POLICY LEVERS FOR IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR OFF-RESERVE STUDENTS

By Helen Raham

About the Author

Helen Raham is an independent education policy consultant living in Kelowna, BC. From 1996 until her retirement in 2008, she held the position of Research Director of the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, where she was responsible for the development and management of numerous studies commissioned to inform K–12 policy and practice in Canada. Previous to this, Helen enjoyed a 29-year career as an educator in the British Columbia public school system. She has authored numerous education journal articles and consultancy reports, and served on various education committees at the provincial and national level. She maintains an active interest in education research and policy analysis, and much of her recent work has been focused on aboriginal education.

Contact information:

Tel. 250-860-7948
hraham@uniserve.com

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Framing the Policy Challenge

Aboriginal education has risen to the top of the national policy agenda. Educators and policymakers of all jurisdictions are united in their desire to identify policies and strategies to dramatically improve the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

At least three obstacles to rational policy development stand in the way of achieving this goal:

- The tangle of governance that plagues aboriginal education delivery and fragments efforts at reform.

- The absence of coherent data on how existing policies are working.

- The complexity of teaching and learning and the many variables that influence student success. When learning outcomes are the result of many inter-dependent factors associated with the delivery of schooling and the unique context each child brings to that educational experience, how then do we identify policies with the greatest potential for leveraging large-scale progress for the aboriginal cohort?

In recognition of the complexity of this challenge, this paper takes a systematic and multi-dimensional approach to policymaking.

We begin by briefly summarizing the research in eight domains that strongly influence educational outcomes for aboriginal learners. This research is based on both Canadian and international evidence on delivery models and approaches being used, performance and success rates, implementation issues, and promising practices. We then discuss the implications for policy in each of these domains, identifying directions for scaling up what works to leverage greater progress for more students. In keeping with the theme of this forum, these policies are oriented toward improving outcomes for off-reserve aboriginal students, although many are equally relevant to the band-operated sector. The final section of the paper suggests a set of ten policy priorities with the collective power to close the achievement gap.

This paper draws heavily from an earlier comprehensive review and analysis of the research on best practices in aboriginal education (Raham, 2009) undertaken for the Office of the Federal Interlocutor. That review included over 300 sources of pertinent and current research literature describing what is known about best practice in on and off-reserve schooling in Canada and three international systems with significant indigenous populations - New Zealand, Australia and Norway. Due to space restrictions in this present paper, key findings in each area are summarized without citing sources[1], although the reference section includes the most important of these.

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[1] For supporting evidence and sources, readers are referred to the original paper: Raham (March 2009) *Best Practices in Aboriginal Education: A Literature Review and Analysis for Policy Directions.*

Connecting Policy to Research in Strategic Areas

This section presents the central findings on eight important areas that influence aboriginal learning outcomes, followed by a brief discussion of policies for scaling up promising practices.

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

Literacy skills are the foundation of academic success and a strong predictor of high school graduation. The teaching of reading is of critical importance for aboriginal learners, many of whom enter school with delayed language development and encounter a language of instruction that is not their mother tongue. The research indicates that:

- The language of instruction plays a critical role in the development of reading proficiency.
- Children's literacy growth is more rapid if they are taught to read in their first language, and those who receive their early instruction through a second language commonly experience a delay in both languages.
- With skilled instruction, aboriginal children can learn to read well in either their first or second language.
- Bilingual/immersion instruction advantages indigenous students if done well. The evidence suggests that transfer to instruction in the second language should be delayed for 5-6 years.
- Teacher knowledge of when and how to apply appropriate strategies is a critical factor in reading acquisition, particularly for at-risk students. Additional literacy training for teachers has a positive impact on the reading achievement of their students. Teachers in bilingual programs need further specific training in language acquisition and transfer.
- Reading must be expertly taught across the curriculum at all grade levels. Teachers of struggling adolescent readers must be able to utilize specific intervention strategies.
- Successful literacy programs also encompass high-quality pre-school programming.

