



Institute of
Public Policy
and Economy



A Critical Perspective on the Canadian Education Gap: Assessing First Nation Student Education Outcomes in Canada

May 2021

A Critical Perspective on the Canadian Education Gap: Assessing First Nation Student Education Outcomes in Canada

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the First Nations with Schools Collective (<https://fnwsceducation.com/>) for their patience, teachings, and knowledge-sharing on the educational challenges facing First Nation communities. The FNWSC is a “collaborative partnership between eight First Nations in Ontario seeking to share effective practices in education governance, Indigenous schooling practices and education resource analysis for First Nation education system transformation in their respective communities.”¹ The members of the FNWSC, and contributors are:

From the great Anishinaabek Nation:

- Chippewas of the Thames First Nation
- M’Chigeeng First Nation
- Mississaugas of Credit First Nation
- Sagamok Anishnaabek First Nation
- Walpole Island First Nation
- Wiikwemkoong Unceded Indian Reserve

From the great Haudenosaunee Nations:

- Oneida Nation of the Thames First Nation
- Six Nations of the Grand River

Authors

Gabriel F. Sékaly
(Senior Advisor, StrategyCorp)

Reema Bazzi
(Senior Consultant, StrategyCorp)

Designer

Fenil Shah
(Graphic Designer, StrategyCorp)

The authors wish to especially thank Leslee White-Eye, the Structural Readiness Coordinator of the First Nations with Schools Collective in Ontario, for her sage advice and counsel in the drafting of this paper. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.



**Institute of
Public Policy
and Economy**

The StrategyCorp Institute of Public Policy and Economy provides thought leadership on important public policy issues facing Canadians and their governments across the country by combining policy expertise with key political insights.

This white paper was not commissioned by a client and is an independent publication of the StrategyCorp Institute of Public Policy and Economy.

For questions specifically regarding this document, please contact the authors listed above.

© 2021 StrategyCorp Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Published in Toronto, ON | May 2021

1. <https://fnwsceducation.com/>

■ Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Background and Context	3
Educational Achievement – A Tale of Two Stories, the Evidence is Clear	8
Barriers to Achievement	11
Three Recommendations	14
Conclusion	16

Executive Summary

This paper aims to unpack the history of First Nations education in Canada, provide an overview of recommendations over the last several decades brought forth by First Nation and government bodies, outline the First Nation student learner outcomes in Canada, associated education gaps, and the key barriers to achievement, and initiate a critical path forward through three key recommendations.

Understanding the impacts of education institutions on First Nation communities requires consideration of both the history of education and its role in the erasure of socio-cultural and spiritual practices, as well as its ongoing shortcomings to meet reconciliation goals and address the gaps in educational achievement. This paper aims to unpack the history of First Nations education in Canada, provide an overview of recommendations over the last several decades brought forth by First Nation and government bodies, outline the First Nation student learner outcomes in Canada, associated education gaps, and the key barriers to achievement, and initiate a critical path forward through three key recommendations. These recommendations are premised on the requirement that decision-making be in the hands of each individual First Nation, fully living up to **“First Nation control of First Nation education.”**

- 1. Outcome-based funding:** That the federal government implement a First Nations developed outcomes-based funding formula to create a student-centered, impact driven model for educational reform and reconciliation.
- 2. First Nation Focused Curriculum:** That the federal government ensure equitable resources be provided for the development of curriculum for First Nations schools developed by First Nation communities and leaders, and thus reflecting linguistic and cultural context, educational philosophy, and historical shared experience.
- 3. Qualified Teachers:** That the federal government provide resources to First Nation governments to develop culturally based

teacher training, certification programs, and resources to compensate educators at rates comparable to District School Boards to ensure the attraction and retention of qualified First Nation teachers.

The key focus of the colonial and Western school system has been the achievement of maximum enrollment;² which has become an indicator of education quality. Enrollment rates, however, do not adequately capture or reflect outcomes related to educational achievement, nor does it indicate the experiences or impacts of the education system on First Nation students today.

Establishing education systems that use history as a point of departure and ground their development in the shared experiences and knowledge systems of First Nation communities will help move the needle towards closing the significant education achievement gap characterized by a 32% difference in graduation rates between First Nation students and non-Indigenous students. Fundamental to addressing the First Nation education achievement gap is the empowerment and autonomy of First Nation communities to create an education system that ensures an equity of hope. This means not only putting in place the policies and systems required to achieve better education (and broader socio-economic) outcomes, but also, socio-cultural and spiritual support that re-instills hope and a future-focus on improved quality of life and education for First Nation learners.



