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C.D. Howe Institute COMMENTARY

THE EDUCATION PAPERS

Aboriginal Education in Quebec:

A Benchmarking Exercise

JOHN RICHARDS

In this issue...

In Quebec, the Aboriginal high-school dropout rate for the age 20-24 cohort is 43 percent, 28 points higher than for non-Aboriginals. What can be done?

The Study in Brief

The Author of This Issue

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Quebec Aboriginal poverty is as severe as elsewhere in Canada. And in terms of education, Quebec Aboriginal outcomes are somewhat worse than comparable Canadian Aboriginal results, themselves a very low benchmark. This *Commentary* examines the relationship between these troubling benchmarks – education levels and employment earnings – for Quebec Aboriginals, comparing outcomes within the province's various Aboriginal identity groups and with the rest of Canada.

While lively debates take place about how best to improve Aboriginal education, there is little disagreement on its priority as a goal. Holding constant the level of education, the employment rate is remarkably similar for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population. The similarity holds in both Quebec and the rest of Canada.

Aboriginal educational results do not provide grounds for optimism – either in Quebec or in the rest of Canada. The overall Quebec Aboriginal dropout rate in the age 20-to-24 cohort is 43 percent, 28 points higher than for non-Aboriginals in Quebec, and three points higher than the Aboriginal dropout rate in the rest of Canada. Among the six provinces with more than 100,000 Aboriginals, Quebec ranks third in terms of incomplete high school: lower than Manitoba and Saskatchewan but higher than Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia. Within Quebec, median Aboriginal 2005 earnings were two-thirds that for non-Aboriginals; median Inuit were below three-fifths.

In contrast to the scarring policies of the past, the goal of education reform is not to eliminate Aboriginal cultures. On the other hand, primary/secondary education is about more than cultural transmission – its goal is to impart core competencies in reading, writing, mathematics and science, necessary knowledge if Aboriginal students are to enjoy a realistic choice as adults between participation in Canada's urban industrial society or a rural, more collective style of life. The study makes six broad recommendations to improve educational outcomes with that goal in mind.

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Many factors – including a history of discrimination – matter in explaining Aboriginal poverty and distress. History, however, cannot be rerun; in terms of what can be done now, improving education outcomes should loom large. No community in an industrial society can escape poverty until the overwhelming majority climb rungs on the education ladder, starting with high-school certification. Even so, a high-school diploma is a low rung, and for a community to achieve middle-class incomes, most must achieve higher rungs.

From Thunder Bay to Vancouver, most "elites" – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – want better integration of Aboriginals into the mainstream economy and accept that better education outcomes are a prerequisite to achieving that goal. Although some Aboriginal traditionalists argue such integration is incompatible with cultural survival, most are more optimistic, convinced they can reconcile Aboriginal identity, urban living and a "good job." While lively debates take place about how best to improve Aboriginal education, there is little disagreement on its priority as a goal.

Most Aboriginals, 60 percent, live in one of the four western provinces; only 9 percent live in Quebec. And whereas Aboriginals comprise 13 percent of school-age cohorts west of Ontario, the comparable statistic in Quebec is less than 2 percent (see Figures 1 and 2). Presumably, this relative invisibility explains Quebecers' lack of attention to Aboriginal education. The lack of public attention does not mean the economic condition of Quebec Aboriginals is better than in the West. Quebec Aboriginal poverty is as severe as elsewhere in Canada when measured by market earnings. And in terms of education, Quebec Aboriginal outcomes are somewhat worse than comparable Canadian Aboriginal results, themselves a very low benchmark.

This *Commentary* begins with a description of the distribution of the Quebec Aboriginal population, in terms of Aboriginal identity groups, and area of residence (on- or off-reserve, rural or urban). It also summarizes census information on income and earnings. The second part uses data from the latest census, in 2006, to benchmark Quebec Aboriginal education outcomes and compares them to outcomes among non-Aboriginals in the province. This benchmarking looks at intergenerational trends among cohorts aged 25 and older and outcomes among young Aboriginals aged 20-24. The *Commentary*'s final part discusses policy implications of these findings.

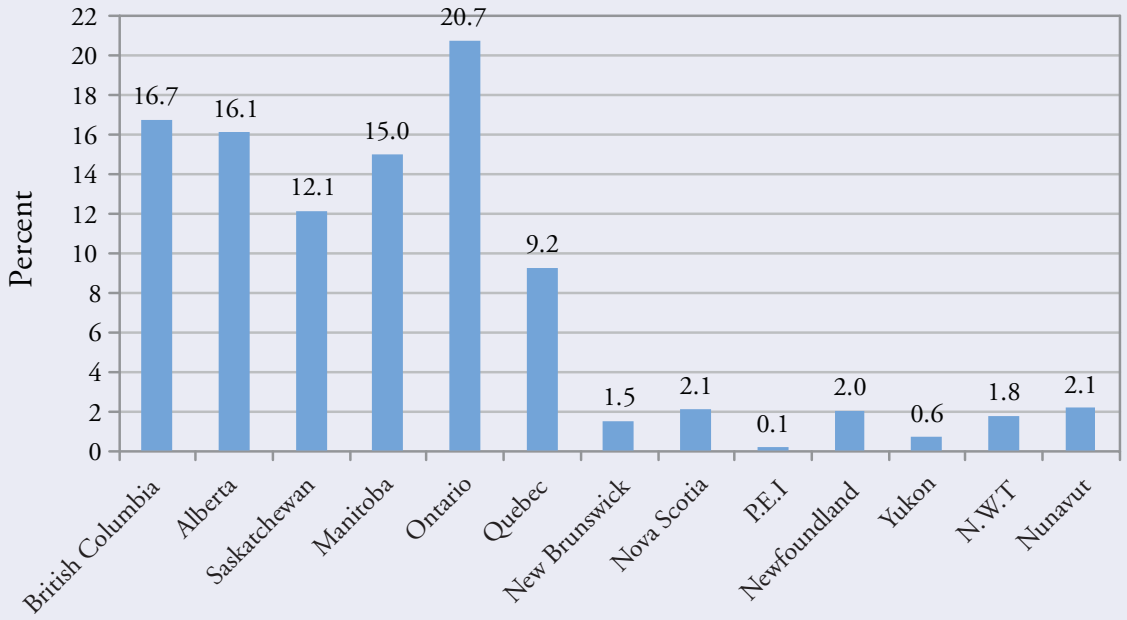
Quebec/Rest of Canada Comparisons: Distribution of Aboriginal Populations and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Income Gaps

The distribution of Quebec's Aboriginal identity population by groups (Figure 3) differs somewhat from that elsewhere in Canada. The Inuit share is nearly three times larger, and among those Quebec Aboriginals identifying as Indian/First Nation, a larger share live on-reserve. Finally, those identifying as having Métis or mixed Aboriginal identities comprise a smaller share than in the rest of Canada.

Aboriginal population shifts in Canada have parallels among ex-slaves in the United States. Beginning at the time of the First World War, a vast rural-to-urban migration began among the children and grandchildren of American ex-slaves. They left farms in southern states in search of industrial jobs in America's expanding cities.

