

FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION: FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

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First Nations people have both a Constitutional and a Treaty right to education; however, the Crown's jurisdictional obligations to provide educational services have not lead to similar educational opportunities and attainment achievement for First Nations students as compared to Canadian students in provincial schools. Canada's Auditor General, in 2000, stated that Indian and Northern Affairs Canada could not demonstrate that it reached the objective to assist First Nations students on reserve in achieving their educational needs and aspirations. In 2004, the Auditor General noted a widening achievement gap.. Using statistical information from the Department of Indian Affairs and the Auditor General to consider educational financial accountability, the author argues that equitable financial resources are required to support First Nations students in band-managed schools.

Key words: educational administration, fiduciary responsibility, educational equity, school achievement

Les Premières nations ont un droit constitutionnel et à la fois au plan constitutionnel et conféré par traité. Toutefois, les obligations de la Couronne en cette matière n'ont pas eu pour effet de susciter chez les élèves autochtones des possibilités éducatives et un rendement scolaire semblables à ceux des élèves canadiens dans les écoles provinciales. En 2002, la vérificatrice générale du Canada signalait que le ministère des Affaires indiennes et du Nord canadien ne pouvait démontrer qu'il avait atteint son objectif d'aider les élèves autochtones dans les réserves à combler leurs besoins et réaliser leurs aspirations en matière d'éducation. En 2004, la vérificatrice générale notait que l'écart en matière de réussite scolaire entre autochtones et allochtones allait en grandissant. Se servant de données statistiques provenant du ministère des Affaires indiennes et du Nord canadien et de la vérificatrice générale en vue d'analyser la responsabilité financière du gouvernement fédéral en éducation, l'auteure soutient qu'il faut des ressources financières équitables pour soutenir le travail des les Premières nations dans les écoles gérées par des bandes.

Mots clés : administration scolaire, responsabilité fiduciaire, équité en matière d'éducation, rendement scolaire

During the 1870s, representatives of the prairie First Nations and Her Majesty Queen Victoria met, discussed, clarified, and agreed to Treaties 1 to 7. The numbered treaties were contractual agreements between nations and stipulated the obligations and commitments of each party. Indian Affairs' *Annual Report* to Parliament noted the numbered treaties focused on "important matters . . . related to reserves, schools, the amount of the money gratuities and annuities made or secured to the Indians" (*Annual Report*, 1877, p. xi). Cardinal (1969) argued: "To our people this was the beginning of a contractual relationship whereby the representatives of the queen would have lasting responsibilities to the Indian people in return for the valuable lands that were ceded to them" (p. 29). One of the Crown's contractual obligations was the provision of formal education. Formal education "would not . . . deter" from First Nations' traditional education (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 31), but rather be additional to their "daily" life (Morris, 1880/1991, p. 193). For traditional education was

A livelihood, that was taught . . . it revolved around survival of the people, and a lot of this livelihood was taught from the teaching of many generations, the teachings from Creation . . . we had our own doctors, our own medicine people. There were a lot of teachings, lifelong teachings that were passed from generation to generation. (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 11)

In relation to the Treaty 6 discussions, Alexander Morris, the Crown's treaty commissioner involved in the numbered treaty negotiations, commented, "I was agreeably surprised to find so great a willingness on the part of the Crees . . . to have their children instructed . . . the universal demand for teachers . . . [was] encouraging (Morris 1880/1991, p. 194). Furthermore, Morris wrote he was "glad indeed to find many [First Nations parents wanted] . . . to send their children to school" (p. 240). At the Treaty 6 meetings, Morris informed the Cree representatives "your children will be taught, and then they will be as well able to take care of themselves as the whites around them" (p. 213). Throughout the numbered treaty negotiations, formal education was highlighted as a preparation for "the future" and associated with opportunities, employment and prosperity for successive First Nations generations (pp. 268-272).