2. Grant, A. 1996. No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications Inc.

Introduction



Education is among the myriad of issues that First Nations in Canada must deal with. The actions of the successive Canadian governments, both implicit³ and explicit, have resulted in a significant educational gap between First Nation students and non-First Nation students. This paper will lay out the historical context of First Nation education in Canada including some of the recommendations from successive studies and Commissions over the years, the barriers faced by First Nation students and communities, and finally, specific recommendations to improve educational outcomes for First Nation students.

First Nation education goes beyond the traditional classroom. First Nation education is rooted in the language, culture, traditions, and history of each individual First Nation. This focus means that Elders, Traditional knowledge keepers, and the community as a whole play an important role in the education of their children. It means that First Nation education

encompasses lands-based education that connects the student to their environment and teaches the importance of caring for “Mother Earth for the next 7 generations.” The combination of technology, connectivity and a lands-based education focus could be, in fact, 21st century learning for First Nations.

The western approach to education is not inclusive by nature and its underlying educational process come from a place of privilege. Resolving the vast and persistent gaps in student educational learning outcomes must be rooted in concepts of education as understood by the First Nations, not a traditional western/colonial approach.



3. By implicit, we mean that there are systemic barriers within the bureaucracy that are not recognized or acknowledged as such.



Background and Context

The inception and history of the education system in Canada is inextricably related to the attempted colonial and western erasure of Indigenous culture, heritage, knowledge-systems, and familial ties. However, the institutional impacts of education on First Nation communities are substantial and extend beyond any one historical epoch. Educational institutions in Canada have generated socio-cultural impacts on Indigenous communities, particularly youth. This requires that any analysis and forward-looking strategy on educational outcome improvements be grounded in historical experience to effectively redress acknowledgement and reconciliation efforts, and generational impacts.

Why Acknowledgement and Reconciliation? – A History of “Indian” Education Policy

Early Western colonial schooling systems were tethered to the erasure of Indigenous culture, language, and genocide of communities as-a-whole, based on and perpetuated through the propagation of Christian doctrine through the vehicle of “education.” The first documented and known schools for Indigenous youth were established in Quebec in 1620, where the purpose and intention of education was the French-washing and conversion to Christianity.⁴ By 1630, Missionary mechanisms to implement the religio-cultural erasure among Indigenous communities evolved to what is more commonly known today as settlement boundaries, reserves, and the residential schooling system. The establishment of settlements during this time were intended to address the “greatest impediment to Christianization”⁵ —that is, the cultural and nomadic lifestyle patterns among Indigenous communities; or, in other words, the removal of land-based education from First Nation learners. This also translated to the removal of children from families as standard protocol, creating separation between familial and cultural ties, and interfering in early childhood development years to establish Christian dogma and conversion.

The imposition of the Indian Act (1876) by the Crown paved the way for a federalized education system that was tasked with providing denominational education through existing church missions. In 1893, the federal government moved to reduce education-related

costs and developed a per capita school funding system that delineated further responsibility of education provision onto missionary organizations. The key focus of this school system was the continuous achievement of maximum enrollment, to reduce costs, and achieve higher “education outcomes” for students in residential schools.⁶ The implementation of the per capita model has since proliferated in modern education systems and carries with it the echoes of historical systems. In other words, the continued use of per capita based models neglects the consideration of outcomes and impacts of First Nation students, and learners.

Later amendments to the Indian Act (1894) made school attendance mandatory “for 10 months of the year, for all Indigenous children over the age of 6.”⁷ The dominant approach from 1894 throughout the 1900s was to shift from forced social integration to segregation, where the emergence of an enclosed notion of First Nation land called the reserve came to be. This enclosure of land was perpetuated institutionally through mandatory attendance policies, and the inevitable and intentional separation of children from their families. The Indian Act, and the subsequent imposition of the colonial education system has culminated in an incomplete education system. In other words, the history of education in Canada can be characterized by 150 years of neglect and cultural erasure, and thus, has imposed a substantial catch-up effect on First Nation communities

