



Supporting Transitions from School to Work Report

Southern First Nations Secretariat (SFNS)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement.....	3
Part One: Introduction	4
Purpose & Background	4
Context.....	5
Methodology.....	6
Part Two: Key Findings & Recommendations	7
Key Findings	7
Recommendations	8
Part Three: Detailed Findings.....	9
Demographics	9
Motivation	10
Employment.....	11
Barriers	11
Supports	12
Strengths	14
Conclusion	15

Table and Figures

Table 1. First Nations Trades – Great Lakes Region.5

Figure 1. Survey participant age ranges.....9

Figure 2. Survey participant trade statuses.9

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Southern First Nations
Secretariat





Part One: Introduction

Purpose & Background

The purpose of this project is to support First Nation apprentices and tradespeople in Southern Ontario as they transition from school to work. Colleges, unions, First Nations and other partners can reduce obstacles and better promote entry into apprenticeships by understanding the barriers First Nation apprentices and tradespeople face. They can also learn from the supports and wise practices that have helped First Nation apprentices and tradespeople to navigate these transitions successfully.

In April 2025, [Southern First Nations Secretariat \(SFNS\)](#) began collaborating with the [Canadian Apprenticeship Forum \(CAF-FCA\)](#) on this project. SFNS is a Tribal Council, presently located in Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiit (Delaware Nation), in Southwestern Ontario. SFNS' vision is for their seven member First Nations to be prosperous and supports communities through program and service delivery in areas including Post-Secondary Funding & Support Services, Technical Services, Employment & Training Support Services, Economic & Capacity Development and Financial Advisory Services. Member First Nations include:

1. Aamjiwnaang First Nation
2. Caldwell First Nation
3. Deshkan Ziibiing – Chippewas of the Thames First Nation
4. Eelūnaapéewi Lahkéewiit – Delaware Nation
5. Nalahii Lunaapewaak – Munsee-Delaware Nation
6. Chippewas of Kettle & Stony Point
7. Onyota'á:ka – Oneida Nation of the Thames

CAF-FCA is a national non-profit that brings together employers, unions, educators, and other stakeholders to strengthen Canada's apprenticeship systems and workforce. Through research, collaboration and events, it shares best practices, addresses challenges and promotes the value of hiring and training apprentices.

This initiative builds on CAF-FCA's Indigenous Project Advisory Committee's prior work in 2023–2024, which supported the development of an Inclusion Framework for Success to help retain Indigenous Peoples in the trades.

Context

In Canada, there are more than three hundred trades recognized by the provinces and territories, which range from Carpenter, to Baker, to Welder.

However, First Nations participants recognize a broader range of occupations as trades. This includes both contemporary occupations they identify as trades, as well as traditional trades undertaken by First Nations people in Southern Ontario (and across Turtle Island), in which they have long engaged but are not represented on this list. Table 1 below highlights some of these traditional trades for reference. Recognizing First Nations people's definitions of trades is important because it is one way to respect First Nations' self-determination. The methodology contains more information.

Table 1. First Nations Trades — Great Lakes Region.

Trade / Craft	Description / Notes
Birchbark / dugout canoe building & paddle carving	Use of locally harvested materials (birch bark, cedar or ash ribs/wales, spruce roots, pine pitch) to build watercraft suitable to Great Lakes rivers and lakes. ¹
Basket weaving (black ash, birch bark, cedar, sweetgrass, etc.)	Creation of baskets and containers for gathering, storage and everyday use — often using wood or bark fibers. ²
Hide tanning and leathercraft (moccasins, bags, clothing, etc.)	Processing animal hides (deer, moose) via traditional tanning methods (softening, scraping, smoking) for use in clothing and functional goods. ³
Quillwork & beadwork	Decoration of functional items (moccasins, bags, garments) with porcupine quills; post-contact, glass beads were often added. ⁴
Snowshoe and toboggan making	Bending and shaping wood (soaked cedar, ash, etc.) to make snowshoes or sled/toboggan frames for winter mobility. ⁵
Seasonal harvesting & landbased sustenance skills	Knowledge of local plants and animals for food, medicine, and materials; tied to crafting tools and storage containers (canoes, baskets, hides). ⁶

1 Edna J. Gate, "[Living Tradition in Ojibwa Beadwork and Quillwork](#)," *Algonquian Papers*, no. 16 (1985): 12.

2 [Frontenac Park, "Indigenous Culture and Heritage,"](#) accessed December 9, 2025.

