

Stories of collaboration, partnership and reconciliation

Pathways

2023





Pathways 2023

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Message from

Ranj Pillai

Premier of the Yukon

As the Premier of the Yukon, it is my pleasure to introduce the latest edition of *Pathways* magazine. *Pathways* showcases stories of collaboration, partnership and reconciliation in order to foster learning and growth.

In this edition, we are reflecting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. We are using this opportunity to report on progress being made on the Calls to Action across the Yukon government and in close collaboration with First Nations governments and organizations.

Reconciliation is a shared responsibility that requires active participation from all orders of government, communities, organizations and individuals. Reconciliation is not a destination, but an ongoing journey – a journey we undertake together, as we seek to understand and take action to address the harms of our painful history of colonization.

This edition of *Pathways* delves into the initiatives that are advancing the TRC's Calls to Action. You will read stories of growth, learning and innovation from Yukon and First Nations government staff, community leaders and organizations who are at the forefront of reconciliation efforts. From decolonizing education to promoting Indigenous sports, these stories illuminate the path forward and inspire us to create more inclusive and responsive public services.

I extend my gratitude to the contributors, authors and everyone involved in the creation of this edition of *Pathways* magazine. Your dedication and passion in sharing these stories will undoubtedly spark conversations and build momentum towards change.



Up to 24,000 years ago

people migrate across the Bering land bridge, settle in traditional territories and develop distinct languages

1867 – British North America Act creates Canada

1876 – The Indian Act becomes law

1898 – The Yukon becomes a territory and the Klondike Gold Rush has significant impacts on First Nations

1902 – Ta'an Kwäch'än Chief Jim Boss requests compensation for his people's loss of land and hunting grounds

1973 – Yukon First Nations present their vision to the Government of Canada in *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*

1993 – Umbrella Final Agreement establishes a new modern treaty framework for the Yukon

1993 – 2005
11 Yukon First Nations sign *Final and Self-Government Agreements*

2003 – The *Devolution Transfer Agreement* gives control of land and resources to the Government of Yukon

2007 – *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* is adopted despite Canada's vote against it. Canada removes its objector status in 2016.

2015 – The Truth and Reconciliation Commission releases its *94 Calls to Action*

2017 – Government of Yukon and First Nations reestablish the Yukon Forum to advance shared priorities

The changing landscape of the Yukon's governance

In 2023, the Yukon celebrated a number of big anniversaries: 125 years since we became a territory, 50 years since *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*, 30 years since signing the *Umbrella Final Agreement* and 20 years since devolution of federal powers to the Yukon.

Relationships between the Yukon government and Yukon First Nations governments have evolved immensely, with challenges and successes marking the way.

The vision of Yukon First Nations has remained constant over decades. From Chief Jim Boss's calls for a treaty in the 1900s to *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* in 1973, First Nations have been seeking a greater role in Yukon governance. They want partnership and control over the programs and services that affect their people.

The TRC Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its reports in 2015, reconciliation has become a driving force for change in the Yukon and across Canada.

"Reconciliation and collaboration with First Nations governments is a central commitment of the Yukon government," says Premier Ranj Pillai.

Documents like the TRC Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the Declaration) "shine a strong light on the relationship between First Nations and the Crown and the wrongs of the past," says Brian MacDonald. "I think they put pressure on governments and really emphasize the need for us to do better as public governments." A Citizen of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, Brian is the Assistant Deputy Minister of Aboriginal Relations with the Government of Yukon.



On February 14, 1973 Elijah Smith and Yukon First Nation leaders presented *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*, to the Canadian government. It began the negotiations towards Yukon's *Final and Self Government Agreements*. (Photo: Yukon Archives, Judy Gingell collection, 98/74, #1)



When thinking about these national and international documents, Council of Yukon First Nations Grand Chief Peter Johnston emphasizes that Yukon First Nations have been very clear in their vision for reconciliation, since long before documents like the Calls to Action and the Declaration came along.

“The first priority is to use the tools we negotiated for over 20 years,” says Grand Chief Johnston. “Yukon has the best Agreements in Canada, maybe the world.”

He says Yukon First Nations have been “studied, diagnosed and dissected for years” and he urges this must end and it’s time to start meaningfully implementing Agreements.

“The Declaration and the TRC Calls to Action are validations of the vision of First Nations leaders who developed *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* and the *Final and Self-Government Agreements*,” says Brian. “Their vision of self-determination was a strong prosperous Yukon, where First Nations were equal partners.”

“The Calls to Action and the Declaration influence and inform the Yukon government’s approach to reconciliation,” says Premier Pillai, “but it is the modern treaties and shared priorities set through government-to-government discussions and the Yukon Forum that are the framework for reconciliation.”

Capacity challenges

Yukon governance was transformed between 1993 and 2005 with the signing of the *Umbrella Final Agreement* and 11 *Final and Self-Government Agreements*, in addition to the changes brought by devolution.

The Government of Yukon and Yukon First Nations governments are relatively new in their existing roles and all are facing capacity challenges to meet their expanding mandates.

“We’re all in this period of intense transition,” says Daryn Leas, a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Citizen and lawyer. “Through land claims, the Yukon government assumed more responsibility for partnership and working with First Nations. They also took on responsibilities under devolution for lands, waters and forestry. There’s a lot of pressure for staff to assume these new responsibilities.”



On May 29, 1993, the *Umbrella Final Agreement* was signed by the Government of Canada, the Government of Yukon and the Council of Yukon First Nations. The Teslin Tlingit Council, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun also signed their Final and Self-Government Agreements. (Photo: Government of Canada)

Grand Chief Johnston is also concerned about capacity challenges. “Yukon First Nations should have a role in every part of governance in the Yukon, but we aren’t able to take advantage of all those opportunities,” he adds. “Capacity is a huge issue.”

He highlights the fact that many Yukon First Nations people are suffering from the impacts of colonization. Many people cannot focus much beyond survival as they struggle with the opioid crisis, poverty and trauma.

“Our success depends on the human capacity both in First Nations communities and in the Yukon government,” says Brian. He points to the growing Yukon population and influx of new public servants. “It’s going to be important that we retain and recruit people into our governments who understand the importance of the relationships between Yukon and First Nations governments and of Yukon treaties.” Brian states that a strong education system will be an important part of the solution.

From negotiations to implementation

“The Yukon leads the rest of Canada. There’s no other jurisdiction with as many self-governing communities. We are seeing something very unique here: collaborative governance,” says Daryn.

The relationships between the Yukon government and First Nations are shifting as the process moves from negotiations to implementation. The last *Final and Self-Government Agreements* were signed in 2005 with the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and Carcross/Tagish First Nation.

Daryn and Brian both point to the shift from adversarial relationships during negotiations towards collaborative implementation of Agreements and remind Yukoners that this is a big adjustment.

“Negotiations are adversarial,” says Daryn, who was involved in land claims negotiation. “The process can be tense and frustrating – for all sides.”



“Once the Agreements were done, we became partners in implementing those Agreements,” he adds. “This has been challenging. It takes a long time to develop trust, particularly with those you’ve been negotiating with.”

Keys to success

“We know that we cannot meet the needs of Yukoners on our own,” says Premier Pillai. “We need close collaboration and partnership with First Nations governments to achieve a strong economy, build healthy communities and protect the environment.”

Brian says, “the concept of reconciliation is, first, acknowledging historical wrongs, and second, undertaking to do things more collaboratively going forward”.

“The Yukon Forum and the Intergovernmental Forum are gatherings where we identify areas to work together as governments,” says Premier Pillai.

Daryn says the key to success is working together. “No longer can we govern lands or resources in silos: this is my jurisdiction and that’s your jurisdiction. If we proceed on that basis, it means weaker management for land and resources and poorer services for Yukoners.”

Brian is clear that reconciliation is an ongoing process. “We’ll never achieve perfection. It’s an evolving relationship that has to be recalibrated and rebalanced, and we have to be willing to do things differently and be introspective.”

Navigating change

Yukon leaders underscore that when talking about reconciliation we are talking about change, and change is hard and it takes time. Reconciliation means undoing decades of colonial and racist government policies, laws and practices and shifting our thinking, our culture and our institutions.



We would like to thank Northern Cultural Expressions Society and carvers: Wayne Price (Lead Master Carver), Justin Smith, Duran Henry, the late William Callaghan, Ben Gribben, Owen Munroe, Sara Villeseche, Joshua Lesage and Colin Teramura for granting permission to use this image of the Healing Totem. (Photo: Jolie Patterson)

Advice for public servants who are working to foster reconciliation in their roles and build better relationships with Yukon First Nations governments.



Grand Chief Peter Johnston

“Listening, understanding, appreciating, empathy and kindness – all these matter in discussions.”

“Participate in our events, spend time in our communities.”

“Understand our history. That’s the simplest way to understand.”



Brian MacDonald

“Government has to be collaborative. To be effective, you need to have those relationships.”

“Be curious and embrace a collaborative perspective.”



Premier Ranj Pillai

“Look for shared interests. Be solutions-focused.”

“People are struggling now, people need help now, and reconciliation is everyone’s responsibility.”



Daryn Leas

“Take the time to understand the land claim agreements and the vision that is articulated so well in *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*.”

“Their legacy is a blueprint for how we’re going to engage with each other and move forward.”



Project Manager Deborah Dupont, left, former Chair, Adeline Webber, and current Chair Judy Gingell, right, of the Yukon Residential Schools and Missing Children Project speak at a community meeting in Carcross. (Photo: Carcross/Tagish First Nation/ Max Leighton)

The search for answers and healing for families of missing children

Warning: This story contains details about residential schools and the search for missing children.

Imagine sending your child to school and never seeing them again. For many Yukon families, it's a reality they have lived with for decades.

"There's a lot of broken hearts out there," says Judy Gingell. "People don't have the answers." Judy is the chair of the Yukon Residential Schools and Missing Children Project, a group dedicated to finding children missing from the territory's residential schools.

Residential schools operated in the Yukon from 1903 to 1985.

During that time, there were six residential schools in the territory: Chootla School in Carcross; Coudert Hall, Yukon Hall and Whitehorse Baptist Mission in Whitehorse; the Shingle Point School in Shingle Point on the Yukon's Arctic coast; and St. Paul's Hostel in Dawson. The Lower Post School in northern B.C. also housed Yukon First Nations students. Each school was operated by a different religious order with funding from the federal government.

Residential schools were hard places to be a child. Some

children who left for these schools never returned home. In some cases, children got sick and were sent to hospitals outside the territory, where they died and were buried; in other cases, details are still unknown. Often, families were simply never told what happened to their children.

This is the truth of truth and reconciliation

The Yukon Residential Schools and Missing Children Project wants to try to find out what happened to them and help bring some closure for families still grieving from their loss.



GeoScan technicians did ground penetrating radar search of the Choooutla Residential School grounds in June 2023. (Photo: Carcross/Tagish First Nation/ Max Leighton)

“This is the truth of truth and reconciliation,” says Judy.

