



A Perspective
On
First Nation Alternative Education

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April 2004

Introduction

A universal definition that fits most alternative programs and classes comes from the Michigan Department of Education,

“...an alternative education program may be designed and provided for pupils who simply are more academically successful in a non-traditional setting. An alternative classroom may vary from a small group of pupils from several grade levels receiving instruction for several subject areas from one certified teacher in a non-graded classroom setting to a program lab in which the certified teacher is present and pupil works at his/her own pace on assigned subject matter. These pupils may attend on a part-time basis for several hours per day for specified subjects or a pupil may attend one-on-one teacher/pupil session several times a week. The classes must be of subjects that are acceptable for a pupil to earn credit toward a high school diploma or grade level progression.”

From a First Nation perspective the above definition would fit most alternative programs. More clearly, First Nation alternative education programming is understood to be an option for students acquiring credits in a non traditional classroom, mature students, and students who are suspended or choose to leave the mainstream high school programming and have the opportunity to achieve high school credits and attain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

Raywid (1990) identified three categories for alternative education programs based on their underlying assumptions and goals. The first being, **True Educational Alternatives**; based on the theory that all students can learn if provided with the right educational environment. This type of program strives to meet students' needs in order to help them succeed. The second being, **Alternative Discipline Programs**; considered “last chance” programs for disruptive students focus on behavior modification. This type of program attempts to change students by teaching compliance skills and return them to their traditional schools or classrooms. The third type, **Therapeutic Programs** assumes that students need to change to succeed in traditional schools. This type elicits change through counseling, rather than through behaviour modification.

First Nation alternative programming aim for True Educational Alternatives, where the right educational environment and non-traditional classes meet their students needs and generate greater student success. Alternative Discipline Programs are generally associated with larger high schools, where students and administration may use this type of program as a temporary accommodation for problem students. Therapeutic Programs are generally associated with social agencies requiring an educational component for student clientele.

Alternative education programs gained popularity for school boards across the province and Canada in the mid to late eighties when many mature students realizing the need and importance of a high school diploma, returned to high school. Alternative education has become a common component for many school boards, First Nation secondary programs, and the adult education system for attaining a high school diploma.

The Ministry of Education has organized the Independent Learning Centre (ILC)¹ and made responsible for easy access and preparation of self-study courses that meet the Ministry standards and guidelines. These ILC type courses are easily attainable by all schools, education programs and individuals across the province through telephone, mail or internet.

¹ Information on the Independent Learning Centre can be found at <http://www.ilc.org>

Many provincial high schools have an alternative program for students who cannot cope with the traditional classroom instruction or students who are expelled or suspended from mainstream programming. Ontario students who enter alternative programming become familiar with ILC (Independent Learning Centre) courses. These courses are designed in twenty lesson formats, equivalent to one high school credit. The Ontario Ministry of Education approves the courses and like all courses taught in Ontario, they must cover the overall expectations in the Ministry guidelines. Teachers who write up their course outlines must fit these overall expectations into a minimum standard of 110 hours of instruction and evaluation. For a student to complete one credit in the twenty lessons format does and generally exceeds the 110 hours of independent study. Students in mainstream classes generally complete eight high school credits in an academic year. It is realistic for students in alternative education to complete four to six credits in an academic year.

Alternative programming using ILC courses is available to most First Nation students across the province. First Nation students that leave mainstream high school have access to the Independent Learning Centre through an application process with their education counsellor. Many First Nations in northern and northwestern Ontario have alternative programming available for their members. Many programs use the ILC packages or if funding is available or arranged, the school or education authority may design their own independent studies or programs and have them approved by the Ministry of Education. Some of these Unique Programs will be described later in the paper.

A high percentage of First Nation students across Ontario and Canada leave mainstream education before graduation.² There are a variety of reasons why First Nation students choose to leave mainstream education; expelled or suspended and don't return, pregnancy, part-time employment, low self esteem, poor academic and study skills, no parental support, little community support, low motivation, tired of bussing, peer pressure, substance abuse, behavioral, personal issues, bored with school, and bored with the curriculum.

Frustrating and sadly, for many First Nation students, leaving school before graduation is common. With many First Nation students choosing to leave early, good potential students are discouraged and dispirited by early leavers and many conform to the rest of group. These students are under great stress and often the social pressure is too great to place graduation over friendship and being part of the group.