3 Edna J. Gate, "Living Tradition in Ojibwa Beadwork and Quillwork," 14.

4 Freeman, Laura. "Porcupine Quillwork and the Transformation of Anishinaabe Material Culture." *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 39, no. 2 (2019): 45–68; Melissa Twance, [Futurities in Anishinaabe Arts Practices: Beading as Decolonial Praxis](#) (PhD diss., Lakehead University, 2024), 88.

5 Johnson, Leslie Main. "An Ethnobiological Look at Snowshoes (Northwestern Canada)." In *Proceedings of the Society of Ethnobiology Annual Conference, 1997*. Society of Ethnobiology; Gillespie, Craig. "A Look Back – An Overview of Traditional Snowshoe Design in Canada." *Snowshoe Magazine*, October 10, 2011. *Snowshoe Magazine*; "Snowshoes and Indigenous Winter Ecologies." In *Snowshoe Country: Snowshoes and Indigenous Winter Ecologies*, edited volume, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

6 "[Seasonal Activities and Crafts](#)," *Aanjiibimaadizing*, accessed December 9, 2025.

Methodology

SFNS and CAF-FCA hired [SISCO Consulting \(SISCO\)](#) to support the work for this project. SISCO is a longstanding partner of SFNS and supported CAF-FCA with the 2023–2024 work that led to the development of an Inclusion Framework for Success to help retain Indigenous Peoples in the trades. Together, SFNS, CAF-FCA and SISCO established a Project Committee, composed of Employment and Training, Education, and other employees from SFNS' member First Nations to help oversee the work and promote outreach to enhance engagement.

With the guidance of the Project Committee, we conducted extensive outreach and engaged a total of seventy-four First Nations apprentices and tradespeople at various stages of their journey (pre-apprenticeship, employment, uncertified, apprentice, provincially certified with or without a Red Seal endorsement, depending on the status of the trade, pre-employment and other stages of their journey), exceeding our target of fifty participants. This includes fifty-three participants in the online survey, nine phone or online interviews participants, and twelve in-person focus group participants. We have also included a few insights from the Project Committee that while not raised directly by participants in this project, reflect issues shared by First Nations tradespeople in Southern Ontario with Committee members over time.

This project originally focused on engaging First Nations people in Southern Ontario in trades that are recognized by the provinces and territories for input into how they can be better supported with their transitions from school to work. SISCO Consulting utilized a screener alongside the Ellis chart to ensure prospective participants were in a trade recognized by the provinces or territories.⁷

However, as the project progressed, we also received interest from First Nations people in Southern Ontario engaged in both First Nations traditional trades and other occupations that First Nations participants identified as trades. Additionally, the online survey included an open-ended question, “In what trade(s) have you received training?” that invited participants to define trades. Between the online engagements and online survey, participants identified themselves as receiving training in the following trades which are recognized in the province of Ontario:

- Bricklayer
- Carpenter
- Construction Craft Worker
- Construction Electrician and Industrial Electrician
- Cook
- Floor Covering Installer
- Industrial Mechanic (Millwright)
- Ironworkers
- Landscaping Horticulturalist
- Machinist
- Plumber
- Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Mechanic
- Roofer
- Steamfitter/Pipefitter
- Truck and Coach Technician
- Welder

In addition, a few participants listed the following occupations in response to this question:

- Aesthetician
- Canoe-Building
- Dental Technician
- Education / Social Work
- Massage
- Mechanic
- Nail Technician
- Non-Destructive Testing
- Photography
- Reflexology

While these occupations are not provincially recognized trades in Ontario, we have included their data in this report in the spirit of respecting First Nations' sovereignty and supporting traditional First Nation trades' revitalization.