The written treaty documents all included a statement related to the provision of education; the wording varied in the specific treaty. Treaty 1 stated, "Her Majesty agrees to maintain a school on each reserve hereby made, whenever the Indians of the reserve should desire it" (Morris, 1880/1991, p. 315). Treaty 7, signed seven years later in 1877, stated:

Her Majesty agrees to pay the salary of such teachers to instruct the children of the said Indians as to her Government of Canada may seem advisable, when said Indians are settled on their reserves and shall desire teachers. (p. 371)

Ray (1996) has argued that the difference in the treaty education clauses signaled a "movement away from the policy of granting Native people a say in deciding when instruction should begin . . . and the government retained complete discretion in the matter" of education (p. 236). The Canadian government, on behalf of the Crown, has over the past century and a quarter controlled and set the parameters of formal education for First Nations students with little input from parents or First Nations' communities. From the 1880s onwards, First Nations have demanded fulfillment of the Crown's treaty commitments, often to little avail. The Canadian courts have, from time to time, rendered decisions in areas of dispute between the treaty partners and established the meaning given to the Crown's treaty commitments. Furthermore, the courts have affirmed that each of the treaty partners negotiated in good faith and as evidenced in the 1996 Supreme Court of Canada decision in *R. v. Badger*:

[I]t must be remembered that a treaty represents an exchange of solemn promises between the Crown and the various Indian nations. . . . [The Crown] always intends to fulfill its promises. (Cited in Elliott, 1992/1997, p. 45)

This article, within the context of qualitative and quantitative methodology, focuses on the Crown's treaty and constitutional obligation for the provision of educational services for First Nations students, specifically financial policies and practices, as one facet of a complex, multidimensional issue that affects the educational attainment level of First Nations students. Although the focus of the article is present-day educational attainment levels, it is an historical issue that

has been identified in numerous Special Parliamentary Joint Committees and a variety of reports. Research is focused on documentary materials available from (a) the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), (b) the office of Canada's Auditor General, and (c) various statistical information. This material is used to compare the difference in educational attainment of First Nations' and Canadian students in general. Financial resources, policies, and practices, it is argued, are systemic issues that hinder First Nations school effectiveness and account, in part, for the educational attainment gap evident between First Nations' students and students attending other educational systems. Financial data relating to three specific First Nations schools are used with permission of the individual First Nations. The student and staff quotations used in this article are responses from surveys completed as a part of school effectiveness reviews conducted in First Nations schools in Saskatchewan. They are used with the permission of the specific educational entity or First Nation.

A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The 1867 *British North America Act* (subsequently repatriated as the *Constitution Act, 1982*) provided for the division of powers between Canada and the provinces. Constitutional jurisdiction for education was vested in the provinces: each province "may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education" (section 93) for all students within their provincial boundaries with the exception of First Nations children living on reserve. The Constitution vested responsibility for "Indians and lands reserved for Indians" (section 91(24)) in Canada and thus "exclusive legislative responsibility" in all matters relating to Indians was a federal responsibility (Borrows & Rotman, 1998, p. 500). The federal government used section 91(24) to enact the federal *Indian Act, 1876* (p. 500), by which it defined the type and scope of programming and services provided for First Nations communities including educational services.

The Constitution Act established two systems of education in Canada: one provincial the other federal. These two systems remained apart and isolated legally and organizationally and although educational programming was similar, educational policies and practices over the past century have fostered different levels of educational opportunities

and educational attainment for students within the two systems.

SYSTEMIC EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

Although Canada and the First Nations entered into an educational partnership through the treaties, quality educational services for First Nations students and equitable educational programming with that provided in provincial schools has not evolved. Unlike the provinces, Canada did not enact an education act, educational and professional regulations, any significant educational governance mechanisms, programming, or curriculum support initiatives. Rather, over the past century, Canada's provision of educational services has been limited to sections 114-122 of the *Indian Act*. The Act has been amended from time to time, though the last significant amendment was in 1951.

Regardless of its constitutional and treaty responsibility to provide educational services, Canada was, historically, a passive bystander, as religious and missionary organizations undertook to establish and operate schools for First Nations people. Only after the schools were constructed did Canada contribute towards the cost. In 1881, *Indian Affairs Annual Report* noted, that "assistance [was] given by the Government of \$100.00 for the purchase of glass, stone, &c., after the erection of a suitable school-house" (p. xxx). By the mid-1880s, \$300 was allocated annually by Indian Affairs towards the cost of teachers' salaries and school supplies if the school maintained an average attendance of 25 students. Religious organizations frequently supplemented the schools' operation and also requested an increase in the level of funding, to little avail. The acting superintendent at Battleford, Saskatchewan, wrote to the Minister of Indian Affairs that "schools should be established on several reserves but the Government cannot expect to get capable teachers for \$300 or less per annum" (*Annual Report, 1880*, p. 106), while Indian Affairs headquarters staff questioned whether the \$300 granted to schools resulted in a "fair return for the expenditure" (*Annual Report, 1884*, p. 103). Miller (1989) suggested that the promise of education to First Nations developed in a chaotic approach with rudimentary efforts by

