

**Engaging First Nations Parents in Education:  
An Examination of Best Practices**

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INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement in education is not a concept that is distinct to First Nations people in North America nor is it a struggle that only First Nations people embark upon. What distinguishes the First Nations situation from others is the culture, languages and world view that they bring to the equation – none of which exist anywhere else in the world – and the number of stakeholders – Departments, Ministries, School Boards - that must be cajoled to realize First Nations’ goals. These groups have posed and will continue to pose the biggest challenge to accomplishing a meaningful degree of parental and community involvement in First Nations education. At the same time, however, given the difficult realities these same groups are now encountering in the realm of education, they may also prove to be our greatest allies.

In 1994, under the Royal Commission on Learning, the government of Ontario embarked upon a comprehensive review of education in the province that examined a wide spectrum of education issues from curriculum development to teaching methods to support services to assessment and evaluation. Parental and community involvement was an important factor in this review and led to a broadly based recommendation that “communities of concern” be developed as a holistic approach to educate children. Teachers, parents, social agencies and community members would jointly develop an educational approach to support learning. (***Government of Ontario, For the Love of Learning: Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, 1994***) This recommendation mirrors the definition of First Nations education that has been articulated historically and, more recently, in First Nations policy documents on education:

*Enhancing the holistic perspective of education, First Nations have persistently emphasized the need for education systems that reflect and reinforce First Nations cultures and traditions ... To achieve that goal, family and community involvement in the education process is crucial. Children’s learning about their values and traditions is tied to the home and community environment. (Barbara Kavanagh: **The Role of Parental and Community Involvement in the Success of First Nations Learners**)*

Throughout all the recent literature dealing with First Nations Education, the concept of parental/community involvement is advocated and reinforced. In the major position papers and studies published since the 1970’s, parental involvement forms a central feature underlying First Nations control. Parental and community control is the basic tenet of the 1973 document “Indian Control of Indian Education” produced by the National Indian Brotherhood<sup>1</sup>. This concept is reiterated throughout the essays that comprise the 1987 *Indian Education in Canada Volume II*, the Assembly of First Nations’ *Tradition and Education* in 1988, the 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* and the 2002 “Final Report of the Minister’s National Working Group on Education” in addition to a multiplicity of other major studies and websites. In Ontario, the Chiefs in Assembly recognize the importance of parental influence as a factor in school participation by First Nations students:

*“... a communication strategy should be undertaken to reach out to parents and families and to encourage our students to stay in school, study maths and sciences, attend science fairs and camps and to pursue health care studies” (Resolution 03/22 – Strategy for Increasing First Nations Health Professionals, Chiefs of Ontario, June 2003)*

The commitment to parental involvement does not exist only in theory. A good many communities have overcome a variety of challenges to attract and sustain the participation of parents and community members in their education system. Often, their work is undertaken in isolation of long-term or adequate financial assistance and the formal support of neighbouring non-Aboriginal school systems and services. Rather, they rely on the community’s internal resources – the teachers, the parents, the Elders, the First Nations Council - and, in some instances, the good will of education

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<sup>1</sup> The position paper described parental responsibility and community control as the central features to improving First Nations education systems in Canada.

experts far-removed from their territories. In the end, perhaps these community resources are the most logical proponents and managers of parental and community involvement.

As will be seen in the pages that follow, the definition of parental involvement is flexible and can involve a wide range of activities. It is as circumscribed or as far-reaching as a community allows and, frequently, reflects the needs and expectations of the community in question. For the purposes of this report, however, the term 'parental involvement' shall be understood to include not only the direct involvement of parents, but also participation of Elders and community members, at large, unless otherwise stated.

## **THE VISION**

In some form or another, parental involvement has been an historic reality for First Nations education in Canada, particularly over the past three decades. However, without the activism of First Nations parents, there would have been little change in education management and programming despite the professed federal advocacy of Indian Control of Indian Education. While parental involvement has prompted many positive developments, First Nations students continue to experience difficulty at much higher levels than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Many First Nations students struggle with basic literacy and numeracy skills and for many, post-secondary education remains a dream. Perhaps a new form of parental and community involvement is required. A host of research and case studies offer a glimpse of what the future may hold in this regard.

### **Envisaging Parental Involvement**

In their comments regarding First Nations jurisdiction over education, the Assembly of First Nations makes a clear distinction between the transfer of education programs and the transfer of decision-making authority. First Nations view jurisdiction as local control and parental involvement that encompasses the delivery, planning, budgeting and evaluation of a local education system. Moreover, the ideal level of parental involvement is defined as participation in the development of all education programs and curricula, and the selection, employment and supervision of teaching personnel and administrative staff (*Assembly of First Nations, Tradition and Education 1988*).

The AFN Community Survey and Committee of Inquiry<sup>2</sup> offered even greater detail with regard to the types and level of parental involvement in First Nations education. They strongly promoted greater involvement in the management of First Nations education and in the daily conduct of educational systems both on- and off-reserve:

***First Nations recognize the vital role of parental involvement in education. ... Parents must participate in establishing the direction and goals of the education program. Active involvement of parents in school programs create better understanding and cooperation between the education staff and the parents, in fact, the community as a whole.***

***Parental involvement in education can range from formal to informal participation. Parents in First Nations communities can become involved by working in all areas of the education program, for example: as directors of education, principals, teachers, classroom assistants, counselors, secretaries, maintenance engineers, and language teachers. Elders of the communities can become involved with the teaching of First Nations languages, traditional value and skills, and cultural studies.***

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<sup>2</sup> The Assembly of First Nations commissioned four major data gathering studies as part of their comprehensive national review of First Nations Education. These included the Secondary Research Program, the Community Survey, the Committee of Inquiry and the First Nations Schools Review.

*Informally, parents should be encouraged to participate in school activities, such as professional development days, parent-teacher workshops, socials, sports activities, outings, dances and other student activities. (Assembly of First Nations, Tradition and Education)*

The AFN Report goes on to state that between the release of Indian Control of Indian Education in 1973 and the 1988 publication of Tradition and Education, little has changed on the parental involvement front, particularly in provincial schools attended by First Nations students. The Report notes that, although parents have become marginally more involved in the provincial school system – in hot lunch programs, school maintenance and playground supervision – they continue to feel alienated from a school environment that appears not to respect or reflect their values. The Report recommends that parental involvement be enhanced through parent-school workshops that facilitate the joint identification of parent involvement activities. It further recommends that parents receive a variety of training: to serve as resource people in curriculum development; to perform as partners in strategic education planning; to enhance parenting skills; to act as language and culture instructors in the schools. (*Assembly of First Nations*)

The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People examines education issues at length and, from this research, a long list of possibilities related to parental involvement can be derived for on-reserve and off-reserve schools. These encompass a range beginning with early childhood to adult education and outline recommendations for First Nations involvement. As will be seen in later sections of this report, First Nations have made progress in achieving the high level of involvement advocated by the RCAP report, particularly in early childhood and First Nations controlled community schools. Nonetheless, a considerable amount of work remains to be done.

The RCAP report prescribes the following levels of community and parental involvement:

**Early Childhood Education:**

- First Nations should exert control over the design of programs, early childhood educational options, the development of curricula and instructional materials;
- Elders should be regarded as the language experts and involved in language instruction and the development of materials;
- An understanding of the specific First Nations culture and world view should underlay the overall curriculum

**Elementary/secondary Education:**

First Nations should exert control over their children's education in the following ways:

- The development of curricula and instructional materials specific to First Nations culture, language, world view, history and current affairs;
- The involvement of Elders in language immersion or instruction, including appropriate recognition and compensation as instructors;
- The establishment of Parent Committees;
- The participation of parents, Elders and community members in classroom instruction;
- Ensuring that First Nations people are well represented as teachers, administrators, support workers, counselors, community liaison workers, psychologists, speech therapists and in other paraprofessional positions within the educational facility;
- Ensuring that the educational facility is required to develop and distribute regular public reports regarding First Nations education standards, goals and the achievement of objectives;
- The participation of community representatives on local school boards, educational committees or other governing councils;

- Ensuring that youth have a role in developing cultural curricula and programs related to academic skills development and support, sports and recreation, leadership and healing.

#### **Post-secondary**

- Ensuring that First Nations people are represented on governing structures for post-secondary programs dealing specifically with teacher education;
- Facilitating relationships between community governments and post-secondary institutions in developing curricula that enhances self-government and community development;
- The participation of First Nations people on the Board of Governors of post-secondary educational institutions;
- The creation of Aboriginal Councils to advise the President of post-secondary educational institutions;
- Ensuring that post-secondary institutions actively recruit faculty members;
- Ensuring that post-secondary institutions employ First Nations counselors;
- The development of First Nations post-secondary institutions and an overarching association to support these institutions;
- Recognition and compensation for Elders involved in post-secondary educational instruction.

