

Building Up First Nations Community Schooling: An Alternative to the First Nations Education Act

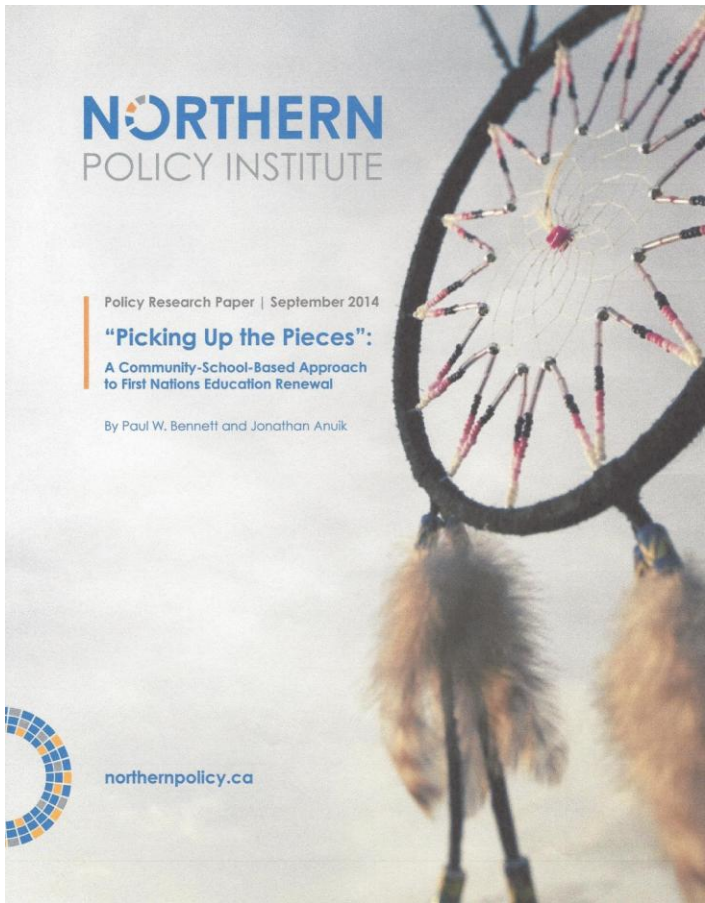
PANEL DISCUSSION

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Picking Up the Pieces: A Community-School Alternative for First Nations Education Renewal

The proposed First National Education Act suffered “a great fall,” much like Humpty Dumpty in the popular children’s fable. The latest deal, announced with great fanfare by Assembly of First Nations Chief Shawn Atleo and Prime Minister Stephen Harper on February 7, 2014 may have sweetened the financial offer, but it did not hold.



When Atleo resigned in early May 2014, Ottawa’s plan for bureaucratic reform, known as Bill C-33, was abandoned, leaving the pact shattered into pieces. Putting it all together again, will require a completely different approach and a more responsive model of self-governance building from the First Nations up, not the top down. That will also open the door to supporting very promising First Nations Community school innovations in local education governance.

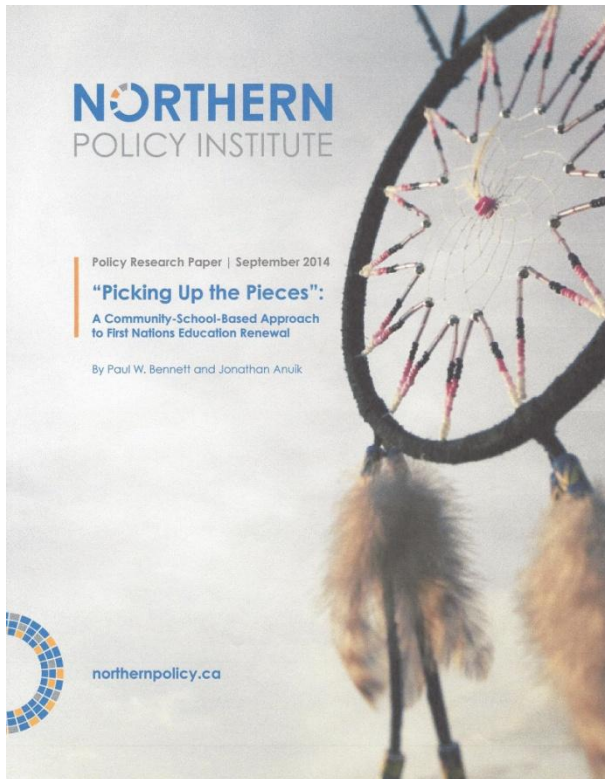
“We have no reason to accept (the First Nations Education) announcement at face value....We remain focused on protecting our children’s inherent rights to fair and equitable education.”

