

SHK DAY
IGNITING THE FIRE WITHIN

Annual Report

2025 - 2026



SHKODAY ABINOJIIWAK OBIMIWEDOON



Shkoday Abinojiiwak Obimiwedoan is the legal name of the organization that was established at 1610 John Street Road in 1996 and incorporated in 1997. The name was gifted to the new Aboriginal Head Start program in Thunder Bay and later became the organization's official name.

We were told that the name is loosely interpreted as Shkoday (fire), Abinojiiwak (children), and Obimiwedoan (spirit within), honouring the important work the organization was beginning.

Thunder Bay Aboriginal Head Start nurtures the social, physical, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive development of Indigenous children while honouring parents and guardians as their first teachers. Through seasonal teachings and cultural programming, children participate in language learning, land-based activities, free play, storytelling, drumming, and singing, helping to strengthen cultural identity and a strong sense of belonging.



Igniting The Fire Within

Since then, Shkoday has grown and evolved while remaining firmly rooted in culture and community, supporting children, youth, and families in building a strong sense of identity, connection, and belonging.

This continuum of care has expanded through Biwaase'aa, which serves children ages 7 to 13 in elementary schools across Thunder Bay. Named by Elder Agnes Hardy ban, the program reflects the feeling of hope in people's hearts as the dawn rises on a new day. Biwaase'aa provides in-school presentations, nutrition, the Little Eagles program, and after-school programming, which includes cultural education and teachings, mentorship, homework support, and recreational activities.

The Shkoday Pathways Thunder Bay program was launched in September 2023 to support Indigenous high school students. This free program provides tutoring, mentorship, cultural development, and individualized academic, financial, and social supports through collaborations with youth and their caregivers. The primary goal of this program is to improve graduation rates among Indigenous youth and lessen the obstacles to succeeding in education.



VISION, MISSION & VALUES

SHKODAY'S REACH

Self-identified student registrants
(2025/26 fiscal year)

Igniting the Fire Within.

Vision

Mission

Values

Shkoday Abinojiiwak Obimiwedoan is an Indigenous-led organization that revitalizes traditional knowledge and culture to nurture Indigenous children and communities to embrace Mino Bimaadiziwin.

Shkoday's values include commitments to the good life (Mino-Bimaadiziwin) and the Seven Grandfather Teachings.



THE SEVEN GRANDFATHER TEACHINGS:

Zaagidiwin
(love)

Dbaadendiziwin
(humility)

Aakode'ewin
(bravery)

Mnaadendimowin
(respect)

Debwewin
(truth)

Nbwaakaawin
(wisdom)

Gwekwaadiziwin
(honesty)



Boozhoo, Sago, Wachay, Aaniin!

President's Message:

To our youth, families, Elders, fellow Board members, partners, community leaders and members, it is once again my absolute honour to serve as President of Shkoday and to work alongside the dedicated people who believe in the strength, potential, and future of our youth.

Our young people are the heart of our communities. They carry our teachings, languages, traditions, and hopes for the generations to come. Through culture, education, mentorship, wellness, and community support, we are committed to creating opportunities that empower youth to succeed while remaining connected to who they are and where they come from.

We recognize that many young people face challenges that can impact their confidence, education, mental wellness, and future opportunities. As an organization, we are committed to walking beside them with compassion, respect, and encouragement. We believe every youth deserves to feel valued, heard, supported, and inspired.

Our work is grounded in the teachings passed on by way of our ancestors and guided by the wisdom of our Elders. By strengthening identity, building leadership, and fostering positive connections, we are helping to create a brighter and healthier future for our communities.

The staff and Board have worked very hard over the year to support our continued progress, and here are examples of some of the work we have been doing behind the scenes:

- Call for Auditors and Indigenous governance training facilitators
- Evaluation of Executive Director by external consultants
- Board self-evaluation
- Recruitment of additional Board members
- Governance Policies and Procedures - updated and Indigenized
- Revised Articles of Incorporation

I would like to say Chi-Miigwetch to our staff, volunteers, community partners, and supporters for their ongoing dedication and commitment. Most importantly, I want to say Chi-Miigwetch to our youth for inspiring us every day with their resilience, creativity, and vision.

Together, we will continue building safe spaces, meaningful programs, and opportunities that honour our traditions while supporting the dreams and goals of the next generation.

Miigwetch / Thank you,

Jason Thompson
President

We grounded ourselves in our traditional teachings and culture.

Executive Director's Message:



Boozhoo, Wachay, Aaniin, Sago, Taanishi, Hello!

