

Submission on the Indigenous-Focused Graduation Requirement

Submission By:

The Canadian Union of Public Employees

British Columbia Division

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CUPE BC represents over 100 000 members across British Columbia, working in more than 160 locals. These members deliver public services, working in municipalities, school boards, community social service agencies, community health, libraries, colleges and universities, ambulance services, public utilities, and other public institutions.

CUPE BC supports the provincial government's move toward making Indigenous-focused education mandatory for secondary students in British Columbia. As an organization, CUPE BC's leadership and members have worked to advance reconciliation, decolonize and Indigenize our practices, and support Indigenous members and their communities. Our members work in communities across British Columbia supporting the delivery of public services, and they can see firsthand the impacts of colonization and intergenerational trauma. As the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair has said: "education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it."

The Indigenous-focused education requirement speaks directly to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action related to education, specifically number 62, which calls on federal, provincial, and territorial governments to "make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students." Further, as recommended, this work is being done in consultation and collaboration with Indigenous people, residential school survivors, and key stakeholders.

Our members also work as Aboriginal Education Support Workers at schools in communities across the province. This gives CUPE BC a unique perspective on how this work can move forward in a way that best supports students, education workers, families, and communities to further efforts toward truth and reconciliation. As such, we have four recommendations outlined below:

Recommendation #1: Address wage disparity between Aboriginal Education Support Workers and other support staff

Aboriginal Education Support Workers (AESW) make between \$22.07 and \$30.75 per hour. The average wage is lower than all other average wages for support sector job classifications in schools (with the exception of custodians), with an average of \$26.86 per hour as compared to

an average of \$27.75 per hour for the average Education Assistant (EA). This creates an imbalance within schools, where Indigenous workers are often paid less than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Further, this makes it more challenging to recruit and retain workers, especially in areas with high costs of living. Not only will addressing this wage more appropriately acknowledge the value of this work, but it will also create better, more stable education environments, and will support Indigenous workers and their families.

Recommendation #2: Prevent the creep of increased job duties for Aboriginal Education Support Workers

While CUPE BC strongly supports the Indigenous-focused education requirement, we are cautious about the potential creep of job duties for Indigenous people working as Aboriginal Education Support Workers. Especially when non-Indigenous teachers are teaching students about issues related to Indigenous people, there can be a tendency to turn to other Indigenous people for support to teach content and communicate ideas. While our members support educating students about Indigenous people and histories, the onus should not be placed on Indigenous people who are not teachers and who are not compensated at the same level to fulfill curriculum requirements. Instead, bringing in guest speakers, Elders, and community organizations to share Indigenous perspectives is more appropriate. If Aboriginal Education Support Workers are asked to support the teaching of course material, additional compensation should be discussed.

Recommendation #3: Support culturally safe workplaces and learning environments for Indigenous students, education workers, and families

Cultural safety is an essential component of creating supportive learning and working environments for Indigenous students, education workers, and families. The concept of cultural safety includes respectful engagement with one another and recognizes and addresses power imbalances stemming from the history of colonization. Cultural safety seeks to eliminate structural racism and discrimination. In order to ensure that schools are culturally safe environments, a focus must be placed on educating all workers in schools, students, the families of students, community members, and decision-makers in education, including administrators and school trustees, about why the Indigenous-focuses graduation requirement is a priority. Students do not live in a bubble; if parents and guardians can be brought along in the learning process, this will help move beyond checking a box and instead support transformational change across the province. Indigenous people come with their own family histories, which sometimes includes intergenerational trauma. They cannot simply set aside this piece of themselves to do the work or learn, and this should be considered in the supports and education that is provided.

Schools and school divisions may also consider the idea of an Elder-in-Residence to support both students and education workers in their educational journeys. This could look like having

culturally safe supports available in crisis situations, having Indigenous people who can help educators problem-solve or address questions, or just normalizing the presence of an Elder holding space as an alternative to other authority figures in schools. Having a repository of Indigenous-focused resources, including 24-hour phone lines and educational materials, will also be important for both students and staff, and may help prevent Indigenous people from being overburdened as resources.

Recommendation #4: Foster relationships between students and Indigenous community organizations

Often, teaching students about Indigenous people focuses on the shameful history of the treatment of Indigenous people during colonization. While this is incredibly important, it can also have the effect, intentionally or unintentionally, of portraying Indigenous people as victims and removing their agency. It is important, as a part of this requirement, to also ensure that students see Indigenous people as resilient and thriving despite the history and legacy of colonization. There is a rich diversity among Indigenous people, and much of this is displayed in the form of art, music, dance, and ceremony. Exposing students, educators, and their families to Indigenous culture will help to build relationships and a deeper understanding of one another. A priority of schools should be to connect with local Indigenous groups, including Indigenous Nations and Friendship Centres, and building mutually beneficial relationships. Reciprocity, in the form of shared learning, will help us grow together and strengthen our communities and help develop shared understandings.

Conclusion

CUPE BC is proud of the work that has been done to move forward with an Indigenous-focused graduation requirement, and we are happy to see that this work has been done in collaboration with Indigenous people and key stakeholders. We clearly see the benefits that this requirement will have, not only for students, but for our communities more broadly. We understand that this process may come up against barriers, but CUPE BC is committed to partnering with the Ministry and the government to ensure that this work is successful.



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