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Policy Research Paper | September 2014

## “Picking Up the Pieces”:

A Community-School-Based Approach  
to First Nations Education Renewal

By Paul W. Bennett and Jonathan Anuik



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## About the Authors

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Paul W. Bennett, EdD (OISE/Toronto), is Founding Director of Schoolhouse Consulting and Adjunct Professor of Education at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dr. Bennett is a widely recognized leader in Canadian education. From 1997 until 2009, he served as headmaster of two of Canada's leading independent co-educational day schools, Halifax Grammar School and Lower Canada College. He has written or co-authored eight books, including *Canada: A North American Nation* (1998 and 1995); *Vanishing Schools, Threatened Communities; The Contested Schoolhouse in Maritime Canada, 1850–2010* (2011); and *The Last Stand: Schools, Communities and the Future of Rural Nova Scotia* (2013).

Today Dr. Bennett is primarily an education policy analyst and commentator, producing regular columns for the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, magazine articles for *Progress Magazine*, and a variety of publications. His most recent academic articles have appeared in *Acadiensis*, *Historical Studies in Education*, and the *Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society Journal*. Over

the past five years, he has produced major policy papers for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, the Society for Quality Education, and the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools Association. He specializes in K-12 educational policy, education history, educational standards, school governance, teacher education, and special education services. He is currently chair of the Board of Halifax Public Libraries and a board member at Churchill Academy, a Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, school for students with severe learning disabilities. ●



## Jonathan Anuik

Jonathan Anuik, PhD (University of Saskatchewan), is Assistant Professor, Theoretical, Cultural and International Studies in Education in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. In addition to his PhD, he holds an Hons. BA in History from the University of Saskatchewan, and an MA in History from Memorial University of Newfoundland. Over the past decade, Dr. Anuik has produced dozens of academic papers and book reviews on every aspect of First Nations and Métis education. Working under Dr. Marie Battiste, he emerged as a leading scholar instrumental in researching the "Learning Spirit" and developing the Holistic Lifelong Learning Framework for Aboriginal education.

Dr. Anuik is a leading Métis scholar. His PhD thesis won the Canadian History of Education Association Founders' Prize in 2010, and his first book, *First in Canada: An Aboriginal Book of Days* (Regina, 2010) captured a 2011 Saskatchewan Book Award. His conference papers, academic articles, and book reviews appear regularly in the *Prairie Forum*, *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, and the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. Throughout 2010 and 2011, he presented a series of professional conference papers on "Nourishing the Learning Spirit" all over the Americas in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and San Luis Posti, Mexico.

Since 2002, Dr. Anuik has taught educational history and First Nations and Métis education courses at Memorial University of Newfoundland, the University of Saskatchewan, Lakehead University, and the University of Alberta. He is now writing a second book on *Missions, Churches, Modern Schools, Métis Families, and Communities in Saskatchewan, from 1866 to 1980*. ●

## Executive Summary

First Nations Education has been the focus of a great deal of controversy and discussion in recent months. The latest proposed “solution” put forth in Bill C-33 was built around an enhanced federal financial contribution. The bill was, however, ultimately rejected by many first nations and subsequently abandoned by the government. . In “Picking up the Pieces,” Paul Bennett and Jonathan Anuk demonstrate why the education reform proposed in Bill C-33 missed the mark. More money in the form of increased capital funding might have brought modest gains to on-reserve schooling, but replacing one bureaucracy with another rarely changes the state of education or improves the quality of student learning at the school or community level.

A community school-based approach, respectful of what Indigenous scholars such as Marie Battiste term the “learning spirit,” that supports a real shift in the locus of decision-making, stands a far better chance of making a difference and improving the achievement of all Indigenous children and youth.

Education governance is a contested democratic terrain. Provincial district school boards across Canada are currently facing

a public crisis of confidence, and the proposed Act ran the risk of perpetuating that problem by extending it into First Nations communities. Publicly elected trustees and school-level administrators now voice serious concerns, most recently in a 2013 Canadian School Boards Association study, that “centralization” is slowly choking-off local-decision-making and

rendering elected boards powerless. Simply enabling the establishment of school boards may well reinforce that centralization impulse.

First Nations control over education now involves a transformation enabling First Nations to develop educational programs and practices rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and consistent with Aboriginal ways of learning, exemplified recently in what First Nations call Holistic Lifelong Learning Models. However, instead of accepting the centrality of First Nations knowledge systems as an essential pre-condition to discussion, Ottawa focused on advancing a plan more narrowly focused on improving employability skills, reflected in student achievement and graduation rates.

The declaration between the federal government and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) on February 2014 speaks of “mutual accountability” yet insisted upon a core curriculum that “meets or exceeds provincial standards,” requiring students to meet minimum attendance standards, teachers to be officially certified, and schools to award “widely-recognized”

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By 2026, the  
on reserve  
First Nation  
population of  
407,300 in 2000  
is expected to  
increase by 64%  
to 667,900.

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diplomas and certificates. Following the declaration, a small group of First Nations people, sparked by Blood First Nations activist Twila Eagle-Bear Singer, began wearing “blue dots” symbolizing the tradition of exclusion. Subsequently, First Nations leaders across Canada not party to the national agreement coalesced, forcing the AFNs Chief Shawn Atleo to resign and the rejection of Bill C-33.

With the federal bill broken into pieces, the authors propose an alternative model for First Nations schools that they term “Community School-Based Management” renewal. That approach embraces a mode of decision-making that has much in common with First Nations ways and practices, and most notably the “Talking Circle” tradition of the Mi’kmaq.

Pioneered in the Edmonton Public Schools in the 1980s and now adopted by the World Bank in its international education initiatives, the essential concept of “school-based management” would seem to be more in accord with the aspirations of First Nations for a greater measure of self-government in education.

The First Nations population is not only young but growing rapidly, creating a sense of urgency. Forty-two percent of the country’s registered Indian population is 19 years of age or younger as compared to 25% of the Canadian population as a whole. By 2026, the on-reserve First Nation population of 407,300 in 2000 is expected to increase by 64% to 667,900.

Educating First Nations children and youth is too important to be left solely to the federal officials who still tend to set the education agenda for AFN chiefs. We urge the Canadian government to invest in supporting and expanding community-

led initiatives involving teachers, parents, and families outside of the existing span of administrative control to achieve longer-term goals of improved literacy, academic achievement, and life chances.

Community school-based renewal rather than bureaucratic reform will build sustainable school communities, unlock the First Nations “learning spirit,” and truly engage children and youth on and off First Nations reserves. ●





**1.0 Introduction**  
**First Nations Education and the**  
**Limits of Bureaucratic Reform**

## ■ 1.0 Introduction

### First Nations Education and the Limits of Bureaucratic Reform

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*We have no reason to accept [the First Nations education] announcement at face value....We remain focused on protecting our children's inherent rights to fair and equitable education.*

— Anishinabek Nation Grand Council Chief Patrick Wadaseh Madahbee

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On February 7, 2014, AFN National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo shook hands with Prime Minister Stephen Harper on a major financial deal aimed at salvaging First Nations education reform. At Kainai High School in Treaty No. 7 territory near Cardston, Alberta, the two leaders announced a new funding plan, clearing the way for what was proclaimed as “a new approach to First Nations control of First Nations education” (AFN 2014a; Graveland 2014; Harper 2014; Taber 2014). Although Atleo claimed that the pact met the conditions set out by the AFN in Resolution 14-2013 (AFN 2013), there was no written agreement, and even the AFN chiefs agreed that money alone would not fix Canada’s neglected on-reserve schools. In early May 2014, Atleo was toppled and the federal plan, embodied in Bill C-33, shattered into pieces (Galloway, 2014c). After the collapse of the agreement, it is time to look more critically at the proposed structural education reform and at whether it was the best way to build sustainable First Nations school communities, unlock the “learning spirit,” and truly engage children and youth on and off reserve.



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*Without a comprehensive understanding of Aboriginal people's perspective on learning and a culturally appropriate framework for measuring it, the diverse aspirations and needs of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis across Canada will continue to be misinterpreted and misunderstood.*

— Canadian Council on Learning

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The public show of consensus at Kainai High School proved short lived. Within the month, a small group of First Nations people, sparked by Blood First Nation activist Twila Eagle-Bear Singer, began to protest the deal by wearing “blue dots” symbolizing exclusion (Sherritt 2014). First Nations leaders from northern Ontario, the Kahnawake First Nation near Montreal, Alberta, and elsewhere who were not party to the national agreement expressed caution or disappointment about the pact or rejected it outright (Carpenter 2014; French 2014; CBC News Montreal 2014; Galloway 2014). Judith Rae, of the Toronto law firm Olthuis Kleer Townshend and a legal advisor to Ontario First Nations, offered a detailed critique (Rae 2014) of the new funding pact focusing on the big number — the promised \$1.9 billion in education funding over three years — and pointing out that this was “less money” than was needed based on a May 2009 Parliamentary Budget Officer's report (Canada 2009, 12–13). More important, First Nations news services such as *Wawatay News* supported Rae's contention that “passing off responsibility without adequate resources is a set up for failure.” (Carpenter 2014; INM Collective 2014). It was becoming clear that, although “a bit more funding” would help, it would be insufficient to revitalize First Nations education.

The federal government's initial attempt at introducing a *First Nations Education Act* in October 2013 capsized after encountering stiff First Nations resistance, particularly on the part of AFN chiefs. Federal authorities, guided by Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt, might have pulled that failed legislation out of the fire, but “sealing the deal” signalled a fresh start, rather than the culmination of First Nations education reform. The proposed law, Bill C-33, was renamed the *First Nations Control of First Nations*

Education Act, and Ottawa pledged \$1.25 billion over three years, beginning in fiscal year 2016/17, with an annual escalation of funding of 4.5 percent. An Enhanced Education Fund would provide \$160 million over four years starting in fiscal year 2015/16, and \$500 million would be invested over seven years in upgraded infrastructure (AFN 2014a, 2). Although Atleo and a coterie of AFN chiefs won financial concessions, the renamed act remains a statement of principles with an accompanying financial ledger and essentially an empty legislative shell awaiting further definition. More money might bring modest gains to on-reserve schooling, but it is unlikely to change actual circumstances at the school and community level. Replacing one bureaucracy with another rarely changes the state of schooling or improves the quality of student learning. A more community-school-based approach, respectful of the “learning spirit” and supporting a real shift in the locus of decision-making stands a far better chance of making a difference and improving the life chances of all Indigenous children and youth.

The proposed *First Nations Education Act*, first telegraphed in the 2012 federal budget, was yet another attempt to break the “gridlock” (Paquette and Fallon 2010) that has been the reality of First Nations education policy since the ill-fated White Paper of 1969. First Nations have been seeking greater local control over education, more parental involvement in educational decision-making affecting children, and more support for the promotion of Indigenous languages and culture ever since the release in 1972 of a National Indian Brotherhood policy paper, “Indian Control of Indian Education.” Some progress has been made: as the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Affairs noted in 2011, “parental responsibility and local control of on-reserve education is much more prevalent today” (Canada 2011a, 8).

Yet, the proposed First Nations Education Act was aborted because it attempted to establish a framework for an educational governance “system” without first settling the contentious funding issues. Moreover, judging by the February 7, 2014, declaration, the legislation’s second incarnation seems to contain another critical flaw in that it assumes that the creation of de facto First Nations school boards will raise educational standards and strengthen local democratic accountability (AFN 2014b).

In fact, attempting to improve the quality of First Nations education through governance reform means treading on contested democratic terrain. District school boards across Canada already face a public crisis of confidence, and publicly elected trustees and school-level administrators surveyed by the Canadian School Boards Association are now voicing serious concerns that “centralization” is slowly choking off local decision-making and rendering elected boards powerless (Galway et al. 2013, 1–3, 27–28). By enabling the establishment of school boards in First Nations communities, the proposed act would merely extend the problem to these areas. What is needed instead is the development of what we term “community-school-based management” in First Nations schools.

The reform of First Nations education should begin by focusing more on successes than on deficits. That means building upon promising initiatives such as the Mi`kmaw Kina`matnewey (MK), a Nova Scotian Mi`kmaw school authority founded in 1992, formally recognized by the federal and provincial governments in 1997, and originally consisting of nine Mi`kmaw First Nations. It is, what MK negotiator John Donnelly aptly describes as “an overnight success -- years in-the-making.” Today, the MK schools, currently operating in 12 of

the province's 13 Mi'kmaw communities, although small and enrol only 3,000 students, they are contributing to rising graduation rates on reserves in Atlantic Canada. Across the country, the proportion of on-reserve adults under age 25 with a high school diploma rose from 25 percent in 1996 to 30 in 2006, but Atlantic Canada, led by Nova Scotia, registered the highest rate of high school graduation, rising significantly from about 55 percent to 65 percent over that period (Canada 2012c, 24–25). Graduation rates in MK schools are also rising, although not as dramatically as reported because the official figures reflect only grade 12 completion rates (Fabian 2013; Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey 2013, 2–13). Nevertheless, such encouraging trends do raise the fundamental question: how can we capitalize on such advances and build First Nations-run community schools more effectively into the current education reform process?

