

LAYING THE FOUNDATION:

Treaty Education for Young Students

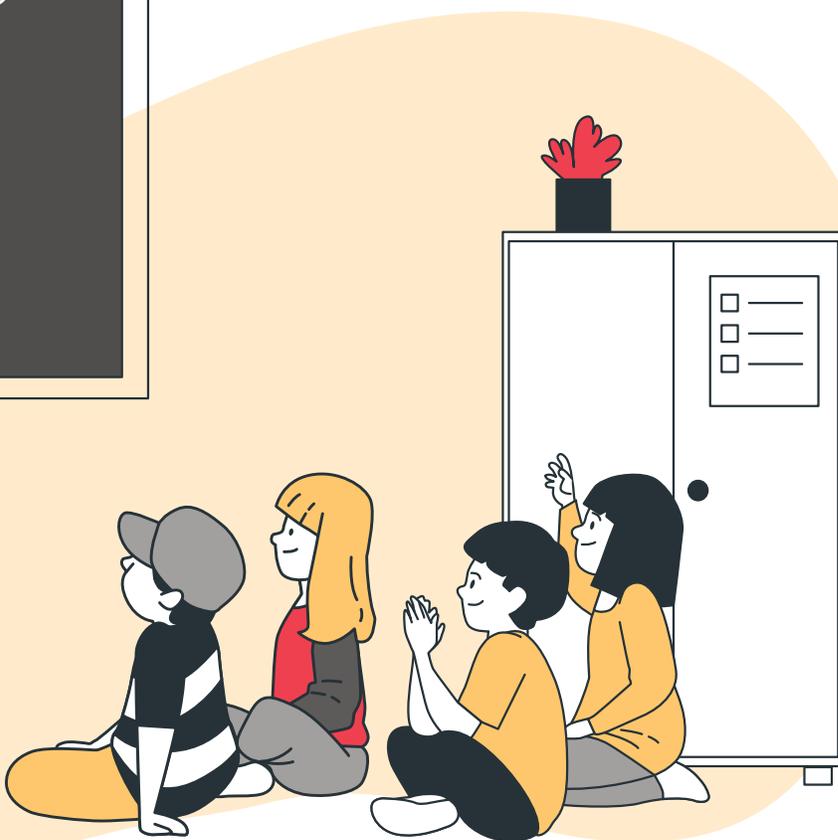
By Carolyn Gruske



Officially, the Williams Treaties have 100 years of history tied to them. Unofficially, they are the products of hundreds of years of history leading up to their creation. Explaining what the Treaties are and the effects they had is challenging enough when standing up in front of a high school class, but teaching junior elementary school students about the Williams Treaties—or any of the treaties between the Crown and Indigenous peoples in Canada—is a seemingly impossible task for even the most experienced teachers. Fortunately, people with expertise and experience in treaty education say the first step is simple: Don't be afraid.

GETTING PAST THE FEAR

“Some teachers are hesitant because they don't have the background, they don't have any knowledge of the subject matter, or even a relationship [with the Indigenous peoples affected]. They don't want to do it because they're afraid to do it wrong. That's really hard for educators,” explains JoAnne Formanek Gustafson. An occasional teacher, Formanek Gustafson is Anishinaabe, from Treaty 3 Territory in northwestern Ontario near Fort Frances.



In addition to spending time in the classroom and studying to be an art therapist, Formanek Gustafson runs workshops and training seminars to educate teachers about Indigenous issues. She is also one of the co-authors of a list of [treaty education resources](#) compiled for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

According to Formanek Gustafson, there are some very basic places for teachers (at any level) to begin speaking about treaties.

"I would say, given the history [of Indigenous peoples in Canada] that we're aware of now, one of the first things I always focus on with educators is creating empathy so that the students will feel a more human connection to what they're reading or learning about, as opposed to them developing the mindset of [absorbing] dry facts—the sort of mindset that I think (for the most part) people are finally beyond now."

Jodie Williams, Indigenous Education Consultant for the Dufferin Peel Catholic School Board, also cites fear as one of the major impediments when it comes to teachers' willingness and ability to teach about treaty or Indigenous history.

"It's a topic that is hard for a lot of teachers, because they have to be educated," she says. "They have to unlearn what they thought was respectful [knowledge] and they're afraid of teaching the wrong information or not using the correct language, so the number one hesitation is fear for exactly those reasons."

Williams is an educator, but she is also co-chair of the First Nation, Métis & Inuit Education Association of Ontario, an organization that supports K-12 teachers in the area of Indigenous education. Specifically, in terms of treaty education, the organization has [created](#) resources, videos, and lesson activities for teachers to use. (Most school boards in Ontario have a membership in the association and teachers should be able to use that to access member-only material. Individual memberships are also available.)

All of the material is vetted by a province-wide Elders Advisory Council. Many of the Elders are fluent in their Indigenous language and some are residential school survivors. Having that level of Elders involvement and scrutiny, Williams advises, is vitally important to ensure what is being presented to teachers is accurate and respectful, which isn't always true of information found online or in other sources—even textbooks.