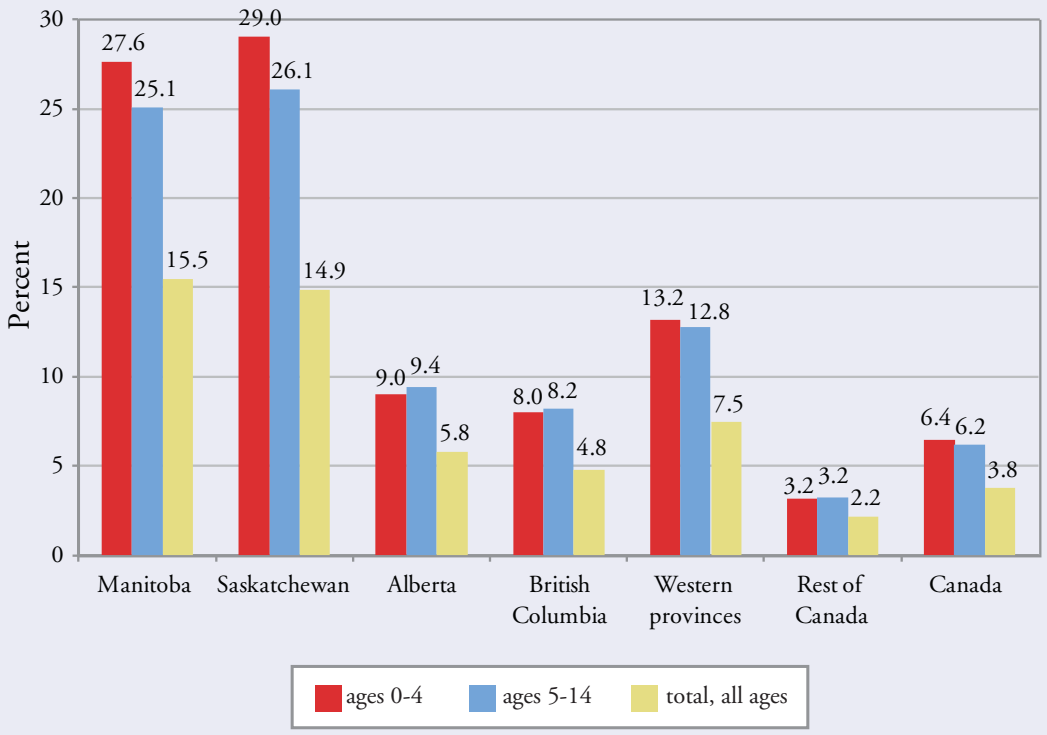
An earlier draft of this *Commentary* was presented at a social policy conference conducted in October 2010 at Laval University, sponsored by the Centre interuniversitaire de recherche en analyse des organisations (CIRANO), the Centre interuniversitaire sur le risque, les politiques économiques et l'emploi (CIRPEE) and the C.D. Howe Institute. I thank Michael Mendelson and Colin Busby for reviewing drafts. The section on policy implications draws from a report Megan Scott and I prepared for the Canadian Policy Research Networks (Richards and Scott 2009).

Figure 1: Distribution of Aboriginal Identity Population, by Province and Territory, 2006



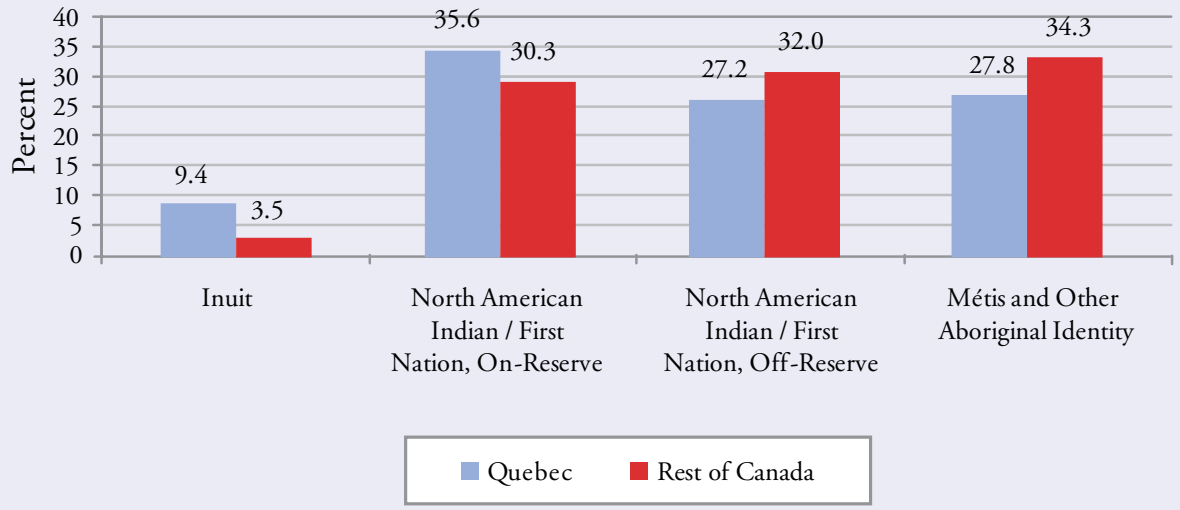
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008a).

Figure 2: Aboriginal Population Share, Selected Age Intervals and Provinces, 2006



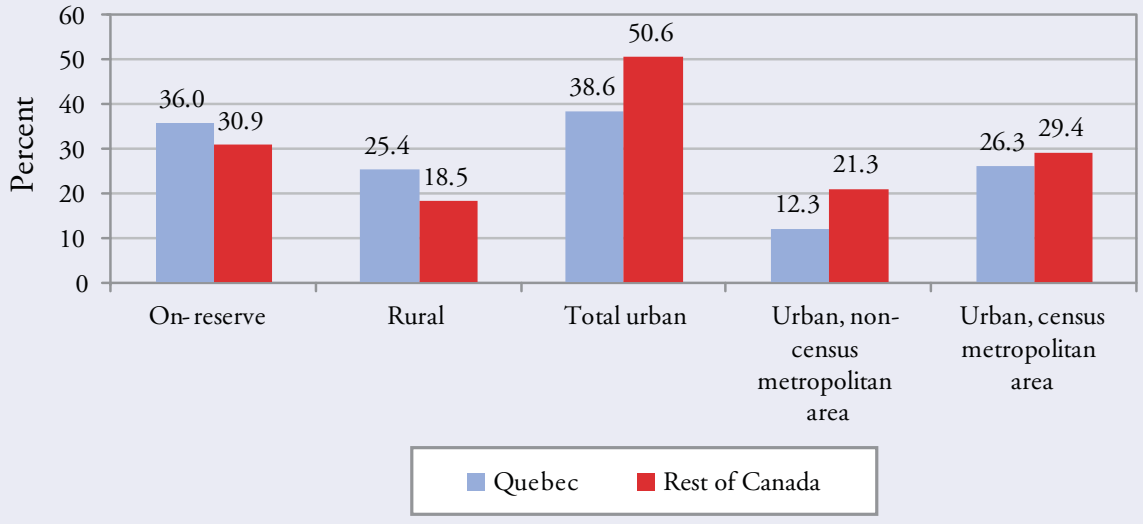
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008a).

Figure 3: Distribution of Aboriginal Identity Population, Quebec and Rest of Canada, by Aboriginal Groups, 2006



Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008a).

