IMPROVING THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Research findings prepared for Peace Wapiti School Board, June, 2002
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although there is no agreement on the exact figures for Native student drop out rates, researchers suggest that aboriginal people have the highest high school dropout rate among students in Canada, almost twice that of other students. The costs of dropping out for society as a whole and for Aboriginal peoples in particular is enormous. Concerned about success of Aboriginal students under their jurisdiction, the administration and trustees of the Peace Wapiti School Board commissioned the following study.

This report summarizes the interviews of 19 Aboriginal students, 24 parents and community members, and nine faculty and staff members. It begins by reviewing some of the current information about dropouts and retention. It concludes by making recommendations to the school board, suggesting how delivery of education to Aboriginal students might be improved, thus resulting in a better school experience and higher completion rates. By improving the schooling for Native students, all students in the school jurisdiction might benefit.

Students clearly indicated that more Aboriginal content is needed in the school curriculum for it to be more relevant to their needs. They would like to see Cree language taught as well as Aboriginal culture and heritage. They expressed the need for more Aboriginal teachers and visits by Elders and other Native speakers and entertainers.

Questions to parents were directed to why Aboriginal students dropout or are unsuccessful. Parents indicated that racism discouraged them in school, reinforcing similar findings from other studies. Parents felt more Aboriginal teachers and counselors are needed in schools. Parents felt teachers need to become more culturally aware. They suggested teachers get training in Native culture to help them deal with prejudice and racism. Teachers need to work one-on-one with students who have behavior and learning difficulties.

Teachers and administrators made a number of suggestions for improving services to Aboriginal students: bringing in Aboriginal people to serve as role models, to assist in mentoring, and to teach Cree, culture and heritage; establishing smaller classes to allow individualized instruction and provide hands on experience in a “warm and caring environment”; developing a support system at home and in the community and partnerships so that the Aboriginal community feels it has ownership and direction in the
children’s education. They also indicated that teachers need to become better informed about Aboriginal culture and issues. History and other topics need to be taught from an Aboriginal perspective.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Introduce small classes to allow a “warm and caring” atmosphere that permits teaching from various learning styles and encourages one-on-one interaction. Develop activities that take students away from the school place and immerse them into their culture.

2. Enrich the curriculum by involving Native Elders and other Aboriginals to share their experiences and knowledge, their language, culture and heritage. All students could benefit from this experience, but language and culture classes should become a recognized part of the curriculum for all Aboriginal students.

3. Provide mentoring and tutoring for Aboriginal students using Natives after whom the youth can model their lives. Establish a Native presence in all schools where there are Aboriginal students.

4. Use the talking circle (as suggested by Makokis) to allow all parties in the education of Aboriginal youth to come together “to work towards and experience unity” of purpose and design of schooling for Native students.

5. All teachers and administrators should have diversity training, to help them understand and accept cultural differences. This instruction should train them to recognize and develop delivery skills for various learning styles.

6. Develop meaningful partnerships with the Aboriginal community that allow parents and Native leaders to shape the educational process for their youth.
Problem

Although there is no agreement on the exact figures for Native student drop out rates, researchers suggest that aboriginal people have the highest high school dropout rate among students in Canada. The 1996 census reported 54% of Aboriginal people aged 15 and over did not have a high school diploma, while the number of non-Aboriginal people 15 and over without a high school diploma was 35%. Galt (2000) using Statscan data put the figure for Aboriginals at 45% and non-Aboriginals at 17%. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP, 1996) put the dropout figure much higher at almost twice the level of other students, 68.5%.

The costs of dropping out for society as a whole and for Native peoples in particular is enormous. The singular study, prepared by Brenda Lafleur in 1992 for the Conference Board of Canada, suggested that by lowering the dropout rate from 34% to 10% by the year 2000 Canadians could save $26 billion. The year 2000 has passed and the drop out rate continues to be about the same. What are the costs of dropping out, particularly to Native peoples?

In Canada, “without a high school diploma, school leavers are largely denied the opportunity for further training, promotion, and indeed access to a general ‘career structure’ (Mackay & Myles, p. 158). Makokis (2000, p. 11) suggests that “dropping out adds stress on youth, their families, and the Aboriginal community in general.” Native young people “often become higher risk youth, experiencing other social problems including suicide.” (In Canada the First Nations suicide rate is four times the national average.) Because unemployment is already so high on reserves, uneducated youth are left with few options, except to become further burdens on their communities and society. The percentage of Aboriginal’s receiving social assistance is almost four times higher than the total Canadian population, 28.6% versus 8.1% (RCAP, 1996).

