Aboriginal Education in Canada: A Saskatchewan Perspective

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The Need for a Broad Perspective

During the 1870s, representatives of the Crown and First Nations met and negotiated the numbered treaties, which not only addressed land issues but ultimately outlined the obligations of the Crown to provide educational services for First Nations People. Education was identified as a way "to prepare for the future" so that the people "will prosper" in a system "equal to the whites" (Morris 1991/1880, pp. 233-238). As part of its treaty negotiations, the Government of Canada was obligated to fulfil its treaty commitments and provide educational services for First Nations people. Yet a century later research has consistently documented differential rates of academic achievement for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Student achievement is not merely an individual issue but one set within a broader historical, social, and economic context, both nationally and internationally.

In 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and in so doing recognized

(1) Everyone has the right to education…

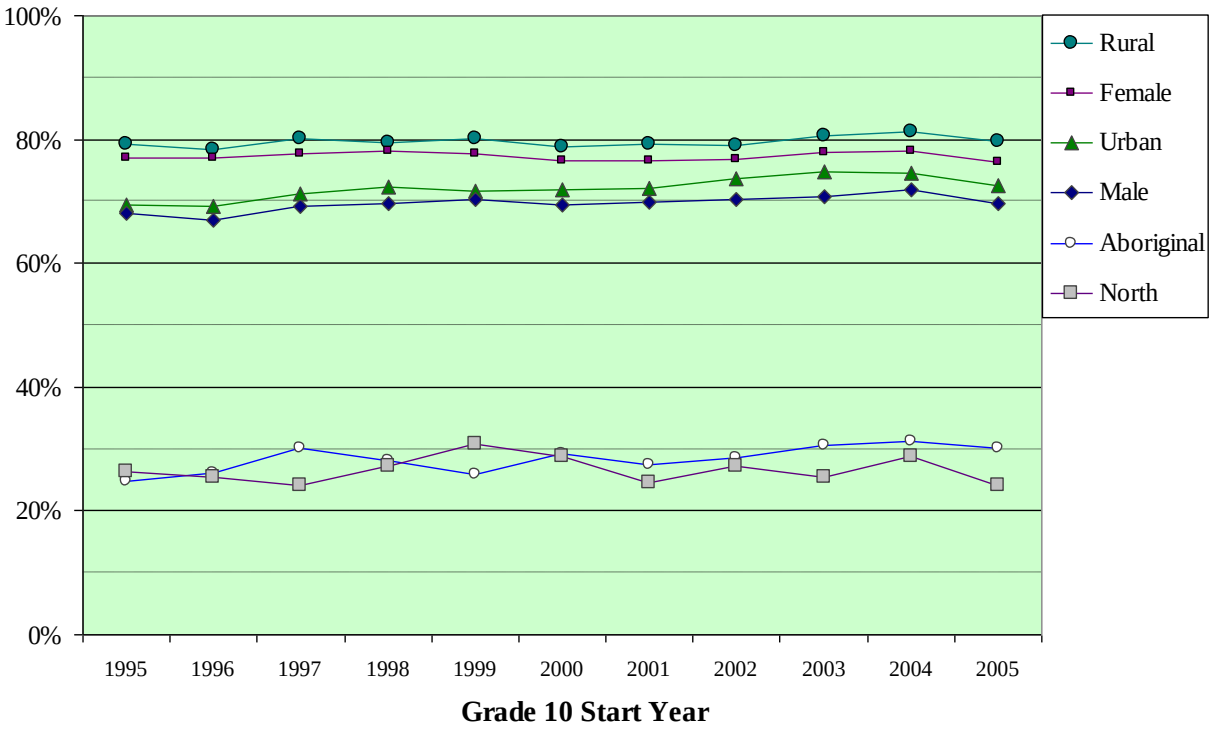
(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality

In 2007, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the United Nations in 2007 set forth "the framework for the future," for Indigenous communities worldwide which "face many challenges in education" (Magga, nd, p. 1). The Chairperson of the United Nations Permanent Forum stated further "we must ensure that Indigenous children, young people and adults have access to all levels of education

(including adult education) on a basis comparable to that available to other citizens" (p. 1). While Canada did not sign the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, yet the quality and availability of education for First Nations children in Canada is plagued by similar issues facing Indigenous people worldwide. In 2000, Canada's Auditor General's Report stated "Indian and Northern Affairs Canada cannot demonstrate that it meets its stated objective to assist First Nations students living on reserves in achieving their educational needs and aspirations" (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2000, p. 3-4). Four years later in a follow-up Report, the Auditor General stated "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" (Office of the Auditor General, 2004, p. 1).

Perhaps the clearest statement relating to the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is provided in the 2008 Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report (Ministry of Education, 2008) which documents high school completion rates. While Table 1, outlined below, indicates some differential completion rates of male versus female students completing grade 12 in 3 years or less after beginning grade 10, the striking difference relates to the difference between Northern, which is approximately 85% Aboriginal in population (personal communication, Al Loke, May 20, 2009), and self-declared Aboriginal students, as compared to other student cohorts. An approximate 30% completion rate for Northern and Aboriginal students as compared to 70-80% completion rates for other students indicates a striking disparity.

Table 1: Percentage of Saskatchewan Students Completing Grade 12 in 3 Years or less after Beginning Grade 10, by Student Category, 1995-96 to 2005-06 Grade 10 Cohorts



Source: Ministry of Education. (2008). *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12. Figure 42c*. Regina, SK

This paper will briefly review historical and legal context regarding the issue of student achievement gaps. It will also consider information related to student achievement from a Saskatchewan context, including the relationship to labour market attachment and future earning potential. Finally it will share a number of policy recommendations, based upon existing research, regarding possible avenues for the improvement of student achievement. These will include the need for increased attention to issues of poverty and disadvantage, improved leadership and governance, more attention to language and culture, and more appropriate instruction and curriculum.

The Issue of Poverty

Research continues to suggest that reasons for student achievement discrepancies are related to fundamental issues of poverty and disadvantage. A recently published study by the Saskatoon Health Region (Lemstra & Neudorf, 2008) attempted to identify factors that were closely identified with health disparity in Saskatoon. They indicated that:

> Given the reality of limited human and financial resources, it is important to ascertain the main determinants of health upon which a positive return on investment is likely. If the main determinants of health responsible for health disparities are variables like income status and educational status, a comprehensive and coordinated set of policy options will be required to reduce extensive health disparity in Saskatoon (p. 3-4)

Their research conclusions led Lemstra and Neudorf (2008) to propose an anti-poverty initiative that included policy options which:

> Should be viewed in combination instead of isolation. Some policy options are to address immediate needs, while others are long term strategies that address macro level social structures. For example, short term income and housing stability measures are intended to provide the necessary support and stability to allow education and employment initiatives to have a realistic chance of success." (p. 340)

One example of the importance of focussing on issues such as poverty relates to the Aboriginal community. Lemstra and Neudorf (2008) comment that, after controlling for variables such as socio-economic status, Aboriginal culture status " no longer has a

statistically significant association with low self report health, diabetes prevalence, heart disease prevalence, lower child immunization rates and depressed mood" (p. 7). The implication of this and other research findings is clear – if the Saskatoon Health Region is to improve overall health, attention to a broad number of health-related indices is necessary. More specifically, from the perspective of this study, issues such as poor educational achievement rates need to be viewed within a larger context. If issues such as poverty are not meaningfully addressed, it will be difficult to show progress on increasing overall First Nations and Métis student achievement rates.

