



INSTITUT C.D. HOWE INSTITUTE

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POLICY CONFERENCE REPORT

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IMPROVING EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS  
CHILDREN IN CANADA  
RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

APRIL 15, 2016



## AN OVERVIEW

On April 15, 2016, a small group of thinkers drawn from Canada's foremost leaders in First Nations education gathered at the C.D. Howe Institute to discuss goals for students, the roles and responsibilities of government, and practical steps towards achieving measurable and attainable improvement in education outcomes for First Nations students.

Participants expressed the importance of community-driven goals, suggesting that educational curricula could have significant variation at the community level. However, core subjects should maintain sufficient compatibility with provincial curricula in order to permit students to transfer to provincial schools without academic penalty and to qualify for admission to postsecondary programs.

All participants believed in the value of measuring student performance, though views varied on how early or often this should be done, as well as whether the test results should be publicly available. Participants highlighted that "we measure what we value," and as a consequence there must be flexibility in measurement across First Nations communities.

Although the overall state of First Nations' education in Canada is a major concern, there are pockets of tremendous success in primary and secondary education. There are also successes in postsecondary education. These successes should be studied for lessons worth learning. Participants emphasized the cumulative nature of children's education and, hence, the importance of better pre-school and early primary outcomes.

Participants discussed the recent federal budget. For 2016/17 Ottawa has allocated approximately \$300 million in additional annual funding for reserve school operation – a roughly 20 percent increase – plus an additional \$100 million for capital and other investment in reserve schools.

There were suggestions that Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) may benefit from revising strategies to manage school funding. It was felt that distributing additional revenue via a request for proposals (RFP), while helpful in accommodating unique local needs and establishing pilot projects that can serve as models for change and improvement, may maintain a management practice that has not succeeded in obtaining results for all First Nations students, including for communities with the greatest needs. Shifting decision-making and authority away from INAC and towards local communities is important, and may be facilitated using new interim school funding formulas.

All expressed urgency and the desire for rapid action to reduce the state of social crises in many struggling communities across Canada.

## AGENDA

### FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION MEETING C.D. HOWE INSTITUTE SPECIAL POLICY CONFERENCE

Friday, April 15, 2016, 8:30 am - 2:00 pm  
C.D. Howe Institute, 67 Yonge Street, Suite 300, Toronto, ON



#### *AGENDA*

8:30 am – 8:50 am	RECEPTION AND REGISTRATION
8:50 am – 9:00 am	WELCOMING REMARKS William B.P. Robson, President and Chief Executive Officer, C.D. Howe Institute
9:00 am – 10:15 am	Session I - Vision for Aboriginal Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What are the short- and long-term education goals for students and First Nations communities?</i></li> <li>• <i>How are these goals unique to First Nations communities?</i></li> </ul> Speakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harvey McCue</li> <li>• James B. Wilson, Former Commissioner, Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba</li> <li>• Robert Matthew, Principal, Chief Atahm Elementary School (retired)</li> </ul> Discussion (Moderated by Bill Robson)
10:15 am – 10:30 am	BREAK
10:30 am – 11:45 am	Session II - Who Should Do What? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What should the responsibilities be for each major group involved in First Nations education?</i></li> <li>• <i>What should the role of band and First Nations councils be? Federal and provincial governments? Businesses?</i></li> </ul> Speakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don Avison</li> <li>• George E. Lafond, Treaty Commissioner of Saskatchewan</li> </ul> Discussion (Moderated by Colin Busby, Associate Director, Research, C.D. Howe Institute)
11:45 am - 12:30 pm	Lunch
12:30 pm - 1:45 pm	Session III - Practical Steps Forward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What specific, measurable, relevant and attainable goals can be accomplished in the next two years? In the next ten?</i></li> </ul> Speakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John Richards, Professor, School of Public Policy, Simon Fraser University &amp; Fellow-in-Residence, C.D. Howe Institute</li> <li>• Barry Anderson, Solte Consulting, former Special Advisor to the Deputy Minister, British Columbia Ministry of Education</li> <li>• Gordon Martell, Superintendent, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools</li> <li>• Anita Tenasco, Director, Kitigan Zibi Education Sector</li> </ul> Discussion (Moderated by Craig Alexander, Vice President, Economic Analysis, C.D. Howe Institute)
1:45 pm - 2:00 pm	Session IV - Rapporteur's Remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Final thoughts from the day, reflections &amp; next steps</i></li> </ul> Colin Busby, Associate Director, Research, C.D. Howe Institute

*Observers: The Rt. Hon. Paul Martin, former Prime Minister of Canada, and the Hon. Chuck Strahl, former Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada*