This study looked at the reality of Aboriginal children attending schools in one northern Alberta school jurisdiction and determined what must be done to have them achieve success, by their definition, in local schools. Results of the study, although specific to one school district, may provide insights to other
policy makers as they consider ways to reduce dropouts among Aboriginal students and improve their learning experience.

**Background to the Problem**

The reason for the failure of the school system to meet the needs of so many Native students stems from the past educational experience of Aboriginal peoples. Makokis (2000, p. 16) lays the blame partly on colonialism, an attitude that she claims continues to exist toward Canada’s Natives today. Prior to the white people’s arrival, the community was responsible for teaching the children. “Survival depended on ensuring that the children were taught the values, the culture, and the roles (including the male and female roles) within the community. The Elder’s role was critical, as they taught the children the necessary lessons about life. Many of the teachings took place in the moment, when adults were observing the children. Children were always in close proximity to the adults, learning through observation. Overall learning was community based, involving the whole village, and was holistic in nature. Essentially, Mother Earth was the classroom. Everyone was responsible for ensuring the children learned the good life.”

When the Europeans arrived, they set out “to civilize, Christianize and terminate the Indian culture” (Makokis, 2000, p.17). Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A. MacDonald, in introducing the first Indian Act, declared that “Indian children should be taken away from their parents so as to eliminate their barbarian influence and expose the children to the benefits of civilization” (cited in Makokis, 2000, p.18). The goal of residential schools was to “drive a wedge between the students and their culture, to turn Indians into budding young Christians trained in the work ethic.” Duncan Campbell Scott, the deputy superintendent of the Indian Department in the early 1990s stated, “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and therein no Indian question” (cited in Makokis, 2000, p.18).

Finally with the closure of residential schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Aboriginal children were returned to their homes, leaving a legacy of “social maladjustment, abuse of self and others and family breakdown” (cited in Milloy, 1999, p.295). Families were broken in spirit, language and culture were lost, and pride in one’s heritage was taken away. “Many Aboriginal children today are still affected by the scars incurred by their parents and grandparents and by the intergenerational impact of a broken
culture. As a result of residential schools, education was devalued” (Native Education Policy Review, 2000, p. 4).

A new era began with attempts of assimilation and integration in provincial schools, but the “predominant attitude again was one of paternalism, coercion, discrimination, and racism” (Makokis, 2000, p.20). A White Paper, introduced in 1969 by then Minister of Indian Affairs, Jean Chretien, had the effect, according to some Native people, of eliminating “the treaties and therefore the special relationships of the Indians to the Crown,” and of hastening “the assimilation of Indians into White society” (Makokis, 2000, p. 21). From the First Nations perspective “integration viewed as a one-way process is not integration, and will fail. In the past, it has been the Indian student who was asked to integrate: to give up his identity, to adopt new values and a new way of life”(Statement from the National Indian Brotherhood [NIB], cited in Makokis, 2000, pp. 20-21). First Nations argued for Indian control of Indian education, but instead of self-determination in the education of their children, bands became administrators on behalf of Indian Affairs, which continued to control the purse strings. Mecredi and Turpel (1993) argued that “A First Nations government must be able to decide whether to establish its own standards or whether to follow provincial standards.” In some cases they claimed provincial standards don’t apply. “In education … we need a combination of First Nations and provincial curricula in order to teach First Nations languages, customs, traditions and history.”

Why students dropout

By determining the reasons students dropout of school, potential dropouts may be identified, and something might be done to prevent them from dropping out. Barnes Deschamps (cited in Makokis, 2000, p. 57) in a comprehensive review of studies in 1992 concluded that the most common dropout characteristics were ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, coming from a single parent home, high absenteeism, discipline issues, grade retention, low academic performance, and poor achievement test scores. Wells, Bechard and Hamby (cited in West, 1991) added education level of the parents, special program placements, number of school moves, ethnic/gender distinctions, language spoken in the home, participation in extra-curricular activities, teen pregnancy and parenthood, and coming from a broken home, single parent or large family. In a study among Ontario Aboriginals, Mackay and Myles (pp. 163-
168) determined that poor language skills, a lack of parents support, and a failure to communicate between school and home were factors that contributed to dropouts.

Clarke (1994) studied Native American graduates and dropouts in five reserves in Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota. He concluded that the two primary reasons students left school were negative family situation and negative teacher/student relations. Other major factors were poverty, being forced to grow up too fast, running away from home because of abuse, teachers not believing students, school was boring, teachers ignored them, teachers did not like them, teachers did not care, and teachers expected them to drop out. When asked to “express in their own words” reasons for dropping out or staying in school, students identified poverty, insensitivity of teachers, and a lack of a caring school environment (Clarke, 1994, p.86).