An example of this reality relates to the issue of student mobility. Numerous studies (Sanderson, 2004; Fisher, Matthews, Stafford, Nakagawa, & Durante, 2002; Aman, 2006) document the challenges related to high student mobility. Sanderson (2004) comments on the role that family instability and poverty exert on student mobility, indicating that students who move frequently are much more likely to repeat a grade or experience other types of academic challenges. Similar challenges face Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan. While measures such as the provincial tracking system (www.education.gov.sk.ca) can alleviate some of the difficulties related to student mobility, this issue will not be resolved until meaningful measures to alleviate poverty and improve family stability are implemented. However, the situation should not be viewed solely within a negative perspective. For example, Siggner and Costa (2005) indicated that:

> In terms of life long learning, there is some cautious good news. The shares of Aboriginal your acquiring higher levels of schooling in the selected CMAs have increased over the 20-year period. School attendance

> among Aboriginal youth in the 15-24 year age group has increased substantially since 1981 and Aboriginal young adults aged 35-34 years have seen their shares with post-secondary completions increase as well. It has been much more dramatic for females than for males, but both shares have gone up in almost all CMAs in the study. The exceptions were Aboriginal males in Regina and Edmonton. (p. 24)

The message here is simple – student achievement must be viewed within a broader context, rather than focussed narrowly educational issues. While positive changes are occurring, attention to larger social, economic, and cultural issues is critical if student learning and achievement is to meaningfully improve.

An Historical Context

Education is the process by which communities transmit knowledge, values, language, culture, and skills from one generation to the next; it is also a process of learning which enables each individual to pursue choices and opportunities. Referencing Stoney education prior to contact, Chief John Snow wrote "education was interwoven into the life of the tribal society…it was a very extensive study of many things" (Snow, 1977, p. 6). Yet, Leitch (2006) argued that Canada "failed to recognize…Aboriginal cultures that existed prior to European contact" and that today Canada "does not place all cultures on an equal footing" (p. 107). In reference specifically to language rights, Leitch argued further that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) "may protect all cultures and languages from governmental interference, but it only explicitly gives the right to publicly funded education to Canada's official language" groups – English and

French Canadians (p. 107). Yet the divide between rights to education for First Nations people and Canadians in general goes beyond language rights.

The British North America Act, 1867 (subsequently repatriated as the Constitution Act, 1982) provided for the division of powers between Canada and the provinces. Constitutional jurisdiction for education is vested in the provinces: each province "may exclusively make Laws in relation to education" (s.93). Constitutionally, each provincial legislature was empowered to establish educational services and programs, and professional parameters/requirements within the context of the socio-economic beliefs and focus of the individual province for all students within their provincial boundaries. However, provincial authority for education does not encompass First Nations for children living on-reserves. The Parliament of Canada within its authority "to make Laws for the Peace, Order, and good Government of Canada" (s.91) was granted "exclusive Legislative Authority" for "Indian, and Lands reserved for the Indians" (s.91-24). The Constitution, therefore, created two separate educational systems in Canada – a provincial system for all residents of each province, and a federal system for those who lived on-reserves across Canada.

The Treaties and Education

It is difficult to discuss any aspect of First Nations education without reference to the numbered treaties. As the formal agreements that delineated the terms under which First Nations communities agreed to share their land in exchange for a series of commitments to them by the Crown – including the obligation to provide educational services. The treaties, the Treaty 4 Commissioner assured First Nations people, would

establish a "caring relationship" (RCAP, 1996, p.167) and that "no harm would come to them as a result of the treaty and that their way of life would be safeguarded" (p.168). The Chiefs and Headmen who negotiated the numbered treaties with the Crown representatives identified western educational services as a means by which their people would be able to learn skills which would enable them to participate in the new economy. The numbered treaties vary little in the written form. In reference to education, school, schools for instruction, and teachers to instruct, the treaties give similar meaning in each statement relating to the treaty right to education clause in each treaty. The Crown's education commitment in Treaty 1, 1871 stated, "Her Majesty agrees to maintain a school on each reserve hereby made, whenever the Indians of the reserve should desire it" (Morris, 1991/1880, p. 315). Treaty 1 established both the treaty right to and the policy context for the provision of educational services when First nations requested them. As well, the numbered treaties established the Crown's fiduciary obligation for First Nations education. The treaties gave First Nations responsibility for the implementation and control of education, and when and where educational services were to be provided. Treaty 3 (1873) and subsequently Treaty 5 (1875) and Treaty 6 (1876) stated:

> Her Majesty agrees to maintain schools for instruction in such reserves hereby made as to her Government of her Dominion of Canada may seem advisable, whenever the Indians of the reserve shall desire it. (Morris, 1991/1880, p. 323)

Although education clauses in the numbered treaties are terse, they clearly identify the Crown's responsibility to provide both a physical building and teachers to instruct "Indians." Furthermore, the treaty education clauses establish educational policy – the availability of educational services whenever "Indians" desire such services – and

emphasize the Crown's fiduciary obligation to provide educational services (Carr-Stewart, 2001). Yet for the most part, Canada paid little heed to its treaty obligations. Instead, Canada utilized its own legislation, the *Indian Act* enacted in 1876 and revised from time to time, to provide educational services according to its own criteria.

In Canada, the subsequent imposition of the residential school system personified the failure to honour treaty commitments. Canada chose to leave the management of such schools to others while establishing the overall policy related to these schools, whereby "the government of Canada embarked upon a century–long attempt to assimilate native children" (Leitch, 2006, p. 108).The results of the policy of assimilation implemented in through the residential system are well documented.

Yellow Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) writing from an American context, indicated that:

> We suggest these social ills are primarily the product of a legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief across generations. It is proposed that this phenomenon, which we label *historical unresolved grief,* contributes to the current social pathology, originating from the loss of lives, land, and vital aspects of Native culture promulgated by the European conquest of the Americas. (p. 60)

The achievement gap is not a recent phenomenon. Appearing before the Special Joint Committee of Parliament in 1946, the Director of Indian Affairs Branch reported that the school enrolment of First Nations students across Canada numbered 18,805 and furthermore approximately 12,000 children of school age living in northern and isolated areas "did not have access to educational facilities" (Special Joint Committee, 1946, p.

192). Across Canada, funding for schools on reserve varied according to the elected party of the day, national priorities, regional allocations, and public opinion. Educational programming and services for on-reserve schools was limited at best and educational attainment was stymied by lack of school materials, teachers, and pedagogy designed for Indigenous children (Carr-Stewart, 2006).

Speaking in the House of Commons, the Member of Parliament for Yorkton, Saskatchewan painted 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, 5489)

It is not the purpose of this study to focus on past history regarding the treaty making process and the subsequent decision by the Government of Canada to pursue an agenda of assimilation. However, it is important to set context for the study and its subsequent focus on strategies for the enhancement of student achievement among First Nations children. Put briefly, a major reason for the current challenges facing improved student achievement among First Nations and Métis youth relate to failures in past policy. If positive change is to occur, recognition of past failures and the desire to pursue a more constructive direction is necessary.

In 1972, the united stand on education by First Nations people across Canada resulted in the seminal document *Indian Control of Indian Education* which was presented by the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada to the Minister of Indian Affairs

and Northern Development Canada. This document which outlined the philosophy of First Nation educational called for education "to reinforce their Indian identity" and "to provide the training necessary for making a good living in modern society" (p. 3). Furthermore, the document called for parent and community control of education; today there are 494 band managed schools across Canada: Schools which for the most part, are managed by individual First Nations or Tribal Councils who have delegated authority to hire teachers and generally manage their school within the confines of federal funding levels and appropriate federal legislation. Considerable gaps in funding and programming remain between provincial and on-reserve schools: Differences which as identified by Canada's Auditor General provide significant variance in outcomes for children attending two different educational systems in Canada.

