

Tackling the Achievement Gap

The provincial First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Framework focuses primarily on gaps in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and it includes goals for closing them.

Currently in Ontario, achievement is measured primarily through literacy and numeracy tests, graduation rates and credit accumulation. But a number of First Nations, Inuit and Métis groups have emphasized the importance of a broader, more culturally-relevant definition of success—one which goes beyond academic achievement and looks at issues of well-being and culture.²³

According to members of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association Native Trustees' Council, "success should not be defined as coping well in the mainstream, [or by mainstream

measures], at the cost of losing one's identity."²⁴ FNMI groups also emphasize the importance of a collaborative approach to implementing the strategy that builds on the knowledge and experience of Aboriginal communities.²⁵

In August 2013, the province released *A Solid Foundation: Second Progress Report on the Implementation of the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. The report confirms "a persistent gap in achievement between Aboriginal students and all students."²⁶

The report shows that, measured by EQAO test scores, there is a consistently large gap (more than 20 percentage points) in the percentage of students reaching the provincial standard between First Nations students and the provincial average (except in applied Math where the provincial average

Achievement Gap 2011–12 – Provincial EQAO scores and Credit Accumulation						
	Percentage of students achieving the provincial standard				Percentage point gap	
	First Nations	Métis	Inuit	All English students*	First Nations Students	Métis Students
Grade 3						
Reading	44%	61%	58%	66%	22	5
Writing	55%	68%	54%	76%	21	8
Mathematics	45%	62%	62%	68%	23	6
Grade 6						
Reading	53%	65%	54%	75%	22	10
Writing	50%	64%	50%	74%	24	10
Mathematics	31%	45%	38%	58%	27	13
Secondary						
Grade 9 Applied Math	65%	78%	n/a	84%	19	6
Grade 9 Applied Math	37%	39%	n/a	44%	7	5
Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)	59%	77%	86%	82%	23	5
Students with expected number of credits at the end of grade 9	61%	75%	65%	85%**	24	10

* A Solid Foundation reports separately on English and French students' achievement. Most Aboriginal students are enrolled in English Boards.
 ** Provincial average, all students (English and French).

is also extremely low). For Métis students, the gap ranges between 5 and 13 percentage points across all measures. The numbers of Inuit students are so low that the results may be less representative.

ABORIGINAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FACE FURTHER DISADVANTAGE

In secondary schools, data from *A Solid Foundation* also show that the Aboriginal students are significantly overrepresented in applied courses.

According to their 2011-12 data, 59% of First Nations and Métis students are enrolled in applied courses, compared to a provincial average of 30%.²⁷ This raises a number of concerns because applied courses are associated with lower achievement, credit accumulation, graduation rates and post-secondary participation.²⁸

AUDITOR'S REPORT POINTS TO SHORTCOMINGS

Although there has been progress since the provincial framework was introduced in 2007, Ontario's Auditor General, in his 2012 report, found significant problems in the implementation of the FNMI Framework.

He was particularly critical of the delay in developing performance measures for the framework. One of the goals of the framework is to close the achievement gap, but the province didn't provide the achievement data needed for a baseline until 2013.

The Auditor also raised concerns about the lack of a detailed implementation plan.

Unlike other key Ministry initiatives such as school safety and student success programs, which have such strategies, he observed that, because there is no specific implementation plan, school boards interpret and implement FNMI Framework with limited consistency and minimal reporting obligations.²⁹

In addition, the Auditor pointed to wide variations in the effectiveness of different boards' policies around self-identification on the part of Aboriginal students. A handful of boards have been very successful, but overall, fewer than half of the Aboriginal students have self-identified than would be expected according to census data.³⁰ This creates difficulties for planning and otherwise responding to the needs of Aboriginal students.

