

**First Nations Education in British Columbia  
Are there Lessons for the Rest of Canada?**

Canadian Economics Association,  
Montreal  
May 31, 2013

**Abstract**

**May 25, 2013**

In Canada, there is a well-documented gap between the school performance of aboriginal and non-aboriginal students. Over the past 15 years, this gap has been very significantly reduced within British Columbia.

This paper describes the size and nature of the improvement, using data reported by the BC Ministry of Education. It also describes several of the most important financial, policy and legislative changes that may account for the comparatively rapid improvements taking place in the province.

The need for coordination and control of policies that support improvement is illustrated using a taxonomy of the policy options available to education systems.

Suggestions as to how these options might be used in future are provided.

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**1. Introduction**

The agreements between Canada and First Nations mean that Canada has, at a minimum, financial “responsibility” for the education of status, on-reserve aboriginal students. This has long been translated into fiscal responsibility for First Nations’ students attending provincial schools and for band-operated schools located on reserves.

Aboriginal students who reside off-reserve are entirely a provincial responsibility. Provinces delegate operating responsibilities to Boards of Education and independent schools. In addition to funding, provinces and their delegated agencies attempt to monitor and control quality by inspections and provincially specified assessments. They also control quality by regulating curriculum, teacher certification and school calendars.

Even though education is a provincial jurisdiction, the federal government, First Nations Organizations, Band Councils, Boards of Education, Independent schools, building principals, teachers and labour organizations are all “involved stakeholders” in the control of education for aboriginal and First Nations’ students.

For many years First Nations have called for aboriginal control over aboriginal education. While no one seems to be firmly against the idea, it has proven impossible for stakeholders to give up control. The most important resistance comes from the federal government, which has not provided sufficient funding with suitable incentives. This makes it impossible for First Nations to control content and delivery, or to accept responsibility for results.

There is an ongoing struggle between First Nations and the Federal Government over what constitutes adequate funding and what manner of financial control Ottawa must retain. This particular dispute has dragged on in British Columbia for more than the school career of a youngster.

Difficulties faced by on-reserve communities are multiplied when their children attend public schools. In these schools children from reserves, and other aboriginal students, are too often unseen and unsupported. Aboriginal students are everywhere in the provincial school system, although the extent to which they are concentrated within any one school varies greatly.

Provincial Ministry's of Education, along with school boards, administrators, teachers and other employees, along with unions, have erected many institutional obstacles to aboriginal involvement in schooling. The potential for schools to serve as agents of cultural assimilation and destruction can be very high.

The demands of running busy organizations with relentless demands on staff and budgets make it easy for schools to ignore the results obtained by aboriginal students.

## **2. The Performance Problem**

At all levels of the education system, the collective result of governments' work with First Nations, Metis and Inuit children reveals a significant ethical and educational failure on the part of governments and First Nations.

The failure has severe consequences for aboriginal children and communities. It also has costly consequences for Canada because of the high social and health costs that result from poor education and are borne by all Canadians.

First Nations, Canada, and the Provinces all agree there is a problem. The pace at which they are responding indicates that most do not consider it to be an *urgent* problem that requires a speedy solution.

Since the 1990s, British Columbia, BC First Nations, and the Federal Government have taken steps that, collectively, have improved important educational outcomes for aboriginal students. Recent reports suggest that BC is making progress on the matter of school performance.

The purpose of this paper is to show the performance improvements that have been occurring during the past twenty years and sketch some of the steps associated with their attainment.

### **British Columbia's Experience**

The BC Ministry of Education has just passed its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary. During those years it exercised responsibility for providing a core school program for all students everywhere in the province.<sup>1</sup> The period featured rapid expansion in the number of students, extension of service to the most remote areas of the province and ongoing extension of the number of years each student would spend in school.

In the last thirty years the Ministry has been improving service for students whose needs were not met during the period of rapid expansion. Aboriginal children were

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming, Thomas. "Letters from Headquarters" in *School Leadership*, edited by Thomas Fleming. Mill Bay, Bendall Books, pp 19-53. 2001.

among those for whom improved service was sought.

The Ministry of Education formed an Aboriginal Education Branch in the 1970s. It was tasked with improving recognition of aboriginal culture in the schools, thereby making schools more welcoming to aboriginal students.

In the 1980s, the branch began funding school boards to develop aboriginal curriculum content. The grants were small single year commitments that were used to develop local content for their aboriginal students. With a few exceptions, the result had only local application, and the program as a whole had little impact.

Funding was later expanded to support per-pupil grants for aboriginal students enrolled in aboriginal education programs. Auditors began to examine this funding; seeking evidence that the students were, indeed, aboriginal and receiving services.

By the 1990s the pattern of funding curriculum development with a scattering of grants, and funding school boards with grants to support aboriginal students enrolled in aboriginal education programs was well established. Auditors had begun to shape policy as they sought definitions for “aboriginal education programs,” and clarity about which students could be properly defined as aboriginal.<sup>2</sup> BC defined aboriginal students as those who are so declared by their parents and/or by the student on the federal government’s Nominal Roll.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence drawn from a student information system<sup>4</sup> first installed in the late 1980s, began to appear in 1998. The results were extremely disappointing.

The most important sign of failure was the school completion rate. In the 1999 “How Are We Doing?” report<sup>5</sup> only 36% of grade 8 aboriginal students completed secondary school in six years, whereas 74% of non-aboriginal students did so.

