



**2023**

# **GADZOOSDAA RENEWAL**

Results & Recommendations







# BACKGROUND

The Gadzoosdaa Student Residence was officially opened by the Honourable Piers McDonald, Minister of Education, October 4th, 1990.

The Gadzoosdaa Student Residence is named in recognition of the many contributions made by Mrs. Virginia Smarch.

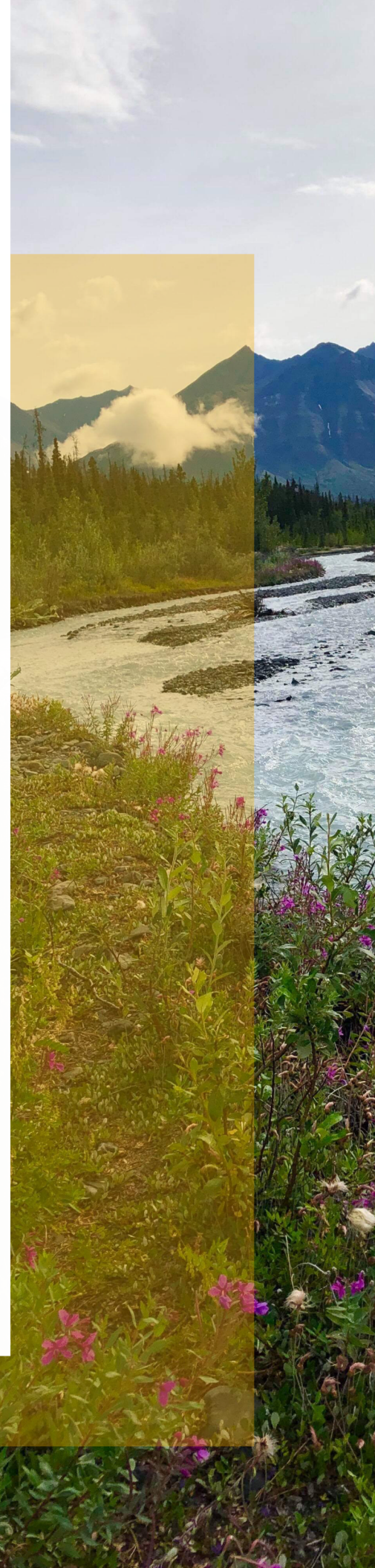
Elder Virginia Smarch, who in Tlingit was affectionately known as Gadzoosdaa, was a distinguished Elder of the Teslin Tlingit Council (Eagle Clan) and was the first teacher of the Tlingit language in the Teslin School. Over the years, she gave generously of herself to act as interpreter at meetings and to speak at gatherings of young people. Above all, Virginia Smarch was a superb teller of legends, complementing her stories with appropriate lessons and insights for present day conditions and the younger generation.



# INTRODUCTION

IRP was honoured to do the important work of engaging with the 14 Yukon First Nations, Taku River First Nation, and other education partners on the renewal of the Gadzoosdaa Student Residence (GSR). The catalyst to engage on this topic now and in this way was grounded in the understanding that there have been lots of changes over the years with Education, Yukon First Nations communities and for students and their needs and finally the holdovers and realities that GSR was faced with through and in the aftermath of Covid. The work to listen deeply was undertaken with the direction from Yukon Department of Education to gather feedback that will help ensure the GSR programs and services align with the Department of Education priority that “Yukon students are fully supported to meet their unique needs, particularly First Nations and rural students”. The Department set out the expectation that they wanted to ensure an inclusive process where education partners feel valued, that their input has been heard, and the recommendations provided will support the Department, the GSR staff and the GSR advisory committee in furthering revitalization and Indigenization of the student residence.

We have done this work in a way that we hope represents the important conversations and valuable feedback that we received from those we spoke with. With much respect for the families, students, and communities who have and continue to send their students to GSR and the staff who have supported them over the years, we are optimistic that these recommendations support an effective renewal of the GSR.







# PROCESS OF ENGAGEMENT

IRP created a plan of engagement for the GSR renewal engagement which was approved by the Department of Education. Phase one of this plan included outreach directly to Ross River Dena Council, Teslin Tlingit Council, Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Vuntut Gwich'in Government and Taku River Tlingit First Nation. In phase two, the outreach expanded to include the rest of the Yukon First Nations and other education partners as identified and approved by the Department of Education.

At the conclusion of the project IRP had met with the following:  
Initiating First Nations - these five nations, who did not have High School opportunities in their communities, played an important role in pushing forward the development of GSR.

**TTC:** Virtual/phone/surveys/FNEC

**RRDC:** In-person/survey

**TRTFN:** Virtual/survey/email

**VGG:** Phone/in-person/survey/FNEC

**CTFN:** Phone/email/survey/FNEC

Other Yukon First Nations and Education Partners and Stakeholders

**FNEC**

**Gadzoosdaa Staff Past and Present:** In-person/survey

**Current Students:** Survey

**First Nation School Board/YFNED:** Virtual/phone

**FH Collins Staff:** In-person

**Gadzoosdaa Advisory:** Virtual

The following pages are the result of what we heard from these groups and the recommendations that were derived based on their input.