Yet it is not only children attending on-reserve schools. The information presented within this paper will focus primarily upon student achievement within the provincial Pre K – 12 school system in Saskatchewan. It will document a dramatic difference in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal Student Achievement and the Saskatchewan Context

Setting the Stage

It is important to consider Aboriginal Pre K-12 student achievement in Saskatchewan within the context of the implications of these differential rates of academic success. The first implication relates to differences in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Saskatchewan. As Table 2,

outlined below suggests, Saskatchewan Aboriginal residents demonstrate consistently lower rates of educational attainment.

Table 2: Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	**Saskatchewan**		**Aboriginal Identity**		
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Percentage Point Difference
Total Population 15 years and over:	766,235		91,295		
No certificate, diploma or degree	231,730	30.2	45,135	49.4	19.2
High school certificate or equivalent	205,495	26.8	20,055	22.0	(4.9)
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	86,310	11.3	8,910	9.8	(1.5)
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	111,770	14.6	9,055	9.9	(4.7)
University certificate or diploma below the bachelor level	32,180	4.2	2,850	3.1	(1.1)
University certificate, diploma or degree at or above bachelor level	98,755	12.9	5,285	5.8	(7.1)

Source: Statistics Canada. 2007. 2006 Community Profiles. 2006 Census. Statistics Canada. 2008. Aboriginal Population Profile. 2006.

Similar results may be observed when considering Saskatchewan labour force characteristics. As Table 3 suggests, the unemployment rate is 3.25 times higher for Saskatchewan Aboriginal members, while the employment rate is 28.6% lower than the general population.

Table 3: Labour Force Characteristics

Labour Force Characteristics	Saskatchewan	Aboriginal
Population 15 years and over	766,235	91,295
Number in the Labour Force	524,305	51,480
Participation Rate (%)	68.4%	56.4%
Number Employed	494,901	42,095
Employment Rate (%)	64.6%	46.1%
Number Unemployed	29,361	9,390
Unemployment Rate (%)	5.6%	18.2%

Source: Statistics Canada. 2008. Labour force indicators by age groups for both sexes, 2006 counts – labour force, for Canada, provinces and territories – 20% sample data (table).

A review of average and median income, shown below in Table 4, demonstrates similar results. Once again, the Saskatchewan Aboriginal population lags dramatically behind the general population. For example, the average income of Aboriginal residents is $19,939 as compared to $33,108 for the overall population.

Table 4: Income Levels

15 Years and Over	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	Percentage
Number With Income	646,405	82,560	NA
Average Income $	33,108	19,939	60.2
Median Income $	25,234	13,843	54.9

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-563-XCB2006008.

Saskatchewan Aboriginal residents consistently demonstrate lower levels of educational attainment, labour force engagement, and income. While one cannot claim a direct relationship between the Pre K-12 student achievement levels outlined below and these measures, the relationship provides food for thought.

Aboriginal Pre K-12 Student Achievement in Saskatchewan

The Saskatchewan Indicators Program

The Saskatchewan Indicators Program arose from the Directions Report, a major curriculum reform in the 1980's, which re-visioned and updated provincial curriculum and practice. In an assessment of the progress to date, Saskatchewan Education (1993) "suggested that the Directions vision needs to be expanded to take into account the new circumstances of the 1990's. It is, therefore, deemed to be imperative to also collect information on the system as a whole to assess progress towards system goals of relevance, accessibility, equity and accountability" (p. 24). The result was the Saskatchewan Education Indicators Program, with the following mission statement:

> The purpose of establishing a set of indicators is to collect relevant and appropriate data to support decision making, planning, and policy development at all levels of the education system and to demonstrate public accountability by providing information about the education system to the education community and the public at large.
>
> The indicators should promote the best possible learning environment for all students in Saskatchewan schools by providing information about the attainment of the Saskatchewan Goals of Education. (p. 22)

The Indicators Program proceeded to collect information on a broad range of indices, including context, process, and outcomes. Most recently, the decision was taken to dis-aggregate the data with respect to aboriginal students. For the first time, the 2008 Indicators Report provided information related to student achievement that identified aboriginal students as a separate group. This has allowed provincial stakeholders access

to this data, a process which has already generated useful dialogue. The information provided here is drawn from the 2008 Indicators Report. It reinforces earlier comments in this paper regarding the apparent discrepancies between the academic achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

The 2008 Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report

Table 1, which is drawn from the 2008 Indicators Report, provides a striking example of the information contained within the report. It suggests a striking disparity between three year graduation rates of the various student populations, with an approximate 30% completion rate for Northern and Aboriginal students as compared to 70-80% completion rates for other students. While perhaps one of the most striking examples of the disparity, it is not unique. The information that follows further illustrates this discrepancy. It should be noted that Table 1 includes First Nations communities that chose to participate in the provincial student tracking system.

Table 5: Percentage of Saskatchewan Self-Declared Aboriginal Students Completing Grade 12 by Years after Starting Grade 10, 1995-96 to 2005-06 Grade 10 Cohorts

Grade 10 Year	Years from Start of Grade 10 to High School Completion						Not Enrolled	Still Enrolled	Total Students
	3 or less	4	5	6	7	8 or more			
1995-96	24.8%	31.8%	36.4%	40.1%	43.0%	49.5%	48.3%	2.1%	749
1996-97	26.2%	35.0%	38.3%	39.7%	42.1%	48.5%	48.7%	2.8%	866
1997-98	30.0%	37.6%	41.4%	44.4%	46.5%	53.3%	43.0%	3.7%	889
1998-99	28.1%	36.3%	40.4%	44.5%	48.3%	53.3%	44.2%	2.4%	947
1999-00	25.8%	34.6%	41.0%	45.9%	48.4%	51.4%	44.6%	4.1%	1,010
2000-01	29.3%	40.0%	46.8%	51.2%	53.6%	55.0%	40.6%	4.4%	1,241
2001-02	27.4%	38.2%	44.4%	48.4%	50.3%		42.6%	7.0%	1,447
2002-03	28.6%	38.6%	45.7%	48.9%			37.9%	13.2%	1,787
2003-04	30.5%	39.7%	44.2%				33.3%	22.5%	2,041
2004-05	31.4%	40.6%					22.5%	36.9%	1,910
2005-06	30.1%						11.4%	58.3%	2,146

Source: Ministry of Education. (2008). *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12*. Figure 43. Regina, SK

As Table 5 indicates, self-declared Aboriginal students tend to complete high school at rates between 24.8% in 3 years or less (1995-96) to 55.0% in 8 years or more (2001-02). As Table 1 indicates this compares with an approximate 70-80% completion rate in three years or less for urban and rural Saskatchewan students. While self-declared Aboriginal graduation rates are trending in a positive direction, a striking difference is still observable. Similar trends may be observed with students retention rates prior to high school attendance. Table 6 shows that self-declared Aboriginal students are more likely to continue in the previous grade and not re-enrol for the next year of schooling in both grade 9 and 10. The only other provincial group with similar rates is the northern population, which is approximately 85% Aboriginal.

It should be noted that urban enrolments include students attending school in any of the 13 cities in Saskatchewan. North includes students attending school in the Northern Region of Saskatchewan while rural includes enrolments in all other schools.