Long-term Impacts Still Felt Today

The effects of the residential schooling system, and the overarching systemic disruption to Indigenous ways of being and worldviews, can be observed in modern society. There exists an education-related trauma because of deliberate efforts by government and the church in the 18th and 19th century, and earlier. The impacts range from medical, psychosomatic conditions, mental health issues, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as cultural effects of language loss, erosion of spiritual practice, and the diminishment of traditional knowledge.⁸

Language loss is among the most pressing issues facing First Nation communities from the perspective of cultural preservation. The importance and central role of language in cultural continuity renders the impacts of colonial history as ongoing and sustained due to the intentional and systematic erasure that characterized residential schooling and

4. White, Jerry P. and Peters, Julie, “A Short History of Aboriginal Education in Canada” (2009). Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi). 23. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/23>

5. White, Jerry P. and Peters, Julie, “A Short History of Aboriginal Education in Canada” (2009). Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi). 23. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/23>

6. Grant, A. 1996. *No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications Inc.

7. Grant, A. 1996. *No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications Inc.

8. Wilk, P., Maltby, A. & Cooke, M. Residential schools and the effects on Indigenous health and well-being in Canada—a scoping review. *Public Health Rev* 38, 8 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-017-0055-6>

colonialism. Barriers to language preservation range from aging First Nation communities to low rates of Indigenous language speakers, and insufficient programs and supports to encourage re-learning and reconnection to Indigenous languages. This impact sets the stage for establishing a universe for education that parallels the French Immersion education model. Addressing the above-noted key barriers is central. However, government support for First Nation and Indigenous schooling options similar to that of French Immersion should be considered feasible and high-impact solutions to language preservation. Presently, more than “two-thirds of more than 70 Indigenous languages spoken in Canada are considered endangered. In B.C., only ~4 per cent of Indigenous people fluently speak their language; most of which, are older in age”.⁹

Special Education and Mental Health Supports

Schooling and education systems specific to First Nation communities have been characterized by substantial shortcomings in funding, as well as in representation and curriculum development. There are significant mental health impacts that have been further exacerbated by the continued erasure of language and culture and have been cited as endemic among First Nation communities. Suicide rates among First Nation communities, for example, has been cited as two-times more likely to occur than among non-Indigenous populations.¹⁰ These impacts can be attributed to colonialism, as well as the immediate and residual impacts related to loss of connection to culture, heritage, and familial ties. As it relates to improving education systems, these effects impact the need for, and definition of special education. The current definition and scope does not effectively capture the intergenerational and ongoing trauma facing First Nation students in their interaction with western education systems.

Education System Leadership and Governance

The interpersonal, as well as socio-cultural effects have also created conditions related to educational achievement that can only be characterized as the 150(+) year catch-up effect, where First Nation communities have been tasked with increasing responsibility to integrate into modern education systems after decades of exclusion, segregation, and forced socio-cultural integration, and with no comparable funding to effectively do so.

Further, the gaps in educational achievements can be directly correlated to the expectation of First Nation integration into government systems, where there is a corresponding infrastructure gap related to data management systems, schools, teacher training systems, professional learning organizations, curriculum resource development, among many other issues. In British Columbia, for example, there exists a 16% gap in graduation rates between First Nation and non-First Nation students.¹¹ In Ontario, this gap is more significant, with a 28% gap between First Nation and non-First Nation students at the high school level.¹²

Looking back at the numerous commissions, studies, investigations, and declarations on First Nation education over the last 40 years, it is evident that progress and reform in this sphere has moved at a less than glacial pace. This means that new generations of First Nation students have been ill-served by the education structure supporting First Nation education. We want to be clear that we are not talking about the dedicated First Nation teachers, leaders, community workers, and Chiefs who have been pushing this reform boulder up the hill. Rather it is the inaction by the Government of Canada¹³ notwithstanding the public comments made over the years. There have been several Federal attempts to ameliorate the situation, but a huge amount of work remains. In the meantime, First Nation children are disadvantaged.

Federal “Indian” Education Policy Unresponsive to Calls for Change

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations published one of the first policy papers laying out the foundation for First Nation control of First Nation education:

“Indian parents must have FULL RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTROL OF EDUCATION. The Federal Government must adjust its policy and practices to make possible the full participation and partnership of Indian people in all decisions and activities connected with the education of Indian children. This requires determined and enlightened action on the part of the Federal Government and immediate reform, especially in the following areas of concern: responsibility, programs, teachers, facilities.”¹⁴

- National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, 1972

9. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/06/21/indigenous-languages_a_23465069/

10. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190628/dq190628c-eng.htm>

11. https://www.bcauditor.com/sites/default/files/OAGBC_Ab-Ed-Progress_RPT.pdf

12. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/fr/magazines/policy-challenges-for-2020/closing-the-gap-in-first-nations-education/>

13. Though there has been an improvement in the approach of the political level recently, until that attitude permeates all levels of the organization, change will continue to be difficult.