In her study of Native student dropouts, Makokis (2000, p. 174) found that racism was mentioned in almost every student interview, either directly or in more subtle ways, such as “teacher favoritism or teachers not caring.” One mother noted, “I can feel for these kids because I went through that and it still exists in this school in this age and time.” In addition to racism, parents indicated a need for greater parental involvement in provincial schools. Parents felt they got “the runaround” when they dealt with schools. Community leaders expressed dissatisfaction with “the ineffective policies affecting the implementation of provincial tuition agreements, and communication patterns (or lack thereof) among the federal government, the provincial school jurisdictions, and the First Nation school board authorities” (p. 176). Makokis (2000, p. 178-179) summarized her findings indicating students dropped out because they felt alienated and had poor student/school relationships whereas parents felt a distrust of the educational system. Community leaders felt powerless to initiate the necessary change while the Elders felt the current situation is because of oppression and colonization which resulted in severe pressures within families and the larger First Nations community.

The Native Education Policy Review (2000, p. 11) identified major barriers to learning, including low rate of parent involvement, lack of appropriate role models in school, lack of sense of belonging, few teachers of Aboriginal ancestry, culturally insensitive environment, ignorance by non-Aboriginals of the Native way of life, and unaddressed individual learning styles.
Success in schools

In spite of all the attention given to educational improvement and reform over the past years, the rate of dropouts had not changed significantly (Makokis, 2000, p. 61). To adequately address the dropout problem, one must first determine the reasons for leaving school and then come up with possible solutions. As Clarke (1994) pointed out, a primary reasons that students dropout is because schools fail to meet their needs. Five successful strategies for dropout prevention have been mentoring, tutorials, counseling, parental involvement and alternative curriculum methods (Wircenski, cited in West, 1991). However, these measures are “stopgaps”, adds Wircenski, if the real issue is curriculum relevancy. If the potential dropout appears to be having difficulties with curriculum, alternative curriculum methods might include part-time, evening or weekend classes, year round schools, open entry/open exit programs, schools within schools and expanded time on task programs. These options might require alternative classes, alternatives programs or alternative schools (Wircenski, 1991). Alternative classes would involve individualized instruction, specialized instruction, while maintaining regular classes, and early intervention where students are falling behind. Alternative programs include part-time or evening classes, open entry-open exit classes, or extended time for certain subjects. Alternative schools utilize non-traditional approaches to education, usually located in separate locations with specially trained staff. They operate day or evening, have more relaxed rules, and may have separate pass/no pass options and their own certificates of graduation.

An Alberta Learning discussion paper (May 15, 2000) suggested lessening the dropout problem by prevention, intervention, transition strategies, and systemic renewal. Prevention strategies including early intervention, alternative schools, individualized programs, and mentoring and tutoring would improve academic achievement. Intervention where Children’s Services worked closely with schools and with programs to stimulate and maintain parental involvement would enhance personal, social, family and community conditions. Transition strategies considering school to work transition, post-secondary institution and business partnerships, and program choice would improve career preparation, job training and the relevance of education. Community linkages and teacher education/professional development would help system renewal.

Makokis (2000, p.186) recommended staff development which included the surrounding First Nations and shared collaborative leadership with Native counterparts. Developing and maintaining positive
relationships is important. Schools need to seek out effective home, school, and governance partnerships that are based on “caring, knowledge, respect and responsibility” (p.192). Since all participants expressed concern about discrimination, racism, and race relations, a key recommendation of Makokis’s study (pp. 182, 193) was for diversity training. She suggested organizations could enhance diversity by using the talking circle, which “allows people of difference … to come together and sit in a circle to work towards and experience unity.” Provincial schools must make concerted efforts to involve parents in the education of Aboriginal children and hire First Nations employees to serve as role models. Elders could teach classes on Native culture and provide on-going in-service for school staff. Tuition agreements should exist between school districts and First Nation communities, not Indian Affairs. If First Nations Education Authorities “held the monies instead of INAC, the relationship” between Native leaders and the schools would be better and stronger (p.198).

Cultural differences

Makokis (2000) suggests to be successful in schooling Aboriginal youth educators must understand Native culture. Aboriginals view leadership as relational as opposed to individualistic, she writes.

The concept of relational leadership requires a paradigm shift. No longer is the top down hierarchy recognized as effective, as it dehumanizes people. In fact, relational leadership implies that anyone can lead, whether it be the student, teacher or administrator (Makokis, 2000, p.80).

Relational leadership is based upon the following characteristics: collaboration, caring, courage, intuition and vision. Leaders that practice these five attributes, according to Makokis (2000, p. 82), will essentially be embracing the Natural Laws of the Creator. “In the Native community the establishment and maintenance of relationships is key” (p. 88). Thus, other factors like keeping on task or on time would be secondary. The building of partnerships becomes an essential element with the Native community.