Table 6: Proportion of 2005-06 Grade 8 Students who Transition into Grade 9 in 2006-07, and Grade 10 in 2007-08

	One Year Later - 2006-07			Two Years Later - 2007-08		
	Continuing Previous Grade	Grade 9	Students not Re-enrolled	Continuing Previous Grade(s)	Grade 10	Students not Re-enrolled
Total	1.4%	96.4%	2.2%	5.3%	91.2%	3.5%
Self - Declared Aboriginal	4.6%	91.4%	4.0%	16.1%	77.8%	6.2%
Male	1.5%	96.6%	1.9%	5.6%	91.0%	3.4%
Female	1.3%	96.3%	2.4%	5.0%	91.5%	3.6%
Urban	0.9%	97.3%	1.8%	5.2%	92.2%	2.6%
Rural	1.1%	97.2%	1.7%	4.0%	92.6%	3.4%
North	8.9%	87.5%	3.6%	15.9%	75.8%	8.3%

Source: Ministry of Education. (2008), *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12. Figure 40b.* Regina, SK

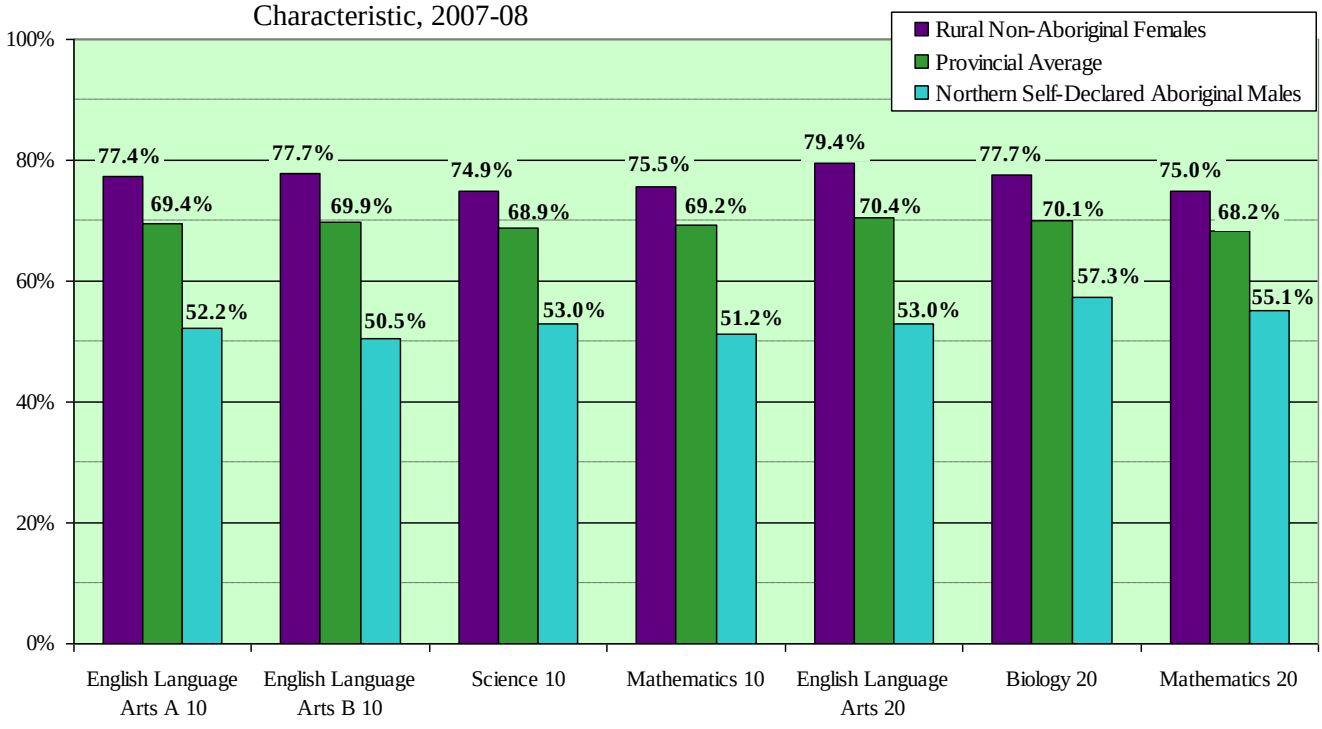
The same pattern is observed with respect to high school marks in grade's 10-12. Tables 7 and 8 illustrate the difference in average grade 10 and 11 (10 and 20) marks. In all cases, self-declared Aboriginal students have lower average marks.

Table 7: Average Marks for Selected 10 and 20 Level Courses, by Student Characteristic, 2007-08

Non-Aboriginal	Urban		Rural		North	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
English Language Arts A 10	67.9%	74.7%	69.1%	77.4%	62.8%	66.0%
English Language Arts B 10	68.4%	75.4%	69.4%	77.7%	58.5%	61.9%
Science 10	68.7%	72.6%	69.7%	74.9%	68.3%	67.0%
Mathematics 10	69.1%	72.8%	70.7%	75.5%	59.9%	60.7%
English Language Arts 20	66.8%	75.3%	69.2%	79.4%	61.0%	71.0%
Biology 20	67.6%	73.0%	69.6%	77.7%	63.2%	61.3%
Mathematics 20	66.4%	70.6%	69.0%	75.0%	61.0%	61.6%

Self- Declared Aboriginal	Urban		Rural		North	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
English Language Arts A 10	52.8%	58.4%	55.9%	61.5%	52.2%	57.7%
English Language Arts B 10	53.1%	58.0%	55.5%	61.8%	50.5%	57.9%
Science 10	53.3%	56.2%	58.2%	60.8%	53.0%	57.1%
Mathematics 10	53.8%	56.4%	56.6%	59.6%	51.2%	53.9%
English Language Arts 20	54.5%	58.8%	56.5%	62.6%	53.0%	62.2%
Biology 20	55.4%	59.2%	57.2%	61.8%	57.3%	60.6%
Mathematics 20	54.8%	57.6%	57.4%	61.4%	55.1%	58.4%

Table 8: Range of Average Marks for Selected 10 and 20 Level Courses, by Student Characteristic, 2007-08



Source: Ministry of Education. (2008). *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12. Figures 19a and 19b*. Regina, SK

Grade 12 average marks show similar trends. While the information for self-declared Aboriginal students is not provided, the average marks for northern students provides some indication of aboriginal average marks, since approximately 85% of these students are of Aboriginal origin. Once again we find that northern students achieve at lower levels than do students from urban and rural populations. For example, the average mark for northern females in English A 30 is 62.7 as compared to 73.9 for urban females or 76.6 for rural females. Similarly, northern males obtained an average mark of 62.0 in Mathematics A 30, as compared to 66.0 for urban males or 68.8 for rural males. A very consistent pattern was observed in almost all cases.

