

# Intelligence MEMOS



From: John Richards  
To: Canadian Ministers of Education  
Date: December 21, 2017  
Re: Look to B.C. for a Glimmer of Hope in Indigenous Education

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Statistics Canada recently released its final batch of results from the 2016 census, which included education statistics for Canadians – including Indigenous Canadians. Indigenous education outcomes are perhaps the most important findings, and among those outcomes the most important are perhaps high school completion results. They provide a snapshot of how Canada's K-12 school systems are performing. For the record, among non-Indigenous young adults (20-24) in 2016, 92 per cent have at least a high school certificate. Among Métis, the rate is 84 per cent. Among First Nations young adults living off reserve, 75 per cent. But among those living on reserve, only 48 per cent have done so.

Regardless of race, children who do not complete at least high school are unlikely to gain regular employment and are probably doomed to poverty as adults. One of the best ways to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and "settler" populations is to close unacceptably large education gaps, starting with high school.

Admittedly, both on and off reserve, First Nations results are five to six percentage points better than in the 2011 census. However, if any other sizable group of young Canadians had such large high school completion gaps, there would be a hue and cry.

Earlier in the decade, there was. Shawn Atleo, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), spoke eloquently about the importance of education. And despite some serious disagreements between them, he and prime minister Stephen Harper succeeded in negotiating legislation for the organization of reserve schools, plus a large increase in federal funding. Rather than look at the Atleo-Harper agreement as a glass half-full – which could be topped up – most chiefs and Liberal MPs denounced their efforts. Atleo resigned, and the bill died when the election writ was issued in 2015.

In 2016, the new Liberal government quietly increased funding for reserve schools in line with the Atleo-Harper agreement, but there is little other evidence of urgency on this file from either Ottawa or most Indigenous leaders. Among the 94 "calls to action" of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), only seven concerned K-12 education and only one referred explicitly to the provinces, the order of government responsible for almost all Indigenous students in high school.

It is important to realize that only half the Indigenous population are "registered Indians" entitled to live on reserve, and fewer than half of those registered actually live on reserve.

The AFN, the TRC and everyone else involved in K-12 education should be raising the alarm with provincial governments and their education ministries. The census shows which provinces deserve the most aggressive prodding. Among the six with large Indigenous student cohorts, B.C. stands out as by far the best, Manitoba as the worst. In 2016, 70 per cent of on-reserve First Nations young adults in B.C. had completed high school; in Manitoba, only 36 per cent. In B.C., among First Nations young adults living off-reserve, 81 per cent had a high school certificate; in Manitoba, 61 per cent.

As a generalization, both on-reserve and provincial schools are doing things better in B.C. Not perfect, but better. While B.C. has no silver bullet to close the gaps, it can point to many incremental initiatives over the past quarter-century that have steadily increased provincial native completion rates.

If there are no new initiatives involving the provinces and the on-reserve high school completion rate rises six points every five years, then in 35 years it will match the rate for non-Indigenous young adults. That's a long time to wait.

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