<u>Implications for Policy</u>

Policies establishing effective literacy/language programs for aboriginal learners should be a priority. They determine the level of proficiency students bring to the core tasks of processing, organizing and communicating information which are integral to their achievement across the curriculum, and directly affect their motivation, cultural identity, and the relevancy of learning.

Because research on aboriginal literacy and language learning in Canada is scattered and small-scale, schools, districts or systems often adopt literacy programs without rigorous research on their efficacy for aboriginal learners. More resources must be dedicated to documenting the effects of various instructional approaches in both mainstream and immersion programs on aboriginal learners' literacy and cognitive development.

Equipping all teachers of FNMI children with a repertoire of effective literacy strategies and interventions will require significant investments in teacher training and professional development. School-based literacy coaches can play a potent role in staff development, suggesting districts should ensure their presence in every school.

Aboriginal language immersion programming poses another set of policy options. Which languages are most viable and should receive the long-term investments required to deliver quality programs? What policy actions are needed to develop an adequate supply of highly proficient language teachers, the production of related high quality and engaging language materials for instruction across the curriculum, and the development of reliable standardized assessments and diagnostic tools in these languages? The delayed acquisition of English among learners in aboriginal language immersion programs suggests a mechanism will be needed for calibrating their results with mainstream large-scale literacy assessments during Years 1-6. As success in immersion programs is also closely linked to early childhood programs, this implies the necessity of an integrated language strategy Pre-K to 6.

Interventions on the part of senior levels of government are needed to create the conditions for success in aboriginal language immersion programs. This might take the form of language institutes such as those established in New Zealand and Norway to coordinate the production and dissemination of language materials, assessment tools, conduct longitudinal research and cost-benefit analyses of immersion programs, and provide training and establish certification standards for language teachers.

CULTURALLY-BASED CURRICULUM

The inclusion of culturally relevant materials in the curriculum is widely accepted as beneficial for aboriginal learners. The research evidence suggests that:

- Introducing native language and culture into the curriculum has positive effects on their attendance, behaviour and dropout rates.
- Culturally-adapted programs are often more practical (hand-on), place-based, and vocationally oriented.
- The use of pedagogical approaches considered compatible with traditional aboriginal learning styles can be beneficial, but must be consistent with rigorous learning objectives, high expectations and quality instruction.
- Regardless of learning styles and preferences, good pedagogy is critical to the achievement of aboriginal learners.
- The degree of culturally based instruction should be determined in consultation with the school community and involve aboriginal parents, elders and community in its delivery.

Implications for Policy

In recognition that FNMI learners are more successful when their culture is reflected in the curriculum, such curricula is increasing being developed at the provincial/territorial level. However, the resources required by the school or district are often geographically specific,

and in general, only larger school districts possess the dedicated capacity and in-house expertise for the development of high-quality local resources to support language and culture instruction.

As a consequence, governments must play a larger role in providing support to smaller education authorities in the development and evaluation of resources for cultural and language programming. This might be facilitated through partnerships with various regional FNMI organizations and universities. Principles of community design and ownership and quality assurance will be fundamental to these arrangements.

Training opportunities including local orientation courses for new teachers and credentialing policies must be put in place to ensure that teachers of aboriginal students are culturally proficient and well-versed in effective teaching approaches such as experiential learning, hands-on and land-based activities, cooperative learning, etc.

ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

The high school graduation rate for the aboriginal cohort lags 28% below the national average. It is essential to learn the interventions and supports required to keep aboriginal youth engaged in school and planning for higher education/training and successful entry into the workforce. The research suggests that:

