

**First Nations
Education**

10

plain
talk

it's
our
time



Education can make my life better by helping me succeed in life. Education is very important to me as it will help me reach my goal in becoming a fighter jet pilot. Education will open many doors to more knowledge or opportunities, and it will teach me responsibility. After all of that, hopefully I will become a better citizen.

Kenzie, Cross Lake First Nation, Manitoba

First Nations have the inherent right not only to access education but to assert jurisdiction over education. The right to education appears in several international declarations related to the rights of Indigenous peoples, including the **International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination** (1965), the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (1966), the **Convention of the Rights of the Child** (1989) and the **United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** (2007). The **Constitution of Canada** (1982) also supports the provision of education, which is inclusive of post-secondary. These declarations specifically outline the right to an appropriate education in the context of lifelong learning for Indigenous peoples.

If education is a universal human right, there must be an understanding of what is meant by “education.”

Education can be defined in a narrow way, as the formal act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge and developing the powers of reasoning and judgment in preparation for mature life, conducted under systematic mechanisms like schools, colleges, universities and other institutions. Or education can be defined in a broader and much more inclusive way, as a series of formal and informal experiences that transmit a society’s accumulated moral and spiritual values, skills, knowledge, attitudes over the course of a lifetime, from birth through to old age. This broad and inclusive definition characterizes how First Nations define education, as lifelong learning.

A Holistic Perspective

First Nations lifelong learning is a process of nurturing First Nations learners in linguistically and culturally-appropriate holistic learning environments that meet the individual and collective needs of First Nations and ensure that all First Nations learners have the opportunity to achieve their personal aspirations within comprehensive lifelong learning systems.

Applying the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model, First Nations learning systems are characterized by:

- a foundation of First Nations cultures, languages, values, histories, and worldviews and the role of Elders;
- acquisition of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom from both First Nations and Western perspectives;
- learning as a continuous process that involves constant change, development and strengthening through all stages of our lives;
- learning activities that nurture emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual dimensions;
- opportunities to reach full potential as healthy, productive members of peoples' communities, working in occupations and professions of their choice;
- curricula and programs developed by First Nations, from early childhood through higher academic levels, career options and continuous learning opportunities.

The Past

During the residential school era, the federal government viewed the education of First Nations people as an instrument of assimilation. First Nations peoples were deprived of their cultural and linguistic heritage, with the goal of indoctrinating them into European values and standards. This resulted in profound damage to countless individuals and subsequent generations, and is now seen as a process that was oppressive, racist and an affront to human rights. In many respects, the federal government's neglect of First Nations education today continues the abuses of the past.

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood (now the **Assembly of First Nations**) adopted a seminal policy paper, **Indian Control of Indian Education**. The 1972 policy paper proposed that the Government of Canada and First Nations work together to put in place the financial and educational resources needed to enhance the success of First Nations learners through **Indian Control of Indian Education**. To support this policy, the document laid out the principles and values underlying First Nations education, starting with a **Statement of Values**.

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honored place in Indian tradition and culture. The values that we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian.

We want the behavior of our children to be shaped by those values which are most esteemed in our culture. When our children come to school, they have already developed certain attitudes and habits that are based on experiences in the family. School programs that are influenced by these values respect cultural

priority and are an extension of the education which parents give children from their first years. These early lessons emphasize attitudes of:

- self-reliance,
- respect for personal freedom,
- generosity,
- respect for nature, and
- wisdom.

All of these have a special place in the Indian way of life. While these values can be understood and interpreted in different ways by different cultures, it is very important that Indian children have a chance to develop a value system which is compatible with Indian culture.

The Present

There is a recognized gap between the educational success of First nation students and non-First Nation students. According to a 2004 report by Canada's Auditor General, the education of First Nation peoples living on-reserve is close to 30 years behind the non-Indigenous population.

The educational inequity between First Nations and non-First Nations populations is reflected in a number of unsatisfactory educational outcomes, including lower graduation rates and weaker academic achievement. Correction of this inequity is essential for the future of First Nations individuals, First Nations communities, and Canadian society as a whole.