14. Indian Control of Indian Education, National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, 1972 <https://oneca.com/IndianControlofIndianEducation.pdf>

In 2010 the Assembly of First Nations updated the 1972 policy paper and developed a mission statement for a First Nation Education Policy Statement:

"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."¹⁵

– Assembly of First Nations, 2010

On February 27, 2012, the Canadian House of Commons unanimously adopted "**Shannen's Dream**" that supports the concept of true equity for First Nation children and included the following statement as it relates to First Nation education:

"That, in the opinion of the House, the government should adopt Shannen's Dream by: (a) declaring that all First Nation children have an equal right to high quality, culturally-relevant education; (b) committing to provide the necessary financial and policy supports for First Nations education systems; (c) providing funding that will put reserve schools on par with non-reserve provincial schools; (d) developing transparent methodologies for school construction, operation, maintenance and replacement; (e) working collaboratively with First Nation leaders to establish equitable norms and formulas for determining class sizes and for the funding of educational resources, staff salaries, special education services and indigenous language

instruction; and (f) implementing policies to make the First Nation education system, at a minimum, of equal quality to provincial school systems."¹⁶

– Shannen's Dream, 2012

The Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, provided a number of recommendations to the Government of Canada on First Nation education, and in particular the development of a new legislative framework for First Nation Education:

"10. We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:

- i. Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.*
- ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.*
- iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.*
- iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.*
- v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.*
- vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.*
- vii. Respecting and honouring Treaty relationships."¹⁷*

- Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, 2015

15. Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Control of First Nation Education, July 2010, page 10

16. Canadian House of Commons, February 16, 2012, 268 in favour, 0 against <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/41-1/house/sitting-84/journals>

17. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf



The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms the right to self-determination and control of their destiny including in education as specifically delineated in the following articles:

Article 13

1. *Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.*
2. *States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.*

Article 14

1. *Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.*
2. *Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.*

3. *States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.”¹⁸*

- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007

*The Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario’s **Inquest into the deaths of seven First Nation Youths in Thunder Bay** also made several recommendations related to education of First Nation children.¹⁹ Though some of the recommendations were aimed at the Government of Ontario as well as to Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the majority were addressed to the Government of Canada. Many recommendations focused on the need to reduce the learning outcome gap over ten years by providing sufficient, stable, transparent, and predictable funding as well as culturally appropriate education.*

18. United Nations, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, March 2008, https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

19. Office of the Chief Coroner, <https://www.mcscs.jus.gov.on.ca/english/Deathinvestigations/Inquests/Verdictsandrecommendations/OCCVerdictsSevenFirstNationsYouths.html>

Educational Achievement – A Tale of Two Stories, the Evidence is Clear



Federal and Provincial Data

There are numerous studies that show a significant educational achievement gap between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. This gap is prevalent throughout K-12 and exists for both on-reserve First Nations students and First Nation students enrolled in the provincial education system in Ontario. Given the frequent lack of secondary schools in First Nations communities, First Nation students must travel to other communities to enroll in Ontario School Board run schools or in the few First Nation-run secondary schools.

In 2012, the Auditor General of Ontario remarked about the educational attainment gap between First Nation students and non-First Nation students:

Research indicates that many Aboriginal students are faced with significant challenges that impact their achievement levels in school, such as high rates of poverty, substandard housing and poor nutrition. Equally important, many of these students live in areas with little prospect of future employment, which is often a demoralizing factor in taking their education seriously.

The 2006 census (the most recent definitive data on Aboriginal education) identified that only 62% of Aboriginal adults had graduated from high school as compared to 78% of the general population, a gap of 16%. The academic achievement gap is even more pronounced—as high as 50%—for the youngest adult age group (aged 20–24). Only 39% of the First Nation people living on reserve in this age group had graduated from high school. This issue is even more important considering that 46% of First Nation people are under the age of 25, as compared to the overall population where 32% are less than 25 years old.²⁰

In that report, the Auditor General remarked on the 34% graduation rate gap between on-reserve First Nation adults compared to non-Indigenous adults. For on-reserve 20-24-year-olds, that graduation gap was an astounding 50% in 2006.

