



Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre

An Indigenous-Led Model for Education Infrastructure Development

Centre for the North



Canada's North is rich in culture, resources, and natural beauty. Yet northern regions lag their Southern counterparts in critical social and economic areas, such as employment, income, education, health, and infrastructure. Closing these gaps would be undeniably valuable to the North and to Canada as a whole.

The Centre for the North is Canada's only cross-sectoral, collaborative research initiative dedicated to addressing the policy gaps, systemic barriers, and structural challenges that impact Northern socio-economic development and reconciliation.

The Centre maintains a grounded and action-oriented approach that embraces the North's diversity, provides tools for better decision-making, and highlights innovative and successful initiatives. Its members—public, Indigenous, private, not-for-profit, and academic organizations—jointly inform a program of research and convening that targets issues of pivotal importance to Canada's North.

Our Research Centre is funded by multiple members united in their mission for progress who support and inform the Centre's research agenda. We are appreciative of the support from our funding members. Their passion and understanding of the urgent need for progress helps propel us forward and allows us to conduct research that matters to Canada's North.

We welcome you to join us.

Funding members

Assembly of First Nations

Canadian Northern Economic
Development Agency

Crown-Indigenous Relations and
Northern Affairs Canada

Federal Economic Development

Agency for Northern Ontario

Government of Nunavut

Government of Yukon

Indigenous Services Canada

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Makivik Corporation

Métis National Council

National Indigenous Economic
Development Board (NIEDB)

Qikiqtaaluk Corporation

Royal Bank of Canada

Société du Plan Nord

Transport Canada

University College of the North

Yukon University

Contents

4

Highlights

5

Need for education infrastructure
in Northern regions

6

Constance Lake First Nation

6

Building the school

7

Governing locally

8

Creating a culturally
grounded school

9

Student pathways and
holistic supports

10

Creating local jobs

10

Connecting through technology

11

Serving the community

12

Maintaining and adapting
the facility

13

Pathways, priorities, and
lessons learned

14

Appendix A: Methodology

14

Appendix B: Bibliography

Highlights

- The creation of Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre (MHEC) in Constance Lake First Nation has eliminated long-distance travel for students, allowing children and youth to attend school in their own community.
- MHEC functions as a community hub, offering classes from junior kindergarten to Grade 12, along with childcare, cultural programs, recreation, and space for community gatherings.
- The school is run by the Constance Lake Education Authority (CLEA), which allows the community to make decisions about programs, staff, and funding based on local needs and culture.
- Culture is an important part of learning at the school. About half the teachers are Indigenous, and many come from Constance Lake or nearby communities.
- Since the school opened, more students are graduating and moving on to college, training, or trades programs. This is sustained by relationship based approaches, family engagement, and other supports that keep students connected to school.
- MHEC creates jobs in the community, including teaching, administration, childcare, food services, and maintenance. Most of these jobs are held by community members.
- Better internet access through Starlink has increased learning opportunities. It allows for online classes, virtual meetings, and stronger connections with external partners.
- MHEC's infrastructure has been upgraded over time to meet growing student and community needs. This includes adding portable classrooms, improving heating and energy use, and installing a backup generator so the school can stay open and act as a warming space during power outages.

Need for education infrastructure in Northern regions

Across Northern and remote regions of Canada, access to quality education infrastructure is broadly lacking.¹ Many First Nations communities continue to rely on facilities that are over capacity, in disrepair, or lacking modern amenities such as reliable internet access, science labs, and gymnasiums.²

A 2023 review by Indigenous Services Canada found that over 40 per cent of First Nations schools require major repairs or full replacement.³ The quality of education infrastructure is directly linked to the quality of education provided in the community. The Assembly of First Nations has identified higher construction and maintenance costs in remote and Northern communities as a key driver of persistent school infrastructure gaps and educational inequities.⁴

Signal49 Research estimates that closing the infrastructure gap for First Nations schools and facilities would generate billions in national economic output and support thousands of jobs, both directly and indirectly.⁵ Constance Lake First Nation in northeastern Ontario demonstrates the impacts of these broader regional challenges and highlights how some communities are finding creative ways to overcome them.