The Ministry intends that school boards will target funding to local needs in support of activities linked to the Framework's goals and performance measures. However, the Ministry has not placed any specific stipulations on this funding or provided any formal guidance on how the funding is to be spent. According to the Ministry, this provides boards with the flexibility to determine how best to allocate resources. In addition, although the Ministry may have discussed program spending with board representatives, there is no documented evidence of such discussions and there is no formal report-back process from the boards of any confirmation that the funds have been used to support Aboriginal students.

Auditor General of Ontario, 2012

Building a Sense of Belonging

Although there are no clear statistics because only a few boards have moved ahead with a self-identification policy for staff,³⁸ there is a wide consensus that Aboriginal peoples are underrepresented in the staff of schools as well.

Not every Aboriginal teacher has access to traditional teachings or is an expert in teaching about the history and culture of First Nations, Métis or Inuit peoples. But as acknowledged in the FMNI Framework, the presence of Aboriginal staff is very likely to contribute to a sense of belonging on the part of Aboriginal students and families.

The barriers posed by a shortage of Aboriginal educators and staff in schools underscore the importance of multiple strategies to ensure that public schools are responsive to Aboriginal communities and families. These strategies include a commitment to employing Aboriginal educators throughout schools and boards, ensuring that initiatives and strategic planning around Aboriginal education are developed, evaluated and ideally led or delivered by Aboriginal people, as well as further establishment of structures to support engagement between families and government.

Alongside the recommendations about indigenizing schools in her 2010 report on the Toronto District School Board’s Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Program, Professor Dion focused on the need to “decolonize” schools.

True decolonization involves recognizing that long-standing education policies in Canada and Ontario were designed to strip Aboriginal students of their cultural identities.

These policies—in particular, the residential school system (the last residential school in Ontario closed in 1974)—“were designed to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture... based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal.”⁴⁰ As recognized in the federal government apology, the “consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative ... this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language”⁴¹ as well as devastating effects on families and individuals.

A key aspect of decolonization is ensuring Aboriginal participation and leadership throughout the school system. Through these combined strategies, according to Dion, students in Ontario schools would be able to “Investigate and learn from the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, including the legacies of oppression and their ongoing impacts... [and] Participate in collective action aimed at transforming the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples...”.

First Nations Control of First Nations Education

The Assembly of First Nations—representing First Nations across Canada—has clearly articulated the importance of First Nations control of high quality First Nations schools on reserve.

Another component of that vision, however, extends to First Nations students attending provincially-funded schools. This position is supported by the Chiefs of Ontario, a coordinating body for 134 First Nations across Ontario.

In the policy document *First Nations Control of First Nations Education* (2010), the AFN says:

The needs of First Nations learners are best met in First Nations institutions. However, First Nations learners may attend a provincial, territorial, or other learning institution due to a variety of reasons, including but not limited to:

- 1. The lack of a learning institutions in the community,*
- 2. Parental choice, or*
- 3. Families living away from their communities for education, social, medical, economic or housing reasons.*

It is essential that the inherent and Treaty rights of First Nations learners to quality and relevant learning be supported and maintained while attending non-First Nations schools, as these Rights are portable.

Provincial and territorial education systems must be accountable to First Nations governments, education authorities, parents, and caregivers for the learning outcomes of all First Nations learners attending their institutions. They also have a responsibility to provide quality, culturally-relevant learning opportunities for all First Nations learners enrolled in their learning institutions.

New Provincial Report Shows Some Progress

In its August progress report on the First Nations, Métis, Inuit Framework, the Ministry outlined the focus for 2007–2013:

- support boards in developing voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification policies (something the Auditor felt was being implemented with inconsistent success);
- continue to develop curriculum resources and related training for teachers and principals; and
- foster stronger partnerships with the federal government and Aboriginal education partners.

To support the implementation of the framework, the Ministry of Education—working together with First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders—created an Advisory Council and a Directors' Council on Aboriginal Education. The Ministry also provided increased funding for Aboriginal education—primarily to fund increased enrolment in Native Studies and Native Languages courses.

