



OPINION COLUMN

TFC fills education gap

Thursday, October 15, 2015 9:45:44 EDT AM



Paul W. Bennett is Senior Education Policy Fellow at the Northern Policy Institute based in Thunder Bay and Sudbury, Ontario, and Director of Schoolhouse Consulting, Halifax, N.S.

TIMMINS - Every September a fresh crop of hundreds of mostly novice teachers head North to teach in remote, mostly First Nation populated communities.

Hired by northern public school districts or Aboriginal education authorities, the recruits arrive flush with excitement and prepared to “sink or swim” on a mostly unfamiliar educational terrain.

This year is different for one reason: Teach for Canada (TFC) is a new “wild card” on the educational scene and it’s an independent NGO committed to breaking the mould, 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,” said Cynthia Wesley-Esquimault, 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.”

All eyes are on that one specially trained group of 31 teachers who have just taken up their posts in the Ontario North. They are, after all, the first cohort of emissaries recruited, selected and supported by Teach for Canada, co-founded by two energetic former Action Canada fellows, Kyle Hill and Adam Goldenberg.

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

Since its inception, TFC has not only sparked a series of openly hostile teacher union blog posts, but prompted the CTF to issue a briefing document and greet the new TFC graduates in August 2015 with a condemnatory media release.

Close observers of First Nation communities are downright puzzled by the reaction of teacher unionists to the Teach for Canada pilot project in northern Ontario. “We currently do nothing to train and acclimatize new recruits entering First Nations communities and so it’s definitely an improvement,” said Wesley-Esquimault.

“Teach for Canada is filling a hole, so how can you complain?” said 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 highly acclaimed principal of Thunder Bay’s First Nation high school, Jonathan Kakegamic, winner of a 2013 Learning Partnership Outstanding Principal’s Award, is also supportive of the initiative.

“I just found out about it this August, but it looks like a step in the right direction,” he said. “It’s hard to find qualified teachers, especially in high school, so it fills an immediate need.”

Northern Ontario public school boards have been slow to react to the TFC initiative. This is perhaps understandable because, right from the beginning, they too have been reluctant to embrace Teach for Canada. True to form, they have been disinclined to acknowledge, let alone respond to, this initiative from outside the system.

The initial Teach for Canada project only got off the ground in the Ontario North when the Northern Nishnawabe Education Council, a First Nations-run education authority based at Lac Seul, jumped at the opportunity to secure motivated, committed and eager new teachers for their remote, far-flung elementary schools.

One of TRC’s most impressive recruits, Roxanne Martin, an Anishinaabe raised in Toronto, is effusive in her praise for the project. Growing up in Ontario’s teeming metropolis, she longed to know more about her cultural identity and is delighted to be a pioneer for Teach for Canada teaching this fall at the Lac Seul First Nation school.

“Knowing we have a great support system and being able to incorporating First Nations culture into our teaching is great,” she told CBC News. “I don’t think you could find it anywhere else.”

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

Sweeping condemnations of educational innovations originating outside the system are all too common. From the ground level, it looks like a positive development, if only as a transitional program.

Paul W. Bennett is Senior Education Policy Fellow at the Northern Policy Institute based in Thunder Bay and Sudbury, Ontario, and Director of Schoolhouse Consulting, Halifax, N.S.

If you're 50+ read this 
instaflex.com
Canadians are shocked by this 10 second joint
pain trick