Chi-meegwech to the Elders and Knowledge Holders, Shkoday's Board of Directors, management and staff, volunteers, students, and children whose gifts, teachings, and contributions shaped this past year. It has been a year of many twists and turns, and at times we were called to adjust our path forward. Through it all, we grounded ourselves in our traditional teachings and culture, which remain the foundation of the work we do at Shkoday.

We were deeply honoured to have Joe Duncan and Marcel Bananish help raise our tipi and share their teachings with staff, children, and families. Their guidance reminded us that the tipi is not only a place of shelter and warmth, but also a powerful symbol of caring, sharing, connectedness, and Indigenous identity. The teachings carried by each pole, and by the rope that binds them together, spoke to the importance of living these values in harmony with one another.

Staff also attended the Cradle Board (Tikinagan in Anishinaabemowin) project display, which featured cradleboards from different places and generations. The display beautifully highlighted the craftsmanship, care, and practical design of these teachings-based items, and their role in providing protection, warmth, comfort, and safety for children.

Shkoday's Board, management, and staff remain committed to learning from the past and sharing ancestral teachings with children, families, and communities. We are proud to provide children of all ages with a safe place to learn, grow, and thrive. We want our children to know who they are, where they come from, and the strength of those who came before them, because they are our future leaders and carry so much promise for the generations ahead.

At our June 2025 year-end event, we celebrated important milestones for children and youth across our programs. Children in Aboriginal Head Start prepared to begin elementary school in the fall, while youth in the Biwaase'aa program marked their transition into high school. We also celebrated five students from our Pathways program who earned their high school diplomas. Pathways provides tutoring, mentoring, and cultural development supports to help youth complete high school. These graduates are now moving on to college, university, trade school, and the workforce. These milestones

are meaningful for the children, youth, and families we walk alongside, and we are grateful to be part of their journeys.

Across programs, staff provided practical supports such as food, bus tickets, and school supplies, while also connecting participants to community agencies, guest speakers, Elders, and Knowledge Holders.

As food and transportation costs increased, the need for support also grew. Over the year, we served more than 36,000 meals to participants—an increase of more than 9,000 meals from the previous year. We also saw growth in parent participation, attendance in Little Eagles through the Biwaase'aa program, and student registrations in Pathways. Delayed funding decisions reduced support staff capacity within Aboriginal Head Start and, combined with staff illnesses and challenges recruiting qualified employees, at times resulted in classroom closures, service gaps, and fewer after-school programming opportunities.

Despite these pressures, volunteers, on-call staff, supervisors, managers, and co-workers worked together to maintain services and minimize disruptions for children and families. Elders and Knowledge Keepers also played an important role throughout the year, providing cultural teachings and one-on-one support to staff.

I encourage you to read the following pages to learn more about the services we provide and the positive impact of this collective effort.

To the Elders, Knowledge Keepers, staff, volunteers, and Board members who helped us navigate the twists and turns this year; to the funders and our partners who support the work of Shkoday; to the parents who entrust their children's care and education to us; and to all the children who we continue to learn from while we support them in navigating their educational and life journey,

Chi-meegwech!

Marilyn Junnila
Executive Director



A CHILD'S SOCIAL SYSTEM

The following diagram illustrates how Shkoday's Programs (Aboriginal Head Start, Child Care, Biwaase'aa and Pathways) promote healthy child/youth development in the context of a child's social system.



Child:

- Strengthens positive child health and social development
- Strengthens children's Indigenous cultural and language knowledge and skills
- Provides healthy nutrition, active living and life skills
- Builds positive self-esteem through traditional teachings, assisting with homework, mentorship and tutoring

Family:

- Strengthens social support through positive play and social interactions, access to recreational and cultural events
- Strengthens parental engagement
- Assists caregivers to respond effectively to the needs of their child and family
- Strengthens parent's/caregiver's culture and languages
- Strengthens parent's knowledge of nutrition, child-rearing, financial and community services

Community:

- Strengthens Indigenous culture and languages within the community
- Customized programming to meet local needs of families
- Strengthens participation in community service system planning as it relates to child health
- Strengthens social networks
- Promotes knowledge development and exchange
- Provides an integrated community service approach and improves service navigation
- Fosters life-long learning

Nation/Society:

- Fosters equity and inclusion to decrease racism and bias
- Promotes traditional cultural learning and activities to all ages
- Integrates Elders and Knowledge Keepers to all areas of programming
- Ignites the spiritual fire within each child to be proud of who they are, their family, community and Nation.