⁷ [Search Ellis Chart, Trades information.](#)



Part Two: Key Findings & Recommendations

Part Two provides an overview of the key findings and recommendations drawn from this research and engagement. This report focuses on the barriers and supports for First Nations in Southern Ontario transitioning from high school to the trades. While some findings may apply to all tradespeople, the report does not include a comparative analysis.

Key Findings

1. Exposure to the trades among friends, family and at school are key drivers of trades interest; early exposure, hands-on experiences, role models, and practical supports may encourage First Nations students to pursue trades careers.
2. Friends and family, direct applications, placement agencies, knocking on doors (reaching out to potential employers who may not have posted a job), and online platforms help First Nations tradespeople find their first trades job.
3. Transportation, cost (tuition, equipment, supplies, childcare etc.), time commitment, job inconsistency, nepotism, and discrimination represent barriers for First Nations tradespeople, as does the unionization of certain trades.
4. There is a need for more support for First Nations people as they transition from school to trades, including:
 - in high school, dedicated trades counsellors, clearer trades paths, events to connect with peers and mentorship opportunities; and
 - after high school, financial support, pre-apprentice and apprentice training, transportation and mentorship.
5. Despite these challenges, First Nations tradespeople feel it is worth it; they are proud, resilient, hopeful for the future, and grateful to be in a fun, versatile job.

Recommendations

Based on participant insights about needs, barriers, and wise practices, we have provided the following recommendations, which should be First Nations-led and localized to ensure implementation can be tailored to the unique realities of individual First Nations communities. This could mean that the initiative is led by Indigenous Skills Employment and Apprenticeship Development (ISEAD) or Indigenous Skills, Employment and Training (ISET) in partnership with regional bodies like SFNS and their respective members, and with support from CAF-FCA.

✓ *High schools should partner with colleges, unions, and trade schools to provide earlier hands-on (experiential, not just informational) exposure to a variety of trades. This could include:*

- bringing in tradespeople* who can act as role models for those who do not have friends or family in the trades
- offering job-shadowing with tradespeople* in a variety of trades
- facilitating events and workshops to connect First Nation and other students interested in the trades with one another
- delivering mentoring programs with tradespeople* in a variety of trades
- providing dedicated Trades Counsellors who work together with local colleges, unions, First Nations, and other partners to support students in navigating trades pathways.

* Ideally, all tradespeople brought in as role models, for job-shadowing and mentoring would be First Nation.

✓ *Provide anti-Indigenous anti-racism (and / or allyship) training to address anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination in the trades, including pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and pre-employment training programs as well as in employment. This training should be broadly available across trades to encourage safe learning and workplace environments.*

✓ *Support the development of Indigenous Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) in the trades to foster community, amplify voices, support inclusion and retention and to prevent discrimination in the workforce. Indigenous ERGs provide a safe space for Indigenous workers to connect, share experiences and mentor one another. They also advocate for culturally safe and equitable policies and supports, while raising awareness of Indigenous representation and needs in the trades sector.*

✓ *Advocate for greater funding to support people in their transition from high school to trades, including for:*

- tuition and books
- equipment and supplies
- transportation (to obtain licenses, a vehicle, gas for carpooling and / or bus passes)
- childcare
- cost of living.

✓ *Share success stories and celebrate First Nations tradespeople's achievements to increase visibility and encourage high school students to pursue this pathway. This could include:*

- motivational presentations in high school classrooms and videos featuring First Nations tradespeople
- awards ceremonies to celebrate major achievements and success among First Nations tradespeople, including in First Nations communities.