Securing the support and consent of First Nations will mean meeting First Nations people halfway and including them fully in the process of reform. True First Nations control over education is now clearly understood by First Nations peoples themselves to mean a transformation that enables them to develop educational programs and practices rooted in Aboriginal culture and consistent with Aboriginal ways of learning (see Anuik 2013b; Anuik and Battiste 2008; Cannon 1994; Haig-Brown 1995). First Nations will not consider any educational policy acceptable unless it respects their commitment to “culture, traditions, historicity, worldviews, family and community.... that reflect an expression of self” (Absolon 2011, 84). In the case of British Columbia, the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) expects the new federal act at least to

match the commitment of the BC Tripartite Education Framework Agreement to provide “adequate and sustained funding” sufficient to support what it describes as a “comprehensive, integrated and responsive system” (FNESC 2013, 1–2).

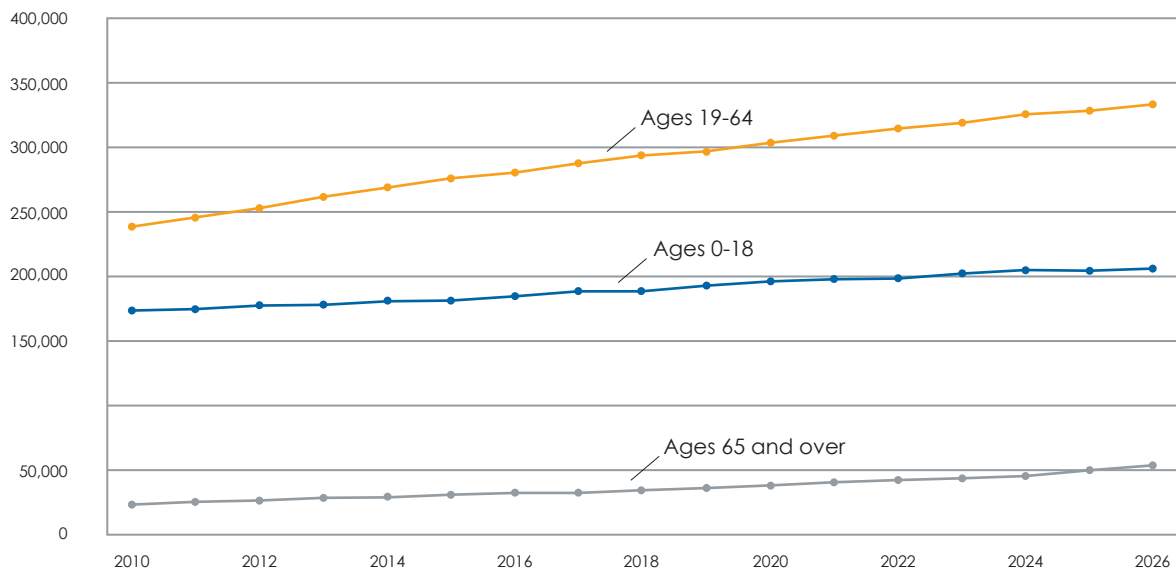
The principle of First Nations control of Aboriginal education was affirmed by the AFN in 1988 and again in 2010, and was a centrepiece of the report of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada 1996). For First Nations, such control means core principles that recognize “a suitable philosophy of education based upon Indian values,” which are the means to enable a child to learn “the forces which shape” him or her; “the history of his (or her) people, their values and customs, their language.” In effect, the child is not considered educated unless and until he or she knows oneself or one’s “potential as a human being” (Anuik, Battiste, and George 2008; see also Cannon 1994). The source of the impasse, however, is the federal government's initial approach to “fixing” the First Nations “education problem.” Instead of accepting the centrality of First Nations knowledge systems as an essential precondition to discussion, Ottawa chose to interpret transferring control as meaning the devolution of management responsibility and, in some cases, oversight. Operating on such assumptions, the attempt to improve student achievement and graduation rates is likely to fall far short of expectations. Indeed, it might end up being another in the succession of saddening precedents that Paquette and Fallon (2010) summarize in their book, *First Nations Education Policy in Canada: Progress or Gridlock?*

The First Nations population is not only young; it is growing rapidly, creating a sense of urgency. Forty-two per cent of

the registered Indian population is 19 years of age or younger, compared with 25 percent of the Canadian population as a whole, while the on-reserve population is expected to increase from 407,300 in 2000 to 667,900 by 2016 (Canada 2012b, 3; see Figure 1). That significant bulge of First Nations children and youth represents both a formidable challenge and a possible opportunity. Significantly more funding will be required to educate that growing population, and improvements will be needed to avert the tragedy of depriving another generation of the education it deserves.

**FIGURE 1: Projected Population Growth by Age Category of Interest from 2010 to 2026**

Source: AANDC, *Summative Evaluation of Elementary-Secondary Education*, June 2012, p. 17.



Of the approximately 5 million junior kindergarten to grade 12 (K-12) students in Canadian schools, 450,000 are First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Some 116,400 First Nations students live on reserve, and about 60 percent of them attend more than 550 band-operated on-reserve schools, most of which serve younger students from kindergarten through grade 8<sup>1</sup>. Only seven of the band-operated schools are administered by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC).

Year

The remaining 40 percent of First Nations students attend off-reserve schools run by school boards, divisions, or districts under provincial authority. A few thousand attend privately run First Nations schools, mostly band-operated inspected secondary schools. All funding for First Nations education comes from AANDC; in turn, First Nations fund the on-reserve schools and reimburse school boards, districts, and divisions for the education First Nations children receive in off-reserve schools. In fiscal year 2011/12, AANDC budgeted over \$1.55 billion for First Nations K-12 education and an additional \$322 million for post-

<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada estimates the numbers of schools as "over 500"; a report by the Parliamentary Budget Officer (Canada 2009, 8) puts the number of existing "permanent structures" at 726, only 574 of which were "inspected" schools.

secondary education to support First Nations and Inuit students across Canada (Canada 2013b). Since 2008, AANDC has spent over \$1.2 billion a year on First Nations K-12 educational operations and \$200 million a year on capital and maintenance costs. Since the early 1990s, the federal government's role has evolved into that of "a transfer agency" that sends cheques to the AANDC's seven regional offices, which then distribute the funds to First Nations bands. Until 2000, only one regional office (Ontario) ran its own education program, and a formal education branch was not established until 2004 and then only in response to a report of the auditor general (Mendelson 2008).

Assessing the cost of operating First Nations schools is a complex matter, given their remote location and the relatively small size of many of them. Although total education expenditures are higher for on-reserve schools than for the much larger provincial school districts — on average between \$5,000 and \$7,000 per full-time equivalent (FTE) student in British Columbia, Ontario, and the Maritime provinces (Richards and Scott 2009, vi, 1–3, 52–63) — across-the-board comparisons are misleading. In fact, a 2012 AANDC report found that, in comparing instructional service costs per FTE student in First Nations schools with those in provincial boards enrolling fewer than a thousand FTE students, First Nations schools receive less funding (Canada 2012c). In British Columbia, provincial districts with smaller student populations received an average of \$2,029 more than their First Nations counterparts, and the gap was even greater in Quebec and Ontario and in all regions except Manitoba (ibid., 32–34). A 2009 report by the Parliamentary Budget Officer documented estimated shortfalls in operation and maintenance costs of

\$11 million a year, and reported that the number of new schools had dropped from 35 a year between 1990 and 2000 to only 8 schools a year from 2006 to 2009 (Canada 2009, 8). Given the complexities and variety of program funding sources, the most critical need is for a more reliable funding formula to determine the resources First Nations schools will need to meet expected standards of curriculum and teaching, quality of facilities, and access to programs.

The proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*, however, would give high priority to creating bureaucratic solutions, and will continue to focus on the "transition" of First Nations education from a "non-system" to a new model with an explicit governance role delegated to new or existing First Nations authorities. The 2013 draft legislation sets out a framework that, in many ways, mirrors the conventional provincial model of governance vested in another layer of bureaucratic authority. Local autonomy is envisioned, but nowhere is it specifically guaranteed or spelled out in legal terms. Little recognition is shown for the core philosophy, knowledge, and experience that would sustain First Nations self-government in education. Instead, the February 2014 declaration (AFN 2014) speaks of "mutual accountability" and adherence to a core curriculum that "meets or exceeds provincial standards." First Nations students will be expected to meet "minimum attendance standards," teachers will have to be properly certified, and schools will have to award "widely-recognized diplomas and certificates" (Taber 2014). Overall, the proposed legislation amounts to yet another scheme that promises devolution to First Nations control of education, but still tied to compliance with "minimum standards"



and adherence to centrally determined educational and financial accountability.

Since many First Nations leaders, educators, and parents are lukewarm toward, resistant to, or uneasy about this most recent iteration of federal policy toward First Nations education (Galloway 2014a,b), this report explores and assesses the potential of an alternative model, rooted in the “learning spirit” of community-school-based management. Pioneered in the Edmonton Public Schools in the 1980s (see McBeath 2003) and now adopted by the World Bank in its international education initiatives (Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011), the essential concept of “school-based management” seems to be more in accord with the aspirations of First Nations for a greater measure of self-government in education. It is also philosophically more compatible with the tradition of school community councils that have been championed by First Nations and Métis in cities such as Winnipeg and Regina since the early 1980s (Elliott 2012; Evitts 2007). The MK community-school-based renewal model of Nova Scotia’s Mi’kmaq demonstrates the potential advantages of such an approach (Lewington 2012). Working with the federal and provincial governments, some tribal councils, such as the File Hills Qu’Appelle Tribal Council in southeast Saskatchewan, have assumed broader responsibilities for social service delivery, manifested in projects supporting a passion for lifelong learning (Anuik, Williamson, and Findlay 2009, 76–83).

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*The proposed ‘First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act’ would give high priority to creating bureaucratic solutions*

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What might an expanded community-school-based management model offer First Nations parents, students, and families? Instead of strengthening central authority and introducing another layer of bureaucracy, it might well break the gridlock described by Paquette and Fallon (2010) and empower First Nations peoples to develop Indigenous educational foundations, while providing fresh incentives for Aboriginal children to stay in school until graduation. Improved literacy and academic achievement would be a by-product of higher levels of student engagement in schools. Adopting a school-based-management model would be a substantive change, and one likely to address effectively the serious and chronic educational challenges facing First Nations communities. Such an initiative would give a major boost to First Nations knowledge and language retention, and recognize their impact on producing better student outcomes (Canada 2012c, 2, 3, 45). Addressing the critical need for a firm commitment to long-term sustainable funding is proving to be essential to overcome the existing impasse (Ibbitson and Galloway 2013a). With such a guarantee, it would be much easier to secure agreement on achieving higher standards in literacy and numeracy and on setting goals for raising graduation rates.

After reviewing the proposed First Nations education reform and carefully analysing the pressing challenges facing First Nations schools, we recommend a more focused approach to education reform, grounded in First Nations traditions and culture and designed to achieve longer-term, sustainable improvements in student achievement, social well-being, and life outcomes.

Our key recommendations, detailed at the end of the report, are:

1. Rethink the plan in the proposed First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act of conventional education governance reform, and instead open the door to a more flexible and community-school-based model that provides parents and students access to a variety of publicly funded school options, thus fulfilling the promise of true First Nations community-run schools.
2. Review the adequacy of the proposed funding plan — specifically, the implementation costs of \$160 million over four years, or \$40 million a year, which amounts to only about \$63,000 annually for each of Canada's First Nations.
3. Embrace traditional Indigenous knowledge and languages as the core foundation for First Nations education policy and as reflected in the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Framework.
4. Adopt new measures of student performance and success, drawing on the First Nations Holistic Learning Framework and incorporating validated accountability measures
5. Support First Nations community school authorities in developing new and innovative forms of local decision-making, including parent/ community governing boards.
6. Establish a First Nations culture, language, and learning institute to study and pilot promising practices in teaching and learning.
7. Assess progress in implementing community-school-based management and improving student achievement levels, starting in the 2018–19 education year. ●



■ **2.0 The Federal Initiative**  
The Proposed Reform and Its Origins

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*Investing in First Nations youth, the youngest and fastest growing population in the country is... not the culmination of our work, it is the beginning. First Nations must decide on the approach that works for them to make First Nations control a reality.*

— Shawn Atleo

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## 2.0 The Federal Initiative: The Proposed Reform and Its Origins

Eighteen years ago, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada 1996), chaired by then AFN chief George Erasmus, asked a troubling question: “Why, with so many sincere efforts to change the quality of Aboriginal education, have the overall results been so disappointing?” That same question might be asked today — and the rationalizations for inaction provided then would be even less convincing. The latest national review, conducted by the National Panel on First Nations Elementary and Secondary Education (Canada 2012b), covered much of the same educational terrain and produced no real surprises. First Nations education in Canada is a patchwork of organization, and lagging literacy and high school graduation rates signal deeper problems (AFN 2012).

