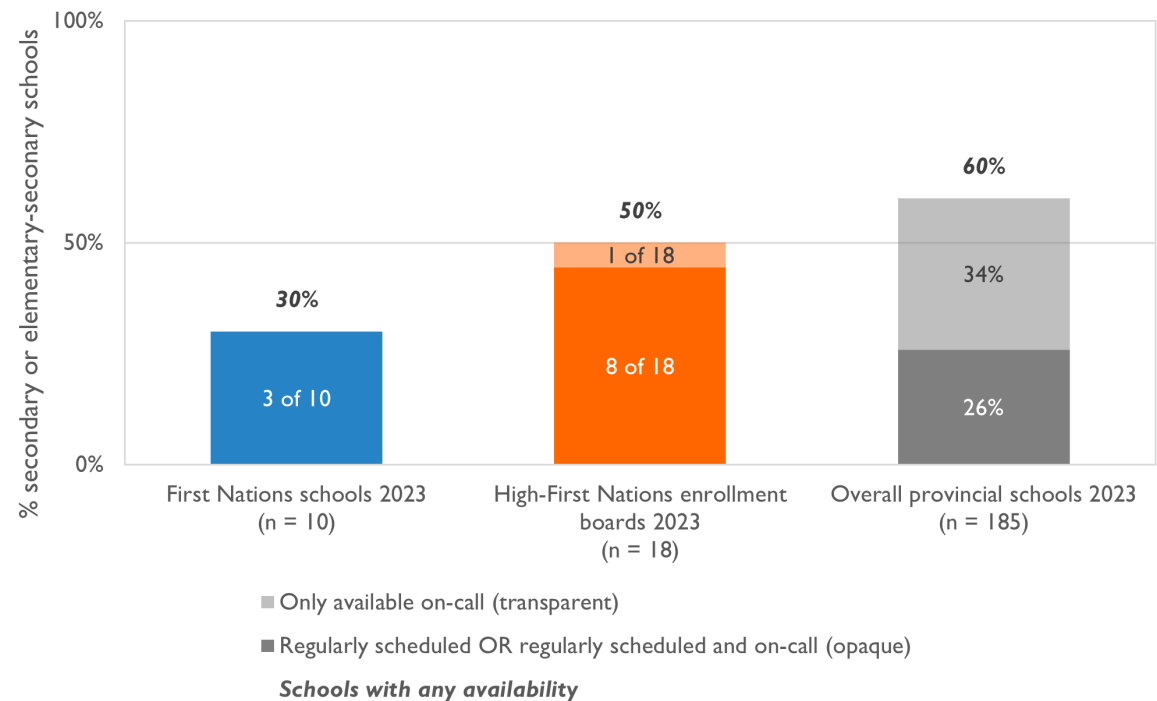
Graduation Coaches

Graduation coaches are used as an early-identification and prevention strategy to prevent drop-out in secondary schools (Bacote, 2017). They typically work with students facing challenges with attendance, behaviour or failed courses. Graduation coaches have become a widespread part of student success initiatives over the past twenty years (Baldwin, 2012).

In Ontario, 60% of provincially funded secondary schools have graduation coaches working either virtually or in-person. Half of provincially-funded schools in high-First Nations enrollment boards have them. By contrast, 3/10 of First Nations schools serving secondary students report they do not have a graduation coach. We note graduation coaches are regularly scheduled in First Nations schools, while the majority are only available on-call for provincially funded schools.

While this is certainly a significant gap, given the many priorities for investment, it is important to note that we were unable to locate any published research on their efficacy. A pair of American doctoral dissertations found no statistical evidence to suggest a significant connection between the presence of graduation coaches and improved rates of attendance or graduation (Bacote, 2017; Baldwin, 2012).

Secondary-Serving Schools with Graduation Coaches Available
(in-person or virtually)



Equitable Access to Supportive School and Classroom Environments

While robust curriculum and high-quality instruction are key elements of learning and success at school, students also need safe, supportive learning environments. Students' thriving is related to their access to supports for well-being, including linkages to community services to meet needs beyond the schools' capacity.

The National Academies of Science and Medicine identified a strong school climate, preventative, non-exclusionary discipline policies, and supports for students' mental health and social-emotional development as key elements of supportive school and classroom environments (National Academies of Science and Medicine, p. 104). We have broadened these indicators to include support for students' physical well-being, including access to physical activity, high-quality schoolyards, and nutrition programs.

School discipline is the subject of a separate [report](#), *Suspensions and Equitable Access to a Positive Disciplinary Climate*. That report focused on provincially-funded schools, and highlighted the significant inequities in access to positive, preventative discipline for First Nations children. Notably, suspension rates for First Nations children in elementary school are almost five times higher than the provincial average. In secondary school, First Nations students are 2.2 times more likely to be suspended.