By 2012, some of the results of this work are apparent.

Fifty school boards now have First Nations Métis and Inuit Advisory Committees, 64 boards have hired someone to lead and support the implementation of Aboriginal education initiatives, and all 76 school boards and school authorities have established voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification policies—an increase from 10 boards in 2007.³¹ According to the provincial progress report, approximately 44% of the estimated 64,000 Aboriginal students attending provincially funded schools have self-identified.³²

There have been other significant changes, such as the establishment of Toronto DSB's Aboriginal Education Centre³³ and the formation of an Aboriginal Education working group within the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. Formal agreements between the province of Ontario, the Government of Canada and the Métis Nation of Ontario and the Nishnawbe-Aski Nations and the Anishnabek Nation also hold some promise of improved working relationships.

The province has also funded pilot projects in a number of boards, though there is currently no system to identify which projects have resulted in promising practices, so it is difficult for other boards to replicate them.

One note of caution is that in the Ministry of Education's 2013 progress report, the province appears to focus more on the achievement gap, rather than the broader goals of Aboriginal education for all students.

Progress on Aboriginal Education*

- Enrolment in Aboriginal language and native studies programs has increased from 5,343 students in 2007 to 19,345 students in 2012. Targeted funding helps cover the cost of these programs.
- There is support for Ontario Indian Friendship Centres to administer alternative education programs, in part funded by Ministry of Education.
- The province has funded Urban Aboriginal Pilot Projects in three boards as well as more than 1000 smaller Board-initiated projects
- 79% of teachers who had targeted professional development on FMNI issues report that they use what they learned in the classroom.

* Source: *A Solid Foundation*.

Conclusion: Addressing All The Gaps

The past several years have seen significant progress in addressing the challenges of Aboriginal education, but it is clear that more must be done.

It will take a multi-pronged approach, which includes targeted educational and social supports (within and beyond the school), to close current knowledge, resource and achievement gaps. It will also require sustained efforts to ensure that Aboriginal students learn, together with their classmates, about their shared histories and cultures.

As the province further develops the implementation plan for the FNMI Framework, it is critical that there remain a clear focus on the importance of Aboriginal education for all Ontarians. In the development of performance measures, it is important to monitor the availability of learning resources and opportunities for Aboriginal students as well as achievement figures, and it is vital to recognize that true success is about more than scores in reading, writing and mathematics.

Too narrow a focus on achievement gaps may result in overlooking some of the background factors that will ultimately contribute to greater success for FMNI students and an improved relationship between Aboriginal peoples and all Ontarians.

Recommendations

Education is critical for the future of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities; just as education about contemporary Aboriginal issues and the history of colonialism is vital for all Canadians.

People for Education recommends that:

To address the knowledge gap:

All Ontario educators receive high quality professional development to support them in understanding and teaching about the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians; and that the province include a mandatory Aboriginal education unit in the newly expanded Bachelor of Education program.

All Ontario students have Aboriginal education opportunities integrated throughout the curriculum, to ensure that students learn about First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures and history and about the ongoing impact of colonialism.

To address the resource gap:

Boards are provided with adequate support to ensure that schools with a high percentage of Aboriginal students are provided with First Nations' language, special education, childcare, arts and physical education resources that are at or above the provincial average.

The Ministry of Education work with other Ministries to ensure that students and their families have access to the supports they need in and out of school.

To address the achievement gap:

Working in close consultation with Aboriginal groups, the province follow through on the recommendations of the Auditor-General of Ontario to ensure effective implementation of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Framework.

The province and First Nations, Métis and Inuit organizations, co-create goals for Aboriginal education that include, but are not limited to, EQAO targets.