- Anishinabek Nation Grand Council Chief Patrick Wadaseh Madahbee, *Wawatay News*, Sioux Lookout and Timmins, Ontario, 28 February 2014

“ Without a comprehensive understanding of Aboriginal people’s perspective on learning and a culturally appropriate framework for measuring it, the diverse aspirations and needs of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis across Canada will continue to be misinterpreted and misunderstood.”

- Canadian Council on Learning, *The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success*. (Ottwa: CCL/CCA, 2009), p. 4.

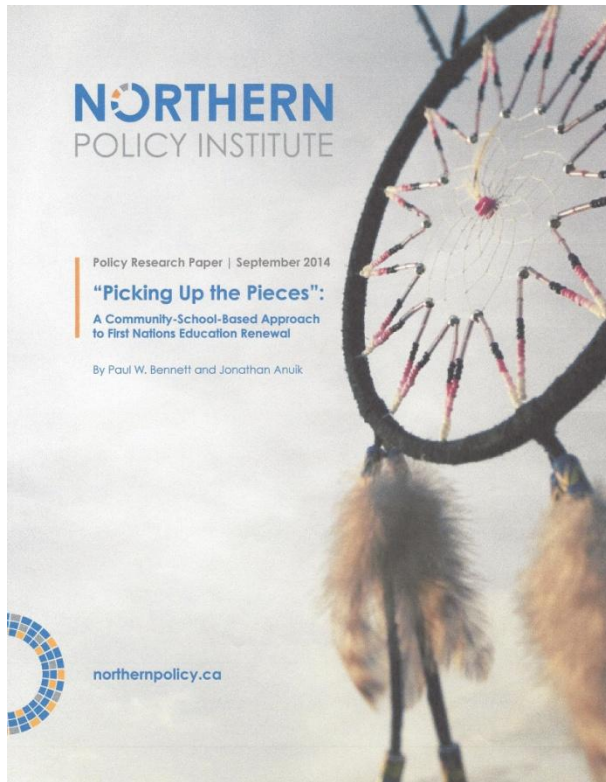
Picking Up the Pieces: A Community-School Alternative for First Nations Education Renewal



Our research report, “Picking Up the Pieces,” for the new Northern Policy Institute based in Thunder Bay and Sudbury, Ontario, demonstrates why the proposed structural education reform missed the mark. More money in the form of increased capital funding might have brought modest gains to on-reserve schooling, but *replacing one bureaucracy with another rarely changes the state of education or improves the quality of student learning at the school or community level.*

A community-school based approach stands a far better chance of not only overcoming the broken trust, but ultimately improving the achievement of First Nations children and youth. *To win acceptance, it must offer a real shift in the locus of decision making, respect what Indigenous scholars such as Marie Battiste term the “learning spirit,” and recognize students’ and communities’ inherent capacities to learn.*

