

CEA: “Learning from the Best:” A report on an investigation

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Over the past two decades, all levels of government across Canada have recognized their social, moral and legal responsibilities to improve the achievement of aboriginal students at school and to ensure that aboriginal students graduate in numbers comparable to non-aboriginal students. The Federal Government’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission reminded Canadians “reconciliation must create a more equitable and inclusive society by closing the gaps in social, health and economic outcomes that exist between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.” Because the aboriginal population is growing at more than five times than the national average, governments are also acutely aware that improving educational outcomes for aboriginal youngsters will have profound social and economic impacts as opportunities for employment increase and as opportunities for health and social well being improve. In British Columbia over 60,000 aboriginal students attend provincial schools, or more than 12% of the provincial school population.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, British Columbia was among the first jurisdictions in the country to launch a province-wide initiative to improve educational outcomes for aboriginal learners. In 2005, the BC government announced that it would attempt to achieve parity in educational outcomes for aboriginal and non-aboriginal students by 2015, an ambitious project given that the graduation rate for aboriginal youngsters at the time was less than 50%, compared to 80% for non-aboriginal students. By 2014, 62% of aboriginal students were graduating but, clearly, more can be done.

British Columbia has generally been far more successful than other provinces and territories in raising educational achievement levels for aboriginal students but there are still districts among the province’s 60 districts where fewer than 50% of aboriginal students graduate.

Research on aboriginal underachievement

Reasons for low achievement rates among some aboriginal youngsters are many and well known. Assorted federal and provincial investigations, policy papers, and voluminous academic writings document a web of factors associated with poor school performance. They include: patterns of poor attendance and poor behaviour; a lack of supportive relationships in and outside schools; inadequate literacy and numeracy skills (especially in kindergarten and the elementary grades); family and community mistrust of schools; uninterested and under educated parents; poor instruction and inadequate support services; and high rates of student mobility between schools.

Unfortunately, much of the research on aboriginal education is limited in its application. That is to say, there are few “large-scale, longitudinal, and comparative studies that attempt to control for variables (Raham 2009).” “Much

of the research, both international and Canadian is qualitative (descriptive), anecdotal and small in scale (Raham 2009).” Put simply, it is difficult to make useful generalizations from the research as many of the findings can be traced to a variety of practices.

Before beginning our research, we conducted our own review of academic and governmental literatures to familiarize ourselves with problems associated with aboriginal achievement, along with the best practices currently endorsed by researchers and practitioners.

The New Paths program

The Federal Government’s concerns with the problems of aboriginal achievement led in 2017 to the creation of an Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) “New Paths for Education” program “to strengthen First Nation education and improve the quality of education in First Nation schools.” A prominent objective for this program is to: “Support research on and the measurement and evaluation of Indigenous education initiatives in Canada . . . and support awareness raising and knowledge sharing on identified best practices.”¹

In setting out this program, INAC was particularly interested in finding out what made a difference in improving educational outcomes. It implicitly posed 11 core questions spread across four broad categories, curriculum, evaluation and instruction; teacher effectiveness, educational outcomes, and community relationships. Essentially, here is what INAC wanted to know:

Curriculum, instruction and evaluation

- Has your school (district/ band) improved the effectiveness of classroom instruction through pedagogical improvements?
- Has your school (district/ band) maintained and increased the use of First Nation languages?
- Has your school (district/ band) increased the availability and use of a culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum?
- Has your school (district/ band) developed or modified curriculum, and conducted activities related to language and culture?
- Has your school (district/ band) developed or modified, and purchased specific instructional materials?

¹ Raham, Helen. *Best Practices in Aboriginal Education: A Literature Review and Analysis for Policy Directions*. On Behalf of the Office of the Federal Interlocutor, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. March 2009.

- Has your school (district/band) enhanced the quality and quantity of data that allows better monitoring and improvement of academic progress?

- Has your school (district/band) increased awareness and knowledge of best practices in Indigenous education?

Teacher effectiveness

- Has your school (district/band) developed strategies to recruit and retain qualified teachers and educators and to provide them with professional development opportunities?

- Has your school (district/band) conducted professional development experiences leading to professional accreditations for education staff?

Outcomes

- Does your school track or measure school to work transitions?

Relationships

- Has your school (district/band) increased parental and community involvement in the education of aboriginal youngsters?

Our investigation

Given our own interest in these kinds of questions, our small research team decided to submit a proposal to the New Paths initiative that reflected both our knowledge and experience of the BC system, as well as our understandings about the problems of aboriginal achievement in provincial schools. Our proposal was accepted for funding on July 31, 2017 but, because of complications in satisfying criteria to move forward, our work was delayed five months. Unfortunately, this means we are not in a position today to talk about some of the preliminary results as we originally intended to.

