

Indigenous Peoples' Education

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The public education system is a cornerstone of democracy and must be founded on a commitment to educate all students well so that each can become a productive member of our society. There is no greater challenge facing public education than to realize this promise for those who both historically and in contemporary society have been marginalized and disadvantaged. For this reason, public education and the profession have a greater duty of care when providing for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in Alberta.

While progress has been made, Indigenous peoples have not experienced the success they should expect in the public education system. Approximately 65 per cent of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in Alberta currently graduate from high school. This is significantly below the provincial rate for high school completion and represents a cost in the form of forgone opportunities for Indigenous students individually, their communities and, indeed, all Albertans. Improving the educational outcomes of Indigenous students should therefore be a shared responsibility invoking shared commitment. The Association understands this and is committed to improving education for Indigenous peoples.

The Association believes that public education must foster and support the intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of each child. This statement directly parallels the Aboriginal world view as reflected in medicine wheel teachings. The Association also believes that education for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students must be built on their Indigenous education practices, cultures and languages. Furthermore, the Association recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to self-governance, economic and cultural survival, and the control of education in their communities.

Current Association policy affirms the view that there must be an action plan to address the educational realities of the Indigenous peoples. An action plan is in place. The policy abandons the deficit model in favour of affirming the educational potential of Indigenous students and acknowledging and respecting the contribution to be made by their communities and culture. Improving the quality of education and educational outcomes for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students is of great importance. These students are an asset and are needed to help build a productive democracy from which everyone can benefit.

In the Aboriginal community, the formation and maintenance of relationships is of primary importance. The Association believes that we need to build effective relationships to support students. Through these relationships, teachers will be able to meet the need to incorporate culturally appropriate practices and gain knowledge and perspectives that reflect the community context (for example, involving community members to share expertise and provide traditional guidance to students and other teachers as required).

Role of the Association

The Association recognizes the importance of increasing the number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers in Alberta's education system. In its commitment to Indigenous education, the Association believes it has a necessary role to (a) promote the involvement of First Nations, Métis and Inuit educators in all areas of Association activity and create an ongoing mechanism for the Association to obtain advice and assistance on issues of Indigenous education; (b) promote and provide professional development for teachers in the area of Indigenous content and perspectives, racism, and related instructional practices; (c) encourage and support an enhanced understanding of indigenous education as it relates to other equity and diversity issues; (d) support the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers by creating a support network; and (e) advocate for social and economic justice for Indigenous peoples.

In addition, the Association encourages all members to continue to enhance their professional practices to support the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students by (a) increasing their understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit histories and cultures; (b) increasing their understanding of the impact of intergenerational trauma as a result of residential schools, abuse and racism; (c) bearing in mind the effects of the social impact of poverty on students; and (d) developing sensitive and culturally appropriate ways of building relationships.

In their instructional practices, teachers are encouraged to support the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students by (a) valuing the knowledge, abilities and experiences that students bring to the classroom; (b) developing and implementing appropriate instructional and evaluation strategies; (c) treating all students with compassion and understanding, viewing each child holistically and addressing individual learning needs; (d) recognizing that English and/or French may be additional languages for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students; (e) acting to eliminate racism and racial harassment in the classroom and school; and (f) being proactive in building relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents, families and communities.

Role of the Government of Alberta

If the Government of Alberta aspires to a high quality of education programming for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, there must be adequate and consistent levels of funding and support for the following: (a) programs and initiatives that enhance student success and high school completion rates among Indigenous students; (b) holding school boards accountable for the appropriate utilization of the current funding as it is intended; (c) urging school boards to allocate increased funding for school-based programs and initiatives that enhance student success and high school completion rates among Indigenous students; (d) continuing and expanding programs that encourage individuals of First Nations, Métis or Inuit background to become certificated teachers and qualified support personnel; (e) facilitating the development of school jurisdiction plans, protocols and services, in collaboration with families and community, to support successful transitions for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, including but not limited to those from home to school, rural to urban, grade level to grade level, school to school, school jurisdiction to school jurisdiction, and school to postsecondary education and the workforce; (f) urging school boards to actively recruit and employ a sufficient number of liaison personnel of First Nations, Métis and Inuit background, available to all schools, to enhance the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and to liaise with parents, families and communities; (g) partnerships with others to develop, maintain and make accessible to teachers a collection of teaching and learning resources and locally developed curriculum for all grade levels to support the inclusion of Indigenous peoples' knowledge and perspectives throughout the curriculum; (h) the inclusion of Indigenous peoples' literature in the authorized resources list appropriate for the high school English and French programs of study; and (i) the development of school jurisdiction plans, protocols and services, in collaboration with families and community, to support successful transitions for Indigenous students.

Role of Postsecondary Institutions

Support for new teachers with respect to curriculum content relating to Indigenous peoples and, particularly for those who aspire to work specifically with First Nations, Métis and Inuit students must begin during preservice teacher education programs. The Association urges Alberta postsecondary institutions with accredited teacher preparation programs to (a) work in collaboration with the Association to develop and put in place plans, programs and incentives for the recruitment, retention, support and education of First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers; (b) ensure that during teacher preparation, all students take at least one regular course on the histories, cultures and education of Indigenous peoples; and (c) recognize Aboriginal Studies 30 as satisfying the entrance requirements for a humanities (group A) course.

Role of School Boards

Schools need access to Indigenous personnel/staff to support the school, to communicate with parents, families and communities, to provide advice to teachers, and to bridge the cultural divide. The Association believes it needs to urge school boards to (a) actively recruit and employ a sufficient number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit liaison personnel, available to all schools, to enhance the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and to liaise with parents, families and communities; (b) offer and promote Indigenous studies courses in Alberta high schools; and (c) offer First Nations, Métis and Inuit languages instruction, using resources that support community participation.

Conclusion

The Association is well aware that many Indigenous students face challenges or barriers that can be complex and that are, too often, overwhelming. All education stakeholders must be committed to helping to meet those challenges and break those barriers. All must be willing to act to realize improvements. The ideas presented here offer suggestions and solutions for allowing the required change to happen in various contexts throughout our province. The Association understands its important role in moving forward. Change takes time and is never easy to accomplish, but change must happen and the Association wants to be a catalyst in change in Indigenous education. One of the goals of public education is economic. Increased educational attainment for Indigenous students will have a profound and positive effect on Aboriginal communities that will surely lead to much improved economic development and social conditions in their communities.

Support for Indigenous education is an investment that will benefit all Albertans. It is the right thing to do.