METHODOLOGY

Where not otherwise cited, the statistics in this report are from People for Education's 16th annual survey of resources in Ontario elementary schools and 13th annual survey of secondary schools (2012-2013). The survey acts as an information tool for parents and Ontario citizens. It focuses on quantifiable resources available in schools across the province, tracking any changes that occur. The resulting data provide an annual picture of the effects of education policy and funding shifts. Copies of the surveys in English and French are available in the back of our Annual Report on Schools:

<http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/research/annual-report/>

Surveys were mailed to principals at every Ontario elementary and secondary school in October 2012, with an explanatory letter requesting that they complete the survey. Translated surveys were sent to French-language schools. Reminders were faxed and emailed in December and January. Surveys could also be completed online. Confidentiality of all individual school responses is guaranteed. Where direct quotes are used that might identify a school, permission has been obtained. Only aggregated data are released.

This year's sample of 1,122 elementary and secondary schools equals 23% of the province's schools. Schools in 71 of the province's 72 school boards participated. Sixty-one percent of elementary schools in the sample participated in 2011/12.

ANALYSES

The analyses in this report are based on both descriptive (such as frequency distribution) and inferential statistics (e.g., correlation). The descriptive statistical analysis is carried out to summarize and present numerical information in a manner that is illuminating and useful. In the few instances where inferential statistical analysis is used it is to examine correlations and associations between variables and to compare means of different variables. The data in this study were analyzed using SPSS 21.

REPORTING

The year 2013 in the report refers to the 2012/13 school year (2012 refers to the 2011/12 school year, etc.). Calculations have been rounded to the nearest whole number and therefore do not always add up to 100%. Student-to-staff ratios were calculated for schools that reported both the total number

of students and the full-time equivalent for staff positions. The student-to-staff ratio for the province is the mean of the distribution of the student-to-staff ratios of reporting schools.

Comments from principals are used to enhance, elaborate or explain the quantitative results and broaden the issues discussed and explored in the report.

Schools were sorted according to their postal codes into geographic regions. For the most part, the distribution of respondent schools is representative of their distribution in Ontario.

