



***First Nations Education Administrators Association***

# **“Gathering Place”**

**Activity Report**

**March 2021**

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction.....	5
Town Halls .....	5
National Town Hall .....	7
Surveys .....	13
Videos.....	15
Needs.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Lessons Learned .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Innovative Practices .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Conclusion .....	18

# Executive Summary

- The First Nations Education Administrators Association (FNEAA) launched the “Gathering Place” initiative in August of 2020 as many First Nations schools were planning the return to the classroom. The key objective of the Initiative was to provide First Nations Education Administrators with a “virtual” gathering place where they could share their stories, plans and concerns on how to better respond to the challenges faced by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The main activities of the initiative consisted of five regional town halls, a national town hall, two national surveys and a Knowledge Keepers Talking Circle.
- Through its various activities, the Gathering Place Initiative was able to hear from 428 participants from across the country.
- The regional town halls consisted of the following:
  1. Saskatchewan – held on Wednesday, September 2, 2020 from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. CST.
  2. Nova Scotia, Newfoundland & Labrador – held on Wednesday, September 2, 2020 from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. ADT.
  3. New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island – held on Thursday, September 3, 2020 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. ADT.
  4. Yukon and the Northwest Territories – held on Wednesday, November 4, 2020 from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. MST.
  - A total of 92 individuals participated in the regional town halls and features presentations and facilitated discussions.
- A National Town Hall was held on January 27, 2021 with 148 participants. It featured words of encouragement from the Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde, Deputy Minister Christiane Fox, and Candice St-Aubin, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Indigenous Services Canada. The town hall also featured presentations by Sheldon Couilloneur, Denis Gros Louis and Maureen Johns, Pasqua First Nation.

- The FNEAA also conducted two national surveys regarding the needs, priorities, challenges faced by First Nations schools in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first survey was conducted between September 1 to 30, 2021 and the second survey was conducted from November 1 to December 17, 2021. In total, 168 respondents participated in the survey.
- As a way of reaching more First Nations Education Administrators, FNEAA created 61 videos based on the regional town halls, National town hall and Knowledge Keepers Talking Circle. These videos can be accessed on the FNEAA website and YouTube channel.

# Introduction

COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on First Nations communities and schools. As many First Nations schools plan for the return to school and the classroom, the First Nations Education Administrators Association (FNEAA) launched the “Gathering Place” initiative. The key focus of the Gathering Place” initiative is providing an Information and Best Practices Network to assist First Nations Education Administrators to gather virtually, share stories and plan ways to effectively respond to COVID-19. The goal of the initiative was to provide First Nations Education Administrators with a platform and space to identify their needs and priorities, share their experiences and innovative practices when dealing with COVID-19. It also enabled administrators to access timely, best practices and possible ways to navigate the complexities and shifting environment triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

FNEAA received funding for Indigenous Services Canada A “Gathering Place” an Information and Best Practices Network for First Nations Education Administrators to plan and respond to COVID-19 in August. RFP’s were prepared for Senior Project Manager and Senior Project Information Technologist. Contracts were awarded to Manon Lamontagne as Senior Project Manager and Claire Brascoupe as the Senior Project Information Technologist.

Preliminary work consisted of preparing the working documents to promote the initiative, town halls and survey. The banner image seen above was also developed as a brand for the initiative. Announcements were sent to guest hosts who helped distribute the information for each regional town hall. Information of the initiative and survey were included in E-Blasts that were sent out on a regular basis to sent out at to FNEAA members and through NationTalk.

## Town Halls

As part of its “Gathering Place” initiative, the First Nations Education Administrators Association (FNEAA) held a series of regional virtual town halls with First Nations Education Administrators from across the country. Scripts and open-ended discussion questions were developed around the following topics and themes:

- Local Needs and Priorities

- Operational Challenges
- Mental Health and Wellness
- Role of Culture
- Online Learning Support
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Innovative Practices

The town halls featured presentations from First Nations administrators about the realities they face when dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic at the local level, discussions about their challenges, needs and concerns, innovative practices, success stories and lessons learned. Town halls were designed to gain insight about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted First Nations communities and schools at the local level.