Many First Nation members who leave mainstream education return at a latter age with the intent to complete their high school graduation requirements. Many return for a variety of reasons; a high school diploma is important to them, a requirement for better job opportunities, a requirement for post secondary opportunities, some feel ready to continue, some register for social assistance opportunities, and parental pressure. The average age for alternative education graduates is generally 20+. It is common for alternative programs across Ontario to graduate students of 25 years of age or older.³

The intent of the paper is to inform the reader on Alternative Education and its importance and place in First Nation Education.

² Inferred data from Community Profiles (Without Secondary School Graduation Certificate) compiled from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

³ Average ages of graduates were compiled from five First Nation alternative programs.(Seven Generations Secondary School, Batchewana Learning Centre, Wahsa Distance Education Centre, Ohahase Education Centre)

The Vision

The vision of First Nations education requires provision for a sound education system that begins in early childhood, and extends to adult education and training and post-secondary education. The education system must be grounded in the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge and reinforced with the teaching of language and culture. First Nation education would emphasize learning as lifelong process.

Meeting this vision requires community input, quality instruction, appropriate academic content, a safe learning environment, collaboration of federal, provincial and territorial governments with aboriginal governments, and adequate professional and fiscal resources. Parents, elders, education leaders, native organizations in the field of education in urban and non-reserve areas, and other members of First Nation communities would be responsible for identifying the goals and objectives of their people's education to help create culturally and linguistically competent learners.

Three immediate actions are identified to make the vision a reality: transferring the jurisdiction for education to First Nations; creating a First Nations education infrastructure with supporting mechanisms that enable First Nations to exercise education jurisdiction; and a revised education budget that reflects the actual costs of a comprehensive First Nations education renewal and reform. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, Our Children: Keepers of the Sacred Knowledge)

Individuals who successfully pass through the education system would be confident, competent learners who respect their language and culture and recognize education as a lifelong learning experience.

What currently exists in the First Nations' education system?

What education structures, programs, services and human resources are currently in place?

There are a number of structures, programs, services and human resources currently in place to help meet the educational needs of aboriginal learners. There are approximately 160 First Nation schools/sites.⁴ The most common education program in place on First Nation communities is the K-8 elementary schools. Several First Nations that are road accessible have K-12 schools, as well as a few in isolated northern communities.

⁴ FirstNationSchools.ca lists schools and sites in Ontario.

Secondary schools have to be inspected by the Ministry of Education to grant an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. There are thirty-three private First Nation elementary and secondary schools listed.⁵

Generally, these First Nations that are accessible by road have their secondary students attend public school board high schools. Isolated northern communities without a secondary program send their secondary students south to public high schools.

Alternative education programs are common in Ontario high schools, as well as accessible alternative programming in First Nation communities. There are a significant number of First Nation students that do not complete high school in the customary four years. For a variety of reasons many aboriginal students leave mainstream high school and choose alternative programs to meet graduation requirements.

A vital human resource involved in First Nation Education is the community education counsellor. First Nation education counsellors are the key contact personnel for community members to help provide them with access to schools and training programs, including alternative education. Generally there is one education counsellor per community. Some of the larger communities will assign one counsellor to oversee elementary/secondary education and one to post secondary education. Some community counsellors are involved in the retention of students and aiding students who are dealing with personal issues. Community counsellors also aid students who are dealing with abuse and family issues. (Bazylak, D. 2002)

As well as community education counselors, it is common practice for each First Nation School to hire community members as education assistants to assist both in the classroom and as one-on-one aids for special needs students. In Northern and Northwestern Ontario some public school boards with sufficient numbers of First Nation students are also hiring First Nation community members as teacher aids for their elementary and secondary programs.

Unique Programs: This section overviews a few Ontario First Nation alternative programs that are and have experienced some success and different in program design to fit the clientele and geographic location for the students they serve.

WAHSA

Wahsa Distance Education Centre is a First Nations High School dedicated to providing quality alternative secondary education services to remote Ojibway, Cree and Oji-Cree communities across Northwestern and Northern Ontario Canada.

“Wahsa” is an Oji-Cree term meaning “far away”. The term identifies a unique model of secondary education delivery to remote First Nation learners. Many programs for First Nation students, especially those offered through alternative education, incorporate technology into their programming. This allows for a greater degree of flexibility, as students can access course content at their convenience. The courses are designed to enable the student to participate actively in a course despite being at a distance from Wahsa Central, in Sioux Lookout, Ontario. Students can access their course through radio and teleconferencing.

⁵ Private Elementary and Secondary Schools complete with addresses are located on the Ministry of Education website, under Private Schools and First Nation affiliation.

This program of the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council was established in 1990 as a First Nations High School to provide mature learners with the opportunity to complete secondary studies while living, working and raising families at home.