There is limited comparable data on school climate in Ontario, where school boards do not use common tools to measure this critical construct. In a forthcoming report, we hope to be able to use the evidence-based Middle Years Development Index (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013) to explore elements of school climate as well as student-wellbeing outcomes.

The focus, then, in this section is on disparities in the supports available for students' mental and physical well-being.

Access to Mental Health Services

A key educational issue across Canada – often identified by teachers and principals as their greatest single need – is access to mental health professionals. A recent review paper in the journal *Psychiatric Services* summarized the importance of school-based mental health services (references omitted):

Schools are an optimal setting to identify, manage, and sustain progress for children with mental health problems. An ever-growing body of evidence indicates that integrating mental health supports and services directly within the school setting is an effective delivery system for child mental health programming. Delivering mental health treatments in schools has substantial benefits, including improved access to care for far more children, improved adherence and participation in treatment,

early problem identification and diminished impacts of mental health conditions, decreased stigma among children and their families, and positive impacts on academic and psychosocial functioning (Hoover & Bostic, 2021).

Comprehensive mental health strategies in schools include important roles for all personnel, especially teachers, in providing all students with knowledge and skills for positive mental health, fostering positive relationships and identifying issues (School Mental Health Ontario, 2019). Without minimizing the importance of full-staff engagement, undeniably, a key element of providing adequate services in schools is the availability of specialized staff (e.g., Psychologists and Social Workers).

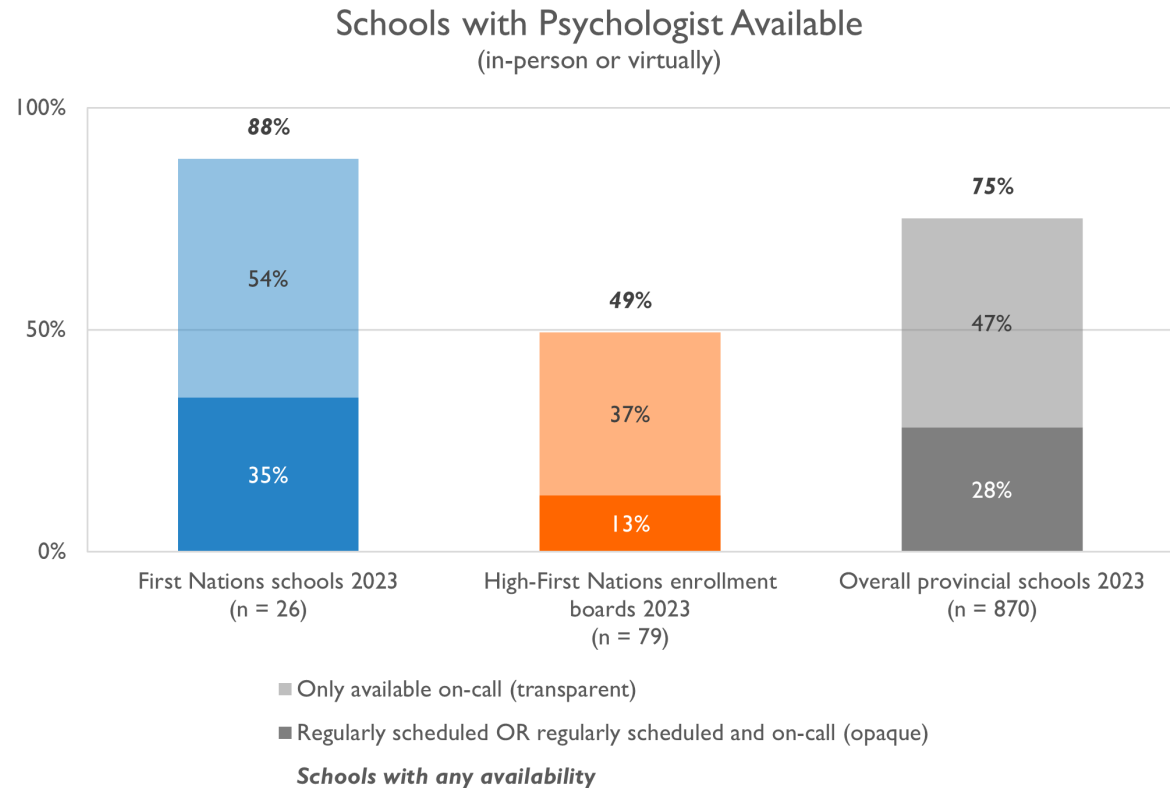
Our data confirms both that all Ontario schools are short on access to these critical personnel, and the schools attended by more First Nations students – whether First Nations schools or provincially-funded ones – are particularly short on the more expert front-line personnel. While different schools / systems try to meet students' needs with different configurations of personnel, the overall picture is one where – even without attention to potentially more acute needs – First Nations schools are somewhat under-resourced in this area.