- Dropping out is preventable. It is most often related to *in-school* conditions: lack of supportive relationships, a widening knowledge and skills gap, weak instructional and support services, perceived irrelevance of the curriculum, poor attendance and behaviour; and low parental involvement.
- There is a high mobility rate amongst urban aboriginal students. For vulnerable youth, the odds of dropping out increase 30% each time they change schools.
- School connectedness is a significant factor in decisions to stay in school. Retention rates improve when schools promote students' sense of belonging through a visible aboriginal presence in the school and curriculum, positive relationships, opportunities to express their cultural identity, and family involvement in the life of the school.
- Attendance is strongly associated with school completion. Schools must be pro-active in addressing attendance, tardiness and behaviour issues.
- In-school supports such as monitoring attendance, easing transitions, introducing native language and culture, personalized learning, homework and tutoring clubs, buddy systems, the presence of aboriginal staff, elder programs, and home outreach have positive effects on attendance, behaviour, motivation, academic progress, and retention.
- Access to technology, vocational, apprenticeship, mentoring and counselling programs, extra curricular and after-school programs keep at-risk youth in school.
- Nationally coordinated approaches in Australia's *Whole of School Intervention Strategy* and New Zealand's *Student Engagement Initiative* significantly increased their aboriginal graduation rates.

Implications for Policy

In-school supports known to have beneficial effects on student engagement and retention should be adopted as common practice in all schools. Schools should gather systematic feedback from drop-outs (exit interviews) and collect longitudinal data to inform their prevention strategies. The coordinated approach used by Australia and New Zealand requiring schools to develop and monitor interventions and supports should be considered.

Dropouts related to high mobility have become a significant issue which urban school districts must address with comprehensive strategies, including requiring school principals to establish effective interventions for students in transition.

Policies must also be developed to address the needs of small isolated communities where high aboriginal dropout rates are common. Where excessive travel distance to the nearest secondary school is a factor, services must be delivered in alternate ways. When the provision of school-based apprenticeship and career training programs is problematic due to the limited economic base and number of local employers, schools need support and training to work with aboriginal and other community leaders to develop stay-in school strategies to fit the local context.

HOME AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Success rates for aboriginal learners improve when parents and community are involved in the education of their children. International research indicates that:

- Partnership efforts should focus on increasing student engagement and achievement.
- The role of aboriginal parents and community should be established in formal decision-making structures (such as representation on school boards and school councils) as well as providing informal avenues of participation.
- Determining the educational provisions in each community to maximize opportunities and outcomes for FNMI learners needs to be achieved through respectful dialogue, sharing of information and participation in establishing the goals and strategies.
- Efforts to build capacity amongst aboriginal families and community leadership to support learning are likely to pay off over time.

Implications for Policy

Policy development should be guided by the principle that parents and community have a key role to play in the education of their children, and that improvements to student performance are more likely to be realized when Aboriginal stakeholders are incorporated into decision-making structures.

Mobilizing leadership in the Aboriginal community for educational progress will help to promote ownership of and long-term commitment to change.

Government support is required to sustain local capacity-building initiatives and scale up their impact. In this regard, BC's Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements represent a model worth replicating. These formal agreements require consultations between schools and aboriginal community leaders to establish targets for improvement and the resources and strategies for meeting these goals.

TEACHER SUPPLY, QUALITY AND SUPPORT

Highly-qualified teachers are essential to closing the aboriginal learning gap. Evidence related to teacher supply and proficiency suggests that:

- The recruitment and training of teachers for aboriginal classrooms has been identified as a priority in Canada. There is an acute shortage of qualified teachers of native languages.
- Teachers of aboriginal learners must be warm and caring, hold high expectations, and possess a wide repertoire of instructional strategies and explicit knowledge of culturally appropriate approaches.
- There has been little evaluation of the efficacy of First Nations *or* mainstream teacher education programs in meeting the needs of schools with FNMI learners.
- Mentoring programs have proven effective in assisting new teachers acquire good practices and in reducing teacher turn-over/attrition. Few comprehensive programs are in place.
- The most effective form of teacher professional development focuses on deepening teacher pedagogical skills and content knowledge through weekly collaborative study in school-based teams, often led by literacy and numeracy specialists. Sustained investment in this form of job-embedded learning significantly improves teacher practice and student achievement, and demonstrates larger effects in lower-performing schools.