Five town halls were held and included :

- 1) **Nova Scotia, Newfoundland & Labrador, which was held on Wednesday, September 2, 2020 from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. ADT.** Seventeen Education administrators participated in the town hall. Many of them met face-to-face at a meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia while others participated virtually using the Zoom platform. Darren Googoo, Director of Education for Membertou First Nation was the guest host and facilitator for this session. The opening prayer was made by Blair Gould and the closing prayer was made by Mary-Ellen Googoo.
- 2) **Saskatchewan was held on Thursday, Wednesday, September 2, 2020 from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. CST.** The guest host for this event was Simon Bird, Director of Education for the Lac La Ronge First Nation. Twenty-one Education administrators participated virtually in the town hall using the Zoom platform. The town hall also featured two presentations on best practices. The first was by Heather Merasty of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and the second was by Maureen Johns, of the Pasqua First Nation. Elder Roger Ratt gave the opening and closing prayers.
- 3) **New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, which was held on Thursday, September 3, 2020 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. ADT.** Seven administrators participated virtually in the town hall using

the Zoom platform. Simon Brascoupé was the facilitator. The town hall also featured a question-and-answer session with Craig Caldwell, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Services, Government of New Brunswick and Dr. Kimberly Barker, Medical Officer of Health, Government of New Brunswick.

- **Manitoba, which was held on Thursday, October 22, 2020 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. CDT.** The guest host for the town hall was Davin Dumas, Director of Education, Fisher River Cree Nation. Twenty-six First Nations Education Administrators and educators participated in the town hall using the Zoom platform. The Town hall featured a presentation by Bev Fontaine from Opaskwayak Education Authority on the planning and challenges faced in reopening schools and the classrooms to students and teachers.
- **Yukon and the Northwest Territories which was held on Wednesday, November 4, 2020 from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. MST.** The guest hosts for the town hall were Melanie Bennett from the Yukon and Jane Arychuk from the Northwest Territories. Twenty-one Education Administrators participated.

## What We Heard

### Local Needs and Challenges

When it comes to operations, many First Nations schools had opted to go with a blended approach in which students do in-class learning on alternate days or in the morning and afternoon. At other times they do online learning, distance learning or complete homework packages. Students are assigned to smaller classroom “bubbles” with some teachers such as language teachers rotating between classes. Due to the more limited time in the classroom, teaching is focussed on the “basics” such as literacy, numeracy and language. Online learning skills were used and developed as part of the classroom learning so that schools are prepared in case of another lockdown. As it was, regional outbreaks meant that some schools went into lockdown sooner than anticipated and so had to adjust their plans for the return to school.

## **Mental Health and Wellness**

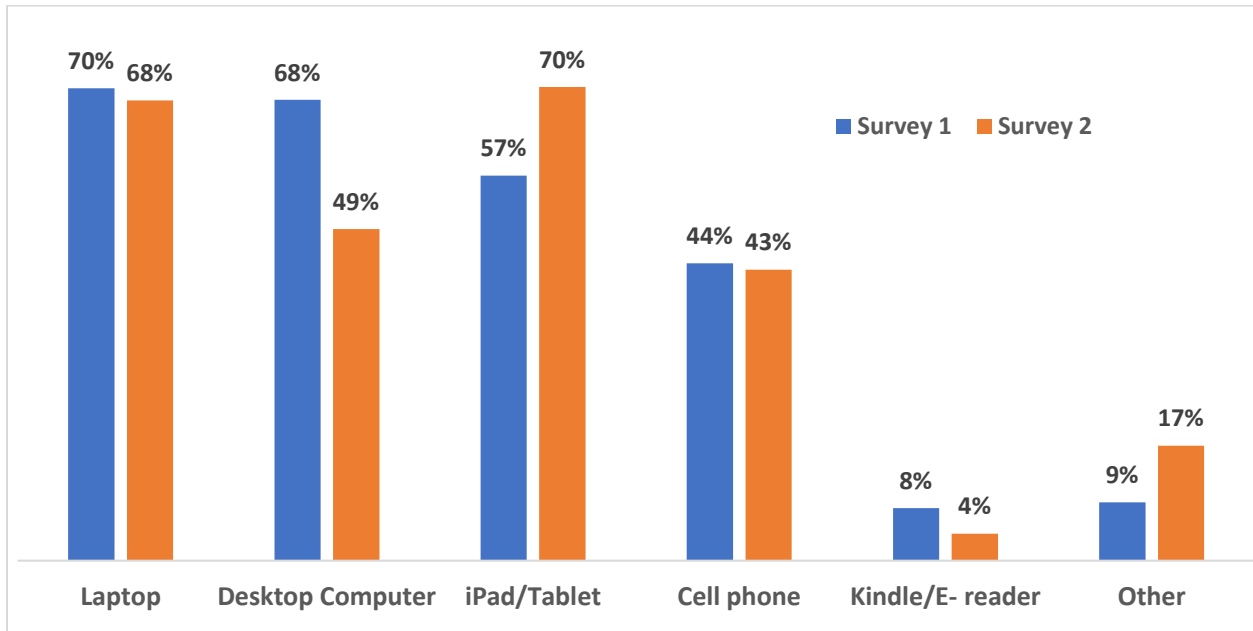
Mental health concerns and access to services was the number one issue mentioned by participants. With the onset of the pandemic, access to mental health support services was more limited due to many communities going into lockdown. The lockdown has been particularly hard on parents. Many parents overwhelmed with providing learning support to their children. Especially for parents of special needs students who find themselves without any services. A number of schools have hired additional Mental Wellness workers and counsellors who are made available to staff and students. Others have established regular team meetings weekly (volunteer basis) at wellness lodge to allow their staff to express their concerns. In addition, a number of activities have been included throughout the day and school year that focus on improving the mental wellness of students.