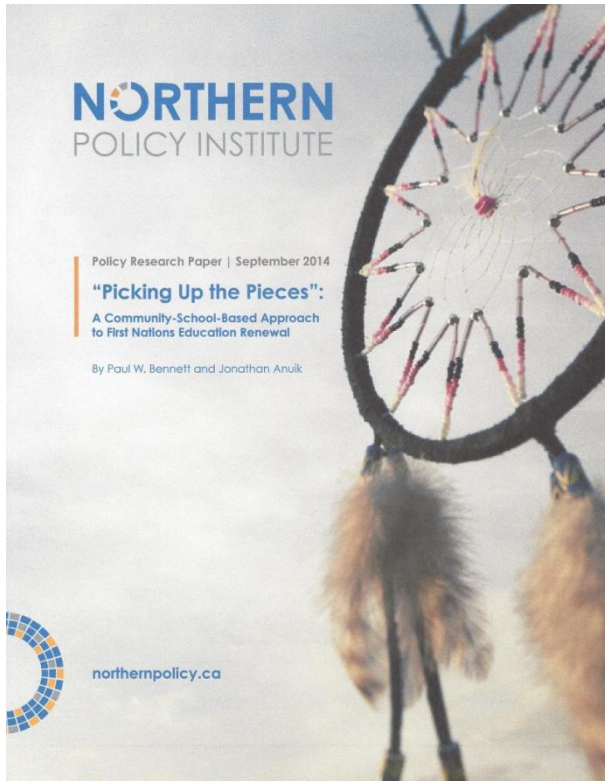
FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION: An Historical Timeline



Milestones in Struggle for First Nations Control of Education, 1972-2014

- **1972**
The National Indian Brotherhood (which later becomes the Assembly of First Nations) asks for more control of its peoples' education. A policy is outlined in a paper called Indian Control of Indian Education.
- **1996**
Official End of Indian Residential School System -- last residential school closes in Yellowknife. Bitter legacy of repercussions of life at these schools trickles down through generations of aboriginal peoples.
- **2004**
Canada's Auditor General finds that if current trends continue, it will take nearly 30 years for aboriginal people on reserves to obtain educational equality with the rest of the Canadian population.
- **2008**
Prime Minister Stephen Harper offers an official apology, June 11, 2008, on behalf of Canada, to survivors of the residential school system.
Along with the apology, the federal government establishes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC is given a \$60-million budget, with five-year mandate.

FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION: An Historical Timeline



- **2010**
Assembly of First Nations issues a call to action on First Nations education
AFN releases "First Nations Control of First Nations Education 2010." AFN Chief Shawn Atleo asks that First Nations people be allowed to lead the way in improving their education.
- **2012**
A Crown-First Nations gathering is held. A commitment is made to "take action on education." Plans are announced December 11, 2012 for a First Nation Education Act., including a Discussion Guide.
- **2013**
AFN Chief Atleo expresses concern over first round of consultation , saying funding shortfall must be addressed if reconciliation is to be achieved.
A "Blueprint" is released for the proposed legislation, opening consultation on a draft bill slated for the fall of 2014., which includes standards for "school-success plans" ; annual accountability reports; and promises governance "options" for communities in accordance with treaty rights.
- **2014**
A new Atleo-Harper Financial Deal is announced, then rejected by chiefs
The Canadian government suspends plan to introduce the renamed First Nations Control of Education Act.