A more recent Ontario Ministry of Education report continued to show significant educational achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Ontario schools.²¹ The table below provides a summary of the results of the EQAO tests in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 for First Nation and non-Indigenous students in Ontario's English school board system.

20. Auditor General of Ontario, Education of Aboriginal Students, 2012 Annual Report, Chapter 3, Section 3.05 <https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en12/305en12.pdf>

21. Strengthening our Learning Journey, Third Progress Report on Implementation of Ontario First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/indigenous/progressReport3rd.html>

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Grade 3 Reading					
Non-Indigenous	66	68	70	NA	72
First Nation	44	44	50	NA	53
Grade 3 Writing					
Non-Indigenous	76	77	78	NA	74
First Nation	55	53	62	NA	56
Grade 3 Math					
Non-Indigenous	68	67	67	NA	63
First Nation	45	42	45	NA	40
Grade 6 Reading					
Non-Indigenous	75	77	79	NA	81
First Nation	53	55	62	NA	62
Grade 6 Writing					
Non-Indigenous	74	76	78	NA	80
First Nation	50	53	60	NA	61
Grade 6 Math					
Non-Indigenous	58	57	54	NA	50
First Nation	31	30	30	NA	23
Grade 9 Math (academic)					
Non-Indigenous	84	84	85	NA	83
First Nation	65	67	69	NA	67
Grade 9 Math (applied)					
Non-Indigenous	45	44	47	NA	45
First Nation	37	31	34	NA	34
Grade 10 OSSLT					
Non-Indigenous	82	82	82	82	81
First Nation	59	57	58	59	59

This achievement gap is substantial. Available data from EQAO shows that in provincially run schools in 2015-16 there was a 32.5% gap in the 4-year graduation and a 26.3% gap in the 5-year graduation rate between First Nation students and all students. Similarly, the credit accumulation rate for FN students lagged substantially behind that of all students: 21% by end of grade 9, 25% by end of grade 10 and 26% by the end of grade 11.

Results of Grades 3-6-9-10 EQAO tests between 2011-12 and 2015-16 continue to show persistent and significant gaps between First Nation Students and non-Indigenous students.

These achievement gaps provide information about the progress of First Nation children as

they progress through the system. If they are years behind their peers in the Grade 3 or Grade 6 testing, they will almost always continue to be behind in high school and thus have a higher drop-out rate and a lower graduation rate.

There are no comparable publicly available statistics for First Nation youth attending schools in First Nation communities. Given other data sources available, it would be safe to presume that the educational achievements are, at best, on par with that in the English school system which shows a significant gap in reading, writing, and math in all grades and throughout the years in the report.



Barriers to Achievement

There is a fundamental difference in what is construed as education between First Nations and the Canadian federal and provincial governments. The starting point for First Nations is sovereignty, not subjugation to a different government. As sovereign, First Nations view education as an expansive concept, not one that is limited to classrooms in a brick building and only covering K-12 education. For First Nations, the definition of education and its delivery must fit within their culture, history, and traditions.

Education encompasses the whole family and the community. It connects the learner to a larger universe that surrounds them. It connects the learner to the colonial past – painful as it may be – and it connects the learner to traditional knowledge and skills. It is an immersive experience that connects the learner to the land and promotes solidarity amongst First Nations.

Governance, or control over educational decisions, is one of the most important barriers facing First Nations. The historic mentality of the Federal Government, whereby they know best, continues in many aspects of daily life in First Nation territories and hinders the ability of First Nations to control their own destiny. Inadequate line-item budgets that require First Nations to receive approval to re-allocate funds from one education line to another hinder the ability of First Nations to quickly meet local needs. For example, a First Nation may have a higher proportion of students requiring special education supports. They should not need approval from Ottawa to re-allocate money from within the overall education budget to meet those needs.

The overall quantum of education funding for First Nations is a significant barrier to close the learning gap that has been documented through many reports and studies over the years. Without adequate resources First Nations will never be in a position to overcome the impact of past colonial actions and close the learning gap for their students. In addition to adequate, ongoing, and predictable funding there are a few other building blocks that will be key to ensuring that First Nation children have an equal opportunity to quality education and achieve similar educational outcomes as non-Indigenous children.