## **Online Learning**

During the regional town halls we heard about the concerns for families that have no internet access. According to the surveys, 80% of the respondents indicated that their community had internet connection but high-speed internet service often does not reach family residences and access remains an issue for many families. We heard about how many communities were finding innovative solutions to address the problem from the establishment of Wi-Fi hubs around the community (parking lots) to allow families without Wi-Fi to upload and download school lessons, to the purchase of MiFi devices that allow computer devices to use cellphone data plans for connectivity and the creation of technical support sites for parents and students to use after school hours. We also heard about how training was being provided to students and staff in the schools in preparation of another shut down. Over the school year, many schools purchased devices for their students. The following table indicates the types of devices that have been made available to students. The increase in iPads in Survey 2 is due to school purchases for elementary grade students. There is still an insufficient number of devices available for First Nations students and many face a difficult challenge getting access to online learning.



## Types of Devices Available for Students



## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth and Children

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major disruptive force for children and youth since many have not been able to participate in consistent educational programming and services. As one participant noted, remote and distance learning does not replace the classroom and learning with their peers. There are fears that students who were struggling and had learning gaps before the pandemic are even more severely disadvantaged now and will continue to be going forward. Other concerns include the impact that the online environment is having on children and youth include issues surrounding cyber safety for students and a noticeable increase in gaming addiction that disrupt sleeping routines.

## Culture

Many cultural activities and gatherings have had to be scaled back because of health protocols. While some elders have learned how to zoom themselves and provide culture and language training to students, for the most part, participants have noted that the pandemic has forced them to innovate. Many have increased the land-based learning activities through the building of outdoor trails and structures. Participants have found that this has been beneficial by helping

to promote physical activity and mental wellness of students. It has also helped with building a resilience for students.

## **Communications**

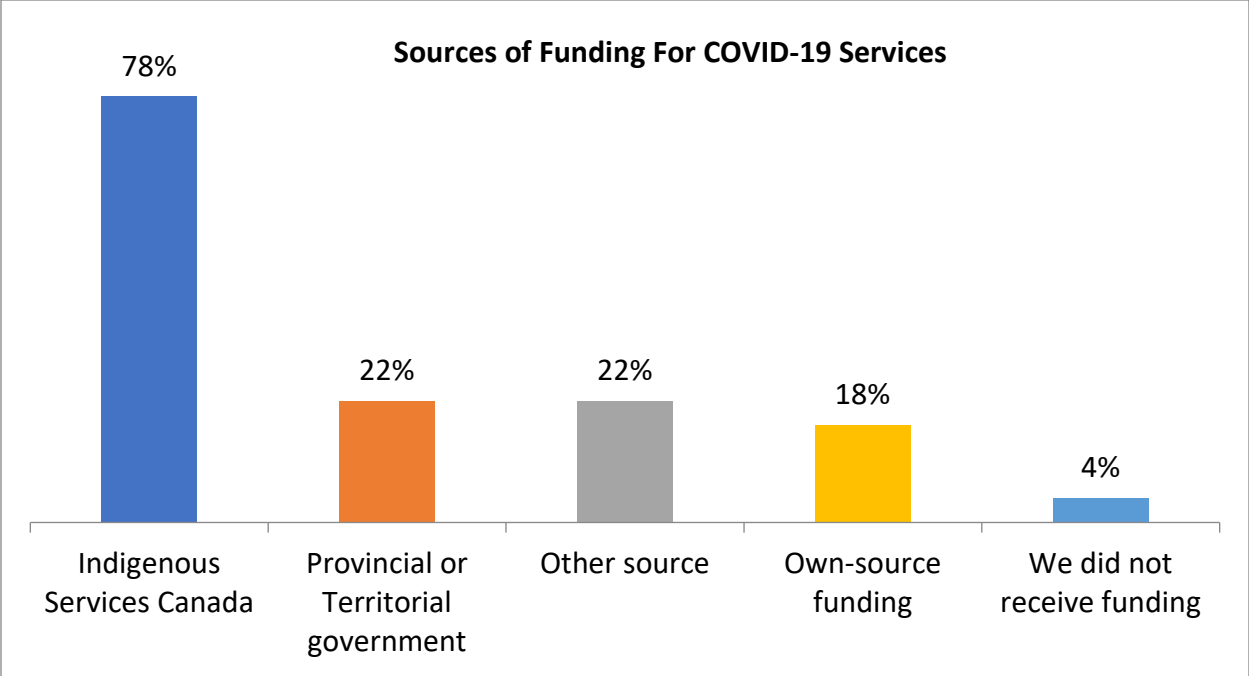
As previously mentioned, many schools have focussed not only on the well-being of students and staff, but they have also paid particular attention to the needs of parents and guardians. Several schools have increased their communication with parents in order to reassure them and keep them informed about what is happening. Regular communication is being done via emails and individual in person meetings. In some instances, schools have dedicated staff who are responsible to make regular contact with parents. The goal of these initiatives is to allay their fears and to encourage them to send their children to school.