Psychologists

Psychologists play various roles in the school system, including counseling and assessing students. Our survey did not distinguish what role Psychologists play; however, given their specialized mental health training it seems reasonable to consider them a key mental health resource.

Perhaps surprisingly, First Nations schools were more likely to have access to a psychologist than either Ontario averages or schools in boards with high First Nations populations. Eighty-eight percent of First Nations schools reported access to a psychologist, whether in-person or virtual, which was a greater percentage of schools than the provincial average (75%).

However, *provincially-funded schools with many First Nations students have noticeably worse access to Psychologists*. Only half (49%) of these schools have access to a psychologist: 13% with regularly scheduled Psychologists and the other 37% with only on-call availability.

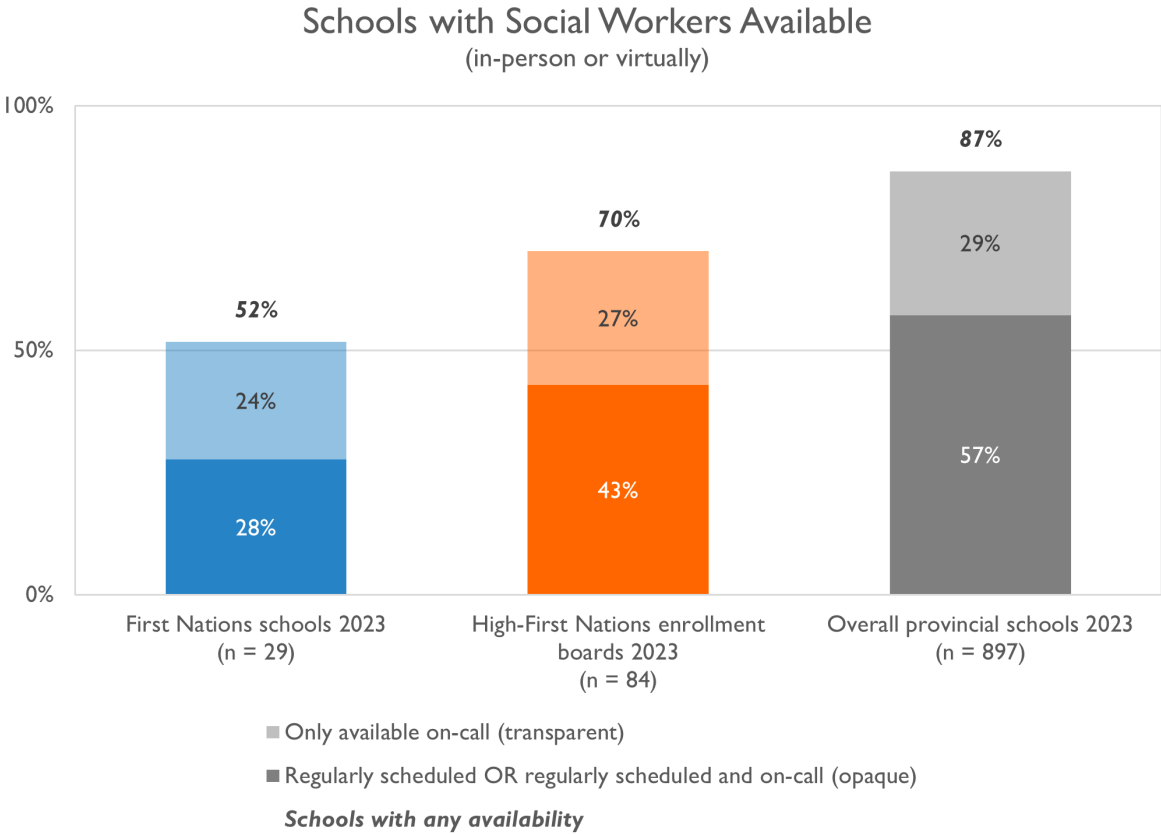


Social Workers and Child and Youth Workers

Typically, Child and Youth Workers and Social Workers are likely to have more sustained contact with schools and students than Psychologists. School Social Workers typically have a Bachelor or Masters degree, and can contribute in significant ways to a positive climate in schools and effectively meetings students’ mental health needs as well as coordinating other types of social supports (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2011). The large majority of provincially funded schools have at least some access to a Social Worker: across Ontario, 57% of schools have regularly scheduled Social Workers and an additional 29% have on-call access (87% have access overall). Provincially-funded schools with high First Nations enrollment are less likely than other provincially-funded schools to have access, especially regularly scheduled access. By stark contrast, only 28% of First Nations schools have regularly scheduled Social Workers and another 24% have on-call access to a Social Worker, meaning only 52% of First Nation schools have access to Social Workers at all (including both in-person and virtual service).