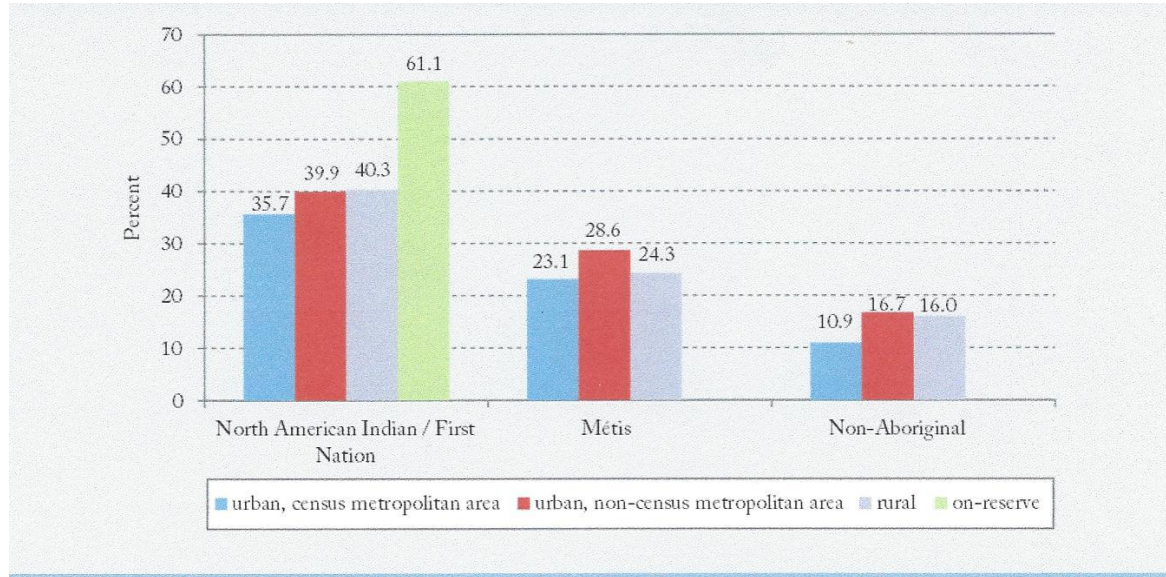
Community School- Based Renewal



The best way to meet the aspirations and goals of First Nations education is to embrace a more holistic and community-based philosophy of lifelong learning (Paul Cappon 2008), to adopt a broader approach to raising student performance, and to establish self-government in actual practice.

Such an approach, we believe, is better suited to unlocking the “learning spirit” in First Nations schools and communities. We take the longer view that, instead of imposing another layer of bureaucratic oversight, it would be far better to build on the potential of the models of the self-governing Mi’kmaw education authority and the promising ventures rooted in local community schools

Conventional Measures of Success: High School Graduation Rates



Students of First Nations ancestry continue to lag significantly behind other Canadian students in levels of educational attainment (Laboucane 2010). In 2006, 40 percent of Aboriginals between the ages of 20 and 24 did not have a high school diploma, compared with 23 percent of non-Aboriginal Canadians in the same age group. The rate was even higher for First Nations people living on reserve (61 percent) and for Inuit living in remote communities (68 percent) (Statistics Canada 2006).

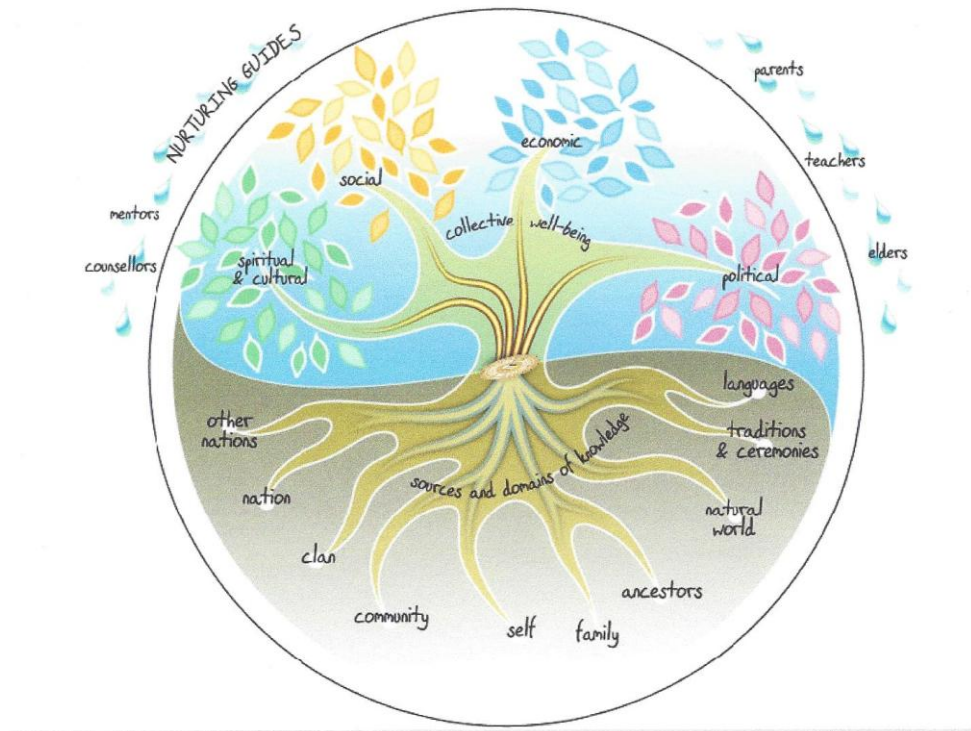
Conventional Measures of Success: Labour Force Participation Rates