- 1 Northern Policy Institute, *Northern Ontario's Infrastructure Gap*.
- 2 Assembly of First Nations, *Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030*.
- 3 Indigenous Services Canada, *Evaluation of the Education Facilities Program*.
- 4 Assembly of First Nations, *Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030*.
- 5 Assembly of First Nations and The Conference Board of Canada, *Benefits for All Canadians*.



Constance Lake First Nation

Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre (MHEC) is located in Constance Lake First Nation, a remote Cree community in northeastern Ontario near the town of Hearst. The community sits along Constance Lake, roughly five kilometres north of Highway 11, in a region characterized by boreal forest, dispersed settlements, and considerable distance from major urban centres.

MHEC is an education complex comprising elementary and secondary schools and the Little Lambs Gathering daycare centre, collectively serving learners from junior kindergarten to Grade 12. Both school principals and the daycare director are Indigenous.

Each year, about 250 to 300 students attend MHEC. They learn a range of subjects, including Cree language and culture, literacy, and STEM.⁶ The centre is located in the heart of the Constance Lake community at the intersection of Musko Road and Nabakhobo Street.

Like many Northern and remote communities, Constance Lake faces long travel distances to secondary schools, training institutions, and services located off-reserve. The education centre is therefore not just a school building; its presence reduces geographic barriers to learning, keeps youth within the community during their formative years, and anchors social and institutional life.

6 Constance Lake Education Authority, "Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre."

Building the school

Construction planning for MHEC began in the mid-1990s. The goal was to address ongoing education access challenges in Constance Lake First Nation. The project aimed to provide a community-based school that would eliminate the need for students to travel approximately 40 kilometres to Hearst for classes.

Construction began in 1996 and was completed in 1998, and MHEC officially opened to students in the 1999–2000 school year. The project was jointly funded by Indigenous Services Canada (then Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) and the Government of Ontario, with the Constance Lake Education Authority (CLEA) responsible for local implementation and ongoing administration.⁷

The school was designed to accommodate classrooms for kindergarten through Grade 12, a gymnasium, and a community field. It also included space for early childhood education, later expanded into the Little Lambs daycare.

"It helped us a lot, having a school in our community," said Gaetan Baillargeon, Director of Education for Constance Lake First Nation. "When I was a kid, we had to travel to town. Now, kids can walk to school, have a hot breakfast and lunch, and parents don't have to worry if they miss the bus—they can just walk."⁸

7 Indigenous Services Canada, "First Nations Infrastructure Fund."

8 Gaetan Baillargeon, interview, Signal49 Research, September 9, 2024.

Governing locally

Local governance plays a central role in how education infrastructure is planned, built, and maintained in Constance Lake First Nation. MHEC is overseen by CLEA, a community-based group that manages funding, sets priorities, and makes decisions about how the school is run and improved over time.

CLEA includes a small team of approximately five staff, along with leaders from the elementary school, secondary school, and daycare. This governance model gives the community direct control over important decisions. Local leaders decide how money is used for operations, building upgrades, and future plans. As Baillargeon explained, “the funding is transferred to Constance Lake Education Authority, and we administer it for our community...it means we can make decisions that truly reflect who we are.”⁹

Because decisions are made locally, the community can respond quickly to changing needs. For example, as student numbers have increased, the school has added portable classrooms and upgraded key systems like heating.

More broadly, Indigenous-led governance models like this are linked to stronger accountability, greater community involvement, and better long-term results.¹⁰ In Constance Lake, local governance helps make sure the school continues to meet the needs of students and the wider community.

