

School Governance On-Reserve: an Unsatisfactory State of Affairs

John Richards jrichard@sfu.ca

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief historical review of interpretation of Aboriginal education treaty rights. It also offers an initial assessment of the 2011 census data on Aboriginal education in Canada. Relative to comparable 2006 results, high school completion rates improved among young Métis and Indian/First Nation Aboriginals (ages 20-24 in 2011). However, among young adult Indian/First Nation living on-reserve, high school completion remains approximately 40 percent, with little change from 2006. Nine in ten Aboriginals live in one of the six provinces from Quebec to British Columbia. Interprovincial variation in education outcomes among the six is large. The paper offers tentative explanations for the dramatically better outcomes in BC relative to the five other provinces with large Aboriginal cohorts. The paper also discusses the role of weak reserve schools as reason for the inter-census decline in the on-reserve share of those identifying as Indian/First Nation.

Ottawa published two major reviews of Aboriginal matters in the 1960s. One was the infamous “White Paper” (Canada 1969) presented to Parliament by Jean Chretien, at the time Minister of Indian Affairs in Pierre Trudeau’s first government. The White Paper recommended abolition of the Indian Act and phasing out of reserves in favour of complete integration of Indians into Canadian society. The White Paper served as foil for

Harold Cardinal's "Red Paper" (Indian Chiefs of Alberta 1970), an early statement on behalf of indigenous autonomy and an expansive interpretation of treaty rights.¹

Now largely forgotten, the second was a much more nuanced review. The Hawthorn Report (Canada 1966-67), named for its director, insisted that policy not be directed at assimilation ("the research on which the Report is based was not directed to finding ways in which Indians might be assimilated" (v.1,10)) but it also insisted "that individuals be given the capacity to make choices which include the decision to take jobs away from reserves, play a part in politics, and move and reside where they wish" (v.1,10). Central to Hawthorn's vision was expansion of the capacity of individuals, which required provision of high-quality on-reserve social services. Once health care and schools of decent quality were available, Hawthorn predicted many reserve residents would choose to leave the reserve and participate in mainstream society – as equals with other Canadians. He acknowledged that many would not make that choice, and that living on-reserve was an equally valid option.

The intellectual and political links from the 1970 Red Paper through section 35 of the Constitution Act to the 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples are obvious. "We propose," stated the RCAP report, "that the treaty relationship be restored and used from now on as the basis of the partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada." And in elaboration:

¹ Thanks to Barry Anderson for comments on an earlier draft. The usual caveat applies about author's responsibility for conclusions and remaining errors.

To bring about this fundamental change, Canadians need to understand that *Aboriginal peoples are nations* [emphasis in original]. That is, they are political and cultural groups with values and lifeways distinct from those of other Canadians. They lived as nations – highly centralized, loosely federated, or small and clan based – for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. As nations, they forged trade and military alliances among themselves and with the new arrivals. To this day, Aboriginal people's sense of confidence and well-being remains tied to the strength of their nations. Only as members of restored nations can they reach their potential in the twenty-first century. (Canada 1996,x-xi)

There is scant acknowledgment in RCAP that Indians/First Nations might choose to “take jobs away from reserves” and participate in mainstream Canadian society. While not stated explicitly, RCAP implied that a life separate from the reserve meant inevitable loss of culture and a life probably scarred by discrimination. A prominent image in the RCAP report was the two-row wampum, a belt commemorating a 1613 treaty between the Dutch and Mohawk:

There are two rows of purple, and those two rows represent the spirit of our ancestors. Three beads of wampum separating the two purple rows symbolize peace, friendship and respect. The two rows of purple are two vessels traveling down the same river together. One, a birch bark canoe, is for the Indian people, their laws, their customs, and their ways. The other, a ship, is for the white people and their laws, their customs and their ways. We shall each travel the river together, side by

side, but in our own boat. Neither of us will try to steer the other's vessel. (Canada 1996,10)

Given the near-universal rejection of the White Paper by Indian/First Nation leaders, Ottawa largely abandoned attempts to design on-reserve policy. In particular, it abandoned attempts to guide primary and secondary education. The Department (currently designated Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development) became primarily a funder for social programs designed by individual bands. Relative to the 1960s, there have undeniably been many positive results. Between 1975 and 1990 the gap between life expectancy of on-reserve residents and all other Canadians was halved (Richards 2006,32). Since, Indian/First Nation life expectancy has risen along with that of other Canadians (although the gap has not been much reduced). As I show in more detail below, the education levels of Indian/First Nation adults born after 1965 (ages under 45 at the time of the 2011 census) are markedly better than those who are older.

There are however major – largely unacknowledged – limitations to the RCAP agenda. Here I concentrate on one: the conclusion by most Indian/First Nation leaders that the treaty right to education should mean individual band control of whatever schools may reside on reserve lands. The 19th century treaties described formal schooling in brief ambiguous language. An important early exercise in defining the right was *Indian Control of Indian Education*, the Native Indian Brotherhood's 1972 submission to the Minister of Indian Affairs:

The past practice of using the school committee [composed of band members] as an advisory body with limited influence, in restricted areas of the school program, must give way to an education authority with the control of funds and consequent authority which are necessary for an effective decision-making body. The Federal Government must take the required steps to transfer to local Bands the authority and the funds which are allotted for Indian education. (NIB 1972,30)

The interpretation of education as a band-based treaty right has meant individual band councils typically operating one small stand-alone school. There exist approximately 500 reserve schools across Canada with a median size of 100 students (Richards and Scott 2009,60).² Dedicated teachers can achieve remarkable results in stand-alone school systems, but the overall results are never likely to be satisfactory. Michael Mendelson (2009) has compared the status quo among reserve schools to that in the Prairies a century ago when rural municipalities ran one- and two-room schools.