Child and Youth Workers typically have a diploma representing skill in developing and maintaining therapeutic relationships, selecting and implementing evidence-based interventions, and providing support and advocacy to children, youth and families (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2022).

There is no major gap in terms of access to Child and Youth Workers: 65% of both First Nations schools and provincially funded schools have access, whether regularly scheduled (46% for First Nations schools and 47% for provincial schools) or just on-call (another 19% of First Nations schools and 17% of provincially funded schools). In almost all First Nations schools that have these resources, they work in-person. Among high First Nations population school boards, 51% have access to Child and Youth Workers (36% regularly scheduled and another 15% of schools had only on-call access).



Mental Health and Addictions Specialists

There is a wide array of possible educational backgrounds for a Mental Health and Addictions specialist. The most specialized are nurses with specific training. They may also be community members with significant knowledge and expertise. Fewer than half of First Nations schools (46%) report having access to a Mental Health and Addictions specialist – despite widely-acknowledged concerns about addictions issues in the community. Proportionately, more provincially-funded schools with a high percentage of First Nations students (75%) and more Ontario public schools in general (65%) report having access to these specialists.

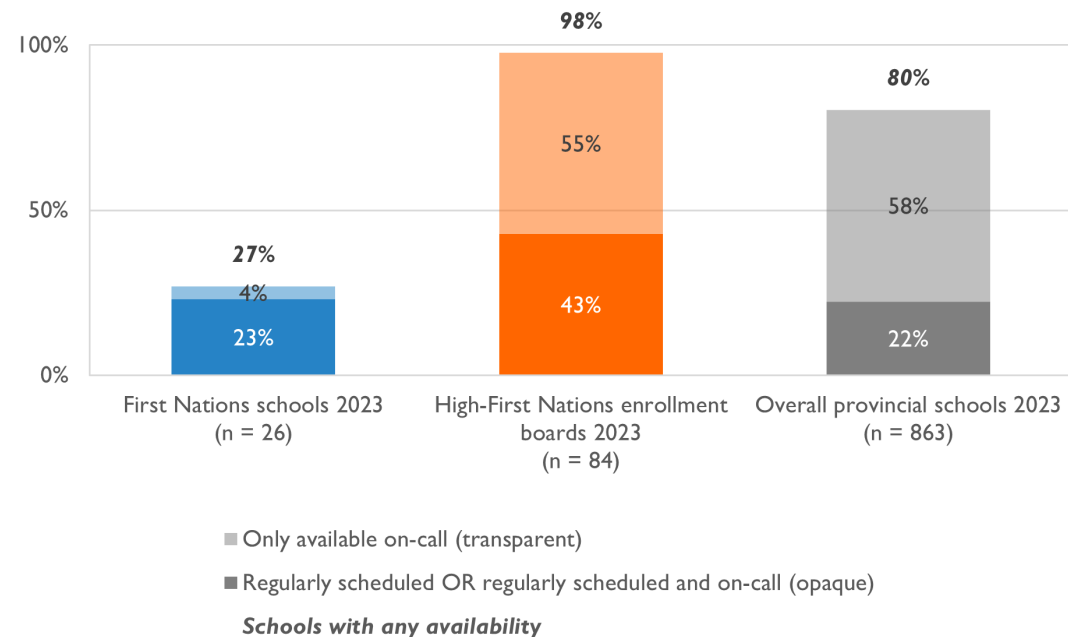
Attendance Counsellors

Attendance is vitally important for students' eventual school success, because students who are not in the classroom by definition are missing out on an opportunity to learn. Attendance also serves as an indirect measure of student engagement and how schools are able to address student needs (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Kearney, 2008). Finally, attendance can reflect issues at home and in the community, such as ill-health, parenting struggles, or poverty-related challenges such as transportation or childcare (see e.g. Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Chronic absenteeism (10% or more of days missed) powerfully predicts early school leaving (Balfanz et al., 2007; Hein et al., 2013). Toronto research found that missing 10% or more of days in one year of elementary school is a more powerful predictor of eventual post-secondary attendance than grades or test scores (Brown et al., 2020).

In our report on student outcomes in provincial schools, we found very high levels of chronic absenteeism across Ontario – particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in 2018-19, before the pandemic, 67% of Ontario elementary students attended school at least 90% of the time, compared to 40% of First Nations overall and 24% of students living in First Nation communities.

Schools with Attendance Counsellors Available
(either in-person or virtually)



In 2021-22, the parallel percentages for all three groups of students dropped to about half (53%) for the general elementary population, and significantly to a quarter (26%) for First Nations students overall, and even drastically to only 10% of students in First Nations communities.