## **Collaboration**

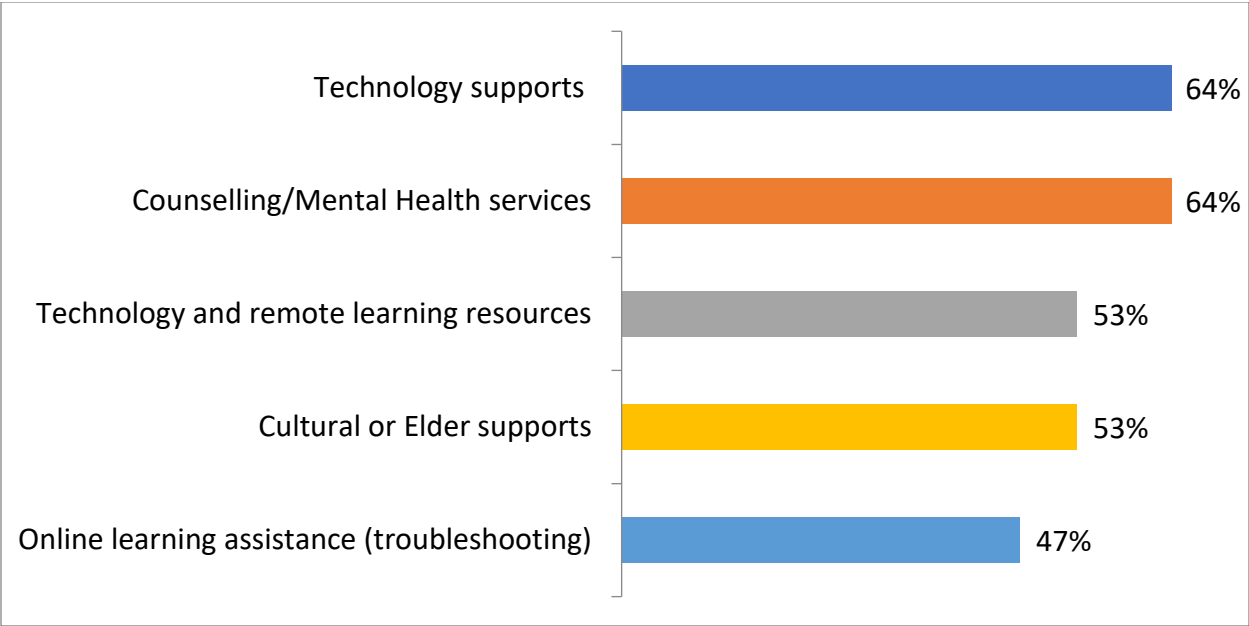
Many participants have credited their ability to address the issues to the collaboration and cooperation between teachers, students, parents and First Nations leadership. Everyone has shown great resiliency and adaptability. Several schools have encouraged students to actively participate in the building of outdoor structures and other land-based activities. They find that this participation helps to increase their own sense of cultural identity. Participants also mentioned the benefit of regular online meetings with other administrators. They have been able to share plans, tools, ideas, and other sources of information.

## **Funding for COVID-19**

Throughout the pandemic, many First Nations were able to access additional funds that were used primarily for the purchase of devices for students, additional health and cleaning supplies and the hiring of additional staff and teachers. The table below provides a breakdown of the sources of funding. It should be noted however, that participants felt that the funding received has still not allowed them to adequately meet the demand for technical support. Above all, there is an urgent need to increase funding to provide more counselling and mental health support.