In his study of Navajo education, Rhodes (1994) suggested cultural differences are a key factor in how Native children learn. Indian children learn that, although knowledge is good, relationships are more important. They learn from their culture that they should do things slowly and right the first time, that rather than jumping in and doing something that they should wait until they understand. Group cooperation
is important and excellence reflects on the group. Rather than talking, they should keep silent and avoid confrontation. Native children learn through active participation and listening.

**METHODOLOGY**

Interviews were conducted with students and parents, members of the Aboriginal community, and public school teachers and administrators of Native students. A separate interview guide, using both open and closed questions, was developed for each group. Interviewees were invited to respond beyond the questions in the guides. Responses were transcribed and analyzed for themes. From these themes conclusions were arrived at and policy recommendations were suggested.

Nineteen students were interviewed (12 female, seven male). Their average age was 16, range 15-17. Seven were status Indians, 11 were not, one was unclear. Seven lived on a reserve within the school district boundaries; 12 did not. All attended the same high school. Seven were in grade 10, eight in grade 11, and four in grade 12. In addition to speaking English, 14 spoke Cree. Ten followed the traditional ways, four followed them somewhat, and five did not.

Twenty-four parents and community members were interviewed. Most were from Alberta, although seven were born in British Columbia. Their average age was 39, range 24-76. Twenty were female and four were male. Seventeen lived on the reserve in the school district boundaries. All, but four had lived off the reserve. Fourteen were status Indians. The interviewees were parents of 46 school-age children, 20 in elementary school, 11 in junior high school, 14 in high school. Sixteen of the 24 interviewees spoke Cree as well as English. Two of the interviewees worked in the helping professions, 11 worked for government, two were trades people, three labourers, one self-employed, one retired and four unemployed. Their average number of grades completed was 10.5, range 1-16 years. Five said they followed the traditional ways, six said sometimes, 12 no, and one no answer.

Nine school staff people were interviewed: three teaching assistants/Native liaisons, three teachers, and three administrators. Four were Aboriginal. Of the non-Aboriginal people interviewed, most had a good knowledge of Native issues and culture, mostly gained from working with Aboriginal people and students.
The school system serves approximately 6,000 students located in 28 schools (including six high schools) spread over an area of 30,000 square kilometers in northwestern Alberta. Some of the jurisdiction's schools are located in remote rural settings while others are located in the region's towns and villages. The district provides schooling for students from one reserve and two Metis settlements. Aboriginal students numbering slightly over 300 mainly attend three schools, an elementary, junior high and high school. Excluding schools serving four Hutterite colonies, the smallest school has an enrollment of just over 30 students and the largest has over 700 students. Cree language classes are offered in the elementary and junior high schools. Native liaison workers assist with school programs in the three schools. The School Board employs the full-time equivalent of over 300 teachers and 398 non-teaching staff. Less than 10 teachers and staff have Aboriginal backgrounds. A member of the Native community sits as an Aboriginal representative on the school board.

**Student Responses**

1. **Is your way of life different from non-Aboriginals?**

   Seven students indicated a difference in lifestyle from non-Aboriginals while 12 did not. One student reported living with the white part of his family, another indicated he doesn’t live differently from whites except for speaking Cree at home. Differences included participating in sweats and powwows, telling stories and talking about traditional beliefs, the speaking of Cree language and eating traditional food.

2. **What school courses do you like? Why?**

   The majority of students liked courses in the Career and Technology Studies stream – communication technology, sewing, cosmetology, computers – because they were fun, the students were good at them, they found them interesting, and considered them as possible careers. Some students indicated they enjoyed academic courses such as English, math, and science, while others preferred drama and physical education.
3. What courses do you dislike? Why?

Students disliked courses because they were boring (accounting and math), English (because I had to speak in front of class), because they were failing (social studies), didn’t see relevance (science) or outdated (social). One student felt out of place because he was the only Native (English) and another was not in his age group (gym).

4. What do you think you need to learn?

Ten students indicated the need to learn to speak Cree, more about ancestors, heritage and background; six felt they needed to learn core subjects like science, math; four felt trades and technology like home economics, foods, cooking, cosmetology were important to learn.

5. In your opinion, how would you improve the schooling of Aboriginal students?

Four students suggested the schools need more Aboriginal teachers, three indicated Cree language classes, and two thought Elders needed to come to school more often and that there be more about Native history and heritage, using speakers and dancers. One felt Aboriginals needed to be more involved individually and another felt there should be pictures of Natives in the school. One student hoped the school would keep the Native liaison “because it is more comfortable knowing she’s here.” Three felt no change was needed and two gave no answer.