✓ *Work with colleges, unions, and other trades organizations to increase authentic First Nations visibility in posters and online advertisements by featuring actual First Nation tradespeople (not stock photos).*

Part Three: Detailed Findings

Part Three provides detailed findings, based on the data collected from the seventy-four (74) First Nation apprentices and tradespeople we engaged. While we include some percentages throughout, they are intended to offer general insight rather than serve as precise quantitative measures.

Demographics

Participants represent both First Nations men and women in urban and rural locations, and a diversity of age groups, trade statuses and trades

Survey participants included a higher proportion of First Nations men (60%) than women (40%), reflecting the broader trend of women being underrepresented in the trades. Participants were split between urban (58%) and rural (42%) locations, noting the absence of remote locations in Southern Ontario. A significant minority (25%) identified as having a disability, ranging from mental health, learning disabilities, knee osteoporosis, arthritis and diabetes. Figure 1 and 2 indicates there are a diversity of age groups, trade statuses and occupations and trades among the people that were consulted for this project. We suspect the higher age skew is because we initially targeted First Nations tradespeople who had left high school within the last ten years, aiming to get a more accurate picture of current challenges and support needed during their transition to trades. As the project progressed, however, we were less strict about this eligibility requirement.

Figure 1. Survey participant age ranges.

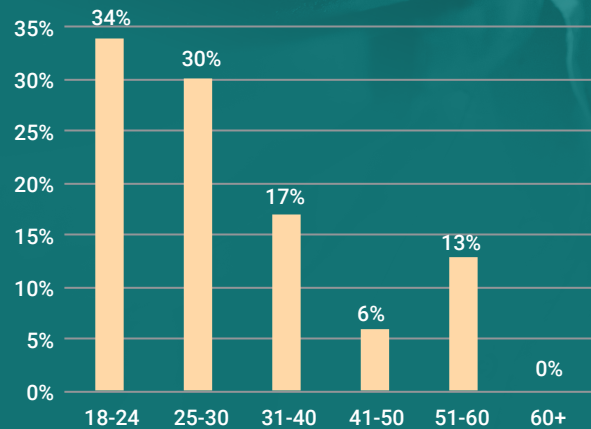
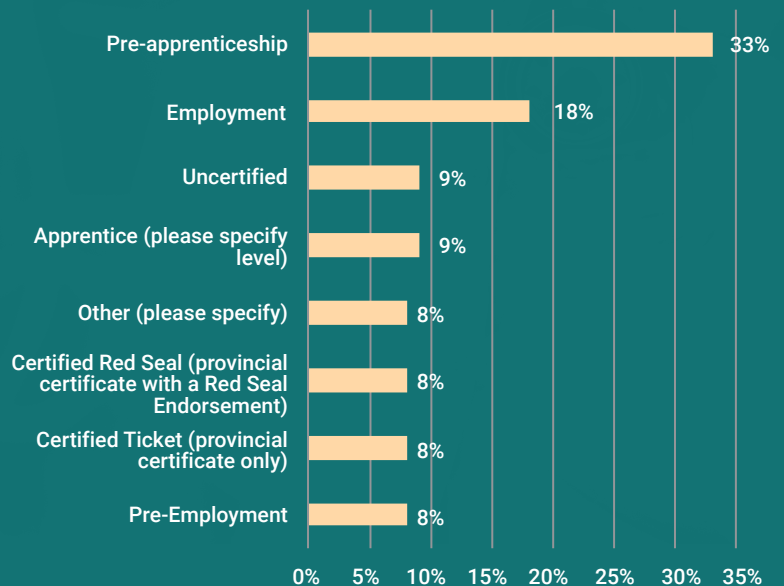


Figure 2. Survey participant trade statuses.



Motivation

Exposure to the trades among friends, family and at school are key drivers of trades interest

Participants described several ways they became interested in the trades, most commonly by real-life exposure through family and friends. For example, participants referenced family members (parents, grandparents, and uncles) who were ironworkers, pipefitters, electricians, carpenters, welders, and hairstylists. Some participants mentioned having access to a garage, woodworking space, and welding shop. One participant referenced exposure through helping a neighbour with electrical work, while another said he helped his dad build a deck.