However, we can talk about the nature of the investigation and the strategies we are pursuing to identify high performing schools and those that perform less well, along with our plans to understand the best practices of these institutions and how these best practices are related to the particular contexts that produce them at classroom, school, family, and community levels.

I am confident that I do not have to remind you of the many positive associations between educational advancements and general economic growth, or what raising educational achievement levels for aboriginal youngsters will mean for their own individual and social development, not to mention the Canadian economy as a whole in the years ahead.

Research Phase 1: Quantitative background

Let me begin by saying B.C. is an ideal jurisdiction for the study we are undertaking because it has constructed a province-wide record system that

contains salient information both about student outcomes as well as key demographics that can provide useful information to educational practitioners and First Nations communities. Successive cohorts of students can be tracked using this information system, making it possible for educators to undertake annual quality improvement reviews in a provincial system now regarded as one of Canada's best performing.

The British Columbia student information database, featuring a system based on student identification numbers, has functioned for over 20 years and contains almost a million student records, including those belonging to First Nations and non-First Nations students.

The value of large student databases in addressing achievement gaps among students remains greatly under-explored. Government officials, educators, decision makers, and First Nations leaders are commonly unfamiliar with these data sets, and do not understand the leverage they can provide in tracking the progress of aboriginal students, or in identifying the educational practices most closely associated with producing success for aboriginal students.

We will examine this large student information system to chart cognitive development using early childhood development measures, assessments of Grades 4, 7, and 10 foundations skills (FSAs) in reading, writing, and mathematics, Grades 10-12 English and mathematics enrollments and, finally, Grade 12 graduation rates.

Analysis of these data will allow us to do two things. First, it will allow us to map out the progress of indigenous students on and off reserves for a period of almost 20 years. And, second, it will allow us to identify the schools and school districts that exhibit a discernible pattern of strong improvement over time, as well as those schools and districts where improvement has been slower or elusive.

Using this information we will select for visits schools and school districts where we can investigate more closely why certain schools succeed and others fail.

Research phase 2: On-site school visits

We intend to conduct a series of up to 16 on-site visits to high performing and low performing schools that will be identified using findings from the B.C. provincial student information system as discussed above. To facilitate these visits, we will prepare protocols that will meet provincial human subject protection standards and ensure that the questionnaire guiding our quantitative and qualitative inquiries will be comparable across all jurisdictions.

We will pay special attention to the analysis of elements found in Local Education Agreements with First Nations, innovative and experimental school-level and district-level practices, the kinds and numbers of annual assessment practices, and the strategies schools and educators employ in instances where indigenous youngsters were unable to meet Grade 4 or other FSA guidelines.

Comparison and contrast will allow us pinpoint strategies and best practices worthy of transmission to other schools, school districts, and band schools where student performance has previously lagged. In conducting these visits we will seek advice from local aboriginal leaders and educators who can instruct us about local conditions and issues, as well as inform us about instructional and other practices that have or have not worked. Visits will enhance our understanding of activities of particular importance to aboriginal students and, at the same time, increase the number of people who are familiar with this research project, thereby initiating the dissemination process at a local level.

In examining strategies and best practices applied by schools, districts, and First Nations schools, we will pay particular attention to how the suite of factors targeted by INAC in setting out the objectives for the “New Paths to Education” program, were embodied in provincial and local efforts to improve schools. More specifically, we intend to find out:

- What strategies and best practices have educators been applying to improve attendance?
- What strategies and best practices have educators been applying to improve attendance and retention rates for aboriginal students?
- What provincial and local initiatives in language and culture have been adopted to prompt greater aboriginal interest in schools?
- What areas of curriculum and instruction have embraced indigenization of education practices, the promotion of experiential learning, and more relevant and appropriate kinds of learning for First Nation students?
- What online and technology-based learning has been introduced at provincial and local levels and to what extent are educators using new technology (apps, distance learning, and other online resources) to improve the educational experience of First Nation students?
- And, finally, what are the kinds and extent of partnerships and collaborations that provincial and local authorities have negotiated with First Nations to facilitate transitions between on and off-reserve schools?

The key deliverable for the second stage of our work will be a comprehensive report that provides a quantitative analysis of aboriginal progress in B.C. schools, along with a quantitative-qualitative analysis of what we have learned on-the-ground about best strategies and practices from the province’s highest performing schools. This analysis will also describe what we have learned about the barriers to student progress found in lower performing schools and where improvements have been slower or negligible.

