



Nishnawbe Aski Nation

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Thursday, June 10, 2021

The Honourable Marc Miller, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Indigenous Services
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6
Via Email: Marc.Miller@canada.ca

Dear Minister,

RE: Choose Life Program

We write to you regarding the impact that Choose Life program funding is making in the lives of First Nations students attending high school off-reserve, and the importance of supporting its continuation moving forward.

Shortly after the Seven Youth Inquest (Inquest) ended in June 2016 in Thunder Bay, the First Nations organizations, who are parties to the Inquest, committed to the implementation of the Jury's 145 recommendations. Prior to the Inquest, few well-being supports and programming – essential for optimal student success – were available to the extent they are today for First Nations students attending high school in Thunder Bay and other urban centres. Most of these students come from remote communities in the North, which tend not to have the community services that youth require for their physical, emotional, and mental well-being, their healing, and an overall better quality of life.

Since the inception of the Choose Life program, the First Nations organizations can attest to similar benefits and successes for their students as reported for children and youth at-risk in the First Nations communities in Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) territory. Choose Life has been a vital funding opportunity that has helped to fill the gaps in services or programs for students. Choose Life has allowed the First Nations organizations to build successful student-centred programs and establish beneficial partnerships with community service providers in areas of access to health and mental health professionals, addictions and treatment, suicide prevention and crisis intervention, special education needs or assessments, modeling healthy relationships and positive life skills, crucial support from Elders, cultural teachings and traditional skills, language, land-based learning and outdoor education, as well as opportunities in sports, the arts, and recreation. Of notable mention is the lower incidences of students experiencing suicidal ideation or engaging in high-risk behaviour while they are out for high school, but more work is required to continue to build student programs and well-being models to support students.



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First Nations students have a myriad of challenges and obstacles to overcome in their life journey because of the significant social issues that exist in their communities. The Inquest examined the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morriseau, and Jordan Wabasse, and the substantial challenges faced by NAN communities was a factor that contributed to the tragic deaths of the youth. A goal of the Inquest was to reduce the risk of future deaths of high school students from the First Nations communities. So, it is incumbent on all of us to keep First Nations youth safe, and to help students to succeed in all areas of their life including their educational goals with the necessary supports in place throughout their journey.

Choose Life and Jordan's Principle support several Inquest recommendations for Keewatinook Okimakanak, Matawa Education and Care Centre, and the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council. There is great risk that progress achieved and positive changes made through Choose Life will be lost if this funding source does not continue to support First Nations students attending high school off-reserve. We therefore call upon the Government of Canada to fulfil its legal and fiduciary obligations, and to commit to the continuation of the Choose Life program as a permanent funded program.

Yours,

First Nations Organizations who are Parties to the Seven Youth Inquest



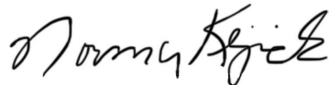
Deputy Grand Chief Walter Naveau
Nishnawbe Aski Nation



David Thompson, Executive Director
Keewatinook Okimakanak



Sharon Nate, Executive Director
Matawa Education Department



Norma Kejick, Executive Director
Northern Nishnawbe Education Council

Cc: *NAN Executive Council*
Andrew Solomon, Director of Education, Nishnawbe Aski Nation
David Paul Achneepineskum, CEO, Matawa First Nations Management
Brad Battiston, Principal, Matawa Education and Care Centre
Leonard Mamakeesick, Board Chair, Keewatinook Okimakanak Board of Education
Dobi-Dawn Frenette, Director of Education, Northern Nishnawbe Education Council
Christiane Fox, Deputy Minister of Indigenous Services
Valerie Gideon, Associate Deputy Minister of Indigenous Services
The Honourable Greg Rickford, M.P.P., Minister of Indigenous Affairs
Rebecca Ramsarran, Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Indigenous Affairs

