

Intelligence MEMOS



From: John Richards and Parisa Mahboubi
To: Provincial Ministers of Education
Date: July 30, 2018
Re: **SHOCKING GAPS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

Collection of data on academic outcomes among Indigenous students is a necessary step towards bridging the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Most provinces provide no regular information to track the performance of native students in core subjects. In our recent report for the C.D. Howe Institute we set out the case for you to improve your understanding of native student outcomes by adding a question inviting Indigenous students to identify themselves for the 2018 round of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which took place earlier this year. Six provinces agreed to add such a question. Unfortunately, four provinces (Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia) refused to do so.

The PISA has become a crucial benchmark for measuring school system performance in three core subjects (reading, math, and science) among a large sample of secondary students, age 15 – and among provinces in decentralized systems such as in Canada. All OECD member countries and 35 other countries participated in the previous round, in 2015. Tracking and comparing school system outcomes is one means to assure accountability.

By far the most important gap in terms of high school completion among major ethnic communities is that for Indigenous students. Across Canada, typically one K-12 student out of fifteen is Indigenous, but in western Canada the presence of Indigenous students is much higher – over one in four in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

In any high-income country such as Canada, escape from poverty requires children to complete, at a minimum, their secondary education and that the instruction be of decent quality. To enjoy “middle class” incomes requires, in general, some form of post-secondary education (PSE). Based on the 2016 census, young First Nation adults, ages 20 - 24, 75 percent living off-reserve have completed high school, but only 48 percent living on-reserve have done so. This compares with 92 percent among non-Indigenous students. Not surprisingly, there is a high correlation across provinces between the share of Indigenous adults aged 20-24 who complete high school and those aged 25-34 who have PSE certification.

In this cohort (25-34), 68 percent of the non-Indigenous have obtained a post-secondary degree or certificate. The comparable statistic for Inuk/Inuit is 30 percent and for the First Nation identity population 38 percent. For Métis, the statistic is 53 percent. These national results obscure large interprovincial variations, especially among the First Nation population. At the provincial level, First Nation PSE rates range from the pair below 30 percent (Manitoba and Saskatchewan) to the middle pair at 35 percent (Alberta and BC) to the pair with a rate above 45 percent but below 50 percent (Ontario and Quebec).

While the census provides evidence on highest education *levels*, it is not a substitute for assessing *outcomes*, what students have learned. Including an Indigenous indicator in provincial samples for the 2018 round of PISA will provide evidence for Indigenous students comparable across the six provinces that agreed to include the question. Hopefully, for the next PISA round, in 2021, the other four will reconsider.

A final point. Education concerns more than the three core subjects. In particular, provincial schools have an obligation to prepare a culturally relevant curriculum for Indigenous students. However, culturally relevant studies are not a substitute for reading, math, and science.

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