9 Ibid.

10 OECD, *Linking Indigenous Communities with Regional Development in Canada*.



Creating a culturally grounded school

A key part of MHEC's success is its deep integration of culture across its design, teaching, and staffing. Cultural considerations informed not only the curriculum but also the physical and spatial design of the centre, ensuring that the environment reflects community values and traditions. CLEA's vision is: "Constance Lake First Nation Education will ensure continuous learning of our culture, community history, traditions, and languages by embedding in all grades and classes."¹¹ This commitment is further reflected in staff composition: approximately 50 per cent of teachers are Indigenous, and many come from Constance Lake or nearby First Nations.¹²

This cultural foundation shapes everyday school life through strong relationships, family involvement, and community connection. Because many staff come from the community, they understand students' experiences and are able to provide meaningful support. As Secondary Principal Stephanie Sutherland explained, "We really can see their needs...they're able to open up with us."¹³ This creates an environment where students feel understood and supported. "When you recognize yourself—spiritually, emotionally, and physically—in your school, it changes everything," Baillargeon noted.¹⁴

This emphasis on recognition and relationship-building extends beyond the classroom and shapes how the school responds to student behaviour and approaches discipline. Rather than relying on punishment, they prioritize understanding and support. Baillargeon provided an example: "Instead of expelling [the student], we sat with his grandparents and supported him...He just needed to be heard."¹⁵ Such practices contribute to improved student engagement and retention.

Research across Canada shows that culturally relevant education improves outcomes for Indigenous students. The Assembly of First Nations reports that students are more likely to attend school and succeed when Indigenous culture and language are embedded in learning.¹⁶ At the same time, Statistics Canada data shows that only about 46 per cent of First Nations youth on-reserve graduate high school, compared to 73 per cent off-reserve and 91 per cent of non-Indigenous youth.¹⁷ This highlights the importance of culturally grounded, community-based education.

MHEC's success has increased pressure on the school building itself. As more students stay in school and new programs are added, space has become a major challenge. As Sutherland explained, enrolment is growing: "We've had to add portables...[but] it's still not enough."¹⁸ This increased demand has also required infrastructure upgrades, such as improvements to the heating system. Community-based programs, such as mentorship, cultural learning, and student supports, continue to expand the school's role beyond the classroom, increasing the need for flexible and well-maintained infrastructure.

11 Constance Lake Education Authority, "Education Vision Statement."

12 Baillargeon, interview, 2024.

13 Stephanie Sutherland, interview, Signal49 Research, January 9, 2026.

14 Baillargeon, interview, 2024.

15 Ibid.

16 Assembly of First Nations, *Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030*.

17 Statistics Canada, "First Nations Youth Experiences."

18 Sutherland, interview, 2026.

Student pathways and holistic supports

MHEC shows how Indigenous-led education infrastructure can unite learning, culture, and student support in one place. As a locally run, community-based centre, it was designed to meet the needs of Constance Lake First Nation and support the whole student.

Staff have seen more students stay connected to school, complete high school, and move on to post-secondary education and trades.¹⁹ The school has also welcomed students returning after being away from learning for long periods, creating pathways for them to finish high school.²⁰

“The biggest career path we’re seeing is teaching,” said Baillargeon. “Several of our graduates are now teachers or teaching assistants in the school. Others have gone into welding and millwrighting.”

The school offers a range of programs to support different learning needs. These include land-based education courses at the secondary level and the Minopimatisiwin (life skills) program, which helps students who are returning to school or need extra support in the classroom. These programs reflect the school’s focus on making learning relevant, flexible, and connected to culture.

As a community hub, MHEC brings together education, cultural programming, and student supports under one roof. This makes it easier for staff to work together, involve families, and respond to student needs in a coordinated way. At the same time, Sutherland noted that those needs are growing. More students require Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and mental health and wellbeing needs are also increasing, including challenges related to addiction.

¹⁹ Baillargeon, interview, 2024; Sutherland, interview, 2026.

²⁰ Sutherland, interview, 2026.

Because the school was designed to serve multiple roles, it has been able to adapt and expand its supports over time. MHEC has added more full-time staff to their team to increase and strengthen their services. The school now has a nurse, social workers, and other support staff working on site, along with teaching assistants in classrooms. It also works with outside specialists, such as art therapists and speech–language experts. These supports are built into the school environment and form part of how it operates each day.