ABORIGINAL HEAD START

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) is a school readiness program that encourages and sees the parent/ caregiver as the natural advocate and primary teacher of the child(ren). It is a federally funded early intervention program that addresses the needs of young Indigenous children living in urban centres and in Northern communities. AHS is a comprehensive program designed to meet the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of the child.

The program operates on an alternate day schedule to allow as many children as possible to attend. Some children attend on Mondays and Wednesdays. Another group attends on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Shkoday's childcare room operates four days per week with the same group of children attending each day. Funding for the childcare room is provided through the District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB) and parent fees. Eligible parents/ caregivers register their children for this program through TBDSSAB. The program operates utilizing the same curriculum and mandates as AHS.



PROGRAM PILLARS:



Programming Mandates:

- Follow the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical growth of each child
- Encourage life-long learning
- Support parents and guardians as the prime teachers and caregivers of children
- Recognize and support extended families in teaching and caring for children
- Ensure the community is involved in planning, development, operation, and evaluation of the program

Professional Learning:

- **6** staff attended professional learning with TBDSSAB "Rooted In Hope".
- **9** Aboriginal Head Start staff participated in a Trauma Informed workshop.
- **8** Aboriginal Head Start staff members participated in a Diabetes workshop.

Community Services and Volunteers:

- We had a total of **37** volunteers, including students from various organizations, who contributed **757** volunteer hours
- The Indigenous police services (Gawendum Gaakina Awaya) joined the program and interacted with children
- Attended Rockin' Recovery, where we engaged with attendees and shared information about our programs and services
- Promoted Shkoday at Intercity Shopping Centre during Volunteer Week to raise awareness about our various programs and opportunities to volunteer

- Attended the career fair at Confederation College, where we connected with graduating ECE students and provided information about the AHS program
- Participated in the career fair hosted by Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School at the CLE grounds where we connected with high school students and community members. Our three programs were shared along with opportunities for volunteering

Education/School Readiness Programming:

- Parents attended an open house with representatives from Thunder Bay Catholic School Board, Lakehead Public School Board, French Public-School Board and Lac Des Mille Lacs Education Centre to learn more about what the schools offer, enrollment processes, school requirements, and busing etc.
- **92** children registered and attended AHS and childcare during the 2025/26 year
- **118** children are on the waiting list for AHS
- **10** children were given ASQ screening throughout the year. The outcomes of this screening assist parents and staff to concentrate on areas specific to an individual child on their developmental journey
- **25+** children received speech and language sessions throughout the year aimed at enhancing their communication and language development



Culture and Language:

- **52** children, **10** parents, and **11** staff participated in programming with Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers twice per month
- Throughout the year, children learn about the seasons, smudging, the Seven Grandfather Teachings, and songs, while also taking part in land-based activities like gardening and nature walks
- **13** staff participated in semi-monthly Ojibwe classes



Nutrition:

- **12,045** homemade meals were served to children throughout the year, along with monthly cooking activities
- **425** hampers and meals were distributed to families



Health Promotion:

- **32** children received oral health and fluoride varnish treatment
- **64** children and **16** adults visited and participated in dog sledding at Boreal Journey

Parental Involvement:

- **10** parents actively took part in cooking classes with Thunder Bay District Health Unit
- **209** families and guests joined us for our four seasonal feasts, and **226** families and guests joined us for our year-end celebration

Special Events throughout the Year:

- **Orientation Day**
- **Fall Feast**
- **Winter Feast**
- **Christmas Celebration**
- **Winter Carnival**
- **Easter Celebration**
- **Spring Feast**
- **Graduation Day Celebration**

BIWAASE'AA PROGRAM



Biwaase'aa aims to improve the life skills of Indigenous children, youth, and their families through strategies for academic improvement, emotional development, cultural awareness, and nutritional support. Biwaase'aa partners with eight elementary schools to provide a safe place for students ages 7-13 years to access academic and life skills, including cultural teachings. The Biwaase'aa team works with all children and youth, regardless of heritage, offering support whenever needed. Youth Outreach Workers (YOWs) incorporate teachings, stories, and crafts learned from families, Knowledge Keepers, and Elders.

In addition to offering diverse support, Biwaase'aa staff have earned the trust of students by building positive and respectful relationships. This foundation has enabled students to achieve greater success through our programs.

Mentoring and role models

Literacy and numeracy support

Food security

One-on-one student support

Cultural and traditional knowledge exchange

YOUTH OUTREACH WORKERS (YOWs)

4 student volunteers contributed a total of 680 hours.