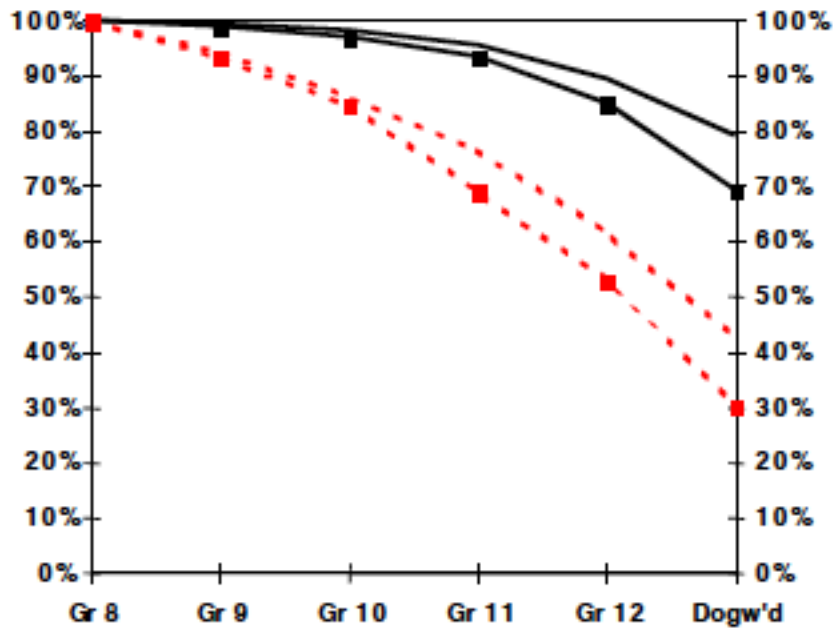
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<sup>2</sup> King, Thomas. The Inconvenient Indian. Doubleday Canada, 2012. King (pp 53-76) describes three kinds of Indians: Dead Indians (stereotypes that do not and may never have existed), Live Indians (those who exist today) and Legal Indians (a sub-set of Live Indians who have legal status as aboriginal people-usually by virtue of being on the federal government’s register). New legal precedents are expanding the Legal Indian category.

<sup>3</sup> The Nominal Roll lists all status aboriginal students who live on reserve. Their K-12 education is a federal fiscal responsibility. If students on the Nominal Roll attend provincial schools, the federal government and/or bands transfer funds to school boards to pay their tuition.

<sup>4</sup> The system assigns every student a unique Provincial Education Number (PEN). This allows the progress of each student to be tracked over time, including enrolment in British Columbia’s post secondary institutions.

<sup>5</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Education. How Are We Doing? An Overview of Aboriginal Education Results for the Province of BC. Victoria, BC Ministry of Education, 1999

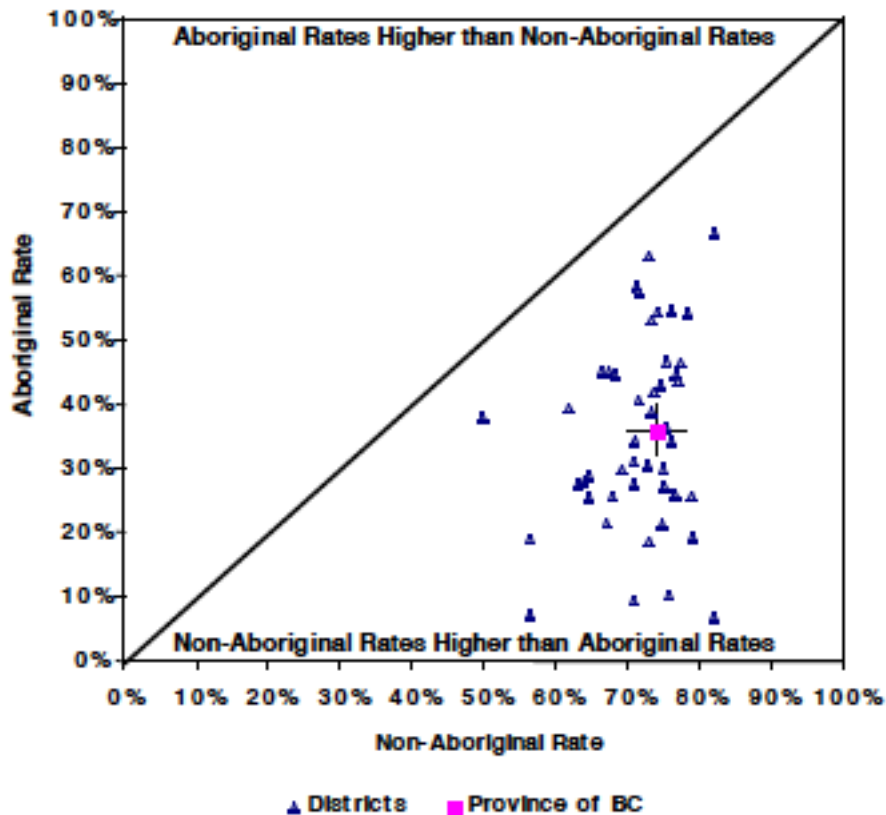


**Figure 1**  
**Persistence in School from Grade 8 to Graduation**

Achievement in fundamental skills at the fourth grade is an important indicator of success.<sup>6</sup> Only 48% of aboriginal students showed that they met or exceeded expectations in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading, and only 47% did so in 4<sup>th</sup> grade numeracy. The remainder either did not take the assessments or, if they did, had not yet met expectations. By contrast 75% of 4<sup>th</sup> grade non-aboriginal students met or exceeded expectations and 74% did so for numeracy.

Fourth grade results are important because they are excellent predictors of graduation eight or nine years later. Students who possess the skills measured by these assessments have a much higher probability of graduating from secondary school than do students who do not demonstrate that they meet expectations.

<sup>6</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> grade is the first time achievement is assessed by the Ministry of Education.