**Additional Funding Needed**



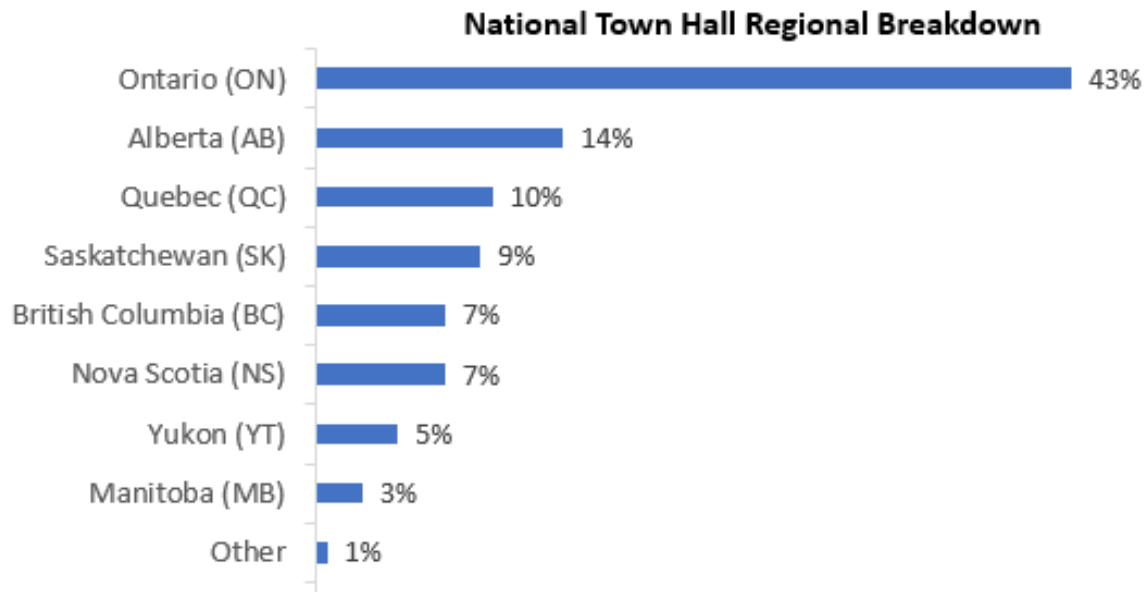
## **Innovative Practices**

Throughout the Gathering Place initiative, we have heard about a number of innovative practices. This includes the use of plexiglass shields in the classroom, new layout design for classroom bubbles, the building and use of outdoor structures and land-based learning to complement in-class learning. There are several lessons learned from the pandemic. One has been about the resiliency and adaptability of teachers, students and communities. It has forced everyone to think outside the box, to embrace new ways of teaching with new technology and has led to rediscovery of the importance of culture, language and land-based learning.

## **National Town Hall**

FNEAA hosted a National Town Hall on January 27, 2021. It an opening prayer by Mike Mitchell, Knowledge Keeper of Akwesasne in Ontario and an honour song sung by Claire Brascoupe from FNEAA. featured words of encouragement from the Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde, Deputy Minister Christiane Fox, and Candice St-Aubin, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Indigenous Services Canada. The town hall also featured presentations by Sheldon Couilloneur of the Stoney Education Authority in Alberta who talked about how they reorganized their school operations in the face of the pandemic; Denis Gros Louis of the First Nations Education Council (FNEC) in Quebec who described how the FNEC was able to ensure high speed and broadband connectivity to all the First Nations communities it serves in the province; . and Maureen Johns of the Pasqua First Nation in Saskatchewan who spoke about how culture and traditions served as the guiding philosophy and principles for their approach to dealing with the impact of COVID-19 on their school and the role culture plays in fostering resilience.