#### **Adult Education:**

- Community control over programs related to adult literacy, basic education, academic upgrading and job training, including adapting program design, admission criteria and the language of instruction to suit the needs of the community. (*Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 5*)

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People established a high standard for parental involvement in First Nations education. Where most researchers tend to focus their efforts on elementary and secondary education, occasionally venturing into a discussion about early childhood education, RCAP covers the gamut of parental involvement in education for First Nations and addresses these from an expansive sovereignty position.

Primary and other secondary research that reiterates and diverges from RCAP is valuable in offering both a philosophical and practical overview of community goals in relation to parental involvement initiatives. During February 2004, a number of focus groups and consultation sessions were conducted by the Chiefs of Ontario across the province in an effort to develop a clearer picture of First Nations education issues in the province. The focus groups<sup>3</sup> included participation from parents, teachers and community people and offer several important vision statements that correspond with earlier findings on parental involvement. In most cases, the entire vision statement is included, but particular emphasis is placed on the parental involvement sections.

- ***ENGAGEMENT of the community is the most important factor.*** *We need (to) make education a part of each community; it cannot be abstracted.*
- *Elders and the community leaders must be involved in an open dialogue .... We need more direct control over education (Chiefs of Ontario Consultations Meetings Report, 2004, Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, editor)*

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<sup>3</sup> Parental and community engagement focus groups, commissioned by the Chiefs of Ontario, were undertaken by Pat Baxter in North Bay, Thunder Bay, Hamilton and Kenora. Similarly, consultations related to broader First Nations education issues were facilitated by Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux in Toronto, Kenora, Sudbury and Thunder Bay. Reports were developed that describe the findings of the respective sessions and are referenced in this report by their editors (Baxter or Wesley-Esquimaux) and, if relevant, their locations.

In North Bay, participants noted that:

*“The vision for First Nations education is the philosophy on 7 grandfathers teachings as foundation and values. Education starts in the womb and is life long. Culture needs to be reclaimed and strengthened within our educational systems. The teachings should be based from the four directions of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.*

***Parents are the first leaders in First Nations education however community support is essential. (Parental and Teacher Engagement Focus Group, North Bay, 2004, Pat Baxter, editor)***

In Thunder Bay:

*Parents need to have a leadership role in education... Participants talked about the vision for education inspiring students “to live a good life”. It should invoke life long learning for all First Nations citizens. It should encompass the educational requirements for special needs and gifted students and encourage professional development for youth. The curriculum must preserve a (sic) holistic approach with strong culture and language components. **Education must be self-governed and self-directed. It should partner with other agencies and with parents to ensure quality education with sufficient funding.**” (Parental and Teacher Engagement Focus Group, Thunder Bay, 2004, Pat Baxter, editor)*

In Kenora, participants identified the following components of parental involvement that form part of their vision for education:

- ***Vision should evolve around building success for both students and parents;***
- *Total emersion (sic) in culture and language for all grades;*
- *Integrate programs, buildings and school where services and programs and school can benefit from geographic closeness; where community gathers on a regular basis;*
- *Build on cultural value that school is about preparing for a “good life”;*
- *Creating a welcoming, safe environment in our schools;*
- *Success means graduating our children with the academic skills required;*
- *Provide our schools with sufficient resources that will allow them to try new ways of teaching, methods that accommodate needs, new learning;*
- ***Parental engagement means parental involvement at all levels of education, in Boards, classes, volunteers, at home, policy and cultural development and implementation***
- *Our schools (even off reserve) need to show case our culture, our cultural symbols, treaties, have pictures and display Elders and other past Leaders as role models. (Parental and Teacher Engagement Focus Group, Kenora, 2004, Pat Baxter, editor)*

Although discussions regarding vision in Hamilton only briefly addressed parental involvement, they did recommend importing the “Safer, Saner School Program<sup>4</sup>” from the USA, amongst other vision statements:

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<sup>4</sup> *The program employs three principles to improve the learning environment in host schools: holding young people accountable; enhancing relationships among students, faculty, administrators and parents; building a sense of community in the school (Safer Saner Schools, an IRP program, [safersanerschools.org](http://safersanerschools.org))*

*First Nations education and parental engagement must be built on the following value: “Appreciate our gifts from the Creator – our children”.*

*First Nations education must be unified and support First Nations culture and languages. It must educate children in the culture and language without compromising academic skills required to succeed in mainstream systems.*

*...Ontario needs a First Nations Education Charter to support the goals and aspirations to unify educational vision (Parental and Teacher Engagement Focus Group, Hamilton, 2004, Pat Baxter, editor)*

The Royal Commission on Learning undertaken by the Ontario Government in the early 1990’s also sheds some light on the aspirations of First Nations with regard to a vision for education. Specifically, presentations advocated the recognition and instruction of Aboriginal languages, world view and cultures in provincial schools, the development of a more First Nations-sensitive learning environment; the creation of enhanced support services for off-reserve students, the creation of post-secondary Aboriginal Teachers programs to increase the numbers of Aboriginal teachers; the establishment of shared decision-making between provincial school boards and First Nations education authorities. Specific to parental engagement, the Report states:

*“...aboriginal parents also want to have more input into the schools their children attend. Some Native people feel this might be achieved by having more trustees on provincial school boards, or by being able to vote in school board elections, and others are looking for more direct involvement with their local schools. Still others are more concerned about achieving full self-government and controlling their own education system from early childhood to post-secondary and adult education and training” (Government of Ontario)*

The First Nations Education Steering Committee<sup>5</sup> outlines a host of requirements that will create excellent education for First Nations. Although undefined, they note: *“It is essential that First Nations parents are included in educational decision-making.” (First Nations Education Steering Committee, “Quality Education – Elements and Responsibilities”, 1995)*

Outlining the vision for parental involvement in First Nations education is incomplete without a clearer sense of the principles that will guide us in implementing that vision. These principles delineate a process for attracting and maintaining the involvement of parents and community in the education of First Nations children. They allow us to follow in the path of those before us who have struggled and succeeded in strengthening parental involvement in education.

### Key Principles of Parental Involvement

First Nations education is regarded as a lifelong learning process that begins at birth and extends into old age. It assumes that, throughout their stages of life, individuals grow and change and that the education system must reflect this reality. Therefore, in examining parental and community involvement, it is essential that discussion explore how these factors are present in all facets of the education system both on- and off-reserve, from early childhood to elementary, secondary, post-secondary and, finally, in adult education. It is also critical that the manner in which First Nations support parental and community involvement in education be reviewed.

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<sup>5</sup> *The First Nations Education Steering Committee was established in British Columbia in May, 1992 by participants at a Provincial First Nations Education Conference. The FNEESC was mandated to: “facilitate discussion about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information and soliciting input from First Nations.” For more information, see [www.fneesc.bc.ca](http://www.fneesc.bc.ca)*

In much of the literature dedicated to education, it is generally accepted that parental involvement demands a certain set of circumstances in order to flourish. The Ontario Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project<sup>6</sup> developed a group of characteristics that typify this kind of positive environment. These include addressing the wholeness of the child and his/her environment; adaptability of a program to local circumstances; well trained and compensated staff; program integration; and, significant parent involvement. (*Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project*). To a large degree, the school plays an important role in setting the stage for this kind of school-family-community interaction.

The Ontario Royal Commission on Learning directly petitions the school to act as the hub for community involvement in education. A group of other researchers, including the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in the United States, note that school practices play a more significant role in cultivating parental involvement than does the educational background, family size or socio-economic status of the parents. In addition, Barbara Kavanagh, in her overview of parental involvement literature notes that schools are instrumental in fostering parental participation in the school system. Following the lead of other education specialists, she identifies six key activities that support parental involvement:

- *Assisting with the creation of safe and supportive home environments;*
- *Designing effective two-way communication strategies;*
- *Creating welcoming environments for parental involvement in the school;*
- *Helping parents in assisting with home learning activities;*
- *Involving parents as key partners in educational decision-making; and*
- *Integrating school and community agencies to support students and families. (Kavanagh, citing Epstein<sup>7</sup>)*

Kavanagh further notes that parental involvement must be meaningful and developed as an ongoing process. It must extend beyond the expected parent-teacher interview process to include parental participation in planning, homework and home learning.