Vital to the success of the program are the community distance education coordinators, print correspondence, radio-mediated context courses, culturally relevant programming and a sense of ownership by the education authority and community sites.

Wahsa offers a distinct high school alternative for First Nation students. The Distance Education program emerged in 1990 in response to the mass exodus and subsequent return of students from southern mainstream high schools. These students were finding it difficult, for a variety of reasons, to adjust to life outside their communities. Without Wahsa, many of these students would not be able to complete their graduation requirements.

Students may enroll in radio and/or correspondence courses. Students may listen to radio classes through the chosen radio frequency and/or Bell Express Vu. They may phone a 1-800 number to participate in their classes, and can even call a teacher collect at home for individual tutorial support. Teachers and academic counselors are based at Wahsa central.⁶

The Keewatinook Internet High School Program

The KiHS is a “Council Operated” private school presently serving students in six remote Ontario First Nation communities. KiHS uses the internet to deliver high school courses to students located in a traditional type computer classroom within their home community. KiHS is the first Internet high school in Ontario to be authorized by the Ministry of Education to grant credits leading toward an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

The KiHS students are youth who live in their home communities and who otherwise would have to leave home to attend high school.

The greatest benefit for communities is that it allows their students to complete grade nine and ten before leaving for a larger urban center to complete high school. The additional two years in the community allows students to mature as learners and build the skills required for success in secondary school.

A trained teacher resides in each community and is present in the classroom. Grade nine and ten applied⁷ courses are offered. Each teacher in the community is responsible for one subject area. While not instructing, the teacher is responsible for tutoring students in their other courses.

In this program, students have time to respond during the online sessions. This is different to the immediate face-to-face feedback usually required in traditional settings. The online format allows students to reflect on the subject content before responding.

The school year is flexible with four nine-week terms. This gives students the chance to complete more focused work in a smaller time frame. The students have access to a computer 100% of the

⁶ Wahsa central is located in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, and more detailed information about Wahsa can be obtained from the following website <http://www.dfc.nnec.on.ca/wahsa>

⁷ Applied courses cover the essential concepts of a subject. Knowledge and skills will be developed through both theory and practical applications, but the focus will be on practical applications.

time in a one to one ratio. The students use a wide range of technology and software programs daily to complete course expectations.

Seven Generations Secondary School, Ohahase Ed. Centre, Batchewana Learning Centre Adults in Motion.

Each of these programs offers alternative education to First Nation student populations that have returned to school to complete their graduation requirements. As well, some students transfer to these programs because of truancy or suspension from mainstream high school.

Seven Generations Education Institute operates the secondary program while First Nation Technical Institute operates Ohahase Education Centre. Batchewana Learning Centre and Adults in Motion School are governed by area First Nation Education Authorities. All programs were developed to help meet the needs of the increasing number of First Nation students who were not finding success in mainstream education. The number of First Nation students enrolled in these programs determines the number of teachers required for program delivery.

These programs offer self-study format courses, usually 20 lessons in length per credit. Additionally, all schools offer quality co-op programs where students can gain valuable work experience in a variety of settings. These programs also offer mainstream type instruction for some core courses. Some compulsory courses are offered as in-class instruction.

Sharing of courses is a common practice between these schools. Since the implementation of the new curriculum (1999) these private schools have had to develop new courses to meet the curriculum expectations, since the Independent Learning Centre/TVO did not have a full complement of courses ready for alternative programming and still do not have all compulsory courses available for these programs.

INAC had funded some course development for the first two years. Alternative programs, however, must now budget for course development. This is a huge challenge to programs and students who are dependent on a variety of courses to meet their graduation post secondary requirements.

Success of these programs are dependent to dedicated staff working to understand their students' needs and the unique challenges faced in implementing the programs. Staffing of these programs are qualified teachers who are from the area or community. A genuine interest in the students and passion for what they do are the main characteristics for teachers in these programs.

The Adults in Motion program is open year round, as they are hired as band staff employees. The other programs operate on the academic school year and are generally closed for the summer; however, students can continue with their studies over the summer months.

What are the key components of a First Nations education system, which distinguish it from mainstream?

The main component of a First Nations education system that distinguishes it from the mainstream is the inclusion of Native language and culturally relevant curriculum. Teachers, community members and elders stress the importance of including local knowledge, culture and tradition in the education program, as a means of connecting students to their community.