Figure 4: Distribution of Aboriginal Population, Quebec and Rest of Canada, by Area of Residence, 2006

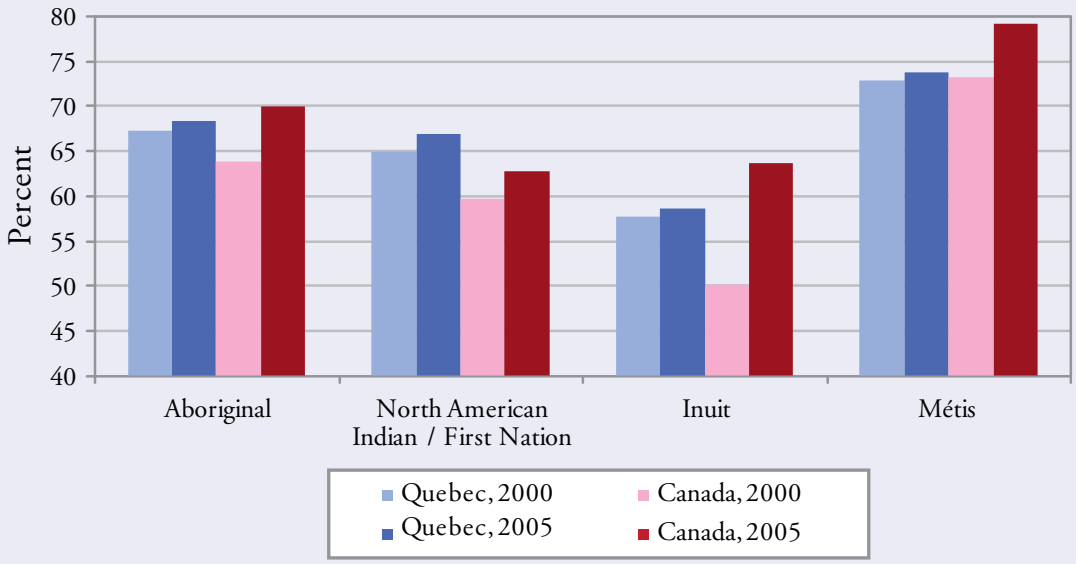


Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008a).
Note: On-reserve Indian / First Nation population estimate has been adjusted. See glossary for details.

Following the Second World War, a similar if much smaller migration has been taking place among Aboriginals. By 2006, roughly half the Canadian Aboriginal population lived in a city.

This rise in the urban share over the last half-century is due in part to "ethnic identity migration." As prejudice against Aboriginals has receded and pride in native identity has grown, more Canadians have chosen to identify with their Aboriginal heritage. Since Canadians are, overall,

Figure 5: Aboriginal Median Earnings, Quebec and Canada Relative to Non-Aboriginal Canadian Median Earnings, 2000 and 2005



Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008e).

more urbanized than Aboriginals, "identity migration" of a fraction of the overall population has tended to augment the urban share of the census Aboriginal identity population. Aboriginals are also more mobile than other Canadians, and they undergo considerable urban-to-rural return migration. Meanwhile in Quebec, whether due to less "identity migration" or less physical migration, Aboriginal urbanization is less pronounced than in the rest of Canada (Figure 4).

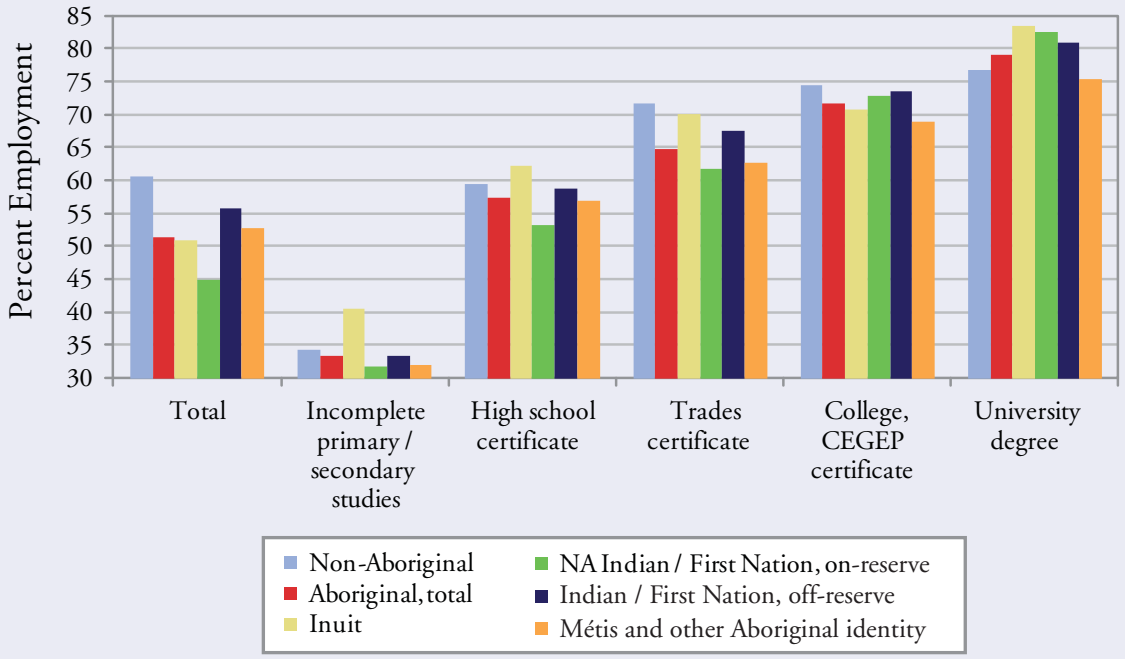
In considering the total Aboriginal identity population, a modest convergence in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal per capita earnings took place between 2000 and 2005 (Figure 5). Nationwide, Aboriginal median earnings rose from 64 percent to 70 percent of the relevant non-Aboriginal medians. In 2000, median Quebec Aboriginal earnings were slightly higher and in 2005 slightly lower than the national Aboriginal medians.

The Importance of Education

To argue the importance of education in reducing Aboriginal poverty is hardly novel. Many, including colleagues and myself, have written on the subject (Bell et al., 2004, CCL 2009, Demmert et al., 2006, Richards and Scott 2009, Sharpe 2008, White et al., 2009). There are two routes whereby higher education levels lead to a closing of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal income and earnings gaps. The first is the inducement to work: more education leads to higher expected wages/salaries, which increases the reward from employment relative to transfer income, such as social assistance, available to those not in the labour market. The second route is simply that, among those employed, incomes are higher at higher education levels.

At the same levels of education, the employment rate is remarkably similar across identity groups. The similarity holds for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. Among Quebecers with incomplete primary/secondary studies, Aboriginals have an employment rate within one percentage point of that for non-Aboriginals (Figure 6). Within all six groups illustrated, those with completed primary/secondary studies as their highest education level have an employment rate that is 21-25 percentage points higher than the comparable

Figure 6: Employment Rate, Quebec, by Identity Groups, 2006



Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008c)

identity group that has not completed secondary school. Again, within all identity groups, those with post-secondary education levels achieve similar further increases in average employment rates.[1]

Aboriginal income and earnings data are not readily available at the same level of disaggregation as employment and education statistics, but the available evidence is consistent with the above argument. To summarize: within Quebec, the 2005 earnings gap between Inuit and non-Aboriginals is over 40 percentage points. The comparable gap between Indians/First Nations and non-Aboriginals, combining both on- and off-reserve, is 33 points. For Métis, the gap is only 26 points. Similar results exist nationwide and for the earlier census year 2000 (Canada 2008e).