In their synthesis of studies, the British Columbia First Nations Schools Association<sup>8</sup> offers this list of practical recommendations as essential in developing parental involvement:

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<sup>6</sup> *Better Beginnings Better Futures, established by the Ontario government, was designed to prevent young children in low income, high risk neighbourhoods from experiencing poor developmental outcomes, which then require expensive health, education and social services. It incorporated the creation of holistic, quality early child development programs, community and parental involvement and program integration.*

<sup>7</sup> *Joyce Epstein, cited here by Kavanaugh, developed a broad list of initiatives designed to cultivate stronger parental engagement with schools. These activities have informed similar lists by many other education experts and are generally accepted as the basis of parent-school cooperation. Epstein is the author of such articles as "Effects on Student Achievement of Teachers' Practices of Parental Involvement", "Perspectives and Previews on Research and Policy for School, Family, and Community Partnerships.", "School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share.", "School and Family Connections: Theory, Research, and Implications for Integrating Sociologies of Education and Family." She has also collaborated on numerous other publications.*

<sup>8</sup> *"The First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) is a non-partisan organization committed to promoting First Nations control of education, and to improving and supporting the development of quality and culturally appropriate education for First Nations students... The FNSEA is operated and directed by First Nations schools, and its primary objective is to facilitate improvements in the quality of education offered to First Nations students." (www.firstnations-schools.bc.ca/aboutus.htm)*

- *Parents should be partners in the educational process;*
- *Teacher training about parent involvement is essential;*
- *Parent involvement is a process that evolves over time;*
- *Educators should ask parents how they want to be involved in their children's education;*
- *Policies should clearly define involvement and should be developed together; and*
- *Resources should be provided to schools to develop parent involvement programs. (First Nations Schools Association, First Nations Schools: Reflecting Communities through Governance Structures, Parental Involvement Programs and School Calendars, , 1999)*

Other critical principles also emerged in a variety of materials. For instance, the research is quite consistent in advocating a multi-dimensional, flexible approach for involving parents. Parents, together with school officials must be the creators of their own parental involvement programs – programs that make sense within the context of the community, that can address its strengths and weaknesses. In other words, “...recognize that involvement will take many forms” (**Kavanagh**):

***There is no "one size fits all" approach to partnerships. Build on what works well locally. Begin the school-family partnership by identifying with families, the strengths, interests, and needs of families, students and school staff. Then design strategies that respond to identified strengths, interests and needs.***

***Flexibility and diversity are key. Recognize that effective parent involvement takes many forms that may not necessarily require parents' presence at a workshop, meeting or school. The emphasis should be on parents helping children learn, and this can happen in schools, homes, or elsewhere in a community. (Institute for Responsive Education – responsiveeducation.org)***

***Every First Nation has its own needs; they need to be addressed specifically and locally (Wesley-Esquimaux, Kenora)***

The standards regarding parental involvement derived from the literature is based on the experiences of many individuals and communities who have worked to improve the scholastic achievement of a wide variety of students in a wide variety of circumstances. They are eminently sensible and practical. But the question remains: Why the push for parental and community involvement? Is there any real justification for creating a system which is so difficult to attain? As the next section of this report demonstrates, the answer is unequivocally yes.

### The Outcomes of Parental Involvement

In 1973 with the publication of Indian Control of Indian Education, First Nations posited that, with greater control and parental involvement, the performance of schools and students would improve. In their document, “Quality Education”, the First Nations Education Steering Committee notes that First Nations parents have been denied a right enjoyed by non-Aboriginal parents: the right to develop an education system that reflects their cultures, their world view, their languages and their values. It is this kind of system that constitutes a quality educational system. Is it any wonder, then, that while non-Aboriginal middle class students thrive in an educational system that mirrors their experiences and understanding, First Nations students struggle. Quality education demands parental involvement and parental involvement translates into student success.

Countless research projects, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have demonstrated the invaluable impact of parental and community involvement in education:

*Certain kinds of parental involvement pay handsome dividends: higher student achievement, higher aspirations, better attendance, improved classroom and school climate, and more positive relationships between parents and teachers. (Susan Ziegler, "The Effects of Parent Involvement on Children's Achievement: the significance of home/school links" Toronto Board of Education 1987)*

*... one-half to two-thirds of the variance in student achievement can be accounted for by home rather than school variables (Kavanagh citing Coleman et al., Mosteller and Moynihan)*

*...for at risk students, parent and family involvement in learning has been identified as the single most important determiner of success (Kavanagh citing Mills)*

*High school students whose parents remain involved maintain their quality of the work, develop realistic plans for the future and are less likely to drop out of school (Kavanagh citing Henderson and Berla; National PTA 2002)*

*students with involved parents are more likely to:*

- *Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher level programs*
- *Be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits*
- *Attend school regularly*
- *Have better social skills, show improved behaviour and adapt well to school*
- *Graduate and go on to post-secondary education (Southwest Educational Development Library 2002)*

Based on the foregoing, can there be any doubt that parental involvement is worth every moment of the struggle to achieve it? But, as we know, theory is one thing, reality another. Are there any communities that have been able to implement at least part of the vision advanced by First Nations using some of the principles previously outlined? Fortunately, there are and from their example we can learn.

## **WHAT EXISTS IN FIRST NATIONS COUNTRY**

In Ontario, across Canada and throughout the United States, there are many parents, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, struggling to develop an education system that is more responsive and better grounded in the community and its ideals so that it produces well-rounded, responsible individuals. Many of these parents are burdened with problems related to poverty, social dysfunction, low education levels and racial discrimination. They are also categorized by their ability, despite the odds, to revolutionize their involvement in the community education system into a positive force that has not only altered the school but also the achievements of their children within the educational system. As will be seen, parental involvement has the ability to transform almost every level of education from early childhood to adult education.

### **Best programs – Best practices**

#### **Early Childhood Education:**

Both Canada and the United States host Head Start programs that target the development of skills within the first five years of a child's life. The program integrates child learning activities with the development of parenting skills and the empowerment of parents as partners in program creation, implementation and monitoring. In Canada, the **Aboriginal Head Start** program operates in

numerous sites across Canada with twenty-six of these running in locations both on- and off-reserve in Ontario<sup>9</sup>. Aboriginal Head Start describes itself as an early childhood education program that:

*“focuses on the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional growth of each child and supports the parents to meet the child’s developmental needs... The primary goal of AHS is to demonstrate that locally controlled and designed early intervention strategies can provide Aboriginal children with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for learning and opportunities to develop fully as successful young people. ... All AHS sites include programming in: Aboriginal culture and language, education and school readiness; health promotion, nutrition; parental involvement; and social support. ...Projects involve parents and communities in the design and implementation of projects. (Health Canada, Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities Program and Participants 2001)*

At this time, Aboriginal Head Start has yet to undergo a formal quantitative evaluation. Nonetheless, it has been included as a best practice for a number of reasons. In a qualitative review of the program, AHS graduates are described as entering kindergarten with social and academic skills that surpass those of non-AHS attendees. Similarly, parents and grandparents report improved parenting skills, better understanding and use of community resources, increased confidence and employability, and pride in their children’s development and academic accomplishments *(Tomson Highway, Johnny National Superhero – Aboriginal Headstart Initiative, 2000)*.

The positive assessment of AHS is echoed in the Hamilton Focus Group report edited by Pat Baxter. Participants acknowledged the value of the program and recommended that the model be adapted for elementary and secondary education programs.

Aboriginal Head Start is significant in the manner in which it meets many of the principles demanded of meaningful parental involvement by Epstein<sup>10</sup>. The program targets the development of parenting skills and a value for education. It demands that parents receive regular information regarding options to participate and that parents be empowered to participate and communicate. The program is designed to incorporate parental involvement and to acknowledge parental contributions. It assists parents to understand the developmental needs of their children and how to cultivate their abilities. The program requires the active involvement of parents in the development, operation and assessment of the program. Finally, AHS works in cooperation with other support structures to assist parental understanding of and access to community resources.

Apart from Epstein’s criteria, Aboriginal Head Start is significant in that it stipulates the inclusion of Aboriginal culture and language as an essential feature of the program. According to program literature, 97% of the AHS sites provide Aboriginal language instruction daily. Elders and traditional people guide cultural activities that vary depending on the location. Through this program, children, their families and communities, are provided with the opportunity to learn about their cultures and languages, to understand and relate to a distinctive First Nations world view and to develop pride in their heritage.

A second early childhood education model exists that offers some of the same characteristics as AHS. Following criteria established under Ontario’s Better Beginnings, Better Futures<sup>11</sup>, Walpole

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<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) operates in the following on-reserve locations: Akwesasne, Bear Island, Chippewas of the Thames, Delaware Nation, Deer Lake, Ginoogaming, Kettle and Stoney Point, Long Lac #58, Muskrat Dam, Sandy Lake, Oneida of the Thames, Tyendinega, Pawitik, Pic River. Off-reserve locations include Fort Erie, Ottawa, Kenora, Toronto, Hamilton, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie and Sioux Lookout. While the Windsor area AHS is currently closed, sites in Fort Frances, Cochrane and Moosonee may be operational as early as the fall of 2004.