A review of the impact of education must address two aspects of the educational process:

1. The consequences of education inequity
and
2. The factors that affect educational success and educational equity.

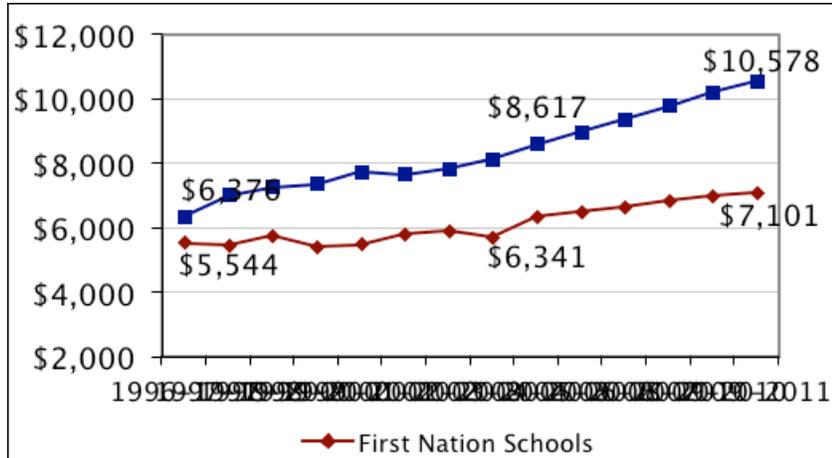
Since 1972, the federal government has made inconsistent efforts to support the spirit and intent of the **Indian Control of Indian Education** document and the essence of the **First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model**. In affirming the **Indian Control of Indian Education** policy document, the federal government resulted in doing little more than transferring some of the administration of programs to First Nations communities. Jurisdiction remains unrecognized, and education funding woefully inadequate. The evidence is unequivocal that First Nations peoples living on reserves, compared to the Canadian population, are at a serious disadvantage with respect to educational achievement, educational funding and opportunity. Compared to the Canadian population:

1. Fewer First Nations learners have graduated from high school (First Nations graduation rates are approximately 37 percent).
2. Fewer First Nations adults have completed a diploma or undergraduate degree.
3. Fewer First Nations males than First Nations females have completed a university degree.

Numerous factors contribute to the inequality characterizing First Nations education:

1. Funding for First Nations schools is determined by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) using an outdated national funding formula that was developed in 1987 and last updated in 1996 for appropriate population and living costs.
2. Since 1996, AANDC's national education funding formula has been capped at 2 percent per year. This is despite both a steady growth in both inflation and the First Nations population over the same period, requiring an annual increase of 6.3 percent since 1996 for First Nations education.
3. AANDC's chronic underfunding of First Nations schools has created a First Nations education-funding shortfall of \$747 million in 2010-2011, and a cumulative funding shortfall of over \$3 billion since 1996.
4. This funding shortfall does not include costs needed to support the educational components of a twenty-first century school system that are currently missing from AANDC's funding. This includes such basic services as:
 - School libraries
 - Technology (computers, connectivity, data systems);
 - Sports and recreation;
 - Vocational training;
 - First Nations languages; and
 - School board-like services.
5. Funding agreements are based on the corporate business cycle rather than the school year. To satisfy the terms of this funding regime, needless reporting is required for the release of funds at the start of a new fiscal cycle.
6. In 1996, AANDC provided, on average, \$5,544 per-student to First Nation schools. This was up to 15 percent less than what AANDC provided to First Nations attending Provincial or Private schools.
7. Since 1996, the funding discrepancy has grown to an average of nearly \$3,500 less per student. This means that AANDC now provides nearly 50 percent more funding to First Nations attending Provincial or Private schools than to those attending First Nation schools.

Average per-student funding, First Nation schools and provincial schools, 1996-2011



* Per-student funding is calculated using the following formula: Core Funding allocated by Federal Government for First Nation education (FN school OR provincial/private school) / Nominal roll (FN school OR provincial/private school).

Source: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Financial Information (1996-2011); Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Nominal roll statistics (1996-2011)

Consequences of educational inequity

Researchers have identified a number of serious consequences of low academic achievement, low graduation rates and poor connection to the education process that may result from educational inequity.