6. What sort of work would you like to engage in when you are finished school?

The students had definite opinions about what they wanted to do after school. Only one didn’t know. Most required post-secondary education: teacher, nurse, doctor, arts and music, counselor, mechanic, oil industry, massage therapy, hair dresser, dental hygienist, biologist, business manager, and accountant, architect and interior design, fashion studies, and computers. One wanted to work in the bush. One dreamed of being an actress while another wanted to be a professional volleyball player.

7. Will you be going to a post-secondary institution after you graduate?

Eleven students indicated they planned on attending a post-secondary institution after graduating, while five thought it was most likely, and two were unsure. One said no.
Parents’ Comments

Parents were asked to provide comments to three questions:

1. What experiences encouraged you or discouraged you in school? Was there anyone in particular who helped you in school?
2. What is your opinion of the quality of schools your children are now attending?
3. In your opinion, what can be done to improve the education of your children?

1. What experiences encouraged you or discouraged you in school? Was there anyone in particular who helped you in school?

Only eight people felt they had been encouraged in school. Although some people mentioned family and friends as encouraging them in their education, five people indicated that teachers provided them most encouragement in school. Mrs. Davidson was one teacher who kept me going when I wanted to quit grade 12,” said one parent. Another parent indicated it was her grade 8 teacher who encouraged her to stay in school. However, she also said “another teacher had no tolerance for us.” Another parent said activities and her friends helped her to get through school.

Most parents (16 of 24) indicated they received no encouragement, but were rather discouraged, in school. Seven parents identified racism and prejudice specifically as the major reasons for discouragement. “Prejudice discouraged me. I didn’t fit in,” said one parent.

Another parent indicated that racism discouraged him. He felt left out because he didn’t get invited to trips, events or games.

A parent said she was discouraged by “being native, having to defend myself with teachers and students.” She said she was encouraged by “seeing my friends going down, going nowhere in life. Having nothing, wanting to eat.”

“The biggest problem I faced was racism,” said one parent. “It wasn’t very bad or was nearly non-existent in the city schools, but in the smaller schools it is everywhere. The sad thing about it was that a lot of the teachers showed me racism as well. I was not encouraged when I had something to complete or complimented when I finished something. It was more like, ‘Oh, you actually finished. I thought you wouldn’t.’ I was made to feel like I was worthless and not wanted.”
“My determination encouraged me,” said another parent. “I was discouraged by the attitude of other peers toward me and the lack of interest from teachers.”

Other factors also discouraged parents from completing school. “I, myself, was very interested in my schooling. I became discouraged when I had to be a mother to my younger siblings.”

Other parents indicated that school was very boring or “pointless.”

“No one really helped me in school,” said a parent. The work was hard, but she said she got things done and decent marks got her through. “Mean classmates, mean teachers” was what discouraged her most.

2. What is your opinion of the quality of schools your children are now attending?

Half of the parents (12) were satisfied with the quality of the schools. “My opinion is the quality is better,” said one parent. “My children are doing good and haven’t had any serious complaints. Teachers and staff have been fair to my kids.”

Two parents indicated the high school was doing a better job than the elementary and junior high school.

Another parent indicated the elementary school quality was very low. There is “no equality in teacher time for students. If a child is not fitting to a teacher that child is pushed along. My daughter is in grade 2 and still struggling with her teacher. I demanded a resource to take her to outside screening and it was that request that got her the valuable extra help she desperately needed. She should have been given that help from the beginning of school.”

Five had no opinions about school quality. Several of the remaining parents commented about discipline. “Schools these days are not teaching children respect. There is no discipline and many of the problem children are not learning.”

Several of the remaining comments related to the theme of prejudice. “Very, very prejudiced,” said one parent.

Another parent said the schools are very racist toward Native youth. “They do not encourage the children and it seems they do not want them in the schools at all,” she said. “One youth said a teacher was
being racist toward him and when asked she replied, ‘I never taught Natives before.’ Like we are slower or
do not have the thinking capacity as other peoples.”

Finally, a parent said she didn’t see anything wrong with the school [structure] itself. “They [just]
don’t care about the Native children.”

3. In your opinion, what can be done to improve the education of your children?

Seven parents had no answer or didn’t know what to suggest to improve the education of their
children, but the remaining parents suggested a range of ideas from special training for teachers to help
them avoid racism to the establishment of a Native school.

Five parents touched on the theme of racism. Comments were: “Stop the racism in the faculty.”
“Change teachers’ attitudes toward Native students.” “Treat students equally.” “Treat them with respect.”
“Stamping” kids with the “bad guy” brush is a problem stated a parent. “Teachers are not always
right, students do have things to say.”