Together, these supports show that education infrastructure in Indigenous communities is about more than classrooms. At MHEC, the building, programs, and staff all work together to support students in a way that reflects community needs, culture, and priorities.



Creating local jobs

Beyond the benefits offered by the school, MHEC's operation creates local employment opportunities in teaching, food services, administration, and maintenance.

"It's bringing a lot of money into the community, too," said Baillargeon. "We have finance, HR, daycare staff—most of them are from the community. Even the people making the food are from Constance Lake."²¹

Beyond direct employment, the school has also supported new partnerships and skills pathways. Recent efforts have included co-op programming with local organizations and exploration of training partnerships to support construction and trades development.²² These initiatives link education infrastructure to longer-term workforce development.

Previous Signal49 Research has found that each dollar invested in Indigenous community infrastructure generates approximately \$1.93 in national output, supporting employment in construction, education, and related industries.²³

Community-based infrastructure development also enhances long-term economic capacity by enabling skills development and supporting local service delivery.²⁴

²¹ Baillargeon, interview, 2024.

²² Sutherland, interview, 2026.

²³ Assembly of First Nations and The Conference Board of Canada, *Benefits for All Canadians*.

²⁴ Assembly of First Nations, *Sparking Prosperity: Economic Reconciliation Report*; Assembly of First Nations. *Annual Report 2024-2025*.

Connecting through technology

MHEC has benefited from improved digital connectivity through the installation of Starlink broadband internet, which has expanded the school's capacity for blended and remote learning.

"Before Starlink, we couldn't even hold a video meeting," Baillargeon said. "Now we get 300 to 500 megabytes per second—it's changed everything."²⁵

Improved connectivity has enabled virtual meetings, access to online learning platforms, and stronger links to external partners. Expanded broadband infrastructure in Indigenous communities has been found to improve educational equity, strengthen digital literacy, and increase access to post-secondary and skills-training opportunities.²⁶

Beyond connectivity improvements, digital upgrades form part of a broader pattern of ongoing adaptation. As noted by both Baillargeon and Sutherland, maintaining and expanding infrastructure, including heating upgrades and additional classroom space, has required continual investment as enrolment and program demands grow.

²⁵ Baillargeon, interview, 2024.

²⁶ Assembly of First Nations, *Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030*.

Serving the community

MHEC has become a central gathering place for the Constance Lake community. The gymnasium and outdoor field regularly host events, feasts, and cultural programming.²⁷ As Baillargeon explained, the gym is often called a “community gym” because it regularly brings people together—sometimes 300 to 400 people at a time. Without the school, it would be much harder for the community to host events of this size.²⁸

Families are also involved in school life. Parents and grandparents participate in extracurricular and cultural programming, including sewing classes and volunteer committees. These committees, which include school representatives and parents, are formed to tackle questions like how to better support student mental health, address issues such as addiction and suicide prevention, and plan programs that respond to the needs of youth in the community.²⁹ Baillargeon emphasized the importance of this approach: “I wanted to make sure we can get the parents behind everything we do... It’s not just office people making decisions—parents are involved, and their voices matter.”³⁰

The school also supports families through its daycare and after-school care programs. Because childcare is located in the same building, children can stay in a familiar, secure place at the end of the school day instead of traveling elsewhere. This makes things easier for families and helps create a smoother daily routine for young children.

27 Sutherland, interview, 2026.

28 Baillargeon, interview, 2024.

29 Sutherland, interview, 2026.

30 Baillargeon, interview, 2024.

31 Sutherland, interview, 2026.

32 Ibid.

Looking ahead, many community members would like to see more opportunities for adult education at the school. Many have expressed a desire for a dedicated space where adults who did not complete secondary school can return to learning in a supportive, classroom-based environment.³¹ As Sutherland noted, “Adult education is something people keep asking for—we don’t really have the space for it right now, but the need is definitely there.”³² While online options exist, she explained that many learners benefit from face-to-face instruction and the structure of a shared learning space.

In short, the educational centre has become a multi-generational hub for both education and community life.