Judy, a respected Kwanlin Dün Elder, leader and Survivor of residential schools, has been involved with the project since 2021.

“Knowing what happened to your family to your people and in your communities is essential to healing,” she says.

A collaborative effort

The project is run by a working group composed of representatives from each First Nation, who have taken on this important and challenging work for all Yukon First Nations.

“Knowing what happened to your family, to your people, and in your communities is essential to healing.”

The working group is starting their search for answers at the Choooutla Residential School, which ran from 1903 to 1969. More than 1,300 students from across the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and northern British Columbia were forced to attend. The building was finally demolished in 1993.

The Yukon is the only region in Canada taking a coordinated, territory-wide approach to searching for missing Indigenous children.

“We are all in this together,” says Judy. “Children from throughout the Yukon went to those residential schools. So it only

makes sense that we all come together as one, support each other and take a united front on this issue.”

The team meets regularly with working group members and First Nations leaders and works with communities to determine how to carry out this sensitive work.

Deborah Dupont, the project manager, explains that the working group is gathering information from a variety of sources to try to find the answers that families and communities are looking for. The project has contracted the historical research firm, Know History, to conduct archival research.

During its work, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission identified 20 students who went missing from the Choooutla Residential School, but further research has so far identified



Harold Gatensby, left, is a Survivor of Chooutla Residential School. His daughter, Violet Gatensby, is an artist who painted a commemorative piece on the grounds of the school. (Photo: Carcross/Tagish First Nation/ Max Leighton)

33 deaths. The number may grow as research continues.

The working group is also interviewing Survivors for their first-hand accounts of children who died or went missing. That information can help the team decide where a ground-penetrating radar search in the Chooutla Residential School area should take place to identify potential unmarked graves.

Unfinished business

Harold Gatensby is a Survivor of Chooutla Residential School and lives near the site. He says people who live in the area know the spirits of children are still there, but he says there's nothing to be frightened of. "They are just saying, 'we're here,'" he says. "Those children – the spirits that are wandering around – want to be acknowledged. They are making their presence known because we need to do something about it."

He says there's some peace that comes with acknowledgment.

"We have some unfinished business here to take care of," says Harold. "In my own experience, I've been living on this site for 40 years, we're just

getting started and cleaning up the mess and legacy that it left behind for us."

Answers and ongoing questions

The working group is at a critical juncture with their Chooutla investigation. GeoScan completed its initial ground-penetrating work this summer and has shared the results with the working group.

GeoScan's report identified 15 potential grave sites near the Chooutla school. They say these findings are consistent with community and Survivor stories.

Archival research could help shed some more light for grieving families. In some cases archival records are showing where children were buried when they were sent to hospitals in other provinces. This information can help families find closure and hold ceremonies.

This is what inspires the working group to keep up their work.

"This is work that needs to be done so it can bring some peace to our people. How many years have they been sitting there, always wondering?" says Judy.

The working group has shared GeoScan and Know History's findings with First Nations leaders to help decide what should be done next. It is clear to Judy that this work must be driven by First Nation communities and that ceremony will play a vital huge role in healing and closure. The working group will work closely with communities to identify appropriate ways to address the findings of the search.

First Nations are incredible people, he says. "What we are now is not who we are. It's what we've become because of a hundred years of oppression, of being told you're no good for nothing, and you'll never amount to anything. That affects people."

Violet Gatensby is an artist and Harold's daughter. She says her parents gave her a life they never had but, even still, she says she feels the intergenerational

something that wasn't fun anymore. I wanted to look at that rock and not think about all those thoughts that I was thinking of. Now when I drive by, it's kind of a sign of hope. We got through this part. Now let's start thinking about the next part."

Judy says the discussion of residential schools and the information they are uncovering is helping some people to open up. "I'm one of them," she says. "I've never talked to my children about residential school. You kind of just put it behind you."

"Those children – the spirits that are wandering around – want to be acknowledged. They are making their presence known because we need to do something about it."

Information recovered through the project will eventually be stored in a First Nations-managed database, memorializing the history of Yukon's residential schools.

Healing a painful legacy

"A lot of our people drink and they're on drugs. One of the biggest reasons is to keep their feelings numb," says Judy. "They get flashbacks, and a lot of us weren't taught how to be parents."

Judy reflects on her own experience. "We were taught to speak when asked to speak, be quiet or you get a strap."

"The truth," Harold explains, "is that until we deal with the impacts of the residential schools, we're not gonna move forward."

impact of residential schools.

Violet is fulfilling her father's hopes and holding up her culture through artwork. "I do my artwork in a way where people can look at it and be like, wow, what a strong, beautiful culture, rather than seeing that dark history that we all have to acknowledge."

She created a commemorative piece of art on a chunk of concrete that was part of the steps of the old Chooutla Residential School. She says it represents little kids who made it through the chaos they did not deserve. And the ones who didn't.

"When I was a kid I remember playing on this rock. Boy, was it ever fun! Then once you learn the history of it, it became

Finding solace in community and culture

The working group understands this process will be painful for many people. As they work with communities, they are sharing the message that communities need to be prepared for the feelings that this process may bring up. Communities need to get ready with their support groups and ceremonies to support healing.

Judy says the project's work also has the potential to heal.

"This information is going to bring back a lot of things," Judy acknowledges, "and maybe a lot of parents will start to open up to their children because, honestly, a lot of children didn't even know this happened to their parents."

Without truth, understanding and answers, residential schools could remain an open wound for many.



Violet Gatensby created a commemorative piece of art on this chunk of concrete that was part of the steps of the Chootla Residential School. She says it represents kids who made it through the chaos they did not deserve and the ones who didn't. (Photo: Carcross/Tagish First Nation/ Max Leighton)

Support is available for Survivors and their families

- ▶ Call the 24-hour National Indian Residential School Crisis Line at: **1-866-925-4419**.
- ▶ Contact the Committee For Abuse in Residential Schools (CAIRS) outreach and counselling for residential school Survivors at: **867-667-2247**.
- ▶ Schedule Government of Yukon Rapid Access Counselling at **867-456-3838**

Contact your First Nation government for supports and services they may have available.

This project is a big step towards healing for Yukon communities and is truly grounded in the strength, resilience and unity of the Yukon First Nations people.

“The most important part is supporting each other, standing together and being there when we hear something,” says Judy.





CYFN's Family Preservation Services has a family playroom available to support family visits, appointments and meetings. (Photo: Cathie Archbould)

Shifting the balance from intervention to prevention in the Yukon's child welfare system

Child welfare is a complex and ever-changing system. Some families face multidimensional and often intergenerational challenges. In the case of Yukon First Nations and Indigenous families, many of these challenges stem from decades of racist policies enforced by the federal and territorial governments.

That legacy is hard to break, but the Yukon First Nations and Government of Yukon are working together to break those cycles.

Shadelle Chambers is the Executive Director of the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN) and she leads much of CYFN's work on child welfare issues.

"There's such an overrepresentation of Yukon First Nations children involved in the child welfare system," she says. "Yukon First Nations need to have

a seat at the table to ensure that those practices and policies are reflective of the needs and histories of our communities."

Updates to the *Child and Family Services Act* now ensure First Nations are central to the process. Changes to this legislation were made collaboratively with Yukon First Nations and now the Act enshrines Yukon First Nations participation and involvement in the system.

Leeann Kayseas is the Director of Family and Children's Services (FCS) with the Yukon government.

"As far as modernizing the Act, I think it will always change. Some elements will probably be removed as prevention programs become more prevalent



CYFN's Family Preservation Services staff provide culturally appropriate wrap-around supports to Yukon First Nations and Indigenous families. (Photo: Cathie Archbould)

and there will be less need for protection services.”

That is what they are working towards – a shift from interventions to protect children, to prevention-based, wrap-around support for families. Through the Act, the Yukon government is obligated to

Shadelle says it’s a great partnership and model to consider for other supports and services.

The CYFN has built a robust suite of services in their Family Preservation Services department, through funding

“The families who used to walk through FCS’s door now have other options through the programs of CYFN or their First Nation. The families we see now are those with an intensive need.”

For Leeann that’s the goal. “In the future, I see FCS becoming smaller and smaller because there is such a robust prevention option, that we no longer need protection services.”

Although collaboration with Yukon First Nations is now legally required from the FCS team, it’s more than that.

“It’s more than a requirement. It’s a responsibility and a humbling honour,” says Leeann. “I can’t imagine not working collaboratively with Yukon First Nations. Without that collaboration, we are not moving forward in a good way.”

provide cultural support, but that doesn’t mean they are best placed to provide those services.

The Government of Yukon contracts CYFN to provide some of those culturally appropriate, wrap-around services and supports.

from the federal and Yukon Government. They deliver cultural programming, prenatal and birth worker supports and Jordan’s Principle, and they help families navigate the child welfare system.

Leeann says she’s seeing the difference in the community.

“There’s such an overrepresentation of Yukon First Nations children involved in the child welfare system.”



CYFN's Family Preservation Services staff meet as a case management team to ensure wrap-around supports. (Photo: Cathie Archbould)

One project they are working on together is the Caregivers Strategy. The goal is to remove barriers and make changes so they can recruit and retain more Yukon First Nations and Indigenous caregivers for circumstances when Yukon First Nations and Indigenous children need out-of-home care.

“Connection to community and culture are essential to good outcomes for children,” says Shadelle. “The best way to do that is to have our own people raising our children and keeping them in the community.”

The collaboration and increasing support for Yukon First Nations-led programs is changing child welfare in the territory.

“Even five years ago there weren’t that many options for families,” says Shadelle. “They’d have to go to Family and Children’s Services if they were struggling with poverty or addiction issues. Now we are seeing a lot more supports and services delivered by Yukon First Nations and organizations like CYFN’s Family Preservation Services department and the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate.”

Rebalancing the child welfare system takes time, but more than anything it takes relationships of trust and partnership. The Yukon government and Yukon First Nations are working as a team to navigate the complexity and challenges of this systemic change together.





The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government organized a traditional medicine workshop for families and children. (Photo: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government)

Partnering to serve and support First Nations families

In June 2023, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government and the Government of Yukon signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to collaborate on the delivery of child and family services.

The MOU guides how the two governments work together, from frontline workers through to leadership. It includes trauma-informed holistic approaches to ensure cultural safety.

Leeann Kayseas is the Director of Family and Children's Services with the Yukon government. She says their legal responsibility is to promote the safety and wellbeing of children who need protection

by providing services to children and their families.

"Family and Children's Services works with families and their Yukon First Nation to ensure that children remain connected to their family, community and culture while they are receiving services from us," Leeann explains.

Building relationship

Allison Kormendy is Director of Nì'ehtyat Nidähjì' (Our Families, our Future) with Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. Her department is responsible for administrating, managing and delivering child, youth and family programs and

services for Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. She says the MOU with the Yukon government is grounded in Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in values and principles.

"It speaks to the main values that we hold, which are integrity, balance, interconnection, respect, accountability, cooperation, cultural safety, substantive equality and transparency," Allison says.