Several parents indicated more Aboriginal teachers and counselors are needed as way to create
more understanding and tolerance of differences among Native students. One parent indicated that “more
traditional people [are needed] to do and talk to [students] to bring up their self-esteem.” Better screening
of potential teachers is required, suggested another parent. “Are they really wanting to teach or just want
to be bullies?”

A parent suggested the schools need training to “help those teachers who do not know anything
about us!”

A number of parents suggested more time is needed working one-on-one with Native students
with better understanding of student’s individual needs. More money, more teaching assistants, more
teachers per grade would make it possible to give extra attention to students who need it. One parent
suggested just understanding and listening more would help. She said “everyone is different. They may be
difficult to understand. Take time and realize where and what you could do to help kids like this, not
ignore and let them be because they’ll end up quitting.” Another parent added, “Treat us as equals; do not
ignore us because we are different.”
“Help them find their goals early and guide them towards them. Try to identify problems early and address them. Make them feel secure and wanted,’ suggested a parent.

“The children that have learning or behavior problems should be helped instead of pushed through the system,” said a parent. “I personally know a fifteen-year-old boy that is in grade 10 and he cannot read. What’s up with that?”

Maybe “we should be looking at our own school!” suggested a parent. There is “no support for our kids that need help. You have to be forceful in order to get help. You have to demand to get help! We need advocates for the parents who cannot speak for themselves.”

Several parents indicated that many Native students are quieter than other students. “Understand why the kids are shy,” suggested a parent. “Do not discipline shyness as not knowing.” Teachers “could have a little understanding of quiet, shy kids; not just leaving them unattended,” said another parent.

Several parents said greater variety in learning activities are needed. Make school relate more to the outside world, said one parent. Another parent said more “field trips are needed” with activities that are less one sided. [Activities that would appeal to Native youth and support Native culture?] More involvement with parents and more fun activities, suggested another parent. More education is needed on smoking and drug abuse, said a parent.

“Parents need to know the importance of education,” said a parent. And “children need to [learn] the importance of education from their parents.” Another parent said, “My child needs to take his own initiative to want to do things he wants to do or not do.” Somehow we need to “have them come to school,” a parent suggested.

Teacher / Administration Responses

Interviewee #1

A non-Aboriginal school teacher, who has 50 percent Native students, said the most significant issue among Aboriginal students in her school seems to be severe absenteeism and what seems to be a lack of accountability for absenteeism. “I believe these students, as with other students, learn best in an environment that offers consistency and by attending school regularly.” She said absenteeism causes
students to get behind. Students are advanced “right from primary grades” and “placed” in the next grade without having acquired the previous grade skills.

This teacher indicated “a lack of accountability toward attendance” exists partly because “school is not important for parents” and, “therefore, not for students.” Successful students seem to have positive role models, she said. 20-40 percent of her students have no problems, but some of the other students attend as few as 80 of 200 school days.

Another problem, she identified, is defiance of authority, particularly among boys.

Interviewee #2

An administrator at a school with a large Native student population said he has gained information about Native students from a Native faculty member on his staff, among other sources and through personal experience. He indicated that he felt Aboriginal students tend to be unsuccessful in school because their "value system is different." He said Aboriginal students learn best "hands on" and that education would be more meaningful "by having supportive parents."

He suggested the following structure for a school for Natives:

- One on one with kids, immediate feedback
- Technology
- Hands-on
- Stress regular attendance

He said he would need a lot more resources to run a successful Native program.

Interviewee # 3

A teaching assistant at an elementary school who is Native said most Aboriginal students are unsuccessful because they don't attend classes. Aboriginal students learn best by being at school every day. "Our kids are slower," she said, so "more time is needed to grasp issues." She felt the school needed to offer classes in Cree language and culture. Parents need to be involved more in the schooling of their children.
Interviewee # 4

An Aboriginal liaison and teaching assistant (who is a Native person) said she felt Aboriginal students were unsuccessful because they lack a support system, especially at home. Native students with difficulty, she said, "work well one on one." Students need more core subjects, lifeskills and cultural history. Education would be more meaningful if there were "Aboriginal role models to speak to kids" and if students got "more support from home." Family connections are important. Also, there needs to be greater involvement of the community in the school. There needs to be "more respect for Native students from staff." Every day should be a new start.

Interviewee # 5

A non-Native teaching assistant felt she could be better informed about Aboriginal issues. She said she felt Native students are unsuccessful because they don't get enough support from home. To be successful they need to be taught in "a strict environment." They need structure so they can learn. They need special education programs in academics and teachers require a lot of patience to work with Aboriginal students. Teachers need to develop trust with individuals so students feel a connection with their educational environment.