Several participants also noted that they had exposure to trades and pre-apprenticeship opportunities in high school, including carpentry/woodworking, welding, plumbing, electrical, vehicle maintenance/autobody, construction (building homes), manufacturing and culinary. One participant inspired to pursue trades because of his instructor who talked about welding on the Alaskan pipeline, drinking beer and watching the Northern Lights while salmon fishing. A few participants said they were exposed to trades education programs when they returned to high school for adult education, some with no prior experience. Only one person said they had exposure in middle school.

Others referenced being attracted to trades because of the hands-on aspect, ability to be creative and fix things, curiosity and interest in the trade (e.g., construction process), ability to earn while learning, opportunity to work in their communities and to make a good income in a sustainable field. One participant noted that his pay tripled when he left his former position in a factory to work in his trade. Another participant referenced the appeal of having benefits, being protected, and able to retire. Others referenced the reliability of income and sustainability of work in their fields. A few participants talked about the value of the skills they learned in their trade journey to being more self-sufficient and independent beyond income, with one participant sharing, "Knowing the foundations of how to build a house - you will never be without a house if you know how to build one."

A few participants mentioned they learned about the trades through a Friendship Centre or a union. A handful of participants mentioned they were specifically attracted to

working with a union for the security and protection it offers, as well as the doors it can open.

Whether exposed through family, friends, school, or otherwise, many participants referenced seeing others' success in the trades as a driver, alongside wanting to have a meaningful but attainable career.

One canoe builder talked about how she was inspired to revitalize this traditional First Nation trade by connection to the blood memory of her ancestors which carries her traditional ingenuity. She explained that this is a trade that was created but never perfected, and that through blood memory, she has access to her ancestors' thinking before a lot of current technology. She explained that "it's a lot of pride pedagogy, it's rote, it's all kinds of things. It's inserting that knowledge into places where we have been excluded."

Project Committee members noted that exposure before high school may be ideal, but it is often not feasible for First Nations schools in Southern Ontario. They explained that most school systems in First Nations communities in this region do not provide career development opportunities before high school. One representative from an emerging First Nation-owned trades school explained that their goal is to begin working with students as early as grade four. At the same time, members also explained that the vast majority of community members from First Nations attend high schools outside of their communities.

Early exposure, hands-on experiences, role models and practical supports are critical to encouraging First Nations students to pursue trades careers

Participants emphasized that increasing First Nations interest in the trades begins with earlier and more meaningful exposure in high school. They noted the importance of hands-on learning, experiential opportunities, placements, and connections that allow students to see what a career in the trades looks and feels like. A strong support system (teachers, counsellors, family, peers and friends) can also play a crucial role in inspiring students to consider the trades sooner. Clear and accessible information about trade pathways, day-to-day work, apprenticeships and available financial supports was also identified as important.

To encourage more students to pursue trades, participants recommended providing worksite tours and job-shadowing opportunities. One participant explained, "I think getting a

tour of shops could be helpful. Some might find it interesting after seeing what actually goes on in a trade setting. Or possibly, if they are interested, have them shadow someone working for a day.” Participants also suggested engaging role models to share success stories and real-life experiences through motivational presentations and videos. Promoting trades at job fairs, in classrooms and through social media was another key recommendation. Participants emphasized highlighting the benefits of working in the trades, such as earning while learning, RRSP options and employee benefits. Finally, they recommended offering dedicated support for high-school graduates, including a contact person to assist with job searches, provide guidance and offer encouragement during the transition into the workforce. One participant said if he could offer any advice it would be, “Don’t pick what you want to do. Pick what you love and find a way to make money doing it.”