Implications for Policy

Steps taken on other policy fronts will not yield results for aboriginal student achievement without concomitant attention to pedagogy. The need for a highly skilled cadre of teachers for FNMI learners has implications for teacher training institutions, provincial/territorial governments and local education authorities.

Governments must make a concerted effort to hold training institutions accountable for what novice teachers know and can do. Local education authorities must provide teachers with effective induction and ongoing job-embedded professional development and coaching throughout their teaching career. This will involve scheduling blocks of collaborative teacher leaning time into the school day and year.

Both governments and school districts must find new solutions to address teacher recruitment and retention in schools serving aboriginal learners. Increasing the supply of skilled aboriginal educators requires long-range planning, target setting and annual progress reports. Initial preparation and credentialling programs should be rigorously evaluated, and

the best models replicated widely. The creation of an Arctic university could be an important source of skilled native educators for northern schools. Culturally proficient educators should be recognized with a specialist degree/certification and additional salary.

Policies to support mentoring programs for new teachers as well as programs to train and credential mentors will pay long-term dividends in student achievement. In medium and large schools serving aboriginal learners, a full-time resident master teacher to mentor new staff would serve this purpose. The mentoring of teachers in small schools in rural and remote areas is more problematic, and might best be addressed through itinerant pedagogical supervisors or stipulating an "internship" period prior to assuming full-time responsibility. Local education authorities should dedicate staff at the district level with the expertise to coordinate and support and evaluate services for FNMI students.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Schools serving FNMI students need exceptionally skilled and committed principals. In addition to other responsibilities, these principals must be able to create a safe and welcoming climate for aboriginal learners, establish high expectations for their success, provide additional programming and services to support their needs, incorporate their culture and language into the curriculum and life of the school, recruit and develop a staff which is both culturally and pedagogically proficient, and build positive parent/community relationships to facilitate their engagement in the education process. The research on aboriginal school leadership suggests that:

- The quality of leadership is the most important factor in a school's effectiveness in creating progress for its students.
- There is a shortage of highly qualified principals of aboriginal heritage.
- Stability of school leadership is critical for building trusting relationships with families.
- School leadership is often shared among a leadership team. Administrative structures should be designed to best meet the needs of the school.
- Little specialized training and professional development support is available for principals in schools serving high proportions of FNMI students.
- Principals of community schools require more administrative support and specialized training in effectively coordinating the services of multiple agencies in the school.

Implications for Policy

These findings suggest that investing in policies to strengthen school leadership would improve aboriginal student performance. Presently, the vast majority of principals in schools with high aboriginal populations receive their training and administrative experience in the mainstream system. The creation of regional FNMI school leadership academies which confer specialized training and credentialing recognized for salary purposes could address the need for a cadre of principals with the skills and knowledge required for this position.

These leadership academies could also play an important role in the provision of ongoing professional development services for principals responsible for aboriginal education. The establishment of a formal network such as Australia's *Dare to Lead* program which provides national and regional support for such principals should also be considered for its contribution to the leadership practices of Canadian school administrators.

SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

The research related to effective programming suggests that:

- Aboriginal learners and their families benefit from more seamless programming from early childhood to post-secondary.
- School programming is most effective when it is holistic, offers a broad range of supports for students and their families, and shares community resources to achieve this goal.
- Programming must be flexible and personalized for particular learners' needs. Approaches that extend teaching and learning time through such mechanisms as double blocks of literacy and math, before and after-school programs, homework clubs and summer reading academies are known to be beneficial.
- Programming is enhanced by the contributions of aboriginal educators, support workers, community connectors, and elders.
- Community (full-service) schools have been shown to reduce risky behaviours in at-risk youth and have positive effects on attendance, achievement and family involvement. This model requires fundamental changes in school organization and program delivery in order to successfully integrate multiple agency services to support learners and their families.
- The delivery of high-quality programs and services in remote communities and schools with low enrolments remains a challenge.