EASILY UNDERSTOOD CONCEPTS

As with any other subject, teaching about treaties is like creating a structure out of building blocks: laying down the basic foundations and then adding more information and complexity over time.

When talking about the concept of a treaty, there is a basic explanation that junior elementary students can easily grasp, says Formanek Gustafson: "When you're starting with small kids, you don't need to get into any depths. To start with, a treaty is a promise. There's a promise on both sides."

Maurice Switzer echoes that approach. Switzer, who lives in North Bay, is a traditional Knowledge Keeper and an expert on the Williams Treaties. He is also an author, having written two books that have been used in schools to teach children about treaties. One is a graphic novel aimed at older students, entitled [We Are All Treaty People](#). The other is a picture book/video resource for younger children called [Grandpa...what is a treaty anyway?](#) It was created as a project with the Near North District School Board. The book's illustrator is Jack Smallboy, a Moose Factory Cree member and a residential school survivor who also resides in North Bay.

Switzer explains that younger students don't need to hear about how governments broke treaties or how the treaties didn't contain what their original drafters promised. Instead, he thinks it's best to put treaties into terms even the youngest students can understand, which is what he did in his picture book.

"The thing that they identify with the most in the story is the part where I liken it to kids having mutual agreements with their parents, like chores: you do chores for your mom and dad, and then they do things for you. That's similar to the mutual responsibility part of a treaty. They love that part," Switzer says, adding that he always asks children about the chores they do and how they negotiate those deals, driving the engagement and making the treaty concept real for the students.



He takes a similar approach when explaining why treaties were necessary in the first place—to create agreements between the newcomers and the people who had made this land their home for generations. During these group discussions, Switzer makes sure to paint both Indigenous peoples and settlers in a sympathetic light.

He also says that even young children are familiar with the concept of immigration—with families living in other countries and moving to Canada, especially since some are immigrants themselves—and that many also know what refugees are, so that's the context he uses when he describes early immigrants and their relationship with the Indigenous peoples.

“Most of the people who came to this part of the world were refugees,” he explains. “They had no freedom of speech. They lived like slaves. They call them serfs: they couldn't own their own land, in many cases, because in their countries, it was only the wealthy that had those privileges, so they were refugees.”

Switzer also notes that, “there are stories that are good to talk to young kids about: stories about how the Indigenous peoples welcomed the settlers—as long as they came in peace—and they showed the settlers survival skills... Those are the positive stories. The negative ones, there's always time to tell those, and I prefer to do that when the students are a bit older. The stories about good relationships, those are a good way to start elementary kids on the learning track.”

And if junior elementary students have a hard time conceptualizing immigration, there are similar analogies that should also work, even for the youngest kids. For example, Formanek Gustafson suggests talking about going away on a trip, and how many sleeps the trip will last—just grounding the idea of being away from home (and how students would be expected to behave while being away) in a way that is relatable.

Switzer also likes using physical items while teaching younger students. When he visits a classroom, he usually brings in a wampum belt. His are copies of the original belts that were exchanged between Indigenous nations and settlers to mark the conclusion of treaty negotiations or other types of agreements. He commissioned them from Indigenous artists. One measures approximately six feet in length and all are made from traditional, hand-crafted shell beads. The tactile nature of younger students

leads to them touching the belt, asking questions, and getting excited about treaties.

For those who don't have wampum belts of their own, Switzer notes that at one time, LEGO replicas of the purple and white Treaty of Niagara belt were produced by the Anishinabek Nation (also known as the Union of Ontario Indians) and were endorsed by the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs for use in the classroom. The LEGO wampum belts were part of a teacher's kit for elementary educators called “We Are All Treaty People.” In 2021, the Anishinabek Nation decided to build upon that kit, and created an interactive online treaty education resource called *Ezhi-nawending: How we are related*. The resource includes 80 animations and videos, as well as interactive games, with the goal of teaching elementary students about topics such as wampum and natural law.

INDIGENOUS SOURCES

In fact, going to First Nations and other Indigenous sources for teaching material and teacher training is something Switzer, Formanek Gustafson, and Williams all strongly encourage. They especially emphasize that learning about geographically local treaties and local Indigenous nations is the best way for teachers to familiarize themselves with the topic, to avoid a “pan-Indianism” approach to treaty or Indigenous history and to make the teachings relevant to students.

“Make sure that not everybody gets painted with the same brush,” says Williams. “Be careful and make sure there's an understanding that Indigenous people come from diverse, very different nations and know that there's diversity within the nations themselves. That's what we try to focus on: that kids are walking away with a sense that Indigenous people come from brilliant, sophisticated, amazing civilizations and nations, and that those nations continue to exist today.”