Table 9: Percentage Enrolment and Average Mark for Selected 30 Level Courses, by Gender and Location, 2007-08

Registrations			Urban		Rural		North		Province	
			Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
English Language Arts A 30	12,858	% enrol	50.8	49.2	52.0	48.0	65.6	34.4	51.8	48.2
		avg. mark	73.9	66.0	76.6	69.3	62.7	59.9	74.3	67.0
English Language Arts B 30	12,616	% enrol	50.8	49.2	51.0	49.0	62.9	37.1	51.3	48.7
		avg. mark	73.7	67.2	76.9	69.6	62.9	59.0	74.4	67.9
History 30	7,464	% enrol	49.0	51.0	50.6	49.4	45.9	54.1	49.7	50.3
		avg. mark	73.5	68.2	76.0	70.2	61.5	55.8	74.6	69.0
Native Studies 30	2,306	% enrol	62.9	37.1	58.1	41.9	62.1	37.9	61.8	38.2
		avg. mark	66.3	59.7	73.2	63.4	63.5	58.3	67.9	60.6
Social Studies 30	3,513	% enrol	48.2	51.8	49.7	50.3	57.5	42.5	48.9	51.1
		avg. mark	74.0	67.1	77.0	71.8	61.6	64.7	74.1	68.1
Mathematics A 30	10,734	% enrol	52.2	47.8	51.2	48.8	67.2	32.8	52.2	47.8
		avg. mark	70.0	66.0	73.5	68.8	64.3	62.0	71.0	67.0
Mathematics B 30	8,106	% enrol	52.3	47.7	54.1	45.9	66.0	34.0	53.2	46.8
		avg. mark	73.3	70.8	75.6	71.9	68.2	64.9	74.0	71.1
Mathematics C 30	6,076	% enrol	51.0	49.0	55.4	44.6	59.2	40.8	52.8	47.2
		avg. mark	76.8	73.5	77.7	74.1	68.9	74.4	77.0	73.6
Calculus 30	2,352	% enrol	48.1	51.9	52.3	47.7	72.4	27.6	50.2	49.8
		avg. mark	80.9	77.4	81.7	78.7	75.8	69.3	81.2	77.9
Biology 30	9,410	% enrol	61.8	38.1	58.1	41.9	66.8	33.2	60.7	39.3
		avg. mark	72.6	70.3	74.8	69.5	63.5	57.2	73.0	69.5
Chemistry 30	6,242	% enrol	57.2	42.8	59.1	40.9	66.0	34.0	58.1	41.9
		avg. mark	76.2	73.5	76.5	74.0	66.0	56.8	76.1	73.4
Physics 30	4,917	% enrol	43.9	56.1	50.0	50.0	64.6	35.4	46.7	53.3
		avg. mark	77.8	74.7	77.3	75.3	70.3	68.9	77.4	74.9

Table 10: Average Final Accredited Teacher-Assigned and Composite Marks, Selected Subjects, 2007-08

	Accredited	Dept Exam[1]	Teacher - Submitted[2]	Composite[3]
English Language Arts A 30	70.8%	68.6%	72.9%	71.2%
English Language Arts B 30	71.2%	68.4%	73.8%	71.6%
Biology 30	71.8%	68.6%	72.7%	71.1%
Mathematics A 30	68.6%	68.7%	72.4%	70.9%

Note: Data includes all schools and all programs, except modified advanced (A, AP, IB) or modified basic (31) courses, and courses delivered in French. Registration plus a mark is required (excludes transfer credits). Includes all schools, including Technology Supported Learning, but not exams written for 100% of a student's marks (i.e. supplementals or adult challenges). Data is categorized as rural or urban based on the predominant residential location of the students served by the school, rather than the location of the school division.

1. "Dept Exam" includes departmental examination marks, intended for blending with a teacher-submitted mark. Dept exam marks are scaled to reflect mark distribution of all marks submitted by teachers.

2. Teacher-Submitted includes marks submitted by non-accredited teachers for blending with the mark received on a departmental examination.

3. Composite is the final mark resulting from the blending of the teacher-submitted mark and the mark received on a departmental examination.

Source: Ministry of Education. (2008). *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12. Figures 20a and 20b*. Regina, SK

Similar results may be observed in other assessment information. For example, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education has developed the provincial Assessment for Learning (AFL) program to assist teachers, schools, and school divisions in the improvement of instruction to students. The AFL program provides assessment data to teachers and division personnel for diagnostic, reflective, and planning purposes toward improving student learning. It was not intended to be an assessment of learning approach that had as its primary objective the comparison of students and their test results, but rather to focus upon the use of assessment information to assist teachers in the improvement of instruction. This has been an issue of controversy in Saskatchewan and Ministry officials have been sensitive to the need to ensure that all key stakeholders within the Pre K-12 educational community are prepared to support an assessment initiative that operates in a collaborative manner. For example, the decision to disaggregate self-declared Aboriginal student data was supported by stakeholders despite some feedback that this information was detrimental to the Aboriginal community.

With respect to the area of reading, Table 11 indicates that Aboriginal and northern students consistently achieved at lower levels than did other population categories. Of interest is the fact that northern students demonstrated lower levels of success in the area of writing even in comparison to self-declared Aboriginal students. Similar results, both for Aboriginal and northern students were observed for writing, as Table 12 illustrates. For example, 83.0% of Aboriginal and 78.9% of northern students performed at the "Adequate or Above" level, as compared to 91.4% of urban students and 90.0% of rural students. Student results in the area of mathematics were also consistent with this pattern. As Table 13 indicates, the observed percentages of Aboriginal and northern students achieving at "Adequate and Above" and "Proficient" levels were once again lower than other population groups.

Table 11: Percentage of Students Achieving "Adequate and Above" and "Proficient" Standards in Reading, by Student Characteristic, by Grade, AFL 2007

	Grade 4		Grade 7		Grade 10	
	Adequate and Above	Proficient	Adequate and Above	Proficient	Adequate and Above	Proficient
Overall Reading Comprehension						
Province	79.5%	44.0%	87.6%	48.7%	88.2%	62.6%
Aboriginal	58.7%	22.8%	75.4%	28.6%	75.0%	40.0%
Male	78.4%	42.1%	85.7%	46.1%	86.5%	58.4%
Female	81.3%	46.6%	90.1%	51.9%	91.4%	68.6%
Urban	78.7%	41.3%	87.3%	48.5%	88.0%	62.6%
Rural	85.3%	51.4%	91.4%	52.9%	92.8%	67.4%
North	46.2%	18.3%	61.5%	18.0%	65.2%	31.2%
-Explicit Comprehension						
Province	83.7%	53.5%	92.0%	71.9%	85.5%	44.4%
Aboriginal	68.1%	33.3%	85.1%	56.1%	77.6%	32.7%
Male	82.7%	51.4%	90.6%	69.6%	83.7%	42.6%
Female	85.4%	56.4%	93.8%	74.9%	88.3%	47.0%
Urban	83.0%	51.6%	91.7%	71.1%	85.1%	43.4%
Rural	88.3%	59.9%	94.6%	76.6%	88.4%	48.4%
North	61.6%	26.0%	77.7%	44.0%	71.3%	28.9%
-Implicit Comprehension						
Province	77.2%	46.0%	87.9%	55.2%	83.6%	55.9%
Aboriginal	58.0%	25.6%	77.7%	37.7%	66.7%	34.9%
Male	76.1%	44.3%	86.3%	52.9%	81.3%	51.5%
Female	79.0%	48.4%	90.2%	58.1%	87.3%	61.9%
Urban	75.7%	43.0%	87.6%	54.4%	84.0%	56.4%
Rural	83.4%	53.9%	91.7%	60.1%	87.5%	59.5%
North	46.8%	20.5%	61.1%	25.9%	58.4%	22.8%
-Critical Comprehension						
Province	79.4%	45.6%	83.0%	39.7%	91.1%	75.3%
Aboriginal	58.6%	24.8%	66.8%	22.3%	81.4%	56.1%
Male	78.7%	44.5%	81.0%	37.2%	90.1%	72.3%
Female	81.0%	47.3%	85.6%	42.9%	93.6%	80.0%
Urban	79.3%	44.6%	83.3%	39.9%	90.7%	74.9%
Rural	84.2%	50.7%	86.5%	42.7%	95.2%	80.5%
North	47.2%	19.0%	51.4%	13.8%	73.3%	45.4%
Reader Response						
Province	84.8%	52.7%	81.4%	41.7%	71.2%	35.6%
Aboriginal	75.6%	41.5%	69.0%	28.7%	55.8%	21.6%
Male	83.0%	49.0%	75.1%	32.4%	63.5%	26.2%
Female	86.9%	56.8%	88.1%	51.4%	80.0%	46.0%
Urban	83.7%	51.1%	82.1%	43.0%	71.1%	35.7%
Rural	88.6%	57.5%	83.5%	42.6%	74.2%	37.8%
North	72.9%	37.4%	54.9%	17.9%	50.5%	18.7%