Throughout the year, YOWs have supported students in the eight schools we serve, earning the trust and admiration of students. YOWs integrate Indigenous cultural teachings into their classrooms by teaching math in both English and Ojibwe, sharing the significance of hair braiding in health class, making medicine pouches, and smudging. The YOWs work alongside the school's teachers to identify students who will benefit from extra support and one-on-one time. When the YOWs work with students one-on-one, they focus on what the student may need help with, such as adding and subtracting, understanding fractions, meditation or breathing skills, or just being there to play a game in a quiet space. The YOWs focus on culture in small groups, classrooms, and one-on-one.



2025/26 PARTICIPANTS:

1147

In School Unique Students

1550

In School Literacy, Numeracy & Mentorship Sessions

8591

In School Cultural Teachings

704

Little Eagles

160

After School Program Participants

7755

After School Participants

23612

Supported Through Food Security

1860

Parental Engagements

1227

One to One Interactions



PROGRAMS:

The Little Eagles Program: is a major component of in-school programming. Designed as a structured 7-week program, it revolves around the teachings of Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, Truth, Wisdom, and Love (the 7-Grandfather Teachings). YOWs, principals, and teachers work together to identify students who would benefit most from this small group setting. Each week, students participate in activities aligned with a teaching, culminating in projects such as collage paintings, clay figures, ribbon skirts and shirts, and medicine bags or pouches.



The Nutrition Program: The Nutrition Program is embedded in our In-School and After-School Programs. YOWs prepare healthy lunches and snacks for students in need and often involve students in food preparation. The YOW models safe food handling by showing students how to wash their hands, safe knife skills, and teaching them recipes they can make at home. Lunches include options like egg and ham sandwiches with vegetables and fruit. In the After-School Program, students help plan and cook snacks, learn about kitchen safety and cleanliness, and make foods like scrambled eggs, toast, and smoothies.



During meal planning at school, a spaghetti dinner was chosen, and one child asked, "Do you know how to make soft broccoli?" The class murmured in agreement, "I love soft broccoli!" The YOW demonstrated three methods for steaming broccoli: microwave, blanching and frying.



After-School Programs: Immersed in Indigenous culture, YOWs and After-School Assistants (ASAs) maintained the program's requirement for over 50% physical activity, focusing on five key components:

- Physical
- Mental
- Cultural
- Emotional
- Nutrition

Our Community Partners For the School Year:

- Thunder Bay Catholic School Board
- Lakehead District School Board
- Confederation College
- Lakehead University Outdoor Program
- Lakehead University Active U
- Children's Centre Thunder Bay
- Thunder Bay District Health Unit

GOOD NEWS STORIES:

FROM A PARENT:

..."Since joining Biwaase'aa, not only I, but X's support team at school has noticed a tremendous positive change in him. The program has had a significant impact on his cultural connection, academic success, and overall well-being. X went from leaving work incomplete and earning D grades to completing his work and achieving B grades. We truly believe that without this program, he could have fallen through the cracks.

As a child with autism, X has always found it challenging to build and maintain relationships. With the support of the Youth Outreach Workers and the Biwaase'aa Supervisor, he has developed meaningful friendships and connections within his school community. He now looks forward to coming to school each day, knowing there are caring staff there to support him.

X has also grown in his cultural knowledge and often comes home excited to share what he has learned. One memory that stands out is when he explained the importance of braiding sweetgrass gently and with a good heart. He often tells me he wants to stay in the program forever and hopes there will be a similar program for him when he is older. He also hopes his younger sister will one day have the opportunity to participate and enjoy the same experiences."

"X" is used in place of child's name.

A PARENT REPORTS:

.... "The after-school program is very beneficial, especially the sports and recreation programs including basketball, hockey, badminton, and obstacle courses. My children enjoy the program and connect well with the Youth Outreach Workers."

A YOW SHARED:

..."Since October, K. has made tremendous progress in managing his emotions, communicating with others, and building positive relationships. He enjoys spending time with peers and staff, stands up for his friends, and knows when to seek support when he is feeling overwhelmed. K. has also become more adventurous in trying healthy new foods, is welcoming to new students, and brings kindness and positivity to the program. We have seen a noticeable increase in his excitement about coming to school and participating in programming each day."

"K" is used in place of children's name.

Pathways to Education



After School Tutoring Program

Pathways Thunder Bay provides registered high school students with volunteer tutors who support them in subjects where they may need additional help. Our tutors are volunteer university students and peer mentors who are passionate about helping students succeed.

Tutoring is offered after school at the Pathways Thunder Bay location and during lunch hours at Hammarskjold High School, Superior Collegiate & Vocational Institute, Westgate Collegiate & Vocational Institute, St. Patrick High School, and St. Ignatius High School. Our after-school program also gives students access to computers and learning spaces they may not otherwise have access to.