When we look at the most common school-level staff position that focuses on attendance, it is clear that First Nations schools are far less likely to have attendance counselors on staff, relative to provincial averages. Larger school boards also tend to have centralized social work staff who may take responsibility in this area, also typically unavailable in First Nations schools. 27% of First Nations schools have attendance counselors available compared to 80% provincially and 98% in boards with high First Nations populations.

A substantial body of evidence – though little from First Nations communities – suggests that targeted attendance programs can lead to dramatic improvements in this serious problem. There is a growing body of evidence on effective interventions to address chronic absenteeism, through the work of schools, often working with community and public health partners (Attendance Works, 2017; Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Centre, 2016; Centre for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration, 2022; Gandy & Maxfield, 2007; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Railsback, 2004).

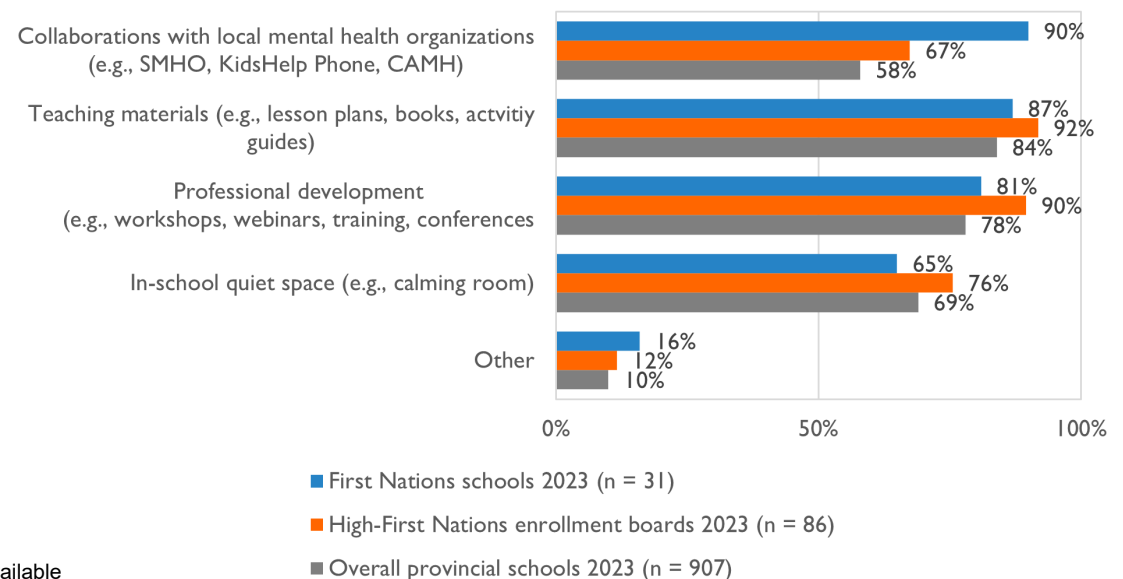
While most highly effective measures talk about the importance of school-wide policies and teacher messaging, they also emphasize the need for more specialized and intensive supports for students experiencing chronic absence. There is evidence for home visits, community partnerships and service integration to tackle underlying causes, “check and connect” monitoring of students who are really struggling etc. All measures require both intentional planning *and* resources.

Access to Other Mental Health Resources

While staff (onsite or on-call) are probably the most important mental health resource, are others can make a difference.

First Nations schools were more likely than provincially-funded schools to have community collaborations, and have comparable levels of access to teaching materials and professional development between the types of schools.⁸ While many First Nations School principals commented on limited space in their schools throughout the survey, two-thirds (65%) of First Nations schools report they had “in-school quiet spaces;” a proportion somewhat comparable to that of the provincial average (69%), but lower than that of provincially-funded schools with a high proportion of First Nations students (76%).

Mental Health and Well-Being Supports Provided by Schools



⁸ Note that the option “None” was not available on the COO survey, but was available to People for Education respondents. In the overall provincial sample, 2% reported offering “None.”