Source: Ministry of Education. (2008). *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12. Figure 23b.* Regina, SK

Table 12: Percentage of Students Achieving "Adequate and Above" and "Proficient" Standards in Writing, by Student Characteristic, AFL 2008

	Grade 5		Grade 8		Grade 11	
	Adequate and Above	Proficient	Adequate and Above	Proficient	Adequate and Above	Proficient
Writing Process						
Province	82.0%	42.0%	90.0%	58.0%	90.0%	66.0%
Aboriginal	75.0%	33.0%	83.0%	48.0%	84.0%	57.0%
Male	81.0%	37.0%	87.0%	52.0%	87.0%	59.0%
Female	88.0%	48.0%	94.0%	64.0%	95.0%	74.0%
Urban	84.7%	43.1%	91.4%	59.4%	90.9%	67.4%
Rural	85.2%	43.3%	90.0%	56.4%	90.2%	65.2%
North	66.3%	26.5%	78.9%	44.6%	80.9%	54.2%
Product Quality						
Province	57.0%	14.0%	66.0%	25.0%	67.0%	34.0%
Aboriginal	41.0%	7.0%	50.0%	13.0%	55.0%	22.0%
Male	52.0%	11.0%	61.0%	20.0%	62.0%	28.0%
Female	63.0%	17.0%	72.0%	30.0%	74.0%	42.0%
Urban	56.5%	14.3%	66.7%	25.8%	66.9%	34.4%
Rural	60.6%	15.0%	66.7%	24.6%	68.5%	35.0%
North	33.8%	4.5%	40.6%	10.7%	52.1%	20.6%
Messaging and Content						
Province	78.0%	24.0%	74.0%	38.0%	69.0%	45.0%
Aboriginal	59.0%	14.0%	61.0%	22.0%	58.0%	31.0%
Male	69.0%	21.0%	70.0%	33.0%	64.0%	38.0%
Female	76.0%	28.0%	78.0%	43.0%	75.0%	52.0%
Urban	72.3%	24.4%	74.6%	38.4%	68.7%	44.4%
Rural	74.7%	25.6%	74.2%	37.7%	70.3%	45.5%
North	56.4%	10.0%	54.3%	18.4%	53.3%	29.1%
Organization and Coherence						
Province	47.0%	18.0%	59.0%	29.0%	69.0%	42.0%
Aboriginal	33.0%	9.0%	42.0%	15.0%	56.0%	30.0%
Male	42.0%	14.0%	53.0%	23.0%	62.0%	35.0%
Female	52.0%	22.0%	65.0%	35.0%	76.0%	51.0%
Urban	47.2%	18.2%	60.7%	30.4%	68.6%	42.4%
Rural	48.6%	18.7%	58.2%	28.0%	69.7%	42.7%
North	24.4%	6.6%	34.9%	11.7%	54.8%	30.2%
Language Use and Syntax						
Province	67.0%	10.0%	70.0%	18.0%	68.0%	26.0%
Aboriginal	54.0%	5.0%	59.0%	9.0%	57.0%	16.0%
Male	62.0%	7.0%	66.0%	14.0%	63.0%	20.0%
Female	73.0%	13.0%	76.0%	23.0%	74.0%	33.0%
Urban	65.8%	9.8%	70.5%	19.3%	67.8%	26.7%
Rural	71.8%	10.7%	71.0%	18.1%	68.8%	25.8%
North	45.2%	2.2%	54.8%	8.0%	54.9%	12.0%

Source: Ministry of Education. (2008). *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12. Figure 21b.* Regina, SK

Table 13: Percentage of Students Achieving "Adequate and Above" and "Proficient" Standards in Mathematics, by Student Characteristic, by Grade, AFL 2007

Mathematics Skills	Grade 5		Grade 8		Mathematics 20	
	Adequate and Above	Proficient	Adequate and Above	Proficient	Adequate and Above	Proficient
Mathematics Content						
Province	70.7%	26.6%	58.9%	18.4%	71.6%	20.0%
Aboriginal	62.4%	20.3%	37.5%	8.1%	55.4%	10.7%
Male	72.1%	28.4%	60.3%	19.3%	71.9%	20.5%
Female	70.6%	26.0%	58.9%	18.5%	72.2%	19.9%
Urban	70.8%	26.0%	59.5%	19.3%	75.0%	22.1%
Rural	75.0%	30.2%	61.8%	18.9%	68.4%	16.7%
North	41.7%	7.4%	28.8%	3.2%	43.7%	7.5%
Integrated Applications						
Province	55.1%	33.0%	54.5%	31.6%	85.8%	30.8%
Aboriginal	50.0%	27.9%	41.2%	20.1%	74.2%	19.2%
Male	55.6%	33.6%	54.4%	31.3%	86.1%	32.9%
Female	56.2%	33.9%	55.5%	32.4%	85.9%	29.1%
Urban	54.3%	32.2%	54.9%	32.0%	87.2%	30.3%
Rural	59.3%	36.8%	56.6%	33.1%	84.7%	31.8%
North	35.5%	15.6%	33.8%	14.4%	68.5%	17.7%
Calculator						
Province	80.9%	65.1%	49.5%	26.3%	50.4%	32.8%
Aboriginal	77.1%	60.6%	35.8%	16.8%	40.7%	24.0%
Male	80.8%	65.0%	49.5%	26.3%	50.6%	33.3%
Female	81.9%	66.4%	50.7%	27.4%	50.6%	32.5%
Urban	80.5%	64.5%	48.0%	25.7%	49.7%	32.0%
Rural	84.5%	69.3%	53.6%	28.8%	52.1%	34.1%
North	62.4%	44.1%	36.6%	13.4%	47.0%	29.5%
Computation						
Province	60.7%	36.1%	61.2%	37.4%	65.0%	32.9%
Aboriginal	54.0%	30.8%	47.5%	24.8%	54.4%	22.7%
Male	61.2%	36.8%	60.7%	36.9%	63.8%	32.5%
Female	61.5%	36.4%	62.6%	38.8%	66.6%	33.7%
Urban	59.2%	35.2%	60.4%	36.6%	67.4%	35.2%
Rural	65.4%	39.5%	64.3%	39.9%	61.1%	29.0%
North	46.0%	23.1%	44.5%	24.4%	60.0%	22.3%
Estimation						
Province	52.5%	28.1%	58.3%	37.7%	62.6%	41.2%
Aboriginal	47.9%	24.6%	48.0%	27.5%	49.5%	28.2%
Male	54.6%	29.9%	57.7%	36.8%	65.4%	43.6%
Female	51.5%	27.0%	59.6%	39.4%	61.0%	39.9%
Urban	52.2%	27.8%	57.8%	36.8%	63.0%	41.4%
Rural	55.8%	30.3%	60.5%	40.3%	62.5%	41.4%
North	29.9%	13.4%	42.6%	24.8%	53.1%	27.6%

Source: Ministry of Education. (2008). *Saskatchewan Education Indicators: Prekindergarten to Grade 12. Figure 22c.* Regina, SK

Research and Recommendations for Future Policy Direction

The comparison of Saskatchewan student populations clearly documents lower student achievement results for Saskatchewan self-declared Aboriginal and northern students as compared to urban and rural students. As was suggested by other data regarding Saskatchewan Aboriginal residents and lower levels of educational attainment, labour force engagement, and income, it seems reasonable that consistently lower rates of student achievement and success in school will have an impact on future life potential. Given this situation, action to improve aboriginal student achievement is necessary.