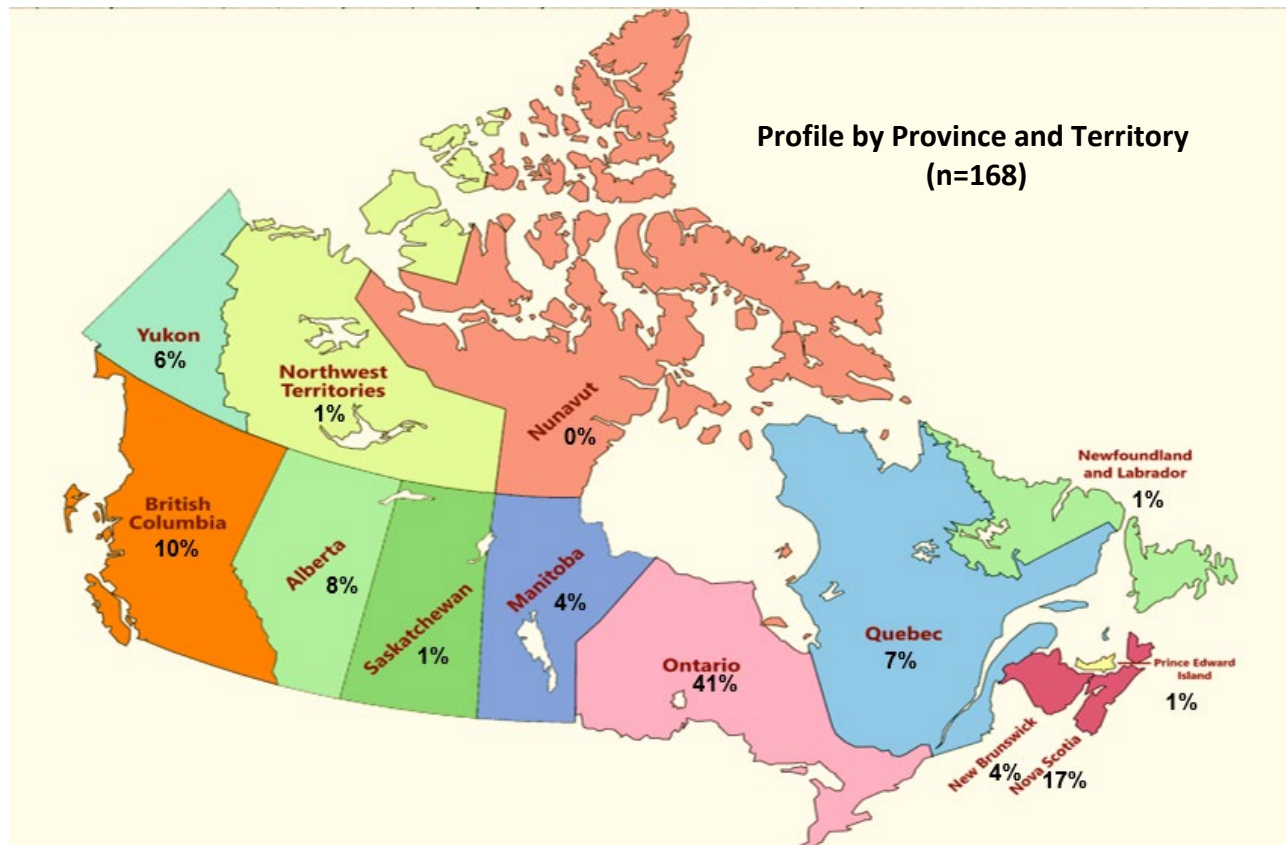
The town hall also featured a presentation of the key findings of the two national surveys presented by Dr. Paulette Tremblay, President and CEO of FNEAA and a summary of what was heard through the regional town halls by Manon Lamontagne, Senior Project Manager for the Gathering Place initiative. Initially, 262 people registered to participate in the town hall and 148 individuals participated in the event. The following chart:



## Surveys

In addition to the regional virtual town halls, FNEAA also developed two surveys to further gain insight into how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted First Nations schools as well as to hear from local administrators about the specific challenges, concerns and innovative practices that is happening at the local level. The surveys was distributed via the FNEAA website and other networking channels such as e-mail distribution. The surveys were designed to provide respondents with as much flexibility as possible. They consisted of 14 multiple-choice questions and six open-ended questions. Respondents were given the option of choosing more than one answer and they could provide further detail with each question. Open-ended questions were analyzed to identify those themes that emerged from the survey

In total 168 individuals responded to both surveys. The first survey was conducted between September 1 to 30, 2020. The second survey was designed to help to further gain insight once students had returned to school and classroom and identify how the specific challenges, concerns and innovative practices have evolved and was conducted between November 1, 2021 and December 17, 2020.



## Knowledge Keepers Talking Circle

On March 10, 2021, FNEAA held its first Knowledge Keepers Talking Circle. Knowledge Keepers from around the country were gathered in virtual Talking Circle to tell their stories that reflect the power of culture, storytelling, and land-based education. As Mike Mitchell from the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation indicated, “... our culture and language heal us. In this time of the COVID-19 pandemic it is our culture and language the give us comfort and strength that puts us on the path to health and wellness.”

The goal was to gather in a sacred circle to share stories and songs for pandemic times, to listen to Knowledge Keepers tell stories of triumph over adversity, cultural values to guide us and heroes and great achievements in the past and recent times. The Talking Circle included the following Knowledge Keepers named by representatives of their respective nation or region.

1. Mike Mitchell, Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, ON
2. Gwen Point, Skowkale First Nation, BC

3. Roberta Oshkabewisens, Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve, ON
4. Cecile Asham, Pasqua First Nation, SK
5. Lorne C. Keeper, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, MB
6. Rebecca Ross, MB
7. Sykes Powderface, Stoney Nakoda First Nation, AB
8. Tina Fox, Stoney Nakoda First Nation, AB
9. Dr. Mary-Ellen Googoo, Membertou First Nation, NS
10. Priscilla Campeau, Athabasca University, AB
11. Doris Camsell, Hay River, NT
12. Dr. Imelda Perley, Tobique First Nation, NB

The Knowledge Keepers were joined by staff and some Board Members of FNEAA.