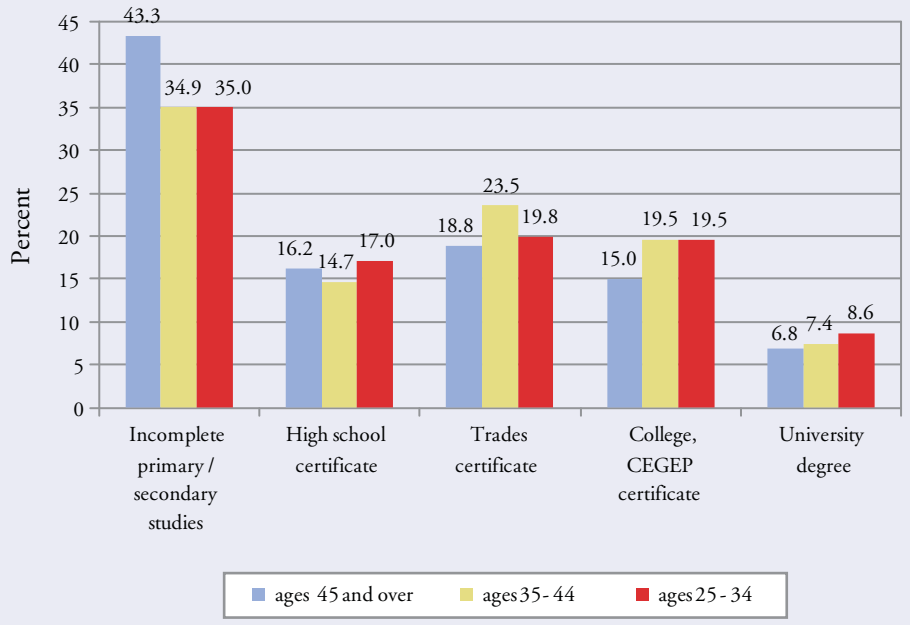
Within the Aboriginal population, the employment rate is above average for Indian/First Nation people living off-reserve and among Métis. This is due essentially to differences in the distributions of highest education levels. As will be discussed below, the average education levels of these two groups are well above the averages for Inuit and Indian/First Nation people on-reserve.

Intergenerational Trends in Quebec Aboriginal Education

The census long form provides information on major intergenerational trends in education levels within specific Aboriginal groups and between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. The youngest tabulated cohort for which it is reasonable to expect completion of formal education is aged 25-34. Each of the panels in Figures 7 and 8 illustrates distributions of highest education level for this and two older cohorts – those aged 35-44

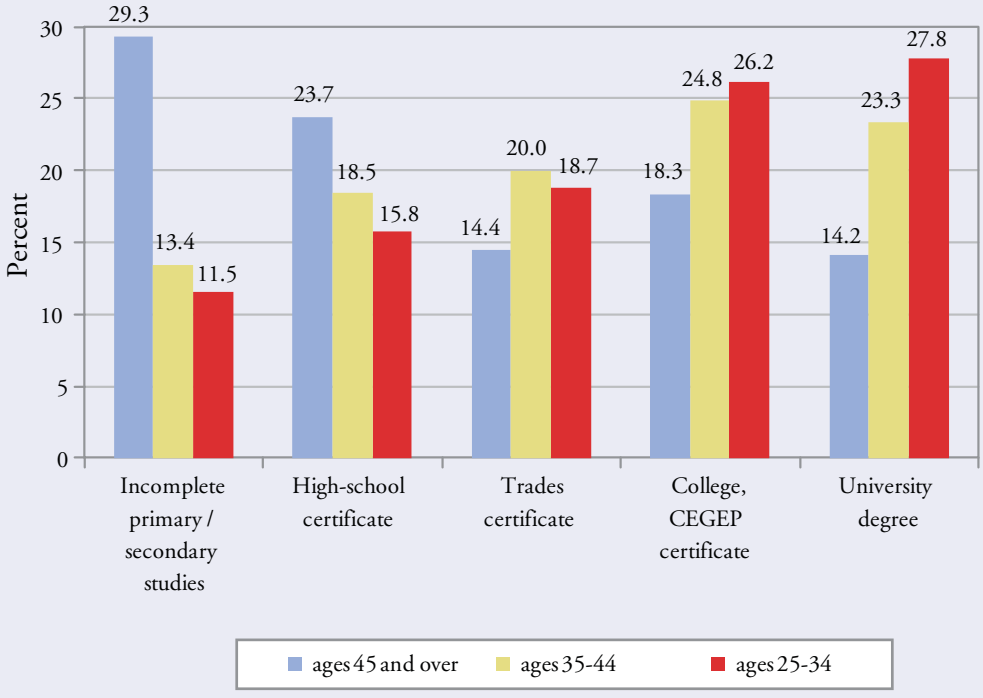
1 Figure 6 exaggerates the role of education inasmuch as those who graduate from high school, or achieve higher levels of education, are not a random sample of the population. Even if they had not completed high-school, members of this group are more likely to be employed than the typical member of the incomplete high-school sub-population. There is, however, a positive incremental effect of high-school certification, even after adjustment for other socioeconomic factors.

Figure 7a: Highest Education Level, Quebec, Aboriginal Identity Population, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



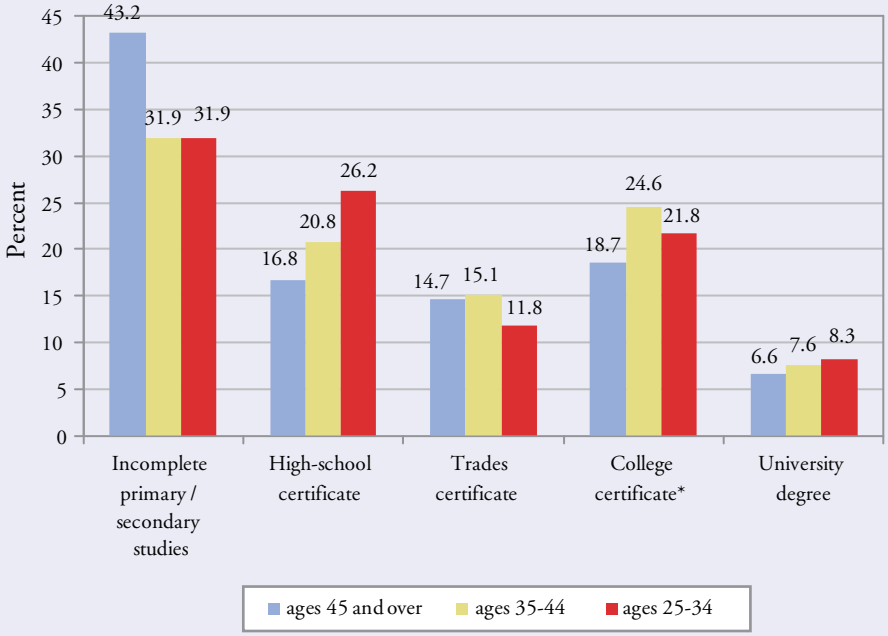
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 7b: Highest Education Level, Quebec, Non-Aboriginal Identity Population, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



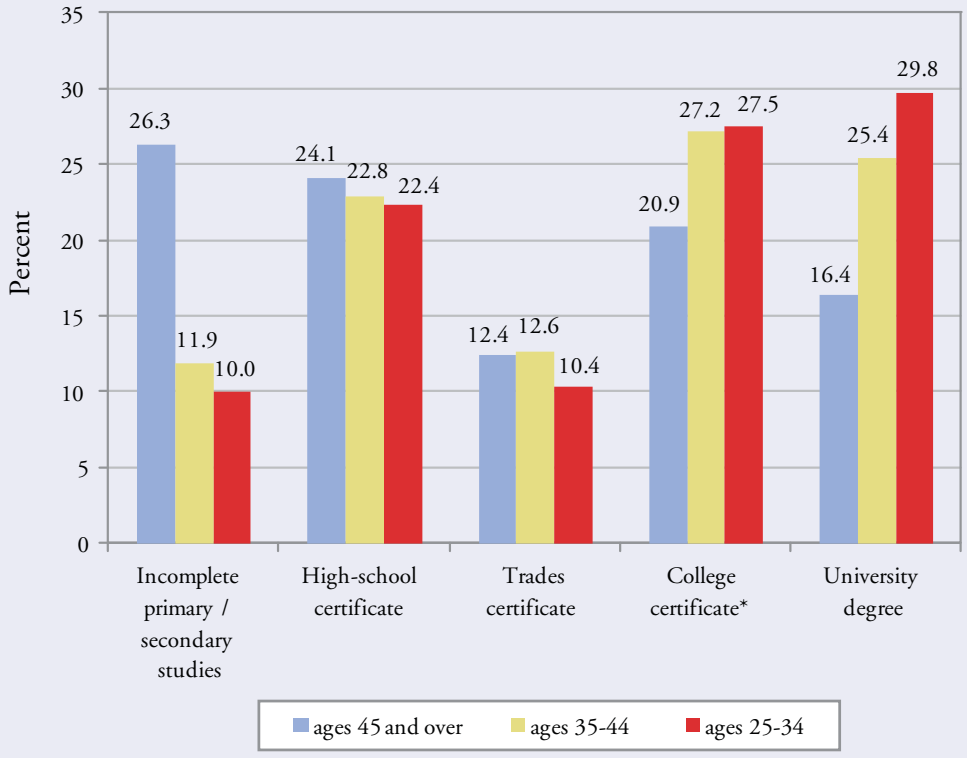
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 7c: Highest Education Level, Canada, Aboriginals, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



