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Improving the Education Outcomes of Aboriginal People Living Off-Reserve: *A Discussion of Delivery Models*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary report of presentations delivered at The Colloquium on Improving the Educational Outcomes of Aboriginal People Living Off-Reserve

**Monday, March 15, 2010 and Tuesday March 16, 2010
Delta Bessborough, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan**

Report prepared by:

Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Canada, improving the education of Aboriginal people off-reserve is recognized as an increasingly important issue; nonetheless, there are relatively few events to share knowledge, experience, and research pertaining to the topic. In order to facilitate improvements in this area, the College of Education and the Johnson-Shoyama School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan held a Colloquium collectively entitled: *Improving the Educational Outcomes of Aboriginal People Living Off-Reserve: A Discussion of Delivery Models*. The event took place at the Delta Bessborough, Saskatoon, SK on March 15-16, 2010.

A series of presentations and small group sessions highlighted the importance of developing policies that enable scaling up best practice strategies and lead to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Speakers agreed that the time has come to turn recommendations into informed solutions, however, deciding on how best to move forward has been challenging. Over the two days of the conference important questions that were addressed included: What curricular, governance, and delivery models are most likely to improve both the experience and success of Aboriginal students in publicly-regulated K to 12 school systems? How do we define and measure the success of Aboriginal students who attend school off-reserve?

To address these and other questions, the Colloquium organizers assembled a group of prominent local, provincial, and national speakers. Including speakers, approximately 70 people attended the Colloquium each day. Participants came from across Canada and represented a wide variety of backgrounds, including academic institutions, provincial and federal government departments, and Aboriginal representative organizations. Colloquium co-chairs Drs. Sheila Carr Stewart (College of Education, U of S) and Evelyn Peters (Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, U of S) chaired the sessions. Dr. Jim Propp, consultant with SELU, summarized the conference proceedings in preparation for writing the executive summary and the full conference report.

Day One and Day Two of the Colloquium consisted of presentations and “Table Topics” discussions that enabled participants to deliberate and discuss practices reflected key information presented by speakers. Presentations were subdivided into six sessions (A, B, C, D, E and F) based on their respective themes. The papers presented on the first day focused on policies, contextual issues, and curricular questions, whereas presentations given on the second day related to governance and service delivery models innovations.

DAY ONE - MARCH 15, 2010

SESSION A - KEY POLICY QUESTIONS

The first day opened with examination of key policy questions. The speakers were concerned with Aboriginal learners' educational outcomes and the persistence of achievement gaps despite Aboriginal students' aspirations for educational success. Laughlin, Richards, and Raham revealed that policies must leverage practices in support of district level strategies. For instance, Laughlin stressed the need for policy makers and educators to shift focus and concentrate on developing appropriate schemas for measuring and improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. He also pointed out that in order to bring about a positive change, policies must: a) include practices that monitor the full spectrum of life-long learning, b) embrace the nature of aboriginal learning and the importance of experimental learning, c) account for political, economic, and social realities, and d) focus on learning success rather than learning deficits.

Richards later demonstrated with evidence from British Columbia (BC) that improvements in educational outcomes of Aboriginal learners could be achieved through agreements that commit parties and other partners to ongoing participation in developing best practices. He argued that successful school districts in BC maintain that Aboriginal students' educational success is a long-term priority. To enable success in the designing of policy, districts involve Aboriginal leaders and the broader community, use objective data that describe Aboriginal student performance, and then follow through with policy implementation.

In a similar manner, Helen Raham proposed a systematic and multidimensional approach to policy-making that contains eight key domains influencing educational outcomes. Among these domains are: literacy and language, culturally-based curriculum and instructions, student engagement and retention, home and community partnerships, teacher supply, quality and support, school leadership, school programming, and assessment, monitoring and reporting. Raham's model featured developing policies that support "digging deeper to find best practices" and "scaling-up" of these strategies.