**Figure 2**  
**Aboriginal - Non-Aboriginal Inequality by School District**  
 (12 Districts with small enrolments are not shown)

Every indicator included in the Ministry report of results showed disparities between aboriginal and non-aboriginal students. The report revealed that some school districts were doing a much better job of obtaining equitable results than others. It is not helpful to assume that all is hopeless. It is possible to reduce disparities.

None of the evidence was unexpected,<sup>7</sup> but the scope of failure was clearly exposed for the first time, as was its distribution to every corner of the province.

When aboriginal status plays no role in determining results, there should be no difference between the performance levels of aboriginal and non-aboriginal

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<sup>7</sup> Preliminary performance results were presented at a meeting of managers in 1981. One gentleman (they were all men in those days) said, "I can explain that. It is just the percentage of aboriginal students in the district!" Figure 2 demonstrates he was wrong. But, accepting such poor achievement on the part of any group of students is ethically bankrupt in the Ministry responsible for public education. If accepted, the explanation would call into questions the *raison d'être* of a public education system. Fortunately, it was rejected.

students.

Figure 2 shows there were only a few districts where aboriginal and non-aboriginal completion rates were nearly equal. These districts are near the diagonal line in Figure 2. In all districts, the aboriginal achievement rate is lower than the non-aboriginal rate as illustrated by the placement of all districts below the diagonal line.

Factors outside the control of schools, such as social class, economic conditions, community support and participation and parental pressure are commonly offered as explanations for achievement. But such personal and community circumstances are obstacles that public education systems are intended to overcome.

It was abundantly clear in 1999 that schools delivered very poor results for aboriginal students. This was despite over ten years of effort and over \$240 million in supplementary spending for aboriginal education. Success for aboriginal students, in all schools and in all cases, remained an elusive objective.

As a strategy, the Ministry chose to focus on achievement and to make clear to public schools that their responsibility and goal was to attain parity between aboriginal and all other students. The Ministry was energized by court cases that confirmed the existence of First Nations' rights. Lack of educational achievement had become a problem in need of a solution.

After an internal discussion of the results, in 1999, the Ministry undertook several actions intended to improve aboriginal students' results.

1. Data about performance were converted to easily understood reports to be released annually, starting in 1999. The first such report, *How Are We Doing?* was widely distributed to aboriginal communities in 1999. Afterwards copies were distributed to stakeholders in the public education system. Customized versions of the report, with district-specific information were prepared and distributed to all school boards.<sup>8</sup> This brought the matter of performance into the forefront of discussions.
2. Small grants to school boards for curriculum development were halted.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There was a flurry of concern. For example, the teachers' union sought the assistance of First Nations in suppressing *How Are We Doing?* Its approach was rebuffed, as the report was almost the only solid evidence of the results public schools were obtaining with aboriginal students. First Nations welcomed documentation of concerns they had been raising for years.

Administrators protested the manner in which they received the information – it was after First Nations received it, not before. There was grumpiness about having to prepare additional reports. But many influential administrators and teachers welcomed the information as another tool to use in thinking and talking about what could be done to improve results for First Nations students.

With one important exception concerns petered out. The exception is the teacher union's ongoing effort to halt provincial assessment of students. This continues despite overwhelming evidence that assessment plays a key role in improving quality and maintaining standards in the world's best school systems.

Instead, the funding was used to supplement the per-student aboriginal education grants on the basis of improved academic results for aboriginal students.

3. The Ministry began to modify and create provincially developed courses and course frameworks to make provincially authorized courses more approachable for aboriginal students.
4. BC Universities and Post-Secondary institutions were asked to include new courses, such as First Peoples English 12, in their admissions processes.
5. Frameworks for language programs were adapted from internationally recognized OECD standards to facilitate the development of aboriginal language courses.
6. School Boards (today called Boards of Education) were required to prepare reports on the performance of aboriginal students within their schools and to publish plans to improve results.
7. The Ministry began to support First Nations that were seeking more control over federal funds paid to Boards of Education. The Ministry and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) encouraged Bands to enter into Local Education Agreements (LEAs) with Boards of Education. These agreements would formalize the services and programs available to aboriginal students, as well as the management processes used to manage the services and the associated funds. The Ministry provided staff and funds to facilitate development of these agreements.

## **Progress**

The province was able to move quickly to implement its results-based approach by confining itself to traditional school goals.

Some notable improvements can be reasonably attributed to provincial efforts.

1. The achievement of aboriginal students has improved, as has the achievement of non-aboriginal students. Performance gaps between aboriginal and non-aboriginal students are closing as shown in Table 1.
2. In the 1999 report, 36% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade aboriginal students graduated in 6 years, while 74% of non-aboriginal students did so. By the 2012 report,<sup>10</sup> 57% of aboriginal students graduated in 6 years, and 84% of non-aboriginal students

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<sup>9</sup> All the Ministry could show for the development work were boxes of mostly incomplete documents stored at UBC's Aboriginal Education Centre.

<sup>10</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Education. How Are We Doing? An Overview of Aboriginal Education Results for the Province of BC, BC Ministry of Education, Victoria, 2004



did so. The gap narrowed from 38 to 27 percent, even as the number of aboriginal students increased from an estimated 40,000 to 63,632.

3. From 1999 to 2012, the proportion of students in provincial schools who are aboriginal grew from 4.5 to 11.2%. The dramatic increase can be attributed to population growth in aboriginal communities at the same time the non-aboriginal student population has been declining, improved retention rates in secondary programs, improved reporting, and possibly increased willingness on the part of aboriginals to self declare their ethnicity.
4. Relationships between First Nations communities and local public schools improved in an uneven manner. Some Board-Band relationships became very productive and excellent progress has been made. Other Boards and Bands are struggling to reach agreements<sup>11</sup> that would let Bands influence use of tuition funds paid by the federal government or the Band.<sup>12</sup>
5. Operational responsibility is widely dispersed to Boards of Education, building administrators and teachers. Some are more effective than others and it is difficult for the Ministry of Education to reach inside Boards of Education to demand improved results.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It was expected that it would take two or three years obtain Local Education Agreements between every Board of Education and the Bands to which the Boards provide school programs. But the development process continues after more than 15 years of work. It has become another mini-business within the aboriginal negotiations industry. That said, in cases where agreements have been reached, there is better understanding of the difficulties under which Boards and First Nations must work.

