



Maytree Policy in Focus

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Poor Educational Outcomes for Aboriginal Students Threaten Canada's Prosperity

- Aboriginal people are growing in numbers and are younger than the average Canadian. The population of First Nations living on reserves is increasing.
- Sixty percent of students living on reserves are not graduating from high school. And things are getting relatively worse compared to non-Aboriginal students, not better.
- Per capita funding of education by the federal government for children on reserves has not kept pace with provincial investment in the regular school system.
- The education system for First Nations is not guided by any educational policy or legislative framework.
- Most schools on reserves are based on a village school model. They are isolated and have little professional support.
- Improving educational results on reserves would help alleviate poverty and would reduce government costs.

Featured Research

SUMMARY

Improving Education on Reserves: A First Nations Education Authority Act

by Michael
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This report recommends that the federal government work with First Nations to create:

1. **First Nations Education Authority Act.** This Act would enable, but not require, alliances of First Nations to create their own organizations similar to School Boards. It would make the federal government accountable for appropriate education funding, and First Nations accountable to improve educational results.
2. **Regional First Nations Education Centres.** Several centres would be set up across the country to provide the support currently provided by provincial ministries of education in the regular school system. The Regional Centres would be run by First Nations.
3. **National First Nations Language, Culture and Education Institute.** This organization would evaluate the First Nations education system Canada-wide, collect and analyze data, and undertake best practice workshops for administrators, principals and teachers. The Centre would also be a repository of knowledge and facilitate exchange on linguistic and cultural issues.

Introduction

Aboriginal Canadians are an important and growing cohort of tomorrow's citizens. According to the 2006 Census, about 1.2 million, or 4% of the Canadian population, are Aboriginal – and most are First Nations people. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan the proportion of Aboriginal peoples is much higher, at 15%. Most residents of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut identify as Aboriginal.

In 2006, 40% of the Aboriginal population was 18 years or younger, compared to 24% for the population as a whole.¹ About one-third of all Aboriginal people live on reserves.² As the Canadian population ages and the babyboomer generation retires, Aboriginal people will be needed to fill emerging labour market shortages – particularly in occupations requiring post-secondary education because this is where employment growth is anticipated to be the most significant.³

The term “Aboriginal” refers to those people living in Canada who identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. Most First Nations Aboriginal people live on reserves, most Métis live in cities, and most Inuit live in the Territories. This issue of *Maytree Policy in Focus* focuses on the educational attainment of First Nations living on reserves.

How well does the education system prepare Aboriginal students?

In 2006, 44% of all Aboriginal people over the age of 15 did not have a high school diploma – compared with 24% of the total population.⁴ The dropout rate appears to be much higher – and getting worse – for First Nations children living on reserves. Most students in their last year of high school are not graduating.

¹ Statistics Canada, *2006 Census of Population*.

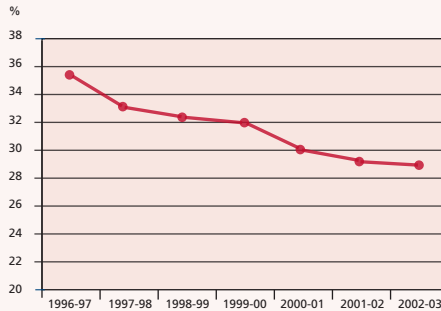
² Statistics Canada, *Projections of the Aboriginal populations, Canada, provinces and territories 2001 to 2017* (Ottawa: Industry Canada, Catalogue no. 91-547-XIE, 2005).

³ Mario Lapointe and others, *Looking-Ahead: A 10-Year Outlook for the Canadian Labour Market (2006-2015)* (Ottawa: Human Resources and Social Development Canada, October 2006).

⁴ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Population Profile, 2006 Census*.

⁵ Michael Mendelson, *Improving Education on Reserves: A First Nations Education Authority Act* (Ottawa: The Caledon Institute of Social Policy, July 2008), 7.

Percent of On-Reserve First Nations Enrolled in Grade 12 Who Graduate



Source: Indian Affairs and Northern Development. (2005a).
Basic Departmental Data: 2004.
More recent data have not been published.

Why is the education system failing First Nations children on reserves?

For children who live on reserves, the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada pays for education from kindergarten through to high school for students resident on reserve. Most children will attend First Nations-run elementary schools on reserves, and are funded to attend provincially-run high schools off-reserve. Per student funding of education for children on reserves by the federal government has not kept pace with provincial investment in the regular school system. Since 2000, increases for on-reserve education have been capped at 2% per year, whereas provincial governments have made significant investments in the same period.⁵

First Nations-run schools do not have many of the necessary supports provided elsewhere (such as professional development and school supervision) to deliver a quality education. Instead, most First Nations schools depend on provincial ministries of education for curriculum which is often not culturally appropriate or realistic given the conditions on reserve.

In addition, reserve-based education is not guided by any educational policy or legislative framework.

IMPROVING EDUCATION ON RESERVES: A FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION AUTHORITY ACT

BY MICHAEL MENDELSON, THE CALEDON INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL POLICY,

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The author recommends creating a **First Nations Education Authority Act**. For First Nations which establish an Education Authority this Act would replace sections of the Indian Act on education, which are rooted in out-dated assimilationist policies and which do not contain any reference to substantive educational issues. The new Act would provide a framework to encourage the building of a First Nations education system, replacing the village school model now in place.