Maintaining and adapting the facility

Although the MHEC facility is highly valued, operating a large public building in a Northern setting brings ongoing operational and capital pressures. Sutherland and Baillargeon identified limited space as the central challenge, particularly as enrolment grows and programming expands to include land-based learning and secondary initiatives. In response, the school has added portable units and additional classrooms and continues to reconfigure existing space to meet evolving needs.

Beyond space, maintaining the building's long-term performance has required sustained attention. Leaders described early construction deficiencies that resulted in legal action, a roof leak, and subsequent replacement needs for major systems such as heating and boilers. Energy-efficiency upgrades, including window improvements, have also been necessary. While Constance Lake is located approximately 35 kilometres from Hearst and is not fully isolated, maintaining and upgrading a large public facility in a Northern climate still involves higher costs, logistical coordination, and long-term planning.

Electricity reliability is also an ongoing challenge. Because the community is located at the end of a distribution line, power dips and outages happen more often and can quickly create safety risks and disrupt daily activities, especially during the winter. To reduce this risk, the school installed a natural gas generator that automatically restores most essential services during outages (including heat, lighting, and food service) and can run for roughly 36 hours before needing a cooldown. Leaders noted that fuel supply is comparatively secure due to proximity to a major gas pipeline and a direct line into the community, helping to ensure the school can function as a warming and support space during extreme cold and weather events, particularly when these events are accompanied by power outages.



Pathways, priorities, and lessons learned

MHEC's path to delivering more services for the community has not ended; more ideas are in the works. These include a growing secondary co-op program developed with local organizations and businesses, continued focus on early career exploration and apprenticeship-related programming, and partnerships that support cultural and land-based learning.

Additional initiatives under discussion include mentorship programming for secondary students, collaboration with Indigenous employment and training partners, and sustainability projects such as a school-based greenhouse. However, practical constraints limit how quickly the community is able to respond to new needs. Long-term planning for expanded offerings is closely tied to space limitations, staffing capacity, and predictable funding that reflects real operating costs.

The MHEC experience suggests several lessons for schools developing or managing education infrastructure:

- **Prioritize local decision-making.** Governance structures that give communities control over funding and programming allow schools to respond quickly to changing needs and reflect local culture and priorities.
- **Design schools as multi-purpose spaces.** In Northern and remote communities, school facilities often serve broader community functions, including childcare, recreation, cultural programming, and public gatherings.

- **Plan for operational resilience.** Reliable backup power, system maintenance, space flexibility, and sustained staffing are essential to maintaining continuity in challenging climates.
- **Integrate academic and wellness supports.** Student retention and graduation are closely linked to culturally grounded staffing, nutrition programs, mental health supports, and access to specialist services.
- **Anticipate growth and evolving needs.** Enrolment increases and expanding programming can quickly create space pressures, requiring flexible design and long-term capital planning.

The experience of Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre shows how community-led education infrastructure can do more than improve access to learning; it can strengthen culture, support wellbeing, and rebuild trust in education systems. By combining local governance, culturally grounded programming, and integrated supports, MHEC has become a foundation for both student success and community resilience.

As Baillargeon reflected, “We’re working in an institution that once tried to break our people. Now that we’re still here—and people are starting to believe in schools again—it is a great thing for First Nations and for Canada.”³³

³³ Baillargeon, interview, 2024.

Appendix A

Methodology

Signal49 Research's *Spotlight on Constance Lake First Nation's Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre (MHEC)* case study uses a qualitative, interview-based approach supported by document review and secondary research.

We conducted one semi-structured interview with Gaetan Baillargeon, Director of Education for Constance Lake First Nation. The interview took place on September 9, 2024, via Microsoft Teams videoconferencing. The session lasted approximately one hour and followed a guide focused on the MHEC project's planning, governance model, community benefits, and socio-economic impacts.

A simplified version of the interview guide was shared with Baillargeon in advance to support informed participation. With his consent, the interview was recorded and summarized for analysis. The participant reviewed interview summaries, including direct quotations, prior to analysis to confirm accuracy and context.