<sup>12</sup> The situation in some districts was so unhealthy that Boards were willing to forgo supplementary funding for their aboriginal students in order to avoid negotiations with local First Nations. From First Nations' viewpoint, communities were simply struggling to obtain quality services for their students. The Ministry has spent several years mediating these discussions, and progress is on going.

<sup>13</sup> On at least four occasions when Boards of Education refused to submit balanced budgets as required by law, the provincial government replaced the offending boards with appointed trustees. Financial issues aside, there have been no occasions when Boards have been replaced for permitting sub-standard results.

**Table 1**  
**Educational Performance in BC Schools**  
**Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students**  
**1999-2012<sup>14</sup>**

Performance Measure	Aboriginal Students			Non-Aboriginal Students		
	1999	2004	2012	1999	2004	2012
<b>School Completion</b>						
Persistence from Grade 8 to Graduation, including Adult Dogwood <sup>15</sup>	36	46	63	74	74	89
Dogwood Diplomas Issued	605	1,587	2,987			38,439
<b>Fundamental Skill Assessments</b>						
Grade 4 reading	48	49	54	75	75	70
Grade 4 numeracy	47	60	50	74	74	69
<b>English</b>						
English 12 Success Rate <sup>16,17</sup>	31 (93/94)	40	<b>53%</b>	67	73	<b>72%</b>
Math 12 Success Rate	12%			38%	38%	
Fundamentals of Math 10 Success Rate			<b>37%</b>			<b>74%</b>
Apprenticeship and Workplace Math 10 Success Rate			<b>35%</b>			<b>17%</b>
<b>Special Education</b>						
Behavior Disorder	9.7	8.1	6	2.7	2.7	2
<b>Enrolment</b>						
Provincial Schools : Aboriginal Students	4.5%	8.4%	11.2%			
# Off Reserve	28,000 <sup>18</sup>	51,616	54,308	888,889	752,060	568,142
# On Reserve	12,000 <sup>19</sup>	11,557	9,324			
# in Band-Operated Schools	5,000 <sup>20</sup>	4,861	4,787			

<sup>14</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Education. [How Are We Doing? An Overview of Aboriginal Education Results for the Province of BC](#). BC Ministry of Education, Victoria, 1999, 2004, 2013

<sup>15</sup> This is measured over 6 years, by which time most potential graduates have passed through the system.

<sup>16</sup> Includes First Peoples English 12 for 2011/2012

<sup>17</sup> As a % of grade 12 enrolments for enrolment and success

<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> Estimated

## **A Digression: Language, Culture and Government Schools**

While governments are beginning to understand the complexity of the contexts in which education takes place, they do not yet *understand* them well enough to develop policies and operational processes that will work throughout the country.

One of the most important complexities involves the place of language and culture in the goals of schooling. Much has been written about the goals of education but at a high level the thinking can be reduced to cultural preservation and economic survival skills.

First Nations' oft-expressed desire to have their children able to "...walk on both sides of the river..." reflects their aspiration for cultural and economic survival.

Here is where trouble begins. The province, Canada and First Nations *differ* about the goals of education. The differences are fundamental.

The cultural and economic aspects of education are so tightly coupled in schools that it is very difficult for students to keep a foot in two cultures. This difficulty is old news to sociologists, but its practical implications for schools systems are not widely understood.

It is extremely difficult for government-operated schools to help children understand and succeed in two cultures and languages. Government schooling in the face of multiple cultural and linguistic entities usually involves "integration" of young people into the linguistic and cultural mainstream. This is because multi-cultural schools systems are complicated and costly.<sup>21</sup> If the cultural and linguistic minorities are small or widely distributed, it can be expensive to fund conventional schools for each minority. In such cases governments usually resort to modest support for alternative, supplementary or independent schooling.<sup>22</sup>

As a result, minority communities struggle to build schools, find qualified staff and deal with the operational issues that arise in schools. Many minorities resort to weekend or summer programs to preserve their language and culture.

Aboriginal communities are different. They have been surrounded by an aggressive wave of immigrants seeking land and resources. The "immigrants" soon sought to integrate aboriginal people into their culture. Until very recently there has been no encouragement or support for the preservation of aboriginal languages and cultures. Quite the reverse has been true.

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<sup>21</sup> Per-pupil funding for the Francophone district is more than 150% the funding for the average BC district.

<sup>22</sup> Failing integration, governments tend to support operate two or three "separate" (but equal) school systems. One will be established for the majority culture and others for significant minorities. For example, British Columbia funds a province-wide Francophone school district in order to meet constitutional obligations to support the francophone community.

The federal government used residential schools to substitute Anglo- or Francophone language and culture for aboriginal. Provincial schools also assumed this function. Everywhere, an explicit or implicit objective of schooling was extinction of aboriginal languages and cultures.

Today, even though First Nations want schools that place a strong emphasis on language and culture, AANDC does not fund language and culture programs in band-operated schools.<sup>23</sup>

This leads to a great divide. Despite long involvement in attempts to destroy aboriginal languages and culture, Ottawa does not now acknowledge responsibility, especially fiscal responsibility, for supporting aboriginal students in anything other than traditional K-12 schooling. It is an understatement to say that this causes resentment and enormous frustration on the part of First Nations.