School Capital

The first of these is to be able to learn in quality schools that are properly equipped and include gymnasiums, laboratories, libraries, special

education space, and other amenities that non-Indigenous schools are equipped with. Given the importance of First Nation culture, it would also be important for these schools to include space for the Elders who will be available to assist students as well as space for traditional and cultural activities. Given that schools are likely to also serve as gathering locations for First Nations, these buildings should also include community-oriented space to serve as a community hub.

Culture-based Curriculum

The next significant barrier is the lack of a broad curriculum in the language of the First Nation that reflects its culture, history, and traditions. The First Nation education system must support and ensure that the language, culture, history, arts, and skills of each First Nation is passed on to the next generation and following generations. This includes the establishment and/or enhancement of immersion programs in the language to regain ground that has been lost. Each First Nation must have the flexibility to use the funding in a way that best assists their individual circumstances. In all cases, learning materials must be developed for all grades and the curriculum must promote the culture and language of each individual First Nation.

This curriculum must also include what is termed “Lands-based Education,” that reflects traditional endeavors. A significant focus on “lands-based” education goes beyond environmental stewardship (caring of “Mother Earth for next 7 generations”) and is delivered outside of the confines of the traditional western-style classroom. The focus of lands-based education supports improving the confidence level of First Nation students as they understand more deeply their own culture and traditions. This focus also plays an important role in helping to develop the leadership capacity of students. The role of Elders is key in the sharing of the knowledge, history, and traditions of the First Nation.

Educator Qualification to Deliver on a Curriculum Based in Culture

To teach a First Nations centric curriculum, the teachers will need to be fluent in the language and well versed in the culture and history of the First Nation. Qualified teachers are the cornerstone to ensure quality education for First Nation students. There are several Faculties of Education in Canada that have specializations for First Nation teachers. It is important not only to recruit these teachers, but more importantly, it would be crucial to retain them in the community.

First Nations schools, especially in more remote communities, have had difficulty attracting and retaining qualified teachers. In times of a surplus of teachers, First Nations have been able to attract younger teachers early in their careers who were seeking teaching experience. These teachers would then move to provincial systems after gaining teaching experience. We are now entering a period of a shortage of new teachers with school boards competing for qualified teachers. This will make the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers even more problematic. To support the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers, there is a need to provide wage and benefit parity with what is paid in the provincially funded system. In addition, there may be a need to provide additional incentives, especially in more remote communities, that recognizes the additional costs in those communities.

Indigenous Teacher Education and Post-Secondary Programming

It is also necessary to greatly enhance access for First Nations people to go to teachers' college. This can be achieved through courses and programs developed by Indigenous institutes and increased financial support. In some cases, this may be the only way to find a teacher with cultural knowledge and expertise and a teacher who can be retained year-after-year.

School Transportation

Many First Nation communities in Ontario do not have a school on their territory, and the majority of those that do only have schools that go to the end of grade 8. This means that their students must travel to a public high school to continue their education. In some communities, this means a daily bus ride to the nearest high school, but for isolated First Nation communities, this means that the young student must leave their home and community supports to attend a high school while living in a distant and unfamiliar city. Without community supports or adequate supports from the "host" high school/school board, these young students have had significant problems adjusting and completing their education. They are already arriving at the non-reserve high school significantly behind their non-First Nation peers academically (based on available test scores) and now must deal with the jarring change of navigating a new town/city without family supports. Under the present

system, funding could be provided to enable students to travel to their home communities a few times a year, as well as to allow families to visit their children.

Expanded First Nation Schooling Options in the Community

To increase the likelihood of educational success, more high schools should be located in First Nations communities. Failing having the numbers necessary to offer the wide variety of courses throughout the secondary level, several incremental options are available. Distance learning (dependent upon Wi-Fi availability) coupled with in-person learning, or locating the junior high school grades in the First Nation community, might be logical intermediary steps.

Community Re-engagement in Schooling and Empowerment

One of the underlying constructs of First Nation education is the role of the community and the concept of "family-centered" education. The historical legacy of Indian education policy in Canada must be overcome for First Nation education to flourish. The societal impacts of these governmental policies (Residential schools, forced assimilation, and loss of language & culture) are still being felt in First Nation communities today. Specific supports are needed to assist the school to engage meaningfully with the community.