ill-trained and worse paid missionaries who had far too many other duties to worry unduly about the abysmal attendance and poor academic showing of the students; a

hodgepodge of schools . . . [to] which the government sometimes made small grants [towards teacher salaries]; and less frequently rarely contributed anything. (Miller, 1989, p. 175)

Lack of funding and low educational attainment has been well documented in a variety of Parliamentary reports, Special Joint House of Commons and Senate Commissions, and other studies since Confederation. The authors of the 1921 Canada Census Study noted, "The Indians are only very slightly connected with the education efforts of the different provinces, the responsibility for their education lying with the Dominion and private denominational institutions" (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1926, p. 38). The Bureau's study indicated that the inclusion of First Nations literacy statistics in the overall Canadian statistics was "most misleading" (p. 38) when Canada was compared to other countries, and stated:

It is very clear the illiteracy of the Indians ought [*sic*] to be considered as a thing apart from the rest of the population . . . [for] taking the illiteracy of the population excluding Indians [would result in] a more accurate description of the true situation. (p. 38)

A quarter of a century later, educational attainment levels had changed little. For example, the Member of Parliament from Yorkton stood in the House of Commons and offered a bleak description of Indian education:

While there are 130,000 Indians in the country, our education and training of these people take care of only about 16,000. Of this number enrolled, only 883 reach grade 7, 324 reach grade 8, and seventy-one reach grade 9. I notice in three of the provinces there are no grade 9 students. (Castledean, House of Commons Debates, 1946, p. 5489)

In a study of the 1946-1948 Special Joint Committee on the Indian Act and Educational Policy, McMurtry (1985) noted that many submissions presented before the Committee highlighted the lack of funding for on-reserve schools in comparison to the level of funding received by provincial schools. He wrote that Canada's schooling for First Nations children was "notoriously under funded, [schools] poorly equipped and constructed, [and teachers were] paid less than their colleagues in neighboring public schools" (p. 61).

In 1970, the Indian Chiefs of Alberta (1970), in *Citizens Plus*, a document presented to Prime Minister Trudeau, stated that their people, as an entity, had the least education of any group in Canada (p. 77). This dismal picture was re-echoed three decades later by Canada's Auditor General (2000) in the *Report of the Auditor General*, on Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's (INAC) Elementary and Secondary Education Programs. The Auditor General stated:

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada cannot demonstrate that it meets its stated objective to assist First Nations students living on reserve in achieving their educational needs and aspirations. (4-5)

The progress in closing the education gap for Indian students living on reserves has been unacceptably slow. At the current rate of progress, it will take over 20 years for them [First Nations students] to reach parity in academic achievement with other Canadians. (Auditor General of Canada, 2000, p. 4-5)

The comparative educational table identified by the Auditor General (2000, 4-8) is listed by in Table 1.

TABLE 1

*Comparative Information on Education*¹

	Indians	All other Canadians
Students eligible to attend elementary and secondary schools who are not enrolled.	20%	N/A
Dropout rate before completion of grade nine.	18%	3%
Youth between 18 and 20 who left school.	40%	16%
Youth between 18 and 20 who graduated.	30%	63%
Population with at least high school education.	37%	65%

Four years later, the March 17, 2004, *National Post* headline read "Education System Failing Native Pupils," quoting secret Indian Affairs documents that, despite an expenditure of \$1.7 billion, the education system "does not produce results" and "First Nations education must be

re-engineered to make further investment worthwhile, while closing the education gap between aboriginal students and the rest of Canada will require focused attention for at least a decade" (*National Post*, March 17, 2004, p. A4). In 2004, the Auditor General again reviewed Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's Education Program and Post-Secondary Student Support, noting:

We remain concerned that a significant education gap exists between First Nations people living on reserves and the Canadian population as a whole and that the time estimated to close this gap has increased slightly, from about 27 to 28 years. (Auditor General of Canada, 2004, p. 1)

Researchers can argue with statistics:

1. They do not account for the large numbers of First Nations students who as adults return to school a number of years later.
2. Education testing/standards are neither culturally nor linguistically appropriate for First Nations students and/or fail to provide a fair assessment of First Nations children's abilities and achievements.
3. Cultural dissonance and socioeconomic factors are not taken into account.