Top-down prescriptions from federal authorities have not worked before, so why would the federal government proceed along the same path again? Devolution from the centre has not worked since the White Paper of 1969. Although the Indian Control of Indian Education policy, adopted in 1972, promised devolution, in practice Ottawa retained its administrative and leadership authority (Anuik, Battiste, and George 2008). Will the proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act* be any different? Perhaps we have got it completely backward. The best and soundest policy lies in empowering First Nation communities and investing in building the capacity of those communities to manage their own publicly funded

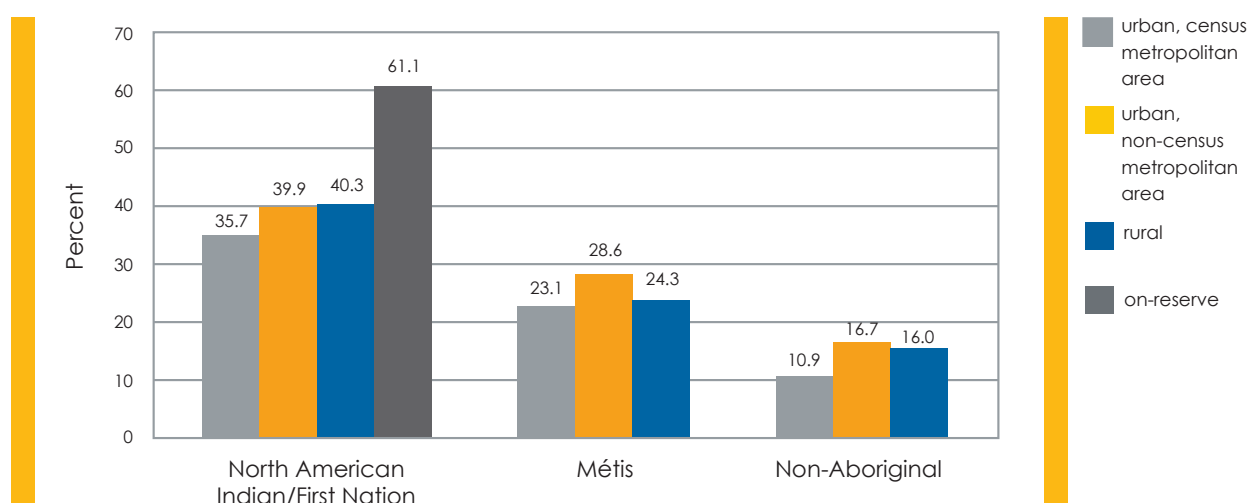
schools. Instead of decrying the lack of a “school system,” perhaps we should rebuild from the schools up by studying the Mi’kmaq project, which embraces local control of education, and learn from the critical lessons offered by the World Bank in its promotion of the school-based-management model of school improvement in a host of countries outside North America (Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011).

Finding a consensus on the persistent problems plaguing on-reserve education is relatively easy. First Nations education remains in dire straits by most accounts. Students of First Nations ancestry continue to lag significantly behind other Canadian students in levels of educational attainment (Laboucane 2010). As Figure 2 shows, in 2006 40 percent of Aboriginals between the ages of 20 and 24 did not have a high school diploma, compared with 23 percent of non-Aboriginal Canadians in the same age group. The rate was even higher for First Nations people living on reserve (61 percent) and for Inuit living in remote communities (68 percent) (Statistics Canada 2006). In the 2011 National Household Survey, the high school completion gap remained significant, with 38 percent of Aboriginals ages 20 to 24 lacking a high school diploma, compared with 19.4 percent of non-Aboriginals ((Statistics Canada 2011; see also Fong and Gulati 2013, 3). Given the importance of a high school diploma as the gateway to better life and work outcomes in contemporary Canada, these figures remain distressing for both First Nations and the broader Canadian community.

The statistics are only slightly more positive for post-secondary education (PSE) achievement. Although growing numbers of Aboriginal youth are completing programs, in 2006 41 percent of Aboriginal people ages 25 to 64 had a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree, compared with 56 percent of non-Aboriginals. Aboriginal people were on a more equal footing when it came to rates of attainment at the college level (19 percent vs. 20 percent) and the trades (14 percent vs. 12 percent), but lagged in university degree completion, where only 8 percent possessed degrees, compared with 23 percent of non-Aboriginals (Statistics Canada 2006). Judging from the 2011 National Household Survey, the pattern and gap in PSE identified in 2006 persists today (Statistics Canada 2011; Fong and Gulati 2013, 3).

**FIGURE 2: Comparative High School Incompletion Rates, Ages 20-24, 2006**

Source: John Richards, C.D. Howe Institute, 2013. Calculated from tabulations of the 2006 Census.



The 2012 National Panel report (Canada 2012b) and the subsequent discussion guide to the *First Nations Education Act* (Canada 2012a) were both based on conventional economic success measures, and both awarded First Nations education a failing grade. In painting that picture, however, the panel overlooked positive signs of the resilience of a more holistic Aboriginal approach to lifelong learning, rooted in what is known as a “learning spirit.” Learning from — and about— knowledge, language, and tradition, according to the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), continues to be “critical to the well-being of Aboriginal people.” Traditional activities such as drum dancing and fiddling and ancestral practices such as hunting, fishing, and trapping are being passed down to the younger on-reserve generation. More than two-thirds (ranging from 68 percent to 86 percent) of Aboriginal people living in rural off-reserve communities and in remote Inuit communities still practise traditional ways, and one out of four (28 percent) of Aboriginal children living off reserve in 2006 attended at least one gathering or ceremony each year.

Although First Nations students are struggling by mainstream society’s standards, the CCL found ample evidence in 2009 of a holistic Indigenous community supportive of youth. Familial ties and support are strong, exemplified by the influential role of Elders who impart a sense of responsibility and community identity and reinforce intergenerational connections and ties. Most, if not all, First Nations youth living on reserve now have access to support in learning their ancestral language, as do 77 percent of Inuit children and some 41 percent of off-reserve First Nations and Métis children. Although access to, and acceptance of, ancestral languages varies from one First Nations community

to another, especially in northwestern Ontario, there is evidence of language retention if not resurgence. As well, some 65 percent of children living on reserve reportedly receive child care in a home setting, and an increasing proportion of off-reserve First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children receive child care in a setting that promotes traditional cultural values and customs. Aboriginal youth, both on and off reserve, also tend to be at least as involved as their non-Aboriginal counterparts in community volunteer activities, social clubs or groups, and sports outside school (CCL 2009, 4–7, 10–17). Yet, none of these positive signs warranted mention in the federal government’s latest report on “the continuing failure” of conventional economic-success-driven public education in First Nations communities (Mendelson 2008, 2).

Given the set of assumptions of its drafters, the *First Nations Education Act* proposed in late October 2013 was bound to encounter a chilly reception. Its preamble presented the proposed legislation as a further step toward reconciliation and professed respect for First Nations rights, but the bill approached governance reform merely as an exercise in school improvement and accountability for better student outcomes (Canada 2013c, 4, 10–31). Sidestepping long-standing First Nations demands for stable, secure funding, as well as proposals to advance Indigenous curricula and pedagogy, the proposed legislation was directed more toward establishing another layer of authority in an attempt to raise academic standards and graduation rates. Viewed through First Nations eyes, the federal government was essentially proposing devolution with strings attached.

The July 2013 discussion guide to the proposed act (Canada 2013a) also sent out

the wrong signals to First Nations. The stated objectives of the proposed legislation were virtually interchangeable with those found in mainstream school systems:

- attendance and structure requirements similar to provincial requirements;
- a recognized high school diploma;
- education support services that lead to better student outcomes; and
- school success plans and reports to the community.

The guide spelled out accountability measures before the section outlining possible “options for educational governance structures.” For the most part, these options were only those existing in current operations: a federally funded community school, a school operated by a First Nations education authority, or funding of a provincial school board either to operate a school or to transfer fees to support students studying at off-reserve schools. In short, the options simply mirrored the status quo in First Nations governance models and practice. Furthermore, the two key principles for funding enunciated were top-down in their orientation. For all the pretence of advancing First Nations self-government in education, the proposed legislation essentially came down to “stable and predictable funding, and encouraging the development of education systems” (Canada 2012a, 1).

Although couched in gentle, progressive reform language, the guide made it clear that the proposed act was essentially a federal accountability compliance exercise. The rationale for the legislation was anchored in the findings and recommendations of the 2011 report of the auditor general (Canada 2011b), with

a nod to two other recent reports, from the Senate (Canada 2011a) and from the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve appointed by the Stephen Harper government (Canada 2012b). Four structural impediments, identified by the auditor general, were given as the prime drivers:

- lack of clarity about service levels;
- lack of a legislative base;
- lack of an appropriate funding mechanism, and ;
- lack of organizations to support local service delivery.

Parsing the 2011 Senate report, *Reforming First Nation Education*, the drafters drew attention to the current funding mechanism, which, it was said, “inhibits effective accountability mechanisms and is inadequate for achieving improved outcomes or specific levels of service” (Canada 2011a, 36). The discussion guide to the proposed *First Nations Education Act* (Canada 2012a) cited the February 2012 National Panel report to reinforce the overall assessment that “the current ‘non-system’ in education has failed First Nations students.” The overarching goal was to bring First Nations students up to provincial educational standards, presumably by mastering provincially sanctioned curricula and student outcomes” (ibid., 2). Publicly funded schooling, viewed through this lens, is best dispensed in centralized systems such as those exemplified by regional school boards. First Nations students, like their counterparts in provincially funded schools, “deserve an educational system that encourages them to stay in school and graduate so that they have the skills they need to realize their aspirations and participate in a strong Canadian



economy." Creating a "system" supposedly would remove one of "the greatest barriers to improving outcomes," identified as "the full range of supports, including legislation, available to non-reserve schools." Working on the assumption that First Nations peoples need "sustainable, high quality and accountable First Nations education systems," the federal government claimed that this "cannot be achieved without these supports" (ibid., 3).

The federal government thus tends to view First Nations education as a manifestation of "the problem" afflicting Aboriginals and their communities. After a succession of inquiries, reports, and failed reforms, AANDC was proposing "a framework for achieving better results," reducing the problem of First Nations education to one of organization. The proposed solution appeared to be driven by the desire to achieve bureaucratic efficiency. The framework set out in the proposed legislation amounted to a replication of provincial education law, including provisions for "clarifying roles and responsibilities" and "strengthening governance and accountability." Little initially was offered on funding except the pledge to address "the need for stable and predictable funding." The conventional educational catch phrases common in official provincial education documents were also all there: "better student outcomes, continuous learning, professional and accountable practices, and supporting students and teachers" (ibid., 4).

Providing flexibility for communities was the last stated goal of the proposed act, tacked on in the discussion guide as a mere afterthought — a half-measure rather than a full commitment. "The legislation would create a framework for improved governance," it began, "while being flexible enough to allow communities to adapt delivery to meet their unique needs, including adapting provincial curriculum." The message was clear, from a First Nations perspective: accountability comes first, then flexibility, but not necessarily flexibility. What would it mean in practice? The proposed act essentially reaffirmed the existing status quo, requiring "services to students and schools" comparable to provincial systems and permitting "the same degree of local flexibility" that "currently exists in the provincial systems." That autonomy shrank, however, under closer inspection. Instead of embracing new forms of local control and management, First Nations authorities and schools were strictly limited to adapting provincial curriculum



and developing local courses of instruction, provided that they “support better student achievement” (ibid., 4–5).

First Nations leaders not only questioned the legitimacy of the first round of deadline-driven consultations, but reacted swiftly to the July 2013 blueprint for the proposed act (Canada 2013a). The real reason for poor graduation rates and lagging literacy levels, AFN chiefs insisted, was chronic underfunding of on-reserve schools, rather than the structure and organization of First Nations education. “We’re not happy with the federal government establishing any sort of standards for First Nations,” said Julia Candlish, education coordinator for the Chiefs of Ontario. “We have the capacity to do it ourselves” (quoted in Hill 2013). Instead of accepting a new tier of federally managed administrative oversight, Vice Chief Bobby Cameron of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) called for First Nations people to implement their own education acts to assert their “Treaty right” to control their own schooling. The FSIN took the initiative by developing with Saskatchewan band councils a First-Nations-created education act, and urged leaders to have it authorized by the bands before the federal government introduced its own legislation. “Let’s be honest here,” Cameron told the Saskatoon *StarPhoenix*. “If they want to improve our on-reserve education systems, prove it by backing it up, committing more dollars to our on-reserve school systems” (quoted in Adam 2013).

Chiefs who attended the AFN meeting held July 16–18, 2013, in Whitehorse, Yukon, unanimously opposed the federal government’s blueprint. The formal resolution by Chief Steve Miller of Atilkameksheng Anishnawbek rejected the proposed legislation for failing on six different counts. The resolution (AFN 2013)

claimed that the plan

- failed to affirm First Nations control of First Nations education;
- failed to provide guarantees for First Nations languages, cultures, and ways of teaching and learning;
- failed to build on successes of First Nations;
- failed to address the necessary linkages to early childhood development, adult education, vocational training, e-learning, and post-secondary education, and the institutions created by First Nations at all levels of education, including language immersion schools;
- failed to address historic shortfalls and elimination of the 2 percent funding cap on annual expenditure increases;
- failed to provide capital funding to provide sufficient access to primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools; and
- failed to provide funding guarantees to ensure First Nations schools and systems would be able to address the actual costs of providing high-quality, culturally and linguistically relevant education similar to the funding principles for schools that provide services in official languages outside Quebec.

