

Moving Forward

National Policy Roundtable: Aboriginal Education K-12



February 22, 2005

Concordia University, Montreal

Media Backgrounder

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ix out of 10 aboriginal students in Canada quit school before Grade 12, a shocking failure rate that has decreased only marginally over the past 25 years. The recent Auditor-General's report estimated that it will take 28 years for existing programs to close the high-school completion gap between aboriginal youth and their peers.

Forty percent of Canada's aboriginal peoples are under the age of 19, representing the fastest growing group in the K-12 system. One third of families on reserves are single-parent, and 59% of adults have not completed high school. The residential schools era has left a legacy of hostility and suspicion which continues to undermine effective home and school partnerships that support learning.

Systemic Challenges

Much of the disparity in the quality of schooling experienced by aboriginal children can be attributed to the tangle of overlapping jurisdictions and governance models which inhibit the development of an effective, equitable and accountable system of education.

The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs spends \$10,833 per student annually, or more than \$1.3-billion, to educate 120,000 aboriginal children. The Auditor General has described accountability measures for that spending as inadequate: "The department has still not clarified its role and responsibilities in improving the education achievement of First Nations. This is an important first step in necessary improvements."

Band governments, who are responsible for administering local education programs, often lack the capacity or will to ensure their schools meet provincial standards. With typically fewer than 500 members, reserves have difficulty hiring qualified teachers. For all but the largest band-operated schools, inadequate educational funding remains a critical issue. While the disparity is slowly improving, federal dollars available to band-operated schools remain substantially below (estimated by some at 75%) the amount received by provincially operated schools.

Although Indian and Northern Affairs Canada is accountable for the quality of education in federally funded schools and its equivalency with provincial systems, there is no effective national process to evaluate the education that aboriginal students receive or ensure its quality. Despite a well-defined link between the use of assessment data and improved performance, the absence of a mandatory large-scale assessment program for band-operated schools prevents monitoring their progress against common benchmarks. Many band authorities have been reluctant to require their schools to participate in provincial assessments for a variety of reasons, including fear of surrendering hard-won control over education, cultural bias in the tests, unfair comparison of band-operated and provincial schools, and the desire for more holistic measures of achievement. As a result, aboriginal parents and Canadians at large lack useful evidence about the relative effectiveness of the various delivery models.

Provincial governments, with one notable exception, have failed to track and report aboriginal results on provincial assessments. In BC, where annual data are published for each school district and the province at large, the percentage of aboriginal students failing to meet expectations in

literacy and in numeracy has steadily fallen as the problem has been identified and annual targets for improvement set.

Yet there is more to do to close the gap. According to BC performance data analyzed by the Fraser Institute, aboriginal students failed more than 40% of the provincial reading tests they wrote in the last four school years, a failure rate more than double that of their classmates. The likelihood that aboriginal students in Grade 8 will obtain their graduation diploma in the usual time is only slightly better than one in five. And on average, they take less than one of the senior level provincially examinable courses that prepare students for post-secondary education.

Unlike countries where closing the minority achievement gap has been a priority, there has been little serious research in Canada to identify those policies and practices that effectively raise aboriginal achievement. And, although the numerous reports commissioned by federal and provincial governments and aboriginal organizations over the past 40 years have produced remarkably similar findings about the problems and recommendations for change, they have had modest or no impact on the system.

Gathering Momentum

After years of rhetoric, however, there are growing signs that the problem will receive the attention it deserves.

In September 2004, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) announced that the provinces and territories had agreed to make improving aboriginal education a collective priority.

The \$85-million Canadian Council on Learning created last year by the federal government has earmarked significant resources for research on aboriginal learning through the development of a national knowledge centre for this purpose.

Demand has been high for a recent study commissioned by SAEF to examine success factors in schools demonstrating measurable progress for their aboriginal students. *Sharing Our Success: Ten Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling* (Bell, 2004) is available at: http://www.saeef.ca/publications/A_021_HHH_MID.php

Catalyst for Change

Moving Forward, held at Concordia University February 22nd, is a bold effort to convene key Canadian decision makers to forge an action plan for aboriginal learner success. The 50 invited Roundtable participants will try to generate constructive solutions to systemic issues of literacy, language and culture; the assessment and reporting of results; governance, leadership and resources; teacher supply, training and retention; and community support for learning. Norman Henchey, McGill Professor Emeritus, will prepare the Proceedings Paper to be published in early March 2005 at www.saeef.ca/movingforward. The project was funded by Max Bell Foundation and the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

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