In a broad discussion of reserve governance, John Graham (2012,38) states his conclusion about band governance of schools bluntly: “In the rest of Canada and elsewhere in the Western world, local governments serving 600 or so people have [limited] responsibilities. No countries assign to such small governments responsibility for the ‘big three’ areas of education, health and social assistance.”

² While the median size is approximately 100 students, two thirds of all students in reserve schools are in one of the 125 schools with a student population over 200.

In mid-20th century, rural municipalities yielded strategic direction of schools, often reluctantly, to provincial education ministries. If children growing up on reserves are to realize decent education outcomes, a necessary – albeit not sufficient – condition, Mendelson and Graham argue, is that bands agree to entrust strategic decisions over school policy to professionally managed school authorities with clear goals. If First Nation leaders want their children able to “walk on both sides of the river,” something similar to the evolution of rural municipality-run schools must occur for reserve schools. After four decades of defining the treaty right in terms of band control it is understandably difficult for First Nation leaders to accept a redefinition of the treaty right in terms of encompassing authorities.

Following this introduction, the chapter proceeds as follows. The next section documents the extent to which those identifying as Indian/First Nation are living off-reserve and the importance of better education opportunities as motivation for migration to cities. The third section illustrates, via 2011 census data, the links between income, employment and education among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity groups. The final section introduces an informal discussion of the role of family characteristics on Indian/First Nation education outcomes and speculates on reasons for superior Aboriginal education outcomes in British Columbia.

Choosing to live off-reserve

Hawthorn was right in his prediction that many Indians would choose to live off-reserve. According to the 2011 census, 55 percent of those who identified as “registered Indian” – and hence have the right to live on-reserve – were living off-reserve (Canada 2013a). (Due to incomplete enumeration of reserves, the actual off-reserve share is probably closer to 50 percent.³) Nearly half of those living off-reserve were in census metropolitan areas (cities with a population over 100,000).

Here and throughout this chapter I make reference to census data, which are self-reported and admittedly suffer from various biases. Nonetheless, the census is the most authoritative source of consistent Canada-wide data. Terminology has changed over time (from Indian to First Nation for example) and new terms have come into common use (such as Aboriginal as an umbrella term). In recent years, the census has primarily reported results based on self-identification questions. The Aboriginal identity population is all those who identify as belonging to one of three groups: (1) North American Indian or First Nation (Mohawk, Ojibwa, Cree, and so on); (2) Métis (descendants of communities formed from the intermarriage of the former with *coureurs de bois* engaged in the fur trade); or (3) Arctic Inuit. Self-identification as an Aboriginal does not necessarily mean Aboriginal ancestry, and identification as North American Indian or First Nation does not necessarily mean the respondent is a “registered Indian” pursuant to the Indian Act. The census Aboriginal identity population does however include those who indicate being a registered Indian, whether or not they also identify as Aboriginal.⁴

³ Based on adjustments made to previous census counts, the off-reserve overestimate is probably about 5 percentage points.

⁴ Based on the National Household Survey, which accompanied the 2011 census, the Canadian Aboriginal identity population in 2011 was 1,401,000. Of the total, 852,000 (61 percent)

Relative to exhaustive studies of on-reserve conditions, there has been little systematic study of other Aboriginals. A notable exception is the ambitious 2009 survey by Environics Institute (2010) of a sample of 2500 Aboriginals living in one of 11 large cities, from Vancouver to Halifax. While the randomization process was not as good as a census allows, Environics researchers strived to generate a sample for each city that matched 2006 census statistics for the city in question, in terms of sex, age, education level, and Aboriginal identify (Métis or Indian/FN).

Moving to a city need not mean abandoning one's identity as an Aboriginal. A large majority (77 percent) of respondents said they were "very proud" to be Aboriginal. A similar percentage (71 percent) considered the city in which they live to be "home" and two thirds (65 percent) said they like living in their city "a lot." Less than a quarter (22 percent) plan to return to their "community of origin" (which may or may not be a reserve); half (50 percent) intend to stay in the city; the remainder are undecided. Among participants in the survey who were first-generation urban Aboriginals and who identified as Indian/FN (as opposed to Métis or Inuit), the most important reason given for migrating to their city was access to education.⁵

identified as North American Indian / First Nation, 452,000 (32 percent) as Métis, and 59,000 (4 percent) as Inuit. The remainder designated multiple identities. The registered Indian population comprised 697,510 (82 percent of the Indian/FN identity population).

⁵ The surveyors asked, "What is the most important reason why you first moved to your city?" The three most important reasons given were, foremost, pursuit of education for themselves or family members (mentioned by 43 percent), followed by a desire to be closer to family members in the city and employment opportunities (Environics 2010, 32).

Environics results are an implicit rebuttal to RCAP. They imply that urban living *is* a viable option for many. Which does not mean going to town is an altogether positive experience. Over two thirds (70 percent) of respondents agreed with the statement, “I have been teased or insulted because of my Aboriginal background” and over one third (36 percent) with the statement, “I don’t feel accepted by non-Aboriginal people” (pp.78-79). And undeniably, in every western Canadian city, Aboriginals are overrepresented in the most distressed neighbourhoods.

One way to evaluate the urban Aboriginal experience is simply to ask people whether they are “happy” or “satisfied” with their life. “Life satisfaction” surveys are an emerging area of social research and the Environics study included a “happiness” question. As with all surveys using such questions, Environics found that the “level of happiness with your life” varied in predictable ways.⁶ For example, employment matters. Among those working full time, 72 percent were “very happy”. This statistic fell to 50 percent for those with part time work, and 34 percent for the unemployed (p.105). A sense of cultural/family connectedness also matters. Among those who knew their family tree well, 70 percent were “very happy”; among those who had no knowledge of it, only 43 percent (p.105).