The failure to complete a high school education carries with it astounding economic and social costs to individuals and society. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

An individual's educational attainment is one of the most important determinants of their life chances in terms of employment, income, health status, housing, and many other amenities. (Levin et al., 2007)

An international body of literature indicates a strong relationship between levels of education and employment and income. This relationship is straightforward: those who do not complete high school experience increased unemployment and decreased income earnings compared to those who have completed a high school education. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

A review of scientific literature shows strong associations between education and health across a range of illnesses including coronary disease, high blood cholesterol, cancers, Alzheimer's, some mental illnesses, diabetes, depression, stress, lung capacity, and obesity. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

High school leavers are disproportionately represented among prison populations. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

Graduation is important since it is the principal gateway to further education, university degrees, and the professions. (Battiste & Barman, 1995)

Education is the bootstrap that First Nations communities must use to improve their social and economic conditions. Like all others in Canada, Aboriginal children need to acquire an acceptable education to have a chance of succeeding in the modern economy. An acceptable education is more than high school graduation – a post-secondary diploma or degree, or a trade certificate, is required – but high school graduation is the door through which most students must pass to go on to post-secondary schooling. The most recent Census statistics, backed up by departmental data, show that this door is shut for the majority of students on reserve. (Mendelson, 2008)

If life chances depend so heavily on education, it is important that educational inequalities be redressed so as to equalize opportunities in a democratic society. (Levin et al., 2007)

In 2010, the Assembly of First Nations published **First Nations Control of First Nations Education**, a significant policy statement about First Nations Education. The document reported some substantial achievements despite persistent inequalities and funding deficits:

1. Sixty percent of First Nations students attend First Nations elementary and secondary schools;
2. Many First Nations communities have locally controlled early education and preschool programs;
3. Over five hundred on-reserve schools use First Nations pedagogies to deliver programs and services from kindergarten to grade 12, thereby promoting First Nations perspectives, traditions and worldviews;
4. Many of the schools controlled by First Nations are administered by First Nations principals, staff and qualified and certified teachers, with most schools offering local language and culture programs;

5. Forty-five locally controlled Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning have been created, providing a full range of programs from adult education to graduate degrees, serving an annual enrollment of over 10,000 learners;
6. Trained and qualified First Nations professionals serve throughout the educational landscape, serving as teachers, education experts, counselors, school administrators, scholars, and university and college professors, presidents and deans;
7. A few First Nations administer their own certification processes for instructors, programs and facilities.
8. Some regions have well established and well coordinated second and third level support programs.

Factors that affect educational success and educational equity

First Nations education must provide students with the skills, knowledge and attitudes that prepare them to realize their aspirations in careers they choose, while concurrently grounding their identity and sense of self in their culture, traditions, and language. To meet these objectives, First Nations education experts, teachers, principals, parents, Elders and students have identified a number of factors that are powerful contributors to First Nations school success. The factors can be organized into four primary categories: Physical (Material), Curriculum, Administrative, and School "Climate" or Environment. Some of the factors listed below may appear in several categories because the factors may involve several aspects, for example, both a material and a curricular component.

1. Physical (Material)

- A library that is well stocked with contemporary and relevant content;
- Availability and access to computer hardware, software and the Internet;
- Satisfactory and relevant tools for the early and ongoing assessment of the needs of students;
- Support for cultural identity by celebrating tangible cultural symbols and representations;
- Sound and safe structures and facilities;
- Tools and resources in math, science, and other areas, particularly as preparation for postsecondary pursuit;
- Adequate funding for the tools and resources of a quality education;
- Facilities and technology for and access to distance learning systems;
- Facilities for strong athletic and recreational programs to enhance quality of life and wellness.

2. Curriculum

- Mechanisms for the identification of and support for special learning needs;
- Support for cultural identity through language and traditional knowledge and teachings;
- Early literacy and numeracy programs;
- Programs for remediation of social factors that are responsible for deficits and barriers to learning;
- Courses and resources in math, science, and other areas, particularly as preparation for postsecondary education;
- A variety of courses that cover a broad range of student interests and needs;
- Culturally-relevant electives and innovative practices;
- Programs for distance learning to address individual needs;
- Strong athletic, art, music, dance and recreational programs that are known to contribute to academic success and that enhance quality of life and wellness;
- Focus on reading, with remedial mechanisms for students experiencing difficulty;
- Inclusion of trades programs for students interested in developing the skills involved in the trades;
- Balance in the curriculum, with students acquiring the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for any career path as well as acquiring self-esteem and identity from the teachings of their First Nations language and tradition.