In sum, transmission of language and culture is entangled with teaching fundamental academic skills. This leads to strong disagreement about both fundamental goals and the method(s) by which education should be provided to aboriginal children.

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Academic performance is an agreed goal.  
How to obtain it remains a puzzle to be solved.

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### **Back to the Story - What Happened?**

Nine large-scale policy levers can be used to manage education:

1. Finance (How to raise and distribute money, provide incentives and disincentives, intended or not)
2. Organization & Governance (Who is responsible for what?)
3. School Programs (For example: academic, vocational, and special education programs)
4. Curriculum (Scope and sequence, key content)
5. Standards (For performance of students, teachers and schools, as well as financial management)
6. Assessment (exams, assessments, school evaluations, and other ways of knowing the individual student, teacher and school are “performing”)

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<sup>23</sup> AANDC may claim there is enough funding to permit Band to offer language and culture if they wish to do so. Disputes about this could be resolved if AANDC built a proper resource-cost funding model to develop the funding requirement.

7. Teacher Certification and Training
8. Facilities (Buildings, grounds and technology)
9. Information (What is collected, how is it used for management and public communication)

In British Columbia all of these levers have been used by at least one of the major actors. It cannot be said that coordination has been impeccable.

### **(1) Finance.**

Beginning in the 1980s, BC provided grants to school boards for each self-identified aboriginal student. In exchange for the grant, boards were expected to develop services, obtain better cooperation with their aboriginal communities, and obtain better results from students.

For a short period of time, small additional grants were paid to boards where student performance in key subjects improved from one year to the next.<sup>24</sup>

In 2010, the province also agreed to a “reciprocal tuition” program whereby it will pay to bands the per-pupil costs associated with non-status students attending band-operated schools. For some schools this has made a very large difference in revenue. The process bypasses difficulties that would arise if each band had to negotiate with its neighboring Boards of Education for tuition costs associated with off-reserve students who attend a band-operated school.

For its part, AANDC has improved funding levels. the Interim Band-Operated Funding Formula (IBOFF) was introduced in the mid 1990s in order to bring Band-operated schools closer to provincial funding levels. In 2011/12, implemented a funding formula designed to ensure funding for band-operated schools is comparable to public schools in similar circumstances.

AANDC provides funding for special education, Internet connections, teacher training and development, school accreditation programs, meetings and conferences and any number of smaller improvement projects.

From the Federal viewpoint, funding is sufficient to provide an education program that mimics provincial school programs. However, given the very low achievement levels delivered by provincial schools, Ottawa should consider other approaches.

Co-ordination of AANDC’s funding mechanisms is poor. There are too many programs, administered by too many areas of AANDC, and operating each program has become an in itself. *The programs are not focused on results for students.*

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<sup>24</sup> This funding system was functioning and its disappearance is unfortunate.

Too often, programs ignore operational realities. For example, Bands that operate schools may also be sending students to nearby off-reserve public schools. The funding mechanism has been such that over-all grants for education are calculated, and then the provincial tuition becomes a first claim on the budget. But provincial costs rise faster than AANDC budgets; so that band-operated schools are left with the leavings of the education budget and/or bands struggle to pay their tuition bills to provincial schools.

To overcome this difficulty, last year, AANDC began to split the education spending into two parts: one to cover provincial costs, the other to cover band schools. This should offer immediate relief to the system, and is a very welcome development.

In 2010, AANDC reintroduced a complicated and economically unsophisticated effort to cause bands to share the costs of running First Nations communities. At the same time, AANDC was negotiating with BC bands who were seeking jurisdiction over education. This is a good example of poor co-ordination on the part of Ottawa. No solution to this impasse is in sight.

The amount of workflow created by AANDCs reliance on multiple funding programs is an issue. Each program requires applications, reports and evaluations. This work has to be done by the few qualified personnel who administer bands and band-operated schools. So far, there is no evidence that the thousands of pages of reports are used to improve programs or results for aboriginal students.

Simple matters like cash flow, are uncoordinated. For example, the BC Ministry of Education distributes grants to school districts twice a month. The minor capital grants are delivered in July, August and September, when schools are doing minor renovation work. December's grants can be obtained in one lump sum by boards facing difficulties managing their offices over the year-end break. The province's methods of matching cash flow to spending requirements stand in stark contrast to AANDC's provision of three payments (30%, 40% and 30%) per year. Bands are left to manage any cash flow difficulties that may ensue.

## **(2) Organization and Governance Structures**

BC did not alter organization and governance structures. However, some Boards of Education created Aboriginal Education Committees or Advisory Panels, and some of these were given *defacto* if not legal, control over the aboriginal funding amounts.

BC First Nations did create new structures. The First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) focuses on the operation and capabilities of band-operated schools. It helps these schools collaborate, share development work and trial new methods and technologies. Its major goal is to improve education for on-reserve students attending band-operated schools.

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) was formed to help bands with education-related aspects of negotiations with AANDC and the BC Ministry of

Education. Its work is strategic and long-term with a major goal to improve the legal, financial and operational frameworks within which First Nations educate their children. This work involves negotiation with the federal and provincial governments on behalf of First Nations.<sup>25</sup>

FNESC and FNSA cooperate and have a high degree of overlap in their membership.

FNESC and FNSA are not like school boards, which are elected authorities set up to fulfill the provincial responsibility for education. A school board derives its authority and revenue-raising capabilities from provincial legislation – it is a creature of the province, which in turn is a creature of the constitution.

By contrast, FNESC and FNSA derive their authority by upward delegation from each participating band. They can make no laws or regulations that control bands, nor can they inspect and control their activities, without explicit consent from each band. This concept is unfamiliar to government bureaucrats accustomed to top-down controls, but it is fully consistent with traditional First Nations commitment to self-government.