An earlier study provides some comparative evidence on “life satisfaction” among both urban and rural Aboriginals. Between 1999 and 2003 the Equality Security and

⁶ Page numbers refer to pagination of the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study*. For a comprehensive analysis of the “happiness” results of the urban Aboriginal survey see Gross and Richards (2012). This is also the source for a summary of the unpublished Heritage Canada survey discussed in the following paragraph.

Community (ESC) project conducted two waves of a general survey of public attitudes on policy issues. The second wave included approximately 5,600 respondents in a nationwide sample. Heritage Canada conducted a supplement to this second wave, using the same questionnaire, to survey approximately 600 Aboriginals living in the Prairies. Among the ESC questions was an invitation for respondents to rate their overall life satisfaction from “dissatisfied” (scored 1) to “satisfied” (scored 10). The average satisfaction level for the national sample was 8.0 and for the Prairie Aboriginal sample 7.9. For rural Aboriginals, the average level was 8.0, slightly higher than for urban Aboriginals, at 7.7. Given the small Aboriginal sample size, neither the difference between the national sample average and the Prairie Aboriginal average nor the difference between average rural and average urban Aboriginal life satisfaction is statistically significant. However, the distribution of life satisfaction among Prairie Aboriginals was considerably more dispersed than in the national sample. Only 9 percent of the national sample expressed a life satisfaction of 5 or below; the proportion for Aboriginals was twice as high, at 18 percent.⁷

A snapshot of education outcomes among young adult Aboriginals illustrates why “going to town” is an attractive option for many Indian/FN families. The youngest cohort for which it is reasonable to expect completion of high school is ages 20-24 at the time of the 2011 census. Young Aboriginal adults in this cohort who identified as North American Indian or First Nation and were living off-reserve, and those who identified as

⁷ Among non-Aboriginals, covered by a much larger sample than were Aboriginals, 67 percent reported a satisfaction rate scored between 6 and 9, while 43 percent of Prairie Aboriginals did so. At the upper end of the distribution, 39 percent of Aboriginals reported the maximum score of 10, well above the 24 percent of the national sample.

Métis reported much lower rates of incomplete secondary studies than those living on-reserve, and their results in 2011 were superior to those in 2006. (See Figure 1.) The census does not provide the location of schooling, but location at the time of the census is a – far from perfect – proxy. Young Aboriginals living off-reserve (whether Indian/FN or Métis) probably received most of their primary and secondary education in schools of the relevant province. These results provide indirect evidence that provincial education ministries are taking more seriously than in past decades their obligation toward Aboriginal students.

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The good news with respect to progress from 2006 to 2011 needs to be qualified. In 2006, census socioeconomic data, including data on Aboriginals, were derived from mandatory participation in a 20 percent “long form” sample. In 2011, participation in the analogous National Household Survey (NHS) was voluntary. The voluntary nature of the NHS may have introduced a bias. Among the Aboriginals requested to participate in the NHS, those who refused may well be poorer, less well educated, and less willing to cooperate with government agencies than would someone in a rigorously random sample. On the assumption the two censuses are both unbiased estimates, the off-reserve Indian/FN incomplete secondary studies statistic is still three times the comparable statistic for young non-Aboriginal (30.2 relative to 10.1 percent) and that for Métis is twice as high (20.4 relative to 10.1 percent). The report cards for provincial education systems might be summarized as “making progress, need to do better.”

For young Indian/FN living on-reserve the rate of incomplete secondary studies remains extremely high, and has declined little since 2006.⁸ As mentioned above, area of residence is an imperfect proxy for location of schooling but probably those living on-reserve at the time of the 2011 census received much of their education in a reserve school. While there is great variation in student performance among them, the overall report card for on-reserve schools across Canada is “inadequate, need to make major improvements.”

It is important to realize that provincial and reserve schools do not reside in watertight compartments, that Aboriginal student mobility between school systems and between schools within a system is high. For “registered Indians” children living on-reserve about 40 percent at any point in the school year are attending a provincial off-reserve school (Rajekar and Mathilakath 2009). Furthermore, family mobility is higher among the poor, and many Aboriginal families are poor. Not surprisingly, Aboriginal families, both Indian/FN and Métis, are more mobile on average than non-Aboriginal.⁹

⁸ Figure 1 statistics refer to all who identified in the census as North American Indian or First Nation, whether or not they were also “registered Indians” pursuant to the Indian Act. Only registered Indians have the right to live on-reserve. Hence, the on-reserve high school completion statistics refer to registered Indians, whereas the off-reserve statistics refer to all identifying as Indian/FN, whether or not registered.

⁹ Based on the 2006 census (Canada 2008d), 13.9 percent of non-Aboriginals lived at a different address 12 months prior to the census date. Among Aboriginals, the equivalent statistic was 19.4 percent. The mobility statistics for Indian/FN and Métis are similar. Any change of family address probably implies a change of school for the children involved. These statistics do not capture interruptions in school attendance arising from family mobility within a school year.

A final observation on the data illustrated in Figure 1. The incomplete high school rate for all young Indian/FN adults (regardless of area of residence and whether registered) declined by over 7 points between 2006 and 2011 (from 48.1 to 40.7 percent). Three quarters of this decline can be attributed to changes in incomplete rates for the two groups, on- and off-reserve, weighted by their share in the total as of 2006. One quarter of the improvement can be attributed to a decline in the share living on-reserve.¹⁰ The reasons for this decline in the on-reserve share are multiple. Based on the Environics survey, the search for better schools is almost certainly one of them.