Mentoring, Leadership and Cultural Programming

Our activities help students build confidence, self-awareness, and a stronger sense of identity. Through journal writing, time management exercises, self-reflection, and guided meditation, students are encouraged to explore their goals, celebrate their achievements, and take pride in their cultural identity.

We provide a welcoming and supportive environment where students feel valued, connected, and empowered to succeed in school and beyond. Staff

also assist students in accessing services and navigating supports when needed.

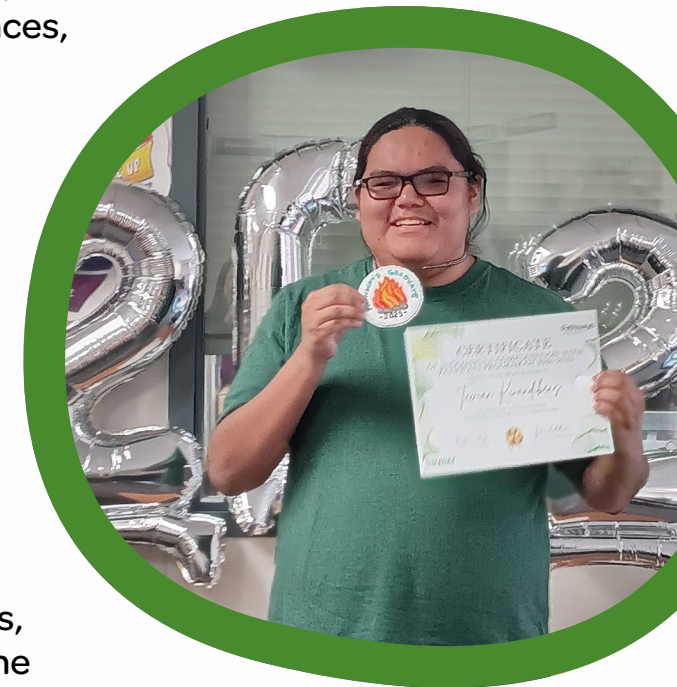
Program partners have included Toastmasters, the Thunder Bay District Health Unit, Thunder Bay Police Service, the Canadian Armed Forces, and NorWest Community Health Centres. Area Elders and Knowledge Keepers regularly share teachings and answer students' questions, while staff also provide traditional knowledge and cultural learning opportunities.

Nutrition

We offer students healthy snacks during program hours and actively involve them in preparing simple meals and snacks. These hands-on experiences help students build confidence and develop practical life skills, including the use of kitchen appliances, and an understanding of cooking times and temperatures.

Financial Support and Advocacy

Students receive incentives to attend the program throughout the week which may include bus tickets, or nutrition gift cards. Students who attend programming can also join fun activities such as bowling, the cinema, paintball, swimming, or other recreational/educational events. For additional services and youth opportunities, our staff collaborate with other organizations, attend committee meetings and work with the schools to create better learning experiences.



134

Unique
Student
Attendees

80

Total
Registered
Students

235

Total
Tutoring
Sessions
Offered

178

Total
Tutoring
Attendance

610.5

Total Hours
Of Mentoring

805

Total
Mentoring
attendance

8

Presenters &
Volunteers

55

Total
volunteer
hours

982
(In Person)

14
(Online)

Student
Engagements

379

Snacks &
Meals offered

Scholarship

Students can apply for financial scholarships to support their post-secondary education or training. This year, five students were successful in receiving scholarship funding to help them pursue their future academic and career goals.



Success Stories

- A student earned his beginner's driver's license this year! He shared some of the challenges he faced while learning to drive, explaining that he often felt nervous when practicing with his guardian and found the city lanes confusing. He was surprised and excited when he passed his test and couldn't wait to share the news with us. When his license arrived in the mail, he brought it in to show us. We were all so proud of him and his accomplishment.
- A Grade 9 student shared her success in improving her grades in both math and science. She said she would not have achieved those grades without the support she received from Pathways, noting that concepts were explained in a way that made them easier to understand. She also enjoys having a quiet space to learn and focus without distractions.



DONATIONS & FUNDERS (2025-2026)

Donations:

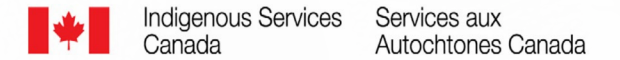
John Teskey

John Walmark

Gateway Casino (Employee fund)

Miscellaneous donations

Funders:







SHKODAY

IGNITING THE SPIRIT WITHIN

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