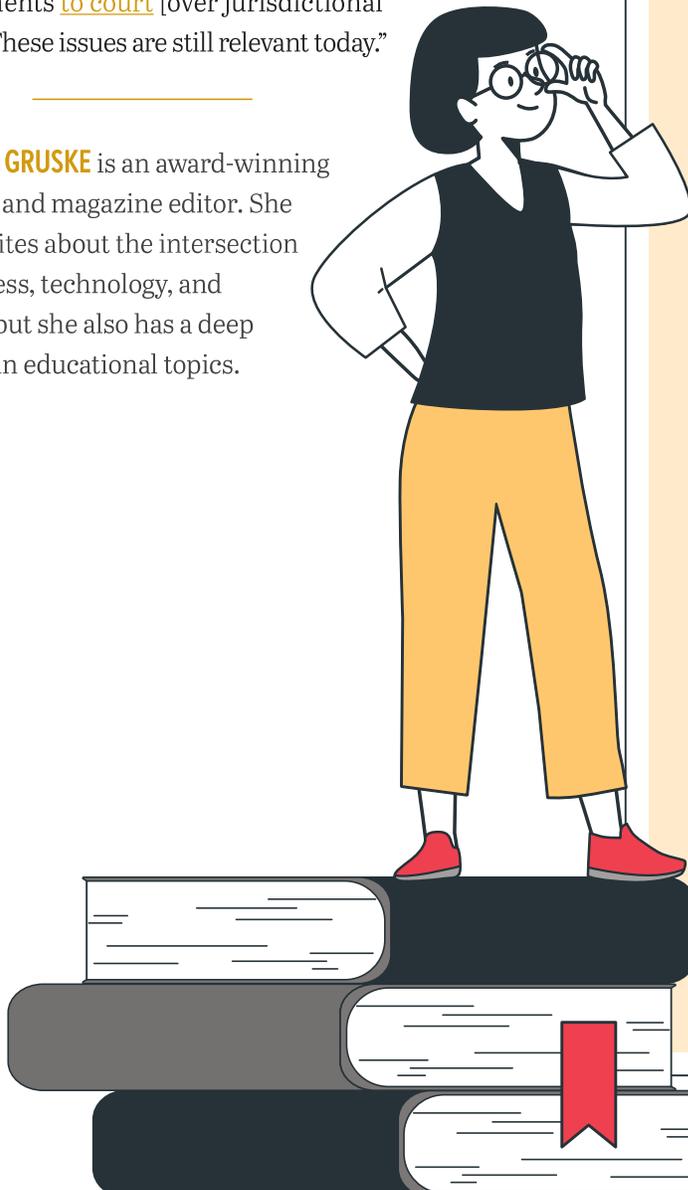
The other recommendation that all three endorse is to make good use of the school board's Indigenous education lead if there is one available. (In Ontario, for example, one is attached to every school board in the province.) That person will have an understanding of the local Indigenous nations and their histories, including the local treaties, and be willing to share their knowledge.

Indigenous education leads should also be able to help teachers find experts who are willing to come into

the classroom and share their experiences and wisdom—an approach that helps the teacher avoid becoming the ultimate authority on the topic. This, in turn, should allow wary teachers to be more comfortable talking about treaties in the classroom, which is of increasing importance since the new curriculum guidelines for Grades 1-3 that were released in September have a focus on treaty education and were created with the expectation that it will be taught from primary through secondary school.

“We’re still very new in this sector of education, but ideally, we want it to look like a scaffolding of learning,” says Williams. “Certainly, there are common understandings that we want to really drive home and number one is that it continues to be about land sharing: we’ve never surrendered or ceded land. That’s why we’re seeing situations like the Treaty 9 First Nations taking the Ontario and Canadian governments [to court](#) [over jurisdictional issues]. These issues are still relevant today.”

CAROLYN GRUSKE is an award-winning reporter and magazine editor. She often writes about the intersection of business, technology, and the law, but she also has a deep interest in educational topics.



ADDITIONAL TREATY RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS:

- This [educational package](#) from Canada’s National History Society contains magazines that focus on treaty history and the treaty relationship. It also comes with an Educator’s Guide.
- Find videos, curriculum resources, and an online game on the [Treaties page](#) of the University of British Columbia website.
- [This is our Understanding](#) is an online experience created by the Anishinabek Nation. It is geared towards secondary students and explores various topics related to treaties. It also includes an interview with Maurice Switzer.
- A group of educators at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study share a [lesson study](#) about treaties for Grade 5/6 students.
- Learn more about treaties and the promises they were meant to uphold through this five-minute [video](#) from the First Nation, Métis & Inuit Education Association of Ontario.
- The [Indigenous Education page](#) of the Ontario Teachers’ Federation website provides books, webinars, and other links to support teachers in the classroom.
- [Indspire](#) is an Indigenous national charity that invests in the education of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis people. It offers mentoring programs, workshops, an online resource centre, and more to assist educators.
- This ten-minute [video](#) by the Anishinabek Nation is accompanied by inquiry prompts that explore some of the promises that were broken after the treaties were signed.
- The Grand Erie District School Board provides a series of [links](#) related to treaty awareness on their website.
- See what progress has been made towards Indigenous education in Ontario, and what still must be done to fulfill the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s education requirements, in this 2023 [report](#) from People for Education.