Because of the high percentage of First Nations students who have not completed their graduation requirements, alternative education programs have become a key component to education and for the retention of First Nation students in First Nation communities. These programs make an effort to accommodate the unique needs of First Nation students who are dispersed throughout Northern Ontario.

First Nation education authorities have also come to recognize the importance of aboriginal teachers and staff working in the education system. First Nations are encouraging those dedicated community members to upgrade their qualifications and role model success for students.

With the increase in First Nation schools over the last fifteen years, there has been an increase in the number of aboriginal educators/support staff working in First Nation schools. First Nation schools recognize the importance of First Nation staff working and seen as role models for their students.

What works best, what are some of the best practices and why they are successful?

- **Alternative Education Programs**

First Nation education authorities recognize the need for alternative programming to allow their community members the opportunity to complete graduation requirements in their home community and prepare for post secondary training or education. These programs generally cater to mature students who did not complete or had not found success in mainstream education and prefer an alternative route that better suits their individual needs and lifestyle. Alternative education is also used to retain First Nation students and encourage students to continue their high school requirements for possible reentry to mainstream education.

Alternative programs are generally less formal and more flexible than traditional means of instruction. These programs allow for more one on one interaction with the teacher/instructor and greater opportunity to explore concepts and meet expectations.

There is a variety of personal, social, economic and family; reasons why students return to complete their high school requirements. It is common for First Nation students to return to high school and many returning students feel uncomfortable with the mainstream system and feel out of place. Thus, the importance of Alternative Education programs in their role for First Nations Education for providing that opportunity to achieve their Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

Alternative education programs are successful for those students who fully utilize the opportunity, program and teachers. It remains a challenge for students as graduation rates remain low, as alternative programs tend to take longer to achieve credits, require a high level of commitment, a proper maturity level, goal oriented, and proper support mechanisms.

- **Ministry Training Sessions**

First Nation private schools and band-operated schools who are registered with the Ministry of Education are encouraged to attend the information sessions regarding programming and

curriculum. These training sessions keep administrators, teachers, and education personnel up to date on current Ministry initiatives.

Regular training sessions started in the late nineties to familiarize secondary schools as to the oncoming changes in secondary policy and procedures. They now occur twice a year and focus on a wide array of topics to benefit front line staff and stake holders in First Nation education.

These training sessions have become a best practice as the Ministry of Education are listening to First Nation concerns in education and are becoming more flexible in program planning which allows language, culture and traditional teachings to be incorporated into course planning.

Ministry training sessions not only provides specific training to educators concerning the Ontario curriculum, but also provides the opportunities for teachers and administrators to network and collaborate with other First Nation educators.

- **Co-op Programs**

Most First Nation secondary programs have implemented a co-op program for students to explore career opportunities and build contacts for future employment. These programs are supported and funded by INAC which allows students to acquire valuable work experience, while honing their employability skills to help them make the transition from school to the work force.

Students have limited employment opportunities on First Nations because there is a lack of job opportunities and high unemployment. Co-op programs allow students to explore a possible career field whereas they would never have the opportunity to experience it.

First Nation schools that are in close proximity to a larger and more diverse workforce have the benefit to find preferred placements to meet the students' interests. Co-op programs are essential to alternative programs because students need to acquire transferable and adaptive work skills and co-op also provides one to two additional credits towards their graduation requirements.

Co-op provides the opportunity for the school and students to link with the community. Provided the placement is successful for the student and employer, the student realizes his or her potential in the workforce and provides a connection and place for the student in his or her community.

- **Community and District Partnerships**

First Nation schools are continually working towards building positive relationships between school and community. This includes recognizing the significance of local culture and traditions for incorporation into the curriculum. Schools encourage elders and community members to contribute to the delivery of culturally relevant programming.

Alternative programs rely on the community education counsellor and members involved in education to aid students transferring or registering in the program. Community members, resources, and organizations aid in the delivery of the program and various subjects. Success of the programs is dependent on student satisfaction of course delivery and constructive feedback which aids in course and program improvements.

First Nation education authorities and school administrators are hiring qualified aboriginal teachers to deliver Ministry curriculum and act as role models for educational achievement. Hiring qualified aboriginal teachers is beneficial for students in recognizing the achievement of First Nation people and use as role models. It is often beneficial for the school because aboriginal teachers and if local, are more likely to stay with the program and provide some stability in the program.

Many First Nation educators have come to understand the need for their schools to share curriculum, resources, and personnel. There has been some reluctance, in the past, for communities to share these resources, as they have often required a great deal of time and money to produce. However, rather than have each community “reinvent the wheel”, resources can be shared and adapted to meet the curricular needs of each particular community. Seven Generations, Wahsa, Batchewana and other Alternative Programs have shared independent study resources, and thus saved time and cost in preparing courses independently of each other.