<sup>10</sup> See “Key Principles of Parental Involvement”- page 9 of this report for details.

<sup>11</sup> See Footnote 6 of this report for further details regarding this program

Island First Nation created a program for children up to age 4 and their families. The program incorporates cultural teachings, healing and wellness and the integration of programs and services. It includes a co-operative nursery, a home visiting program, a drop-in centre, a play group, field trips and other services.

### **Elementary Education:**

While a variety of initiatives respond to the needs of parents of elementary school children, one of the most innovative and effective is the **First Nations Parents Club** approach that has been initiated in British Columbia. The program is flexible in order to address the differing realities of both provincial and First Nations schools. As with Aboriginal Head Start, the Parents Club strategy addresses all of Epstein's principles for parental involvement through the creation of a program that is adaptable to most locations. It differs in that parents, rather than government agencies or education institutions, are obliged to take the lead role in program design, implementation, maintenance and reporting to members.

With funding from Gathering Strength<sup>12</sup>, the First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) in British Columbia created a program geared towards the enhancement of parental involvement in schools:

*The Club was created to acknowledge and support the key role of parents in ensuring educational success for their children. The Club provides parents with information, support, and rewards for their efforts.” (First Nations Schools Association, [firsnations-schools.bc.ca/programs.htm](http://firsnations-schools.bc.ca/programs.htm))*

Through this funding, parents are given information to assist them in: enhancing their parenting practices (ie: limiting television viewing, eating properly, establishing regular routines); developing a home environment that encourages home learning; and developing communications techniques with the school. Information is also provided that describes how parents can work with the school to achieve First Nations education goals, including assuming greater leadership in school management. A pamphlet that outlines contact information for other support services is also offered. *(First Nations Schools Association, A Handbook for Parents, 2004)*

The success of the program at the community level depends entirely on the commitment of the parents involved and their willingness to employ some of the strategies advocated by the FNSEA. To encourage and assist parents, the Association produces a handbook for parents that includes information on activities to support children's learning, suggestions for involvement, meeting with school staff, volunteering and a wide array of other topics. It further suggests the creation of a 'Parents Club' and offers support to those that are interested in pursuing this option. Support includes the provision of a "Coordinator's Handbook" that addresses such issues as who to involve in the club (parents, principals, teachers, etc...), how to organize a meeting (setting an agenda, recording meeting information, etc...), how to attract and enroll members and documents that outline other resources available to the club. Club members also receive parenting materials and a newsletter and, in some situations, are eligible for such incentive gifts as canvas bags, t-shirts, fleece vests, travel coffee mugs and calendars imprinted with the parents club logo. The FNSEA has also hosted at least one conference for club members. *(firsnations-schools.bc.ca/programs.htm)*

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<sup>12</sup> *In 1998, the Government of Canada responded to the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples with a long-term, broad-based policy approach designated as Gathering Strength -- Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan. This process encompasses a number of diverse initiatives across Canada and, in B.C., has been used to address their educational priorities, amongst other things.*

Six Nations of the Grand River can also boast a parental involvement best practice in elementary/secondary education<sup>13</sup>. As a result of assistance and funding from the Woodlands Cultural Centre, Six Nations has been able to establish the Cayuga and Mohawk Language Immersion School. It should be noted, however, that without the commitment and involvement of community parents, the school may not have succeeded.

In 1985/86, with the strong support of the Cultural Centre and little else (including money), parents in the community mobilized to locate a site for the school, hire teachers and develop the new curriculum. They contributed baby bonuses to pay for costs, supplied all support work and, eventually, convinced other partners to assist them. Parental involvement remains a key feature of the school. Parents undertake fundraising for the school, are involved in staff hiring and firing, participate on the School Council, volunteer for extra-curricular activities and participate in the development of the school's curriculum. As a result, the school can claim one of the highest retention rates across Ontario. Further, the majority of its graduates continue on to post-secondary education and exhibit high levels of confidence, eloquence and social consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Although not as encompassing as the parents club approach or immersion program, a number of best practices for First Nations elementary education emerged in the Focus Group report edited by Pat Baxter. Participants at the Hamilton session described a "Wampum String Commitment" that helps to involve teachers, parents and students in school planning:

*One First Nation school has designed the Wampum String Commitment which promotes planning and commitment with students, parents and all school personnel in a planning exercise for the year. Every year school personnel, along with students and parents, sit down and determine school direction, what commitments students and staff are prepared to make, and on what issues. Once commitments are made, students are given a commitment bead to add to their wampum string. The string should be maintained and kept all year round. If a commitment is broken, a student may ask that a talking circle is organized with all parties (including family) to find solutions. The wampum string is a process that takes time and commitment to work effectively. (Baxter, Hamilton 2004)*

The use of cultural objects that resonate with First Nations appears to be an effective means to attract involvement by the entire community. This cultural connection is repeated in Thunder Bay where the fulfilment of certain activities is linked to responsibilities under the clan systems: "*Some communities have used the clan system where one member of the clan has the responsibility to be in a classroom, network with the school and pass on the information to other clan members who have children in the school.*" (Baxter, Thunder Bay 2004)

Thunder Bay participants also identified a simple but effective best practice that communicates multiple messages. The approach - rewarding both students and parents for perfect school attendance - demonstrates the importance of attendance to the student, but also acknowledges the parent's role in establishing and enforcing standards, recognizing the importance of education and instilling similar values in children.

In North Bay, participants identified "Family Night" as a highly successful initiative in building parent-teacher relationships and cultivating a welcoming atmosphere in the school.

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<sup>13</sup> The School incorporates separate learning environments for the Cayuga and Mohawk languages. The Cayuga program, entitled Gaweni:yo, is offered through I.L Thomas School also known as Odadrihonyanipa, an elementary school on Six Nations. The Mohawk program, known as Kawenni:io, is offered from kindergarten to Grade 12.

<sup>14</sup> Information about the Mohawk and Cayuga Language Immersion School was gathered through a conversation with Amos Key, Language Director, Woodland Cultural Centre.

*Family night ... is a three month program where parents and teachers get together every Monday night for one-on-one activities and interviews for at least 20 minutes each time. This helps to build relationships, and understanding between school staff and parents. As a result, children have shown greater self-esteem and motivation in school. (Baxter, North Bay 2004)*

In some instances, a small effort on the part of teaching staff can make a world of difference to draw parents and community members into the education system. One teacher begins the school year by taking the children on a field trip:

*(They) gather wild mint, Labrador tea, or (sic) rose hips, and then ... the children invite their grandparents to the school for bannock with rosehip jelly and tea. Although the family is invited, the tea is especially for the grandparents. ... While the grandparents are there they visit and tell stories.” (Kavanagh)*

Clearly, depending on the situation, parental engagement can be achieved by implementing a variety of approaches that suit the needs and available resources of the teachers, the parents and the community, at large.

### **Secondary Education:**

First Nations parental involvement in Secondary Education in Ontario is more complex given that, in many schools, the players involved include the Federal and Provincial governments, School Boards, First Nations education authorities and parents. Despite these complications, a number of best practices exist within and outside of Ontario for parental involvement in education.

One of the most interesting best practices gleaned from multiple sources is the “Mohawk Way to go to School”. Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise provides the most in-depth analysis of how the **Mohawks of Akwesasne** managed the development of an innovative culture-based math/science curriculum through partnerships within the community, with a provincial high school and with a host of other institutions and agencies.

The project was conceived as a result of a 1995 study which showed that Mohawk students were purposely selecting course work that would eliminate them from university consideration. The community responded by seeking community control of education and set in motion a collaborative effort to revamp the math/science curriculum to make it experiential and relevant to Mohawk students. Community professionals, teachers, parents, students, outside experts and government became partners in the redesign of the program:

*“At least one of the project goals was being achieved: Elders, spiritual leaders and Mohawk people in general began to reassert their rightful place in the education of their youth by assisting in the curriculum design process and by participating in classroom projects... they developed math themes that incorporate number systems, cultural values, sacred circles, ceremonial significance, space, time, measurement and Mohawk concepts of distance; they also developed geography and conservation themes, along with language art themes that resonate with the Mohawk worldview.” (Brenda Tsioniaon Lafrance, “Culturally Negotiated Education in First Nations Communities: Empowering Ourselves for Future Generations”, Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise, UBC Press 2000)*

Since its inception, the program has been expanded to address other curricular components and has been incorporated into the on-reserve curriculum. It has also received a name change and is now referred to as the Culturally Integrated Curriculum Program. Throughout its evolution, however, parental involvement has been a critical component of its success. Parents participate in a Steering Committee that oversees the program and are regularly consulted in Parent Focus Groups, school board meetings and community meetings. The school also produces school report cards, displays

and, with student involvement, plays and videos that generate additional parental and community interest<sup>15</sup>.