## Videos

Under the Gathering Place Initiative, 61 videos were created from the regional town Halls, National town hall and Knowledge Keepers Talking Circle. The videos are available on the FNEAA website and YouTube channel. The following table is a comprehensive list of videos that were created.

	Presenter	Organization	Province	Topic	Time
1	Heather Merasty	Meadow Lake Tribal Council	Saskatchewan	Presentation - COVID-19 Planning	14:27
2	Maureen Johns	Pasqua First Nation	Saskatchewan	Presentation - COVID-19 Planning	14:35
3	Sheila Fransis	Pictou Landing First Nation	Nova Scotia	Main needs and priorities	1:37
4	Elizabeth Cremo	Eskasoni Mi'kmaw Nation	Nova Scotia	School Operations - Challenges	2:22
5	Darren Googoo	Membertou Mi'kmaw Nation	Nova Scotia	Mental Health Needs	1:44
6	Kelly Oliver	Spekne'katik First Nation	Nova Scotia	Mental Health Challenges	1:44
7	Darren Googoo	Membertou Mi'kmaw Nation	Nova Scotia	Transition to online learning	4:53
8	Kelly Oliver	Spekne'katik Mi'kmaw Nation	Nova Scotia	Mental Health Challenges	4:53
9	Joanne Alex	We'koqma'q Mi'kmaw Nation	Nova Scotia	Transition to online learning	4:53
10	Elizabeth Creno	Eskasoni Mi'kmaw Nation	Nova Scotia	School Operations - Challenges	4:53
11	Simon Brascoupe	First Nations Education Administrators Association	Ontario	Main needs and priorities	1:56
12	Maureen Johns	Pasqua First Nation	Saskatchewan	School Operations - Challenges	1:56
13	Simon Brascoupe	First Nations Education Administrators Association	Ontario	Health and safety	1:58
14	Maureen Johns	Pasqua First Nation	Saskatchewan	Mental Health Challenges	1:58