Nevertheless, such statistics are a major concern. Canada cannot continue to ignore the demands for quality education for First Nations students nor the multitude of reports and subsequent recommendations regarding the provision of educational services for First Nations children.

It must be noted, that significant gains — increased numbers of First Nations students attending and graduating from high school and subsequently enrolling in tertiary educational institutions — have been made over the last 30 years, primarily resulting from the National Indian Brotherhood's (1972) policy initiative on *Indian Control of Indian Education*, which was accepted in principle by the Department of Indian Affairs. However, many First Nations students do not receive equitable educational services demanded and provided for Canadian students in general who attend provincial schools. Differences in the level of educational services arise, in part, from the lack of educational focus within Indian Affairs, the inappropriateness of the Indian Act as a vehicle to deliver educational services, and the lack of financial and

governance support for First Nations educational delivery of effective schools for First Nations students.

EDUCATIONAL JURISDICTION

The *Indian Act, 1985*, sections 114-122, sets out the powers of the minister of Indian Affairs

to enter into agreements on behalf of Her Majesty for education in accordance with this Act of Indian children, with

- (a) The government of a province;
- (b) The Commissioner of the Yukon;
- (c) The Commissioner of the Northwest Territories;
- (c.1) The Commissioner of Nunavut;
- (d) A public or separate school board; and
- (e) A religious or charitable organization. (Imai, 2004, p. 209)

Section 114(2) authorizes the minister to “establish, operate and maintain schools for Indian children” (p. 209), and it is under this section of the Indian Act that First Nations manage schools on behalf of the minister. As a result of such agreements or arrangements, the percentage of First Nations students (living on-reserve) attending various schools and/or jurisdictions in 2001-2002 was 61 per cent First Nations, 36 per cent provincial, 1 per cent federal, and 2 per cent private/other (INAC, 2003a, p. 36).

The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) has primary, but not exclusive, federal responsibility for the delivery of a wide range of programs and services to First Nations people living on-reserves. First Nations communities, on behalf of the department, administer 85 per cent of the program funds allocated by Treasury Board for INAC’s services on reserve, including funding for education. Indian Affairs “acknowledges that this approach does not diminish its responsibility and accountability” for educational services (Auditor General of Canada, 2000, pp. 4-5). Indian Affairs has developed generic funding agreement models for transfer of program funding, including education, to First Nations. There are three specific types of funding arrangements: Comprehensive Funding Arrangement (CFA), Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA), and Financial Transfer Agreement (FTA).

The wording in each of the agreements is similar and the duration of the agreement may vary from one to five years. The Financial Transfer Agreement (FTA) permits funds to be reallocated to address other priorities and in so doing permits a more flexible transfer of funds within the parameters of the agreement. The FTA “provides the First Nation with the *greatest flexibility* . . . in program design and delivery and the management of funds” and specifies that the First Nation be only required to maintain “minimum standards” (INAC, 2001, p. 11). Although flexibility is admirable, within the context of limited resources, moving funding from education to other areas of need limits the effectiveness of First Nations schools. An educational system that supported the provision of “minimum standards” would not, be acceptable to parents or the community within the provincial education system.

Blue Quills Native Education Centre, which opened in 1971, was the first band-administered school in Canada. In 2003, the *Report of the Auditor General* noted there were 614 First Nations in Canada (p. 5) and the *Basic Department Data 2003* identified 496 First Nation-managed schools across Canada in 2002-2003 (INAC, 2004e, p. 41). The number of schools administered directly by a First Nation has increased by 33 per cent over the past seven years (p. 41) and 60 per cent of the total students funded directly or indirectly by INAC attended a band-administered school, compared to 54 per cent in 1994/95 (INAC, 2004e, p. 34). The Aboriginal school population is the fastest-growing segment of Canada’s school enrolment and band-managed schools are the schools of choice for First Nations communities. The total number of First Nations students funded directly or indirectly by the Department of Indian Affairs in 2002/2003 was 119,859 (INAC, 2004e, p34).

FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

First Nations or their designates manage schools on behalf of the Crown; Indian Affairs “provides funding to band councils or other First Nation education authorities to support instructional services” (INAC, 2004a, p. 1). Of particular concern is the quality of educational services First Nations are able to provide for their students when the First Nation financial administration, for a variety of reasons, has been placed by

INAC within the context of a financial recovery plan. The most severe mechanism in this process is Third Party Management – a third party is appointed by INAC “in the event of a default by the Council” (INAC, 2003a, p. 2) to manage the funding otherwise payable to the First Nation Council. Such intervention occurs under the following criteria:

- the recipient community defaults on any of the obligations set out in the agreement;
- the recipient’s auditor issues a denial of opinion or an adverse opinion;
- the council has incurred a cumulative deficit equivalent to 8 per cent or more of the council’s total annual revenues; or
- INAC has a reasonable belief, based on material evidence, that the health, safety, or welfare of the recipient’s community members is being compromised. (Auditor General of Canada, 2003, p. 8)

Placing First Nations administration “into receivership . . . [is a process that] successive Auditor Generals have been pointing out [results in] . . . the reporting requirement of First Nations [being] more strenuous than the requirements imposed on any other form of local government” (Cuthand, 2004, p. 1). The current Auditor General, commenting on the use of Third Party management in one INAC region, stated the process:

1. Does not conform to competent hiring/selection practices (is not open and transparent).
2. Has often resulted in appointments of persons who had no intention of visiting the community whose financial practices they were supposed to rectify; and
3. Does not result in third party managers collaborating with chief-and-council and their administrative staff to establish an increasing administrative and financial capacity.
4. Lacks results-based management and accountability framework.
5. Is not timely (intervention is not triggered early enough).
6. No comprehensive training program or capacity building is available to First Nations administrative units. Lacks dispute resolution mechanism. (Auditor General of Canada, 2003, pp. 4-10)

The cost to the First Nation for third party management fees (in the INAC regions reviewed by the Auditor General) varied from \$195,00 to \$312,000 per year – an amount taken from the First Nation’s overall

budget. Added to the cost of paying for the external manager is the amount required to “pay back” the First Nation’s “deficit” (Cuthand, 2004, p. 1) Thus both the cost of the Third Party Management and the percentage of the budget covering previous years’ debt is taken in each subsequent years from a First Nation’s budget, including funds allocated to education. The *2003-04 Estimates and Report on Plans and Priorities* submitted by INAC to Treasury Board identified that 21 per cent of its overall budget (\$1,127 million of \$5,471 million) was designated for elementary/secondary education (2003c, p. 7) – the largest single program expenditure. Similarly, the education budget received by a First Nation is often the largest portion of its budget, so for those First Nations operating within an imposed financial recovery process, the largest claw back is from the education budget. It is this process that has dire results on the educational services provided for First Nations students.

EDUCATION FUNDING

The education budget for a band-operated school is established in each INAC regional office through a variety of formulas/adjustment factors, which usually account for geographical location, grade levels taught (elementary and/or high school), and specific programming such as high-cost special education. Funding is then calculated on a unit cost based on the number of students (units) enrolled in the school; this number is established through the Nominal Roll (an annual information database compiled each autumn that establishes an annual census of students whose education whether directly or indirectly is funded by INAC). INAC, therefore, controls the amount of funding any band-operated school receives by establishing the unit cost and determining the number of students eligible to be funded. This method is in contrast to funds INAC pays to provincial schools: the unit cost for the provincial tuition rate for First Nations students (who reside on reserve and attend provincial schools) is usually determined by dividing the number of students into the designated operating cost of the provincial school. Provincial schools complete the Nominal Roll and submit such to the appropriate INAC regional office.²

The Nominal Roll thus generates the student units and subsequently the educational budget for a particular school. For those First Nations

schools situated on a reserve whose administration is under a financial recovery plan, a portion of the education budget is allocated or “clawed back” each year to the “debt recovery” process. The “removal” of funds from the education program can have a far-reaching effect on children’s education. The reduction in educational funding due to “debt recovery” in three separate First Nations is illustrated in the Table 2: the specific financial and student enrolment is used with permission of the individual First Nations and their respective educational organizations.