The school she teaches at has about 35 aboriginal students, 30 from a neighboring reserve and five or six from a community farther away. The teaching aide is concerned that the students from farther away are quieter, shyer. The reserve has a lot of money from a land settlement, so the people do not have to work. She says she has seen a real attitude change since the influx of cash money. The attitude change has affected the students who have money as well as those who do not. She said Native students come from a "totally different environment at home" where "behavior expectations and demands are low." The home environment creates mixed messages for the students. Drugs are a problem on the reserve.

Interviewee #6

A principal with 36 Aboriginal students said he felt an understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and spirituality is necessary for building self-esteem. This will provide Native students an idea of their past and where the future will lead. Students need a historical background within a cultural setting.
They need to see their history from an Aboriginal perspective. "By developing pride in their history, understanding their leaders and their achievement, they can see value of the historical past, themselves and their future." Aboriginal students learn best in a "warm-caring environment that does not place different learning values on them and involves different learning activities, methods and techniques." Native students need "to have support, role models, positive reinforcement and understanding." Also, they "need to see value of education by being in a partnership or part ownership and direction of education."

**Interviewee #7**

This non-Native teacher has contact with Aboriginal students through the STAR (Students at Risk) program, in special education programs, the regular classroom program and in extra curricular activities. She said Native students learn best visually and orally, in small classes, where there are understanding, tolerant teachers. They need a "safe, non-confrontational environment." Students need courses in problem solving and communications. They need to know how to "meld their own culture with the mainstream culture." They need a "separate" program that fits who they are. Students are not successful because of pregnancy, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, racism and intolerant classmates and teachers.

She said "the status quo does not work. Squeezing a rectangle into a circle does not work!" The question is "how to change what is?" Mainstream education is not working for Native students. If "we can’t change what is," we need to "accept what is" and "move within what already exists." It is "achievable because you keep trying." STAR (Students at Risk) works for some students because it meets the needs of where they are at.

"Coming to school is a success for some who go through abuse of all sorts," she said. "Being in school is a safe place." But, "learning cannot proceed with all the other things going on in their lives." Drugs are a massive problem with our kids. Money is not the answer, it has never been. Students without money have to work, therefore, they have to stay in school.

A community mentoring program is needed- real communities; not artificial – real communities that work with kids. A lot depends upon who you are and how you connect with the Reserve, i.e., whose family do you belong to?
**Interviewee # 8**

This Aboriginal teacher and counselor has done readings of Native authors and has studied Native art and spirituality. She feels that Native students need courses that empower them personally. They need this power to deal with the problems they face at home and in their reference groups. Through vocal teaching, she is encouraging the revival of story-telling. Through stories, they see the connection of their studies to their real life.

She suggests a program that integrates art into fashion studies. Bringing together sewers and quilters with fashion designers would integrate culture into fashion. Adults should have access to the program as well. Art is a great medium for teaching, she said. “Art classes are a form of story telling that say a lot without speaking.”

Also, students and their teachers should be encouraged to attend the “Dreamcatcher” Conference held in October. If teachers do not attend, students feel they are being sent away as a separate group.

She also said students need to work with aboriginal mentors, who can direct and support them in their studies. The mentors would help the students in the practice of traditions, integrating them into the culture of their communities. Mentors, working in the schools, could help tie Native culture to social studies, creative arts, physical education and other programs.

**Interviewee # 9**

This administrator pointed to some external factors that have had impact on the success of students over the past number of years. Attendance and academic success have increased as a result of increased band support. The band has helped to encourage cultural awareness in the classrooms, through speakers and the Dreamcatcher Conference. Additional money for staff has supported alternative learning and cultural pursuits.

When funds from a land settlement were distributed among band members, attendance dropped to a handful of students at year end. Outside influences like family situations, pressure from home, drug use (cocaine, crystal meth) have been devastating for the entire community, including students. Students with poor attendance may have missed some fundamentals earlier in the education process and became discouraged.
Native students (from another community that did not get land settlement money) have achieved more educational success, because they need schooling. Students from that community have provided good role models and lots of peer support for other students.

To be successful students need community support. The band leadership can encourage student success in a number of ways: by becoming "advocates" for the students, investing in Elder studies, and encouraging the healing process.

Native students need to feel comfortable in the school setting. "If they feel comfortable, they will come." Although some find that they can experience success in all regularly formatted courses, others need a flexible environment relative to attendance and course selection. Courses need to be patterned to individual needs. A program for aboriginal students needs to reflect their needs, however, they might be defined.