Research conducted for the Yorkton Tribal Council (2009) has identified a policy framework related to improved aboriginal student achievement:

- Strong Leadership and Governance Structures
- Language and Cultural Programs
- Teachers, Instruction, and Curriculum
- Effective Schools
- Community and Parental Influences
- Student Characteristics
- Assessment Linked to Instruction and Planning
- Appropriate Levels of Funding

This framework will provide the conceptual basis for the consideration of key policy recommendations that follows. It is important that these specific characteristics should not be viewed in isolation, but rather as pieces of a picture that must be viewed within a holistic framework.

Strong Leadership and Governance Structures

Strong leadership and governance structures are characteristic of effective school districts that priorize student achievement. Maguire (2003) studied four consistently improving Alberta school districts and found that they typically displayed the following characteristics: widely understood vision statements clearly focused on students' learning; a culture of joint planning and decision making that was proudly shared by teachers and school administrators; the effective use of assessment data; and schools consistently attempting to measure themselves against system-level expectations.

Not surprisingly, Aboriginal schools are similar. The case studies conducted within the two Sharing Our Success (Bell et al., 2004; Fulford et al., 2007) Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE) research projects consistently identified strong governance and leadership structures as an important dimension of successful Aboriginal schools. Bell et al. summed up their findings as follows:

> All schools possessed highly effective governance structures, particularly important for band-operated schools. Stable leadership, long-term planning, and strategic alignment of available resources towards the goals they set marked these schools. Two band-operated schools had developed innovative hybrid governance systems beyond the capacity of the band's infrastructure. Most principals had been at the school for some years. While their leadership styles varied widely, their role in promoting and sustaining a common vision, focus and energy was a dominant factor in their school's success. Models of decision-making within the schools ranged from consultation to full power-sharing by staff students and community, all of whom have the right to veto a proposal. (p. 13)

Notwithstanding the value of local control over educational decision making, more work remains to be done. *Communication, Accountability and Follow-Up for School Improvement* (Smith, Bear, Corrigan, & Quinn, 2008) was the final report for the 2008 Cree School Board Educational Review. This report identified a compelling number of changes to administrative practice. Serious management concerns related to issues as fundamental as a top-heavy central office arrangement, an acceptance of inadequate personnel performance, poor hiring practices, a failure to respond to school-based requests, unclear procedures for the purchase of materials, the need for clearer procedures regarding the equitable allocation of resources to schools, and the need to rebuild positive relationships with its communities. This list outlines a number of the concerns raised in the 2007-08 organizational review.

Clearly, local educational control will not necessarily address all the problems within the administration of First Nations school systems. However, careful attention to the types of practices outlined above will move First Nations schools and central jurisdictions in the correct direction. A failure to ensure that strong leadership and governance is in place will make it very difficult to tackle the types of reforms necessary to enhance student achievement.

Language and Cultural Programs

Research related to the impact of language and cultural programs on Indigenous student achievement indicates a powerful relationship. Demmert (2001), in a major review of literature related to Indigenous student achievement, identifies this relationship as one of the key factors affecting student learning. He suggests that the research focuses on two interrelated issues: the desire of Native American communities to preserve or

strengthen their language and cultural heritage, and the relationship between this objective and improving educational outcomes for children. The scope of this research led Demmert and Towner (2003) to conduct another major literature review of culturally based education, which had as a primary focus the importance of language and culture programming in supporting student learning within Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, language and culture play an important role in encouraging the educational success of Indigenous students. As Demmert (2001) indicates "congruency between the school environment and the language and culture of the community is critical to the success of formal learning" (p. 9). It seems apparent that any significant attempt to improve learning outcomes among First Nations children must target this critical area.

Teachers, Instruction and Curriculum

The area of teachers, instruction, and curriculum is another area with substantial research and direction. The importance of competent, caring teachers who understand Indigenous culture was identified. Instructional approaches that reflected an understanding of Aboriginal students and their approach to learning were typically supported. Finally, curricula that reflected a similar perspective were seen to be effective.

Teachers.

Demmert (2001) indicated that teachers working within the Native American community typically displayed qualities similar to all capable teachers. This meant qualities such as interpersonal skills, solid knowledge content, and sound pedagogy. Demmert also commented that "the positive aspects of including the language and cultural base of the Native community served" (p. 18) was an important consideration.

Bell et al. (2004) referenced the ability to create a warm and supportive learning environment while also focusing on educational goals and commitment to the belief that every student can learn, as well as the flexibility to adapt student instruction to student needs. Their work also reinforced the value of appropriate training and development, as well as the fact that the successful schools that they studied typically had found ways to create smaller instructional groups than would be typical of most provincial schools.

The many challenges faced by a teacher successfully working in this environment relates to one of the key issues documented by Fulford et al. (2007). This concerns teacher attrition and the importance of reducing teacher turnover in the schools studied. If teacher turnover is excessively high, it is difficult to develop the type of teacher referred to above.

Instruction and curriculum.

Much of the research related to Indigenous curriculum and instruction concerns the need to adjust to students' unique cultural and learning needs. Rasmussen, Baydala, and Sherman (2004) reviewed literature related to Aboriginal learning patterns and concluded that "the research presented indicates that Aboriginals appear to display a more visual-spatial than verbal learning pattern and they display some unique learning preferences" (p. 334). They commented that Aboriginal individuals were "more holistic, observational, and experiential learners whom prefer collaborative group work and experiential learning techniques" (p. 334).

Several studies noted that cooperative learning models tended to encourage positive learning outcomes among Aboriginal students. Brancov (1994) studied the use of cooperative learning instruction in mathematics with 129 Indian middle school students

in South Dakota. He concluded that statistically significant results were identified for problem solving, attitude to mathematics, and classroom climate. In another study, Laremore (2000) conducted research with Native American children in an urban, public elementary school. He found that cooperative learning practices encouraged students to take more risks, adapt more easily, and perform new skills.

Finally, Fulford et al. (2007), in their qualitative study of 10 exemplar Aboriginal schools, found that while instructional practices varied widely, "Best practices based on recent literacy research – including early intervention, guided reading, running records and levelled books – are being adopted in K-4 classes at many schools and producing impressive improvements in students reading abilities" (p. 311).

Effective Schools

There can be little question that schools play an important role in affecting the lives of students and their educational achievement. With respect to the Aboriginal community, recent research by Richards, Hove, and Afolabi (2008) supports the impact of effective schools on student achievement. In a study that assessed Aboriginal student outcomes across British Columbia, students in schools with a predetermined number of Aboriginal students were compared on a number of factors including gender, racial identity, and socioeconomic variables. Because British Columbia conducts annual province-wide tests in reading, writing, and numeracy, these results were utilized as the independent variable. A portion of the results were as might be expected:

> First, the Aboriginal gradient lies well below the analogous non-Aboriginal gradient. On the other hand, the gradients do have similar slopes. Which is encouraging. For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families, improvements in

> socio-economic status are associated with similar improvements in children's school performance. The slope implies a substantial disadvantage to low socio-economic status families. (p. 6)

The study suggested that, after controlling for the effects of socioeconomic status, it appeared that some schools achieved higher rates than other schools. Within those results, it also appeared that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students did better.