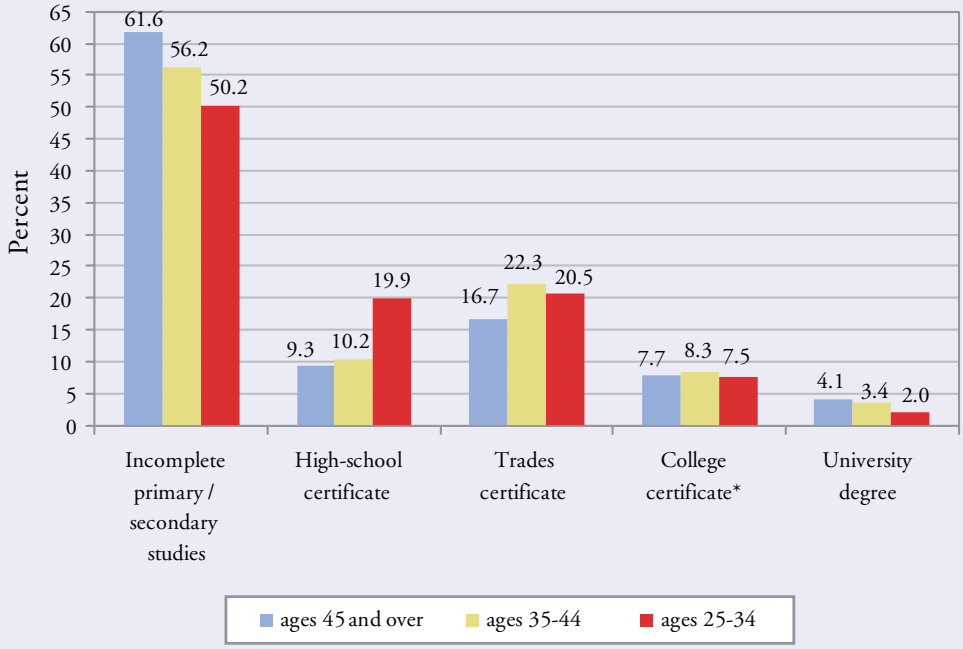
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 7d: Highest Education Level, Canada, Non-Aboriginals, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



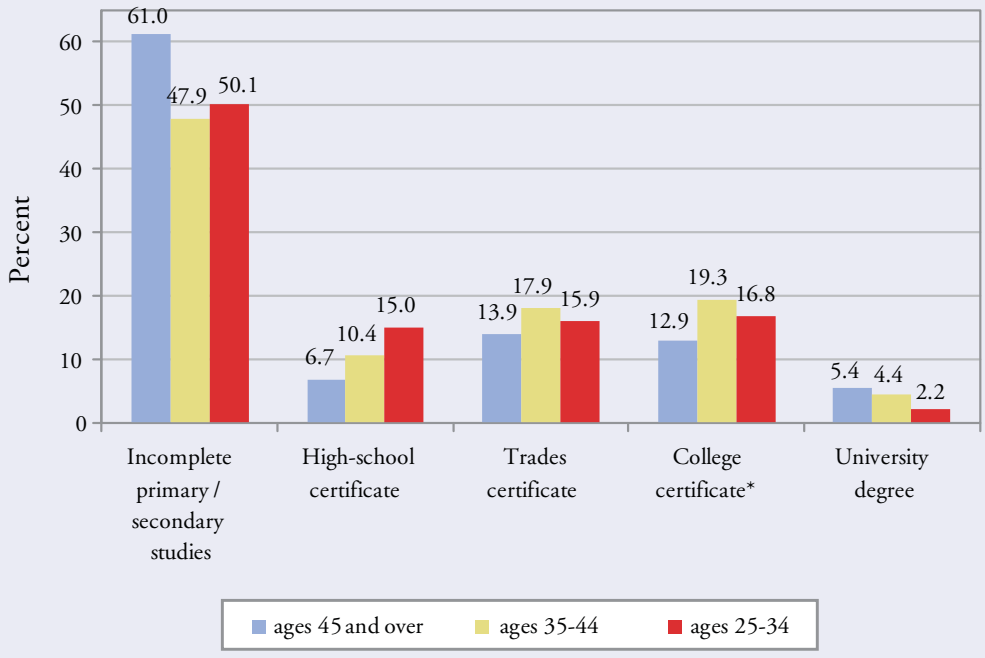
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 8a: Highest Education Level, Quebec, Inuit Identity Population, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



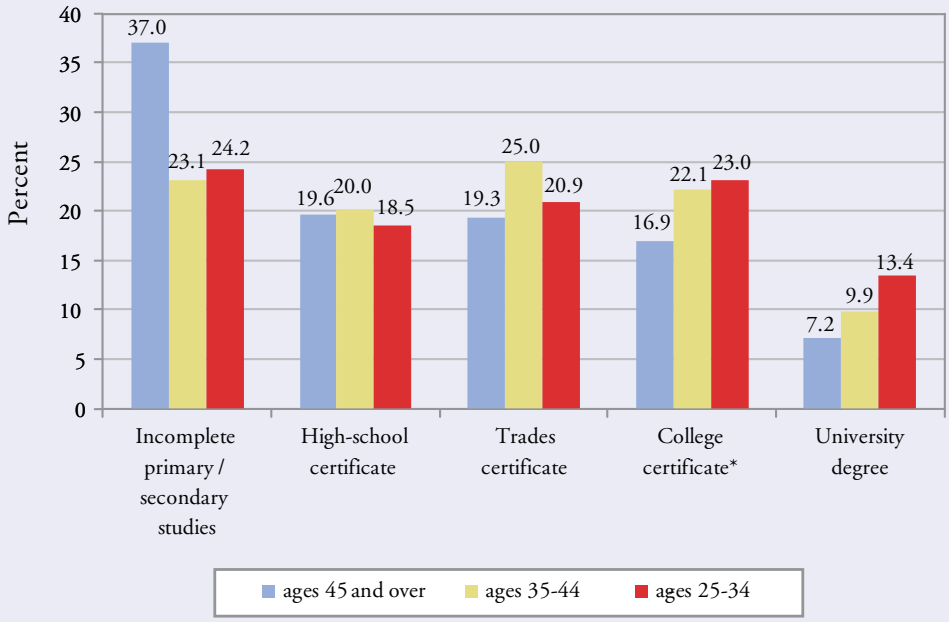
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 8b: Highest Education Level, Quebec, North American Indian / First Nation Identity Population, On-Reserve, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