An Example of: A Partnership Growing

Partnerships have been established with local public school boards and First Nation Education Authorities to meet the needs of First Nation students attending mainstream secondary school. Seven Generations Education Institute and the Rainy River District School Board have established a First Nation Vice Principal partnership position at the Fort Frances High School to deal directly with First Nation students and liaison with First Nation communities. This concept is finishing its first year and is considered a successful arrangement for First Nation students, communities, school and teachers. It seems First Nation education counsellors, students, and parents have found it more comfortable with an administrator familiar with First Nations communities and dealing with decisive, sensitive issues.

Seven Generations in partnership also has two First Nation Education Counsellors working with First Nation students at Fort Frances High School. These education counsellors aid students in course selection, track First Nation students, develop reports and statistics, and act as contacts for First Nations. This arrangement has been beneficial for students transferring between mainstream and alternative programs.

Four First Nation education assistants are also working within the Rainy River District School Board aiding aboriginal students in the public elementary system. Such arrangements and partnerships are becoming common for district school boards across Northern Ontario and are beneficial for First Nation students who require support in the system and for parents or guardians looking for personnel in the schools looking out for their child’s best interests.

- **Cultural Content**

Some First Nation education authorities are including hands on traditional teachings and knowledge to supplement curriculum expectations and native studies programming for both native and non-

native students.⁸ Traditional teachings and incorporation of culture into alternative programming are and can be implemented into a variety of courses, at a number of grade levels. The hands on activities enhance alternative studies, provide experiential learning and connect First Nation students with past teachings and culture.

Some schools in the far north have resorted to year round schooling that allows the community to pursue traditional activities (eg. Spring goose hunt) without interfering with the education of their students. As well, certain traditional activities can only be completed at specific times of the year. In order to incorporate these activities into the curriculum, it is necessary to move to a year round school schedule.

- **Student Incentives**

Many First Nations make monthly student allowances available for fulltime high school or alternative students who attend regularly and in good standing. It is common for First Nation communities, education authorities, and tribal areas to arrange awards and/or bursaries as incentives for students, for completion of education and those planning to continue education or training. Students are generally satisfied with receiving money as a reward for their hard work, commitment and dedication.

Awards and bursaries retain some students, but is not the answer to graduate more students.

- **Professional Development and Training**

The First Nations Principals Course, delivered in partnership with Seven Generations Education Institute and Six Nations Polytechnic Institute, certifies aboriginal and non-aboriginal personnel working in First Nation education programs and administrating First Nation schools. Additionally, Seven Generations in partnership with Queens University, is also certifying aboriginal and non-aboriginal teachers for employment in First Nations schools. These programs focus on the needs of aboriginal learners, aboriginal learning styles, and aboriginal programming.⁹

First Nation communities also hire and train local personnel as support staff within the school (secretarial, custodial, maintenance, etc.).

Seven Generations Education Institute is in the process of delivering an Education Assistant Apprenticeship Training Program, which certifies education assistants currently working in the schools to assist in the classroom. The Ministry of Education often provides training for secretaries of First Nation schools in maintaining student records and organizing files in current computer programs.

First Nation institutes, schools, organizations, education authorities, and communities are working together and improvements have been made over the last ten years in First Nations Education. These improvements may be considered part of the foundation for significant change and gains in education, as there remain a minor percentage of First Nation secondary graduates.

⁸ Some northern communities shut down their schools for a period of time for harvesting of birds and game. Seven Generations Education Institute invites all schools in the district to participate in their Fall Harvest program that involves preparation of wild rice, wild meat, skinning and tanning.

⁹ More information regarding programs available at Seven Generations Education Institute website.

There have been discussions at Ministry Training sessions to formalize a First Nation Principals Association.¹⁰ These principals could share ideas, best practices, and resources that address the needs of First Nation students and schools. These principals could outline the common needs, problems, and trends; devise plans of action on how best to address them; and act as one voice.

What do First Nations need to realize the vision for a successful education system?

What are the gaps between what currently exists and what is needed?

First Nations require a system of education that the people will support and that communities are involved in the learning process and know what is taught is important to the learner. Education systems that work have students and parents that believe in the system, understand what is taught, and have a sense of ownership and control. At present, this is not the case and possibly the reason for lack of achievement for First Nation students and involvement of parents.