Leeann says part of the MOU process is to work with each Yukon First Nations government to ensure the agreement reflects their traditional beliefs and values.

“We sit together and really get into those discussions,” she says.

The MOU process can help build relationships and bring the two governments together while recognizing and respecting each side.

Allison says the process reminds her of a lesson a Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Elder recently shared with her.

“ We have to learn to walk in both worlds – to have one foot in our traditions and culture and one foot in the modern world in respect to legislation and policies.”

“They said we have to learn to walk in both worlds – to have one foot in our traditions and culture and one foot in the modern world in respect to legislation and policies,” she explains.

Terri Cairns is the Director of Justice with Kwanlin Dün First Nation (KDFN). Her role is to oversee Child and Family Supports, Restorative Justice and Community Safety, and Recreation for the community.

Over the past three years KDFN’s services and support for children and families has more than doubled. It hasn’t always been that way.

Following years of tension with the Yukon government over social workers apprehending children, the KDFN and Yukon government created a liaison committee in 2011 focused on child

welfare services. The committee provided a forum for information sharing, collaborative planning, implementation and evaluation in child welfare services.

In 2012, KDFN and the Yukon government signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which was the first agreement of its kind. It formalized their working relationship and helped to open

the lines of communication and repair the harms that had been done.

“The MOA was built on common goals to provide child welfare programs and services that kept KDFN children safe as well as connected to their families, community and culture,” Terri says.

Empowering communities

The child welfare agreements between the Yukon government and First Nations are an important step forward in collaboration.

Allison says the agreement ensures Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in families and children are fully supported.

“I think the impact of some of the programs and services is going to be astronomical,” she says. “Our

families are going to be better supported in the way that they feel safe.”

For Leeann’s team, these agreements help to clarify the roles between the two governments.

“They help us to truly understand how our relationship is working and how we’re working together with families,” Leeann says.

Allison says a lot of government systems don’t work for First Nations people, but the MOU is an opportunity to learn from past mistakes and move forward.

“We can take what we’ve learned from all of the experiences, the knowledge and wisdom and put them into our processes and into our policies moving forward,” says Allison.

In 2018, the Yukon government created a Social Work Enhancement Team to be based in KDFN’s McIntyre subdivision.

The team provided outreach and home visits to families, but as outlined in the MOA, Family and Children’s Services social workers could only meet with a KDFN family or attend a KDFN family home with a KDFN Child & Family Liaison Worker present.

Terri says the project fostered reconciliation and improved outcomes for KDFN families.

“It was a collaborative pilot project that developed a consistent and culturally sensitive approach to child welfare practices in KDFN,” she says.



Kwanlin Dün First Nation organized a youth moose hunt through their Child and Family Supports and Recreation Programs. (Photo: Kwanlin Dün First Nation)

Returning power

Under the Final Agreements, Yukon First Nations have the authority to administer and manage their own children's services programs.

Leeann sees her role as offering a short-term solution.

"We recognize that Yukon First Nations have jurisdiction over child and family services, and the Yukon government is only delivering those services for now," she says.

As the service provider, Leeann says it's Family and Children's Services' job to navigate how best to work together with Yukon First Nations under the *Child and Family Services Act*.

"We're trying to figure out how we can do that together in a

way that makes sure families, children and youth get what they need and that the First Nation is involved," she says.

In Dawson City, Allison says her department, *Ni'ehlyat Nidähjì*, is still in its infancy.

With the support of citizens and the *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in* government, the department is growing and taking shape to better serve and support the needs of the community.

Moving forward, Allison says *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's* priority is to gain jurisdiction and to create legislation that brings *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in* values and principles back to policy – a significant step in the path of self-determination.

For KDFN, they have seen their role shift. By 2020, the KDFN Child & Family Liaison team was actually leading on KDFN case

files, and they no longer needed the additional support of the Yukon government's Social Work Enhancement team.

Terri says the numbers reflect the improvements in services.

"Our child protection caseloads and the number of KDFN children in care has decreased," she says.

In 2023, most of the team's caseload consists of KDFN families proactively reaching out for support before circumstances become too dire or overwhelming. Three years ago, most cases were supporting families with open child protection files.

First Nations and the Yukon government are finding ways to collaborate and work together to provide the best supports for children, and it is making a real difference in positive outcomes for families.



The Ni'ehłyat Nidähjì' (Our Families, our Future) department of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government hosts family fun days as part of the services they deliver to families and children. (Photo: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government)



Kwanlin Dün First Nation hosted a hide tanning workshop to connect Elders and youth to this important traditional practice. (Photo: Kwanlin Dün First Nation)

Child Welfare Agreements between the Yukon government and Yukon First Nations

Child and Family Services has reached Memorandums of Understanding or Agreement with several Yukon First Nations. The agreements improve the relationship by enhancing collaboration and communications as they work together to better serve children and families who need support.

MOUs signed

- ▶ Kwanlin Dün First Nation – 2011
- ▶ Kluane First Nation – 2016
- ▶ Ta'an Kwäch'än Council – 2020
- ▶ Carcross/Tagish First Nations – 2021
- ▶ Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in – 2023





In November 2022, the First Nation School Board of Trustees were sworn in with an emotional ceremony at Grey Mountain Primary School. (Photo: Department of Education)

Building a new education system for all Yukoners

Last year, as students were gearing up for a new school year in Dakwākāda (Haines Junction), the sockeye salmon returned to Klukshu.

After decades of dwindling runs, the salmon came back to this Champagne and Aishihik First Nations fishing village in record numbers.

While the salmon's return signaled a renewal of culture and tradition, the new school year brought the promise of more culture, language and knowledge in the classroom under the new Yukon First Nation School Board.

In February 2022, eight school communities voted to have their

local public schools join the new board, including residents of Dakwākāda for their St. Elias Community School. In August 2023, three more schools voted to join.

Fulfilling a vision

At Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, Dän nātthe äda K'úkhjá (Chief Barb Joe), believes the new school board realizes the vision of *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*.

"This is the vision that was set out 50 years ago and it's what guides our work today," she says.

Jeanie McLean, Minister of Education, agrees. She says two-thirds of *Together Today for our*

Children Tomorrow was focused on education.

"There was a deep understanding that education would be key to the future of Yukon First Nations," she says.

Joining the school board allows Yukon First Nations to have shared authority of the operations and policies of schools on their traditional territory.

"The authority and responsibility to educate our children is part of our inherent right as a self-governing First Nation," Dän nātthe äda K'úkhjá says. "It puts the power back in the hands of our community."

She says involvement with the school board will allow them to integrate dakwanje (Southern Tutchone) and dan k'e (our way) into the curriculum, bringing First Nations' holistic, multi-generational, and land-based approach to education into the school system.

says. "Some of our Knowledge Keepers asked: Do we know what our system is anymore? Because we've all been assimilated through residential schools and an English immersion system."

Using existing legislation under the Education Act, Yukon First Nations recommended that the

says. "There is a picture of what education should look like, and so when you veer off from it, it can be very difficult."

Repairing relationships

Veering off the standard path is exactly what Melissa Flynn, the Executive Director for the Yukon First Nation School Board, and her team are trying to do. Reflecting on her first year at the school board, Melissa says it's been a whirlwind.

"It's been a lot of travelling, eating meals together, and getting to know each other," she says. "Our job is to really listen to the aspirations of the community," Melissa says empowering communities is a major part of the school board's strategic plan.

"We're looking to the community and the First Nations governments to guide us and lead the actions taken at the local schools," she says.

One shift the school board is making is to centre their decisions around learners.

"We're making sure families are included in decision making and we're listening to them," says Melissa. "We want to make sure that families and students feel safe and comfortable in the schools."

Melissa says it will take time to repair relationships with Yukon First Nations.

"Historically, the education system has not had a very trusting relationship with each community," she says. "We're still building trust."

Dän nätthe äda K'úkhjá (Chief Barb Joe), believes the new school board realizes the vision of Together Today for our Children Tomorrow.

Building a new system

Melanie Bennett is the Executive Director at the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate. She says Yukon First Nations have been fighting for better education for decades, but in recent years they are driving real changes.

In 2016, the Joint Education Action Plan between all 14 Yukon First Nations, the Government of Yukon and Government of Canada was stalled, and the education performance gap between First Nations and non-First Nations students was widening further by the year.

The Chiefs Committee on Education decided to take action and began talking to Elders and Knowledge Keepers about creating a First Nations-led education system.

Melanie says First Nations started imagining what a new system could look like. "It really had people thinking," she

Chiefs Committee on Education create a First Nation School Board.

Changing a mindset

Melanie explains that First Nations want an education model rooted in their ways and they want authority over it.

For First Nations, learning is more relational and it's over a longer period of time.

She says it's a very different approach than the current model, which is based in colonialism.

"Our existing education system is basically an industrial model," she explains. "Put the grades through to an academic standard, come out, and then you go off into the big wide world and figure it out." Melanie says the First Nations approach to education can benefit everyone, but it requires changing mindsets.

"It isn't just First Nations who are assimilated into this model, it's society as a whole," she



The Dakwākāda Dancers lead celebrations at the opening event for the First Nations School Board at St. Elias Community School in Dakwākāda/Haines Junction (Photo: Alistair Maitland)

Empowering Yukon First Nations

Under the First Nation School Board agreement, First Nations governments have more authority and control over education.

Melissa says schools are already restructuring their school year to reflect their cultural ways.

This year, Nelnah Bessie John School in Beaver Creek flipped their calendar. Students started school at the end of July, so they can have multiple, extended breaks throughout the year to spend time with their family engaged in cultural activities. Champagne and Aishihik First Nations established its community committee, and they will have shared authority to manage the school's operations including school plans, policies and local and First Nation language programming.

Dän nätthe äda K'úkhjá says the committee ensures the community can support Indigenous students by encouraging participation from family members.

Reconciliation through education

Minister McLean says education is a key path to reconciliation that benefits all Yukoners.

“The Department of Education is working hard to establish a more inclusive public education system in the Yukon and ensure that schools offer all students opportunities to learn about Yukon First Nations traditions and ways of knowing, doing and being.” She says the school board has a significant role to play in this.

Like the salmon's return to Klukshu, the new school board brings the promise of a brighter future for the next generation.

First Nation School Board

The First Nation School Board was established in February 2022, after eight schools across the Yukon voted to join the board.

Through community committees, the board grants Yukon First Nations shared authority, with the Government of Yukon, over education within their Traditional Territory. Board-run schools continue to follow the BC Curriculum, but tailor programming, lesson delivery and assessments to reflect Yukon First Nations worldviews.

Schools under the board take a student-led approach to learning. Learners are at the heart of every decision made, followed by families, then the land, school teams, and First Nations and Community Committee moving outwards to Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

In 2023, three more Yukon schools voted to join the board. There are now 11 public schools in the territory under the Yukon First Nation School Board.