The AFN, in short, rejected the blueprint because it denied the importance of their languages and cultures, failed to reaffirm First Nations control over First Nations education, and did not address a long-standing funding gap (Galloway and Morrow 2013).

Funding of First Nations education emerged as the major stumbling block, and ultimately

forced Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt back to the table. The major bone of contention, according to the AFN, was the federal government's cap on yearly increases for First Nations education at 2 percent since 1996, which provided about \$7,000 per First Nations student compared with the roughly \$11,000 per student that provinces provide their regular public schools. "The [way] in which the federal government has approached this [legislation] hasn't broken the pattern we are looking to break," said AFN Grand Chief Shawn Atleo (quoted in Dolski 2013). Speaking on July 24, 2013, to the Council of the Federation in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, he was more explicit: "federal government...control and oversight is not something First Nations accept. First Nations are not going to establish lower standards than exist elsewhere and have the ability to drive their own systems" (quoted in Galloway and Morrow 2013).

The *First Nations Education Act* white paper of October 22, 2013 (Canada 2013c), attempted to allay the public concerns expressed by the AFN and a host of First Nations groups across Canada. However, while presenting the proposed legislation as a step toward reconciliation, the primary focus continued to be on introducing a First Nations governance framework designed to "support improved quality of education and better results for First Nations students on reserve." The stated rationale emphasized, once again, the commitment to uphold the rights of First Nations to run "community-operated schools" and to retain "the option to work together to form First Nation-led institutions called First Nations education authorities." What was new was a clearer rationale for the consolidation of school systems and a signal that First Nations sectoral self-government agreements

(SGAs) were no longer the preferred route to achieving First Nations self-government in education. "The ability to form a larger organization," the white paper claimed, "creates an opportunity to provide a broader range of services to students and schools, and may be an important means of overcoming some of the challenges of isolation and fragmentation that have been identified by First Nations, First Nations organizations, and reports such as those of the Office of the Attorney General." Entering into larger organizational units, it added, would facilitate reaching agreements with provincial school boards either to allow First Nations students to attend schools off reserve or to manage an on-reserve school (ibid., 4).

Moving forward with the legislation over the objections of the AFN did not go down well with First Nations leaders, nor did insisting on a specific timetable for implementation so that the new law would be in place for the 2014–15 school year (Ibbitson and Galloway 2013b). The backgrounder to the bill declared that it would "recognize the responsibility and ability of First Nations to provide access to education" for students between ages 6 and 21 on reserves, and it proposed to "outline base standards and services required to support success for students and schools" (Canada 2013c, 4). Under the proposed act, band councils would continue to be responsible for schools, but would now be empowered to contract the function out to a provincial school board or private educational operation. Councils were also authorized to band together to create a First Nations educational authority — essentially a First Nations-run school board — that could assume responsibility for managing all the schools in a region or even a province. Like school boards, these authorities would hire

a director, principals, and teachers, as well as develop a First-Nations-centric curriculum, provided that it met provincial standards (ibid., 6–8, 10–31).

Setting and enforcing federally determined standards for on-reserve schools quickly emerged as the most contentious clauses in the proposed legislation. Under the proposed law, an outside inspector would review school standards and performance each year and recommend improvements. Where “major and persistent problems” identified by the inspector were not addressed, if the school was failing financially, or if AANDC found “an immediate risk” to “student well-being and success,” federal authorities would be authorized to appoint a temporary administrator, placing the school in trusteeship (King 2013).

The BC First Nations Education Steering Committee flatly rejected the “overly prescriptive” federal proposals. “The foundation is in place in BC for First Nations education,” FNEESC declared. “We do not need reform.” (FNEESC 2013, 1). The chair of the AFN Chiefs education committee, Morley Googoo of Nova Scotia, claimed the problems with the bill stemmed from a lack of collaboration in its drafting. Little would be resolved, he stated, without changes in funding. “They say that funding is going to be created [later] by their regulations,” he told the *Globe and Mail*. “How are we supposed to support something without knowing the second part of the equation?” Under the act, the federal government and minister, Googoo added, do not accept their share of responsibility for what happens in reserve schools, but still “say ‘I want control’ .... So that’s not acceptable” (quoted in Ibbitson and Galloway 2013b).

The federal financial deal unveiled by Harper, Atleo, and Valcourt on February

7, 2014, ended the impasse, but it also exposed divisions among First Nations peoples. A Blood First Nation activist, Twila Singer, and her two daughters attended the announcement event at Kainai First Nation High School, only to be separated from the invited guests and given a blue dot instead of a yellow dot to wear. Sitting in the adjoining overflow gym with 40 others, Singer felt the frustration welling up inside her, especially after being accused of live tweeting her displeasure and being asked to leave the event. A few days later, an incipient “Blue Dot” movement was born when Singer’s treatment attracted attention, and the “sacred blue dot meme” appeared on social media as a symbol of continuing resistance to the proposed legislation (Greene 2014; Sherritt 2014).

With Prime Minister Harper and Chief Atleo basking in the announcement’s media afterglow, the “Blue Dot” resistance spread like an echo of the “Idle No More” movement. A highly acclaimed Métis artist, Christi Belcourt, then took up the cause of the “uninvited.” “I’m disgusted,” she declared. “I’m claiming the blue dot for us as a symbol of pride.” To her and many other First Nations community activists, the blue dot represented “the people the government would arrest first, or harass first, or doesn’t care about, or throughout history has considered the ‘rebels’ for protecting land [and] speaking out” (INM Collective 2011). The Kahnawake First Nation, near Montreal, flatly rejected the new version of the act. “The cookie-cutter, one approach [policy] does not work in Indian country,” Grand Chief Mike Delisle stated. “When we look at what we are trying to establish here, it’s our Mohawk language, our Mohawk culture, and some of these things are not guaranteed,” added school principal Kanasohon Deer (CBC News Montreal

2014). The impending federal legislation also attracted critical fire at a Western Canada First Nations Education Administrators Conference held in late February 2014 in Saskatoon. Alberta-based lawyer and author Sharon Venne told First Nations delegates from across western Canada that the whole initiative was a colonialist attempt to shift First Nations education from federal to provincial control. "Our First Nations schooling," she charged, "is not recognized by the colonizers, so the colonizers say we don't have standards. That's because they're not standards that are written in their way of thinking" (French 2014; Galloway 2014b). Settling the question of First Nations education reform, it was clear, was far from over. ●



■ 3.0

**The Curriculum  
Question:**

**The Proposed Reform  
and Its Origins**



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*Aboriginal people in Canada have long understood the role that learning plays in building healthy, thriving communities. Despite significant cultural and historical differences, Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis people share a vision of learning as a holistic lifelong process.*

*The Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework ...is grounded in an Aboriginal vision of learning and thus provides the basis for informed program and policy development; the very changes that are necessary to develop the full potential of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.*

— Canadian Council on Learning

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## 3.0

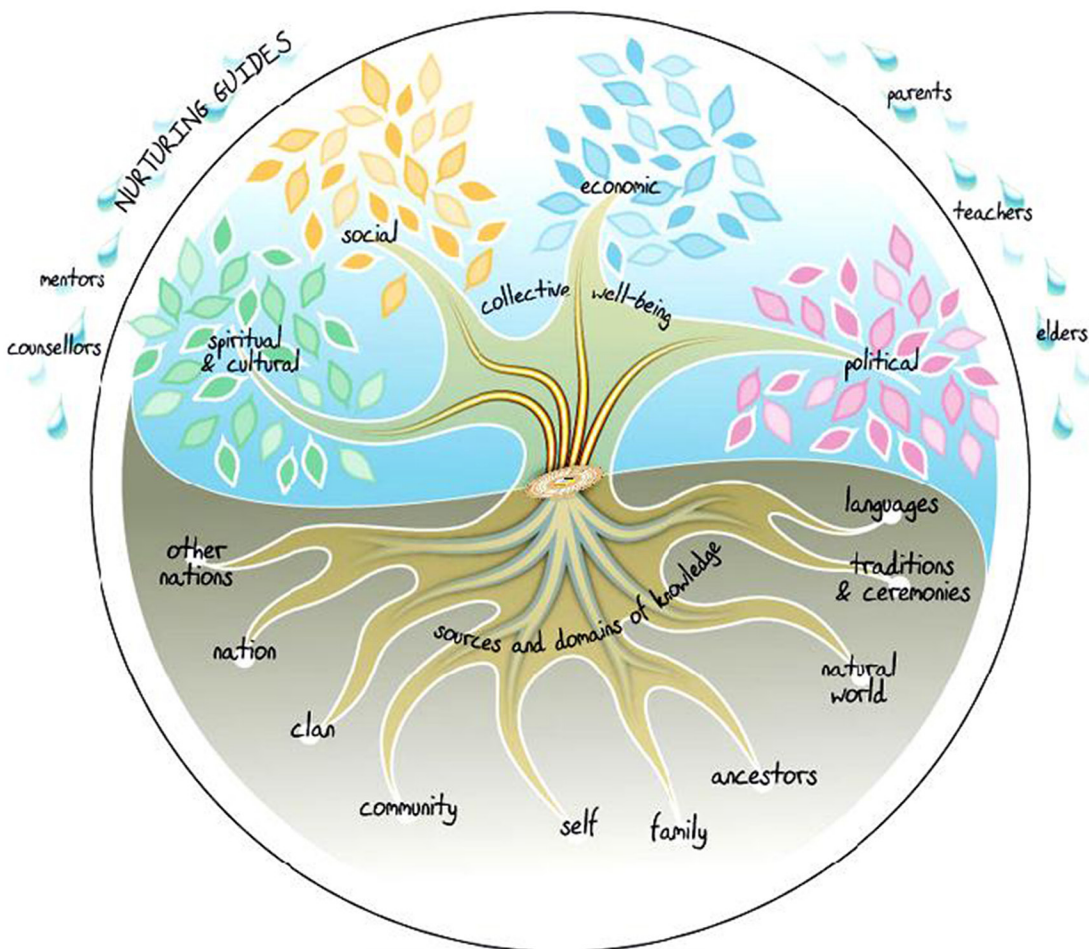
### The Curriculum Question: Whose Curriculum — and for What Purpose?

From past experience, the curriculum imposed on First Nations schools simply has not connected with or engaged students or teachers on reserves. Developing and building on Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing should start with the First Nations peoples themselves. Indeed, the missing piece in ongoing efforts to improve education for First Nations children and youth, according to Lise Chabot in a report for the Chiefs of Ontario, might be a new form of parental and community involvement (Chabot 2005, 2). Parental involvement, in one form or another, has been present in First Nations education, particularly over the past 40 years. As Chabot points out, “[w]ithout the activism of First Nations parents, there would have been little change in education management and programming despite the professed federal advocacy of Indian Control of Education” (ibid.). Despite such positive developments, however, First Nations students continue to experience much greater difficulties than do non-Aboriginal students. Basic literacy and numeracy skills continue to lag, and, for many, post-secondary education remains beyond reach.

One area of great concern to First Nations is how the federal government and the provinces define “achievement.” First Nations Elders and scholars espouse a

conception of achievement that is much broader than strictly book learning. If we draw on the insights from the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning model (see Figure 3, and as discussed in Anvik 2013a; and CCL 2007), teachers, principals, parents, families, and communities are all mentors and nurturing guides responsible for their children's achievement in all aspects of learning. School is part of a lifelong learning journey for children and youth. It is not a quantifiable journey in that learners are half Indigenous and half modern; they instead draw wisdom and insights from “Canadianish” and “Indianish” perspectives and knowledge bases (Littlejohn 1983).

**FIGURE 3: The First Nations Lifelong Learning Model**



Source: Canadian Council on Learning, 2007.

Despite the good intentions to advance First Nations education, policy proposals, documents, strategies, and accords have failed to be implemented at the school level (Canada 2011a). It seems as though policy sits separate from practice. For a school-based renewal strategy to succeed, attention must be paid to both policy and practice — and practice must be grounded in First Nations community ways of learning.. The essential concept of community-school-based management would fit the bill because it represents a mode of decision-making rooted in First Nations ways and practices. Indeed, this model of local decision-making has much in common



with the “talking circle” tradition in Mi'kmaw culture and spirituality (Mi'kmaq Spirit 2013)

Chabot's 2005 report sheds light on best practices by engaging parents in First Nations education. Based on a series of focus groups consisting of parents, families, and communities, Chabot argues that student and parent engagement starts in the community, by embracing the teachings of the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning model. Such an approach could embrace a school-based management perspective and could advance Indigenous understandings of learning. It also could serve to provide the missing link in the current delivery of educational services to First Nations children, youth, and families.

Re-engineering the proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act* to embrace community-school-based management would involve tackling a few critical questions, each of which, in effect, Chabot poses in her report:

- How do we ensure that school-based management councils are truly grounded in local contexts?
- How will parental and community involvement be connected to governance in the First Nations education domain?
- What can school-based management contribute to discussions of educational quality?
- What form should parental involvement take in school-based management councils?

