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The province is meeting with leaders and academics from post-secondary education programs to sort out its next steps in producing more Indigenous language teachers.

Speakers need to become teachers

Schools work to fulfil promise afforded by new law supporting Indigenous languages

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MINAWANIGOZIWIN" is the Ojibwe concept that comes to mind for Sherri Denysuik when the Winnipeg teacher is asked about her thoughts on a new law that raises the status of Indigenous languages in schools.

That term is roughly translated to "one who is happy and joyous."

Denysuik, a member of Sagkeeng First Nation, is trying to learn words many of her ancestors were banned from speaking and, in many cases, punished for uttering inside a residential school.

Recent changes to Manitoba's Public Schools Act are expected to make it easier for future generations to become fluent in Indigenous languages.

Bill 18 places Ojibwe, Cree and others in the company of Canada's official languages in the kindergarten-to-Grade 12 system. It allows schools to teach an Indigenous language for more than 50 per cent of an instructional day.

English and French were previously the only "language of instruction" options, although there are immersion programs — for example, Filipino, Ukrainian and Punjabi streams in the Seven Oaks School Division.

Seven Oaks held its first Ojibwe immersion class in 2016 at Riverbend Community School (also known as Riverbend Gikino'amaagewigamig).

Denysuik, an assistant superintendent, said the growth of their language programming has been "very organic." Seven Oaks wants to continue to expand it and there's high demand, but it's a huge challenge to

find fluent language speakers, she said, noting her employer has been offering training for "emergent speakers."

Statistics Canada data suggests 13 per cent of the population can speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation in it. The number of these language speakers dropped by nearly 11,000 people, between the latest census in 2021 and its 2016 predecessor.

"There's significant urgency in this work so we're trying to, in a really good way, balance a pace that's reflective of that urgency, but in a way that's thoughtful and respectful," said Jackie Connell, the assistant deputy minister who oversees Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning's newly-established office of "Indigenous Excellence."

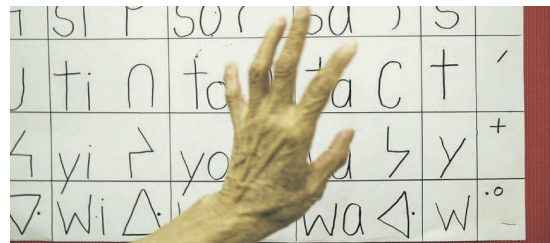
Connell's team is taking the lead from first-language speakers "and people who've been doing this work for generations," the Red River Métis educator said.

She noted that they have been working with colleagues in the professional certification unit to find a clear, achievable and flexible pathway for fluent speakers to work in K-12 classrooms across the province.

Given it's currently "really, really tough" to find Indigenous language teachers, there are ongoing discussions about ways to recognize community-based experience in the certification process, she said.

Connell indicated the province is meeting with leaders and academics from post-secondary education programs to brainstorm next steps.

Thompson's Wapanohk Community School was the first of its kind to —



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Bill 18 allows schools to teach Indigenous language for more than half a day.

with permission from the department of education — offer Cree instruction in every subject in kindergarten through Grade 8.

Co-principal Brent Badiuk's advice to others who want to launch a successful Cree school?

"Surround yourself with staff who are very passionate in growing the Cree language and culture," said the non-Indigenous educator who has spent most of his adult life in northern Manitoba.

Four in 10 classroom teachers on this year's staff roster are fluent in the language, Badiuk said.

He estimated that 95 per cent or more of the roughly 450 students who attend the elementary school are Indigenous. The majority of the student population is Cree, although there are Dene students, too, he said.

"It sounds like the province is catching up to us (with Bill 18) because this is my sixth year here and the language programming is the same as when I got here," Badiuk said.

He noted that it's a symbolic moment in that the province has explicitly recognized Indigenous languages in a historic piece of legislation that underpins the K-12 education system.

MLAs should have acted sooner than June — a decade after the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission released its findings — to acknowledge the importance of Cree and other languages that were being spoken in this country long before English or French, Badiuk added.

The TRC's 94 calls to action address numerous language-related matters.

No. 10 singles out implementing culturally-appropriate curricula and "protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages."

During a phone call in the lead up to Orange Shirt Day 2025, Connell said investing in language revitalization is an important part of reconciliation.

While noting there is significant work required to make Michif and other Indigenous languages as commonplace as English and French, Connell said progress is underway because Premier Wab Kinew is backing this initiative.

Notably, the premier is a polyglot who is fluent in English, French and Ojibwe.

Numerous Ojibwe dialects, followed by Michif and Cree, are the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in Manitoba.

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