Participants also noted that practical supports can make a significant difference. They highlighted the value of funding for meals and transportation, providing gift cards or incentives such as pizza during workshops and training, and offering financial assistance for First Nations apprentices and tradespeople to attend training sessions. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of creating opportunities specifically tailored for women entering the trades.

“I would like to thank SFNS for offering such an amazing opportunity to be able to go into electrical techniques with 7 strong and inspiring Indigenous women. To this day I keep in touch with most of the women!”
— Anonymous Participant

Employment

Friends and family, direct applications, placement agencies, knocking on doors and online platforms help First Nations tradespeople find their first trades job

Most participants said they found their first employer in the trades through a family member or peers, other said they did so by applying directly to a local union hall or job site, placement agencies, “knocking on doors” (reaching out to potential employers who may not have posted a job) and online platforms. A few participants said they found their first job in the trades through post-secondary programs that provided connections, mentors and industry in their communities. Some participants were still looking for an employer, and a few said they are having challenges finding

a job due to lack of experience and reliable transportation (which was identified as a barrier by 60% of participants in the survey).

“Finding a job is the hardest part. I have applied to almost every plumbing company in London and the surrounding area and have not secured an apprenticeship yet.”
— Anonymous Participant

Barriers

Transportation, cost, time commitment, job inconsistency, nepotism and discrimination represent barriers for First Nations tradespeople

Participants identified many barriers and challenges they have experienced during their apprenticeship or trades journey. The most commonly referenced challenge among participants, was lack of access to reliable personal and public transportation to get to and from jobs. Many participants referenced not having a licence, vehicle, or both. Some participants said they were reliant on early morning and long walks, unreliable busing schedules, or carpooling arrangements with coworkers. Some also referenced long commutes.

Funding and financial challenges were also identified as a major barrier by many participants in the survey, interviews and focus group. Specifically, the costs of tuition, certifications, materials, and tools—along with ongoing work, training, and living expenses—make the transition from school to work challenging for many tradespeople. Participants explained that they may not have much savings and are paid only minimum wage to start as apprentices. For example, one participant said they paid \$5,000 and another \$2,000 for their programs, and one participant referenced hunger being an issue. Others mentioned family responsibilities and childcare cost as barriers. Some participants said that apprentice and job opportunities (especially close by) are hard to find, especially in remote areas and small towns where there are limited spots or competition for union or apprentice positions.

Participants identified lack of connections, knowledge, and guidance on how to navigate the trades or career paths at school or college as a barrier. One participant observed that there seems to be a lot of nepotism, sharing that that it is “very hard to get into an apprenticeship program unless you know someone.”

Additionally, participants explained that the time required to complete apprenticeship hours can be a barrier (e.g., a “four-year” program requires thousands of hours and takes upwards of six years), especially if there is not opportunity to apprentice in a specific area of skill development. For example, one participant explained that he has had apprentices that have only worked on residential sheet metal but need to learn other applications and techniques. Another participant said work can be inconsistent and job security is a concern because trades work is often contract-based and workers are laid off after projects, often during winters. This means there is a need to continually follow up for work. Additionally, the United States’ tariffs are impacting some trades, ironwork for example.

Even once a good job is secured, participants said it can be challenging to adjust to the lifestyle, working early mornings and long hours, often in harsher environments and under demanding work conditions that require fitness. Getting on a good sleep schedule, preparing meals for work and balancing full time work with life (sometimes with training) can be challenging. Being tired and hungry can wear on tradespeople. One participant explained, “[You]...got to be mentally ready to work long hours so learning about preparing food for the week ahead of time and getting a good sleep schedule...[is important].”

Some less desirable tasks (sweeping, for example) need to be done but can be demotivating. One participant also said that coming into a new trade as a person in his mid-thirties is overwhelming and humbling because everything is new. Participants expressed frustration in feeling they were not learning fast enough. A few participants mentioned mental health challenges and learning difficulties that can affect performance. One participant said that, “Due to the learning disability, it made it hard to understand and follow simple things during the process of learning. [This is] one of the reasons he just showed me hands on.” A few participants mentioned challenges working cross-culturally with non-Indigenous people and even experiencing racism.