Implications for Policy

Policies that enable broader programming in schools serving FNMI learners will positively impact their educational success. Efforts should first be directed to establishing targetted funding to support delivery of additional educational, social and recreational services including before and after school and summer programs based on identified needs. Mechanisms are also needed to increase the supply of credentialed aboriginal support staff and provide administrative support and training for principals who coordinate these extended programs and services. Schools in isolated areas require additional resources to compensate for the absence of external support services in small communities.

The potential of the community school model to meet aboriginal children's needs in a more holistic manner should not be ignored. Research suggests there is value in extending the traditional role of the school to coordinate and integrate various child and family services, bringing the wider community into closer contact with the school, and building capacity and social capital. Policies to support effective community schools will provide for additional staff training, empowerment, resourcing, technical support, research to document start-up

issues and best practices, and evaluation of outcomes. High-functioning community schools could be identified as demonstration models for extended programming.

In light of the positive effects of early intervention, federal/provincial commitments to early learning and development should be accelerated by delivering these through the school in cooperation with existing and new providers. Provinces/territories which do not fund full-day kindergarten for aboriginal children should consider doing so.

Funding provisions also matter. Short-term funding fosters a piecemeal approach to school programming, impedes long-term strategic planning and monitoring of impacts, and limits system utilization of lessons learned from these initiatives. As results cannot be accurately assessed in the short-term, multi-year funding with built-in monitoring and reporting would be a more effective policy approach.

Finally, school districts and governments should invest in independent evaluation of innovative school programs. Rigorous independent research can provide objective data to determine if the intervention is making a difference, and inform program planning and implementation decisions.

ASSESSMENT, MONITORING AND REPORTING

Improving schools and systems gather performance information and use it regularly to assist in gap analysis, improvement planning, and resource allocation. Among other things, we know that:

- Effective use of classroom assessment improves learning, and the effects are greatest for lower-achieving students.
- Teacher proficiency in using assessment to guide instructional decisions is a key factor in the progress of FNMI students.
- Few reliable assessments for aboriginal languages and culture have been developed.
- Schools benefit from coaching in the use of data for school-wide improvement planning.
- Regular internal and external review of programs at all levels of the system is an essential element of improving educational services to FNMI students.

Implications for Policy

The importance of using multiple forms of assessment at the school level to guide instructional and programming decisions suggests that school boards and provincial governments should maintain annual assessment programs and foster school-level expertise in data-based planning. Schools boards should provide dedicated resources to the development of teacher expertise in using formative assessment.

Collaborative efforts must be devoted to developing more holistic and culturally relevant measures of aboriginal learning as well as aboriginal language assessments and diagnostic tools and their calibration with English/French assessments.

Governments have a critical role to play in facilitating the disaggregation and interpretation of aboriginal cohort data. This depends upon an information system which permits the identification and longitudinal tracking of aboriginal learners. While most jurisdictions are working towards this goal it is a slow and non-standardized process, relying on voluntary self-identification, the politics of which requires establishing high levels of trust and an appreciation of mutual value in the process. A reassessment of identification strategies may be required to expedite the urgently needed development and usage of a national system for monitoring the progress of the aboriginal cohort and the impact of interventions in play.

Continued work is necessary towards establishing a pan-Canadian set of indicators for reporting Aboriginal achievement K-12 across delivery sectors. Initial indicators could include:

- The percentage of students *meeting expectations* in literacy and numeracy at key grade levels, measured through provincial assessments.
- The percentage of students entering school ready to learn, as measured through screening tests administered on entry to Kindergarten.
- Attendance rates.
- High school graduation rates (definitions across jurisdictions must be standardized and refined to differentiate between on time and delayed completion).

To these could be added other useful indicators such as parent and student satisfaction rates, and the percentage of students who are proficient in an aboriginal language or taking senior level math and science courses. Australia and New Zealand gather additional indicators, such as the percentages of aboriginal teachers, administrators and support staff.

All levels of government must collaboratively develop coherent policies and systems for data management and reporting on the agreed set of indicators. Along with these reports should be a plan by each jurisdiction for addressing identified weaknesses.