In addition, there is a recognition within First Nations of the key role of families in educational outcomes, and that unless the whole family is involved and is thriving, then the individual student will not have the supports at home to succeed throughout their academic career. The legacy of past governmental failures must be overcome for the new generation of students to succeed. This can only be achieved by ensuring that families have access to needed programs and supports. This approach is contrasted with the "student centered focus" in many non-First Nation schools. Most parents want their children to be successful and pursue careers of their choice. The focus on culture and language is to create a solid foundation on which learning can be grounded.



Three Recommendations

There are a few strategies that must coalesce to significantly shrink the educational learning gap between First Nation students and non-First Nation students in Ontario and Canada. In this section we will focus on three key recommendations, namely:

- **Outcome-based funding:** That the federal government implement a First Nations developed outcomes-based funding formula to create a student-centered, impact driven model for educational reform and reconciliation.
- **First Nation Focused Curriculum:** That the federal government ensure equitable resources be provided for the development of curriculum for First Nations schools developed by First Nation communities and leaders, and thus reflecting linguistic and cultural context, educational philosophy, and historical shared experience.
- **Qualified Teachers:** That the federal government provide resources to First Nation governments to develop culturally based teacher training, certification programs, and resources to compensate educators at rates comparable to District School Boards to ensure the attraction and retention of qualified First Nation teachers.

These recommendations are premised on the requirement that decision-making be in the hands of each individual First Nation, fully living up to "First Nation control of First Nation Education."

Fundamental Change in the Funding Formula

Many educational funding models base the allocation to local authorities on "inputs", which is an amount of dollars per unit of input. For example, \$500 per student for learning materials. An outcome-based approach must provide the appropriate level of funding to overcome the systemic achievement gaps, decades of underfunding, and active measures by successive governments to undermine the language and culture of First Nations.

This outcome model would provide each First Nation with an overall educational budget and the individual First Nation would make the allocation decisions based upon their unique circumstances, as opposed to being directed by a "central authority" on how to allocate the

resources. The First Nation educational body would be accountable to the members of their community on how the funds are allocated and spent, but more importantly, they would be accountable for student outcomes. The basic premise is that the funds must be spent for educational purposes as defined by the First Nation. There may need to be an investment in building the capacity of the First Nation to enable them to take on this role. They are up to the challenge.