“I experienced some racist behaviour from some forepersons.” — Anonymous Participant

A few women who participated referenced experiencing gender-related discrimination in male-dominated fields, being the only woman on a site and having to work extra hard to prove themselves.

*“It can be challenging at times to be the only woman. Where I work, there is about 20 men between the different trades, and I am the only woman.”
— Anonymous Participant*

The Project Committee also raised unionization of certain skilled trades as a barrier in some contexts as well, noting some challenges in membership access and availability.

Supports

There is a need for more support, including financial support, pre-apprentice and apprentice training, transportation and mentorship

Overall, the majority of respondents indicated that they have not received adequate supports. However, some participants shared that they received some support from their First Nations (Employment & Training, Ontario Works, etc.), SFNS, Friendship Centres and government grants to help ease the financial pressure. This includes funding to help cover the cost of tuition, tools, personal protective equipment (PPE), bus passes and living expenses.

Participants also referenced training as a major support. Specifically, they mentioned trades school staff, especially teachers who were described as encouraging, offering a morale boost and advice on where to go. Additionally, we heard that pre-apprenticeship training offered by unions and other providers after graduation, often came with mentors who guided them and connected them to opportunities. Apprentice training itself was also noted as valuable, particularly because apprentices were able to bring prior experience into their learning.

They also emphasized the importance of SFNS training supports, such as help finding the right school, assistance with applications and support accessing trades training such as welding and millwright courses. Practical supports, such as a dedicated bus for transportation to training, made participation more feasible. Finally, unofficial mentoring from family members and friends played a meaningful role in their success through check-ins, guidance and connections to work opportunities. One participant shared the importance of their First Nation’s Employment and Training organization.

“When I was going through an apprenticeship and had two young sons in daycare, E&T helped because EI [Employment Insurance / Ontario Works] took seven to eight weeks [so I was]...without a paycheck or anything, so E&T helped to subsidize getting me something to help my family and childcare.”—Anonymous Participant

Survey respondents did not provide any insights into whether the supports they received were culturally safe. Some interview participants described the support they received as mostly culturally safe, while at the same time acknowledging that it is not perfect all the time. For example, one participant said high school teachers were supportive and did not make them feel out of place, but pre-apprenticeship programming was better because it included mentors who understood where he was coming from and provided culturally safe training. Another noted the training is pretty generic. In response to this question, some participants said they received training from the First Nation or SFNS, and another referenced receiving only union training.

Dedicated trades counsellors, clearer trades paths, events to connect with peers and mentorship opportunities would be helpful additional supports

Participants shared that additional supports during high school would have been helpful in making their transition to work easier. Specifically, they expressed a desire for more hands-on courses that would allow them to pursue trades certifications in high school. One participant said, “If I was able to get welding tickets in high school it would have made applying for an apprenticeship much easier.” They also want more support from teachers, program staff, and Indigenous liaison persons in navigating courses and staying motivated.

In particular, high school guidance counsellor support with trades pathways is needed. Ideally, a dedicated Trade Counsellor to guide students through trades pathways would be available to answer questions, explain different types of trades, and connect students with pre-training, apprenticeship programs and jobs to help build a career path. Participants also said mentorship from experienced tradespeople and union workers who understand the challenges, can be honest about the realities of the trades and can provide practical advice and encouragement would have been helpful.

Additionally, participants said it would have been helpful to gain broader exposure to and learn about various trades.

They suggested more trades events showcasing a variety of different trades would help to expose students to all of the possibilities. One participant shared, “Just more knowledge in general about the wide variety of trades because I’m still learning about ones I never heard of before.” And, more detailed information is needed about working in the trades, including lifestyle changes (e.g., meal planning, sleep schedule adjustments), mental preparation and associated risks to support readiness. Connecting with peers through group events (e.g., banquets, picnics) was also mentioned as a way to connect students and foster friendships that would support transitions to trades. They also identified the need to engage with employers to understand expectations and provide insight into real-world work environments.