Although the Mohawk example may not address all of the criteria established by Epstein, it serves as a model due to: the communications strategies that are employed between school and community to develop the project; the active solicitation and implementation of parental and community participation on many levels; and for the involvement of parents, Elders and other experts in the development of the culture based curriculum and as instructors in the classroom.

The **Vancouver School District** is another best practice example of provincially delivered secondary education. The District has used various methods to cultivate Aboriginal parental involvement in their schools. The policies associated with this program require that planning and delivery must be undertaken with involvement from the local Aboriginal community and the District First Nations Education Advisory Committee. Even more specifically, parents of children enrolled in the program must be consulted regarding final program decisions.

Further parental involvement is sought through the First Nations school support workers and a First Nations Education specialist. This group is charged with diverse responsibilities including encouraging parental engagement, problem solving with teachers, parents and students and assisting in the development of curriculum (*RCAP Volume 3*):

*The primary role of the FNSSW is to promote success of First Nations students by assisting in the placement of First Nations students in area schools. The workers accomplish this by working closely with students, teachers, parents, counselors, administrators, school health professionals, District office staff and others connected with outside support agencies. (Vancouver School Board, vsb.bc.ca/programs/AboriginalEducation/)*

A number of other avenues exist to engage parents such as participation on school consultative committees, through Aboriginal parents groups or serving on a First Nations Advisory Committee at the district level. The program also includes a variety of culturally enriched programs that combines core curriculum with language/cultural studies. The integration of tutorial assistance, home-school coordination, elder, peer or community counselling form an additional component of the program. Finally, ongoing teacher support programs are built in to ensure consistency in teaching, understanding of the curriculum and, most importantly, to develop strong levels of commitment to these programs.

The **Saskatchewan Education Equity Plan** provides many similar features to that set out by the Vancouver School District. Schools are expected to strive for a parent-friendly environment, students can opt for a blended cultural and core curriculum and cross cultural training of teaching and administrative staff is demanded. (*RCAP, Volume 3*) Although these examples are valuable in addressing the needs of First Nations students integrating into non-Aboriginal secondary institutions, it is important that some consideration be given to First Nations-controlled secondary schools.

In Manitoba, the **Peguis Central School** provides a positive example upon which parental involvement in locally-controlled secondary schools can be modeled. The school ranges from nursery school to Grade 12 and boasts comprehensive programming that includes language and culture programming, extracurricular activities, support for teachers, peer tutoring, a Parents Club, summer school, computers, board support, community volunteering amongst other things. Parental involvement is an integral part of the school's operations:

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<sup>15</sup> Information with respect to the later manifestation of the program was gathered through conversations with Brenda Cole, Coordinator of the Culturally Integrated Curriculum Program.

*... the teaching team is dedicated to ensuring that the school is in touch with community values. School staff members serve on various community committees and organizations, and the notion of service pervades their talk and actions. Providing input is something that the school and community administration has fostered for parents and community members... Parents feel that they can come to the school to talk to the teachers and appreciate the non-threatening communication from the school when there is a problem. ... The school has worked hard to blend academics with the community's values and diversity... (Kavanagh)*

Although the initiatives cited demand considerable community and extra-community partnership and commitment, parental involvement strategies need not be elaborate to be effective. Simple techniques such as those described below can prove extremely beneficial in creating a positive climate for parental participation:

*Indian Head High School staff has gone to the Carry the Kettle Reserve for parent teacher interviews the past several years, rather than holding them in the school. (Kavanagh)*

*The Little River Cree Nation school ... emphasizes parental involvement in the schools in many ways. The school and the community host cultural feasts, and after the cultural feasts, everyone either joins in a round dance or a tea dance. During the cold winter months, the school staff organize plays dealing with Native Cree legends. (Kavanagh citing Sewepegaham)*

*Some schools hold student led conferences with the parents. This is where students present their portfolios to the parents, showing them the school schedule, who the teachers are and the expectations for term. (Baxter, Kenora 2004)*

*In some schools or communities, fall feasts are held, inviting schools, parents and students to participate. It is an excellent opportunity to bring school and community together in a more relaxed social atmosphere. (Baxter, Kenora 2004)*

As with primary education, small steps can go a long way in achieving greater parental involvement. These initial approaches can galvanize parents and communities to take more interest in the academic achievements of their children and to assume greater leadership in the educational methods employed to teach their children. This, in turn, can foster even greater interest in larger scale community development. *(Tradition and Education, Volume 1)*

#### **Post-secondary:**

As has been demonstrated, First Nations have begun to exercise greater control over their children's education at the pre-school, primary and secondary levels. Although similar attempts have been made in post secondary education, progress has been more limited:

*... Aboriginal people have had less control over education at the postsecondary level than at any other level. Almost all Aboriginal education dollars are spent on universities and programs that are not under Aboriginal control. (R.A. Malatest, Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Post-secondary Enrolment Rates, 2002<sup>16</sup>)*

Despite the impediments, there have been noteworthy examples of First Nations controlled post-secondary institutions that accommodate the unique circumstances of Aboriginal people. In tandem with this approach, attempts have been made to modify existing post-secondary institutions to facilitate greater success by First Nations students. Best practice examples exist for both of these approaches.

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<sup>16</sup> R.A. Malatest & Associates were commissioned by the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada to undertake research with regard to best practices in addressing post-secondary enrolment by First Nations people. The study included interviews with key stakeholders and an in-depth literature review of Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand best practices. Barriers and issues were examined in addition to programs established to address Aboriginal participation.

Probably the best-known First Nations controlled post-secondary institution is the **Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC)**. The SIFC is an accredited member of the Canadian Association of Universities and Colleges and offers bachelor programs in language studies, education, communications, fine arts, Aboriginal studies and business in addition to an Aboriginal MBA program and Masters of Arts programs in English, First Nations languages, literature and First Nations studies. The philosophy of the college is to provide opportunities for a blended bilingual, bicultural education that celebrates, protects and illuminates the history, language, culture and arts of First Nations. It is mandated and controlled by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and provides an array of services including academic advice, scholarships and bursaries, tutoring and access to Elders. The college is also in a position to develop curriculum that both meets the academic standard and serves the needs and interests of First Nations students. The college boasts a high number of First Nations staff (approximately 50% of the faculty is Aboriginal) and, for those staff of non-Aboriginal ancestry, the College, in association with the University of Regina and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, has produced a guide that provides information and advice regarding cultural awareness and sensitivity. (*Malatest, 2002*)

Although “parental involvement” is not as clearly manifested at SIFC as at other educational levels, community control, through the Chiefs that oversee the institution, is an explicit component of the institution. As a result of its Aboriginal faculty and supportive atmosphere, the SIFC scores high marks in attracting and producing successful Aboriginal graduates. The success of SIFC has led some governments to consider the establishment of similar university colleges within their jurisdictions. (*Malatest, 2002*)

Another best practice example at the post-secondary level can be found at the Wilp Wilxo’oskwhl Nisga’a or the Nisga’a House of Wisdom. The Nisga’a, through the House of Wisdom, have established partnerships with a variety of other institutions (University of Northern British Columbia, Northwest Community College, the Open Learning Agency) in order to provide a spectrum of program offerings to their people. Studies are bilingual and bicultural and include training in the hospitality industry, fisheries and forestry, science, social services and financial planning, amongst other courses. On the cultural side, Wilp Wilxo’oskwhl Nisga’a has developed curriculum in Nisga’a language, arts and religious studies.

Through their Protocol Agreement with the University of Northern British Columbia, the Nisga’a have assumed important levels of jurisdiction in the First Nations components of the University. These include the development of certain university standards, the hiring of staff for Aboriginal programs and the creation of criteria governing the development of curriculum. The latter involves the requirement that all staff involved in curriculum development possess a bachelor’s or master’s degree or are current cultural practitioners.

UNBC has undertaken similar activities with other Aboriginal groups. Through its Office of First Nations Programming, the University has fostered collaborative community partnerships that develop curriculum with involvement from Elders, community leaders and experts, and university personnel. All curricula is designed to be transferable to other post-secondary institutions and, so, must meet generally accepted academic standards. (*Malatest, 2002*) Once again, although parental involvement appears to be indirect, community control is an essential feature of this partnership.

There has also been activity in Ontario with respect to the establishment of post-secondary institutions. Across Ontario, ten institutes<sup>17</sup> offer various services to their respective communities.

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<sup>17</sup> The Aboriginal Institutes Consortium lists the following institutes as its members: Anishinabek Educational Institute, First Nations Technical Institute, Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute, Iohahi:io Akwesasne Adult Education, Mamaweswen Training Institute, Original People’s Learning Centre, Oskhi-

Although somewhat less expansive than other Aboriginal post-secondary institutes in western Canada, these institutes, nonetheless, offer important services to the communities they serve.