First Nation School Board Schools

- ▶ **Chief Zzeh Gittlit School,**
Old Crow, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation
- ▶ **Grey Mountain Primary School,**
Whitehorse, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council and
Kwanlin Dün First Nation
- ▶ **Johnson Elementary School,**
Watson Lake, Liard First Nation
- ▶ **Nelna Bessie John School,**
Beaver Creek, White River First Nation
- ▶ **Ross River School,**
Ross River, Ross River Dena Council
- ▶ **St. Elias Community School,**
Haines Junction, Champagne and
Aishihik First Nations
- ▶ **Takhini Elementary School,**
Whitehorse, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council and
Kwanlin Dün First Nation
- ▶ **Watson Lake Secondary School,**
Watson Lake, Liard First Nation
- ▶ **Eliza Van Bibber School,**
Pelly Crossing, Selkirk First Nation
- ▶ **Ghùch Tlâ Community School,**
Carcross, Carcross/Tagish First Nation
- ▶ **Kluane Lake School,**
Destruction Bay/Burwash Landing,
Kluane First Nation



Schools under the board take a student-led approach to learning. Learners are at the heart of every decision made, followed by families, then the land, school teams, and First Nations and Community Committee moving outwards to Elders and Knowledge Keepers. (Photo: First Nation School Board)



In July 2023, the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate celebrated the opening of their new Early Years space in Whitehorse at 420 Range Road. (Photo: Isidore Champagne)

Culturally rich training for early childhood educators

The Yukon government and the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED) are partnering to offer a First Nations-designed and delivered training program to early childhood educators throughout the territory.

YFNED worked with the Martin Family Initiative on the design and delivery of the *Understanding the Early Years* course.

With funding support from Canada, the Yukon government has entered into a three-year agreement with YFNED to roll out this course to early childhood educators.

Clara Northcott is the Director of Early Learning and Child Care with the Yukon government. She says this agreement provides more stability and helps to build a relationship of trust and partnership between the Yukon government and YFNED.

“I think it shows our commitment to reconciliation, not just talking about it, but putting our money where our mouth is,” says Clara. “This is not just one and done. This is an important relationship that we want to foster.”

Melanie Bennett is the Executive Director of YFNED. She says the partnership with the Yukon

government is growing. “It can be slow. Sometimes we have to sit across the table and hold them accountable, and they have to hold us accountable too. It’s a relationship.”

First Nation-led training

The training is culturally rich and was developed with input from Elders and Knowledge Keepers. It will support culturally competent and inclusive early childhood educators who will have an understanding of Yukon First Nations.



The Yukon First Nation Education Directorate has an Early Years Team in Old Crow. They held a fish drying workshop this summer. (Photo: Yukon First Nation Education Directorate)

Yukoners who complete the course will receive a level one certificate to practice as an early childhood educator. The priority is rural communities where people may not have access to as many professional development

opportunities. “This training creates another pathway to becoming a level one educator,” says Clara.

advance their skills and increase their wage, as certification brings a higher salary.

Others are benefiting from the YFNED training as well. Clara says Yukon government staff attended reconciliation and cultural training, and YFNED has also trained the owners and operators of early learning programs.

“We want reconciliation and culturally rich programming to permeate through our organization and the early

learning and child care programs that we fund,” says Clara.

Importance of the early years

Clara says the first five years are the most important years in a child’s life. Experiences shape how the brain develops, and 90% of a child’s brain develops by age five.

She says, “children who are cared for by early childhood educators who are culturally competent are more likely to feel accepted and develop a positive view of themselves and their families.”

Several years ago, Clara heard Senator Murray Sinclair speak about how vitally important it is for children to know where they come from and where they are going. She says partnerships like these support this work.

“We want reconciliation and culturally rich programming to permeate through our organization and the early learning and child care programs that we fund.”



The Yukon First Nation Education Directorate hosted a ceremony to welcome Indigenous babies into the community. Kwanlin Dūn First Nation Chief Sean Smith and former Champagne Aishihik First Nation Chief Steve Smith presented the new babies with beautifully beaded headbands by Kelly Silverfox. (Photo: Yukon First Nation Education Directorate)

“If we are really honouring the Calls to Action, we should be supporting First Nations governments and people to lead, design and develop that work.”

YFNED provides wrap-around supports for children and families

Established in 2019, YFNED delivers wrap-around services through nutrition programs, education advocates, mobile therapeutic supports and early years programs. They are advancing First Nations decision making and authority in education and providing culturally rooted programming to support Indigenous children from age 0 – 18.

Melanie says their suite of programming was developed

in consultation with all Yukon First Nations to identify education gaps in their communities.

Their team of Early Years Visitors provide weekly home visits to support and honour new parents, recognizing them as their child’s first teachers.

They also organize group activities such as drop-ins, sewing circles and workshops. Early Years Visitors walk alongside new parents from pregnancy until their child enters school.

Trust and respect

Clara says, “When we respect and trust and keep reconciliation at the centre, it allows for great partnerships”.

Melanie emphasizes the importance of First Nations

leading as well. “This training needs to be developed in partnership with the community, then delivered with a respectful Indigenous lens.” With YFNED delivering this training they are able to ensure that happens.

“As long as we can continue with First Nations leading, that is reconciliation in action,” says Melanie.

Clara is grateful for this partnership. “I hold my hands up to the Early Years Program and YFNED for allowing us to be a part of this training.”





The Yukon First Nation Education Directorate hosts intergenerational gatherings of Elders, Knowledge Keepers, youth and babies. (Photo: Yukon First Nation Education Directorate)



Department of Education curriculum consultants Tammy Stoneman and Flora Asp are working with Elders and Knowledge Keepers to develop culturally and regionally relevant curriculum for schools.
(Photo: Michael Edwards)

Localizing curriculum in the Yukon

Flora Asp moved to the Yukon 26 years ago from Eabametoong First Nation in northern Ontario.

For years, she taught K – 12 in rural Yukon. Flora says her passion for teaching and education came from her mother, who taught Ojibwe in northern Ontario for many years.

Tammy Stoneman is from the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation in northern Manitoba. She has lived in the Yukon for 15 years.

Flora and Tammy are First Nations Curriculum Consultants.

Their roles include: coordinating K – 12 curriculum projects;

collaborating with local First Nations on curriculum and resource development; teaching educators and school administrators about the First Nations ways of knowing, doing and being; and orienting new teachers on the importance of working with local First Nations to bring local perspectives into classrooms.

Tammy says the education system is currently being reimaged to support First Nations students.

She says the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report provided motivation across Canada for provincial and

territorial education departments to refocus their priorities.

Tammy says those priorities include localizing curriculum to reflect First Nations ways of knowing, doing and being.

“Education for First Nations students needs to be holistic, inclusive and student-centered,” she says.

Centered in place

In response to the historical and contemporary marginalization of First Nations students, education is shifting towards a more localized curriculum.

“Education for First Nations students needs to be holistic, inclusive and student-centered.”

Curriculum and resources built on local knowledge and traditions can enhance student growth and also support ongoing learning opportunities for educators. Localization holds space for First Nations knowledge and perspectives to be explored in the classroom and school.

Tammy says embedding First Nations ways of knowing, doing and being is connected to positive change and school improvement.

“Schools that respect, support and implement the languages and cultures of First Nations learners demonstrate better academic outcomes,” she says.

As First Nations Curriculum Consultants, Flora and Tammy represent an important First Nations lens that is more focused on place.

“Each community has different values in the way they’re connected to their land, water and teachings,” says Flora. “We always keep the curriculum local to each area.”

She says when she’s working on curriculum, she thinks about two things: the place where the material will be taught and how to work together with the community.

“It’s important to work with local Elders, Knowledge Keepers and

educators when developing resources,” Flora says. “I follow their lead, because they know the place as well as cultural values and traditions.”

Teachers and other educators are also present throughout the curriculum development process.

“The Elders always reiterate the message that everyone needs to be part of this work from the beginning,” Tammy explains.

Localizing curriculum

A Curriculum Working Group was created by the Yukon government to help develop and

“Schools that respect, support and implement the languages and cultures of First Nations learners demonstrate better academic outcomes.”

review materials and resources for educators across the territory. The group is made up of Elders and Knowledge Keepers from the eight Yukon First Nations language groups.

When Flora and Tammy have a curriculum baseline, they sit with members of the working group to listen to their stories and experiences connected to the subject.

Flora says her job is to listen. “We listen and take notes,” she says. “There’s no time limit. We listen until all of their stories are shared.”

From there, Flora and Tammy begin drafting the curriculum. Once there’s a draft, they put a call out to educators who teach the subject in the area to join the working group.

The group works together to ensure the curriculum is localized to the area and also that educators have an understanding of the material, especially if they aren’t from the area.

“Educators not from the Yukon need to be open to learning about the importance of place,” says Flora.

To get it right, she says the working group is involved in every stage of development.

“In a good way”

Localizing curriculum is always done in partnership with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, as well as local educators and First Nations.

Tammy says it’s essential that the work is a collaboration with partners and done “in a good way.”

“‘In a good way’ is an expression used by many First Nations,

meaning that the work honours tradition and spirit,” she says.

“From a First Nations worldview, work done ‘in a good way’ is a sacred endeavor that illuminates the connections between the spiritual and physical worlds.”

This approach embodies traditions, practices and protocols. Teachings of wisdom,

colonization continues to impact the reality of present-day Canada.

“It’s important that leaders and educators reflect on their own position of privilege and work to build better relationships with First Nations,” Tammy says.

Trine Dennis is the Principal of Hidden Valley Elementary School in Whitehorse. She has been

knowing, doing and being.” Shifting the education system away from the colonial structure is essential to help First Nations students succeed.

Tammy says without it, the system will continue to fail them.

“Today’s reality is that education and curriculum reflects the dominant culture,” she says.

“Collaborating with First Nations is necessary to create mentorship, training and build an inclusive and culturally reflective education system.”

Making big structural changes to the education system will take time.

While that change is underway, Flora and Tammy continue to work with local Elders, Knowledge Keepers and educators.

Working together, they’re localizing curriculum to include more First Nations’ perspectives and helping students to better understand Canada’s complex history and culture.

“Educators not from the Yukon need to be open to learning about the importance of place.”

love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth are important pieces in this work.

Tammy says the work would not be possible without collaborating with partners.

Strengthening relationships with First Nations

Many individuals struggle to understand how the history of Indigenous Peoples and

teaching in the Yukon almost 10 years ago.

Trine says her relationships with Yukon First Nations communities have guided her work in the classroom.

“My most influential teachers are the Elders and Knowledge Holders I’ve met over the years,” she says. “Without these relationships, I may not have had the confidence to develop a localized curriculum based on Yukon First Nations ways of





Robert Service School is the school in Dawson where the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Yukon government are establishing a co-governing relationship through implementation of section 17.7 of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's Self – Government Agreement. (Photo: Department of Education photo not for reproduction)

Co-governing education in Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Traditional Territory

For years, education has been used as a tool of assimilation across Canada. It's the history and lived experience of many Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in citizens.