Accountability

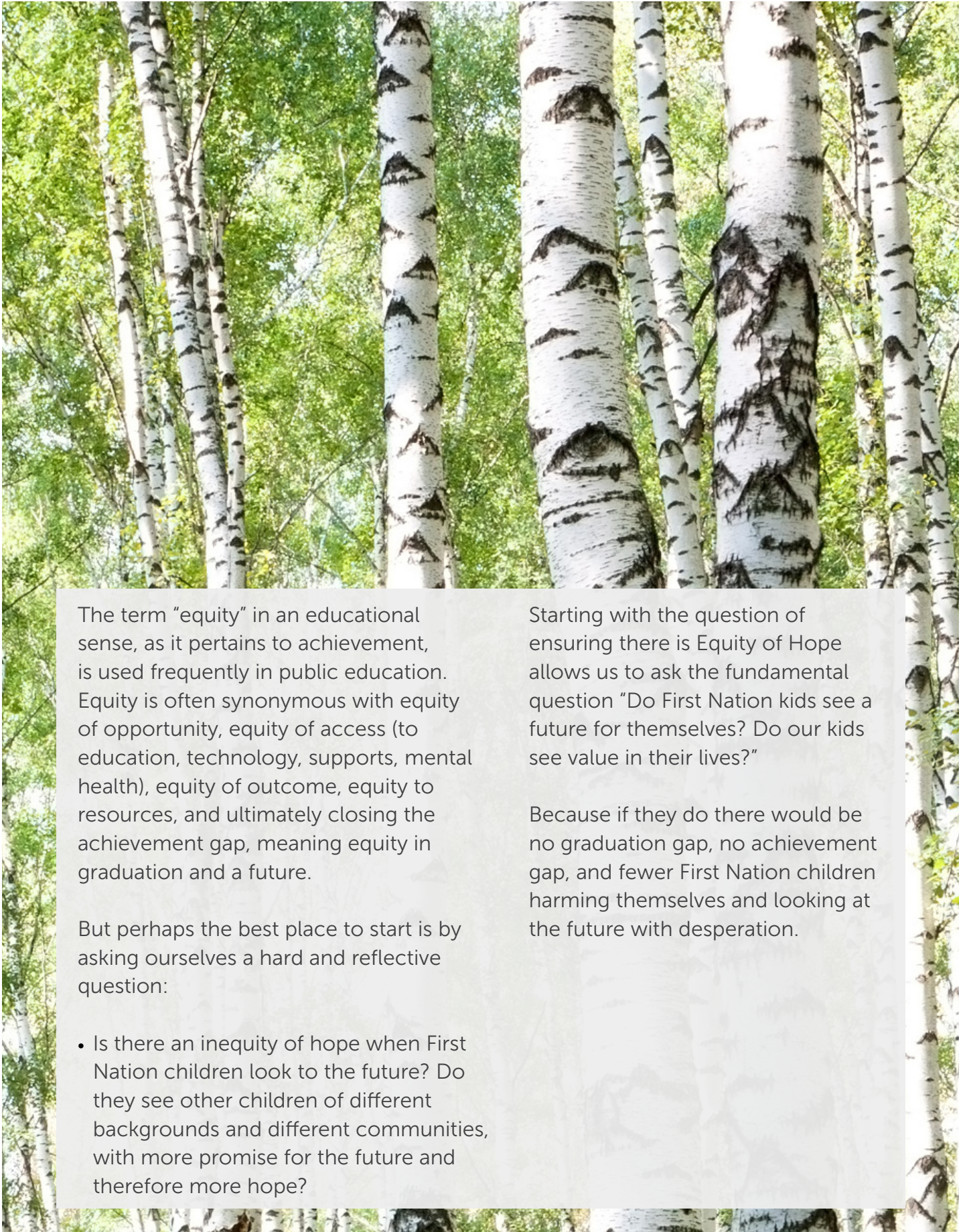
Accountability can be akin to the accountability relationship between the federal government and provincial governments for health transfers, for example, or akin to that between provinces and municipalities. The First Nations could also publish outcome-based reports on their students' educational achievement as well as more traditional financial statements.

Education Systems Foundation

The second recommendation argues that the full aspirations of First Nation communities to provide a holistic approach to their children's education, and which includes the important role of the community, must be recognized. Within that educational framework, First Nations must be empowered and funded to develop a curriculum that reflects their language, culture, history, and educational philosophy. This means the full integration of lands-based education in teachings. It also means that First Nations would develop their own datasets to measure the learning outcomes of their students. The curriculum would necessarily need to reflect the provincial curriculum as many First Nation students attend high schools outside of their home territory. As well, it is necessary for these students to have the provincial graduation degree to enable them enroll in postsecondary education or apprenticeships, should they so desire.

Providing First Nations with the flexibility to allocate their financial resources to areas of greater need would allow them to recruit and retain qualified teachers. This is especially difficult in more remote, fly-in communities. Some of these teachers may need to undertake an "immersion" program to re-acquire or re-acquaint themselves in the First Nation language. First Nations must have the flexibility to invest in this professional development as well as compensate these teachers appropriately.

Conclusion



The term “equity” in an educational sense, as it pertains to achievement, is used frequently in public education. Equity is often synonymous with equity of opportunity, equity of access (to education, technology, supports, mental health), equity of outcome, equity to resources, and ultimately closing the achievement gap, meaning equity in graduation and a future.

But perhaps the best place to start is by asking ourselves a hard and reflective question:

- Is there an inequity of hope when First Nation children look to the future? Do they see other children of different backgrounds and different communities, with more promise for the future and therefore more hope?

Starting with the question of ensuring there is Equity of Hope allows us to ask the fundamental question “Do First Nation kids see a future for themselves? Do our kids see value in their lives?”

Because if they do there would be no graduation gap, no achievement gap, and fewer First Nation children harming themselves and looking at the future with desperation.



**Institute of
Public Policy
and Economy**

The StrategyCorp Institute of Public Policy and Economy is StrategyCorp's think tank on innovation in public policy and economics.

strategycorp.com/institute

Toronto Office

145 King Street East,
2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5C 2Y7
(T) 416-864-7112
(F) 416-864-7117

Ottawa Office

100 rue Queen Street Suite 850
Ottawa, ON K1P 1J9
(T) 613-231-2630
(F) 613-231-4113