



Tools other than legislation that would help to ensure that First Nation students have access to quality education

**Submission to the
National Panel on First Nation Elementary and
Secondary Education**

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Introduction

Canada's businesses recognize the importance of First Nations – and all Aboriginal peoples' – economic development interests to their success. Canada faces a skills shortage primarily as a result of an aging population and a shrinking number of people of prime working age (15-64 years).¹

Canada's First Nations peoples are young and their numbers are growing quickly compared to other Canadians. The 2006 Census² showed that this growth is occurring against a backdrop of incomes and living conditions that lag behind those of other Canadians.

While the root causes of the disparities in income and living conditions between First Nations peoples and the rest of Canadians vary from region to region, clearly there is an opportunity for improvement through offering First Nations peoples more tools and additional options to become full economic partners with the rest of Canada. Secondary school graduation – or its equivalent – is usually the minimal level of education required by employers. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce believes there are measures the federal government could take – some in partnership with business – to improve the secondary school graduation success rates of First Nations and all Aboriginal peoples.

Canada's looming labour shortage

In Ontario alone, "... the projected shortfall in the availability of workers is shown to rise to at least 200,000, and to as high as 1.8 million by 2031, depending on our levels of population growth."³

While much focus is placed upon attracting immigrants to fill our need for skilled workers, we cannot rely solely upon this strategy. Over the next decade, 400,000

¹ Miner, Rick. *People without Jobs, Jobs without People: Ontario's Labour Market Future*. Miner Management Consultants. February 2010.

² Gionet, Linda. *First Nations people: Selected findings of the 2006 Census*. Statistics Canada. Catalogue no. 11-008.

³ Ibid.

Aboriginal Canadians will reach working age.⁴ The key to success in the workforce is an education. Yet Canada's First Nations – and all Aboriginal – peoples continue to be under-represented in secondary school achievement statistics. Improving the secondary school graduation rates of First Nations – and all Aboriginal peoples – will enhance their standards of living and Canada will benefit from a skilled, homegrown, workforce.

Though the economic benefits of investment in good education and training are clear, as the Auditor General observed in her June 2011 report, the federal government has made no progress in improving First Nations education on reserves. “The proportion of high school graduates has risen steadily in the general population across Canada but not among First Nations students living on reserves. Based on census data from 2001 and 2006, the education gap is widening. The proportion of high school graduates over the age of 15 is 41 percent among First Nations members living on reserves, compared with 77 percent for Canadians as a whole. In 2004, we noted that at existing rates, it would take 28 years for First Nations communities to reach the national average. More recent trends suggest that the time needed may be still longer.”⁵

The responsibility and funding for the lifelong learning of First Nations peoples living on reserves rests with the federal government. The federal government provides funding to First Nations bands for their administration. While First Nations are required by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development to deliver a curriculum equivalent to that of the province in which they are located – by provincially-certified teachers – the funding provided to First Nations is considerably less per student than what provinces provide to the students for which they are directly responsible. According to the Assembly of First Nations, “The funding approach is outdated, unstable and is not based on the actual number of students in the classroom. On average First Nations schools receive at least \$2,000 less per child which accounts for the lack of learning materials. It is also difficult to retain qualified teachers in First

⁴ Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. *Building a Competitive Advantage for Canada, Pre-budget submission to: The Honourable James Flaherty, Minister of Finance, November 18, 2009.*

⁵ *Status Report of the Auditor General of Canada, June 2011*

Nations schools because they earn some of the lowest salaries among teachers in Canada.”⁶

A significant source of concern with respect to the education gap is the current Band Operated Funding Formula (BOFF). The current BOFF was developed in 1988 and was originally designed to apply to all First Nations schools in Canada. The BOFF provides funding based on multiplying the number of students by a tuition rate. This amount is expected to fund teachers’ salaries, books and supplies, instructional materials and core curriculum requirements. The terms and conditions of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development’s funding agreements with First Nations specify that First Nations schools must deliver provincial curricula with provincially-certified teachers.

With a lack of sufficient funding it is next-to-impossible for First Nations to provide an education to their peoples that is not only deemed provincially-equivalent, but is culturally relevant and provides the opportunity for students to learn in their own languages. It also makes it very difficult to attract educators equipped to teach the mathematics and sciences essential for post-secondary education and employment.

The economic benefits stemming from addressing the longstanding issues in Aboriginal education are clearly laid out in *Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective*.⁷ This report documents the real economic benefits that could accrue to Canada if - by 2026 - Aboriginal youth were to achieve the same educational outcomes as those achieved by the non-Aboriginal population in 2001. It is estimated that the annual economic output of the labour market would be \$36.5 billion higher, with increased tax revenues of \$3.5 billion and reduced government expenditures of \$14.2 billion.⁸

⁶ Assembly of First Nations. *It’s Our Time: A Call to Action on Education*. www.afn.ca Accessed July 2, 2010.

⁷ Sharpe, Andrew and Arsenault, Jean-Francois, *Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective*, The Centre for the Study of Living Standards, for the Canadian Policy Research Network, 2009

⁸ Ibid.

Because Aboriginal peoples are, on average, much younger than the overall Canadian population with a much higher birth rate, they have the potential to make a disproportionately large contribution to the Canadian labour force over the next 20 years. There is also evidence that increased educational attainment results in increased productivity in the labour market. Therefore, the potential return to Canada's economy could be even greater.⁹

Private sector partners can help

There are complex reasons for the failures of education to bring the desired outcomes. Often it is an issue of a lack of focus and flexibility, not funding. Education curricula developed to meet provincial, territorial and – in the case of Aboriginal programs – national goals may not be focused or flexible enough to meet the differing economic, geographic and demographic realities of individual communities, let alone prospective employers. In some remote communities, where most Aboriginal Canadians live, it may not be possible to offer all of the curricula required for post-secondary graduation on-site or in schools and other means of delivery – for example e-learning and mentoring/co-op programs – must be considered.

There is also an argument to be made for business, First Nations and governments to work more closely together to plan curricula that matches employers' needs.

The Canadian Chamber recommends that the federal government:

- Review the funding formula for education in First Nations communities to ensure parity with the provincial financing model in each of the provinces where First Nations schools are expected to adhere to the provincial curricula recognizing that First Nations schools must keep pace as curricula are updated. Any revised funding model must be public, comprehensive and equitable in its

⁹ Ibid.

construction and application to ensure that the education needs of all First Nations communities are met;

- Work with representatives from colleges, universities, Aboriginal communities and employers who have experience in K-12 education projects to develop best practices that could be immediately implemented to tackle the challenges associated with lower post-secondary participation rates amongst Aboriginal peoples;
- Work with the provinces and territories to improve the connections between all Aboriginal Canadians to education/training resources and employers, focusing on electronic communications for those living in remote locations;
- Ensure its skills and training programs are flexible enough to accommodate the economic, geographic and demographic realities of individual communities and the alternate education models that may be required to deliver curricula effectively; and
- Partner with businesses whenever possible to ensure curricula meet the needs of employers.