In the 2011 National Household Survey, the high school completion gap remained significant, with 38 percent of Aboriginals ages 20 to 24 lacking a high school diploma, compared with 19.4 percent of non-Aboriginals ((Statistics Canada 2011).

Labour force participation rates figures remain distressing for both Aboriginal Peoples and the broader Canadian community. In 2011, lower proportions of the population were employed and the unemployment rate was 7.5 % higher.

| | Aboriginal Peoples | | | Non-Aboriginal Peoples | | | Aboriginal Peoples Gap | | |
|---|--------------------|-------|-------|------------------------|-------|-------|------------------------|-------|-------|
| | 2001 | 2006 | 2011 | 2001 | 2006 | 2011 | 2001 | 2006 | 2011 |
| Labour force participation rate | 61.4% | 63.1% | 61.3% | 66.5% | 66.9% | 66.2% | -5.1% | -3.8% | -4.9% |
| Employment rate | 49.7% | 53.8% | 52.1% | 61.8% | 62.7% | 61.2% | -12.1% | -8.9% | -9.1% |
| Unemployment rate | 19.1% | 14.8% | 15.0% | 7.1% | 6.3% | 7.5% | 12.0% | 8.5% | 7.5% |
| Source: Statistics Canada Censuses of Population, National Household Survey | | | | | | | | | |

First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model



One area of great concern to First Nations is how the federal government and the provinces define “achievement.” First Nations Elders and scholars espouse a conception of achievement that is much broader than strictly book learning. In the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning model, teachers, principals, parents, families, and communities are all mentors and nurturing guides responsible for their children’s achievement in all aspects of learning.

FIGURE 5:

PROPOSED NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING ABORIGINAL LEARNING, 2008