SESSION B - CONTEXTS OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION K-12

In Session B, participants learned about the contexts of Aboriginal education including population demographics, demographics on school level completion, and school achievement. In particular, Dr. Bougie presented current education data related to Inuit, Métis, and off-reserve First Nations students that included demographics on levels of schooling; factors related to school achievement; and language and culture at school. However, a key message in Dr. Bougie's presentation focused on how speaking an Aboriginal language often contributed to Aboriginal students gaining positive self-esteem, community well-being, cultural connectedness, and positive school performance and achievement.

Another key theme that emerged in Session B was that foundational approaches to

education - as designed into the *Inspiring Success* policy document in Saskatchewan - encourage an integrated and holistic orientation to curriculum reform, complemented by resilient learning programs and instructional practices. Bank's Four Levels of Content Integration model for implementing multicultural curriculum reform is a catalyst, a cornerstone, and a best practice in creating culturally responsive learning programs.

Del Anaquod, professor at the First Nations University of Canada, closed Session B with his presentation. In this presentation, Anaquod remarked that given the changing demographics in Saskatchewan - in particular the increasing Aboriginal population - school systems must be responsive and resilient and immediately adopt practices that are culturally relevant, engaging for Aboriginal students, and instill self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect. On a positive note, Anaquod highlighted recent improvements and highlighted three positive changes in Saskatchewan that should contribute to enhancing Aboriginal students educational outcomes. These positive changes include an increasing Aboriginal middle class, a growing Aboriginal business class, and a larger number of Aboriginal leaders who are positive role models.

SESSION C - CURRICULAR QUESTIONS

In Session C, presentations by Bousquet, Shmon, and Guevremont called attention to curricular questions regarding improving Aboriginal educational outcomes. The underlying argument put forward by these speakers was that existing best practices have resulted in positive learning even when these practices appear to be unconventional or non-traditional. First, Guevremont highlighted the key role that the ability to speak an Aboriginal language has on improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Next, Yves Bousquet outlined how parent engagement and improved relationships with parents results when educators create meaningful engagement by cultivating reciprocal and equitable relationships with parents and families. In this way parents become collaborators who not only contribute to the school goals and objectives, but also participate in working to help support children's learning.

Shmon's presentation about Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI) showcased the positive relationship between curriculum and instruction and educational achievement. GDI's teacher preparation program is focused on delivering curriculum and instructional methods that are relevant to Aboriginal students way of knowing. This GDI program represents best practices leading to enhanced and positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal learners.

DAY ONE TABLE TOPIC DISCUSSIONS

In the afternoon of Day One, participants were moved into small groups and provided an opportunity to deliberate and explore topics from the morning sessions.

Participants recommended that indicators must reflect both Aboriginal ways of knowing in the learning process and an understanding of the effects of community factors

including access to Elders, interconnectedness/cohesion of community and school, cultural continuity and safety, parental/guardian/family involvement, development of general life skills, level of extracurricular activities, Aboriginal culture/curriculum, and Aboriginal teachers as role models. In the small groups there was the broad agreement that more needs to be done in developing teaching and assessment strategies that are culturally appropriate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The key recommendations derived in this small group session underscored the need for developing appropriate schemas for measuring and improving educational outcomes, and stressed that new approaches should reflect life-long learning, the nature of Aboriginal learning, Aboriginal students' political, economic, and social realities, and focus on learning success rather than educational deficits. As stakeholders develop culturally appropriate teaching and assessment strategies preference should be given to holistic curriculum reform, complemented by resilient learning programs and instructional practices. One example is speaking an Aboriginal language and the promise it shows as a contributor to positive self-esteem in students. New strategies should also concentrate on improving relationships with parents and promote their engagement with the school.

DAY TWO - MARCH 16, 2010

SESSION D - GOVERNANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY INNOVATIONS

Session D featured presentations by Borgerson, Ottmann, and Bernard. Each speaker shared their experience and knowledge about educational governance and service delivery innovations. According to Borgerson, policy-makers and practitioners must proceed cautiously, because in our haste to address the achievement gap identified by educational indicators, we have to be careful not to create other gaps. For instance for schools to improve numeracy and literacy is of paramount importance, but not if this results in losing arts education. In speaking of retention, Borgerson explained that most of his former students valued the drama and sports programs they participated in. According to Mr. Borgerson, Aboriginal students need opportunities to read and write and do math, but they also need access to meaningful extra-curricular and co-curricular programs. Hence, a key implication for service delivery is to ensure that arts education, cultural education, and spiritual education are protected as integral and beneficial components in all educational systems.