Visits to local schools and districts are intended to help us identify the

educational strategies and practices that have demonstrated their effectiveness in improving learning outcomes for aboriginal students. One important purpose of this report will be to inform low performing schools (and their Boards of Education) about the strategies and practices employed by schools and districts where indigenous achievement is highest.

Such information should enable new professional linkages between successful and unsuccessful schools and should illustrate to underperforming schools that effective strategies and practices do, in fact, exist and can be used to improve results.

Research phase 3: Aboriginal student improvement framework

During the third stage of our work we will combine the findings from the first three stages of our research to develop an “Aboriginal Student Improvement Framework.” This will be comprised of a list of actions that have been successfully employed by aboriginal leaders and educators—as well as provincial, territorial, and local school officials—to improve the educational outcomes of aboriginal students on and off-reserves. It will also provide a checklist of critical indicators that have been found in our research findings to be instrumental in narrowing achievement gaps between First Nations and non-First Nations students.

This checklist might include, for example, strategies to improve attendance and retention, strategies to chart student progress, or strategies to make students feel they are valuable members of a school community. The framework will also make clear the specific kinds of actions that can be taken at various levels—inside classrooms, inside schools, inside families and inside communities—to improve achievement, ranked from simple and inexpensive to complicated and resource intensive.

Final report and dissemination

We approach phases one and two with a belief that there already exist public, independent and band-operated schools, that are very successful in educating status, on-reserve students as well as off-reserve indigenous students. The staff and administrators of these schools will be well aware of what they are doing, and will be able to communicate it to us and to other schools.

Researchers are not always the best people to present findings to those who might implement them. We strongly believe that the educators whose schools are succeeding, especially those in Band-Operated schools, are well positioned to work with their colleagues on the improvement of schools. Our role is merely to assist this function.

Our main task will be to prepare a comprehensive summative report that includes an indigenous student improvement framework and a list of recommendations within the 18 months allowed for this project. We will disseminate the document widely, commencing with Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada and then, within British Columbia, to the First Nations Education Steering Committee, First Nations Schools Association, B.C. Ministry of

Education, the Association of British Columbia Deans, the B.C. Principals and Vice Principals' Association, the Association of B.C. School Superintendents, the B.C. School Trustees' Association, and the B.C. Teachers' Federation.

An executive summary and checklist of successful best practices will then be distributed to personnel in First Nations, provincial, and independent schools.

We anticipate the findings to be of national interest, especially to First Nations leaders and educators across Canada. If INAC and First Nations desire it, the findings will be presented at a national conference or symposium where the results may will galvanize discussion and action.

Dissemination of research to educators is a labour intense activity. For that reason, we hope that the First Nations schools that assist us in the research will play a major role is disseminating a working understanding of the research to their colleagues.

Altogether, we believe the proposal, "Learning from the Best: What High Performing Schools Can Teach Us About Raising Aboriginal Student Achievement in British Columbia" will produce findings that will support progress toward six key objectives set out in the guidelines for New Paths support, notably:

1. To improve education quality and the academic achievement of First Nation students over the long term through the dissemination and application of best instructional practices and strategies.
2. To enhance both the quality and quantity of data schools can employ to monitor and improve academic progress.
3. To identify best practices and to organize data that will equip First Nations education managers and governors with evidence-based administrative and governance tools which, in turn, will enhance local and educational institutional capacity.
4. To identify best practices that will assist schools—as well as First Nations and non-First Nations authorities—in focusing first on student achievement as the core educational objective and, second, on the pivotal role that improved instruction and timely coordination of education programs and services play in raising student outcomes.
5. To identify best practices in ways that will provide new and straightforward ways for parents, educators, and communities to talk about student progress, to visualize how youngsters are progressing, to see where they stand in relation to their peers, and to calculate what they need to achieve in order to pursue potential career paths.

6. To emphasize best practices as part of an educational vocabulary that can be used by First Nations and by educators as simple and effective tools to communicate with parents and communities about learning and to encourage community involvement in schools.

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APPENDIX

**Fundamental Skills Assessment Results
Top 5, Middle 5 And Lowest 5 Of 107 Schools
Status, On Reserve Students
Grades 4 & 7 Reading, Writing And Numeracy
Averaged Over Three Years: 2014/15, 2015/16, 2016/17**

Type of School	Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations	Participation Rate
Band Operated	0.93	0.92
Independent	0.91	1.00
Public	0.87	0.79
Independent	0.80	0.83
Band operated	0.75	0.91
Public	0.46	0.94
Public	0.45	0.67
Public	0.44	0.86
Public	0.44	0.93
Public	0.44	0.64
Public	0.16	0.27
Public	0.15	0.41
Band Operated	0.14	0.67
Public	0.12	0.91
Public	0.04	0.72
Averages	0.44	0.78