

Indigenous-led schools are a way to redress legacy of residential schools: Educator ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

TORONTO -- Leaders of Toronto's first Indigenous cultural school say institutions like theirs are a way to redress the injustices and legacies of the residential school system in Canada.

Kâpapâmahchakwêw – Wandering Spirit School has been around since the 1970s and administrators say its restorative impact cannot be overstated.

"This is a redress to the legacy of the Indian residential school system [which] I don't call it a school at all. It was a system of genocide," Tanya Senk, Toronto School Board District's superintendent of Indigenous education, told CTV's Your Morning on Monday, referring to the ongoing discoveries of unmarked graves at former residential school sites.

Senk called schools like Kâpapâmahchakwêw an "opportunity for young people to recuperate and pick up their Indigenous knowledges in a traditional and contemporary context in creative and imaginative ways."

She told CTVNews.ca that there are only a few other schools like Kâpapâmahchakwêw across the country and that more of them should be established.

The lack of Indigenous history, culture and ideas in school curriculums is a long-standing issue in Canada, with educators from across the board flagging the need for change. They say the spirit of truth and reconciliation means all students should be learning about Indigenous peoples at a young age and be taught "the big picture," which includes systemic racism and the legacy of practices such as the residential school system.

Some of those educators have sought to introduce those ideas formally in elementary, secondary or post-secondary curriculums, while others provide workshops for teachers to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into specific subjects, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics classes.

At Kâpapâmahchakwêw, the Ojibwe language and Indigenous cultures, values and traditions -- particularly from the Anishinaabe perspective -- are "interwoven" through the curriculum, which is taught by Indigenous educators, elders, and knowledge keepers.

Caregivers, staff and students even all join in a big drum circle every Friday, where they share teachings and accolades for one another.

Senk said everything they do provides "an opportunity for them to stand tall in who they are in their indigeneity."

The school, which boasts 180 students, was founded in 1977 by elder Pauline Shirt and the late elder Vern Harper, who were looking for a safer school that nurtured the Indigenous identity for their own child.

For the majority of its history, the school was an elementary school, catering to students from kindergarten to Grade 8. In 2017, it also became a secondary school and, just this past month, the school held its first high school graduation for close to 50 senior students.

"It was great because many of the students had been there since kindergarten and had the opportunity to know who they are as young Indigenous people, and their place in the world, and the contributions that they can make to the rest of Canada as we know it."

Although some of its courses are directly from the Ontario Ministry of Education's First Nations, Métis and Inuit studies curriculum, which is taught across the province, at Kâpapâmahchakwêw Wandering Spirit, older cohorts also learn about Indigenous topics such as restorative justice, which places the emphasis on healing the harm done by the offence and rehabilitation of the offender.

Senk said this idea of broadly incorporating Indigenous understandings in Canadian society will be crucial in tackling challenging issues in the coming decades.

"It will be Indigenous knowledges that will be the way forward when we think about climate change and sustainability."

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