The role of education in creating the “capacity to make choices”

Not surprisingly, the Environics survey indicated that those fully employed were happier than those employed part time or unemployed. Again not surprisingly, respondents’ income and reported happiness were positively correlated. While exceptions and qualifications exist, no community escapes poverty without the majority realizing employment earnings. And the majority do not achieve earnings without the majority having completed high school. Higher education, higher employment earnings and higher life satisfaction are closely related.

¹⁰ The share of young adults ages 20-24 who identified as Indian/FN (whether or not they were also registered) and were living on-reserve declined from 44.2 percent in 2006 to 37.9 percent in 2011 (Canada 2008b,2013b).

insert Figures 2, 3 here

Figure 2 illustrates that, at the time of the 2011 census, employment rates among Indian/FN, Métis and non-Aboriginals were all below 40 percent for those lacking high school certification. Within all identity groups, completing high school (while pursuing no further formal education) increases each group’s employment rate by over 25 percentage points. At higher education levels, employment rates for all identity groups continue to rise. High school is a low rung on the education ladder. For the majority in a community to achieve what most Canadians consider “middle class” incomes requires that the majority achieve some form of post-secondary education – a trades certification, college diploma or university degree. While low, high school completion is obviously a significant rung worth close examination.¹¹

Figure 3 illustrates median employment income in 2010 among identity groups, by highest education level. (The statistics are calculated over all who reported at least some employment earnings.) At each of the three education levels, the Indian/FN median is roughly 80 percent of the corresponding non-Aboriginal median; the Métis median is roughly 90 percent. The gaps may reflect, in part, discrimination in wages offered to comparably qualified Aboriginal workers. However, they also reflect other factors: for example, average weekly Aboriginal hours worked were lower than for non-Aboriginals.

¹¹ For an analysis of the NHS post-secondary education results among Aboriginal identity groups see Richards (forthcoming).

Figure 4a illustrates, via NHS results from four age cohorts (ranging from ages 20-24 to ages 45 and over), the intergenerational profiles of those without high school or other post-secondary certification. Those in the oldest cohort illustrated were born prior to 1965 and all but a few in this cohort can be expected to have completed high school (if they did complete) before 1980. Even within the non-Aboriginal population, over one in five (21.6 percent) of those ages 45 and older did not complete. Among the three younger non-Aboriginal cohorts the statistic is under 10 percent. This first profile is a straightforward illustration of the fact that, for working-age Canadian adults, near-universal high school completion has become the norm.

Figure 4b illustrates, within each age cohort, the gap between the incomplete high school rate of an Aboriginal identity group and that for non-Aboriginals. The gap for Métis is roughly 10 percentage points for all four cohorts. As measured by this gap, Métis high school completion, while not converging on that for non-Aboriginals, has kept pace with the intergenerational rise in importance of high school completion among Canadians overall.

As with Métis and non-Aboriginals, the incomplete rate for Indian/FN is about 10 percentage points lower for those ages 35-44 than for those ages 45 and older. However, for the cohorts below age 45, the Indian/FN profiles differ from the two others. While the gaps illustrated in Figure 4b are obviously high, some convergence takes place at age cohorts above 20-24. Based on the profile for all Indian/FN about 60 percent are

completing high school in the ages 20-24 cohort; among the ages 35-44 cohort an additional 10 percentage points have completed high school or equivalent.¹²

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School quality and socioeconomic factors as determinants of education outcomes

Until now, I have implicitly attributed education outcomes to two factors. The first is cultural differences – including the potential for discrimination – between non-Aboriginals on the one hand and the two Aboriginal groups, Métis and Indian/FN. The second is the quality of provincial schools relative to reserve schools, considered at the national level. National averages hide some large variations in school outcomes at the provincial level, both in provincial and reserve schools. It is also important to introduce family socioeconomic characteristics as a third set of factors that bear on school performance.

¹² The incomplete high school rate for all Indian/FN in the ages 20-24 cohort is 40.7 percent. This statistic declines to 29.7 percent for the ages 35-44 cohort.

How important is each of the three sets of factors? The ideal answer requires a sophisticated regression analysis on a large national sample of young adults, identifying for each individual all relevant factors. Here I present a simple “back of the envelope” analysis based on 18 Indian/FN subgroups defined from tabulated 2006 census data for each of the six provinces from Quebec to British Columbia having large Aboriginal populations (nine of ten Aboriginals live in one of the six):

- 6 on-reserve subgroups, one for each province;
- 6 off-reserve subgroups, living in a census metropolitan area within a province;
- 6 off-reserve subgroups, living in a rural or urban, non-CMA community within a province.

In the discussion here, the average employment rate for all members (ages 15 and over) of a subgroup serves as proxy for socioeconomic family characteristics likely to bear on children’s education outcomes.¹³ The scatterplot in Figure 5 illustrates each subgroup’s average Indian/FN incomplete high school statistic and average employment rate.¹⁴

¹³ The employment rate is a reasonable proxy for income and education. It is highly dependent on completion of K-12, and average incomes are in turn highly dependent on presence of employment earnings. See Sharpe et al. (2009) for a decomposition of the relative importance of socioeconomic and family characteristics on Aboriginal incomes.

¹⁴ Incidentally, the range of variation in employment and high school completion rates among analogously defined subgroups for Métis (not shown) is much smaller than for Indian/FN subgroups. The relatively small variation in Métis employment rates has no statistical significance in explaining variation in Métis high school completion rates.

insert Figure 5 here

The Figure 5 trendlines illustrate the result arising from a regression of incomplete high school rates for the 18 subgroups on the relevant average employment rate for the subgroup and an index variable to identify on-reserve observations.¹⁵ The rationale for inclusion of the index is to accommodate the additional difficulties arising in the context of isolated and very small schools. We would expect a statistically significant negative relationship between a subgroup's overall employment rate and its incomplete high school rate among young adults. We would also expect that, for a given employment rate, the incomplete rate be higher for on-reserve subgroups. Such are the results of the regression.