These questions strongly suggest that we consider the perspectives that parents, families, and communities might bring to bear in implementing community-school-based management under a completely reworked act. The proposed federal legislation is seriously deficient in recognizing and advancing parental engagement in First Nations education. Allowing more scope for school governing councils would build on First Nations governance practices. Too often, policy directives are handed down to schools and communities. Marie Battiste of the University of Saskatchewan (Battiste 1986, 2000) calls this dynamic “cognitive imperialism”: the replacement of one worldview with another, with the implication that the former is superior to the latter.

Chabot's report shows the growing need and potential for active parental participation in First Nations communities. Indeed, the FNESC (1995) has also flagged the critical issue: “It is essential that First Nations parents are included in educational decision-making.” In February 2004, a number of focus groups conducted on behalf of the Chiefs of Ontario in Toronto, Hamilton, North Bay, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, and Kenora, again demonstrated the need and desire for more parental involvement in their children's education. One of the facilitators, Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, reported that “[e]ngagement of the community is the most important factor. We need [to] make education a part of each community; it cannot be abstracted” (quoted in Chabot 2005, 3). In Thunder Bay, facilitator Pat Baxter found that parents “need to have a leadership role in education.” The most important components identified by parents were consistent with the Holistic Lifelong Learning model: “The curriculum must preserve a

holistic approach with strong culture and language components," Baxter reported. "Education must be self-governed and self-directed. It should partner with other agencies and with parents to ensure quality education and sufficient funding" (quoted in *ibid.*, 4).

These findings clearly establish the need for a community-based curriculum consistent with a true self-governing model of education. In her report, Chabot finds that programs such as BC's First Nations Education Clubs and Hamilton, Ontario's "Wampum String Commitment" initiative are clear examples of parental involvement that exemplify an organic view of site-based governance. A few programs, such as Ontario's Aboriginal Head Start, although touted as grassroots initiatives, in fact are "laid on," rather than parent-guided and shared community to community (*ibid.*, 8–9).

Chabot's list of programs is a good start, even if it is more of an inventory of existing programs than a definitive list of exemplars. What is really needed, then, is a more rigorous assessment that probes further into whether the programs actually exemplify true self-governance at the school level. In sum, a significant change from "parental involvement" to true engagement likely is necessary to overcome the non-systemic, patchwork set of policy and programs that exist currently in First Nations education (Canada 2011a).

First Nations participants in the more recent AANDC *Summative Evaluation of the Elementary/Secondary Education Program in Reserve*, released in June 2012 (Canada 2012c), saw cultural and language retention as critical to better student outcomes. In a Harris-Decima national survey sent to 520 of the 616 First Nations across Canada, netting 113 completed surveys, the key priorities

for First Nations people were culture and language retention as well as the need to recognize clear differences in learning needs and the current learning gaps between First Nation and non-Aboriginal students (*ibid.*, 12–14, 20). Although the peer-reviewed research linking culturally based learning to longer-term educational success is still rather thin, there are some promising findings based on the short-term impact of language and heritage immersion (see, for example, Goddard and Shields 1997; Taylor and Wright 2003). Much of the supporting research suggests that culturally based programs help to promote school engagement by including topics of relevance to youth, providing more accurate images of past and present, and improving self-esteem and pride among Aboriginal youth (Castagano and Brayboy 2011; Demmett and Towner 2003).

First Nations schools that are truly anchored in the community are not only best situated to provide culturally relevant curriculum and language immersion programs; they are also more likely to retain students through high school. Students perform more poorly when the language of instruction is different than the language spoken at home. Furthermore, when examining progress from one grade to the next, this difference is a critical factor in explaining the increased time taken to progress through high school. Often cited in relation to English or French language proficiency, it also applies in the case of heritage language retention (Taylor and Wright 2003). The lack of culturally relevant learning has also been identified as a key factor in the under performance of First Nations students in off-reserve schools. First Nations participants in the 2012 AANDC survey reported that their students learn much better with hands-on experiential opportunities, rather than the dominant approach of focusing on mental processes:

“The First Nations students’ inability to see themselves in the subject matter and a general lack of welcoming and culturally relevant learning environments” in off-reserve schools, according to survey participants, leads to “an array of negative outcomes for many students” (Canada 2012c, 20–21).

What works in modern, non-Aboriginal provincial schools is not necessarily what is best for First Nations students on reserves. Focusing mostly on developing mental processes can stand in the way of giving fuller attention to the spiritual, emotional, and physical domains of deeper learning. Educational opportunities need to be more equitable, but also more tailored to the culture, language, and ways of First Nations students and their families. As noted, First Nations students lag behind mainstream non-Aboriginal students in rates of high school graduation. Resistance to state schooling remains high among parents in many First Nations communities, linked to the trauma associated with the residential school legacy. Providing the same services, in a standardized fashion, will not produce better student outcomes or turn around struggling First Nations schools. Many, perhaps most, First Nations communities and schools are starting from a position of real disadvantage and will require significantly more support than their mainstream educational counterparts (ibid., 21–22). ●



■ 4.0 Governance Policy Options & Alternatives

## 4.0

# Governance Policy Options and Alternatives

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*The time has come to do more than think “outside the box” of the current generalized gridlock in Aboriginal and First Nations education; the time has arrived too begin taking major steps to move outside of that box.*

— Jerald E. Paquette and Gerald Fallon

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*Today, though funding is still an issue, the legal arrangement that governs the schooling of about 3,000 Mi'kmaw students in Nova Scotia is winning national attention as a possible model for First Nation self-governance in education.*

— Jennifer Lewington

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The educational governance of Canada's First Nations people and the improvement of band-controlled education have long been under discussion by federal cabinet ministers, policy-makers, First Nations leaders, university academics, and educators. The *British North America Act, 1867* and later the *Constitution Act, 1982* established a dual system of education in Canada, designating provincial authority over education, but retaining federal responsibility for Indian education. As part of its treaty obligations, the federal government also agreed to provide First Nations in western Canada schools and services equitable to those provided by provincial systems (Carr-Stewart and Steeves 2009, 1). Conflict has arisen, however, over the “collision of educational practices and differing world views” held by a succession of “white man's” governments and First Nations peoples (Little Bear 2000). The *Indian Act* effectively institutionalized the exclusion of First Nations communities, Elders, and parents in the delivery of educational services. Despite repeated attempts, reforms to the act, most recently in 1985, have not significantly changed the governance framework (Carr-Stewart and Steeves 2009, 1–2). The continuing challenges facing First Nations education and recent attempts at limited devolution have only whetted public appetites for real change.

Academic experts such as Jerry Paquette and federal policy-makers have spent years

analysing and debating possible reforms aimed at improving the delivery and quality of First Nations education. Since the 1986 appearance of Paquette's influential policy paper, "Aboriginal Self-Government and Education in Canada," he has been in the forefront of those urging "Aboriginal self-government" in the education sector and "making real-world trade-offs" (Paquette 1986, ix). Today, Paquette is still pursuing those reforms, albeit with a harder edge and a deeper sense of foreboding. In his 2010 book co-authored with Gerald Fallon, he addresses the critical question: "Whoever pays the bill," he now insists, "essentially 'calls the tune' whatever the governance arrangements." "In twenty-first century Canada," Paquette and Fallon state, "First Nations peoples cannot reassume responsibility and control unless they are also willing to assume the costs. No room exists for any authentic Indian control agenda for a permanent exemption from self-taxation for education" (2010, 354).

Most of the attempted reforms since 1986 have amounted to what Paquette and Fallon describe as "tinkering around the edges of the status quo," rather than embracing "fundamental change." After pursuing reform for nearly 30 years, Paquette may well have fallen prey to a web of complexity in which "a set of fourteen propositions" must be met in moving the First Nations education agenda forward (ibid., 355). More recently, he has been advocating replacing the "non-system" of Native and First Nations education with a system based on "mutual respect and relational pluralist principles" (Anuik 2014). Much of the impetus behind the current *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act* initiative comes from those seeking to establish a form of governance that essentially mirrors provincial school board models.

## Benevolent Bureaucratic Rule: The Status Quo/Indian Act Legacy)

The hand of the *Indian Act* is still present in First Nations communities, and is particularly evident in the realm of education. Until the late 1960s, schooling for First Nations children and youth was essentially "assimilationist." "The primary purpose of formal education," as stated in the report of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "was to indoctrinate Aboriginal peoples into a Christian, European world view, thereby 'civilizing' them" (Canada 1996, vol. 3, chap. 5, 2; see also Bennett 1990; and Miller 1996). Since the publication of "Indian Control of Indian Education" by the National Indian Brotherhood in 1972, over 40 years ago, policy changes in the form of federal-local education agreements, authorized under SGAs, for the most part have only reinforced the status quo of top-down, albeit partially delegated, federal control over education (Fallon and Paquette 2012, 3).

Conformity with mainstream society, competition, and preparation for the workforce were viewed as the only way forward for all Canadian children and youth, including Aboriginals. Such assumptions effectively limited the scope of First Nations children's educational, cultural, and social life by failing to recognize the legitimacy of Aboriginal holistic learning and indigenous knowledge (Battiste 2002). Policies advocating the assimilation of Aboriginal students and, later on, their integration into provincial or non-Aboriginal schools were the prescriptions for "normal" educational provisions and practices deemed necessary to integrate children and youth into a hierarchically ordered, pluralist state (Moon 1993). Modifications to the *Indian Act* regime would merely perpetuate the status quo

in terms of federal dominance over First Nations peoples. In such a hierarchical social order, students are being prepared for a world still dominated by federal officials or indirectly managed by a chief and band council acting at the behest of the agents of non-Aboriginal society. Whatever their traditional authority might have been," American political scientist J. Donald Moon once wrote, the chief has "come to owe his power mainly to his relationships to the ruling stratum" (ibid., 15).

## Managed Devolution (School Boardization)

Managed devolution of power over education to First Nations would amount to extending federal oversight in education governance. Authority is delegated sufficient to meet the minimum standard of First Nations control in principle, but not in actual practice. Since about 1980, federal policy has promoted First Nations control of education in the context of a model of integration in which First Nations students are permitted to enrol in provincial school systems offering educational services and programs. In addition, First Nations control over education has been gradually ceded to delegated education authorities as part of a larger strategy of fostering economic development in First Nations communities. Although presented as a means of decolonization, the federal and provincial governments have promoted self-government and local control primarily as a way of encouraging First Nations to give up traditional ways and enter the market society. Such experiments in devolution, as Fallon and Paquette aptly observe, have merely substituted a new form of neo-colonialism" that is "deeply rooted in a denial of First Nations peoples' capacity to

formulate their own conceptions of person and society" (2012, 12).

Recent federal-local agreements negotiated as part of the devolution movement in Nova Scotia and British Columbia look promising, but — through control of the purse — actually might perpetuate the hegemony of the federal and provincial governments over First Nations communities. With a few exceptions, the SGAs provide limited devolution of power framed within what Fallon and Paquette term "the municipal model of self-government." Some administrative autonomy is ceded, but only within limits set by outside educational authorities controlled by federal and, mostly, provincial governments. Despite appropriating the public language of First Nations empowerment, the real changes necessary to extend authentic "Aboriginalization" of education seem to be absent on the ground in First Nations communities and their schools. A decade ago, a report by Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux aptly entitled "Reclaiming the Circle of Learning" and written for the Ontario Assembly of Chiefs, warned that history was in danger of repeating itself in that recent shifts in the direction of devolution did not amount to fundamental change (Wesley-Esquimaux 2004; see also McCue 1999).

The proposed 2013 *First Nations Education Act* was the latest mutation of devolution. Under the guise of supporting devolution, the federal government proposed to establish what amounted to a new system appropriating the provincial school board model, with significant strings attached. Despite the friendly sounding rhetoric, the legislation sought to fill the identified void at the centre of the "non-system" of First Nations education (Canada 2013c).

Confronted with what looked like a “fractured mirror” in education governance, Ottawa opted to nudge First Nations in the direction of creating more confederated boards to manage the more than 550 First Nations schools scattered across Canada’s ten provinces.

Introducing a school board model, however, likely would curtail, rather than advance, the movement to community-based schools. A study for the Canadian School Boards Association, conducted from December 2010 to November 2011, raised red flags about the impact of centralization on the state of local democratic control in Canada’s provincially regulated school boards. Surveying national trends over the past two decades, the authors conclude that “the significance of the school district apparatus in Canada has diminished as provincial governments have enacted an aggressive centralization agenda” (Sheppard et al. 2013, 42). In another paper, they claim that democratic school board governance is in serious jeopardy because trustees and superintendents now operate in a politicized policy environment that is “antagonistic to local governance” (Galway et al. 2013, 27–28). Elected school boards subscribing to a corporate policy-making model have also tended to stifle trustee autonomy and to narrow the scope of local, community decision-making (Bennett 2012). Introducing conventional school board governance could impose a new set of system-wide standards and accountabilities while withholding curriculum autonomy and thwarting the introduction of holistic learning, Indigenous knowledge, and heritage languages.