TABLE 2
Education Funding Clawbacks for Remedial Action Plans³

	Nominal Roll/ Full-Time- Equivalent Students	Education Budget	Funding Reduction/ Clawback per Student
School A	750.0	\$4.4 M	\$530.00
School B	360.0	\$1.9M	\$660.00
School C	340.0	\$1.9M	\$590.00

Although none of the above three schools incurred a deficit in their school operations, the First Nation’s overall financial status was considered in default and all programs administered by the First Nations were required to “contribute” to the overall financial recovery plan. Third-party managers maintained that education is “just another program” and “what’s a couple of extra kids in each classroom?” (personal communication, 2004).⁴ The financial recovery procedures are viewed only through an economic lens — how much can be saved from any one program, and does not consider the adverse effects on the quality of education provided. The educational clauses in the Comprehensive Funding Arrangement are of themselves such generalities that reducing educational funding has little effect on fulfilling the Agreement requirements. INAC Educational Program Certification requires only that

A statement signed by the principal of a band school certifying that, for the current

school year, all classroom teachers and the principal possess teaching certificates that are current and valid in the province/territory and that the curriculum being used in the school in all grades meets basic provincial requirements. (INAC, n.d., p. 4)

However, when the reduction of a schools funding is looked at through educational lens by students and teachers the effects become apparent. The following quotations are from School Effectiveness Reviews⁵ conducted in schools in which the First Nation's administration was managed by a third-party manager.

Student and Staff Voice:

We need way more books, paper, and stuff like that.

There's no erasers, no pencils.

We need to improve the stuff in the science room.

I would like to see the broken computers fixed.

If I had money I'd buy some stuff for the school.

We need newer books.

Resources are needed.

We need skill development programs for all grades.

We require more library and resource materials.

Lacking textbooks, videos, computers, etc.

My teacher buys us books.

The students share books, we don't have enough readers for the whole class.

There are no funds and no helpers for after school activities.

These comments give a glimpse of the effects of financial recovery plan on First Nations schools. Reducing the educational budget results in fewer teachers being hired and/or beginning teachers at lower salary levels; lack of purchase of up-to-date curricula; limits to the educational programming provided within the school (although high-cost special education funds are exempt from clawback, funds for regular and remedial programming are subject to reduction); and limits on school trips and extra-curricula activities. The cumulative effect of reduced funding has long-term affects on student attainment and is manifest in age/grade statistics. Thus, in one school there has been an 18 per cent increase in age/grade arrears in grades 1 and 2 when the age and grade for students is compared for two years before, and two years after third-party management was in effect.

Teacher morale is also significantly affected by the consequences of

educational funding clawback. Teacher layoffs, staff turnover, lack of teaching materials, old curricula resources, lack of school trips to supplement the curriculum, and the inability of teachers to attend professional development opportunities (usually offered by provincial school boards) take their toll on the staff.

EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability for financial management must be accompanied by accountability for educational programming by both First Nations and INAC. If INAC is committed to addressing the attainment gap identified by the Auditor General in both the 2000 and 2004 *Report of the Auditor General*, and in its own documents that state the high-school graduation “gap between First Nations people and the rest of Canadians has not narrowed” (INAC, 2004d, p. 1), then INAC must be committed to “working with First Nations and other stakeholders [regardless of financial stability] to ensure the provision of quality education for First Nations learners” (INAC, 2004c, p. 1). The *Basic Departmental Data 2003* identified a declining high school graduation rate over the past decade (2004e, p. 40) as indicated in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Students Enrolled in Grade 12 or 13 Graduating 1995-1996 to 2001-2002⁶

Year	Enrolment in Graduating Year	Graduates	Graduation Rate
1995-96	5,909	2,001	33.9
1996-97	5,618	1,785	31.8
1997-98	5,948	1,975	33.2
1998-99	6,038	1,939	32.1
1999-00	6,463	2,072	32.1
2000-01	7,062	2,168	30.7
2001-02	6,706	1,983	29.6

EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Educational innovation, accountability, and commitment of financial and human resources are required immediately if the growing educational attainment gap between First Nations and Canadian students in general is to be addressed. Across Canada, educational partnerships, innovative governance arrangements, and educational innovations are beginning to change the formal educational environment for First Nations students and subsequently to address and reflect the individual needs and aspirations of First Nations communities.