3. Administrative

- Competent, knowledgeable and caring teachers;
- Parents who are engaged and involved in their children's education and the educational process;
- Control and involvement by First Nations leaders and community members;
- Participation in a larger educational system that provides support and services;
- Satisfactory funding for school staff, teachers, and principals;
- Recognized certification of teachers and principals;
- Mechanisms to ensure and control school attendance;
- Strong leadership by principals and community members;
- Mechanisms for the identification of and support for special learning needs;
- Transition support for students who transfer to provincial systems and experience difficulty adapting;
- Transition support for students who may experience adapting to postsecondary institutions and environments;
- Partnerships with provincial educational systems that incorporate cross-fertilization of expertise;
- Regular monitoring, tracking and reporting of educational attainment of students;

4. School Climate or Environment

- Control and involvement by First Nations leaders and community members;
- Support for cultural identity through language and traditional knowledge and teachings;
- Sound and safe structures and facilities;
- A welcoming and inviting environment;
- Strong athletic and recreational programs to enhance quality of life and wellness;
- Culturally relevant electives and innovative practices;
- Positive interpersonal relationships among students, teachers, and principals;
- School environment free of bullying, racism and demeaning interactions;
- High expectations of students.

The **First Nations Control of First Nations Education** document was designed to “assist governments and First Nations communities in building the requisite policies, programs, services and systems to ensure the future prosperity of First Nations peoples in Canada,” and reasserts “First Nations inherent Aboriginal and Treaty rights to education.” Furthermore:

This policy framework provides strategic recommendations that will enable the development and implementation of education legislation, governance frameworks, policies, programs and services for all levels of education for First Nations learners at all stages of lifelong learning. Key elements of First Nations’ lifelong learning addressed in this paper include language immersion, holistic and culturally relevant curricula, well-trained educators, focused leadership, parental involvement and accountability, and safe and healthy facilities founded on principles that respect First Nations jurisdiction over education.

Through the First Nations Control of First Nations Education 2010 policy, First Nations reassert their refusal to sacrifice future generations to the continued inadequacies of federal government policy and funding. First Nations can and must acquire the tools to achieve economic viability and sustainability through comprehensive learning systems. This requires Canada to uphold the Honour of the Crown by finally meeting its obligation to provide stable, sustainable and adequate resources for First Nations education.

First Nations peoples understand that learning is a formal and informal, instinctive, and experiential lifelong journey, encompassing early childhood learning, elementary and secondary school, career, vocational and technical training, post-secondary education (PSE) and adult learning. The primary role of holistically balanced First Nations learning systems is to transmit First Nations ancestral languages, traditions, cultures and histories, while at the same time preparing and making accessible to the learner the support and tools that will allow them to achieve their full individual potential in any setting they choose. First Nations assert

their right and responsibility to direct and make decisions regarding all matters related to First Nations learning. Provision for, and access to, lifelong learning is an Inherent and Treaty right of all First Nations peoples. Governments must work together to ensure that this lifelong journey is built upon experiences that embrace both Indigenous and mainstream western knowledge systems and that First Nations have access to the supports necessary to achieve successful education outcomes at all stages.

A series of recent reports highlighted the crisis that exists in First Nations education:

- ***Nurturing the Learning Spirit of First Nations Students*** (National Panel Report, Feb 2012)
- ***Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope*** (Senate Committee, Dec 2011)
- ***The Report on Priority Actions in View of Improving First Nations Education*** (FNEC/FSIN/NAN*, Dec 2011)
- ***Our Children, Our Future, Our Vision – First Nation Jurisdiction Over First Nations Education in Ontario*** (Chiefs of Ontario, Feb 2012)
- ***Challenges and Needs in Kikinahamaagewin*** (Education) (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Feb 2012)
- ***Opening the Doors: Reducing Barriers to Post Secondary Education in Canada*** (Senate Committee, Dec 2011)

*First Nations Education Council (QC), Federation of Saskatchewan Indians (SK), Nishnawbe Aski Nation (ON)

The core recommendations of the National Panel and Senate Committee are generally congruent with historical positions taken by the Assembly of First Nations, and consistent with the reports provided by FSIN/FNEC/NAN, the Chiefs of Ontario, and Nishnawbe Aski Nation. These areas of agreement include:

- First Nation Education Reform must be based on the child's right to their culture, language and identity, and to a quality education that is appropriate to their needs. The First Nation child must always be at the centre of this effort through a "child first" commitment that is embraced by all.
- First Nation Education Reform must be undertaken in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration among First Nations, the Government of Canada, and provincial and territorial governments.
- First Nation Education Reform must feature a commitment to mutual accountability for roles and responsibilities as well as financial inputs and education outcomes.