Several observations are worth noting. The range of employment rates is large, indicating considerable interprovincial variation in average prosperity and projected education levels of the subgroups. For the Manitoba and Saskatchewan on-reserve subgroups, the employment rate is close to 30 percent. For three off-reserve subgroups, one in Ontario and two in Alberta, the employment rate exceeds 60 percent.

¹⁵ For the 18 Indian/FN subgroups the regression result is $y = 66.9 - 0.51x_1 + 14.7x_2$, where y is the projected incomplete high school rate, x_1 is the employment rate and x_2 is the index designating a reserve location. The adjusted R^2 is 0.67. The employment rate is significant at 5% one-tail, the on-reserve index at 1% one-tail. The regression could be re-specified to add an index distinguishing CMA from rural/urban, non-CMA Indian/FN subgroups. Such an index has the appropriate sign (implying higher rural than CMA incomplete rates) but is insignificant. The small number of observations means the trendlines are indicative only.

If we project expected high school incomplete rates in terms of the simple regression, we can interpret deviations from projected outcome as an indirect measure of the performance of provincial school systems and of average quality of reserve schools in the relevant province. A positive deviation implies the actual high school incomplete rate is higher than projected and the relevant school system is underperforming relative to expectation; a negative deviation implies superior performance.

Using 2011 data does not alter the basic ranking of provincial school systems in terms of 2006 data (Richards forthcoming). The incomplete rates are lowest in BC, highest in the Prairie provinces. The on-reserve subgroup observations fit the trend line reasonably well – except for BC, where the on-reserve BC high school incomplete rate (46.9 percent) is 13.0 points below the trendline projection. While the deviations from trend for the two BC off-reserve subgroups are smaller, both also lie below the trendline. By contrast, the on-reserve Manitoba high school incomplete rate (72.0 percent) is very high and lies 6.4 points above the trend line. The incomplete rates for the two Manitoba off-reserve subgroups also lie well above trend and are higher than the on-reserve incomplete high school rate in BC. The employment rate may well reflect more than parental socioeconomic characteristics. The large positive deviations of Alberta off-reserve incomplete rates may reflect the relative quality of Aboriginal education in the province; they may also reflect a below-average willingness of students to complete high school due to a provincial resource boom and a correspondingly high market demand for workers, including those with low education levels.

Why one province performs better than another is not obvious, but here are four probably significant differences between BC and the five other provinces under review:

- For two decades the BC education ministry has provided school districts additional funds based on the number of Aboriginal students in district schools, and required the districts to prepare Aboriginal education enhancement agreements in conjunction with local Aboriginal education leaders. The intent is that districts use their incremental funds for Aboriginal education projects and that the agreements define proximate goals, such as targets in future provincial Aboriginal test scores or in attendance rates.
- Relative to other provinces the BC education ministry has a better tradition of publishing detailed Aboriginal student performance, disaggregated at the school level. Knowing the numbers is a prerequisite to making progress.
- First Nations in BC have organized reserve schools into two province-wide agencies (First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations School Authority) that provide secondary services, assess reserve school performance in reading, arithmetic and other metrics, and share resources and ideas.
- Thanks to the first three innovations, it has been easier for AANDC's regional officials to respond to calls for better reserve school funding, to build working

relationships with the provincial education ministry, and to negotiate tripartite (First Nation, BC, AANDC) education agreements.

Conclusion

In 2011 the federal government launched a major initiative intended to improve reserve school performance. At time of writing (February 2014), the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs has posted online a draft First Nations Education Act, which will no doubt be amended before tabling in Parliament. The core purpose of the legislation is to encourage creation of First Nation equivalents of provincial school ministries, and to assure a more stable and transparent basis for funding reserve schools at a level comparable to provincial schools.

Predictably, the initiative has met fierce opposition from many chiefs who perceive it as a violation of their interpretation of the treaty right to education. At time of writing it is unclear whether new legislation will be enacted and whether it will bring about any substantial reorganization of reserve schools. No one should entertain illusions about rapid change: the success of reform in school systems is measured in decades. At best, the Act will enable some valuable pragmatic reforms, which given time will lead to better outcomes. If Ottawa abandons the goal of the Act (either by withdrawing it entirely or legislating only a modest initiative), then on-reserve school outcomes will probably change little and the trend of families leaving the reserve in search of better education