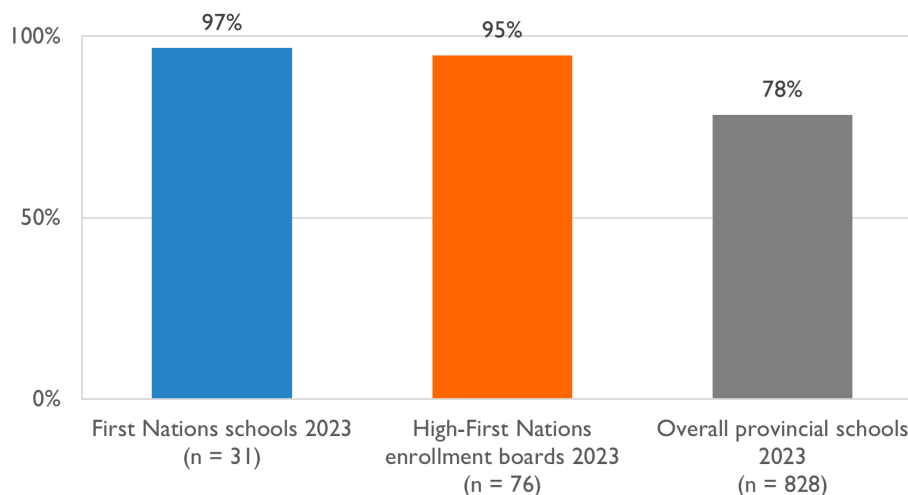
Access to Nutrition Programs at School

Virtually all First Nations schools (97%) offer nutrition programs at school – more than either provincial averages or the averages of schools in boards with high First Nations enrollment. The high levels of food programming represent considerable efforts on the part of Education Directors or others to access funding. One school explained how they funded their program by seeking grants from, “Breakfast Club of Canada; First Nations Student Nutrition Program – about \$14,000 a year for that program and can get healthy snacks shipped up from Sioux Lookout. Also through Northwestern Health Unit is the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program – a case of fruit and vegetables for students or their families.” Another principal explained, “We get to the point that we inform parents, ‘don’t keep your children at home just because you don’t have food for lunches.’ We let parents know, no child will go hungry at our school.”

In schools with generally stretched administrative capacity, these efforts reflect the high priority on student-well-being, and a huge resource drain. A key issue for the recently-announced National School Food Program (*A National School Food Program to Set Kids up for Success, 2024*) is whether it produces new and more streamlined access to resources to support this key function.

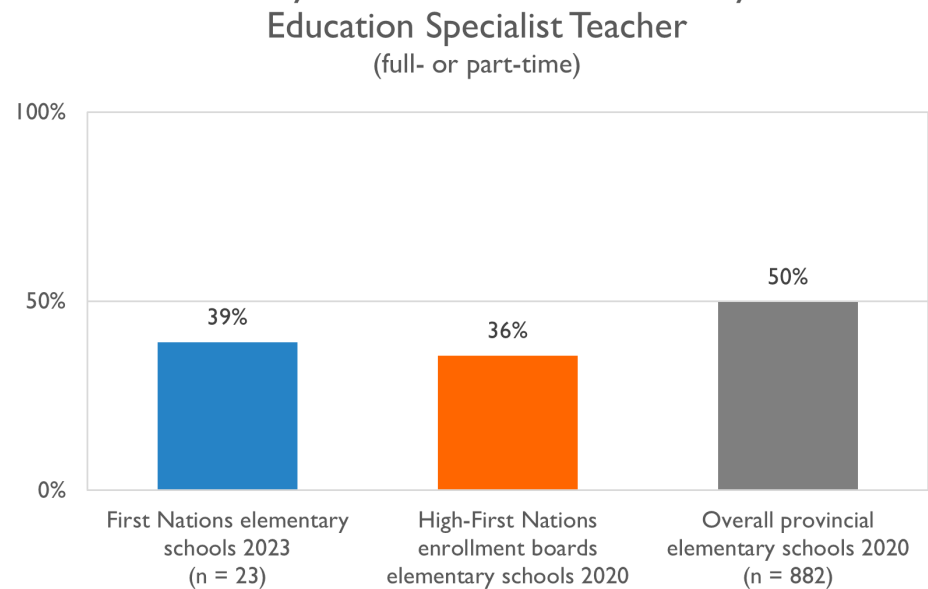
As comments from principals reveal, school food programs are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of ways in which First Nations schools take action to provide for students’ physical well-being. For example, one school extended school hours in the wake of COVID-19 to try to help students graduate. The principal recorded, “[Students can go to the] social counselors’ room to make their own breakfast, plus the regular lunch program. We had supper break when kids went to 6 – paid for by Board as ‘unforeseen expenditure’ – had to explain high school credits to board.” Several principals reported that the school bought boots and coats to ensure students were warm in winter.

Schools with the Opportunity to Participate in Nutrition or Breakfast Programs



Access to Physical and Health Education Teachers

Specialist Health and Physical Education (HPE) Teachers have additional training that has been shown to provide, on average, higher quality lessons and to make a moderate contribution to improved physical health outcomes in children and youth (Telford et al., 2016; Truelove, 2020). First Nations schools are less likely to have specialist HPE teachers.



School Transportation

Half (52%) of First Nations schools in our survey reported that most or all of students arrive by school bus or other school-supported transportation. (This question was not comparable to provincial standards, but considered very important to our Steering Committee).