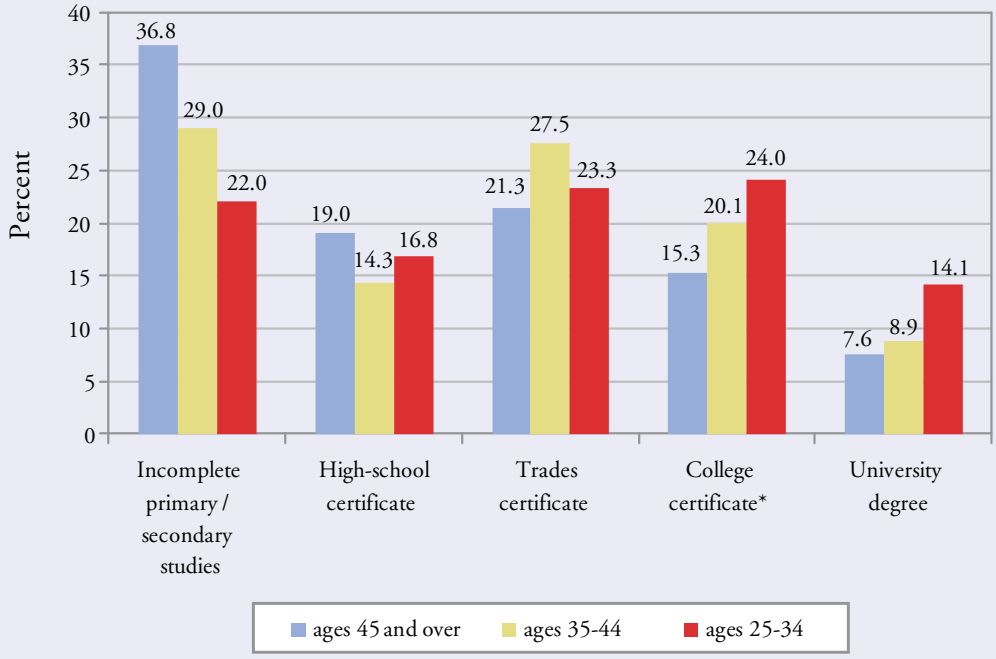
Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 8c: Highest Education Level, Quebec, North American Indian / First Nation Identity Population, Off-Reserve, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 8d: Highest Education Level, Quebec, Métis and Other Aboriginal Identity Population, by Selected Age Groups, 2006



Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

and those aged 45 and older at the time of the 2006 census. Several trends are worth highlighting:

- Among non-Aboriginals in Quebec and nationwide, there has been a dramatic intergenerational shift toward higher education levels. From oldest to youngest cohort, the share with incomplete primary/secondary studies has fallen by nearly two-thirds and the proportion with a university degree has doubled.
- Among Aboriginals in aggregate, both in Quebec and nationwide, there is a decline of about 10 percentage points in the share with incomplete primary/secondary studies between the 45-and-older cohort and the age 35-44 cohort. However, both in Quebec and nationwide the youngest cohort, aged 25-34, shows no further decline in the share with incomplete primary/secondary studies.
- Given large intergenerational shifts in highest education levels among non-Aboriginals and much more modest shifts among Aboriginals, the gap in highest education level achieved between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals has widened between the oldest and youngest cohorts.
- Within Quebec, the intergenerational trends differ dramatically across the four Aboriginal groups—Métis, Inuit, Indian/First Nation off-reserve and Indian/First Nation on-reserve. At the level of incomplete primary/secondary studies:
  - The Indian/First Nation off-reserve group has markedly better outcomes than the on-reserve group. Both display declines from the 45-and-older cohort to the 35-44 cohort but also small increases in incomplete primary/secondary studies from ages 35-44 to 25-34.
  - Starting from an incomplete primary/secondary rate above 60 percent in the oldest Inuit cohort, each younger cohort has lowered the statistic by about six percentage points.
  - The most optimistic intergenerational reductions in incomplete primary/secondary outcomes are achieved by Métis.
- Inuit and Indian/First Nation on-reserve have very low shares of university degree holders. The shares are highest among the oldest, lowest among the youngest cohort. On the other hand, Indian/First Nation off-reserve and Métis groups have nearly doubled their share of degree holders between oldest and youngest cohort.

Education Outcomes Among Young Aboriginal Adults

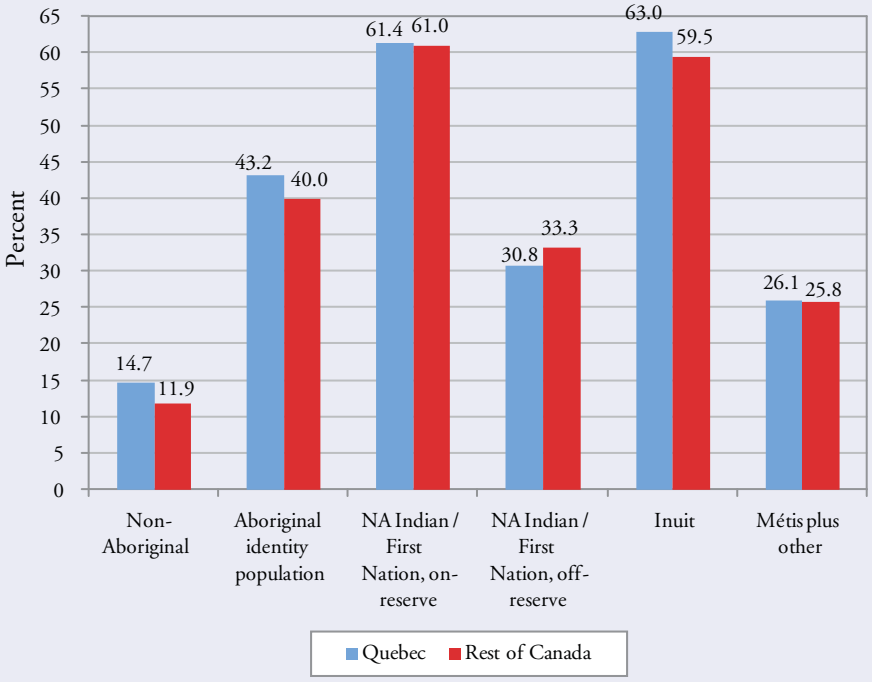
The above intergenerational data provide evidence on education system outcomes in the 1990s and earlier. Those in the 20-24 cohort, the youngest for which it is reasonable to expect completion of secondary school, completed their studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. (The oldest members of this cohort might, without grade repetition, have graduated at age 17 in 1999, seven years prior to the 2006 census; the youngest members of this cohort might have completed their studies in 2003.) Obviously, statistics from this cohort omit education attainments at higher ages, and some people return to school to obtain secondary school equivalence at an age above 24.

The Aboriginal results do not provide grounds for optimism – either in Quebec or in the rest of Canada. While other education gaps, in particular dropout rates among francophone boys relative to francophone girls, are a source of widespread concern in Quebec (Ménard 2009), these gaps are small relative to the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal gaps (Figure 9). At the time of the 2006 census, over 60 percent of Inuit and Indian/First Nation people on-reserve in Quebec had incomplete secondary studies. This is twice the dropout rate for the Indian/First Nation off-reserve and Métis groups, and four times the comparable rate for non-Aboriginal Quebecers.