There seems to be a level of dissatisfaction with the present system, structure, and process to prepare First Nation students to the level of becoming capable, proud, independent, and supportive citizens of their community. Education cannot be fully responsible to raise students to such a level without the support of parents and community. A collaboration of effort from different levels of government and First Nations, education authorities and boards must be in place to discuss and implement a system of education that meets the needs of First Nations and universally prepares its students for the workforce and post secondary pursuits.

It is essential that First Nations have the same secondary and tertiary levels of educational support mechanisms that a quality system of education provides. Without this system, it is almost impossible to narrow the gap in academic results of First Nations students and other Canadian students. What is recommended is the creation of a First Nations education infrastructure that encompasses decision-making structures, administrative capacity and program design and delivery capability at two levels: First Nations communities and regional education bodies.

The percentage of First Nation members across Canada without a secondary school diploma fluctuates from 70% to 90% with some communities at 100%.¹¹ The high number of unsuccessful secondary graduates may be influenced from the excessive number of community members and leaders who themselves do not possess a high school diploma or do not give education a priority within community level policy. If community members are hired on a regular basis requiring no high school diploma or equivalent and the person has no plans to move off reserve, a high school diploma is unimportant. Placing value in a high school diploma through community level policy and making education a mandated priority within the community is necessary to help students recognize and achieve educational goals. Few First Nations in the Treaty Three Area do not have a hiring policy where a high school diploma is required or given preference. This is a problem for alternative programming where attendance is generally not mandatory because of the form of study and type of student; as a result some students will leave for part time employment through the community office and drop their studies for short-term employment. For some students, this has become a cycle of menial work experience, short term financial gain, long term layoff, delayed education, and ultimately

¹⁰ First Nation principals across the north recognize the value to network, share ideas, practices, and common concerns. Discussions of forming a network for F.N. principals are a common topic.

¹¹ Statistics from the Community Profiles on the INAC website.

delayed career planning. Some of these students reapply each year for consecutive years, with few or no credits achieved and eventually become reliant on social assistance, thus ending any career aspirations because of a growing family, problems with the law or dependence on alcohol and/or drugs.

It is unfortunate that Alternative Programs do not receive the recognition for the service they provide. The students of alternative programs are unique and capable of completing the requirements for graduation, but because of a number of varying circumstances, they do not take advantage of alternative programming to meet their needs.

- **Community Level**

There appears to be a misconception by chiefs, councils, and community members about alternative programs and the students who require their services to move on to post secondary training and education opportunities. It seems alternative programs are in a constant struggle to find sufficient space, equipment and supplies. Alternative programs are often viewed as a second rate education to many community members and agencies.

Often, students sign up for alternative programming to receive social assistance from their First Nation and do so for financial benefit with no intention to complete graduation requirements. In most cases, there are no consequences for students enrolled who are receiving benefits and make no progress towards studies or credits completed.

Students enrolled in alternative programs in the provincial system and receiving social service benefits are accountable for lesson and credit completion as well as attendance. Provincial social service agencies require signed reports on a weekly or monthly basis. Generally, off reserve employers recognize a high school diploma or give preference to students working towards their high school diploma.

What are the benefits in implementing First Nation community policies concerning hiring procedures, social service amendments, and reviewing applicants and procedures for alternative programming that could positively impact the value of education for students and community members?

The level of community input in First Nation education generally falls on those servicing the students or working in the education buildings. Parental involvement and interest is a common concern for educators of First Nation students. Successful students are generally associated with involved parents or extended family. Successful schools are dependent on parental involvement and community support.

If language and culture are the key components for native education, the community has to be accountable and supportive in immersing students in language and culture. Providing students with native culture and language programming in the school alone will not meet the community expectations, unless they are immersed in language and culture within the community as well.

In the provincial system, school councils advise, consult and support school programming. First Nation communities rely on administrators, teachers and education authorities to run and operate schools and programs. Generally, the administrators, teachers and those from the education authority are not from the local community and community members provide little input to the programs and operations of their schools.

Chief and council need to take a more active role in education. The leaders are responsible for dealing with the day-to-day issues and concerns of the community, but the importance of education is overlooked. Community leaders implement short-term solutions to recurring problems. Priority on education will lead to long-term benefits.

- **Provincial Level**

Currently, many First Nation students entering high school are not adequately prepared to meet the challenges of the grade nine curriculum. Programs need to address the essential skills necessary for success in high school. All partners in education must identify how to improve achievement of First Nation students.