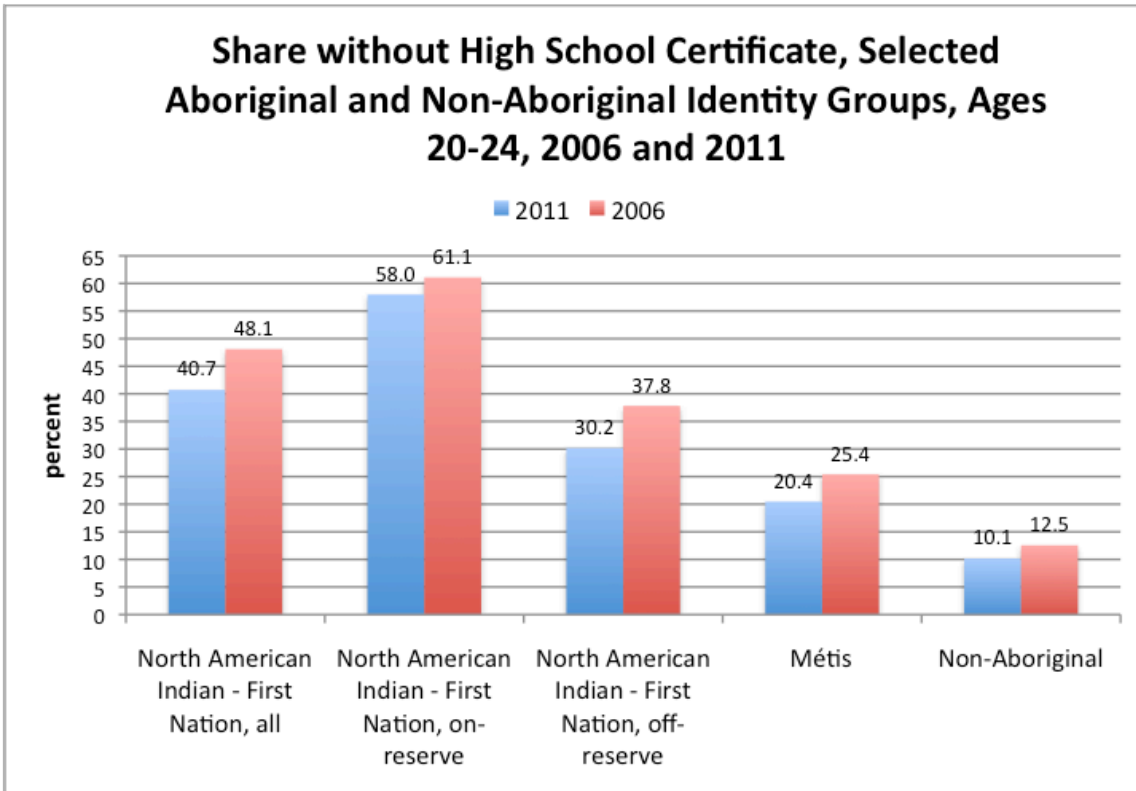
opportunities will continue – as Hawthorn predicted and Environics respondents confirmed.

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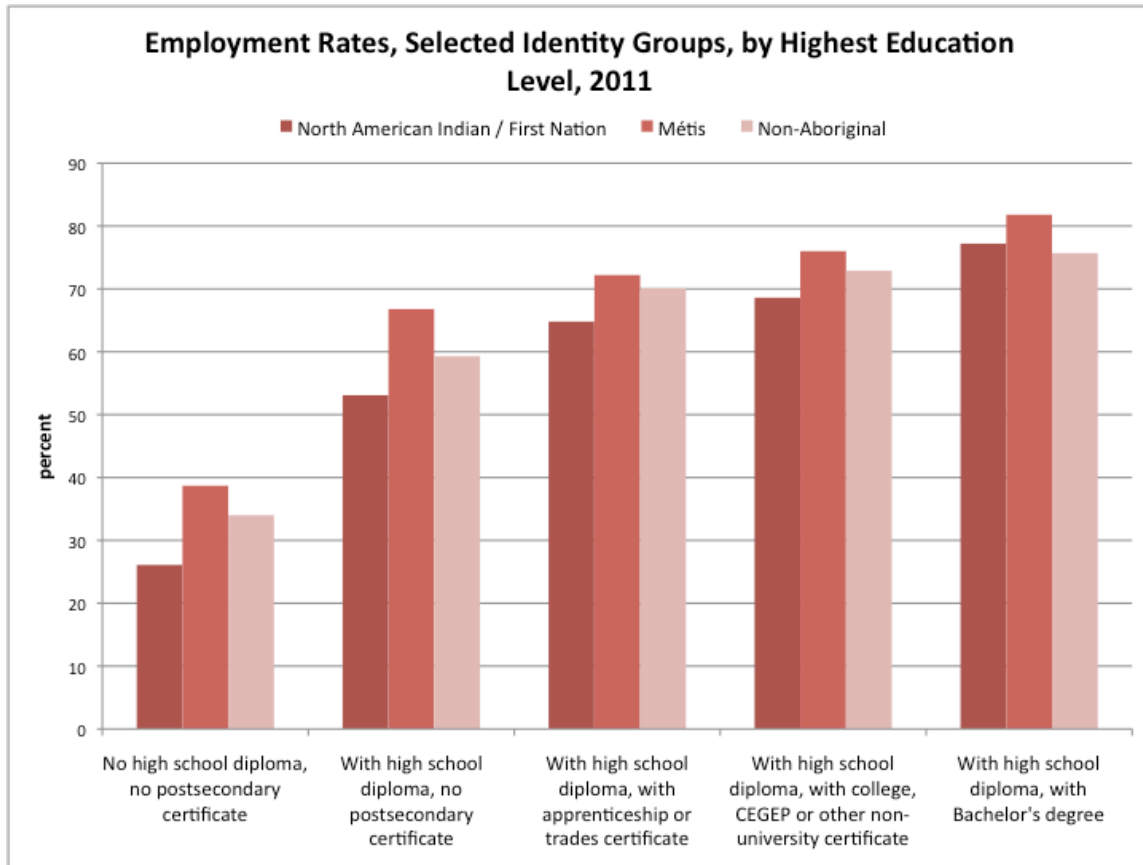
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Figure 1



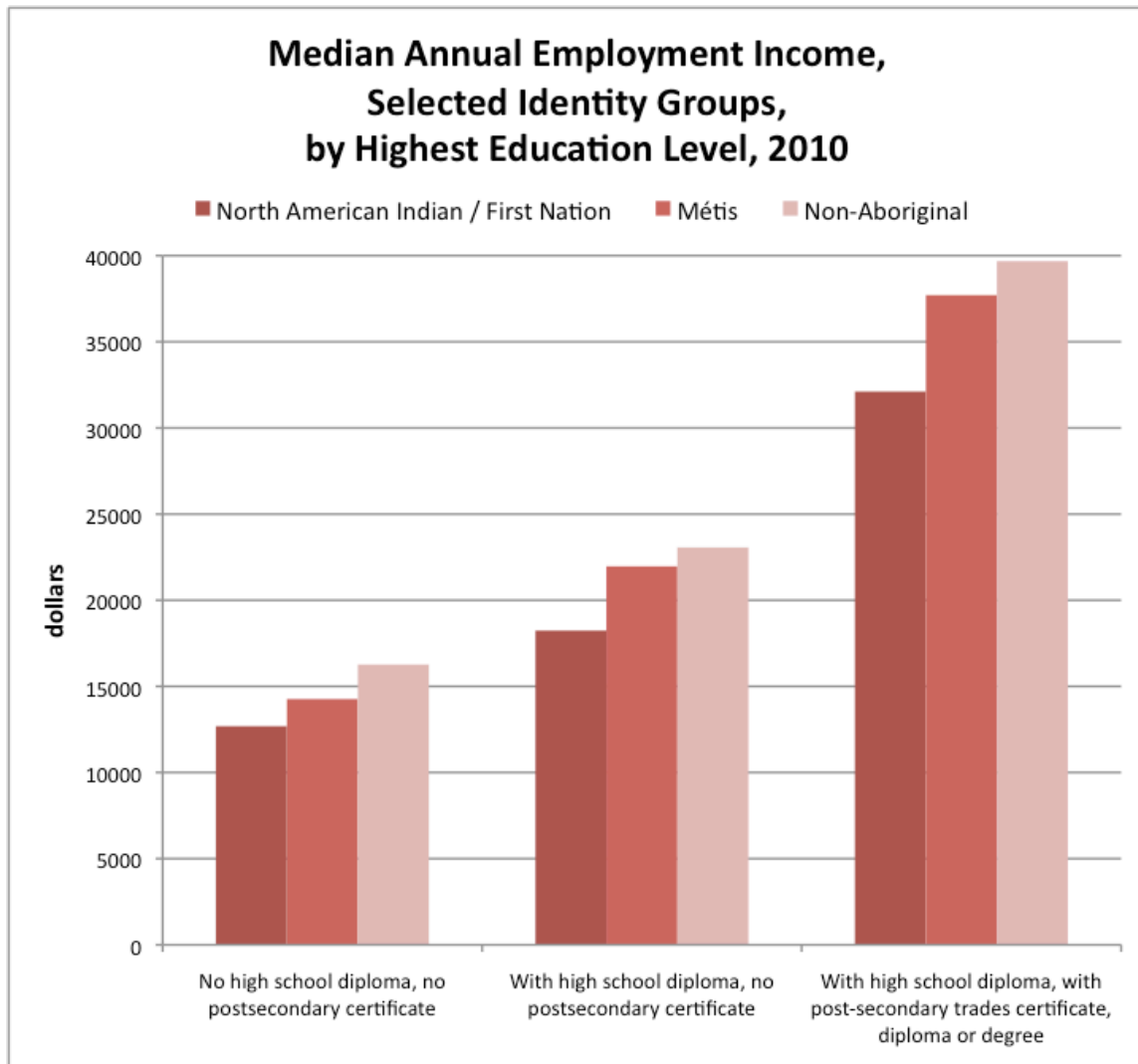
Source: Canada (2008b, 2013b)

Figure 2



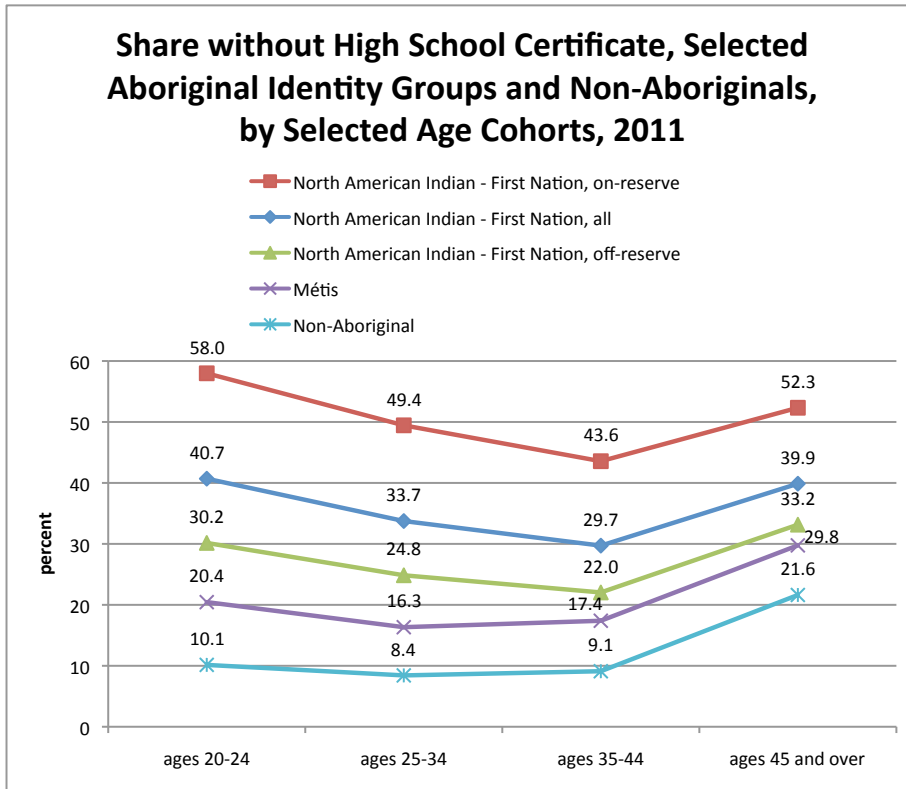
Source: Canada (2013b)