Ottmann underscored the need for strong partnerships with students and community and argued that in order to achieve valid partnerships decision-making approaches need to move from authoritarian to shared or democratic models. As she explained, the democratic partnership model is best suited to making positive changes with educational practices. Flexible and strong leadership and creating a sense of urgency are also required if improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal children are to have a chance.

Executive Director Bernard shared the inspiring story of the Mi'kmaw and the educational benefits afforded to students who learned to speak the Mi'kmaw language. Bernard reported the Mi'kmaw language revival commenced with an immersion program for K-3 students. Early research findings identified that the students in the immersion program who spoke Mi'kmaw language performed at par or above when compared to students who were not speakers of the Mi'kmaw language. The finding demonstrated that the ability to speak an Aboriginal language was a positive contributor to school improvement especially when curricula included language and culture programs delivered by Aboriginal teachers who could also speak an Aboriginal language.

SESSION E - TOWARDS SEAMLESS TRANSITION IN K TO 12 EDUCATION ON- AND OFF-RESERVE

The Session E presentations focused on accounts of best practices with respect to seamless transitions in K-12 education for students on- and off-reserve. Sutherland, Schellenberg and Eyahpaise, de Vlieger, and Pinay stressed that the opportunity for students to learn about their culture, to be taught by Aboriginal educators, and to share cultural experiences with elders are necessary preconditions for positive educational experiences and outcomes.

Principal Sutherland observed that seamless transitions in K-12 education required

“thinking outside of the box,” and at Sakewew High School in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, thinking outside of the box resulted in the ongoing development of new ways to engage and retain students. Sutherland explained that part of this mandate for Sakewew High School was to enable First Nations students to further develop pride, self-esteem, and self-confidence by learning more about their Aboriginal culture and heritage.

On a similar note, Schellenberg and Eyahpaise stated that all people in the school need to have expertise in and understanding of traditional dancing, singing, and ceremonies so the children can learn and bring these cultural traditions forward. According to Eyahpaise, sustaining cultural traditions is essential to students’ success.

Matt de Vlieger identified the Education Partnership Program (EPP) as an instrument that supports seamless transitions between K-12 education, post-secondary education, and employment. For example, Aboriginal educators and Elders have historical, language, and cultural knowledge and expertise to share, and “by working together, we have better opportunities to meet students needs.” De Vlieger observed that shared interests, compelling needs, and the will to succeed are powerful influences for improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal learners, and now is the time to harness these influences in order to develop and implement best practices - including EPPs - that enhance positive educational outcomes and seamless transitions for Aboriginal students

Mr. Pinay, Director of Education Yorkton Tribal Council, concluded the session. He shared the story of his own educational journey and the factors that contributed to seamless transitions through the K-12 system, post-secondary education and employment. Mr. Pinay related the success in life and in education is connected to “all learners having the academic component, but needing people who are supporting, approving and encouraging.”

SESSION F - PUBLICLY REGULATED EDUCATION SYSTEMS: A ROLE IN RECONCILIATION

The last session of the Colloquium concentrated on the role of education in reconciliation with Aboriginal people. Miller, Friedel and Horsman agreed that educating children about treaties - which we are all part of - provides an effective tool for continuing to move reconciliation forward. In this context, Dr. Miller argued that we are all treaty people, and therefore treaty education is an important step in restoring the original treaty partnerships.

Dr. Tracy Friedel spoke about an invisible hierarchy of racism in which Aboriginal people are found to receive the most incidences of intense and frequent racism. Frustration, self doubt, and isolation are typical emotional responses that may result in Aboriginal students leaving school early. Myths, stereotypes, and history that are not taught enable micro-aggression to persist. Therefore to ensure seamless transitions in K-12 systems and beyond, racist practices that racialize identity and stand in the way of reconciliation must be eliminated.