In 1997, nine Mi'kmaq Chiefs and the Minister of Indian Affairs signed *An Agreement with Respect to Mi'kmaq Education Nova Scotia*, and subsequent provincial and federal legislation enabled the Mi'kmaq to opt out of the Indian Act and gain jurisdiction over primary, elementary, and secondary education programs and services. The agreement supports the delivery of culturally relevant curriculum, First Nations educational governance and administrative structures, and a fair, open and transparent educational regime with accountability mechanisms supported by appropriate INAC funding.

Although the Mi'kmaq are the only First Nations to pursue such a comprehensive educational governance option, other First Nations across Canada are entering into agreements/partnerships that reflect their individual needs. In Saskatchewan, the Whitecap Dakota/Sioux First Nation and the Saskatoon Public School Division have entered into an agreement related to integrated professional development, student services, and curriculum development. In North Battleford, the public and separate school boards, the North Battleford Tribal Council, the Saskatchewan Department of Learning, and INAC have entered into a funding arrangement to establish Sakewew First Nations High School within the city for urban Aboriginal and on-reserve students; the North Battleford Tribal Council administers the school while the staff are employed by the North Battleford Catholic School Board. In Edmonton, a similar high school, Amiskwacy Academy, has been established within the jurisdiction of the Edmonton Public School Board. These partnerships strengthen First Nations' traditional educational practices and support academic achievement. They are significant steps; however, much more needs to be done, in the near future to address the level of

First Nations education.

CONCLUSION

In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood in its statement and aspirations for *Indian Control of Indian Education* stated:

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honored place in Indian tradition and culture . . . to give our children the knowledge to understand and be proud of themselves and the knowledge to understand the world around them . . . [and] to provide the training necessary for making a good living in modern society. (NIB, 1972, pp 1-3)

Three decades later, the fulfillment of these aspirations is still wanting. Educational attainment and equitable participation in Canadian society are significant issues, ones that have not gone unnoticed by the United Nations. The latter organization publishes an annual ranking of *The Wellbeing of Nations*, a survey that ranks 180 countries by measuring in terms of living conditions and the ecosystem (IUCN, 2001, p. 1). Whereas once Canada was ranked number 1 as the best place in the world to live, Canada has now “dropped to eighth place . . . one reason given for Canada’s fall are [is] the poor living conditions of Canada’s aboriginal peoples” (London Free Press, 2003, n.p.) — conditions that affect students educational attainment gap. Today, Canada is: “Committed to working with First Nations and other stakeholders to ensure the provision of quality education for First Nations learners that assists them to achieve their educational needs and goals” (INAC, 2004b, p. 1).

It is a federal commitment that requires immediate, ongoing action and resources as well as public support if First Nations students are to receive quality educational opportunities that foster “pride in one’s self . . . and a means of enabling [First Nations communities] to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement” (NIB, 1972, pp. 1-3). First Nations, Canada, and the provinces must, despite Constitutional, cultural, and educational governance differences, work together to address the educational attainment gap between Canadian students in general and First Nations

students and ensure all students are provided with quality educational opportunities regardless of educational jurisdiction and place of residence.

The Aboriginal population is increasing as a portion of the total Canadian population. In Saskatchewan, it is estimated that, by 2016, Aboriginal students will represent 47 per cent of the province's school-aged cohort (Tymchak & SIDRU, 2001). Canada cannot continue to ignore the educational attainment difference between Aboriginal and Canadian students in general. It is an individual and a national issue, which has applicability to other marginalized socioeconomic groups in Canada.

NOTES

¹ Auditor General, 2000, pp. 4-8.

² In the Saskatchewan Region, INAC audits the Nominal Rolls submitted by band-operated schools but not those submitted by provincial schools.

³ Enrolment and financial numbers have been rounded.

⁴ Basic Departmental Data 2003, p. 40.

⁵ Name withheld.

⁶ School Effectiveness Reviews are premised on commonly identified indicators of school and teaching effectiveness and provide stakeholders (staff, parents and students) an opportunity to become involved in thinking about their school and its future. Data is collected through surveys, interviews, focus groups and data analysis.

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