Most provincial boards offer summer programs for students entering grade nine to help improve the necessary skills required for success in secondary school. Students who may have gaps in their education, or are lacking the skills necessary for academic success, are advised to take summer programs, which are administered by qualified teachers and focus on improving math and literacy skills. Such programs are not always available, as provincial school boards apply for funding and hire a teacher to teach it. First Nation students who are registered with the provincial school board can attend. Unfortunately First Nations are not funded for such programs or would have to submit a proposal, locate a qualified teacher and find a general site for at risk students to attend over the summer.

The new curriculum also provides challenges for independent study courses. Course profiles for high school courses were developed for in-class delivery, without regard to independent study programs. Administrators and educators have had to make significant modifications to courses so they can be delivered in an independent study format. This has required a great deal of time and resources spent by the First Nations utilizing independent study format. The province has to be cognizant to such changes that have an effect on education systems outside the provincial school boards and affect First Nation learners.

Some provincial school boards, who are not directly inspected by the Ministry, are allowed to use outdated curriculum and unapproved courses for alternative programming. This can be problematic when these same students transfer to First Nation alternative programs. First Nation alternative programs are required to meet Ministry of Education curriculum expectations and follow Ministry guidelines or are in danger of losing their private school licence.

- **Federal Level**

First Nation principals often discuss the inequities and inconsistencies of Federal funding across the province between native schools and programs and comparisons to the public school board funding. Rising costs of texts, materials, supplies, salaries, and operations are annual budgetary concerns. Funding to meet rising costs should be reviewed on an annual basis and updated every two to three years. A policy dealing with education costs and maintaining a level playing field with provincial system should be implemented.

First Nation communities generally have a high teacher turnover rate that affects consistency in the community's education. Many First Nation teachers are not paid according to a fixed pay grid and they are often lured away from the First Nation communities for more lucrative positions in the public sector. In order to keep teachers in First Nation communities there needs to be a more standardized pay scale, comparable to that of the public sector teachers, as well as incentives for them to stay in the

community (i.e. isolation pay, appropriate accommodations, pension, benefits, etc.) In some instances, teachers are making \$20,000 a year less in First Nation's communities that they would in the public sector schools.

There is some concern surrounding the First Nation control of education dollars. Education dollars are often not separated from other Band expenditures. Some bands are requesting that education funding be moved to a separate account to ensure that education dollars are being spent on education.

In order to operate a First Nation Secondary School and offer a provincial high school diploma or certificate the school must be inspected by the Ministry of Education and classified as a private high school. There are limitations to federal funding through INAC when classified as a private institution. A difference between "private school" classifications must be addressed in INAC policy to ease funding arrangements and confusion with provincial private institutions.

Special education funding is available to Band Operated Council Schools and First Nation communities whose students that require special education services attending provincial and catholic schools. Seven Generations Secondary School and other programs like it that are classified as private schools are ineligible for special education funding and have to make additional amendments to the tuition agreements for each First Nation that is under contract with the school in order to recover additional costs for special needs students that require assistance, testing, materials or supplies.

In 2002-03, the province had allocated \$10 million for board level leadership, as part of the ongoing \$50 million, through the Learning Opportunities Grant and \$90 million to Technological Renewal Education Initiative. (Building Pathways to Success, Grades 7-12, 2003) These dollars are to be used across the province over three to four years at various levels of education to address the Students at Risk Initiative. Certainly, these are large grants for a large-scale population, but the point is that the province is addressing literacy, numeracy, and technology to increase student achievement and better prepare students for school to work transition. It only seems appropriate and timely that First Nation Education Authorities are offered parallel grants at the federal level to address, similar if not more urgent, concerns for First Nation students at risk.

Funding for Education Programs

The federal government is responsible for funding First Nations education. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) is the department, which sets forth the rules, and regulations for First Nations to apply and receive funding for education.

INAC funds students that are placed on the nominal roll for elementary on a formula basis. Secondary education is funded on tuition fees determined by the provincial board of education and tuition agreements between the board of education and the First Nation. Secondary students are also placed on a nominal roll. In all instances, except for the two remaining federal schools, funds are provided directly to First Nations for elementary, secondary and post secondary.

Alternative education is considered secondary education where Ontario Secondary School Diplomas or certificates are granted. Such programs receive tuition fees equal to the provincial board of education if the student is a student of the board or the alternative program is part of the school board.

If the First Nation alternative program is considered a band operated school, the students are funded at the band operated school rate.* It is common for First Nation alternative programs that are separate from provincial boards and in place because of circumstances to meet First Nation student

needs; funding agreements are arranged to meet the costs of the program. These tuition rates are higher than the basic rate but generally meet the provincial board rate.