Operating since 1985, the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI)<sup>18</sup> enjoys a long-standing educational reputation in Ontario. Offering programs at a college and university level in addition to professional development, FNTI attracts students from across Ontario and, with its unique Aviation program, from across North America. A number of these programs were developed in direct response to the needs expressed by community members. Specifically, FNTI created their Public Administration degree program as a consequence of a community survey. Further, their Social Services Worker certificate was established to address a community gap: individuals that were filling these positions lacked the professional accreditation and training that would assist them in performing this crucial community role.

Similarly to other First Nations post-secondary organizations, FNTI incorporates community involvement in several ways. Through its Board of Directors, which is comprised exclusively of Tyendinega residents, the community has an opportunity to influence the activities and direction of the Institute on a quarterly basis. Further, FNTI typically develops programming with the creation of Planning Committees. These committees incorporate the direct participation of community members, other outside organizations and, in some instances, representation from the FNTI Student Body. The Planning Committees are responsible for developing, monitoring and evaluating programs.

Some community control is also exercised in the selection of instructors and the cultural adaptation of programs. Since the standards of instructor qualifications are much more rigorous at the university level, the FNTI Board has little control over the selection of teachers for its university level courses. The Board, however, is able to select instructors for college level courses, and, as a result, these classes often have First Nations teachers.

Finally, FNTI addresses community involvement through the unique cultural programs incorporated into the institution's operations. Although FNTI does not offer an Elder in Residence, Elders, in addition to Student Mentors and Student Counsellors, are available to students throughout the period of instruction. Elders are also involved in the cultural adaptation of programs that would not otherwise reflect a First Nations reality to FNTI students.

In northern Ontario, the Seven Generations Education Institute<sup>19</sup> offers education programs that blend a distinct First Nation cultural perspective with standard post-secondary programming. Organized to address the educational needs of ten First Nations<sup>20</sup> in their Tribal Area, Seven Generations is overseen by a Board of Directors that includes community representation from each of the ten First Nations. Community involvement is also visible in the establishment of new programs. In response to individual and community requests directed to the Board or staff, Seven Generation staff work with community Elders and partnering institutes to adapt curriculum that will address the needs of community members and, at the same time, meet all provincial standards. Culturally adapted programs are often co-taught with both the provincially accredited instructor and

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pimache-o-win Education and Training Institute, Seven Generations Education Institute, Six Nations Polytechnic, and Ogwehoweh Skills and Trades Training

<sup>18</sup> Information regarding the First Nations Technical Institute was gathered through conversations with Trevor Lewis, Technical Services Manager, FNTI. Additional information was also acquired through the FNTI website at <http://www.tyendinaga.net/fnti/index.shtml>

<sup>19</sup> Information about the Seven Generations Educational Institute was gathered through conversations with Bill Perrault, Program Coordinator. Further details are available at [www.7generations.org](http://www.7generations.org)

<sup>20</sup> The First Nations communities served by Seven Generations include Big Grassy, Big Island, Couchiching, Lac La Croix, Naicatchewenin, Nicickouseneneaning, Ojibways of Onegaming, Rainy River, Seine River and Stanjikoming.

an Elder, each of whom provide their complementary perspectives of the material under consideration. Similarly to FNII, however, more restrictions exist in the partnerships with universities than those with colleges. Curriculum adaptation may be more difficult and little control is available over the selection of instructors.

Finally, a provincial program created in 1991 is available to support First Nations partnerships with post-secondary institutions. The program, cited in RCAP, targeted the design and delivery of First Nations programs at Ontario universities. The institutions receiving the grants were expected to integrate First Nations programs into standard curriculum. Further, they were required to incorporate First Nations representation on governing structures and create First Nations committees to guide the program. In addition, a side benefit of the initiative was to support the employment of First Nations counselors and the development of necessary support services for Aboriginal students. **(RCAP, Volume 3)** The long-term impact of this program on developing greater First Nations control and, indirectly, parental involvement, merits further research but was not known at the time of writing.

### **Adult Education:**

Unlike the general population, most indigenous students can be classified as mature students, with an average age of over 25 **(Malatest, 2002)**. Although many of these students may possess better lifeskills than their younger counterparts, they may be lacking in some basic academic skills. Further, many may be single parents with limited income. Given the situation, it is essential that the academic environment accommodates this reality and includes strategies to respond effectively to different needs. In this regard, the **Katavik School Board** in Nunavik has made significant inroads to respond to the requirements of the First Nations adult learner.

As noted in RCAP, some of the biggest challenges faced by adult education programs are the lack of First Nations control, the absence of consistent funding for general programs and Aboriginal language programs, inadequate facilities and the capricious division of basic academics, literacy and upgrading from job training. The Katavik School Board, through the assumption of control over these services, has been able to create modified programs that blend adult education with job market training and address literacy in French, English or an Aboriginal language. Thanks to the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement, the School Board presides over a stable funding base for these services, maintains community adult education facilities and designs programs according to the needs of their community members. As noted in RCAP:

*(The Katavik) experience suggests that Aboriginal people will be best served by programs that place under their control the design of adult education and job training. More flexibility is required so that communities can do what is best for their citizens. (RCAP, Volume3)*

As with earlier examples noted under post-secondary education, the Katavik situation does not directly link parental control with the institution's success. It must be assumed, however, that the School Board, which is comprised of Inuit representatives, is responsive to the community at large, parents included.

From the research and the foregoing examples, it is clear that parental involvement is an evolving process, adaptable to various community circumstances and the educational level of the institution in question. In certain cases, parental involvement is defined as an intense and lively interest in education:

*(At) New Norway ... the parents are guardians of their children's school life. They come out to games, school plays, and social functions. They come to the parent-teacher night. They listen to what their children say about school, and if they have any concerns they phone the administrators. ...Parents monitor school success through their children's work habits and willingness to attend school... (Kavanagh)*

In other situations, parental involvement is manifested through a complex and multi-dimensional program that involves carefully orchestrated parent-teacher meetings, parenting classes, parent life skills, teacher support workshops, the integration of multiple social service agencies, and ongoing monitoring. Furthermore, at some point, the more specific nature of parental involvement that characterizes pre-school, elementary and secondary education becomes the more expansive community jurisdiction that is seen at the post-secondary and adult education levels. What links the arrangements, however, is that they are successful because they address the needs of the community and the students being educated.

## **REALIZING THE VISION**

Over the past few decades, greater levels of parental involvement have been witnessed in many First Nations communities across Ontario. Although most communities enjoy some level of parental involvement, the degree of control envisioned by Indian Control of Indian Education, Tradition and Education and the RCAP are not yet in place. How does this situation continue to exist when educators, policy makers, parents and government are aware of the invaluable benefit of parental involvement? Although it is often easiest to target external authorities as most blameworthy, sometimes it is a combination of community circumstances and outside forces that impede progress.

### **Challenges:**

Parental involvement is not an external educational process, nor is it exclusively a parent-initiated activity. As the literature makes so abundantly clear, educational institutions have a significant role to play in facilitating and encouraging parental involvement. But, as the Parents Clubs in B.C. have shown, parents can also assume a leadership role in their children's education. So, too, can School Boards, provincial governments and Federal departments. With all of these interested players, why is parental involvement in First Nations schools so limited? Answers to this question emerge upon closer examination of the research.

Educational institutions play an integral role in promoting parental engagement. Unfortunately, many schools fail to understand or acknowledge the unique situation of First Nations people. Some parents have experienced outright racism at the hands of school officials:

*...(individuals) told us of regular encounters with racism, racism expressed not only in interpersonal exchanges but also through the denial of Aboriginal values, perspectives and cultures in curriculum and the life of the institution. (RCAP, Vol. 3)*

Disillusionment with the school can be further inhibited by the uneasy response of teachers and principals, many of whom do not know how to approach First Nations parents, seek their input and establish positive reciprocal relationships with them. **(Kavanagh; Baxter, Kenora 2004)**

First Nations parents are often marginalized in the provision of education to their children. Sometimes, however, this is not simply the result of current educational practices. First Nations people have suffered at the hands of education systems for well over a hundred years. Disclosures of mental, physical and sexual abuse have become all too common. These experiences are reflected in the manner in which many individuals approach education for their children. Parents whose school experiences have been painful are uncomfortable involving themselves in their children's education. **(Baxter, Hamilton 2004)** Parents who have abandoned their education or have had limited success with their schooling may feel they have nothing to contribute:

- *Parents feel that they are placed on the "other side ... (they) do not feel the current system has a place for them.*

- *Uneducated parents do not see education as a priority for their children. (Wesley Esquimaux, 2004)*