Community and Parental Influences

Establishing "strong and vibrant educational partnerships with parents" was considered an important priority by Bell et al. (2004). They indicated that the schools studied in their research worked hard to gain the trust and support of their parents. The development of effective community partnerships resulted in tangible financial benefits, but also reinforced a sense of community ownership and pride in the school and the encouragement of solid learning expectations. Leveque (1994) reinforced this perspective, reporting on a study of Native American students in Barstow, California that found one of the strongest elements contributing to academic achievement was parental involvement.

Perhaps the clearest summary of the key issues related to community and parental influences is provided by Kushman and Barnhardt (2001). Their abstract of a cross-case analysis of seven rural Alaska Native communities and their experience in building school-community partnerships, using a reform effort called Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE) captures the essence of this issue:

> First, reform efforts in small communities require an inside-out approach in which educators must first develop trusting relationships with community members, and

> then work with the community to design educational programs around the local place, language, and culture. Second, parents and teachers need to expand their conceptions of parent roles beyond the notion of parents supporting the school to include roles in which parents are active participants in school life and decisions. Third, school and district leaders must move from top-down to shared leadership so that the ownership for school reform is embedded in the community rather than with school personnel who constantly come and go. Finally, educators and educational reformers must recognize that education in rural Alaska has a larger purpose than teaching academic skills and knowledge. (Kushman & Barnhardt, p. 1)

Student Characteristics

Demmert (2001) indicates the importance of language and culture, as well as poverty, resiliency, identity, sense of self and self-esteem, goal-setting and student motivation, communication styles, and language and cognitive skills as important characteristics that affect Native American student achievement. Based on his thorough literature review, Demmert comments that "Clearly, much remains to be learned about personal characteristics of successful Native students – especially what is alterable and what is not in the school setting. The research community must help us understand all of these areas more fully" (pp. 34-35). It would seem that more research in this important area is needed.

Assessment Linked to Instruction and Planning

Research by Bell et al. (2004) and Fulford et al. (2007) both found evidence of widespread use of a variety of assessment practices in the case studies of 20 exemplary

Aboriginal schools. Bell et al. commented that the "uses of assessment made by the schools in this study fall into three broad categories: internal, accountability reporting, and communicating" (p. 310). He indicated that teachers made wide use of assessments for instructional purposes such as measuring success in student learning and classroom instruction, grouping for instruction, and to diagnose learning challenges. Bell et al. report that "Teacher-designed tests, commercial measurements, and built-in program evaluations were the tools most often used for these purposes" (p. 310). Fulford et al. (2007) found similar results, commenting that the schools studies used assessment for four primary purposes: instructional uses, program evaluation, and external and internal purposes.

Both Bell et al. (2004) and Fulford et al. (2007) recommended a continued focus on assessment practice. Bell et al. suggested that the provinces and territories implement programs to "measure, track, and report on the progress of Aboriginal students and requires the use of this data in annual school improvement plans" (p. 324). They also recommended that all Aboriginal authorities should participate in provincial/territorial measures, as well as developing "holistic measures appropriate to Aboriginal programs; and that this data similarly be publicly available and incorporated into annual growth plans" (p. 324).

Appropriate Levels of Funding

Appropriate levels of funding appear to be a major challenge among aboriginal schools, particularly those that are band controlled. Bell et al. (2004) commented that "inadequate funding remains a critical issue for all but the largest band-operated schools" (p. 316). Their research proceeded to provide examples of inadequate funding, indicating

that “while the disparity in funding seems to be slowly improving, federal educational funds available to band-operated schools remain substantially below provincial levels” (p. 316).

Similarly, Fulford et al. (2007) identified funding as a critical issue, providing an analysis of funding for each of the schools studied. They indicate that “Recognising the significant disparities between schools receiving provincial/territorial funding and those funded by BOFF, INAC has created a number of program initiatives since instituting its formula in 1988” (p. 328). Fulford et al. also commented on the potential for disparity that can exist due to differential ability to access these programs. They briefly touched on the problems that conditional funding creates in terms of building stable, long-term programs. Finally, Fulford et al. discussed the federal funding model for special education, stating that the failure to provide realistic levels of base funding for special education has been problematic.

Since the schools reviewed in the Fulford et al. (2007) study were located in eastern Canada, and since none of the schools studied in Bell et al. (2004) were band controlled schools in Saskatchewan, it is difficult to extrapolate these results to the local, band controlled situation. Despite the absence of local research, it seems fair to conclude that funding shortfalls may be an issue within both provincial or band controlled schools, particularly in relation to issues of poverty and disadvantage.

A Concluding Comment

A history of defeat and Canada’s failure to honour treaties signed with good intentions by a conquered people has fostered a culture of dependency, poverty, and

disadvantage. Calvin Helin (2008) captures the situation well with his comment that "The rapidly-growing populations and burgeoning wealth creation potential are set against a backdrop of archaic and largely unsuitable governance structures, a dependency mindset that has been entrenched by government policy, and a host of formidable social pathologies" (p. 14). Helin suggests that a focus on education is critical if the "profound destruction of the welfare trap" (p.259) is to be addressed. Helin's perspective is shared by others. In 2004, the Auditor General of Canada commented that "Education is critical to improving the social and economic strength of First Nations individuals and communities to a level enjoyed by other Canadians" (p. 5.8).

For this to occur, a better understanding of the current situation and the means of addressing the challenges of improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal youth is necessary. The primary purpose of this paper was to consider the issue of Aboriginal student achievement from a Saskatchewan context. The Ministry of Education 2008 Indicators Report, for the first time, provided disaggregated information with respect to the academic success of self-declared Aboriginal students. The results suggest that Aboriginal students are performing at lower levels than other Saskatchewan population groups.

If Helin's belief in education as a primary vehicle for improving the lives of Aboriginal people is to be realised, some important issues must be dealt with. The first is an increased emphasis on remediating the effects of poverty and disadvantage. Aboriginal people, like other population groups, do well when the troubling effects of poverty are successfully addressed. The second issue relates to improved infrastructure and capacity building. Increased attention to parental and community involvement, culturally relevant

curriculum and instruction, improved teacher education programs, and more effective use of student assessment information are examples of ways in which capacity building can occur.

A strong focus on leadership and governance is also vital for improvements in Aboriginal student achievement, particularly in First Nation communities. Enhanced stability and professionalism in Aboriginal education will ensure that quality teachers and administrators are able to pursue the interests of the children in their classrooms. The current mix of politics and education is detrimental to any realistic hope for improved educational outcomes.

Finally, improved funding for Aboriginal education is necessary. Research, both at the national level and, more recently, at the local Saskatchewan level suggests that current funding levels are problematic. Access to quality education cannot occur if the funding for schools serving Aboriginal students does not permit the provision of necessary services. Similarly, the infrastructure needed to support these schools must be properly funded, whether one considers the provision of second level services for band controlled schools, the training of teachers at the university level, or the development of culturally relevant curriculum and teaching strategies.

If education is to successfully assist Aboriginal people in moving forward to a successful future, these issues must be addressed. Future generations of Aboriginal children deserve a brighter future. A failure to provide them this opportunity will diminish all Canadians.

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