Half of First Nations school principals reported that their school transportation system was “good,” 30% said it was merely adequate and 20% said it was problematic. The comments of principals suggest a number of issues: availability and maintenance of school buses, particularly given gravel roads and hard winters; one principal reported overcrowded buses that were only safe because of low speed limits in the community. Some identified problem managing school bus behaviour, resulting in students being unable to access transportation. As with other areas of school operations, staffing was a problem for some schools. One of the principals without school buses highlighted that students often stayed home on the coldest days; and another principal commented that they used the small buses to go get students who were absent from school.

	Most or All	Some	None or Very Few
Walk (n = 29)	17%	41%	41%
Parental transportation (n = 30)	10%	63%	27%
School bus or school-supported transportation (n = 29)	52%	34%	14%

Facilities

We did not ask about facilities, but principals' comments throughout the survey make it clear that a lack of adequate space is an enormous barrier in many, many schools. There are also ongoing concerns of the appropriateness of available spaces.

One principal explained that they would like to offer Grades 11 and 12 in the community, but cannot do so because there is no space; as a result, students who don't want to leave the community do not finish high school and instead try to manage in the adult education program elsewhere in the community. Other concerns that were mentioned include undersized, unsafe gymnasiums (or no gym at all in very small schools); the inability to offer early childhood programming, run co-op supports, or provide mental health programming offered by community groups, or adult education programs due to lack of space (one principal mentioned they had to close the daycare because heat was unavailable that year). Another principal reported students had nowhere to play because the schoolyard was filled with "shipping cans" being used for storage.

These comments are not typical on the provincial survey. We cannot report comparatively on this issue because the questions were not asked on the provincial survey – but it is clear that adequate facilities are a key part of closing systemic gaps and the repair and building backlogs are a major resource challenge facing staff, students and communities (Assembly of First Nations, 2020). This is another critical need for funding resources.

Parent Engagement

In its *Calls to Action*, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission particularly highlighted the significance of parental involvement and accountability to parents in the area of First Nations education. Call to Action #10 sets out key principles for legislation governing Indigenous education. Among them, 10(v) calls for the federal government to “enable[e] parental and community responsibility, control and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems”, and 10(vi) calls for “enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.”

This *Call to Action* reflects recognition of the intergenerational legacy of distrust and alienation from formal schooling that was a key harm of the residential school system, and the importance of accountability to parents and the community as an aspect of sovereignty. It *also* reflects the extremely robust body of literature that emphasizes the importance of parental involvement in students' academic and social success (Corter & Pelletier, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

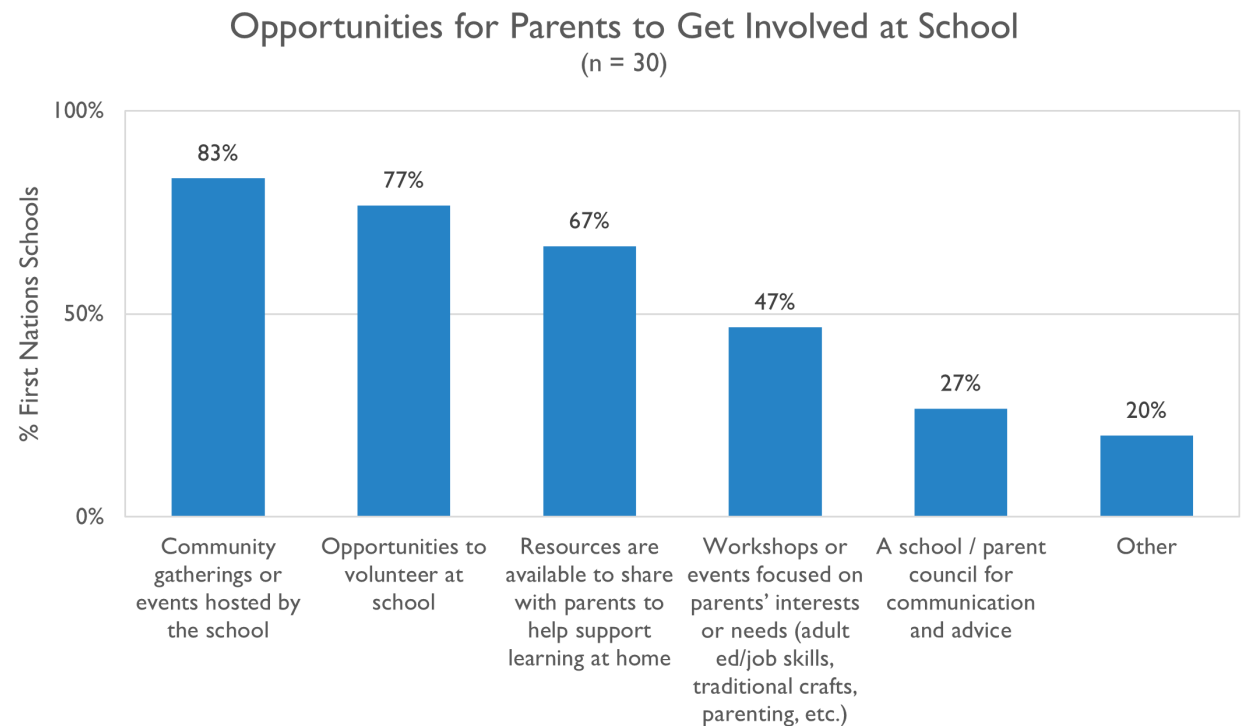
While less visible than school-based activities (such as participating on the school council or fundraising), the literature on engaging parents in their children's education emphasizes