The Panel clearly notes that a new process for change:

"...cannot come from a place of unilaterally imposing the government's will on First Nations, which tragically marred education during the residential school experience. Nor can it be an "off-load" onto struggling communities of the full imperative of improvement without meaningful partnership, support and collaboration in building the systems required.... Given the profound and adverse consequences of historical decisions made without consultation or collaboration, it is essential that First Nations become equal partners in the design and development of a modern education system that will truly nurture the learning spirit of all First Nation students."

The Future

The First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model and the First Nations Control of First Education document calls for education systems that include:

- Programs and services grounded in First Nations languages, values, traditions and knowledge.
- Early learning programs and services that promote language and cultural immersion, school readiness and the holistic development of individuals.
- Curricula for both First Nations and non-First Nations, developed in conjunction with First Nations, that acknowledge the contribution, histories and cultures of First Nations and the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous peoples.
- The right and responsibility of First Nations to exercise free, prior and informed consent in all education decisions that affect First Nations citizens, regardless of place of residence or type of institution.
- Mechanisms to ensure that all First Nations learners, regardless of residency, have access to any school program or institute.
- Provisions that learning institutions acknowledge their responsibility to provide high quality, culturally and linguistically relevant learning opportunities and support for all First Nations learners enrolled in their learning institutions.

A publication by Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) proposes that institutions of higher education—universities and colleges—revise and expand the traditional concept of the 3 Rs (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic) and base research protocols on the following four Rs:

- Respect for the values, traditions, and prior knowledge of First Nations students;
- Relevance of the curricula, instruction, and policies to First Nations' views of the world;
- Reciprocity of the student and instructor relationship in that both learn from the experience;
- Responsibility in that higher institutions become agents in sharing power with First Nations students.

Consistent with the perspective and position of First Nations Control of First Nations Education document, National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo issued a Call to Action in First Nations education, raising the national profile of the crisis in First Nations education among provincial and territorial governments, the private sector, education organizations, media, and the general public. He proposed action on a number of fronts.

1. *Reconciliation: The federal and provincial governments must reconcile our rights within education acts across the country to ensure consistency with constitutional provisions.*
2. *First Nations Education Guarantee: A secure fiscal framework is needed for funding for education.*
3. *Sustainability: Statutory funding arrangements based on real costs, indexation and appropriate treatment for northern and remote communities.*
4. *Systems: First Nation education must be supported through professional and accountable institutional systems delivering second and third level supports.*
5. *Support and Partnership: Creating a learning environment in our communities and linking with organizations, the public and private sector to invest in our schools and for our kids.*

A final quotation from the First Nations Control of First Nations Education policy paper summarizes the Assembly of First Nations position on education.

Full implementation and support for (the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model) will ensure that all First Nations people have the opportunity to achieve their personal aspirations within comprehensive lifelong learning systems that encompass early childhood education, elementary and secondary school, vocational training and post-secondary, and adult learning. All governments must take collective action to guarantee that First Nations learners have access to education systems founded on the lifelong learning model.

References

Battiste, Marie Ann & Barman, Jean. 1995. **First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds.** UBC Press.

Canadian Council on Learning. 2009. **No “Drop” in the Bucket: The High Costs of Dropping Out.**

Cappon, P. 2008. **Measuring Success in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning.** Policy Options.

Durand, Martine. 2008. **Aboriginal Youth Drop-out Rates a Weak Spot in Canadian Education.** Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

First Nations Control of First Nations Education: It's Our Vision, It's Our Time, 2010. Assembly of First Nations.

First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model, 2007. Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning. Canadian Council on Learning.

First Nations Information Governance Centre: Quick Facts RHS 2002/2003. <http://www.rhs-ers.ca/facts>

Indian Control of Indian Education, 1972. National Indian Brotherhood.

International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cerd.htm>

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. 1966. United Nations. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>

Kirkness, V. J. and R. Barnhardt, 2001. **First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's - Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility**. Knowledge Across Cultures: A Contribution to Dialogue Among Civilizations. R. Hayoe and J. Pan. Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong. <http://ankn.uaf.edu/IEW/WINHEC/FourRs2ndEd.html>

Levine, H. M., Belfield, C., Muennig, P., & Rouse, C. 2007. **The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for All of America's Children**. Leeds National Benefit-Cost.

Mendelson, M. 2008. **Improving Education on Reserves: A First Nations Education Authority Act**. Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Nurturing the Learning Spirit of First Nations Students. 2012. The Report of the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve.

UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b38f0.html> (accessed 21 September 2012).

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. 2007. www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfiil/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf