

# Intelligence MEMOS



From: John Richards  
To: Marc Miller, Minister of Indigenous Services, and Provincial Ministers of Education  
Date: July 10, 2020  
Re: **THE EMPLOYMENT KEY TO HEALTHY INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES (III)**

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We have [surveyed](#) the Community Well-Being Index (CWB) results for First Nation communities, and the [centrality of employment for community success](#) in the first two parts of this Intelligence Memo series.

Today, the policy implications.

Well-governed First Nation communities with access to business opportunities – for example, those with treaty rights relevant to development of resource projects – are realizing employment benefits and higher CWB scores. However, such communities are the minority.

Affirmation of treaties and Indigenous culture over the last quarter century has been valuable. That said, for many living in First Nation communities with a low CWB score, out-migration is a reasonable choice – look at the 2001-2016 migration trend discussed in the [previous memo](#).

However, without at least high school certification, employment and income options are limited both on- and off-reserve. From an intergenerational perspective, better K-12 school outcomes are essential – as is post-secondary training.

Those who definitely want to live in remote communities should be able to do so with reasonable employment prospects. For that to happen, successful out-migration must become more feasible for those wanting to go to town. At present, those living in First Nation communities with weak education outcomes face limited employment options – whether in their community or in town. There must be no illusions: realizing significant education improvements in education outcomes among First Nation communities with low CWB scores poses many obstacles.

**First** is the presence of First Nation mistrust of government interventions intended to improve on-reserve education. Much of this mistrust lies in the abuses associated with residential schools. Those who share this mistrust must acknowledge a dilemma: there is little expertise in either Indigenous Services Canada or among most band councils in the administrative requirements of good schools. Since the expertise in running schools lies primarily in provincial education ministries, inevitably they must be involved.

**Second** is the need to organize reform while respecting First Nations cultural traditions. First Nations have a constitutional right to organize schools for their children, and most on-reserve children attend an on-reserve primary school under band control. Successful pedagogy in reserve schools should not set low standards for core subjects (reading, math, science), but it must make major adjustments relative to pedagogy in a typical provincial school (Waubageshig [McCue] 2016).

**Third** is a lack of low-stake assessments of student performance in core subjects among students in on-reserve schools. What assessments do exist often reveal disappointing results. Anderson and Richards (2016) cite evidence on reading assessments in BC reserve schools over the K-12 cycle. The share of children reading “at grade level” declines from approximately 50 percent in early primary to 20 percent by Grade 8. Similar declines have been found in reserve schools elsewhere.

**Fourth** is realizing significant improvements will be expensive. Among the most promising initiatives in improving education outcomes among secondary students at high risk of dropout has been Pathways, a NGO that combines extensive tutoring and mentoring of students living in selected low-income urban neighbourhoods. The annual cost per student is approximately \$5,000, nearly half the average per student cost of a public school student. Pathways organized its original project in a public housing project in Toronto. The evaluation of Pathways by Oreopoulos and colleagues (2015) addressed the self-selection bias in such projects – the difficulty in measuring whether success is due to the initiative or to supportive families whose children are likely to graduate with or without special support.

A final observation: there is no silver bullet to resolve the social problems prevalent in First Nation communities with low CWB scores. Addressing the problems over the next generation will require recognition of First Nation treaty claims over resource-related employment and income, competent First Nation governance of local services, acceptance of out-migration as part of the solution – and higher quality schools.

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