First Nation secondary and alternative programs that provide co-op opportunities are funded by INAC to offset costs. Reports are required annually to maintain eligibility for funding. The amounts are determined by student numbers, teacher salary, course materials, training allowances, travel and supplies.

INAC has new authorities that allow funding up to the age of 21, which follows the provincial model. The province provides funding at half the rate of their foundation grant for those students over 21 and the department is considering that as an option for adult education.*

In some instances the First Nation and the local board of education may partner in the delivery of adult education. Adult education programs may or may not grant Ontario Secondary School Diplomas or certificates. Some adult education centers focus on training programs for specific community needs and may provide upgrading for adults entering college programs or adults preparing for a General Education Diploma. (GED)

Post secondary students are not put on a nominal roll and the reporting on post secondary is different than elementary or secondary. Post secondary has no age restrictions, although alternative adult education programs may not have an age restriction, the funding levels may differ from those available for elementary and secondary programs.

Conclusion

There have been a number of previous reports outlining the visions, best practices and needs of First Nation education in recent years. These reports all have similar visions and suggestions: a commitment to maintaining and preserving Aboriginal language and culture, a desire to prepare students for the skills needed for future success, a need for all parties involved in First Nation education to work together for improvement, a request for adequate teaching training in Aboriginal education, a commitment of adequate resources to fund programs, training and curriculum for the improvement of student achievement.

What is required now is a comprehensive framework and plan of action for how best to achieve these goals. This framework will necessitate numerous changes, and in the past, change has often met with opposition. Michael Fullan suggests 7 propositions for successful change in his article "Getting Reform Right: What Works and What Doesn't".

Fullan's Propositions for Success:

1. Change is learning - loaded with uncertainty.
2. Change is a journey, not a blueprint.
3. Problems are our friends.
4. Change is resources-hungry.
5. Change requires the power to manage it.
6. Change is systematic.
7. All large-scale change is implemented locally.

Communities must be encouraged to become actively involved in changes to education within their jurisdictions. Change can only be successful when implemented locally. It is important for

communities, educators, INAC, Band Councils, and other interested parties to be receptive to change, and willing to work co-operatively to initiate changes in their respective areas. These changes demand resources, good management, training, and a commitment to change before significant improvements in the education of First Nation students can occur. Programs that have proven themselves successful can be used as a framework for best practices, and can be modified to accommodate the needs of the particular community and student.

One suggestion that seemed to repeat itself in much of the research was the need for adequately trained teachers. Many teachers in First Nation communities are relatively new to the profession, and in most cases have not had any training in teaching Aboriginal learners. Often these teachers only stay one to two years in the community, as they use their experience to springboard to more lucrative positions in the provincial public education system. The high teacher turnover rate makes it difficult to maintain consistent teaching practice within the school. Changes that include teacher training in Aboriginal education and salary increments on par with provincial grids would help to improve the teaching quality in First Nation schools.

The large numbers of First Nation students that return to secondary school at a latter age indicate the importance of alternative programs. A significant number of First Nation secondary private schools offer alternative programs or include alternative education in their school programming. Alternative programs best suit the needs of returning adult First Nation students wishing to complete their high school graduation requirements. These programs are convenient, but do require modification to better suit the learning style of most First Nation learners. The changes could include year round scheduling, in-class components, culturally relevant curriculum, language instruction, upgrading programs and instruction, technological upgrades for labs and apprenticeship programs. Changes in programming would mean increased costs. Meeting increased costs is an additional challenge for education programs that are already struggling to meet inflationary costs of texts, materials, supplies, equipment, salaries, heating, electrical, building space and maintenance.

Alternative programming cannot be overlooked; however, program delivery can be modified to better meet the vision. Once the vision for First Nation education is achieved, the role of alternative programming will be diminished, in favor of traditional in-class instruction.

The greatest challenge is at the grassroots level convincing the people of First Nations to address education change and become involved in the process. Education is a win –win long-term investment where leadership and community input is vital for education to be valued, supported, and prioritized and for optimistic change on First Nations.

Some communities are not completely accepting of the locally developed programs offered within their community. Students themselves sometimes feel less motivated because of the lack of specialized programs available through local programming. Some are looking for more diverse choices and opportunities they feel they will have if they enroll in mainstream programs outside their communities.

The program however, finds it difficult to retain specialized staff. There is a constant interruption of smooth and consistent delivery of programs.

The program is also fighting the perception of competing for students from various alternative programs and established high schools, which sometimes diminishes the focus of education.

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