## The Autonomous Community Education Authority Model

Empowering First Nations through self-government in education still has considerable potential to break the long-standing gridlock, and the Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq model might provide a more viable and visionary option going forward. In 1997, nine Mi’kmaq chiefs and Minister of Indian Affairs Ronald Irwin achieved a breakthrough by signing *An Agreement with Respect to Mi’kmaq Education Nova Scotia*. Subsequent provincial and federal legislation enabled the Mi’kmaq to opt out of the *Indian Act* and gain jurisdiction over primary, elementary, and secondary educational programs and services (Carr-Stewart and Steeves 2009, 9). Two years after the agreement, the *Mi’kmaq Education Act* became Canadian law, eventually bringing 11 of 13 Mi’kmaq communities under that umbrella and recognizing the right to local decision-making on educational curriculum, including language, history, identity, and customs.

The Nova Scotia agreement established a new approach to the schooling of about 3,000 Mi’kmaq students (Lewington 2012, 14), but although this governance model was praised by the National Panel on First Nations education, the proposed federal legislation stops short of a full commitment to protect a “child’s right to their culture, language and identity, a quality education, funding, and First Nations control over First Nation education.” It is, however, worth a closer look as a possible model for First Nations self-government in education.

The Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq education model is the culmination of two decades of experience in building the *Mi’kmaq*



*Kina'matnewey*, a First Nations education authority now distributing some \$40 million a year in federal grants to its member communities and preparing local communities to assume more educational responsibilities. Most significantly, the three-party agreement recognizes the role of the education authority to support local band schools in delivering language immersion and other culturally based programs and activities (Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey 2013).

The Mi'kmaw model exemplifies a unique brand of "sovereignty-association" that shows considerable promise for turning around First Nations education in Nova Scotia. Early indications are that students are more engaged because of pedagogy and curriculum that are more attuned to Mi'kmaw traditions. For the 2010–11 education year, the MK reported rising high school graduation rates that are now more competitive with those for the province as a whole. That success rate impressed Scott Haldane, chair of the 2012 National Panel, and demonstrated the potential benefits of extending more autonomy to First Nations in managing their own community schools (Lewington 2012, 14).

The critical public policy question is whether the Mi'kmaw education model is working "on the ground" and is an initiative that is scalable. First Nations schools in Nova Scotia still adhere to provincial standards and diploma requirements, so their students can transfer smoothly to provincial schools at any time (Beswick 2013). Reproducing and aggregating a community education authority model might prove exceedingly difficult, however, given the wide variety of educational provision from province to province. Self-governing educational entities are only as strong as their ties to local First Nations communities, and moving

to a larger scale might risk losing a footing in local communities and their cultures.

First Nations communities continue to exhibit a rich diversity of languages, traditions, and economic development aspirations. Establishing self-governance among First Nations resting on multiple foundations, as Fallon and Paquette warn, can be fraught with potential challenges. As the AFN demonstrates, fashioning common policy can be difficult because of competing priorities that pit First Nations bands steeped in tradition against those with clearer economic development aspirations (Fallon and Paquette 2012, 24). Aggregating First Nations self-government in Nova Scotia proved difficult enough, which raises the question of its viability as a pan-Canadian strategy for First Nations education reform and governance.

## The Community-School-Based Management Model

First Nations education has proven resistant to centralized and top-down education governance from the advent of the *Indian Act* to the present day. AANDC directly manages only seven of the more than five hundred First Nations schools, but still acts as the "transfer agency" and controls the purse strings of First Nations education. Unfortunately, the proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*, whatever its intentions, looks like just another attempt to apply a pan-Canadian educational management cure to what ails First Nations education. However, attempting to replicate the autonomous First Nations authority model on a national scale, with or without the proposed legislation, might prove difficult because the model is more an organic creation than

an organizational venture. Introducing the model in a systematic, top-down fashion might also run the risk of furthering the advance of centralized administration and bureaucratic control. The best alternative to the proposed First Nations education reform initiative might well lie in establishing a governance framework that shifts the focus from erecting organizational structures to developing and building true community schools. Fears expressed by Canadian education policy specialists that decentralization leads to the “the promotion of particularism” (Fallon and Paquette 2012, 25) are largely unfounded. Indeed, the best way forward likely lies in introducing and building on best practices in community schooling and learning from the governance experience of Nova Scotia’s Mi’kmaw schools. Moving outside the box of current Canadian education governance, a dramatic change in the direction of school-based management is more likely to affirm the principle of self-government and, in the end, to generate thriving First Nations schools that produce more engaged and fully educated student graduates.

Good education for First Nations children will come, not from managerial efficiency, increased funding, or even better physical plant facilities, but from improvements in school administration, teaching, and learning. Turning the situation around for First Nations students will also require a major change in the way local schools are actually managed and run. Since the publication of William G. Ouchi’s *Making Schools Work* (2008), school reformers have been more attuned to the centralizing tendencies of education systems and the advantages of school-based management. Those lessons have been absorbed and implemented more outside the United States than inside; in particular, they have been adopted by the World Bank in its

international educational decentralization development projects. As Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos (2011, 87) aptly state, in summing up a 2005 World Bank study, “a service education is too complex to be efficiently produced and distributed in a centralized fashion.”

Decentralization of education to First Nations communities might work far better than introducing a new layer of bureaucratic oversight. First Nations leaders, including AFN Chief Shawn Atleo, are firmly committed to self-governance in education, and community-school-based management would address that aspiration directly. From the federal government’s perspective, such a model might well provide a powerful incentive that ultimately leads to better teaching, learning, and student achievement. Devolution to true school-based management, through First Nations school governing councils, would also provide important new incentives to improve learning and life outcomes for students. US economic policy experts Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann have identified three such incentives unleashed by school-based management: choice and competition, school autonomy, and school accountability (Hanushek and Woessmann 2007). The prime advantages of decentralization in the form of school-based management are, in fact, consistent with the goals and aspirations of Canada’s First Nations. Increased autonomy, devolved responsibility, and responsiveness to local needs — the core principles of community-school-based management — mesh well with First Nations aspirations and the objective of raising student performance and graduation levels (see Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011). ●



■ 5.0 The Case for Community-School-Based Management Renewal

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*We can all agree that Canada needs a new story...Our new story embraces the dream of our ancestors – yours and mine. The dream of the two row of wampum – of canoes travelling side by side but never interfering with the other's path; the dreams of the original Treaties of peace and friendship;... the dream of Indigenous leaders who sought to protect their citizens, their territories, and their way of life.*

— Shawn A-in-cut Atleo

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## 5.0

### The Case for Community-School-Based Management Renewal

The current state of First Nations educational governance has been likened by Sheila Carr-Stewart and Larry Steeves to “a fractured mirror” that has “negatively impacted First Nations education” (2009, 13). Simply transferring funds to First Nations schools to support teacher salaries, they claim, will not, in and of itself, improve levels of student achievement. More can and should be done to turn around First Nations schools in the interests of their students. Judging from the reaction of both the AFN and First Nations educators to the proposed federal legislation, relying on past precedents in First Nations education, centralizing administration, and imposing new school board-like structures will spark dissent and resistance at all levels from chiefs to Elders to local teachers in the more than 550 schools located on reserves.

Over the past century, provincial initiatives, including new governance models, corporate managerialism, and block funding programs, have provided a few lessons about the limits of central direction and bureaucratic “paper accountability” (Johnson 2004, 23) Yet the education establishment views providing educational services to First Nations that are equitable to those provided other Canadians as synonymous with transplanting and extending the centralizing administrative model to First Nations communities (Bell

et al. 2004, 13). Instead, the “school improvement journey” for First Nations, after the legacy of failed centralized administration, must leave room for schools to develop the capacity to manage themselves. At the same time, although the Mi’kmaw education model of shared and distributed authority is difficult to assess definitively, given current levels of funding and organizational support, the goal of affirming the right of First Nations to self-governance would seem to be far better served by giving far more autonomy to principals and teachers in those schools. School leaders, properly trained and mandated, can make a difference through community-based curriculum, consensual decision-making, and pedagogy respectful of Indigenous ways and customs (CCL 2009, 5–7; Hurton 2009).

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*Everyone in the wrong place, focusing on the wrong things. It's a classic case of missing the forest for the trees.... it's the way schools are managed that makes the difference.*

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— William G. Ouchi

Community-school-based management was first implemented in Canada some 40 years ago in the Edmonton public schools by newly appointed superintendent Mike Strembitsky. In the words of former teachers' union president Karen Beaton, Strembitsky's innovation “turned the entire concept of the district upside down” (Neal 1991, 4; see also Ouchi 2008, 24). Adopting a completely new approach, he embarked on an initiative to give self-governance to principals and schools through the decentralization of decisions from the district office to the school. The central idea was deceptively simple: “Every decision which contributes to the instructional

effectiveness of the school and which can be made at school level, should be made at school level” (Coleman 1984, 25). Most of the transfers have involved school-based budgeting and resource-allocation decisions, but the basic principle is also applied to all educational decisions.

Policy-makers looking for actual living examples of community-school-based management would be well advised to take a much closer look at the Edmonton public school model, but decentralized education governance has also been implemented in Regina, Saskatchewan. There, a community schools initiative, negotiated in 1980

with seven groups, including Aboriginals and marginalized communities, succeeded in securing “a greater level of self-determination over their children's education” (Elliott 2012, 1–3, 6–8). In the mid-1990s, the school-based management movement spread to

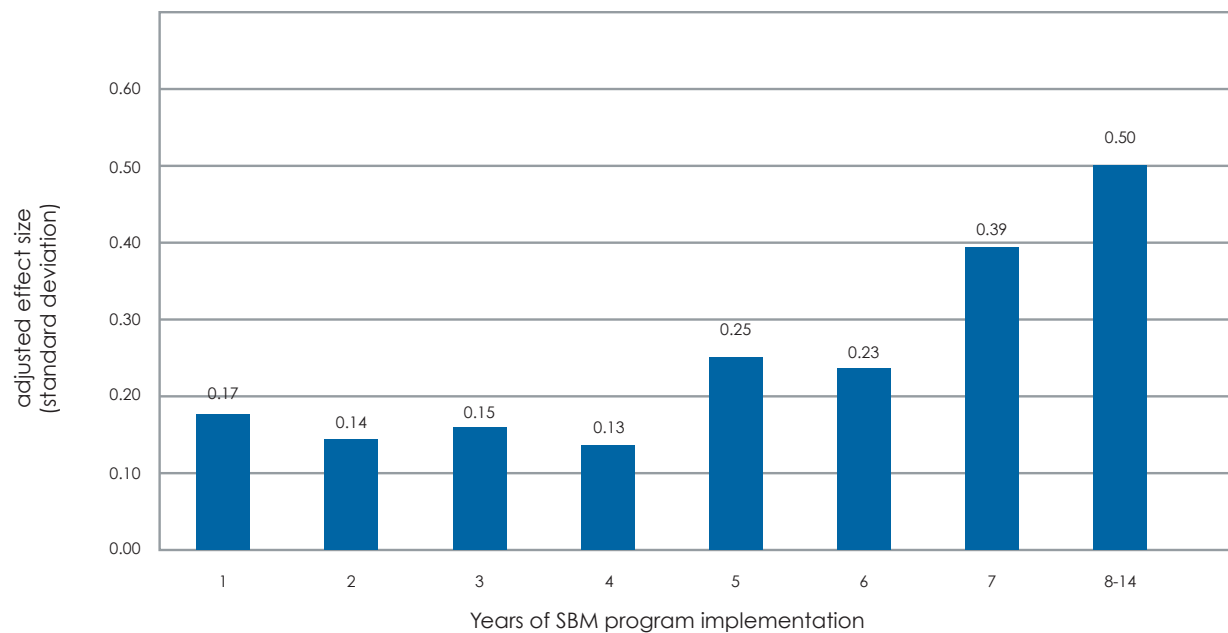
Seattle, Washington, and Houston, Texas, and by 2001 the decentralized model had become fully established in both US cities (Ouchi 2008, 23–46).

As noted, school-based management has also been adopted by the World Bank on a larger scale. Building on research by Eric Hanushek and Dale Jorgenson (1996), since 2004 World Bank authorities have embraced school-based management and teacher autonomy as the means of promoting higher student achievement levels in developing countries (Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011, 88). Decentralization of school decision-making, in fact, has become a

major component of the World Bank's work on "citizen mobilization in education." The Bank provides financial incentives, including grants to schools, to advance the decentralization of school decision-making to parents, principals, and teachers. A 2009 review of such projects offers a generally positive assessment of their cost effectiveness and contribution to increased parent participation, reduced failure rates, and declining dropout rates (Barrera-Osorio, Patrinos, and Fasih 2009). Independent research in the United States claims, however, that school-based management reforms in that country took at least five years for results to become evident and about eight years to yield improved student test results (Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011, 101; see Figure 4 and Table 1).

**FIGURE 4: Measuring the Impact of SBM Initiatives, 1998-2007**

Source: Barbara Bruns, Deon Filmer, and Harry Anthony Patrinos (2011). *Making Schools Work: New Evidence on Accountability Reforms*. World Bank, Graph, pp. 101.