Accountability systems are designed to focus efforts and resources on desired results. In general, education accountability systems tend to be weak, with few consequences or interventions for chronic failure and limited recognition or celebration of excellence. When data are reported annually and longitudinal patterns of performance become visible, internal accountability tends to heighten. The best models within Canada articulate responsibilities for improvement planning based on results data at each level and require public reporting. They are also aligned, in that school planning feeds into district level action plans, the results of which are reviewed by the province. BC is unique in its use of Aboriginal enhancement agreements specifying outcomes for aboriginal education and the resources and strategies for meeting these goals as a part of the district's accountability contract with the government.

Supports for school improvement processes are becoming more common and this should be expanded. While best practice urges data-driven planning which aligns resources, instruction, professional development and programming to support identified goals, many schools are unfamiliar with these processes or implement them unevenly. Technical support and release time for school improvement planning focused on site-specific learning challenges are an effective long-term investment in continuous improvement and strengthened internal accountability for results.

High-Impact Policy Levers

Given the urgency of improving outcomes for Canada's aboriginal learners and the current readiness among educators and policymakers to act, it is important to invest in policies with the greatest potential for leveraging large-scale progress. Given all the initiatives, programs and interventions available and the evidence on best practice, the challenge for Canadian policymakers is to accelerate the rate of progress as broadly as possible within the limitations of existing constitutional and legislative frameworks. No single policy bullet can accomplish this goal.

The following multi-pronged set of high-impact policies drawn from the international research on reducing minority achievement gaps and grounded in best practice findings should take priority for their strategic importance in strengthening the success of aboriginal learners across the system.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Make literacy proficiency a priority for all aboriginal learners as the foundation of their academic success.

2. Invest in high-quality aboriginal language immersion programs supported through the establishment of regional language institutes which will provide the necessary training, teaching resources, assessments and rigorous evaluation of program effects.

3. Require all schools and districts to develop comprehensive intervention strategies and supports to keep at-risk youth engaged in school, and to report annually on attendance and other indicators related to the success of these interventions.

4. Increase the relevancy of learning for aboriginal students through investing in the training of culturally proficient teachers and partnerships with aboriginal organizations to develop high-quality local cultural curricula and learning activities with rigorous learning objectives.

5. Take all necessary steps to develop a sufficient supply of highly skilled teachers for aboriginal classrooms and provide systematic and universal support for their professional growth through mentoring programs and effective forms of professional development.

6. Ensure that schools enrolling aboriginal students benefit from strong leadership by establishing regional FNMI Leadership Academies to provide the specialized training and professional development required by principals assigned to these schools.

7. Build opportunities and capacity for aboriginal families and communities to actively support their children's learning, participate in schools, play a role in educational planning, and forge multi-agency partnerships to deliver services needed to support

student success. Productively managed, such collaborations harness additional resources and expertise to solve local barriers to progress.

8. Invest in the development and study of community schools. Make schools the hub of inter-agency services to support vulnerable learners and families. This includes the provision of quality early years programming for all aboriginal children.

9. Strengthen the accountability and capacity of school boards to govern for continuous improvement in the educational achievement of the aboriginal cohort. Boards should expand their assessment and reporting on key goals for aboriginal learning across the district, and provide technical assistance to low-performing schools in reviewing data, goal-setting, instructional planning, professional development, and programming to prompt improvements.

10. Establish a pan-Canadian data collection system for a common set of performance indicators used to provide an annual report on aboriginal education at the national level with jurisdictional breakdowns to be used for improvement planning purposes. FNMI leaders must participate in the design, collection, interpretation, and access to this data.

It is important to recognize the inter-relatedness of these strategies and the need to implement them in tandem. Action on some policy fronts while ignoring others will not yield the desired results.

Evaluating the Results

This multi-dimensional policy framework should be accompanied by the establishment of a comprehensive coordinated research and evaluation program with national reach. The role of such a program will be to systematically monitor the implementation and impact of these policies to inform future decisions. For details on the nature of this research and evaluation program and the value-added it offers, readers are referred to the original paper.

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