# WHAT WE HEARD

The responses to the outreach were very consistent across all contributors to the engagement. There were very few outlying perspectives and at the heart of each response captured was the overall well-being and success of the students who reside at the Gadzoosdaa Student Residence.

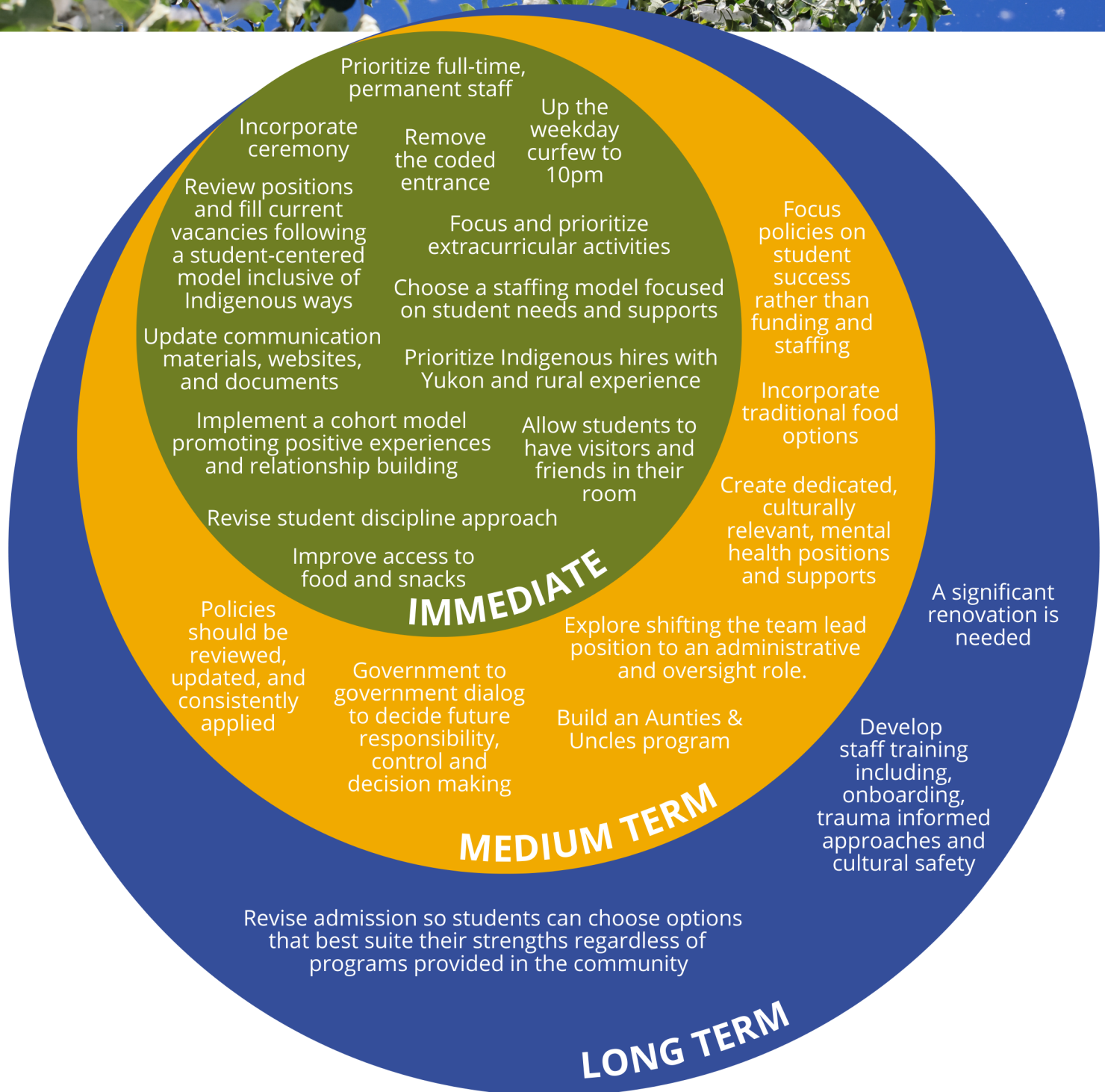
The IRP team was able to categorize the input provided into 10 overarching themes that stood out among all of the responses.

1. A student residence is needed.
2. There needs to be more educational opportunities available for Yukon students in the communities that provide options for Yukon students.
3. Extracurricular activities and the support to take part in these activities, both formal, and residence led are a must for the student residence.
4. GSR staff is working to keep students safe, keep education at the forefront and to create a feeling of belonging.
5. Gadzoosdaa student residence needs to look and feel like a home.
6. Staffing is what makes a residence - effort needs to be put into having appropriate numbers of full time, consistent staff, with a variety of backgrounds and understandings to support the diverse needs of students living in residence.
7. Where does a student residence fit? Who should oversee and manage it?
8. There is an inconsistency in policies and the understanding of the GSR. For example, admissions, acceptance & prioritization, weekend closures, etc.
9. There must be clear and consistent communication with families. For example, which schools GSR students can attend, students' day-to-day wellbeing, GSR rules, etc.
10. There is a perception of elitist preference happening with which students get to stay at GSR vs. which students need to stay at GSR.