**TABLE 1: How to Measure the Impact of School-Based Management (SBM) Initiatives**

Dimension	Objective	Question Type	Question or topic examples
A. Education literature			
Scope	Clarity of goals and real influence of the board	Self-diagnosis; "site team" (community, council, or school board)	Site team members agree on what kinds of decisions team may make, or site team has influence on important issues.
Decision making	Implementation practices	Self-diagnosis; "site team"	Members work to implement decisions made, or members work to correct problems that arise during implementation.
Trust	Interaction among members	Self-diagnosis; "site team"	Site team members have equal opportunity to be involved in decisions, or site team communicates openly.
B. Economic literature			
Information at local level	Changes in key decisions	Personnel (teachers and administrative)	Who makes decisions about firing, hiring, rotation time, training?
		Spending	Spending on infrastructure, training
		Changes in education process	Change in pedagogy, changes in time allocation, absenteeism of teachers
		Resource mobilizations	Amount of resources from community
Accountability and monitoring	Involvement of parents and community	Direct involvement in school	Power of board, type and number of meetings, decisions in meetings
	Better accountability and monitoring	Links between parental involvement and decisions	Do complaints or praise about teachers translate into decisions about the teacher?
		Changes in the accounting systems of the school	Implementation of EMS, changes in account tracking system
		Changes in the climate of the school	Changes in attitude of teachers and students about the school

Source: Barbara Bruns, Deon Filmer, and Harry Anthony Patrinos (2011). *Making Schools Work: New Evidence on Accountability Reforms*. World Bank, Table, pp. 100.

A recent study of the young adult Aboriginal population (ages 20 to 24) in British Columbia by John Richards finds that Aboriginal K-12 student outcomes in that province are much better than those of their counterparts in Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta (Richards 2013; see also Cayo 2013); Nova Scotia, with a unique umbrella First Nations education authority, was not included in the review. These superior student outcomes in British Columbia, according to Richards, were the result of three factors. One is "incentives" for provincial school districts to consult with First Nations leaders and to embrace innovative programs with more community-based participation. Another key factor is comprehensive and regular monitoring of Aboriginal school performance in core competencies of reading, writing and mathematics. The third is the

provision of secondary services by First-Nations-run institutions to reserve schools (ibid., 1, 12). Taken together, Richards' findings tend to support innovation in the direction of more autonomous educational governance by and for Aboriginal communities.

Establishing a governance framework that supports community-school-based management is only the first step, however, in making First Nations schools work for students, teachers, and families. Also required is a major project of capacity building to ensure that First Nations communities, at the school level, take full advantage of the opportunities for more meaningful local engagement in decision-making. The Chiefs of Ontario report (2011) suggests that the essential ingredients might be found in the current band-council-led school system. Lise Chabot (2005) sees evidence of the essential preconditions: parental involvement strategies, policies, programs, and services. Her report, based on 2004 consultations with Ontario First Nations communities, is replete with examples of parent involvement adorned with all the popular buzz words: community governance, consultation, planning, input, partnership, leadership — particularly grassroots leadership and local control. Monitoring and reporting, reciprocal relationships, and representation are all lauded, especially on provincial school boards and committees. Collaboration and coordination are the favoured methods for advancing programs for parents and their children (ibid., 23–25). Parental involvement in schools, whether First Nation or mainstream, can be more symbolic than real and can be constrained by “marginalization,” but it does open the door to more genuine engagement in local decision-making and to stronger

public accountability at the school level (Kavanagh 1999; 2002).

First-Nations-run schools do not necessarily lead, however, to the development of either effective school administration or to true school-based decision-making. Chabot finds that teachers, principals, staff, school boards, and band councils “limit parental involvement in school management,” and that the “virtual exclusion” of First Nations parents from school management and school board membership, and as resource people, supporters and facilitators of education is “a serious problem.” Where the problem is being surmounted, it requires “innovative methods” usually at the instigation of a strong individual or groups of individuals. In the Ontario communities she examines, however, a significant obstacle is posed by “the scarcity of grassroots leaders” (Chabot 2005, 19).

Any First Nations education legislation faces the formidable challenge of filling the gap between the symbolic representation of First Nations parents, families, and communities in school-based management to meaningful representation. Indeed, the Senate report on First Nations education (Canada 2011a) identifies the critical need for programming at schools that brings in, and draws strength from, families and communities. We argue that a true community-school-based management model offers a way to tap into the talents, energies, and commitment of First Nations parents, families, and communities in a fashion that leads to their meaningful involvement in First Nations education.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Holistic Lifelong Learning models all put considerable emphasis on community- or place-based learning. Are parental involvement and community involvement the same?

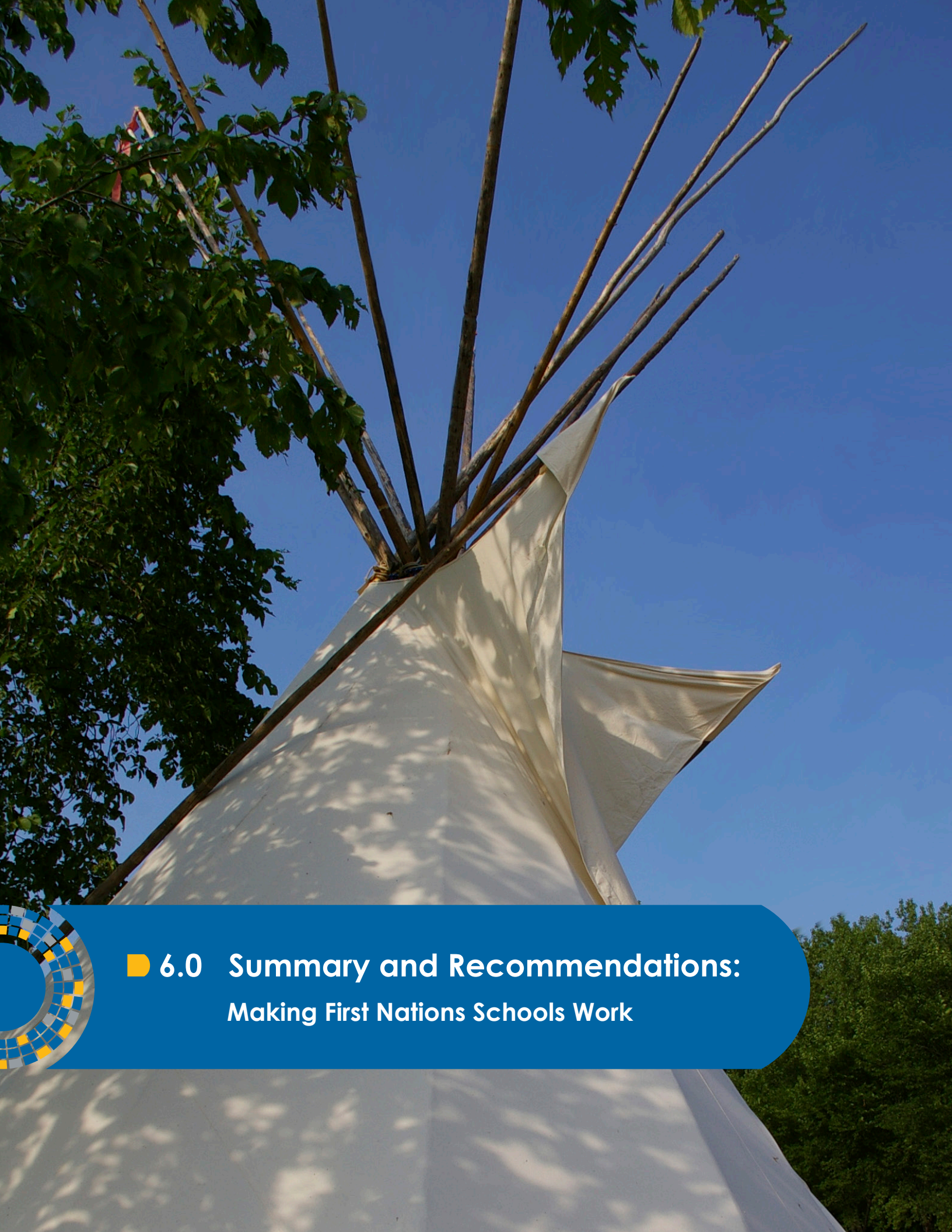


Would implementing community-school-based management help to clarify the differences and linkages between parental and community involvement in school governance? Since Chabot's report is more of an inventory than an analysis, additional empirical research is required to answer these questions definitively. Yet, if the experience of Mi'kmaw education and various World Bank projects in developing countries is any guide, the engagement of parents and community ownership of First Nations schools could be greatly enhanced by such structural reforms.

Community development starts with local First Nations initiatives, as the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council is demonstrating with its child care, youth centre, and lifelong learning ventures in rural southeastern Saskatchewan (Anuik, Williamson, and Findlay 2009, 81–82). Moving forward to broaden the scope of local decision-making would most certainly engage band councils and breathe new life into parental involvement at the school level. Indeed, the June 2012 *Summative Evaluation of the Elementary/Secondary Education Program on Reserve* (Canada 2012c) identifies the lack of parental engagement and family poverty as obstacles to First Nation students' success, but the lack of school leadership and teaching capacity are also a challenge (ibid., 37–38). These factors, combined with resistance to schooling compounded by the residential schools experience, have created “a distance between school and home life.” Measurable improvements in student outcomes are more difficult when basic community needs, such as basic social and economic infrastructure, safety, suitable housing, and family stability, are unmet (ibid., 30). With more band and parental engagement, in the form of community-school-based management,

improved student outcomes likely would materialize over the medium and longer term.

The proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act* needs to be rethought if it is to make much of a difference for First Nations students, families, and teachers. Establishing a school board organizational framework, in and of itself, would accomplish little when not all boards are the same and do not all serve the same purpose. Building accountability requires a longer-term commitment and investment, especially when boards are newly created or serving schools or communities with needs that are significantly greater than usual (Maguire 2003, 9, 11; Raham 1998, 14–16). Simply put, reforming First Nations education involves far more than sweetening the financial terms and imposing a new set of educational accountabilities. In its initial form, the whole approach ran counter to the fundamental principle of First Nations control of First Nations education (Galloway and Morrow 2013; Hill 2013). Although the federal government is now publicly committed to firm funding, it is contingent on First Nations' accepting the proposed bureaucratic reform without any real assurance of a community-based approach more attentive and accountable to First Nations parents, families, and communities. If it is actually to renew First Nations schooling, the proposed legislation must do more than pay lip service to building on community-level work to educate First Nations children and youth under the leadership of supportive parents, teachers, and families. ●



6.0 Summary and Recommendations:  
Making First Nations Schools Work

## 6.0

# Summary and Recommendations:

## Making First Nations Schools Work

More must be done to improve student learning and the quality of education for First Nations people. Some 40 percent of Aboriginals do not finish high school, and of First Nations adults living on reserve, 60 percent lack such certification, which is widely acknowledged as essential to securing employment and increasing life chances. Although the number of Aboriginal university graduates has doubled over the past decade, the gap in educational attainment levels and employment rates between Aboriginals and other Canadians has only grown wider (Fong and Gulati 2013, 1–6). As Queen's University economist Don Drummond has pointed out, the Aboriginal student population is growing dramatically — by the end of this decade, about 30 percent of school-age children in Saskatchewan and Manitoba will be of Aboriginal descent (cited in Freisen 2013). Meeting the growing needs of First Nations children and youth and closing the educational gap thus has emerged as one of Canada's most critical public policy challenges (Richards 2014).

First Nations leaders, community activists, and researchers, however, see the state of First Nations learning through a completely different lens. From AFN Chief Shawn Atleo to leading scholars such as Marie Battiste, they express the need to forge a more common, mutually acceptable, and

sounder understanding of what constitutes success in First Nations learning. Raising student achievement standards is a clear priority, but that does not mean focusing exclusively on student test results and graduation rates. Such an approach, in their view, focuses far too much on failure and tends to ignore the successes rooted in Indigenous culture and languages and that reflect a more holistic conception of lifelong learning. While accepting that educational conditions are poor in the majority of First Nations communities, they believe that focusing on assets rather than on deficiencies would result in a more robust foundation for true Indigenous educational improvement and, in the long run, would be more effective in helping young First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students to achieve their fullest potential in life (Cappon 2008; CCL 2009, 4–7).

The proposed *First Nations Education Act* stirred resistance because of the bitter legacy of past precedents (Miller 1996), the imposition of a tight timetable for implementation, and the initial absence of any funding commitment (Woods 2013). Many chiefs saw in the proposed 2013 law clear evidence of the usual hegemonic perspective and unmistakable signs of top-down bureaucratic reform thinking. Although couched in carefully chosen language, the rationale in the proposed act strongly suggested that the “new approach” was another attempt at “devolution” of self-government, rather than a real transfer of local education governance powers. Through the eyes of Canada's First Nations leaders, activists and scholars, it looked very much like more of the same — establishing a new level of educational authority while withholding full local autonomy and making no solid commitment to addressing the need

for more funding. Nor did the proposed act reflect the educational philosophy and priorities espoused by Marie Battiste, the first scholar to call for the creation of such legislation (Battiste 2000; see also Table 2).