OTHER PROVINCIAL DATA

This year, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) generously shared its data with People for Education. EQAO's demographic data are based on an analysis of the Statistics Canada 2006 census and includes an estimate of the number of Aboriginal students per-school and for each school board. People for Education combined our school survey data with EQAO's demographic data on a school-by-school basis. We integrated the information into our own elementary and secondary school survey data to make comparisons between schools with high percentages of Aboriginal students and provincial averages. EQAO also provided information on the number of students in each school who are taking Grade 9 applied math and Grade 9 academic math.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For more information, see the following websites: Chiefs of Ontario, <http://www.chiefs-of-ontario.org/>; the the Métis Nation of Ontario: <http://www.metisnation.org/about-the-mno/the-metis-nation-of-ontario>; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami: <https://www.itk.ca/>; and the Assembly of First Nations, <http://www.afn.ca/>. For a broader picture, although it is not new, see Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) *Report*. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, available at <https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/handle/1974/6874>.
- 2 See Government of Ontario. (2013) *A Solid Foundation: Second progress report on Ontario's First Nations, Métis and Inuit Framework*. Toronto: Government of Ontario, p.11, citing preliminary data from Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey.
- 3 See e.g., Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2011). *Reforming First Nations education: From crisis to hope*. Ottawa, Senate of Canada, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/411/appa/rep/rep03dec11-e.pdf>; National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education on Reserve (2012). *Nurturing the learning spirit of First Nations Students*. Ottawa, Government of Canada and Assembly of First Nations, <http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education2/national-panel.pdf>; First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, *Our dreams matter too*, Ottawa: author; J. Richards, M. Scott. (2009) *Aboriginal education: strengthening the foundations*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- 4 Ministry of Education, *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, 2007. Retrieved May 8, 2013, from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/aboriginal/fnmframework.pdf>.
- 5 Auditor General of Ontario. (2012) *Education of Aboriginal Students* (c.3.05). Toronto: Government of Ontario. Retrieved May 3, 2013 from http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en12/305en12.pdf
- 6 See Dion, S.D. (2009). *Braiding Histories Learning From Aboriginal Peoples Experiences and Perspectives*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- 7 *Ontario First Nations, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework*, see note 4, p. 22.
- 8 Dion, S.D.; Johnston, K.; Rice, C.M. (2010). *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board*, p. vii. Retrieved May 3, 2013 from http://www.tdsb.on.ca/wwwdocuments/programs/aboriginal_voices/docs/Decolonizing%20Our%20Schools%203.pdf
- 9 Toronto District School Board. (2006). *Best Practices in Including Aboriginal Peoples in the Curriculum*. Retrieved May 3, 2013 from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/deepeningknowledge/TeacherResources/Infusing_Aboriginal_Content_and_Perspectives_into_Your_Teaching/Best_Practices_in_Including_Aboriginal_Peoples_in_the_Curriculum.html.
- 10 Elementary school, Brant/Haldimand-Norfolk Catholic DSB.
- 11 Elementary schools, Toronto Catholic DSB, Peel DSB, Peterborough Victoria Northumberland Catholic DSB, Thames Valley DSB.
- 12 Elementary school, Lakehead DSB.
- 13 Elementary school, Peel DSB.
- 14 Elementary school, Toronto DSB.
- 15 Elementary school, Toronto DSB.
- 16 Elementary schools, Upper Grand DSB, Near North DSB, Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB, Lakehead DSB, Simcoe County DSB, Ottawa-Carleton DSB.
- 17 Dion, Johnston & Rice, see note 8.
- 18 Royal Commission, see note 1.
- 19 http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1314/Technical13_14.pdf
- 20 Statistics Canada. (2009) 2006 Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis and First Nations. Ottawa: Government of Canada, retrieved April 20, 2013 from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-558/p1-eng.cfm>
- 21 Government of Ontario. (2013). Education Funding Technical Paper. Retrieved September 30, 2013 from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1314/Technical13_14.pdf.
- 22 See e.g., Statistics Canada. Aboriginal statistics at a glance, retrieved September 27, 2013 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-645-x/89-645-x2010001-eng.htm>; Loppie Reading, C., Wein, F. (2009). *Health Inequalities and Determinants of Aboriginal Peoples Health*. National Collaborating Centre on Aboriginal Peoples Health.
- 23 See generally, Battiste, M. (2005). *State of Aboriginal Learning*. Canadian Council on Learning, Ottawa, ON. October 2005. 75 pp.
- 24 Garrow, P. September 29, 2013, email on file with People for Education.
- 25 See generally, Battiste, M., note 5; and see for example letter from Gordon Peters, Chiefs of Ontario to Jim MacArthur, Auditor-General of Ontario, Feb 7, 2013, on file with People for Education.
- 26 *A solid foundation*, see note 2, p.28.
- 27 Stephen Harper, Statement of Apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools. June 11, 2008, retrieved from <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649>.
- 28 Ibid, For a fuller account, see e.g., Millar, J.R. (1996) *Shingwaukis Vision: A history of native residential schools*. University of Toronto Press.
- 29 Auditor-General of Ontario, see note 5, pp.132-133.
- 30 *A solid foundation*, see note 2, p.11.
- 31 *A solid foundation*, see note 2, p.43.
- 32 *A solid foundation*, see note 2, page 11
- 33 Auditor General of Ontario, see note 5.
- 34 Decolonizing our schools, see note 8, p.v.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, p. 21. See note 4.
- 37 Dion, S. D. (2012). *Our place in the circle: A review of Métis content in Ontario Faculties of Education*. Toronto: York University. Retrieved May 3, 2013 from http://www.metisnation.org/media/328915/our_place-report-usb.pdf.

38 See, for example, the staff self-identification policies from the Lakehead Board, available at http://www.lakeheadschoools.ca/board/policies_and_procedures or on file with People for Education.

39 *Our place in the circle*, see note 37.

40 Stephen Harper, see note 27.

41 *Ibid*, see note 26.



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