Right now, most First Nations schools are operated by single Bands, without the supports possible through an adequately funded First Nations school board. There is also no requirement that federal funding for First Nations education be equivalent to provincial funding and no objective mechanism to review and resolve disputes about funding levels. The new Act would enable alliances of First Nations to create self-governed Education Authorities empowered and financed under the Act. First Nations could choose (or not) to create an Authority based on clear criteria. The Authorities would combine many First Nations schools under a single administrative structure and provide the support functions of a school board. The Act would commit the federal government to fund Authorities at a level sufficient to achieve results equivalent to that of provincial schools. This would be an enforceable obligation on the federal government, and the Act would include a dispute resolution mechanism should a disagreement arise.

To complement the work of the Authorities, the author recommends the federal government work with First Nations to create **Regional First Nations Education Centres**. These centres would be established across the country, perhaps eventually one in each province, from B.C. to Quebec, and one in the Atlantic region. The territories could be serviced by a centre in a Western province. These centres would provide support to the First Nations Education Authorities and assistance to other schools with First Nations, Métis or Inuit students. This support might include standard setting, curriculum development and other substantial and specialized investments, which are currently provided by provincial ministries to off-reserve schools. To prevent duplication, the regional centres would work closely with provincial ministries, while remaining independent and under First Nations governance.

Finally, the author proposes the creation of a national **First Nations Language, Culture and Education Institute**. This organization would be responsible for Canada-wide First Nations education tasks such as on-going evaluations of the system as a whole, the collection and analysis of data, and best practice workshops for administrators, principals and teachers. The Institute would also facilitate exchange between First Nations from across the country on linguistic and cultural issues required to provide intergenerational continuity.

“Those unfamiliar with education, or simply ill-informed, may make the argument that these levels [the levels of oversight provided by School Board and Ministry of Education] are nothing more than layers of bureaucracy imposed upon the ‘real’ work being done by the front line [...] This line is analogous to saying that Wal-Mart’s head office functions of corporate planning, information technology strategies, accounting and so on are nothing but a bureaucratic burden to the ‘real’ work being done by front line stores. This argument would not be accepted by Wal-Mart shareholders, nor should the analogous argument be accepted by students, parents and taxpayers.”⁶

While it is difficult to predict the costs of his recommendations, Mendelson suggests that the changes, at maturity, could cost about \$360 million annually, although it would take many years before the full cost would be reached. While this is not a trivial sum, the author points out the cost of poor educational outcomes is many times greater – to the public sector, to individual First Nations youth and to society more generally.

The Caledon Institute of Social Policy is an Ottawa-based think tank funded by Maytree.

⁶ Mendelson, *Improving Education on Reserves*, 8 and 9.

Investing in education can reap long-term rewards for both Aboriginal people and the Canadian public.

According to the 2006 census, half of all Aboriginal people working full time, full year, make less than \$34,940 a year. This figure is about \$6,500 less than the median income for the total population.

While education is not a panacea for issues of poverty and inequality, Aboriginal people with postsecondary education experience economic outcomes more similar to others living in Canada. For example, in Western Canada, postsecondary educated Aboriginal people living off-reserve had an unemployment rate of 6.9% compared with 3.9% for non-Aboriginal people. In comparison, the overall unemployment rate was 4.4% for non-Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 and 11.5% for Aboriginal people.⁷

Each year, of the approximately 10,000 students resident on-reserve in their last year of high school, only 4,000 are graduating. To achieve parity with other Canadians, this number would have to increase to 8,500. If a modest goal of raising the graduation rate each year by an additional 1,500 students were reached, it is estimated that the public sector would save about \$375 million because of the improved socioeconomic outcomes associated with a high school diploma. These savings would more than cover the costs of the additional investments in education required to achieve this goal.

To consider:

Some recommend that the Provincial government take over the provision of education on First Nations reserves. However, even if this were desirable, pursuing this option would create needless delays in efforts to improve the education system. The provinces would not agree to this without significant financial guarantees because the federal government has constitutional and treaty obligations for education on reserves. In addition, Aboriginals may not agree to this because it might undermine their rights to self-government and autonomy.

⁷ Statistics Canada, "Labour Force Survey: Western Canada's off-reserve Aboriginal population." *The Daily*, June 13, 2005.

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Mendelson, Michael. *Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada*, The Caledon Institute of Social Policy, July 2006, www.caledonist.org.

This report highlights the facts and figures about Aboriginal people's and postsecondary education in Canada. It presents startling evidence of soaring high school dropout rates.

McCue, Harvey. *Aboriginal Post-secondary Education: A Think Piece from the Centre for Native Policy and Research*, August 2006, http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/campus2020/think_pieces.htm.

This article suggests that the low rates of postsecondary education among Aboriginal Canadians is the result of an unresponsive postsecondary education system, a lack of financial support from the federal government, and the failure of the public system to prepare Aboriginal children for postsecondary education, in large part because of a lack of culturally sensitive curriculum.



About Maytree Policy in Focus

Maytree Policy in Focus, a publication of Maytree, identifies and shares practical research to help inform policy- and decision-making.

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