Jody Beaumont is Education Director for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government. She says education became a major priority during the negotiation of land claims. Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in believes that education is the backbone of a strong society.

"The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Land Claims Working Group recognised

the importance of education in building a successful, prosperous future for the nation," she says. "Education is a critical piece of realizing self-determination, understanding identity and empowering citizens to contribute to the community."

Jody says Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in saw the education system failing its students.

"It really motivated the community during the land claims process," she says. "The working group wanted tools in place to bring

equity back in education and to ensure the First Nation had the authority to inform and govern any education system within its Traditional Territory."

To ensure the Government of Yukon and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in shared responsibility over education, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in proposed a new clause, 17.7, under Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's Self-Government Agreement.

"Through the self-government agreement, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in wanted to ensure a

co-governing relationship would be established. Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in was granted authority equal to Yukon and Canada when it came to designing, delivering and administering education," she says.

Co-governing education

In 2013, under section 17.7 of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's Self Government Agreement, the Government of Yukon and

happened over a decade to move forward, but that's changed in the last few years.

Over the past year, Yukon government has increased capacity in their First Nations Initiatives team, which has helped them focus on this area as a priority.

"We're building our team," says Suzan. "Now we have to show some actions on our joint

Today for Our Children Tomorrow. "Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow is about governments coming together to build a system that improves the lives of everyone," says Jody. "It's about getting away from 'us and them' and using the strengths of Traditional Knowledge and the western system to benefit everyone."

Jody says the current system is broken. Some of the messages, built into the system, quietly tell Indigenous children they don't belong.

"We need a better system that reflects and is founded in the lands that we're on, and speaks to the values of the people who live here," she says.

"The system needs to propel and empower kids and people throughout their lives to contribute to their community in ways that matter here."

Suzan says Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's approach to education is a model for the territory.

"Their education department is completely integrated into their school, which is unlike any school in the territory and really speaks to the co-governance piece," she says.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and the Government of Yukon are building a new model of co-governed education that brings the vision of *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* to life.

"We need a better system that reflects and is founded in the lands that we're on, and speaks to the values of the people who live here."

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in signed an education agreement.

It established an education oversight committee with equal representation from the Yukon government and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. The committee created a work plan that identified joint priorities from both partners.

Suzan Davy, Assistant Deputy Minister of First Nations Initiatives with the Department of Education, admits co-governance was a big shift for the government, and it took some time to understand what the relationship would look like.

"Ten years ago you didn't talk about co-governance with First Nations, it just wasn't something that had been done before," she says. "It took some understanding on our part, but we're moving in the right direction now." Jody agrees. She says very little

priorities to build trust with leadership and the community."

Jody says implementing these changes is not an easy task.

"One of the biggest challenges is explaining the Dënezhu way of knowing," she says. "The Department of Education has a program and service-based mindset of education, and Dënezhu is a system change."

Building a better system

The vision of the Land Claims Working Group was to build an education system that better served Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in citizens and everyone living within their Traditional Territory.

Jody says the 17.7 provision was created in the spirit of *Together*

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's education department supports various cultural and educational programs. (Photo: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in)

Section 17.7: Education co-governance



Between 1992 and 1997, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's Land Claims Working Group met every Thursday. There were 10 official members of the working group, but the meetings were open to all Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in citizens.

Education was a priority for the group. Members saw that the system was failing Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in students and it needed to be fixed. They envisioned a single unified education system in Dawson City that reflected the integrated town.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in wanted a system where Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and non-Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in students could learn together and grow up side-by-side. The curriculum would balance Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in history, culture, language and geography with western education. It would be a true partnership, co – governed by the Government of Yukon and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.

To ensure the Government of Yukon and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in shared responsibility over education, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in proposed changes to the education clause 24.3.2 under the Umbrella Final Agreement, and proposed a new clause, 17.7, under Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's Self-Government Agreement.

The new clause guaranteed the government would “...negotiate the division and sharing of responsibility for the design, delivery, and administration...” of education.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in fought hard for the 17.7 clause, which granted it the authority to co-govern all education within its Traditional Territory. In July 1998, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in signed its Final and Self-Government Agreements.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in was the only Yukon First Nation to have the 17.7 provision in its Self-Government Agreement. However, four other First Nations worked with the Yukon and federal governments to amend their Self-Government Agreements to also include the 17.7 clause.

Now, Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Selkirk First Nation, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation and Ta'an Kwäch'än Council also have the authority to co-govern education within their Traditional Territories. The Government of Yukon and the Government of Canada continue to work with any other Yukon First Nations interested in making this amendment.



Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's education department supports various cultural and educational programs.
(Photo: Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in)

Dënezhu Ways of Knowing

Dënezhu (the people who are from, or of, this land) is the Hän approach to learning.

In the Hän way, becoming Dënezhu is a lifelong journey toward knowledge and understanding. It's personal and self-determined growth, centred around the learner.

As a group, people have the responsibility to create environments where everyone, regardless of age, can learn and build skills through experience and are empowered to become more knowledgeable over time.

Over a lifetime, a learner gathers information and can draw on those lessons to solve any problem they may face in the world.

Core Dënezhu principles

Education is a reciprocal relationship. Everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher.

Education is respectful. Teachers follow the lead of learners and provide learning opportunities that meet their needs and allow them to discover their purpose.

Education is humble. Teachers don't presume to tell an individual what they need to know. They offer their own knowledge and invite learners to build their own understandings of Dënezhu ways of being.





Preparing for a family camp at the Shakat Tun wilderness camp near Haines Junction. This family camp was offered collaboratively through the Yukon government and the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations in summer 2023. (Photo: Government of Yukon/Katrina Couch)

Bringing land-based healing to the forefront

Yvonne Jack (Xhastin) is a healer. She felt the calling early on, but the work comes with a weight and she knew the timing had to be right.

Seven years ago, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) prepared to release its final report, Yvonne created Xhastin's Healing Journey, the Yukon's first land-based healing business.

"I was hopeful there would be some actions supporting land-based healing," says Yvonne. "I knew it would be in there – it had to be."

Since then, Yvonne has worked as a contractor and service delivery partner for the Mental Wellness and Substance Use branch (MWSU) of the Yukon government.

Around the same time, Jayla Rousseau-Thomas began working as a Cultural Wellness Consultant with MWSU. She was also hopeful that the Calls to Action would support a shift in counselling services.

As an Indigenous woman, it stood out to her that the programming offered at the time did not reflect the high number of Indigenous clients. "Using the TRC's Calls to Action as a guide, I started to bring more cultural programming into a system that was built on Western ways of knowing," says Jayla. "We created a visiting Elder program and cultural knowledge workshops, and we scheduled regular outings to other healing or cultural programs."

Land-based healing

The Yukon government has been investing in and collaborating on land-based healing programs for over a decade. Successful programs include Jackson Lake Healing Camp, week-long family camps and youth-led wellness camps.

The director of MWSU, Cameron Grandy, says the government is planning to increase its investment in land-based healing.

"Since the declaration of the Substance Use Health Emergency, our minister has said land-based healing will be prioritized," says Cameron.

Yvonne says land-based healing is about meeting people where

they're at, it's not about fixing them.

"We are here as helpers to guide," she says. "I always let people know that when they first come in here, there are no expectations. We meet you where you're at."

Strengthening partnerships

Yvonne says other government departments and organizations can learn a lot from her positive partnership with MWSU.

"They'll call me up and say, 'we're thinking about this idea, but what's the First Nations lens

"In the recommendations, the TRC says if there is a First Nations person who can do the work, they should be in the lead," she says.

Yvonne says she's not interested in participating in a model that's been failing First Nation people for the last hundred years.

"We know how to heal as a people," she says. "Everybody has healers in their community – that's why we're still on the map."

Cameron says the government works directly with First Nations health departments to design and fund land-based projects. Earlier this year, they partnered

healer. Now, she's teaching her youngest daughter, April, the family trade. She feels a strong responsibility to continue the work of those who came before her.

"Our ancestors have worked too hard to get us this far," she says. "We need to band together to heal and make sure our history isn't swept under the carpet."

Jayla says sometimes her work feels like a drop in the bucket, but it all adds up.

"It's a trickle into the greater stream of supporting both Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients seeking support for their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health."

In August, the government released its Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy with 43 recommended actions and funding to implement 14 of them immediately.

One of the funded actions is more support for Yukon First Nations to develop and implement land – based mental health and substance use treatment options.

The Yukon government says the strategy is a roadmap to promote the health and wellbeing of Yukoners, but acknowledges that collaboration is needed from all partners to succeed.

"Collaboration is essential, as is a tailored approach that understands each community's unique needs, desires and cultural contexts," says Minister of Health and Social Services Tracy-Anne McPhee.

"We created a visiting Elder program and cultural knowledge workshops, and we scheduled regular outings to other healing or cultural programs."

on it? How can we improve our services?" says Yvonne.

Jayla says the Yukon government has made important progress, but more can be done.

"When we are working in the helping field – especially dealing with mental wellness and substance use issues – we need to recognize the hurt and harms people are carrying with them," she says. "The trauma inflicted upon Yukon First Nations is both pervasive and persistent."

Yvonne says her partnership with MWSU embodies the true spirit of the TRC Calls to Action.

with Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in on a youth camp and Champagne and Aishihik First Nations on a family camp. They are currently working with First Nations to better understand what land-based healing means to each nation and how the government can support more initiatives.

"We want to invest more in land-based healing as part of the fabric of our services," says Cameron.

Growing together

Yvonne is hopeful for the future. When she was young, she watched her mother work as a

Substance Use Health Emergency Timeline

September 2021:

The Government of Yukon opens the first supervised consumption site in Northern Canada.

October 2021:

The Government of Yukon expands access to a medically prescribed safe supply of opioids.

January 2022:

Health and Social Services Minister Tracy-Anne McPhee declares a Substance Use Health Emergency following a drastic increase in overdose related deaths in the territory.

February 2022:

The Government of Yukon hosts a two-day, free online Mental Wellness Summit. Feedback and ideas from the Summit support the government's Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy.

September 2022:

The Government of Yukon hosts phase two of the 2022 Mental Wellness Summit and launch two public awareness and education campaigns.

August 2023:

The Government of Yukon, in partnership with First Nations governments and the Council of Yukon First Nations, and in conversations with the Yukon Royal Canadian Mounted Police, launch the Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy.



In March 2023, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and the Government of Yukon hosted an Indigenous-led by-youth-for-youth retreat. The goal of this on the land retreat was to foster connections and support mental wellness. Jayla Rousseau-Thomas, centre, right, helped coordinate this retreat in her role as Cultural Wellness Consultant with the Yukon government's Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services. (Photo: Corentin Favre)

The Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy

In August 2023, the Government of Yukon and its partners released the Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy.

The strategy is a roadmap to guide all partners and communities to respond to the ongoing emergency.

Nine key principles inform the strategy:

1. Inclusion and Respect;
2. Cultural Safety and Honouring Diversity;
3. Choice and Autonomy;
4. Accountability;
5. Growth and Innovation;
6. Person-Centred Care;
7. Compassion;
8. Pragmatism; and
9. Restorative Justice.