FNESC and FNSA rely on communication, persuasion and consensus to develop and implement policies. The process can be slow, cumbersome and expensive. Sometimes there are bands that don't adopt a policy, but for the most part the two organizations succeed in helping band-operated schools, Bands, AANDC and the province define and implement policies that assist First Nations' students.

Can such a system generate decent outcomes for First Nations students? What happens if the consensus fragments? We won't know until the organizations have had more time to develop and mature. Could aboriginal boards of education do any better, and could they over-ride decisions made by Bands? We don't know that either, and it is the same question that plagues Europe and most confederacies.

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) and its predecessors have for many years used FNSA and/or FNESC as intermediary agencies through which they can fulfill their obligations. The nature of the work requires a fine balance, since neither FNESC nor FNSA can make individual bands do anything.

First Nations did strengthen the role of FNESC in delivering second level services, notably special education. This has enabled AANDC to offload management responsibility to First Nations.

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<sup>25</sup> There is work that is most efficiently shared between schools. FNESC has assumed some operational responsibilities for some federally funded province-wide programs, notably Special Education.

### **(3) School Programs**

The Province established early learning programs (Strong Start) and AANDC funded Kindergarten for 4-year-old students. Aboriginal Health established head start programs in many bands.

These programs are intended to improve early learning opportunities and it is likely they will have an impact on aboriginal students. In addition, some Boards of Education created aboriginal education programs, including at least one aboriginal school within a school district as well as aboriginal education programs within many others.

### **(4) Curriculum**

The Province has modified curriculum, first by introducing aboriginal content into courses and encouraging local development of content with a small grant program, then by developing provincial courses tailored to aboriginal students.

### **(5) Standards**

The province set two standards as part of its improvement effort. First, it required that performance be reported by Boards of Education, and that the performance of aboriginal students be reported separately from those of non-aboriginal students. It did the same with its own reports.

Second, it required Boards of Education to publish performance plans setting out how they planned to improve performance. Unfortunately, many of these plans included absolute targets (such as, “We will raise student graduation rates to 85% and aboriginal rates to 60%”) for which there was no path to the goal.<sup>26</sup>

At the provincial level, desired target levels for aboriginal completion rates had to be lowered – presumably to avoid another year of missed targets.

In the absence of reasonably predictable steps that will lead to a result, it is better to use rolling improvement as a target. “Better than last year” is apt to lead to more fruitful management improvements than “Increase graduation by 10%. Rolling targets were used in the initial attempt to connect funding to results. They seemed to work well in drawing attention to the problem of achievement and incenting districts and bands to work together to improve results.

### **(6) Assessment**

Assessment was not altered as part of the push to improve the results obtained by aboriginal students. However, existing performance standards were emphasized, and the performance of aboriginal students against those standards was used as a way to encourage more attention to results. Fundamental skills assessments at

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<sup>26</sup> In the mid 1990s UBC set a goal to enroll 2000 aboriginal students by the year 2000. At the time fewer than 400 aboriginal students graduated from high school each year, and even fewer met academic requirements for university entrance. The goal wasn’t attainable given the performance of high schools.



grades 4, 7 and 10, as well as grade 12 completion and student retention rates were made highly visible.

### **(7) Teacher Certification and Training**

Certification requirements were altered such that prospective teachers are to have courses or training in aboriginal education and culture. In addition, BC Universities made a strong effort to recruit aboriginal students into teacher education programs. The level of effort does not match that which took place 1950 – 1980 as BC sought teachers for its remote rural areas. The rural teacher education program developed *in situ* training to enhance the likelihood that trainees would become long-term teachers in the remote area.

The teaching force is now quite stable, so the major need is to conduct professional development work for existing teachers.

The draft jurisdiction agreement contains a proposal for First Nations to certify teachers for band-operated schools. It may be the case that bands will require additional training of the teachers they hire, thereby imposing new certification requirements without having to deal with the post secondary system or the Ministry's teacher certification branch

### **(8) Facilities**

From the Provincial viewpoint, facilities requirements have not changed. However, at least one Board of Education created a complete aboriginal school in an under-utilized facility, and others created mini-facilities within existing buildings.

There has been dissatisfaction within First Nations about federal funding for band-operated schools. On the one hand, some very lovely facilities have been built. On the other, several schools are in very poor condition.

Schools fit into the larger AANDC capital budget, and bands are frequently forced to choose between schools and other urgent requirements such as housing or safe water supplies. The issue isn't so much the capital budget for schools as the over-all size of AANDC's capital budget in relation to documented needs. The Parliamentary Budget Officer found that AANDC's capital budget was too small to do what was required. In this circumstance, schools can easily become one of many unmet needs even as responsibility for the situation is offloaded to the priorities chosen by bands.

Even so, some capital spending on schools generates questions. For example one band-operated school was constructed between two existing public schools. All three buildings wound up two miles apart strung out along one main road. They are in a small, isolated rural community in which enrolment has been declining.

First Nations children move back and forth between the public and band-operated schools, causing staffing and budget difficulties for both. The community was not

fully using existing schools before the band school was built, so addition of the third school created more underutilized space as well as tensions between the band and the local board of education over budget difficulties caused by intra-year mobility of students.

Could serious federal-provincial-band cooperation have saved some money for other uses?

### **(9) Information**

Ministries of Education have long kept information about the inputs to schooling. Spending on schools, programs and operations is well documented, as are the numbers and qualifications of teachers and administrators. Spending patterns of school boards are recorded and analysed. Budgets are built.

Provincial Ministry's have not traditionally been diligent about recording the results obtained by these inputs.

Teachers and schools do measure results, and they do so frequently. Assessments, tests and assignments, many of them highly sophisticated, provide lots of information about the effectiveness of schools with respect to student performance.

