

Education for First Nations: Yarmouth's Kyle Hill made a difference with Teach for Canada

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Jennifer Manitowabi (education director, Lac Seul First Nation), Ken Dryden (hockey player, author, lawyer, and politician), John Wesley (school bus driver), Sam Manitowabi (economic development manager, Lac Seul First Nation), Adam Goldenberg (co-founder, Teach For Canada), Kyle Hill (executive director, Teach For Canada), Barry King (events manager, Lac Seul First Nation) took part in a five-day visit with our teachers to Lac Seul First Nation in northern Ontario during the summer.

Super-achiever Kyle Hill has come a long way from Arcadia Consolidated School in rural Yarmouth County.

As founding director of a new national teacher training institute, he's creating waves in education by tackling the chronic shortage of qualified, culturally sensitive teachers in northern First Nations communities.

Since graduating from Yarmouth High School, Hill has won a Rhodes Scholarship while at Mount Allison University, completed a PhD in physics at Oxford and then secured an Action Canada Fellowship in 2010-11.

Commingleing with Canada's best and brightest during that year with Action Canada, Kyle had an epiphany.

"As a budding physicist from Yarmouth, Action Canada opened doors and changed my life," he told me recently.

It also opened his eyes to the stark educational inequalities and critical teacher shortage facing First Nations communities.

Instead of just talking about the long-standing teacher shortage, Hill and fellow Action Canada alumni Mark Podlasly and Adam Goldenberg plunged right into the deep end. They co-founded Teach for Canada, a national non-governmental organization in Toronto out to reform teacher training and improve "survival rates" in Ontario's most isolated First Nations communities.

At 31, Hill is executive director of Teach for Canada and totally focused on changing the established pattern that has sent hundreds of mostly novice teachers up North.

Teach for Canada is a new wild card on the educational scene, and it's committed to staunching extraordinarily high teacher attrition rates, filling vacant teaching posts and closing the education gap affecting Ontario's northern First Nations communities.

"By working with First Nations elders and educators and better preparing teachers, the program is filling a void," says Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, Lakehead University's director of aboriginal initiatives.

"That's why we hosted the four-week-long Teach for Canada summer enrichment training session here at Lakehead."

The focus is on one specially trained group of 31 teachers who have just taken up their posts in seven communities in the Ontario North. They are the first cohort recruited, selected and supported by Hill's organization.

Although welcomed by most First Nations chiefs and lead educators, Teach for Canada has received an icy reception from the Canadian Teachers Federation and local teacher union activists. When unionists see the Teach for Canada logo, with its quintessentially Canadian flying geese, they see it big bad American counterpart, Teach for America, and the thin edge of the wedge of creeping “privatization.” They are also leery of recruits signing on with First Nations schools for salaries off the public school wage grid.

Since its inception, Teach for Canada has sparked a series of openly hostile teacher union blog posts and prompted the federation to issue a “briefing document” and greet graduates in August with a condemnatory media release.

Close observers of First Nations communities are puzzled by the reaction of unionists to the Teach for Canada project.

“We currently do nothing to train and acclimatize new recruits entering First Nations communities, and so it’s definitely an improvement,” says Wesley-Esquimaux.

“Teach for Canada is filling a hole, so how can you complain?” says Wawatay News reporter Rick Garrick.

“They are building a network of teaching colleagues to help with the feelings of isolation and provide ongoing support in the transition.”

The initial Teach for Canada project only got off the ground when the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, based at Lac Seul, jumped at the opportunity to secure motivated, committed and eager new teachers for its remote, far-flung elementary schools.

“Our initial project was entirely community-driven,” Hill says.

“We presented at northern tribal councils to the education directors. It led to partnerships with seven different communities built from the ground up with First Nations educators in the Ontario North.”

Fresh from a four-week training session, including a five-day stay at Lac Seul First Nation, the first cohort of Teach for Canada recruits is better prepared than any previous group destined for teaching in First Nations communities.

Sweeping condemnations of educational innovations originating outside the system are all too common. From the ground level, Teach for Canada look like a positive development.

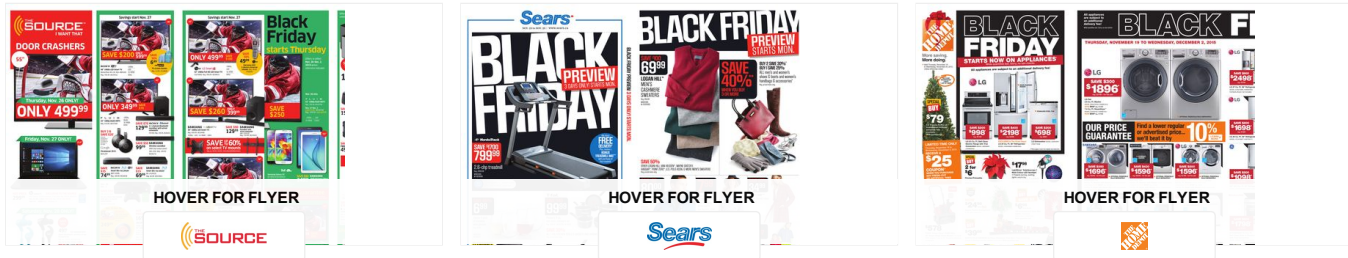
Undaunted by teacher union opposition, Hill remains optimistic. “We’re out to create a virtuous circle where properly prepared teachers inspire First Nations children, and indigenous youth, over time, are motivated to go into teaching in their home communities.”

Paul W. Bennett is senior education policy fellow at the Northern Policy Institute in Thunder Bay and Sudbury, Ont., and director of Schoolhouse Consulting in Halifax.

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