*Presentations and discussions will be closed to media and off-the-record.*

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## CONFERENCE SUMMARY

### Rapporteur's Report

It is impossible to focus on the future of First Nations education in Canada without understanding the past. Canada's history of residential schools sowed seeds of mistrust that continue to make progress difficult. But progress is imperative, and the improvement of opportunities for indigenous peoples remains Canada's greatest social policy issue. It's hard to imagine a prosperous future for Canada that does not see a dramatic turnaround in the education fortunes of struggling First Nations students. We all have a role to play – businesses, provincial and federal governments, school boards, families, communities – and there are no quick solutions. It is urgent that reforms advance quickly, but we must also understand that better results from better schools will take time to materialize.

The new federal government has highlighted the importance of policies towards indigenous peoples, and committed significant financial resources toward improved on-reserve healthcare, housing, and education. But the way in which those financial commitments are delivered matters greatly to their potential success, and to future opportunities for better delivering education to First Nations communities.

On April 15, 2016, the C.D. Howe Institute invited established educators as well as administrators and researchers who have experience in provincial engagement in First Nations education, to a seminar to discuss potential short- and long-term education goals, the responsibilities of all individuals and parties involved in delivering education, and what specific, measurable goals can be accomplished in the next few years.

This report provides a summary of those discussions. To preview what follows, participants emphasized the importance of community-driven goals and the need for community-level curricula. All participants believed in the value of measuring student performance, though views varied on how early or often to measure performance, highlighting room for flexibility. Although the overall state of First Nation education in Canada is a major concern, there are pockets of tremendous success, which should be studied for lessons worth learning. Suggestions were made on how to fulfill the federal government's budgeted commitments, but there was little consensus on how to proceed.

### **The Future for First Nations Education: Potential Short- and Long-term Goals**

Improving conditions for children attending on- and off-reserve schools requires a nuanced and multi-pronged approach. Many participants highlighted the pressing need for new curricula that incorporate cultural, economic and social aspects of First Nations communities and better training of teachers in order for them to be effective for all students. Better learning materials can provide a more meaningful and relevant education experience, although the high costs and capacity required to develop these materials is going to be a challenge. Some participants strongly favoured the use of measures to test the success of schools. This would recognize the need for schools to measure skills relevant to the community and cultural knowledge, in addition to literacy and numeracy.

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One of the challenges in achieving better education was the commonly held view that many teachers lack the appropriate training in teacher's colleges to be successful either on-reserve or with indigenous children in provincial schools. Successful teachers have an awareness of unique cultural traditions and values. This allows them to better communicate with students, to understand their concerns as well as stimulate their interest. There may be opportunities to better train current teachers in the near future. However, improving the design and structure of preparedness in teacher's colleges may take so long as to make it irrelevant in the near term.

In the longer run, an appropriate target may be for First Nations people to develop a broader philosophy of education for themselves. This may involve a set of common principles for all First Nations communities, articulating basic sets of desired objectives for education for their children, which could highlight ways to expand cultural identity and the acquisition of fundamental academic skills, among others.

One innovative approach to improving education underscores the value of education leaders in seeking feedback from former students, including many who had gone on to postsecondary education. When this approach has been taken, former students have highlighted the need to raise academic standards in order to enable students to succeed in provincial secondary schools as well as in postsecondary colleges and universities. They also remarked on the need for cultural education in skills valuable to their community. These former students warned, however, that the stigma should be removed from cultural courses, which were generally perceived as courses for weaker students. These courses should be offered on a more universal basis.

Concern was expressed by some that the number of instructional days per year was inadequate.

Some First Nations communities have learned from successful international approaches to indigenous teaching, such as practised in New Zealand. A common challenge faced by communities is defining success in a way that simultaneously promotes students' educational opportunities in provincial schools and in postsecondary systems, but also recognizes skills of practical value to the community. This means broadening the focus of student achievements beyond numeracy and literacy, and adding other culturally important abilities.

The discussion of goals cannot take place without funding, and there was consensus that present budgets are inadequate. While some argued the case for legislation to provide a solid base for quality education, others were reluctant to suggest legislation because of the time required to bring legislation into place. The intense controversy around legislation proposed by the previous federal government in 2014 hints at the difficulty of developing laws. A faster and more practical approach may be to move policy and practice in the direction of potential future legislation by using existing legislative authority.

Another unresolved subject was funding to develop larger First Nation school boards. Some defended the need for them; others argued they might emerge as an additional layer of bureaucracy. Still others thought some form of multi-school service delivery would emerge as communities began to seek services that are spread across several schools by provincial governments and school boards.<sup>1</sup> There was agreement that schools are the fundamental unit of organization to deliver education and that their improvement is an urgent need.