The strategy contains 43 recommended actions that are based on four areas of growth: prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery, and community safety and wellbeing. The government is working closely with partners and the recently-established Yukon First Nations Chiefs Committee on Health to advance and implement the recommendations as well as identify future actions.



Putting People First

The Department of Health and Social Services is working to transform the health and social system to better meet the needs of Yukoners by implementing the recommendations of the Putting People First report. This includes reconciliation-focused work to close health disparity gaps and ensure culturally appropriate services are available.

In July 2023, a Yukon First Nations Chiefs Committee on Health was formed to provide direction and oversight and ensure First Nations' perspectives are embedded in the processes to improve the Yukon's health care system.



The Chiefs Committee will help advance recommendations from the Putting People First report, including integrating cultural safety into the health and social services system, understanding and addressing Indigenous determinants of health, increasing access to Yukon First Nations cultural and land-based healing, and creating Health and Wellness Yukon, a new health authority to deliver day-to-day health services.

The goal of this work is a person-centred health and social system where systemic racism is addressed, Yukoners are connected to a primary care team, services are connected and culturally safe, prevention is a primary focus, and communities and people with lived experiences are involved.



The Cultural Safety team at Health and Social Services hosted a Leadership Readiness – Conversation Series with Dr. Nel Wieman. (Photo: Health and Social Services)

Building a culturally safe and inclusive health and social services system

As an Indigenous person, Candace Parsons says she has witnessed family members and friends shift their appearance and the way they communicate in order to access health and social care services.

Candace is the Director of Cultural Safety with Yukon government's Health and Social Services department.

"Embedding cultural safety and humility into the health and social service system reflects the voices and stories of many First Nations citizens who provided input into the *Putting People First* report," says Candace.

In March 2023, the Government of Yukon launched a cultural safety team to improve health care for Indigenous people. The team was formed to address section 4.1 of the *Putting People First* report.

Released in the spring of 2020, the report is a road map to help the government create a health and social system that better serves the needs of Yukoners, based on a comprehensive review of Yukon's health and social services.

Putting People First made 76 recommendations to improve the system. The recommendations

will guide the government's work to transform the current system.

"I'm excited to develop tools and resources for people who work within the system, to create environments where First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples feel recognized, respected, and celebrated for their cultural identity," says Candace.

This work is an important first step. True progress will require systemic change across the health and social system to reduce health inequities and build a system that is free of racism and discrimination.

The Cultural Safety team is focused on three streams: training; leadership readiness; and Yukon First Nations and Indigenous student and youth engagement to pursue health and social care careers.

cultural practices of that Yukon First Nation into their work.”

Leadership readiness

The second stream reviews leadership readiness within the

the system more inclusive for students and providing them with opportunities to explore careers in health and social services fields.

She says bringing more Yukon First Nation and Indigenous students and youth into the system will help shift the culture naturally, embedding more Yukon First Nations culture and traditions.

“I get excited by this stream, thinking of an individual who can provide services back to their home community, or go back and care for the Elders and family members,” says Candace. “We have to shift our thinking from bringing services to communities to building our local capacity to work in the system.”

Training health and social service providers

The newly formed team is moving forward with embedding cultural safety and humility in the health and social service system.

Candace says as the team develops new material, training will begin using work done by the Council of Yukon First Nations (Yukon First Nations Cultural Orientation & Protocols Toolkit) and Mapping the Way website.

The work of the cultural safety team is just getting started, but it’s sure to have a positive impact for Yukon First Nations and Indigenous people receiving health and social services and working in these systems.

“Embedding cultural safety and humility into the health and social service system reflects the voices and stories of many First Nations citizens who provided input into the Putting People First report.”

Cultural safety training

The first stream focuses on creating mandatory cultural safety and humility training and continuous education for all health and social services providers, managers, and leaders.

Candace says they plan to create standard training for all health and social services providers, with additional training customized to the local Yukon First Nation.

The customized training will educate Health and Social Services staff on the cultural protocols, traditions, and values within the Traditional Territory they’re providing services to.

“If the healthcare provider is in Haines Junction, they’ll take the Champagne and Aishihik cultural protocol, traditions, and values training,” says Candace. “The training will help them embed

health and social services system. Candace says it’s about developing tools and resources to integrate cultural safety practices into the system to improve access to services at any point in time.

“We have to consider what resources need to be developed to support leaders and healthcare providers modify their practice to include cultural safety and humility to reflect culturally safe and welcoming workplaces,” she says.

Yukon First Nations and Indigenous student and youth engagement to pursue health and social care careers

The final stream looks to the future and recruiting Yukon First Nations and Indigenous students and youth into the healthcare system. Candace says it’s about making



Kelly Allen, Elder Dianne Smith and Joe Migwans, clinical and cultural counsellors (Photo: Kelly Allen)

Reimagining partnerships: Creating Indigenous-led programming in the justice system

Joanne Green is modest. As the Manager of the Justice Wellness Centre, it's her job to keep the lights on, hire staff, and get out of the way to let the specialists and the experts do their work.

In reality, Joanne has empowered her team to reimagine justice and wellness in the territory.

Community programming

For the past four years, Kelly Allen, has worked as a Clinical Counsellor at the Justice

Wellness Centre. For the last two years, she has worked with counsellor Joe Migwans and Kwanlin Dün Elder Dianne Smith to bring cultural wellness programs to Yukon communities.

Kelly says the team's approach goes beyond the initial biopsychosocial spiritual model.

"We use an Indigenous holistic outlook to assist us in putting aside Western biases and incorporating community Elders' wisdom, which sparks innate Indigenous ways of healing," she says.

Kelly attributes any program successes to putting the Indigenous lens first when working in an Indigenous community.

Joe and Dianne provide cultural workshops as well as cultural and spiritual counselling to clients, while Kelly offers therapeutic counselling and program support. Joe says for First Nations, culture is the foremost go-to answer for healing.

"In this time of great change with our culture diminishing so quickly,

we need more understanding of our values and the beliefs around education, parenting, ceremony, forgiveness – just living in connection with community and living in harmony.”

A broken system

Kelly says it's essential that we start decolonizing the justice system.

“We need more understanding of our values and the beliefs around education, parenting, ceremony, forgiveness – just living in connection with community and living in harmony.”

“It's crucial,” says Kelly. “I can say this with certainty because I've been part of justice for many years and I know I've been part of the problem in the past.”

Kelly lived in Watson Lake for more than 15 years. She says living in a predominantly First Nations community shaped her practice and shifted her worldview, but acknowledges that she has been part of the problem.

She says as a white, Western-trained counsellor, she's been groomed to understand the world a certain way.

“Not only through my schooling and my post-secondary education, but also with government policies, practices and a way of being that comes

from a colonial perspective, because that's who we are.”

Kelly has worked hard to decolonize her work and recognizes this is an ongoing practice.

“I make sure that anything I do, from a clinical sense, is decolonized and converted into the Indigenous perspective by practising cultural humility

and continually checking with community partners like Dene Keh and cultural practitioners Joe and Dianne,” she says.

“Everything the team does, is done to support cultural strength in a healing way.”

Reconnecting to culture

Joe believes that First Nations culture is just as valid now as it ever was.

“We need to use our values and the beliefs of our people to create wellness,” he says. “We need to create unity through our true cultural values and return to the circle.”

Joe explains that the circle provides equality, healing and

inclusion in wellness and brings balance into people's lives. He says this approach isn't new.

“The work that's being used was left for a long while because of residential schools and colonialism,” says Joe. “We're reintroducing those ways through the circle.”

Kelly says the culture – focused approach is working, pointing to Liard First Nation's Dena Keh Justice program, (Our People's Way) as a successful example of decolonizing justice and of supporting overall community and cultural wellness. The community-based, alternative justice program uses a holistic approach to restore harmony within the community, based on the Liard First Nation's way.

Kelly and Joe worked with Kaska Elders to understand how culture, values and beliefs could be integrated into the court system and programming.

Creating true partnerships

In recent years, the government has shifted its language from consulting First Nations to partnerships with First Nations.

Kelly says it's an important change but warns that it needs to be done right.

“Partnership is language that means we're in this together,” she says. “But in order for us to be in it together, we have to understand the historical power imbalance between the government and First Nations.”

Kelly says she's done the research, and for decades experts have been saying the Indigenous perspective should come first.

"If we're partnering in an Indigenous community, we have to put their culture, their values, their beliefs, their way in front of everything else," she says. "In order for us to spur healing, or to even facilitate it in any kind of way, it has to be Indigenous-led – that's what true partnership is from a non-colonial lens."

Kelly says the Yukon is lucky to have the Justice Wellness Centre and strong leadership who really understands this kind of partnership.

Joanne says the success of the Justice Wellness Centre wouldn't be possible without the trust of Mark Daniels, former Director of Court Services. She says he gave her team the space to try to do things differently.

Thinking about the future of the centre, Joanne says she hopes to build and support community-led alternative justice programs, like Dena Keh Justice.

"When I look at the growth in self-sufficiency that's happening in Watson Lake after two years, I think that can happen anywhere with the right energy and resources," she says. "I would love to see the First

Nations leading justice-related interventions in their community."

Joanne's team has met with First Nations and communities about developing alternative justice programs.

She's hopeful that some communities will be knocking on her door soon, but they need time to consider what community-led justice looks like to them.

Justice Wellness Centre



The Yukon has two therapeutic courts – the Domestic Violence Treatment Option Court and the Community Wellness Court – that offer an alternative to incarceration and offer therapeutic supports.

The Justice Wellness Centre (JWC) provides a wrap-around service and support for clients in the therapeutic courts. They provide integrated treatment and Indigenous programming to address the underlying causes of criminal behaviour.

Clients who complete therapeutic court have a reduced sentence that typically does not include incarceration. The JWC develops working relationships with many local community resources to provide continued support to clients. This means they have ongoing community-based support even after they finish their involvement with the justice system, which decreases the likelihood of recidivism.



Liard First Nation's Dene Keh Justice team. Back row: Georgina Smith, May Stewart, Melissa Charlie, Daniel Dick. Front row: Brandy Tizya, Nicole Poppe (Photo: Liard First Nation)

Our People's Way: Dena Keh Justice draws on Kaska culture to bring restorative justice

May Stewart says knocking on the door will only get you so far. Someone has to let you in.

The Dene Keh Justice Director, May says the Liard First Nation was knocking on the door of the Department of Justice for years before anyone answered. She says Kelly Allen and Joanne Green of the Community Justice Wellness Team opened the door.

"We were standing there knocking for a long time and Kelly

said, 'hey, we need their input,'" May says. "We really have to acknowledge the work Kelly and Joanne have done for us – they opened the door to the court system."

She says without them, the community would still be struggling.

Liard First Nation's Dena Keh Justice (Our People's Way) is a community-based, alternative justice program. It uses a holistic

approach to restore harmony within the community, based on the Liard First Nation's way.