The overall Quebec Aboriginal dropout rate in the age 20-24 cohort is 43 percent, three points higher than the Aboriginal dropout rate in the rest of Canada. Among the six provinces with more than 100,000 Aboriginals, Quebec ranks third in terms of incomplete high school: lower than Manitoba and Saskatchewan but higher than Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia (Figure 10).[2]

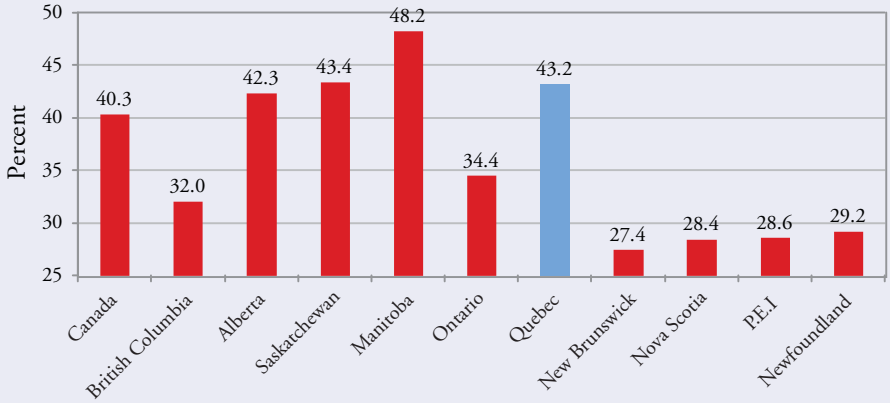
2 Interpretation of results in the Atlantic Provinces is ambiguous due to small Aboriginal populations, both in count and share of provincial totals. In these provinces, there is less potential for formation of parallel Aboriginal communities separate from the non-Aboriginal majority. Accordingly, the Atlantic education outcomes may best be compared to those of the Métis elsewhere in Canada.

Figure 9: Share of Young Adults without High-School Certification, Quebec and Rest of Canada, Ages 20-24, Non-Aboriginals and Aboriginal Groups, 2006



Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Figure 10: Share of Young Aboriginal Adults without High-School Certification, Ages 20-24, Canada and Provinces, 2006



Source: Author's calculations from Canada (2008b).

Policy Implications

Several general features of the Aboriginal student population deserve emphasis. While no consistent nationwide data are available, roughly four of five Aboriginal students are probably attending provincial schools; roughly one in five is in a reserve-based school. The Aboriginal children in provincial schools include those whose families live off-reserve, about 70 percent of the Aboriginal population, plus 40 percent of the children of families living on-reserve (Rajekar and Mathilakath

2009). A second relevant feature of the Aboriginal student population is much higher mobility than among non-Aboriginal students. Given this high mobility, it makes little sense to describe on-reserve children receiving their education solely from reserve-administered schools.

A third feature to acknowledge is skepticism among many Aboriginal students toward formal education. Much as the history of racial segregation remains a hurdle that US education administrators must overcome in addressing education of African-Americans, the Canadian legacy of residential schools and forced assimilation remains a hurdle in the case of Aboriginal education.

Today, the goal of education reform is not to eliminate Aboriginal cultures. On the other hand, primary/secondary education is about more than cultural transmission—its goal is to impart core competencies in reading, writing, mathematics and science, necessary knowledge if Aboriginal students are to enjoy a realistic choice as adults between participation in Canada's urban industrial society or a rural, more collective style of life.

With that preamble, here are six broad policy recommendations:

Recommendation #1

Pre-kindergarten early childhood education (ECE) is a valuable investment for children from marginalized communities, few of whose members have a tradition of formal education. All Aboriginal children should have access to ECE, either on- or off-reserve.

The pattern for many Aboriginal children is a progressively more severe "falling-behind" grade expectation (Richards and Scott 2009). The Quebec education ministry publishes data on the distribution of students in terms of years above the "modal age" for the grade in question relative to students who do not repeat grades. Students enter kindergarten at the modal age. As they progress, some "fall behind," reflected in a rising share above modal age. In 2007/08, about 3,500 students attended schools in the northern Quebec Cree school district. By the second cycle, in primary school, a gap of nearly five percentage points appears between Cree and province-wide children at "modal age." The gap widens to nearly 15 points by the third cycle (Figure 11). In the first year of secondary school, the proportion of Cree school district children at the modal age falls below 50 percent; at senior secondary grades, it falls to 30 percent. The share of Crees two years or more above modal ages is roughly 40 percent (Quebec 2009).

The above example illustrates the severity of education problems in isolated northern Aboriginal communities. School authorities must address a tradeoff between fewer, larger schools – to increase teaching resources in each school – and more, smaller schools to minimize student travel distances. There are other problems. Teacher recruitment and retention is difficult. Motivating students to complete secondary studies may be hard because there are few local jobs requiring high-school certification and above.

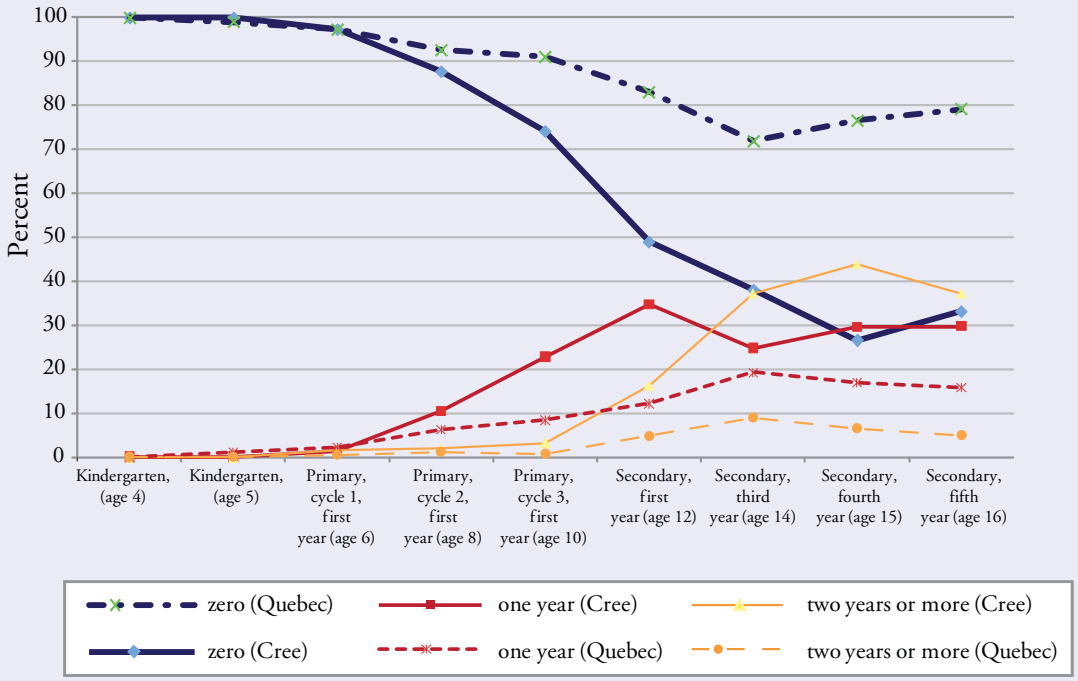
To a lesser extent, these problems exist among non-Aboriginal students in rural Canada. School districts serving rural non-Aboriginal students also record above-average shares of students above "modal age," as well as below-average high-school completion rates. Among Canadians ages 20-24, the overall rural rate of incomplete secondary studies is nearly twice that in large urban centres (Canada 2010).

Whether ECE improves education outcomes of children living in stable middle-class, two-parent families is subject to debate. However, there is no doubt that such programs improve education performance of children from low-income and marginalized communities. Ever since US "head start" programs in the 1960s targeted ECE programs in low-income neighbourhoods, the evidence is nearly unanimous: such programming improves education performance in the early years of primary school. Extrapolating from US experience, there is a good case for assuring the availability of *centres de la petite enfance* in all communities with high concentrations of Aboriginal families.

But to maintain the benefit into higher grades requires other supports from school and family.[3]

3 See Richards and Brzozowski (2006) for a review of the literature.

Figure 11: Years Above "Modal Age", Distribution of Students in Selected Grades, Cree School Board and Quebec Total, 2007/08



Source: Author's calculations from Quebec (2009).