In some instances, priorities of daily survival may prevail over involvement in education, including food, shelter and work. **(Kavanagh)**

Marginalization is also a factor in the actual management of First Nations education. First Nations parents are rarely represented on provincial boards of education **(Kavanagh)**. This is reiterated by Tradition and Education which points out that there are few mechanisms to support First Nations parental involvement in decision-making bodies for provincial and territorial schools **(Assembly of First Nations, Volume 1)**. Wesley-Esquimaux notes that there are “... no parents on school boards even though there is 90 percent attendance (of First Nations students) at some off-reserve schools ...” Baxter further comments that if Native Trustee positions do exist, criteria requires that the appointee pay property taxes to qualify – a standard which many First Nations individuals cannot meet **(Baxter, Kenora)**. First Nations parents fare similarly in their involvement in school management:

*... a study of parental involvement in school ... found that in many cases, principals and school staff exercise consolidated power, and parental participation is largely symbolic; they might be at a school meetings, but they exert little influence on decisions because professionals control the flow of information. (First Nations Schools Association, 1999)*

Unfortunately, provincial school authorities are not the only bodies that limit parental involvement in school management. In reviewing the findings of the First Nations School Review **(Assembly of First Nations, Volume 2)**, the author notes that in only two of the ten schools investigated was parental involvement listed as significant<sup>21</sup>. These schools, all of which can be categorized as successful First Nations controlled institutions, effectively removed parents from decisions relating to school goals, operations and curriculum design. This conclusion is reiterated in comments by Verna Kirkness in 1997:

*Today, band councils and their designated authorities run our schools. Although membership on the band councils and school authorities undoubtedly includes parents, the intention of the policy was to include the parents of all school children in the shaping and running of the schools (First Nations Schools Association 1999)*

The virtual exclusion of First Nations parents from school management, school board membership, and as resource people, supporters and facilitators of education is a serious problem. It has been surmounted, however, in many areas with various innovative methods. In most instances, change occurred at the instigation of one or a small group of individuals:

*In almost all successful cases, someone pushed the idea and provided leadership in terms of encouraging parents, family members, governing authority members, and school staff to support collaboration. (First Nations Schools Association 1999)*

Perhaps one of the most significant obstacles to parental involvement is the scarcity of grass-roots leaders to enact change. While it is believed that the political realm is responsible for addressing this dearth, in some instances, parents are identified as the required leaders. Baxter notes:

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<sup>21</sup> *Schools that were case-studied as part of the First Nations Schools Review include the Mi'kmawey School on Chapel Island, Nova Scotia; Kahnawake Education Centre in Kahnawake, Quebec; Kahnawake Survival School in Kahnawake, Quebec; the James Bay Cree School Board, Quebec; N'ungosuk Pre-school in West Bay, Ontario; the Lakeview School in West Bay, Ontario; the Southeast Tribal School Division, Manitoba; Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan; Kipohtakaw Education Centre on Alexander Reserve, Alberta; the Seabird Island Community School on Seabird Island, British Columbia*

*Some participants felt that First Nation communities need to concentrate on electing leadership that have strong educational background themselves. These individuals may value and prioritize education goals more readily. (Baxter, Hamilton 2004)*

*Parents need to have a leadership role in education (Baxter, Thunder Bay 2004)*

*... parents and teachers feel that leadership has not prioritized education properly, especially for First Nations citizens that have to go off reserve (Baxter, North Bay 2004)*

*Parents are the first leaders in First Nations education however community support is essential (ibid)*

In conjunction with leadership, it appears that a cohesive strategic vision is essential to transform current parental involvement levels. Wesley Esquimaux comments:

*“ ... (there is a) need to have the Province, the Federal government, the First Nation government and the community fully engaged in a dialogue regarding the education and infrastructure needs on reserve.” (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2004)*

From the multitude of examples that have been reviewed as part of this research, it is clear that most of the best practices occurred within the framework of a large scale strategic vision. The Aboriginal Head Start program is a consequence of a lobby effort from First Nations that resulted in a Health Canada strategy. The Parents Club concept is the strategic brainchild of the First Nations Schools Association. The activities at Six Nations, Akwesasne and Peguis are the result of a community strategic vision. The Vancouver School District and the Nisga'a programs are the product of an overarching strategy.

In her focus group sessions, Baxter also found ready support for the development of a First Nations strategic vision:

*Develop strategic management plans for the schools and school boards (Baxter, Thunder Bay 2004)*

*Communities need to work from a common vision to bring balance to First Nations education (Baxter, North Bay 2004)*

*Not having a “unified First Nation educational vision within the community” can create barriers between family members and community, preventing involvement in the schools. (Baxter, Hamilton 2004)*

While it has been argued that a broadly based approach is not necessary to improve parental engagement, it would appear that a well-developed strategy improves the outcome exponentially. Moreover, a community-driven vision that addresses the aspirations, culture, traditional world view and local concerns appears to be most effective.

In considering the obstacles that exist to parental involvement, the impact of resources, or the lack of them, cannot be overlooked: “cheapness in education is expensive” *(Kavanagh citing Tippeconnie)* This is also true of parental engagement initiatives:

*While not all efforts to promote greater parental participation will require substantial funding, research shows that the most effective parent involvement initiatives are those with support for planning and administration through specific funds, materials, space, equipment and personnel. (Kavanagh)*

Fostering Parental Involvement:

In cultivating parental engagement, several major recommendations can be made. It should be noted, however, that there are any number of smaller initiatives that have been employed to great success that should also be reviewed. These are listed, in detail, in Appendix 1.

1. From the research, it would appear that the formulation of a parental engagement vision and strategy is highly beneficial to fostering parental involvement. This can be developed by parents, with outside facilitation, by the community/local school, by a school board or by external policy development. It should incorporate pre-school, elementary, secondary, post-secondary and adult education.
2. In supporting parents as the first teachers of children, a variety of services and training is required. Services might include: counselling, academic upgrading, parenting skills, literacy, education support, and access to a parent-teacher liaison. Training might address such areas as volunteering, curriculum development, literacy, academic upgrading and classroom instruction. Ideally, community service agencies can be integrated as part of an overall parental engagement strategy.
3. The provision of training to teachers and educational administrators would be extremely beneficial in alleviating problems associated with communicating with First Nations parents and understanding their cultural values. Cultural sensitivity training, access to teacher support, and training in communications strategies would be valuable. Teachers would also benefit from an integrated service model that provides easy access to other agencies and the creation of a parent-teacher liaison.
4. The Ontario government must amend legislation to ensure that First Nations participation is a requirement on School Boards responsible for educating First Nations children. This level of control can be supplemented by parent advisory committees, parent liaison staff, curriculum developers and liaison staff. Policies should also address the integration of other services into the education program. Tax provisions associated with FN trustees must be eliminated.
5. First Nations schools, education authorities, Tribal Councils and provincial territorial organizations must ensure that meaningful parental involvement is a significant component of their mandate.
6. The Federal, Provincial and First Nations government must negotiate and ensure a sufficient level of resources to implement First Nations parental involvement strategies within and external to First Nations communities addressing all levels of the educational spectrum, from pre-school to adult education.

## **THE COST**

Very little substantive information is available in research documents regarding the costs associated with parental involvement. What does exist is specifically related to some of the best practices noted in Section 2.

In materials documenting the results of Aboriginal Head Start, it is reported that the average expenditure per community is \$212,168. It should be noted, however, that the program's offerings differ substantially from one community to another (ie: some have a transportation service and own their facilities) and that many employ uncertified workers, have limited employee benefits and cannot offer services to all the children wishing to enroll, particularly those with special needs.

In terms of resources for the Parents Clubs, the situation varies slightly but overall the Clubs operate on little or no funding. The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and the First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) receive overall funding of about \$90,000.00 from Gathering Strength for the operation of the initiative, which includes approximately 100 Clubs in British Columbia. The funding is used to produce five newsletters and an annual parents club calendar for about 2500 members. Approximately 1000 Parents Club Handbooks are published and distributed and a variety of incentive materials are acquired for the clubs, such as books, board games, t-shirts, vests and coffee mugs. Of course, some of the funding is also used to cover administrative costs of running the club from a central office.

The locally-based clubs themselves are rarely provided any direct funding, unless the FNESC or FNSEA unexpectedly access a grant. The organizations have occasionally secured funding for a province-wide parents club conference, but those costs have been in addition to the regular operating funds described earlier.