Restoring community harmony

Justice Worker Daniel Dick says Dena Keh Justice is about empowering the Kaska Nation to assume greater responsibility for administering justice within the community.

“We want to create a fair and inclusive justice system that meets our needs,” he says. “Our focus is to help people go through the justice system, take responsibility for their actions and help them start their healing journey.”

accountable,” she says. In the Dena Keh Justice system, victims have a central role in restoring harmony and the person that did the harm speaks for themselves. May says it can be a more meaningful process for everyone.

system,” she says. “They need to feel that they’re going to get good results and they’re going to be happy with the outcome.”

One piece of advice May offers to other nations trying to build their own program is to let Elders guide the process.

“We want to create a fair and inclusive justice system that meets our needs.”

May says Elders are the foundation of the program. As knowledge keepers, they guide the healing journey.

“Elders bring support, understanding, life experiences and traditional context to the process,” she says. “They help the harmer acknowledge their actions and work with them to change their behaviour and restore community harmony.”

“With our culture and community justice, the responsibility lies on the person who did the harm,” she explains. “They have to take accountability and responsibility for their actions and make things right with their victims.”

Building a strong justice process

It took a lot of work and trust to build the Dena Keh program.

“It’s important to include knowledge keepers – Elders and youth – in building a strong justice process,” she says. “People trust our Elders and their knowledge. They ensure we are using our cultural ways and traditions.”

Now that the door is open, Joanne Green says her Justice Wellness Centre team is consulting with other communities about how to create more alternative justice programs.

Joanne says her role is to support the communities and let them create the systems that fit their needs.

“Our focus is to help people go through the justice system, take responsibility for their actions and help them start their healing journey.”

A cultural lens

May says the program brings Kaska culture to the forefront of the justice process.

“The Western world of justice doesn’t work for our people – they don’t understand the system and harmers aren’t made

Kelly says without May and her team’s leadership, support, and devotion to address the Kaska community’s needs, none of this would have been possible. May says community involvement makes the program successful.

“It’s important that both the harmer and the victim trust the

“I think lots of communities are talking about creating justice programs,” she says. “We’ve done some proactive work with communities, but it’s really our job to wait for them to come to us rather than the other way around.”

Joanne encourages communities to take their time figuring out what community-led justice looks like to them. She says once they have a plan, she’s ready for them.



The Dena Keh Justice and Family Support Program is rooted in Kaska culture and traditions. This is a Dried Meat and Tool Making Workshop from September 2022. (Photo: Liard First Nation)

Dena Keh Justice

Dena Keh is a community-based alternative justice program based on a circular model of justice and centred around Kaska traditions and values.

The goal of the process is to:

- ▶ repair the harm done;
- ▶ increase the social justice for victims and the community; and
- ▶ support the harmer to recognize and understand their behaviour then guide the individualized healing.



The process

During the Dena Keh process, the victim, harmer, family and community come together with a Dena Keh trained facilitator in a family group conference.

At the conference, the victim has the opportunity to be heard, while the harmer is able to acknowledge and restore their wrong. The family and community are also given space to voice their concerns and feelings. At the end, the harmer takes responsibility for their actions and is held accountable. An agreement is created by the participants to repair the harm done.

The outcome

After the Dena Keh process, the harmer returns to court and a judge decides whether to stay the proceedings or proceed with criminal charges.

A harmer doesn't receive a criminal record if they go through the Dena Keh process and completes their agreement.

However, if they don't complete their agreement they will return to the criminal justice system and will receive a conventional sentence, which could include a fine, jail time or probation.



Kaska Elders show students how to cut the moose leg. Elders are the foundation of the Dene Keh Justice Program. (Photo: Liard First Nation)



Members of the Yukon Advisory Committee on MMIWG2S+: Joy O'Brien MMIWG2S+ Outreach Program Coordinator with the Yukon Aboriginal Women's Council, Doris Bill co-chair, representing Yukon First Nations, Jeanie McLean, co-chair, Minister responsible for the Women and Gender Equity Directorate, representing Government of Yukon, and Toni Blanchard, MMIWG2S+ family representative pose with the Implementation Plan after the public launch of the document on June 6, 2023 at Yukon Arts Centre. (Photo: Manu Kegenhoff /Government of Yukon)

Centring families in the quest to uphold dignity and justice for MMIWG2S+

For decades Indigenous families, Survivors and communities have been advocating for the missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S+).

“There were many, many calls for justice by families, Survivors and communities for years,” says Jeanie McLean, Minister responsible for the Women

and Gender Equity Directorate. “They wanted governments to acknowledge the issues and to have an inquiry.”

In June, the Yukon Advisory Committee released the Implementation Plan for *Changing the Story to Upholding Dignity and Justice: Yukon's MMIWG2S+ Strategy*. This is a significant milestone to end

systemic issues that lead to violence against Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit People.

Centred in truth

Reflecting on the National Inquiry's work, Minister McLean says it was centred in truth. Without truth, there is no reconciliation.

“We knew before we could reconcile, we needed to have a true understanding of the history of colonization in our country and in the Yukon,” she says. “And we

Directorate, supported the development and release of the strategy.

Ann says for too long governments have dictated what should happen and how things should come together. She says that changed with this strategy.

“There were many, many calls for justice by families, Survivors and communities for years.”

needed to bring Canadians along on the journey with us.”

Doris Bill, co-chair representing Yukon First Nations governments, says bringing the truth into the light is healing for Survivors.

“We were taught in residential school to conceal the truth – to not tell anybody, to hold it in,” says Doris. “So for us to release the truth, it’s huge. It means we no longer have to carry the burden by ourselves.”

Decolonizing the work

In addition to three co-chairs, the Committee represents families and Survivors, Elders and Yukon’s three Indigenous women’s organizations.

The Implementation Plan was created through collaboration between the Committee’s members using a decolonized, community-led approach.

The Committee’s work followed a decolonized approach and centred the perspectives of families and Survivors while developing the strategy. The Government of Yukon, through the Women and Gender Equity

Minister McLean says the government’s role in decolonization is to listen to others to better understand the truth.

“We need to listen to the truth to fully understand the mistakes of the past and the reason Indigenous people continue to distrust governments,” she says. “Through listening and acknowledging the truth, we develop a greater empathy for the history of colonization and a better understanding of how to make change.”

Ann Maje Raider, Executive Director of the Liard Aboriginal Women’s Society and co-chair representing Indigenous women’s organizations, says the test of decolonization is about action, commitment and accountability from the government.

“Nobody wants another document sitting on the shelf,” says Ann. “People want it to be alive, fluid and moving. They want to see action.”

Focused on families

For years, families of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit+ People have used the slogan, “nothing about us without us.”

“We needed the experts in the room,” says Ann. “The families who went through this storm are the experts. They’re the ones that helped us determine what needs to be done – they are the centre of it all.”

Minister McLean agrees.

“A key priority for us is to keep families informed and to be accountable to them, but also to each other,” she says. “We’ve heard them loud and clear and their words are reflected in the Strategy.”

Throughout its work, the Committee reported back to families. In the summer of 2020, the Committee held two family gatherings before the release of the final Strategy in December 2020.

The gatherings were designed to share updates, hear from families, and collect their feedback.

Before the Implementation Plan was released, the Committee travelled to several communities and met with families first to ensure they had it in their hands before it became public. Minister McLean says keeping families informed is important.

“There’s a framework around accountability within the strategy – it’s a big part of the work,” she says.



YAC Co-chairs Ann Maje Raider and Jeanie McLean, Deputy Premier and Minister Responsible for Women and Gender Equity Directorate at the announcement of Priority Action Items for the Yukon's MMIWG2S+ Strategy in December 2022. (Photo: Cathie Archbould/Government of Yukon)

The Committee held its first Accountability Forum last May, and the next one is scheduled for October 2023.

Whole-of-Yukon approach

Partners in the Strategy and Implementation Plan include all 14 Yukon First Nations, eight Yukon municipalities, the Canadian and Yukon governments, Indigenous organizations and politicians.

Doris says everyone – families, advocates, partners – need to come together for the Strategy to succeed.

“It’s about building solid relationships in good faith,” says the Minister. “If we’re going to resolve some of these issues we need partners at the table and we need to come together as a community – we all have a part to play.”

Minister McLean says creating systemic change in the Yukon can’t be done by one organization or one government alone.

“It’s going to take multiple partners that can identify gaps and support multiple organizations in working together to achieve a singular vision,” she says.

A whole-of-Yukon approach extends across industries and sectors, regions and political

stripes, but also generations. Doris says the committee owes a debt of gratitude to the Indigenous women who kept the issue alive.

“They worked so hard and struggled for so long to deal with some of these issues. It’s time that governments and leaders step up and take on some of this work to move it forward for them,” she says.

Ann echoes the sentiment.

“We all recognize how much in our hearts we want this violence to end and how much we don’t want to see our grandchildren and children behind us still doing this work,” says Ann. “We want it to end and we want justice.”

Implementing the Plan

In June, the Committee held a technical forum on the Implementation Plan with partners and contributors. The Committee asked key partners to bring the plan back to their organizations to identify how they can lead or support milestones.

The Women and Gender Equity Directorate is now developing

tracking templates to monitor the progress of government departments and strategy partners to meet Implementation Plan milestones.

Doris says the plan as a whole can be overwhelming, but breaking it into smaller pieces across partners makes it more manageable.

“There are ways that you can break it down and do what makes sense for you and your

organization,” she says. Doris urges Yukoners to “do a little at a time, but do something.”

She's hopeful that solutions will be put in place to help families and Survivors going forward.

This fall, the Committee and its partners will begin to implement the plan. The work is centred on creating safety, supports and equity for Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit+ People to make the Yukon safe.

Yukon Advisory Committee on MMIWG2S+

In 2015, the Yukon Advisory Committee was created to guide and support the first Yukon Regional Roundtable on MMIWG2S+ and connect the work of the National Inquiry on MMIWG2S+ to Yukon families, Survivors, experts and communities.

Following the National Inquiry, the mandate of the Committee expanded to include developing and implementing a whole-of-Yukon strategy.

The committee has three co-chairs:

- ▶ Ann Maje Raider, Executive Director of the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society and Co-Chair representing Indigenous women's organizations;
- ▶ Doris Bill, representing Yukon First Nations governments; and
- ▶ Jeanie McLean, Minister responsible for the Women and Gender Equity Directorate and Co-chair representing the Government of Yukon.