The administrator said it is important that Native students acquire at least functional skills in reading, math and some aspects of social studies. It is desirable that they experience success in all aspects of the program.
Summary of Findings

Students were not asked the reasons why Aboriginal students dropout or are unsuccessful in school. They were asked to comment about why they disliked certain courses. Their responses affirmed some of the findings by Clarke (1994) and others. Some students found courses boring or irrelevant. Some said they felt out of place because of their race.

Students clearly indicated that more Aboriginal content is needed in the school curriculum for it to be more relevant to their needs. They would like to see Cree language taught as well as Aboriginal culture and heritage. They expressed the need for more Aboriginal teachers and visits by Elders and other Native speakers and entertainers.

Questions to parents were more direct about why Aboriginal students dropout or are unsuccessful. Most parents indicated that racism discouraged them in school, reinforcing similar findings by Makokis (2000). Like students, several parents also felt school was boring and irrelevant. Parenting responsibilities took them away from school as did poor relationships with teachers and other students, both findings by Clarke (1994).

Parents also suggested they get the runaround from teachers, a finding similar to Makokis (2000). “You have to demand to get help,” one parent said. Some parents felt schools did not care nor understand Aboriginal students.

Parents felt more Aboriginal teachers and counselors are needed in schools. Parents felt teachers need to become more culturally aware. They suggested teachers get training in Native culture to help them deal with prejudice and racism. Also, several suggested students need to be treated with respect and given a say in their education, supporting Makokis’s point about relational leadership. Teachers need to work one-on-one with students who have behavior and learning difficulties. Shyness should be recognized as a cultural trait and not disciplined.

Teacher and administrator comments reflected some of the bias parents described as racism. They indicated that absenteeism and discipline are problems among Aboriginal students. School is not important to parents, said one teacher. Another teacher said students come from an environment where “behavior expectations and demands are low.” Even Native staff failed to understand the difference in learning styles
that are part of Native culture. “Our kids are slower,” said a Native teaching assistant, so “more time is needed to grasp issues.”

Teachers and administrators made a number of suggestions for improving services to Aboriginal students: bringing in Aboriginal people to serve as role models, to assist in mentoring, and to teach Cree, culture and heritage; establishing smaller classes to allow individualized instruction and provide hands on experience in a “warm and caring environment”; developing a support system at home and in the community and partnerships so that the Aboriginal community feels it has ownership and direction in the children’s education. They also indicated that teachers need to become better informed about Aboriginal culture and issues. History and other topics need to be taught from an Aboriginal perspective.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The racism that is the focal point of so many parent comments is likely systemic rather than individual. Teachers and administrators as individuals are not racist, but rather training has shaped attitudes and methods that may be construed as prejudice by Aboriginals. Even the Native teaching assistant showed these attitudes when stating “our kids are slower.” Rather than slowness, it is more likely a difference in learning styles. Another prevalent attitude is to blame the Native students and their parents for absenteeism and discipline problems. This comment reflects that attitude: “Children get no support nor discipline at home.”

The system needs to take an introspective view of itself and ask, “What are we doing that causes absenteeism to be so high?” or “What can we be doing to decrease absenteeism and discipline problems?” The answer might result in changes in the school system that would provide more relevant and interesting curriculum and more effective delivery approaches. Also, school personnel need to look at the culture and value system of Aboriginals to get a better understanding of how they should teach Native children. Stop blaming the Native people and their society and consider how the public school system should change to meet the needs of Aboriginals. Integration into the education system should not mean assimilation or one-sided integration with the Native youth changing to fit the white man’s education mold, but rather both accommodating each other and meeting each other’s needs. It is from this viewpoint and based on these findings that the following recommendations are made:
1. Introduce small classes to allow a “warm and caring” atmosphere that permits teaching from various learning styles and encourages one-on-one interaction. Develop activities that take students away from the school place and immerse them into their culture.

2. Enrich the curriculum by involving Native Elders and other Aboriginals to share their experiences and knowledge, their language, culture and heritage. All students could benefit from this experience, but language and culture classes should become a recognized part of the curriculum for all Aboriginal students.

3. Provide mentoring and tutoring for Aboriginal students using Natives after whom the youth can model their lives. Establish a Native presence in all schools where there are Aboriginal students.

4. Use the talking circle (as suggested by Makokis) to allow all parties in the education of Aboriginal youth to come together “to work towards and experience unity” of purpose and design of schooling for Native students.

5. All teachers and administrators should have diversity training, to help them understand and accept cultural differences. This instruction should train them to recognize and develop delivery skills for various learning styles.

6. Develop meaningful partnerships with the Aboriginal community that allow parents and Native leaders to shape the educational process for their youth.
REFERENCES