Figure 3



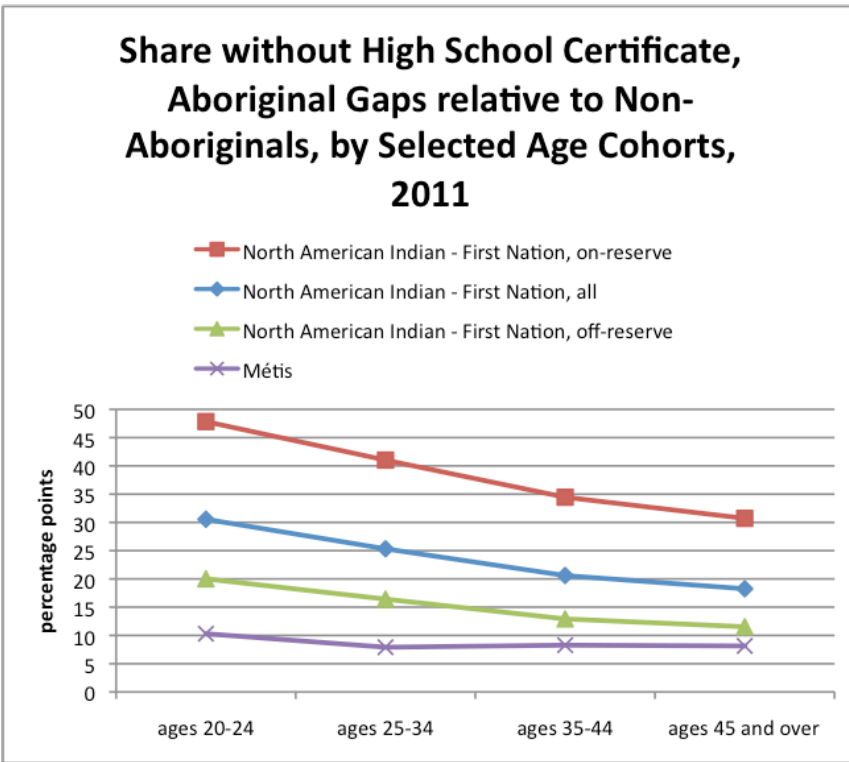
Source: Canada (2013c)

Figure 4a



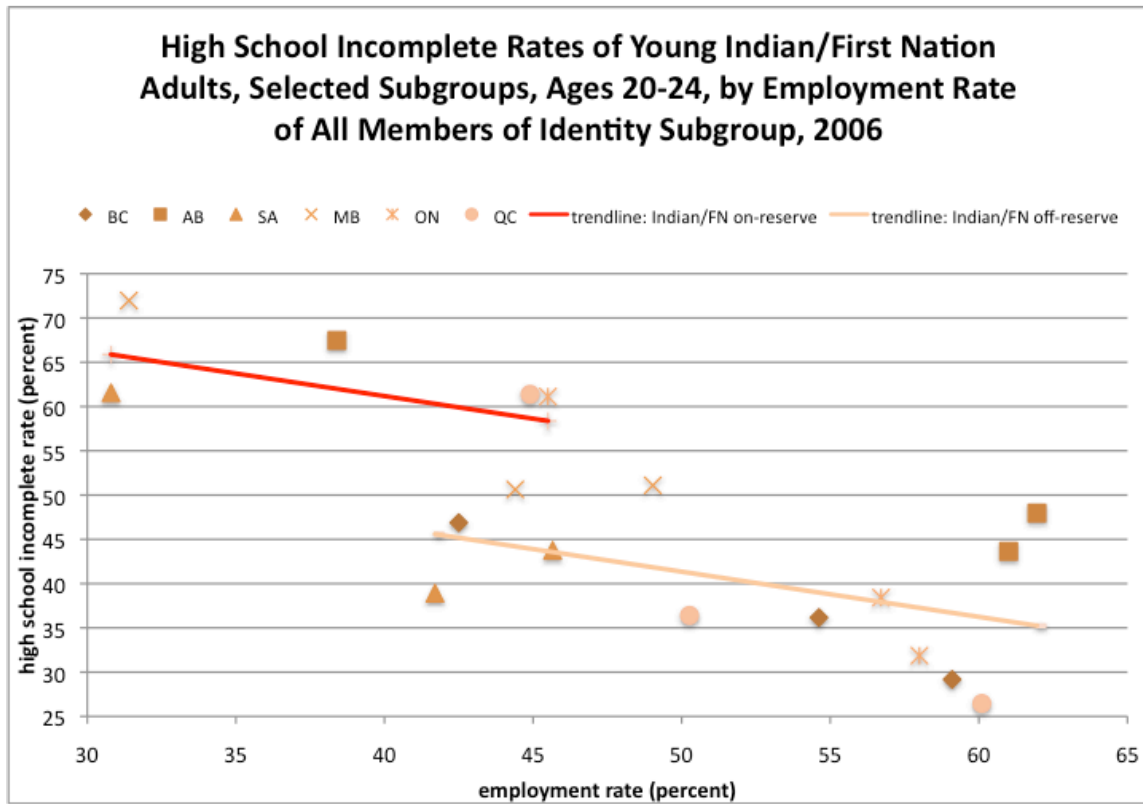
Source: Canada (2013b)

Figure 4b



Source: author's calculations from Canada (2013b)

Figure 5



Source: Canada (2008b,2008c)