MMIWG2S+ Strategy and Implementation Plan

June 2019:

The National Inquiry releases its Final Report, including the 231 individual calls for justice

December 2020:

The Yukon Advisory Committee releases Changing the Story to Upholding Dignity and Justice: Yukon's MMIWG2S+ Strategy

December 2022:

The Yukon Advisory Committee releases Priority Action Items for the Strategy

June 2023:

The Yukon Advisory Committee releases the Implementation Plan for the Strategy



Attendees gather around the sacred fire at the announcement of Priority Action Items for the Yukon's MMIWG2S+ Strategy in December 2022. (Photo: Cathie Archbould/Government of Yukon)

Implementation Plan for MMIWG2S+ Strategy

The Implementation Plan details objectives, milestones, timelines as well as proposed leads for each objective and lists 32 action items identified through the Strategy. The Strategy has four goals:

- ▶ Implement coordinated and effective violence prevention, intervention, and crisis response across the Yukon.
- ▶ End violence against all Indigenous people in the Yukon, in particular women, girls and Two-Spirit+ People.
- ▶ Increase the economic independence of Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit+ People.
- ▶ Increase public awareness and engagement with the community in ending violence against Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit+ People.



Understanding history and culture creates safe places for everyone

Juniper Redvers working on a moose hide with her mother. Juniper developed the cultural safety training course for Government of Yukon employees. (Photo: Juniper Redvers)

The first step in supporting reconciliation is to increase awareness.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call-to-Action #57 calls on all levels of government to educate public servants on the history of Indigenous peoples including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law and Aboriginal-Crown relations. Kaitlyn Charlie, Northern Tutchone,

is the Diversity and Inclusion Program Advisor with the Public Service Commission. She supports cultural safety, anti-racism, reconciliation and human rights training across the Yukon government.

She says everyone has a responsibility to understand the history of the place they call home.

"We need to acknowledge how we came to be on the land we're on, whose land we are on, and how it came to be that we can

occupy this space," says Kaitlyn.

Her team has created, delivered and implemented diversity training to help increase Yukon public servants' knowledge and understanding of Yukon First Nations history, culture, governance and ways to better support reconciliation.

She says learning the Yukon's history, and the contemporary implications of colonization and residential schools, will help break down cultural bias and discrimination.

"By learning about this space and this place, we respect the people that were here before us and the people who are still here," Kaitlyn says.



"We need to acknowledge how we came to be on the land we're on, whose land we are on, and how it came to be that we can occupy this space."

Cultural safety training

Juniper Redvers is Métis Chipewyan from the Northwest Territories.

She's an academic researcher and an Indigenous counsellor, facilitator, writer and consultant.

The Government of Yukon contracted Juniper and Kwanlin Dün Elder Dianne Smith to develop the cultural safety training course.

For her, the work is personal.

"As an Indigenous person, I've definitely experienced places that were culturally unsafe," says Juniper.

Cultural safety is much bigger than individual change, it's about addressing systemic racism and colonialism.

She says cultural safety training is one component of a huge puzzle.

"If I'm involved in that little piece, then at least it's one part trying to create places that are more culturally safe."

Overwhelming response

Kaitlyn says the response to the training has been overwhelmingly positive.

She says the experiential and reflective nature of the cultural safety training has really shifted people's thinking and they want to put their learning into practice immediately.

"Some people want to be able to put all of this into action immediately," says Kaitlyn. "It's incredible. It's really wonderful to see that response from our colleagues in the organization."

She says the training empowers people to make change in areas where they have influence.

Truth and Reconciliation and Diversity and Inclusion learning path

The Organizational Development Branch offers the following training to all YG staff:

- ▶ Residential School Awareness
- ▶ Yukon First Nations Traditional Knowledge
- ▶ Anti-racism in the Workplace
- ▶ Introduction to Cultural Safety
- ▶ Yukon First Nations 101
- ▶ LGBTQ2S+ Awareness and Inclusion in Services and Practices
- ▶ Trauma Informed Care – Building a Community of Strength
- ▶ Bias, we all have it, now what?
- ▶ Vicarious Trauma-Strategies for Resilience





Supporting Highways and Public Works staff with First Nations engagement and consultation

First Nations Relations Unit: Tricia Johnson-Drapeau, Senior Advisor; Sharina Kennedy, Manager; and Ariana Porter, Indigenous Training Program Coordinator. The team provide support, training and advice to Highways and Public Works.

Across the Yukon government, new positions and units are being created to help facilitate stronger relations with First Nations governments or improved services to First Nations clients. Sharina Kennedy is the manager of the First Nations Relations Unit in the Corporate Services Division at Highways and Public Works (HPW).

What does your unit do?

Senior leadership recognized that the Yukon government needs more corporate and strategic guidance to advance reconciliation and to build positive relations with Indigenous governments and communities. The First Nations Relations Unit is one of two units in HPW that collaborates with staff to advance these important goals.

Our work focuses on four strategic areas:

1. Developing partnership agreements and implementing the Yukon First Nation Procurement Policy.
2. Engaging and consulting Indigenous stakeholders and partners.
3. Enhancing Indigenous staff representation in the Yukon government, through initiatives such as the award-winning Indigenous Training Program for Indigenous youth.
4. Educating staff and building awareness about reconciliation.

What are some examples of your work?

We're always looking for ways to collaborate with First Nations partners and communities. Our goal is to advance shared priorities, innovate together and advance reconciliation.

For example, to increase the visibility of Indigenous languages in Beaver Creek, we worked with White River First Nation to develop street signs in Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone. The community is very happy with the results.

Another example is how we break down our 5-year capital plan by traditional territory. We meet with each of Yukon's 14 First Nations to review the plan. These face-to-face conversations identify potential partnership opportunities and often lead to broader conversations related to government programs, projects and activities in First Nations traditional territories. Our unit then liaises with other areas of government to address challenges and share information.





Swimmer Kassua Dreyer of the Ross River Dena Council, was Team Yukon's flag bearer at the pep rally for the North American Indigenous Games. (Photo: Star Flower Photography)

Creating community, culture and connection through sports

Five of the 94 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action focus on sports and reconciliation. Community leaders who work in Indigenous sports and recreation agree that the Calls to Action significantly impact their work.

Executive Director of the Yukon Aboriginal Sports Circle (YASC) Gael Marchand says that national and territorial funding has increased for their programming. He attributes the Calls to Action, which highlight the need for inclusive sport policies,

programs, initiatives; Indigenous athlete development; continued support for the North American Indigenous Games; and public education that tells the story of Indigenous athletes in history.

Megan Cromarty works closely with YASC in her role as the First Nations Recreation and Sports Consultant with the Yukon government. She says she regularly refers to the Calls to Action in her work. Yukon and YASC are developing a memorandum of understanding on how they will work together to

implement the Calls to Action and increase Indigenous participation in sport.

The role of sports in reconciliation

Gordon Reed is a citizen of the Teslin Tlingit Council and he is the longtime President of the Yukon Aboriginal Sports Circle.

“We have this holistic belief that sports benefit youth in mental, emotional, physical and spiritual ways,” says Gordon.



Team Yukon pep rally in Whitehorse for the North American Indigenous Games. The Team sent over 130 athletes, cultural performers, coaches and mission staff to the North American Indigenous Games in Nova Scotia. Yukon athletes competed in 11 of 16 sports and brought home 39 medals. (Photo: Star Flower Photography)

“Sports provide opportunities, leadership development and a sense of inclusion, where they may not otherwise exist.”

He says participation in sports and recreation can help with many social problems that communities are facing.

“These sorts of healthy opportunities can build their self-esteem and confidence and have spin-off effects that can reduce the risk of suicide and substance abuse.” He says sports and recreation are not just a benefit to youth, but to the whole community.

“Sport is a place to create social connection and a sense of belonging,” explains Gael.

Gael says sports transmit values and culture. It’s important that those working in sports take a

reconciliation-focused lens and think about how to make these spaces inclusive of Indigenous values and participation.

The North American Indigenous Games: much more than a sporting event

Megan, Gordon, Gael and others were involved in bringing over 130 Yukon athletes, coaches and mission staff to the North American Indigenous Games. Gael was the Chef de Mission, alongside assistant Chef de Mission Megan and Karee Vallevand with Kwanlin Dün First Nation. They worked together to coordinate everything from uniforms to travel to coach selection.

Gordon says NAIG is much more than a sporting event. “The

games are an opportunity to experience and showcase our culture as Indigenous people.” There’s song, language, dance, meeting other athletes, and learning about training programs or scholarships. He says the games can open many doors. “The games build a sense of pride in being an Indigenous person,” he says.

Megan has been to 11 other multisport games but this was her first NAIG. “The opening ceremonies gave me goosebumps.” She said there was cheering and traditional songs played by the Selkirk Spirit Dancers and drummers who led them in.

“It really felt like a celebration – of not only sport, but culture.”

She says the Yukon is fortunate because we put as much



Gordon Reed, the President of the Yukon Aboriginal Sports Circle, chanting with Team Yukon before the opening Ceremonies in Halifax. (Photo: Star Flower Photography)

emphasis on NAIG as other multisport games, which is different than other jurisdictions.

This year, the Yukon government almost doubled its funding support for NAIG.

NAIG reaches a different community than other games and it can be a life-changing experience to participate in an event of this magnitude. For many youths, it's their first and maybe only large sporting event. What sets NAIG apart is that it's a social and cultural gathering for Indigenous youth.

Gael says it builds identity to be surrounded by other Indigenous youth from across North America. "It's an important element in people's lives. They will remember it for a long time because it opens their eyes to what it means to be

Indigenous."

The 2023 NAIG was Team Yukon's most successful games to date. Team Yukon participated in 11 sports and brought home 39 medals from five different sports.

Working together to increase opportunities

Megan, Gord and Gael's work does not stop with NAIG. They are working together on a number of initiatives to increase Indigenous participation and opportunities in sports and recreation.

Megan says she works closely with roughly half the sport governing bodies in the Yukon and several community recreation organizations. She helps them

increase Indigenous participation in sport and build connections with the Yukon Aboriginal Sport Circle.

For her, sports and recreation are one and the same. It's about adults and youth coming together to participate in health activities. Her main focus is to reduce barriers so that everybody has equal access to these opportunities.

Megan says, "when you see community involvement in activities, it's just a healthier, more vibrant community."

Our rural communities struggle to offer some programming. Often it comes down to volunteer capacity, not access to facilities. Sometimes we don't have the people to organize and lead sports."



Team Yukon marching to the Opening Ceremonies. (Photo: Star Flower Photography)

Gordon also highlighted the need for community champions and coaches. “I’d like to see more people find a way to stay involved.”

He also encourages people with kids to get in touch with YASC to see what kind of support is available. YASC has a Legacy Fund to support Indigenous athletes to achieve their goals. YASC is also the sport governing body for Arctic Sports, Dene Games and Archery.

Gael says other sport governing bodies are reaching out to ask how to make their sports more inclusive. He says it’s a long process, but they are seeing the beginning of a movement towards more reconciliation-focused sports and recreation.





Team Yukon at the opening ceremonies. (Photo: Star Flower Photography)



Gael Marchand is the Executive Director of the Yukon Aboriginal Sports Circle and was Yukon's Chef de Mission at the North American Indigenous Games. (Photo: Star Flower Photography)



Members of Team Yukon before the opening Ceremonies in Halifax at the North American Indigenous Games (Photo: Star Flower Photography)





Pathways

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**Yukon**