**TABLE 2: Proposed National Framework for Measuring Aboriginal Learning, 2008**

		Place where learning occurs (sources of learning)				
		Home	School/ Institution	Community	Land	Workplace
Early learning	Formal learning					n.a.
	Informal learning	Extent to which parents read to children	Access to First Nations-specific ECE program	Access to organized activities (reading programs, play group)	Interaction with family who help understand traditional practices	n.a.
Elementary/ secondary education	Formal learning		High school graduation rate		Exposure to school field trips to sacred sites	
	Informal learning	Use of First Nations language at home	Participation in sports and recreation programs at school	Participation in First Nations ceremonies and festivals	Practice of First Nations traditional skills (hunting, trapping)	Availability of internship programs
Post-secondary education	Formal learning	Participation in distance learning courses leading to a certification	University completion rate	Availability of community-based post-secondary programs		Availability of apprenticeship programs
	Informal learning	Exposure to First Nations culture and traditions at home	Access to Aboriginal student centres and/or support programs	Access to community library	Use of celestial bodies (interpreting seasons, navigation, weather)	Availability of non-formal workplace training
Adult learning	Formal learning		First Nations adults returning to school to complete high school diploma			Participation in formal workplace training
	Informal learning	Reading non-work-related material at home		Community involvement and volunteering	Knowledge of traditional medicines and herbs	Self-directed learning through the Internet
Intergenerational learning	Formal learning		Proportion of teachers in school who are First Nations			
	Informal learning	Intergenerational transmission of First Nations culture at home	Involvement of elders at schools	Exposure and interaction with elders who help understand language and culture	Extent of use of traditional practices	Use of First Nations language in the workplace

Source: Paul Cappon, "Measuring Success in First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Learning." *Policy Options* (May, 2008), p. 65.

All school boards, as Helen Raham aptly observed in 1998, are not created alike, and the proposed First Nations model in the 2013 legislation is no exception. Over the past 20 years, school boards have become even more subject to centralization (Galway et al. 2013). Creating a new layer of centralizing administration would do little or nothing to address what Lise Chabot (2005, 19) terms the “marginalization” of parents and local community members in the actual management of First Nations education. School superintendents, education officials, and principals might even enjoy consolidated power, rendering parental participation mostly symbolic, limited to attending meetings, complying with strict governance rules, and exercising little or no influence because professionals control the flow of information (ibid.; Kavanagh 1999).

The proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*, even in its latest form, is at odds with the fundamental aspirations and vision of education voiced by First Nations over the past 40 years (see, for example, AFN 1988, 2010; NIB 1972). Looking at First Nations education governance as a “fractured mirror” and describing it repeatedly as a “non-system” clearly reflects the centralist perspective deeply ingrained in the Canadian education establishment and exemplified in the vast majority of school boards scattered across Canada’s ten provinces. It is, in fact, becoming increasingly clear that the real intent of the proposed federal legislation is to impose another layer of administrative oversight in the realm of First Nations education.

In our view, the way to meet the aspirations and goals of First Nations education is to embrace a more holistic and community-based philosophy of lifelong learning

(Cappon 2008), to adopt a broader approach to raising student performance, and to establish self-government in actual practice. Such an approach, we believe, is better suited to unlocking the “learning spirit” in First Nations schools and communities. We take the longer view that, instead of imposing another layer of bureaucratic oversight, it would be far better to build on the potential of the models of the self-governing Mi’kmaw education authority (Fabian 2013) and the promising ventures rooted in local community schools. Rather than attempting to replicate provincial school board administrative management, we recommend studying and learning from the lessons provided by school-based management ventures supported by the World Bank in dozens of countries around the world. Building schools from the school level up is also seen as “an antidote to new managerialism” and proving to be more sustainable in the end (Johnson 2004, 1, 23). For those who prefer North American examples of what can be done to restore true local autonomy in publicly funded schools, we recommend looking at the Edmonton public schools, a proven school choice model too often overlooked in Canada but much admired by school reformers around the globe. A genuine community-school-based management model, rooted in respect for First Nations knowledge systems, languages, and ways of knowing, has the greatest potential for improving education on and off First Nations reserves.

**Recommendation 1:**  
**Rethink the proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act* and embrace community-school-based education renewal.**

Abandon conventional education governance reform in favour of a more flexible and community-based model of school renewal that provides parents and students access to a variety of publicly funded school options, fulfilling the promise of true First Nations community-run schools. Make a much clearer commitment to support and build capacity for community-school-based management in First Nations reserve schools. Embrace the “learning spirit,” embodying the true aspirations and goals of First Nations education as expressed in the Canadian Council on Learning’s 2009 report, *The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada* and incorporating additional provisions for the improvement of student achievement levels.

**Recommendation 2:**  
**Review the proposed funding plan.**

Review the adequacy of the proposed funding plan — specifically the implementation costs of \$160 million over four years or \$40 million a year, and representing only \$63,000 annually for each of Canada’s First Nations.

**Recommendation 3:**  
**Embrace traditional Indigenous knowledge and languages as the core foundation for First Nations education policy.**

Affirm the centrality of traditional knowledge and languages as reflected in the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning framework developed by Marie Battiste (2002) and the Canadian Council on Learning (2009).

**Recommendation 4:**  
**Adopt new measures of First Nations student performance and success.**

Support the initiative shown by First Nations in developing the Holistic Lifelong Learning Model framework for assessment, expanded to include shorter-term goals for improving student achievement levels and graduation rates.

**Recommendation 5:**  
**Develop new and innovative forms of local decision-making, including parent/community governing boards.**

Enable autonomous First Nations community schools authorities, governed entirely by First Nations peoples themselves, to adopt new forms of governance, respecting First Nations traditions and supporting innovative forms of local education decision-making, including parent and community governing boards.

**Recommendation 6:**  
Establish a First Nations culture, language, and learning institute to study and pilot promising practices in governance, teaching, and learning.

Create a First Nations culture, language, and education institute, as recommended by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada 1996), that would be responsible for gathering research and data on the state of Aboriginal education and entrusted with a mandate to generate policy research on educational improvement in First Nations communities.

**Recommendation 7:**  
Assess progress in implementing community-school-based management and improving First Nations student achievement levels, starting in the 2018–19 school year.

After expanding the number of community-based and -managed schools, undertake a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the initiative every five years, starting in the 2018–19 school year. ●



**7.0**

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## Who We Are

Internally, Northern Policy Institute seeks to be as “flat” as possible with much of the work contracted out to experts in the fields under consideration. This approach avoids the risks associated with large bureaucratic organizations. It also allows Northern Policy Institute to flexibly respond across a wide range of issues while also building up in house and regional expertise by matching bright young minds on temporary placements and project specific work with talented experts who can supply guidance and coaching.

**Some of the key players in this model, and their roles, are as follows:**

**Board:** Sets strategic direction and holds CEO accountable.

**CEO:** Recommends strategic direction, develops plans and processes, and secures and allocates resources to achieve it.

**Advisory Council:** A group of committed individuals interested in supporting, but not directing, the work of Northern Policy Institute. Leaders in their fields, they provide guidance and input on strategic direction, communication, potential researchers or points of contact in the wider community. They are Northern Policy Institute's source of “sober second thought” on overall organizational direction and tactics.

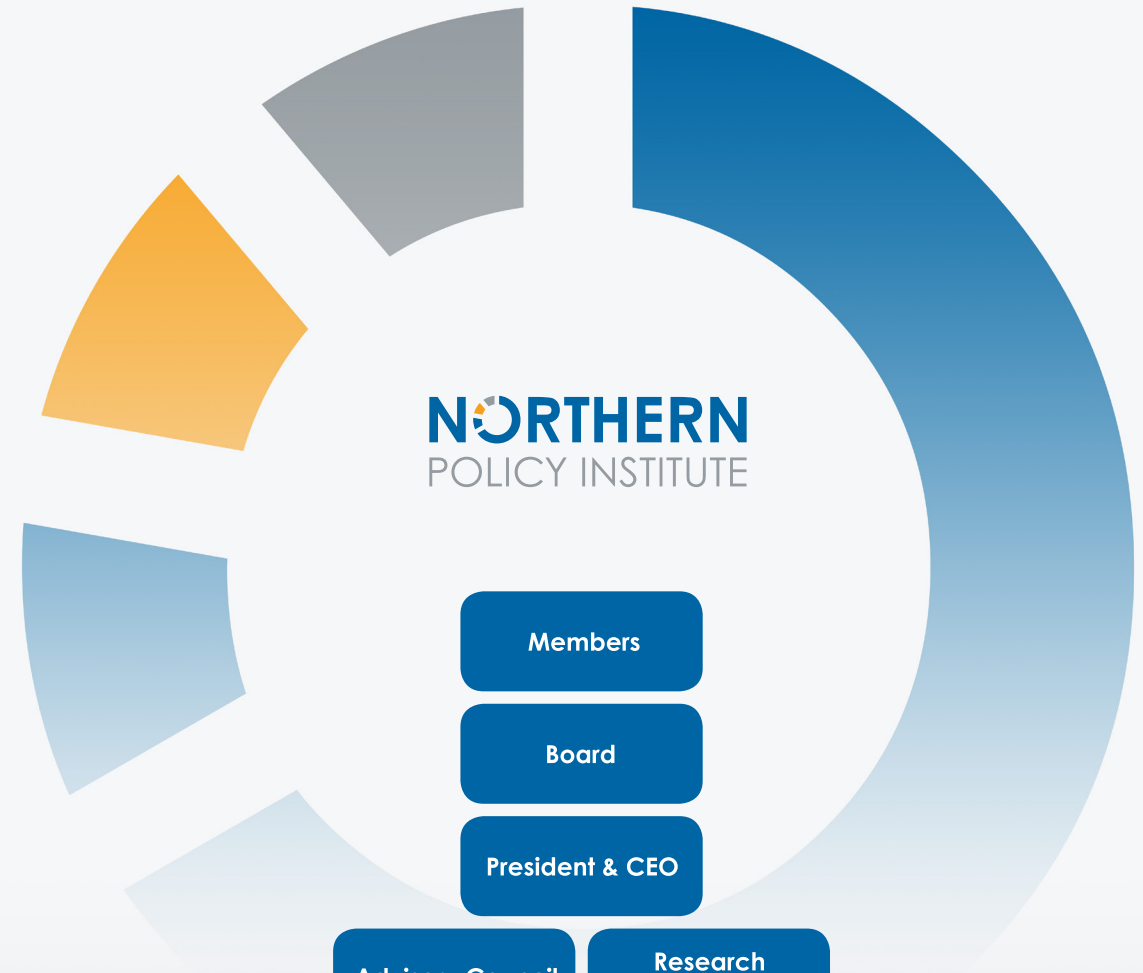
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**Peer Reviewers:** Ensure specific papers are factual, relevant and publishable.

**Authors and Research Fellows:** Provide independent expertise on specific policy areas as and when needed.

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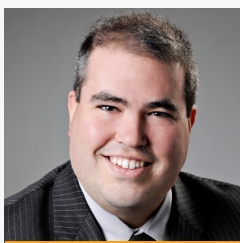
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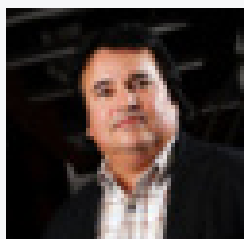
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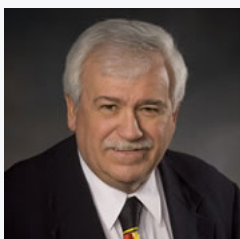
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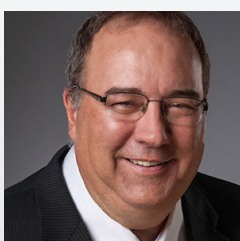
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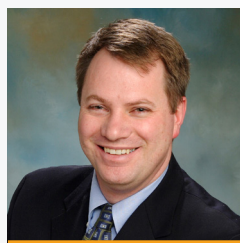


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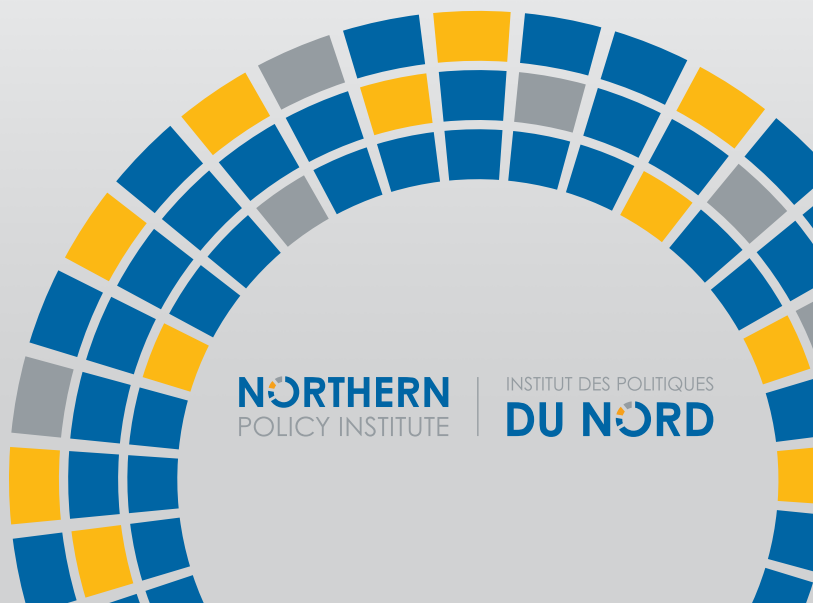
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