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1 These include such items as technology, telecommunications, on-line courses, accounting, student assessment, high-cost special education services, transportation, teacher training, assessment of students, professional development services for teachers.

### *Summary Remarks*

Participants agreed that children educated in on-reserve schools should not be disadvantaged by experiencing lower standards of achievement and expectations than students attending off-reserve provincial schools. They grappled with how to balance this with diverse traditional and local goals for education. Encouragingly, there are examples of successfully balancing these goals at the school level.

There was consensus that there is a need to adapt curriculum to better reflect the realities of First Nations communities. Communities need the capacity to develop the most effective curriculum for them, and receive the funding to accomplish this as well. There was no shortage of positive stories about educators who have taken command of their school curriculum and are now making it accessible to children, usually in concert with community-driven education priorities.

### **What Are the Responsibilities for Major Groups Involved in First Nations Education?**

Defining responsibilities in First Nations education has been a source of conflict and confusion. Since the *Indian Control of Indian Education Report* (1972), First Nation leaders have insisted on autonomy in management of K-12 education on-reserve. However, there are few on-reserve high schools, and students are mobile, moving on- and off-reserve and often between reserve and provincial schools. Clearly identifying the federal and provincial roles and better integration of education services where feasible would be beneficial.

Participants insisted that there is now a shared sense of urgency among all concerned – whether First Nation leaders, Ottawa or the provinces – on improving education results for First Nation children to ensure a more prosperous society for all Canadians. A natural possibility is to make responsibilities align with comparative advantages in skills – with First Nations running on-reserve schools and, under FN leadership, the

provinces may help work in areas of need, such as in secondary education services and perhaps in coordinating instruction for on-reserve children in provincial schools, for example. Ottawa's primary obligation is to fund schools adequately; a secondary obligation would be to engage provinces and their school boards to improve results for on-reserve students attending off-reserve schools. Presently, there is too much fragmentation and too little acceptance of responsibility.

There is too much diversity in the situation of Canada's First Nations for a uniform national plan to work successfully. In some provinces, individual First Nations have come together to create province-wide associations able to provide secondary services, such as standardized testing, special education, adult education, etc. In a few cases, First Nations have formed effective partnerships with nearby provincial school districts. Elsewhere, regional groups of First Nations have formed the equivalent of provincial school districts. The option of using federal legislation to more formally establish goals and responsibility came up repeatedly, with little agreement.

One presenter focussed on explanations for the relative success in BC, where the high-school completion rate among First Nation young adults on-reserve is well above the national average. Several features of the education system were highlighted: province-wide First Nation associations provide secondary services to reserve schools and act as agencies negotiating with Ottawa and the provincial government; Ottawa and Victoria have negotiated a comprehensive tripartite agreement with the First Nation Education Steering Committee; and the provincial government has, since the early 1980s, undertaken a series of reforms to improve outcomes for Indigenous children in provincial schools.

Among the provinces, BC has by far the most comprehensive data on performance of Indigenous children in provincial schools. The data have been used successfully as a means to pressure schools to improve results for all students.

Another speaker highlighted a teachers' union initiative, which enabled public school teachers to work in First Nation schools without losing seniority. Here was a small, but critical, tweak to boost on-reserve teacher supply, which could be extended if other union locals grant the same benefit.

The severity of social problems on many reserves prompted calls for considering education in a multi-disciplinary fashion. Compared to public school student bodies, a high proportion of reserve school children might be considered "special needs" in the jargon of provincial school administrators. This means they require additional teacher time and other supports to be successful.

There was a call to make sure all relevant provincial departments were included in delivering upon education goals, not just education ministries. Education is not a standalone problem, and should be looked at in conjunction with other issues, including mental health, family breakdown and poverty, which plague some communities and severely limit realization of education goals.

### *Summary Remarks*

Although there was much agreement on treating education as part of a larger problem in First Nation communities, it was also agreed that this should not delay setting and meeting appropriate education goals. This session saw brief arguments in favour of federal legislation to help clarify responsibilities in ways that are amenable to First Nations leaders and community educators, but there were concerns that legislation is a bridge too far at the present time. Better teacher training for those working on-reserve and in provincial schools with indigenous children was repeatedly emphasized, as was redesign of curriculum. The federal role in improved funding was clear, as was the expectation that, under First Nation leadership, provinces play a greater role to help where required.