Unfortunately, teachers and schools tend to think of this information in individual terms. The results are perceived as indicators of the performance of students, not of the schools themselves. Perhaps this reflects the deep linkages between education and psychology, but it is not an approach to the information that helps teachers and schools improve.

Parents receive their child's report card, often simply a summary of much more detailed data available to teachers. Parents do not receive reports about their school's performance in relation to other schools, or in relation to stated goals and objectives for the school.

Data are seldom organized and presented to teachers and students in ways designed to improve results. When data are made public, it is too often in the form of "league tables" that rank order schools with little consideration of the local conditions within which they must work, nor of what could be done to improve results.

BC has its own league tables produced by the Fraser Institute and published by a Vancouver Newspaper. It also has a very long tradition of using data to improve instruction (and hence results). Teams of practicing teachers create the high stakes examinations used in secondary schools. Teachers mark the examinations and detailed results are provided to all subject-matter teachers so that they can improve instruction. This constitutes a very large-scale professional development program, the effect of which is shown by the strong results achieved by students.

In the elementary grades, teachers also construct fundamental skills assessments in

reading, writing and numeracy. There is a much weaker tradition of using the results to improve instruction, possibly due to union resistance to the tests and lack of funding to support better use of results.

The individual student record system has enabled much better tracking of students over time and has improved analyses of results. The fortunate (or perhaps unfortunate) consequence of this has been the revelation that some schools are doing badly, and that within schools there are often significant differences in the results obtained by different groups of students. Such differences call for action.

Information lets us know that schools are not yet successful in obtaining equity on the fundamental skills. We know that aboriginal students are among the most overlooked in this regard. It is not ignorance of the situation that we must deal with, it is establishing how to organize and manage effective responses to the inequality we all know exists.

### **What Next?**

Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber<sup>27</sup> conducted a study of countries whose educational performance was consistently improving over time. They classified the countries by their stage of improvement: poor to fair, fair to good, good to great, and great to excellent.

The report highlights points that should be considered as we try to improve the educational attainment of aboriginal students.

The authors found policy levers such as those identified above. They found that the levers were used in different ways, depending on the country's stage of improvement.

In Canada, we have a highly professional teaching force, for which teacher certification and training should assume a high level of competence and a great deal of professional responsibility and autonomy. This may lead us to misdiagnose the development needs of our small, isolated schools. Staff isolation and turnover remains very high in these schools. For example, curriculum may need to be very specific as to what is to be taught and when it is to be taught.

Mourshed *et. al.* also found that steadily improving countries had "...a steady hand on the tiller," usually in the form of a long-term deputy Minister or Minister. This enabled policy levers to be used in a strategic and mutually reinforcing manner.

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<sup>27</sup> Mourshed, Mona, Chijioke, Cineze, Barber, Michael [How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better](#). McKinsey and Company, 2010.

Consistency and coordination have been difficult to achieve in British Columbia. This is partly because policies are independently set by Federal, Provincial, Band and School District organizations. In addition, there are difficulties associated with any change effort: staff turnover, waning interest in the face of other issues, budget pressures imposed by demands from the “regular” system.

Here are suggestions that may help Aboriginal, Provincial and Federal agencies in their quest for improved educational results.

### **Provincial Aboriginal Organizations (such as FNESC, FNSA)**

1. Develop a high performance culture. Seek the best science, best literature, best music, best tourism training. A big objective should be set, and all actions directed towards it. At present, far too much effort has to be directed to obtaining funds and resolving operational issues that will never lead to excellence.
2. Develop performance standards for language and culture. What do First Nations mean by these terms and how can progress towards success be assessed and reported?
3. Obtain permission from Bands for the provincial level organizations to function as if they were Boards of Education. Obtain funding from AANDC to support sufficient staff to manage the aboriginal side of the school system. In BC, for example, 11.2% of the student body is aboriginal. If you combine enrolment of on-reserve students attending provincial schools with enrolment in band-operated schools the notional “district” enrolls slightly more than 14,000 students. This is not small.
4. Increase community involvement in schools, both on and off reserve. Any involvement that can be seen by children sends signals to them that school matters. The community needs to get its children to school, on or off reserve. The community also needs to ensure it is healthy. Schools cannot help children suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome, or drug and alcohol abuse.

### **British Columbia**

1. Improve the use of assessment information. Strengthen final examinations first, so teachers get more feedback. Then move to FSA, improving item-by-item and class-by-class use of data. Start with grade 4 because this is where timely intervention is most important. Strengthen reporting because too many aboriginal students are ignored by virtue of dropping out and by not taking critical courses.

There is high potential to waste energy on blame in this area. The BCTF, some Aboriginal organizations, some teachers/principals don't want to

- publicize bad outcomes. But, the outcomes are the outcomes. The task is to do better next time, not squabble about where the results are published.
2. Strengthen science, math and English enrolments among aboriginal students. These are the critical courses for later participation in the economy.
  3. Increase “jawboning” in districts and schools where results are poor. If necessary, tie some funding to improved results.
  4. Set realistic targets for improvement. The objective should be to develop a culture of continuous quality improvement.<sup>28</sup>

## AANDC

1. Create Urgency. Convene a meeting of Provincial Ministers of Education to discuss the results their Ministries are obtaining with the students for whom AANDC is paying. Solicit on behalf of the meeting advice from provincial Minister to be shared with their colleagues. Follow this with a meeting of Aboriginal education leaders to find out what they think they can do within their provinces. Solicit on behalf of the meeting advice from these leaders to be shared with their colleagues. Follow up both meetings in 4 months.
2. Get funding. Since the aboriginal population is growing, AANDC will need budget room. AANDC will need more room to deal with health and unique circumstances. Obtain a government commitment to do this in a responsible manner. (see 2 below)
3. Manage for results – and the result is improved educational achievement. Tie funding to it; make every AANDC manager talk about it; implement professional development to teach employees how to do it. In aid of this, consolidate all education-related funding programs so that each band gets one grant for education. Make a portion of the grant contingent on improved results.
4. When provincial-level agencies are organized by First Nations, fund them to play a lead role in curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, special education and over-all improvement programs. Tie a portion of their funding to results.
5. Decentralize the education file. Provinces have the responsibility for education and AANDC needs close collaboration with provincial Ministries of Education. This cannot be a national file unless AANDC is prepared to assume the whole file. It is not so prepared, and nor should it be.