While these themes are a broad exemplification of what was heard across communities, governments and sectors involved with and engaged with GSR, both the themes and recommendations are directly tied to the vital input that was shared with the team as insight into what has happened in the past and where the broad-based GSR communities seek to see the Residence move towards in the future.



# RECOMMENDATIONS



The following recommendations have been outlined in a manner that is meant to create ease for actioning. The delineation of short, medium and long term does not necessarily speak to when a recommendation will be started but is meant to allow for recommendations that may take longer to complete to have the appropriate time expectations set for them. As the leads of each of these recommendations begin to work with the appropriate supports to bring them to fruition more solidified timelines will emerge.





## IMMEDIATE CHANGES

1. Work with the advisory committee to decide on a different staffing model that better reflects the needs of the students and focuses around supports needed.
  - For example, examine going to a staffing model that doubles the evening/night staff and adds three Full-Time positions and two Auntie/Uncle positions.
2. Staffing needs to be prioritised for Full-Time permanent staff and not casual employees. We have found that the casual staffing of key positions is detrimental to the success of GSR on many levels.
3. Staffing should preference Indigenous hires and include Yukon and rural community experience. **(ongoing)**
4. The Department of Education should work with the GSR advisory committee to prioritise the hires for current vacancies, some positions need to be reviewed to support a more student-centred model and be inclusive of Indigenous ways.
  - For example, moving to a different role for support positions.
5. Revisit the student discipline approach and work to incorporate YFN ways into this important policy.
  - For example, revisit the policy to move away from docking of curfew hours for missed classes and the 3 strikes approach to discipline.
6. Look to find more ways to incorporate ceremony.
  - For example, ceremony could be used to start of the year in a good way or at major milestones and to close the year. **(ongoing)**
7. Remove the coded entrance (as it was before COVID).
  - The intent here is for GSR to be more accessible and support a homey atmosphere.
8. Allow students to have visitors and friends in their room.
9. Up the weekday curfew to 10 pm.
10. Work with students to improve the student's access to food and snacks.
  - For example, students need a variety of snacks and to be able to access snacks and meals outside of determined mealtimes, in creating a homey feel for the residence, access to food should have the same type of homey feel.
11. GSR needs to focus and prioritize the number and type of extracurricular activities that students have access to and support to participate in.



12. Implement strategies to strengthen a cohort model that promotes positive relationships and experiences amongst the students.
  - For example, planning, fundraising and implementing GSR outings and trips for all students together on a regular basis.
13. Update communication materials, websites, and documents to ensure information is accessible, accurate, current, and culturally relevant.
  - For example, the website needs to be updated. **(ongoing)**

## **MEDIUM TERM CHANGES**

14. Consider building an Aunties and Uncle's program with permanent positions that are centred around cultural supports and activities.  
These positions can be built to reflect the supportive roles Aunties and Uncles play in Yukon First Nations families and support the decolonization and indigenization of the GSR.
15. Create dedicated mental health positions and supports that are culturally appropriate.
16. Policies and guidelines should be reviewed, updated and consistently applied.
  - For example, there appears to be confusion about GSR policy on students attending for a full year versus only a semester. **(ongoing)**
17. Shift away from policies based on funding and staffing, towards Student focused and strengths based priorities.
  - For example, the policy around students returning home on the weekends could be shifted to stop the expectation that some students must go home on the weekends and instead allow choice based on what is best for students in their circumstance. **(ongoing)**
18. Consider shifting the team lead position to a different more administrative and oversight role.
19. Incorporate more First Nation traditional food options into student mealtimes.
  - For example, there should be Traditional YFN foods on the menu at least twice a week and for important events. Moose, caribou and other traditional foods are an important part of YFN culture and life and that should be reflected in the GSR programming and services. **(ongoing)**
20. It is timely to host a dialogue in a government-to-government approach with the 14 Yukon First Nations that seeks to explore where the responsibility, control and decision making for GSR belongs moving forward. **(ongoing)**

## **LONG TERM CHANGES**

21. There needs to be a focus on building up quality high school programming and education in communities but this in no way should limit students' ability to attend school in Whitehorse. The goal would be to give students the options that best suit their strengths. **(ongoing)**
22. GSR needs a significant renovation, it needs to look and feel like a home.
  - This should be done in collaboration with a subcommittee of the advisory group, with an extended invitation to the First Nations and a seat for at least 1-2 students.
23. Staff need to be supported with relevant onboarding, team building opportunities, and continued training focused on trauma informed approaches and First Nations cultural safety and knowledge. **(ongoing)**

**Presented to:**  
Cassandra Kelly, ADM,  
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June 2023

**Prepared by:**



**IRP**

inspire.  
reconciliation.  
potential.