According to Ken Horsman there is little doubt that racism is the fundamental challenge to relevant and successful Aboriginal education programming and reconciliation. In the matter of best practices, Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education made Treaty education compulsory, so the OTC's Treaty Education curricula were not only timely and effective, but have also been found to support reconciliation. Teaching Treaties promotes harmony and understanding as antidotes to racism and as Horsman reported, education has a major role in reconciliation, and "this is where Treaty education comes in because if you have relationships with kids in schools you begin the reconciliation process."

DAY TWO TABLE TOPIC DISCUSSIONS

Participants in Day Two small groups recognized that in the area of innovative curricular practices that support Aboriginal students, there are numerous positive examples to think about. Mandatory Treaty education in Saskatchewan is regarded as a positive innovative practice with considerable potential in support of improving Aboriginal student educational outcomes.

Table topic participants also recognized professional learning communities (PLCs) as another positive step forward. PLCs operating within schools generally meet once a month and enable staff to discuss what's working and what's not working with students' learning. Following analysis of what is working, the educational stakeholders explore appropriate curriculum and/or instructional changes.

Participants stressed the importance of the *Inspiring Success* document in Saskatchewan in particular as a driver of curriculum change in the province. Additional positive practices included providing anti-racist education for teachers, and enabling teachers more exposure to developing cultural awareness, and enhancing cultural understanding and competence in both teacher candidates' pre-service program and teachers in-service programs.

With regard to challenges, Day Two Table topic participants were in agreement that as with most sectors in society, no two school systems operate exactly the same as one another. The same is true in how school divisions approach curriculum change; the story of curriculum change in Saskatchewan is highlighted by diversity as each school system implements curriculum differently, which may present challenges to sustaining province-wide momentum for education change geared to enhancing educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After deliberation and discussion of the positives and the challenges, participants in the Day Two small group sessions generated an extensive list of solutions reflecting innovative school services and seamless transitions. Participants agreed that in order to prepare teachers for these challenging tasks, they must be provided with the necessary resources and training. In this way, it is crucial that innovative solutions include elders, teachers, students, administrators, school divisions, governments, and community in the

change process. Furthermore, to enable focusing on the students' best interests participants suggested that policy makers and educators should reframe communities as whole communities rather than framing communities in terms of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal segments.

Policy-makers and educators were encouraged to continue pushing forward and continue improving upon practices that are working. Pushing forward also included borrowing lessons learned from other successful programs such as Aboriginal teacher training and recruitment, culturally relevant curriculum, Aboriginal language learning, and/or Treaty education. From the point of view of Colloquium participants, a most important recommendation is that communication and information sharing must stay open, and to this end participants voluntarily created an email network.

Policy-makers and educators should also ensure that educational programs accommodate students rather than expecting students to accommodate to the system. Band schools and provincial schools should work more closely together to eliminate gaps in programming and ensure curricular consistency for transient students. The private sector should be encouraged to get more involved in the schools as this is a great way to recruit employees for our future workforce. Importantly, alternative programs for students who have problems with the regular curriculum should be initiated and could include training for a specific job i.e., trade certificates.

IN CLOSING

Elder Sutherland compared the picture presented in the data to "the aerial view" of Aboriginal education and remarked to participants that "what you need is the picture from below - it is not just about listening, but more about doing." As negotiated in the Treaties, Canadian First Nation and Aboriginal people were promised an equal education system and according to Colloquium participants delivering on this promise is long overdue.

Study of Aboriginal students' educational outcomes highlights gaps in programming and according to Colloquium participants this conference is a call to action. Equipped with the knowledge and understanding of innovative practices, praxis is the next step for improving Aboriginal students' educational outcomes and now it is incumbent upon participants of this Colloquium to facilitate networking and participate on committees charged with planning and moving ideas generated at this conference into best practices in support of improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.