While some participants said they received support from their First Nation’s Employment and Training office, many others said it would have been helpful. This could reflect a lack of awareness about what is available or that supports vary among First Nations, with some being more limited in what they can offer.

Participants mentioned a need for more culturally safe supports, although, they had some difficulty defining what these were. However, they referenced community and culture as well as mentors specifically, and highlighted barriers around working with non-Indigenous mentors in some cases who might not understand some of the challenges they face. Additionally, participants suggested designated seats in programs would be helpful.

Other suggestions of what would have been helpful, aligned with the barriers participants identified, including a need for more financial, training and skills development, job placement and transportation supports. Lastly, a few participants referenced that subsidized daycare would have been helpful because the high costs can make it difficult to take time away to learn, noting that tradespeople are often unpaid in work placements and/or underpaid during apprenticeships.



Strengths

Participants feel proud, resilient, hopeful for the future and grateful to be in a fun, versatile job

Although there are challenges, when asked if there was anything else they would like to share, participants overwhelmingly said they view trades as rewarding and empowering. Overall, participants shared that while entering the trades can be challenging and more supports are needed, the work is rewarding and they are ultimately glad they pursued it. When asked what their favourite thing about the trades is, they identified seeing the fruits of their labour, access to cutting edge technology, growth and camaraderie as the main strengths.

Many participants shared pride and a sense of satisfaction in looking at the progress they have made. Participants described the joy they get from seeing an empty piece of land evolve into something they helped to create. One participant said, “Driving around town and seeing all buildings and apartment buildings—I’ve helped build those!” A few participants said they like having access to cutting edge technology; one noted that he is currently using waterjets in his trade that will not be accessible to the general public for another five or six years. Another participant said, “The

innovation in my trade and technological advancement. I think I am a little bit excited about the future of where I am at in my trade.”

Several participants talked about the opportunity for growth in their trade. They shared that while it is challenging at the start of the journey, it gets easier, helps to build resilience and is worth it. One participant said, “For me as a first-year apprentice, and then becoming a journeymen looking after 200 guys now, [the] entire union; [I’m thinking]... I hope that at some point you take my role.” Some participants also referenced the versatility of the trades, and ability to move from one to another. In one instance, someone switched trades after an injury. Other participants referenced the camaraderie that comes with working in the trades. For example, one participant said, “It is fun, working with a bunch of people who like what they’re doing.” Another participant shared that she is, “hopeful and proud to see more women in trades, defying odds.” Lastly, one participant referenced taking pride in being a role model to others, especially younger siblings.

Curiously, while mentioned in other instances, money / reliable and good income, was only mentioned by one participant when asked about what their favourite thing about the trades were specifically.

Conclusion

Supporting the transition of First Nations students from high school to careers in the trades is a multifaceted process. It requires early exposure to strong role models. It calls for targeted support through culturally sensitive counselling and mentorship. Apprentices need financial assistance throughout their journey into the trades. The apprentice system needs to implement strategies that will overcome the persistent challenges, including discrimination and job instability. By addressing these barriers and providing robust pathways, we can help First Nations tradespeople embrace their professions with pride, resilience, and optimism.

Supports should be led by First Nations and adapted to each local context. Early, hands-on exposure to trades in high school can be fostered through partnerships with colleges, unions and trade schools, prioritizing First Nations role models and mentors. Anti-Indigenous racism and allyship training must be implemented at all stages of trades education and employment. Indigenous Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) should be supported to nurture community, offer mentorship, and promote culturally safe workplaces. Increased funding is needed to cover tuition, supplies, transportation, childcare and living expenses for those entering the trades. First Nations tradespeople's successes should be celebrated and promoted with stories, motivational presentations and awards to inspire others. Lastly, promotional materials for trades should authentically feature real First Nations tradespeople.