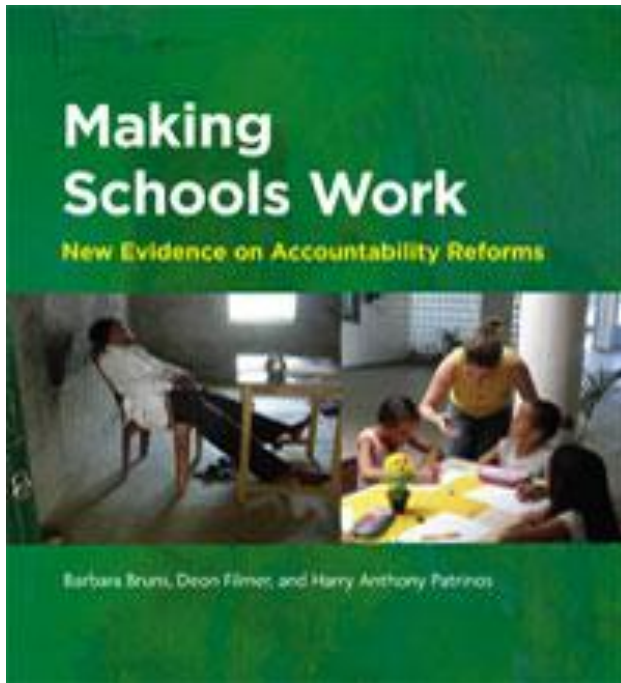
| | | Place where learning occurs (sources of learning) | | | | |
|--|-------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
| | | Home | School/ institution | Community | Land | Workplace |
| Early learning | Formal Learning | | | | | n.a |
| | Informal learning | Extent to which parents read to children | Access to First Nations-specific ECE program | Access to organized activities (reading programs, play group) | Interaction with family who help understand traditional practices | n.a. |
| Elementary/ secondary education | Formal learning | | High school graduation rate | | Exposure to school field trips to sacred sites | |
| | Informal Learning | Use of First Nations language at home | Participation in sports and recreation programs at school | Participation in First Nations ceremonies and festivals | Practice of First Nations traditional skills (hunting, trapping) | Availability of internship programs |
| Post-secondary education | Formal learning | Participation in distance learning courses leading to a certification | University completion rate | Availability of community-based post-secondary programs | | Availability of apprenticeship programs |
| | Informal learning | Exposure to First Nations culture and traditions at home | Access to Aboriginal student centres and/or support programs | Access to a community library | Use of celestial bodies (interpreting seasons, navigation, weather) | Availability of non-formal workplace training |
| Adult learning | Formal learning | | First Nations adults returning to school to complete high school diploma | | | Participation in formal workplace training |
| | Informal learning | Reading non-work-related material at home | | Community involvement and volunteering | Knowledge of traditional medicines and herbs | Self-directed learning through the Internet |
| Intergenerational learning | Formal learning | | Proportion of teachers in school who are First Nations | | | |
| | Informal learning | Intergenerational transmission of First Nations culture at home | Involvement of elders at schools | Exposure and interaction with elders who help understand language and culture | Extent of use of traditional practices | Use of First Nations language in the workplace |

Why the FNEA Fell Short

The proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*, even in its latest form, is at odds with the fundamental aspirations and vision of education voiced by First Nations over the past 40 years (see, for example, AFN 1988, 2010; NIB 1972). Looking at First Nations education governance as a “fractured mirror” and describing it repeatedly as a “non-system” clearly reflects the centralist perspective deeply ingrained in the Canadian education establishment and exemplified in the vast majority of school boards scattered across Canada’s ten provinces.

It is, in fact, becoming increasingly clear that the real intent of the proposed federal legislation was to impose another layer of administrative oversight in the realm of First Nations education.

Community School-Based Reform: A Few Examples



Community-school-based management was first implemented in Canada some 40 years ago in the Edmonton public schools by newly appointed superintendent Mike Strembitsky. In the words of former teachers' union president Karen Beaton, Strembitsky's innovation "turned the entire concept of the district upside down"

Adopting a completely new approach, he embarked on an initiative to give self-governance to principals and schools through the decentralization of decisions from the district office to the school. The central idea was deceptively simple: "Every decision which contributes to the instructional effectiveness of the school and which can be made at school level, should be made at school level".

Rather than attempting to replicate provincial school board administrative management, we recommend studying and learning from the lessons provided by school-based management ventures supported by the World Bank in dozens of countries around the world. Building schools from the school level up is also seen as "an antidote to new managerialism" and proving to be more sustainable in the end (Johnson 2004, 1, 23).

OUR CHILDREN OUR SCHOOLS OUR COMMUNITIES



RealRenewal Education Advocacy Association

Decentralized education governance has also been implemented in Regina, Saskatchewan. There, a community schools initiative, negotiated in 1980 with seven groups, including Aboriginals and marginalized communities, succeeded in securing “a greater level of self-determination over their children’s education” (Patricia Elliott 2012, 1–3, 6–8).

