



Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc.

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MKO Statement on the Return to Schools in Northern Manitoba

Treaty Five Territory, Thompson, MB – Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) Inc. is issuing this statement in response to the re-opening of schools in September.

In Manitoba, the current plan is that teachers will return to schools on September 2 with students returning on September 8. MKO has met with a variety of leaders who oversee plans for re-opening schools in Northern Manitoba to get a sense of what steps are being taken to mitigate risks to children and youth returning to schools this fall.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee shared the following remarks on the re-opening of schools:

“I am thankful to all of the educators and administrators who have met with MKO to share their plans for re-opening schools, however, I am very concerned about the re-opening of schools next month. As we have shared many times, the demographics in Northern Manitoba are different than in the rest of the province. We can see from rising cases of COVID-19 that the risks are still here within our province. Schools across the province have inadequate resources to respond to COVID-19, which also plays a factor when it comes to minimizing the potential ramifications of the virus.

Some schools in our communities are better equipped to respond to this pandemic, as their student population is low and easily allows for physical distancing. However, many of our schools have large student bodies and schools will need to consider setting up classes in gymnasiums, libraries, and multi-purpose rooms. I’m encouraging schools to continue thinking outside the box and incorporate land-based learning approaches as much as possible. This will help MKO students connect with their culture while having access to fresh air.

Another concern for Northern schools is transportation. Most children in our communities must take the bus to school. It is unclear whether there are enough busses and drivers to accommodate the need for physical distancing. I’m encouraging parents and guardians to talk to their children about the importance of wearing a mask on the bus and how to properly wash their hands.

Our First Nations are planning for various scenarios to ensure that our schools can be safe from COVID-19. The Province of Manitoba should utilize every possible avenue to ensure the safety of students and teachers. We also need to ensure that pandemic plans are in place and ready to be executed in the event there are positive cases in our schools.

MKO continues to be concerned about the lack of Internet in Northern Manitoba. While online learning has been an option for some students in the province, it's not a viable option in Northern Manitoba. The quality of education for First Nations children and youth is compromised when we have insufficient technology and resources. From my perspective as a teacher and a leader, I'm very concerned about the well-being and education of our children and youth. I will continue to push for high-speed Internet in all MKO communities to ensure that online learning becomes an option for our students."

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Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc. (MKO) is a non-profit, political advocacy organization that has represented 26 First Nation communities in Manitoba's North since 1981. The MKO represents more than 72,000 First Nations people.