We also conducted two follow-up interviews to validate and expand on earlier findings: one with Gaetan Baillargeon on December 9, 2025, and one with Stephanie Sutherland, Secondary Principal, on January 9, 2026.

Data was coded thematically, with codes developed from the interview guide and refined during review to reflect emerging themes related to community-led governance, cultural inclusion in education, workforce development, and infrastructure outcomes. Transcripts generated 90 pages.

This case study also draws on publicly available materials and supporting documentation from the Constance Lake Education Authority, Indigenous Services Canada, and the Assembly of First Nations, along with secondary research from Signal49 Research's *Benefits for All Canadians* (Part 2) report, to corroborate and contextualize interview findings.

Appendix B

Bibliography

Assembly of First Nations. *Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030: National Cost Estimate*. Ottawa: AFN, 2023. <https://afn.bynder.com/m/367574a3a5cb5abe/original/1-AFN-Closing-the-Infrastructure-Gap-by-2030-National-Cost-Estimate-English-report-1.pdf>.

–. *Annual Report 2024–2025*. Ottawa: AFN, 2025.

–. *Sparkling Prosperity: Economic Reconciliation Report*. Ottawa: AFN, 2026.

Assembly of First Nations and The Conference Board of Canada. *Benefits for All Canadians (Part 2): Long-Term Socio-Economic Impacts of Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030*. Ottawa: AFN/CBoC, 2025.

Constance Lake Education Authority. "Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre." <https://www.mhec.education/home>.

–. "Education Vision Statement." <https://www.mhec.education/>.

Indigenous Services Canada. "First Nations Infrastructure Fund." Government of Canada, last updated July 11, 2022. <https://sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100010656/1533645154710>.

–. *Evaluation of the Education Facilities Program*. Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2024. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1721735986614/1721736015511>.

Northern Policy Institute. *Northern Ontario's Infrastructure Gap: Education, Health, and Broadband Access*. Sudbury: NPI, 2023.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Linking Indigenous Communities with Regional Development in Canada*. Paris: OECD, 2020.

Statistics Canada. "First Nations Youth Experiences and Outcomes in Secondary and Postsecondary Learning." Government of Canada, last updated June 21, 2023. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-599-x/81-599-x2023001-eng.htm>.

Acknowledgements

This Spotlight was prepared with financial support provided by the funders of the Centre for the North. For further information, visit the [Centre for the North](#).

Many Signal49 Research colleagues helped to bring this research to life, including Adam Fiser, Principal Research Associate, PhD, who conceived this initiative and provided overall project development and oversight throughout the research process. Alicia Hussain, Senior Research Associate, PhD, and Jacob LeBlanc, Senior Research Associate, MAE, contributed to this research project. We thank Stefan Fournier, Executive Director, MA, who provided feedback on drafts of this Spotlight.

This Spotlight was designed by Mallory Eliosoff, Senior Graphic Designer.

We would like to sincerely thank Gaetan Baillargeon, Director of Education, and Stephanie Sutherland, Secondary Principal, at Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre (MHEC) for generously sharing their time, knowledge, and experiences. Their insights and perspectives were invaluable to this work.

Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre: An Indigenous-Led Model for Education Infrastructure Development

Alicia Hussain and Jacob LeBlanc

To cite this research: Hussain, Alicia, and Jacob LeBlanc. *Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre: An Indigenous-Led Model for Education Infrastructure Development*. Ottawa: Signal49 Research, 2026.

Forecasts and research often involve numerous assumptions and data sources, and are subject to inherent risks and uncertainties. This information is not intended as specific investment, accounting, legal, or tax advice. The responsibility for the findings and conclusions of this research rests entirely with Signal49 Research.

An accessible version of this document for the visually impaired is available upon request.

Accessibility Officer, Signal49 Research

Tel.: 613-526-3280 or 1-866-711-2262 | Email: accessibility@signal49.ca

Published in Canada | All rights reserved | Agreement No. 40063028

AERIC Inc. is an independent Canadian registered charity operating as Signal49 Research.



Where knowledge
inspires action