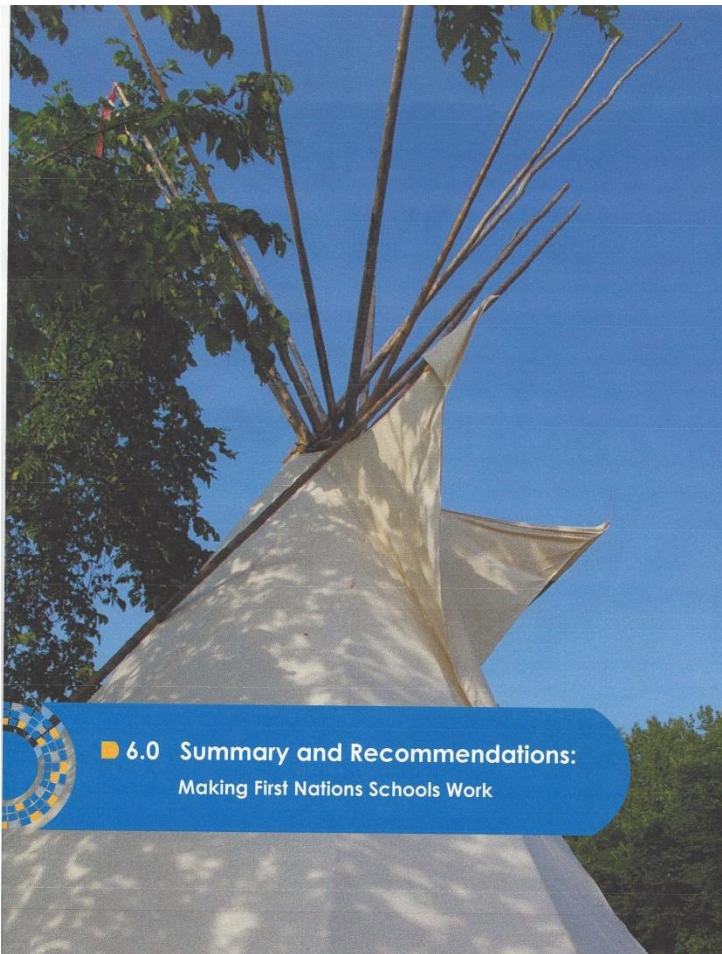
Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey:

A Promising Mi'kmaw Education Initiative

The Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw education model is the culmination of two decades of experience in building the *Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey*, a First Nations education authority with 12 schools educating 3,000 students. It now distributes some \$40 million a year in federal grants to its member communities and prepares local communities to assume more educational responsibilities. Most significantly, the three-party agreement recognizes the role of the education authority to support local band schools in delivering language immersion and other culturally based programs and activities (Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey 2013).

The Mi'kmaw model exemplifies a unique brand of “sovereignty-association” that shows considerable promise for turning around First Nations education in Nova Scotia. Early indications are that students are more engaged because of pedagogy and curriculum that are more attuned to Mi'kmaw traditions. For the 2010–11 education year, the MK reported rising high school graduation rates that are now more competitive with those for the province as a whole. That success rate impressed Scott Haldane, chair of the 2012 National Panel, and demonstrated the potential benefits of extending more autonomy to First Nations in managing their own community schools (Lewington 2012, 14).

Looking to the Future



Key Recommendations

We recommend a more focused approach to education reform, grounded in First Nations traditions and culture and designed to achieve longer-term, sustainable improvements in student achievement, social well-being, and life outcomes.

1. Rethink the plan in the proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act* of conventional education governance reform, and instead open the door to a more flexible and community-school-based model that provides parents and students access to a variety of publicly funded school options, thus fulfilling the promise of true First Nations community-run schools.

2. Review the adequacy of the proposed funding plan — specifically, the implementation costs of \$160 million over four years, or \$40 million a year, which amounts to only about \$63,000 annually for each of Canada’s First Nations.

3. Embrace traditional Indigenous knowledge and languages as the core foundation for First Nations education policy and as reflected in the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Framework.

4. Adopt new measures of student performance and success, drawing on the First Nations Holistic Learning Framework and incorporating validated accountability measures

5. Support First Nations community school authorities in developing new and innovative forms of local decision-making, including parent/community governing boards.

6. Establish a First Nations culture, language, and learning institute to study and pilot promising practices in teaching and learning.

7. Assess progress in implementing community-school-based management and improving student achievement levels, starting in the 2018–19 education year.