The clubs themselves may access funding from the community, but it is extremely limited when it does happen and it is not available to all Clubs. Generally they hold meetings in free venues and use the materials provided through FNESC and the FNSEA as a basis for their operations. Several clubs are beginning to undertake fundraising for their own needs or for school or student needs such as field trips or library books.<sup>22</sup>

In speaking with representatives of the Vancouver District Board, it was explained that the program serves approximately 2,000 First Nations students in the region, most of whom do not originate from the local First Nations<sup>23</sup>. The entire program, including an Administrator, a Curriculum Consultant, an Aboriginal Educator Mentor, 22 First Nations Support Workers, four separate Aboriginal language and culture programs (each of which integrates various social service workers and counselors) costs approximately \$2.1 million per year to run. A further \$60,000 to \$100,000 is expended yearly on an Aboriginal Strategic Planning exercise that incorporates First Nations involvement and entails constant re-examination of existing programs. These monies are allocated by the government of British Columbia and are not part of the monies provided by Indian Affairs as part of the Tuition Agreement.<sup>24</sup>

Support for parental engagement initiatives in Ontario is also available, at least temporarily, through a program established by the Department of Indian Affairs in 2003/04. This pilot program consists of a budget of approximately \$300,000 and is currently being offered through the Chiefs of Ontario (COO). Although formal guidelines exist, the expectation is that the program will be responsive to proposals submitted by First Nations and accommodate the varying needs and realities of each community. It is anticipated that through the transfer of program administration to the COO, the program will be able to address many situations in as flexible a manner as possible. Given that 2004/05 will see a possible sunset of the pilot program, the window of opportunity is extremely limited for First Nations wishing to develop parental engagement processes.<sup>25</sup>

## **ROLES OF THE PARTIES**

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<sup>22</sup> *Information about the financing of the Parents Clubs initiative was gathered through an email dialogue with Barbara Kavanaugh, Director of Research and First Nations Schools, First Nations Education Steering Committee*

<sup>23</sup> *The First Nations communities situated around Vancouver typically operate their own elementary and secondary programs rather than sending children to provincial schools.*

<sup>24</sup> *Information about the financing of the Vancouver District Board's Aboriginal Education Programs was gathered through conversations with Jeff Smith, Aboriginal Education Administrator, School District #39*

<sup>25</sup> *Information about the Parental Engagement Program gathered through conversations with Kathy Hill, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada*

As with any discussion about First Nations education, the provincial, federal and First Nations governments have an important role to play in cultivating greater parental engagement in systems of education. The Tradition and Education report is unequivocal in requiring the implementation of the inherent right to self government as the critical mode to improve all aspects of First Nations education. This would enable First Nations to assume jurisdiction and develop education systems that reflect their cultural and linguistic traditions and their unique worldview. This philosophy is echoed throughout RCAP which further remarks that nearly 70% of First Nations education is controlled by provincial or territorial governments. Unfortunately, little accountability to First Nations or First Nations parental involvement exists to ensure that the needs of First Nations students are adequately addressed (*RCAP, Volume 3*).

Despite the prominence of the enactment of the inherent right as an avenue for change at the political level, it is a less visible comment from day to day education practitioners. These individuals are often more concerned with the practical realities of delivering a responsive, parent- and community-driven education to First Nations children.

Full implementation of the inherent right to self-government is the political means for change and may take considerable time to accomplish. In the interim, a number of other options should be explored to enhance and monitor parental engagement in First Nations education. The majority of these require action at the First Nations, provincial and federal levels:

#### First Nations

First Nations must ensure that certain criteria are implemented that assures appropriate levels of parental involvement as the situation warrants. This may demand a broadly based strategy that creates not only better students, but better parents:

*... parents need to be taught to parent. They need to understand the role that they must play in their children's education. These are the activities that need to be taken on by First Nations communities. (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 1995)*

1. Facilitate the involvement of parents and community members in the creation of education goals and directions to ensure that these reflect the expectations and requirements of the community.
2. Ensure that parental involvement is an essential component of the holistic education philosophy advanced by First Nations and that this is reflected in all education policies and activities. This means the inclusion of all education levels from early childhood education to adult education.
3. Establish an integrated approach to engaging parents by drawing in other community agencies that can assist parents with parenting skills, the development of positive home environments and learning activities, and access to training and adult education opportunities. This integrated approach can also assist in addressing the health and social service needs of children in the education system.
4. Create school-parent liaison positions such as First Nations support workers, home-school coordinators or First Nations resource workers, to assist in the bridge between home and school, school and community and student and community.
5. Facilitate events that demonstrate the community's support of the school.
6. In negotiating tuition agreements with provincial authorities, ensure that parental engagement and regular communications with the community are incorporated. Monitoring and the achievement of specific targets should also be addressed as part of this negotiation.

#### Ontario

The Ontario government must develop a meaningful relationship with First Nations across the province in the field of education. This can be accomplished through the creation of an Act that encompasses a range of educational issues (*Baxter, Thunder Bay 2004*). In particular, however, the province must move to ensure that parental engagement is an essential ingredient in all legislation and policy related to the education of First Nations students. This must include:

1. Legislation that requires that tuition agreements include adequate First Nations representation at the Board level without any criteria related to property tax.
2. Legislation that requires all school boards to host and resource First Nations parent/community advisory committees.
3. Policy that requires and resources the creation of parent-school liaison positions at all provincial schools educating First Nations students.
4. Policy that facilitates the integration of services geared to the individual needs of First Nations students and their families.
5. Policy that requires and supports the involvement of parents, Elders and communities in the creation of curriculum, as instructors, as advisors, as educational staff, administrative staff, board staff and volunteers in provincial schools, whatever their level.
6. Policies that support First Nations parental involvement through the provision of support and resources to all educational institutions, teachers, administrators and boards, from pre-school to post-secondary. This can include training and support of teachers/administrators in seeking parental involvement, the establishment of liaison staff, the creation of First Nations-school advisory committees, and the integration of services.
7. Legislation that requires the identification of adequate financial resources, outside of standard tuition agreement transfer monies, to support new policies and programs related to parental/community involvement. This should include resources to address on-going strategic planning exercises conducted with First Nations involvement.

### Federal Government

The importance of the Federal government in facilitating positive change in First Nations education cannot be overstated. As the signatories of Tuition Agreements, the funders for provincially-delivered First Nations education, the policy-makers and funders for on-reserve education, their involvement in advancing First Nations control over education is critical. As such a key sponsor of First Nations education, they play a decisive role in promoting greater parental engagement.

*The Federal Government must work with First Nations to develop arrangements that support “quality education” for First Nations learners. This will involve changes in policy, changes in attitude, changes in financial arrangements and possibly changes in legislation. These must be determined in concert with First Nations. (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 1995)*

In fulfilling its role, it is critical that the Federal government not only endorses but promotes local control over the design, development and delivery of First Nations education programs. This includes the establishment of education priorities as a locally driven exercise. Some of the steps that must be taken to achieve these goals are:

1. Recognize the importance of parental involvement as a key feature of First Nations control. As part of this recognition, Canada must ensure that sufficient, sustainable resources are available to both locally controlled First Nations schools and in tuition agreements to realize the goals that First Nations may have with respect to parental engagement. This must include resources to address personnel costs, equipment, materials and physical space requirements. The transfer of such resources should not add unnecessary administrative burden to First Nations.

2. In developing policy to support parental engagement, Canada must acknowledge the diversity of circumstances in First Nations communities and that this will result in a diversity of programs to support parental engagement.
3. Recognize the holistic approach to First Nations education by addressing parental engagement as a facet of programs ranging from pre-kindergarten to post-secondary.
4. Require First Nations representation on provincial school boards, advisory bodies and parent councils as part of tuition agreements. Communications with First Nations, consultations regarding curriculum and other Aboriginal program development must also form part of Tuition Agreements in addition to target-setting and monitoring provisions.

## **CONCLUSION**

Parental engagement in First Nations education is an old concept that has been discussed and promoted for many years. It formed an integral part of Indian Control of Indian Education, was advanced as part of both Tradition and Education and the Royal Commission of Aboriginal People. Small, inexpensive projects as well as costly, large-scale strategies have been employed and, in general, all have met with some element of success. Fortunately, all of these experiments have left a trail that can be followed. The less effective approaches can be discarded and the methods that seemed to work miracles can be adapted and implemented. What remains problematic is ensuring that all First Nations parents have access to one or more programs that, in turn, will benefit their children, their schools and their communities. Too often, the resources available to one community to develop programs and services is denied to others wishing to implement similar programs. This, then, is the concluding recommendation: that an overall strategy be developed and implemented which supports the creation of parent-directed engagement programs and furnishes the required resources. This strategy may receive its impetus from First Nations, but the involvement of Federal and Provincial governments and numerous educational partners will also be essential in order to realize the legislative, policy and financial supports that will be necessary for its fruition. As the saying goes: "It takes an entire village to raise a child". In the case of First Nations children, it takes not only a village but the willingness of external agencies to remove themselves and hand over control so that First Nations can get on with the business of raising, and educating, their children.

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