### **Practical Steps Forward**

In its 2016 budget, Ottawa has allocated approximately \$300 million in additional annual funding for reserve school operation – an increase of about 20 percent – plus an additional \$100 million for capital and other investment in reserve schools (Canada 2016, 147). Participants mentioned that Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) could distribute much of the additional revenue via a revised mix of funding plans and not only with the request for proposals (RFP) process. Many pointed out that the RFP model, while helpful in establishing pilot projects that can serve as models for change and improvement, may benefit communities that are successful in writing these requests, and that the communities with greatest need might fail to submit successful proposals. More flexibility in the overall funding mix could help. An alternative to a RFP is to help provide new funding within improved, albeit interim, school funding formulas. There was little consensus, however, on exactly how to proceed, other than to acknowledge that initial formulas almost always require ongoing improvements and revision. Where needed, the establishment of provincial, regional or local governance structures, to be determined by First Nations communities, was also mentioned by some as important for progress.

There are significant questions yet unanswered. Should INAC incorporate the additional funding in the current federal budget into a uniform interim funding formula for all reserve schools? Should INAC allocate education funds to the regional INAC offices and mandate them to negotiate interim funding formulas for their respective schools? Should INAC propose some rules (for example, require reserve schools to benchmark academic outcomes and propose interim improvement targets)? Additionally, \$25-\$50 million could be reserved for special projects. At this point, there is high risk of another year's

delay while awaiting federal action. The 2016/17 school year is already well underway in that staffing decisions are being completed and recruiting is proceeding.

All attendees expressed urgency and the hope for rapid improvement. There was frustration at the pace of development, especially given the state of social crises in many First Nations communities across Canada.

As a concrete example of using student outcome data as catalyst for policy reforms, one participant discussed the role of benchmarking First Nations student performance in BC provincial schools and requiring school districts to use the data in preparing medium-term targets for academic improvement (BC Ministry of Education 2015). Preparing the targets is done by school superintendents in consultation with local First Nations leaders. Making the results public underscored the challenges within the BC school system, and rooted policy responses in evidence. Much more than benchmarking school performance is at stake. BC used its data to press for changes that improved indigenous high-school completion rates from around 45 percent in 1995 to 73 percent in 2015.

Discussions on accountability within education were fraught with potential conflicts over use of the results. There was general agreement that standards must be clear and communicated to families and others. One presenter reiterated the need for community-level measurement in the form of tracking graduates and their achievements after they left school. Measures of success in reserve schools should always include cultural goals of the First Nation community as well as academic goals in core subjects such as reading and mathematics.

### *Summary Remarks*

While there was consensus on the need for assessment going forward, it was noted that care should be used in the interpretation of data and in its integration into education governance. The

political ramifications of assessment were also highlighted, as well as the potential for opposition created if data are tied to abstract notions of accountability rather than improvement.

Decisions regarding the appropriate funding levels and allocation decisions were seen as critical first steps forward. The option chosen by the federal government will set the tone for the next few years and greatly impact on future discussions on First Nations education. Some mentioned the potential to drive accountability through education results and success – rather than accountability for inputs, but to do so at a regional level and channel some funding based on such outcome measures. This would likely require more time for serious deliberation.

### **Conclusion**

Sharing education success stories in First Nation communities provides an optimistic outlook for the future. Many communities and educators within them are doing ground-breaking work, and their efforts should be celebrated. First Nations communities serve as an important voice for all Canadians, highlighting, in ways many forget, the importance of traditional values like respect for elders, living sustainably and protecting the environment, among other things. It is important to improve First Nations' connections to other communities to increase opportunities, improve education and to encourage deeper participation in the world economy.

Despite pockets of education success, the overall scene is far from satisfactory. The problems faced by the majority of on-reserve schools and communities are serious and urgently need attention. Although action is needed promptly, we should be mindful that the results of new initiatives will emerge slowly. The expertise and passion during the C.D. Howe Institute discussion was palpable, and lessons learned from successful communities will provide critical objectives for reform efforts.

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The need for community-defined curricula, compatible with – but different from – provincial curricula, was mentioned often as a key change in improving the engagement of indigenous students. So too, was greater teacher preparedness. An overarching requirement to bring about these improvements: the need for more funding to increase community-level education capacity. This

raises a number of challenging issues surrounding the size, scope, and method of distributing both new and existing education funds. As well, education cannot advance without much better delivery of other social programs, such as health and social supports. These need to be dealt with in short order.

## REFERENCES

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- National Indian Brotherhood (NIB). 1972. “Indian Control of Indian Education.” Reprinted as Appendix I in Assembly of First Nations, 2010, First Nations Control of First Nations Education.

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NOTES:

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