Recommendation #2

Provincial education ministries should expand existing provincial precedents that enable school districts to undertake discretionary Aboriginal education initiatives.

In British Columbia, where Aboriginal students comprise 10 percent of provincial K-12 school enrolment, an important feature is an emphasis on independent school district initiatives with respect to Aboriginal education. This does not imply that all school districts achieve superior results among their Aboriginal students. In fact, the range in Aboriginal student performance in core competency tests is large, and it is not clear what specific initiatives explain the superior record of particular districts. The successes seem to derive from districts adopting a range of best practices (Richards et al., 2008). In BC, provincial education ministry support for district initiatives has taken several forms:

- awarding supplemental funding to districts based on the number of identified Aboriginal students;
- requiring districts to draw up explicit agreements with provincial education ministries;
- requiring districts to engage Aboriginal community leaders in school policymaking; and
- collecting and disseminating data on district-level Aboriginal student outcomes, with the intent of highlighting best practices and problems.

Recommendation #3

To improve quality of school management, bands should form school authorities equivalent in size and jurisdiction to provincial school districts and professionalize administration.

Most on-reserve schools across Canada are "stand-alone," operated by the relevant band. Provincial education ministries long ago abandoned a stand-alone system due to its inability to provide adequate secondary services at reasonable per-student cost. Secondary services include specialized courses and higher-level management, such as negotiating teacher compensation and terms of work. Band-operated schools are not only stand-alone, they are also very small relative to provincial schools and have a high proportion of special-needs students. Both factors tend to increase per-student cost of providing equivalent quality teaching to large schools.

It is unreasonable to expect more money to improve on-reserve education outcomes unless it is accompanied with major institutional reform that transfers authority and budget for on-reserve schools from individual band councils to school authorities managing a reasonable number of schools (Mendelson 2009). However, aggregating schools into larger administrative units is not a panacea, as demonstrated by the low graduation rate among Quebec's Cree school board students.

Recommendation #4
Provinces should enable local Aboriginal organizations and individuals to participate meaningfully in school governance where numbers warrant.

Overcoming widespread Aboriginal cultural alienation toward formal education requires engaging Aboriginal communities in school management. This may range from an active role for elders in particular schools to curriculum advisory committees comprised of local Aboriginal leaders. A dual responsibility exists. At all levels, provincial school authorities need to provide opportunities for Aboriginal organizations, parents and citizens to participate meaningfully in school governance. Simultaneously, Aboriginal leaders have a responsibility to engage with the provincial education system and address education goals beyond cultural preservation.

Recommendation #5
Provincial education ministries, band councils and reserve-based school authorities, where relevant, should engage in comprehensive performance measurement activities, and results should be publicly reported, preferably at the school level. One key activity is gathering data on Aboriginal student performance in core competency tests.

The effectiveness of schools in supporting Aboriginal students should be measured and reported for two main reasons. First, measuring and reporting school and student performance serves an accountability function. Whether Aboriginal or not, parents and citizens are concerned about the effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of the schools their children attend. As well, given the absence of educational accountability to Aboriginal communities in the past, information about school performance is particularly important to convince Aboriginal communities that education programs are working for Aboriginal students. Second, performance measurement is a tool for evidence-based program evaluation and planning by those responsible for school program design.

The approach to performance measurement should be comprehensive. Measuring Aboriginal student performance on tests of basic skills is important since competence in reading, science and mathematics is essential for success both in higher education and mainstream society. Given the priorities of Aboriginal communities, measuring cultural dimensions should also be undertaken.

Recommendation #6
The provinces should undertake more aggressive affirmative action to encourage Aboriginal post-secondary students to become teachers, and for anyone aspiring to a teaching career in school districts with sizeable Aboriginal cohorts, the expectation should be that he or she has pursued courses in Aboriginal culture/history.

Among the robust results in education analysis is the value of teachers who can identify culturally with their students and, vice versa, the value of

students being able to identify culturally with their teachers. In most Canadian jurisdictions, Aboriginals remain seriously under-represented in both teaching and educational administrative positions (Richards and Scott 2009).

Conclusion

Compared to the time and effort spent analyzing treaties and land claims over the last generation, the study of means to assure quality education for Aboriginals has been negligible. Neither Aboriginal treaties nor better quality schools are a quick fix. Both require a long-term commitment.

Across Canada, the best Aboriginal education outcomes are in general among those aged 35-44. Among younger Aboriginals, education progress has by many measures stalled. Yet there is evidence that good policy can make a difference. Across the six provinces with large Aboriginal student populations, British Columbia has the best performance when it comes to young adult (ages 20-24) high-school completion (68 percent) and Manitioba the worst (52 percent). While no one should interpret British Columbia's outcomes as satisfactory, the difference from Manitoba is evidence that provincial education policy matters. Overall, on-reserve education outcomes are weaker than in provincial systems but here, too, there is a range of outcomes. Clearly, good policy and leadership can achieve some impressive results. Good policy and leaders do not explain all variations in Aboriginal educational performance – far from it – but nor do socioeconomic conditions or issues of cultural identity. There is much work to be done.

Glossary

Aboriginal identity population
The Canadian census defines the Aboriginal population in several ways. The most widely used is based on self-identification. Individuals can self-identify as belonging to one of three Aboriginal identity groups: (1) ***North American Indian*** *or* ***First Nation*** (Mohawk, Ojibway, Cree, and so on); (2) ***Métis*** (descendants of communities formed from the intermarriage of Indians and coureurs de bois engaged in the fur trade); or (3) Arctic ***Inuit***.

Another census definition is based on an individual indicating that he or she is a ***registered Indian*** under provisions of the *Indian Act*, a Canadian statute dating from the late 19th century. The great majority of those who self-identify as Indian/First Nation are also registered Indians. Only registered Indians have the right to live on designated reserve lands and receive the associated benefits. The census defines the ***Aboriginal identity population*** as those who self-identify as Aboriginal or indicate that they are registered Indians.

At the time of the most recent census, in 2006, the Aboriginal identity population was estimated at 1.17 million. A total of 698,000 identified as Indian/First Nation, 390,000 as Métis and 50,000 as Inuit. Among those self-identified as Indian/First Nation, a subset of 624,000 indicated they were also registered Indians (Canada 2008a, 2008b).

The census suffers from under-enumeration on-reserve (Canada 2005). As a result, this *Commentary* uses a revised estimate of the on-reserve Indian/First Nation population based on Statistics Canada's revised estimates for the 1996 and 2001 Indian/First Nation populations.[a]

Income and earnings
Income includes wages and salaries; net farm income; net non-farm income from unincorporated business and/or professional practice; child benefits; Old Age Security pension and Guaranteed Income Supplement payments; benefits from Canada or Quebec Pension Plans; benefits from Employment Insurance; other income from government sources (such as social assistance); dividends, interest on bonds, deposits and savings certificates, and other investment income; retirement pensions, superannuation and annuities, including those from RRSPs and RRIFs; and other money income.

Earnings refer to a subset of total income received as wages and salaries, net income from a non-farm unincorporated business and/or professional practice, and/or net farm self-employment income.

Median earnings (income) refers to the median among the defined population, age 15 and over, who reported positive earnings (income). The statistics exclude those who report no earnings (income).

a Extrapolating Statistics Canada's 1996-2001 estimated growth rate of the Indian/First Nation population to 2006 yields an estimate of 785,000 – as opposed to 698,000 – and a revised estimate of the total 2006 Aboriginal identity population of 1,260,000. The revision in the estimated on-reserve Indian/First Nation population has been allocated across provinces in proportion to the reported provincial on-reserve populations.

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