that home-based activities, including supporting high expectations, conversations about school, and contributing to positive attitudes and habits, make the biggest difference (Ho & Willms, 1996; Nye et al., 2006). Strong relationships between schools and parents can be challenging, but are no less important where students are struggling (Mapp & Hong, 2002; Pianta & Walsh, 1996).

Our survey showed that First Nations schools provide various opportunities for parent engagement. As one would expect in relatively small First Nations communities, a large majority (83%) of schools welcome parents at community gatherings or events. More than three-quarters of schools had opportunities to volunteer, about two thirds had resources to support home-based learning, and nearly half (47%) had workshops or events focused on parents' interests or needs.

Only about a quarter of schools had school councils.

Several principals reported significant challenges with getting parents to come to school. While COVID-19 was raised as a problem by a few, others pointed to more ongoing problems: “we have a lot of residential school survivors so there is still a lot of trepidation about coming in,” commented one. Broader struggles – with clear ramifications for students – were also acknowledged. One principal explained, “A huge portion of our students lost a parent this year.”



Conclusions

This report is meant to inform negotiations and support advocacy for needs-based funding. The appropriate standard of need is whether the resources are enough close gaps in a generation, not merely to be comparable to provincial averages.

Currently, far from meeting the need to accelerate and enrich education, there are significant gaps in important resources in a number of areas that are very important for educational achievement, well-being and equity.

In particular, we've highlighted major shortcomings in the following critical educational resources:

- First Nations schools are far less likely to provide access to early childhood education and care, which in many cases is not available elsewhere in the community.
- Fewer than half the teachers in First Nations schools are provincially certified, and First Nations schools report significant staffing challenges that interfere with learning.
- There are significant gaps in curricular breadth; notably, libraries and teacher librarians, arts education, out-of-class learning opportunities and extracurriculars (except for culture clubs).

- There are considerable inequities in access to courses that prepare students for postsecondary and many First Nations high schools do not have access to technical or pre-apprenticeship training.
- There are major gaps in the availability of academic supports, notably, schools without special education teachers, and more students per special education teacher, and a relative lack of tutoring, guidance counselors, and graduation coaches.
- First Nations schools are much less likely to have access to School Social Workers, Mental Health and Addictions Specialists and Attendance Counsellors, as well as specialist Health and Physical Education Teachers.

First Nations schools are ahead of provincial standards in terms of access to First Nations educators, access to First Nations culture and language programming, access to Psychologists, and other professionals who provide special education-related supports, and access to school food programs.

Despite growing areas of strength in First Nations schools, there is need for significant funding and non-financial resources to address these systemic gaps in on-reserve schooling. First Nations may wish to consider this data in making resource decisions, and identifying priorities for improvement – but they will need additional resources to be able to make a dent.

Ultimately, however, the disparities reported here will require significant new funding if they are to be addressed and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission achieved. First Nations with long-standing, tri-partite self-government agreements in the area of education, such as the Mi'kmaw, provide important examples of how the combination of resources, structures and leadership have led to the closure of gaps in achievement within a generation.

The majority of First Nations students attend provincially-funded schools. This report reveals that students in boards with high First Nations enrollment are doubly challenged: they are less likely to have access to the critical cultural assets that are hallmarks of First Nations schools, and they face consistently lower-than-average school resources relative to provincial averages. Current mechanisms to provide support to First Nations students in the provincial school system fall far short of need.

It is very likely these resource gaps in schools serving high proportions of First Nations students contribute to the disparities that the Chiefs of Ontario reported on in the Systemic Gaps Report 1 – Outcomes in Provincially-Funded Schools, and Report 2 – Positive School Discipline in Provincially-Funded Schools. It is hoped that this report will lead to positive new initiatives to be developed through the [First Nations Lifelong Learning Table](#).

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