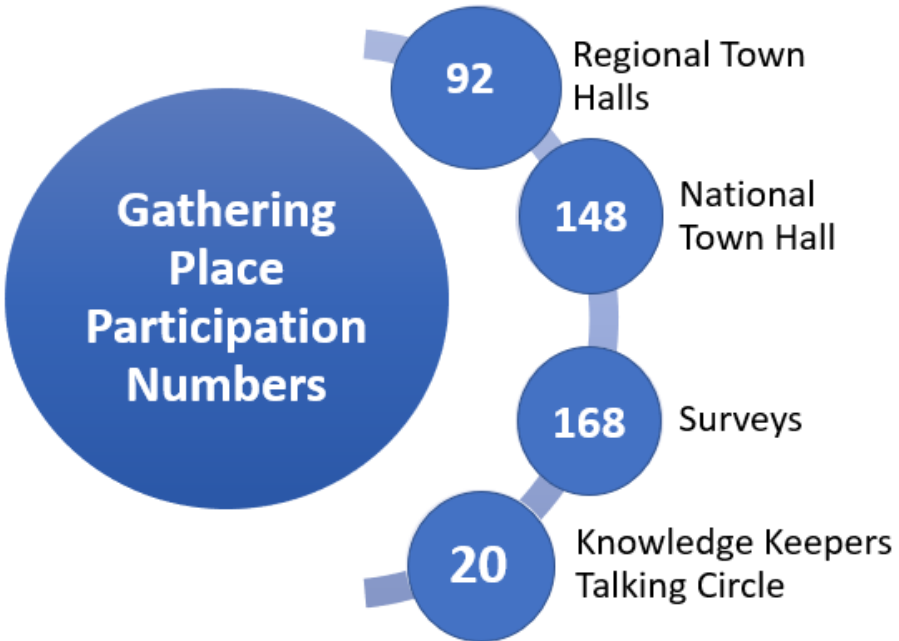
15	Patrick Bugler		Saskatchewan	School Operations - Challenges	1:58
16	Simon Bird	Lac La Ronge Indian Band	Saskatchewan	School Operations - Challenges	1:58
17	Maureen Johns	Pasqua First Nation	Saskatchewan	Knowledge Keeper Teachings	3:03
18	Savannah Simmons	Pabineau First Nation	New Brunswick	Communication Challenges	1:56
19	Annette Paul	St. Mary's First Nations	New Brunswick	School operations	2:22
20	Ivan Augustine	Elsipogtog	New Brunswick	School operations - Connectivity	3:01
21	Heather Mason	God's Lake Narrows First Nation School	Manitoba	Challenges and best practices	2:40
22	Bev Fontaine	Opaskwayak Education Authority	Manitoba	Presentation - COVID-19 Planning	2:40
23	Davin Dumas	Fisher River Cree Nation	Manitoba	Impact of COVID-19 on School Operations	2:40
24	Bev Fontaine	Opaskwayak Education Authority	Manitoba	the story of Opaskwayak education authority	7:45
25	Warren Woodhouse	Fisher River Cree Nation	Manitoba	Adapting to online learning	3:57
26	Morgen Serger	George Saunders school	Manitoba	Innovative Practices - Online Learning	2:00
27	Bev Fontaine	Opaskwayak Education Authority	Manitoba	Communications	1:40
28	Taralee Beardy	Chief Sam Cook Mahmuwee Education Centre	Manitoba	Adapting to change	3:00
29	Claire Brascoupe	First Nations Education Administrators Association	Ontario	Honour Song	3:03
30	Darren Googoo	Membertou Mi'kmaw Nation	Nova Scotia	National Town Hall Opening	6:26
31	Mike Mitchel	Akwesasne	Ontario	Opening Prayer	7:07
32	Maureen Johns	Pasqua First Nation	Saskatchewan	Culture/Story telling	11:35
33	Sheldon Couillonneur	Stoney Education Authority	Alberta	School Operations - Challenges	15:51
34	Jeff Cressman	Yukon Education	Yukon	Mental Health Challenges	3:51
35	Leona Bryden	Yukon Education	Yukon	Mental Health Challenges	3:51
36	Jeff Cressman	Yukon Education	Yukon	Mental Health Challenges	5:00
37	Morgan Douglas Alexander	Yukon Education	Yukon	Mental Health Challenges	5:00
38	Christiane Fox, Deputy Minister	Indigenous Services Canada	Ontario	Message Indigenous Services Canada	7:00
39	Candice St-Aubin A/ADM	Indigenous Services Canada	Ontario	Message Education and Social Development Programs	7:00
40	Denis Gros-Louis	First Nations Education Council	Quebec	Connectivity	7:00
41	Dr. Paulette Tremblay	First Nations Education Administrators Association	Ontario	Report on Two FNEAA National Surveys	7:00
42	Manon Lamontagne	First Nations Education Administrators Association	Ontario	Report on Five Town Halls	7:00
43	Bev Fontaine	Opaskwayak Education Authority	Manitoba	Communications	1:40
44	Jeff Cressman	Tantalus School	Yukon	Mental Health	4:00
45	Charyl Charlie	Vuntut Gwitchin Government	Yukon	Mental Health	4:00
46	Leona Bryden	Carcross/Tagish First Nation	Yukon	Mental Health	4:00



47	Jeff Cressman	Tantalus School	Yukon	Mental Health	5:00
48	Morgan Douglas-Alexander	Tantalus School	Yukon	Mental Health	5:00
49	Mike Mitchell	Akwesasne	Ontario	Knowledge Keeper Series	1:40
50	Dr. Gwen Point	Skowkale First Nation	British Columbia	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
51	Roberta Oshkabewisens	Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve	Ontario	Knowledge Keeper Series	10:00
52	Cecile Asham	Pasqua First Nation	Saskatchewan	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
53	Lorne C. Keeper	Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation	Manitoba	Knowledge Keeper Series	10:00
54	Rebecca Ross	Cross Lake (Pimicikamak) First Nation	Manitoba	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
55	Sykes Powderface	Stoney Nakoda First Nation	Alberta	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
56	Tina Fox	Stoney Nakoda First Nation	Alberta	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
57	Dr. Mary-Ellen Googoo	Membertou First Nation	Nova Scotia	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
58	Priscilla Campeau	Athabasca University	Alberta	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
59	Doris Camsell	Hay River	Northwest Territory	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
60	Dr. Imelda Perley	Tobique First Nation	New Brunswick	Knowledge Keeper Series	15:00
61	Claire Brascoupe	Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg	Quebec	Honour Song	3:00

## Gathering Place by the Numbers

The FNEAA Gathering Place Initiative was able to hear from **428** participants from across the country through its various activities and events. The following graphic provides a breakdown of participants for each activity:



## **Conclusion**

The Covid-19 pandemic has created many new challenges and brought with it many new changes for First Nations school. Through the Gathering Place initiative, FNEAA has been able to provide a space for administrators to come together and share their stories, successes, and challenges. The many reports and videos created throughout the initiative help to acknowledge the hard work, problem-solving and collaborative approaches adopted by many First Nations schools. The efforts of so many is proof of their dedication to the well-being of the children and the community.