

Lack of education must be tackled ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Agree or disagree with the Fraser Institute's recent Report Card on Aboriginal Education -and many professional educators do express well-reasoned arguments challenging its methods and conclusions -it at least advances a conversation that we must have as a society about the gap between mainstream society and first nations' youth in educational achievement.

This conversation requires honesty and rigorous self-examination by everyone -first nations communities, professional educators, and politicians from band council to provincial legislature to federal Parliament and, not least, citizens in the mainstream. All of us have a deep vested interest in fixing what needs to be fixed.

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the percentage of Canada's aboriginals who haven't graduated from high school still lags that for mainstream society by an unacceptable rate, some encouraging improvements notwithstanding.

The 2006 Census shows 43 per cent of aboriginals aged 25 to 64 and living on reserve have not achieved the minimum educational standards required to participate in a knowledge-based economy. On average, 46.4 per cent of aboriginal men living on reserve have no educational credentials at all. Aboriginal women are slightly better off at 39.4 per cent. For aboriginals living off reserve, the numbers are 29.6 and 23.5 respectively.

In the mainstream, 88.4 per cent have achieved at least high school graduation and 62.5 per cent have completed some form of post-secondary education. This lag puts aboriginals at a vast disadvantage competing for jobs.

The fact is that as Canada's economy becomes more knowledge-intensive and media-rich, demanding greater technical skills revolving around literacy and numeracy, educational gaps like this threaten to render the dreams of first nations communities stillborn.

So the conversation is important for first nations communities because their self-determination depends upon a well-educated workforce that will be the foundation of a healthy, self-sustaining economy.

It's also important for mainstream society because yet another inadequately educated generation of first nations youth represents an enormous foregone opportunity in an economy where demand for skilled workers is outpacing our ability to produce them.

And yet, what to do?

Renewal must begin in first nations communities themselves. Only there can the painful legacy of the residential school system -and the colonial policy of forced assimilation they served -be buried at last. Not forgotten, of course, never forgotten, but at last disempowered. Their cruel memory still engenders in too many a skepticism, suspicion and failure of trust toward formal education. For education to be fully valued by young people, their elders will have to defeat the attitudes that discount the worthiness of mainstream educational values, institutions, authorities and the credentials they bestow.

"Education enriches cultures, creates mutual understanding globally, underpins democratic societies, builds respect for the rule of law," declared the ministers of education from the world's most powerful nations at the G8 summit in 2006.

"Education, the enhancement of skills, and the generation of new ideas are essential to the development of human capital and are key engines of economic growth, drivers of market productivity, and sources of cohesion for all nations."

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So our educational establishment needs to listen to and hear the advice of first nations communities about how to address these pernicious barriers -and first nations need to seek and hear the advice of professional educators about the support that students need outside the school environment.

For example, a C.D. Howe Institute study in 2006 recommended universal access to early childhood education for aboriginal children, both on and off reserve. The research concluded that access to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten intervention, particularly in marginalized communities whose members have little or no tradition in formal education, has a dramatic positive impact upon subsequent academic performance.

Early educational intervention interrupts a pattern in which children from marginalized and low-income communities progressively fall behind in primary and elementary school, lose self-esteem and are eventually casualties of the system.

In British Columbia we do have impressive models for aboriginal education. We have schools that demonstrate remarkable success in improving students' foundation skills; we have communities that outperform others in advancing students into post-secondary education; we have universities making enlightened efforts to recruit, welcome and support aboriginal students. Let's identify, emulate and extend that capacity so that it becomes the broad norm for first nations youth rather than the narrow exception.

Politicians must ensure that these initiatives are sustainably funded over the long term and not subject to arbitrary cuts based on the changing ideologies of government.

For example, the Assembly of First Nations has argued that the federal government, which is responsible for aboriginal education, pays up to \$3,000 less per student than provinces pay for non-native students' education. Clearly, there cannot be justice without equality and Ottawa is certainly able to match the per-capita student expenditures of any province. It should do so without delay.

Nobody should be under the illusion that achieving these objectives will be easy or inexpensive. But achieve them we must. Our national well-being is at stake.

-reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

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