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<sup>28</sup> Deming, W. Edwards. The New Economic for Industry, Government, Education. Cambridge. The MIT Press, 1994

## Appendix 1

### Aboriginal Control over Aboriginal Education.

First Nations' search for aboriginal control over aboriginal education is fundamentally important for band-operated schools, which are now regulated by AANDC.

There are slightly more than 100 band-operated schools in BC, but only 13 bands have indicated a desire to draw down their education-related powers. FNEC is working on behalf of these 13 bands in negotiating full, legal control over education.

Because First Nations students move back and forth between band-operated and provincial schools, British Columbia joined in the negotiations between First Nations and Canada. FNEC, Canada and BC signed an agreement that would enable bands to draw down their education powers without waiting for a completed treaty. Both Canada (in 2006) and BC (in 2007) passed legislation that would enable jurisdiction to be drawn down. The arrangement required only adequate financial support before implementation.

There has followed 6 years of frustrating, and still inconclusive, negotiations.

A method of calculating "adequate" financial support had to be found. An acceptable solution that tied funding to provincial spending, albeit in a complicated and indirect manner was eventually agreed upon.

The solution, developed and studied for only 13 of BC's 100+ bands, was adopted by AANDC for the entire band-operated system for September 2011. On balance, the new system is a significant commitment of new funding and more importantly a commitment to tie AANDC to provincial funding for education. The connection between federal funding and provincial spending for education means the BC First Nations communities will benefit from the political pressure that all BC citizens place on government to fund education.

Even as the "new" system was announced by AANDC, the agency announced that bands that chose to take jurisdiction over education would lose part of their education funding as an offset against any "own source revenue" (OSR) they might have. AANDC's *de facto* position on jurisdiction thereby became "*If you take jurisdiction, you will receive less money than if you leave responsibility over education with Ottawa.*"<sup>29</sup>

This was a very bad signal. If government seeks to strengthen self-sufficiency

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<sup>29</sup> This is an incredible position in that it provides a *negative* financial incentive for First Nations assuming control over education. It also re-introduced a concept that had been explicitly removed from the table when jurisdiction was first being negotiated. It forced the negotiating First Nations into an untenable position, since their Chiefs had decided that revenue sharing should fall under treaty negotiations.

among First Nations a better signal might have been “...we will match, at a declining rate, every dollar you raise ...” That would have led to an entirely different discussion.

So far, reintroduction of the Own Source Revenue (OSR) policy has delayed First Nations assumption of jurisdiction for over two years. The discussions have become entirely financial in nature, while the educational benefits to children are ignored.

Methods to delay or “work-around” the official policy have been suggested by AANDC and rejected by First Nations.

The negative financial incentive aside, there are sound reasons for rejecting the proposed OSR policy. These include unstable revenue, the difficulty of meeting existing fiscal obligations when revenue is deducted from grants, and the accounting and consulting fees associated with managing the policy.<sup>30</sup>

Another distraction has appeared in the form of a proposed First Nations Education Act. The unseemly urgency of “consultations” about this proposal aside, it is impossible to conceive how the federal government believes it can quickly develop legislation to govern a Canada-wide “system” of band-operated schools. Quite simply, Canada has no evidence of successful practice anywhere in the country, nor has it expertise in the field of education.

AANDC has already created terribly fragmented policies, implemented in a huge variety of ways. It has information worthy of the name about the success of its programs. In fact, there is a “...tangle of governance that plagues aboriginal education delivery and fragments efforts at reform.”<sup>31</sup>

The administrative complexity created by AANDC has consequences for the demands placed on Bands, and on AANDC itself. As a recent example, as of May 17, 2013, Canada has not been able to complete the count of status, on-reserve, school children in British Columbia. The school year to which this count applies ends in six weeks. Can an agency that cannot count its clients be relied upon to improve the results it obtains for those same clients?

Government could reasonably introduce legislation and attendant regulations if anyone actually knew what do. But in the absence of evidence of sound practice, which is where we are, we need a plan to conduct modest and contained studies in improvement. A good basic curriculum, well-trained teachers, and ease of access for students would help, but we do not even have these comparatively modest elements

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<sup>30</sup> Only three months ago, after FNEC had spent two years on a consulting team to assess and critique the draft policy, AANDC officials thanked FNEC for demonstrating to them that the policy wouldn’t work in BC. No new proposals are on offer.

<sup>31</sup> Raham, Helen. “Policy Levers for Improving Outcomes for Off-Reserve Students.” Saskatoon, Colloquium on Improving the Educational Outcomes of Aboriginal People Living Off-Reserve, March, 2010.

in place. First Nations need encouragement to collaborate with one another, to assume responsibility for the results obtained by their schools and to carefully experiment with approaches to schooling.

Organizations similar to British Columbia's province-wide Francophone school district might work to support band-operated schools, provided AANDC was willing to fund them at appropriate levels *and* provided First Nations had responsibility for the organizations. But such organizations would be expensive to create and even more expensive (politically and financially) to dismantle should they prove unsuccessful.

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