

ONTARIO 360 – INDIGENOUS EDUCATION – TRANSITION BRIEFING

Closing the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Ontarians

Issue

Ontario is home to about a fifth of Canada’s Indigenous peoples aged 0-24, nearly 85% of whom live off reserve. In total, this means that Indigenous peoples make up about 3.4% of the off-reserve population aged 0-24 in Ontario. While the federal government has jurisdiction over the provision of education on reserves, it is the responsibility of the provincial governments to provide education to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples living off reserve. The incoming government should seek to implement policies that reduce the gap in schooling outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples living off reserves.

Overview: Improving the education system for Indigenous students

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—the organization that emerged from the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and was tasked with documenting the history and impacts of the residential school system—released an executive summary of their findings along with 94 calls to action regarding the path towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. One of the major themes of the calls to action related to the current system in which Indigenous students are educated; 7 of the total 94 calls to action directly addressed education reform.

Although many of the calls to action pertaining to education are addressed to the federal government, there are several calls to action that outline the ways in which the provinces can step in and contribute towards reconciliation. Specifically, the provincial governments can assist in eliminating educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians; they can assist in increasing education attainment levels and success rates, including the development of culturally appropriate curricula in schools,

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protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, enabling parents to participate in their children's education, respecting and honoring Treaty relationships; and they can help provide adequate funding to end the backlog of Indigenous peoples seeking a post-secondary education.

The Ontario government has already made several substantial steps towards ameliorating the provincial education system for Indigenous students. This includes the development of the Ontario Education Equity Action Plan in 2017 – a roadmap for identifying and eliminating discriminatory practices and systemic barriers that contribute to the persistence of inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Among a range of different tactics, one of the most important initiatives is to develop a process of data collection, integration and reporting. This has the potential to greatly assist in identifying the largest barriers to achievement for Indigenous students, as well as the policies and procedures that help Indigenous students succeed.

In addition to the initiatives at the primary to secondary levels, the Ontario government recently announced sweeping changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program – the primary source of financial aid for students in Ontario. Some of the changes include free tuition for students from households who make under \$50,000 annually, and the elimination of the individual contribution for Indigenous students.

The need for reform

Identity Based Data

Note: *any collection of data involving Indigenous Peoples must always be done in recognition of the principles of ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP®), especially for First Nation peoples, as outlined by the First Nations Information Governance Centre.*

The development of a system that collects identity-based data for students across Ontario will greatly assist in identifying barriers that Indigenous students face. It will also allow for rigorous quantitative evaluation of school and classroom practices that may benefit Indigenous students, like the inclusion of Indigenous cultures, histories, perspectives and contributions in

curricula. That being said, without a strategic plan to implement these policies gradually, and in a way that lends itself to causal evaluation, prior to their widespread implementation, we will not know for certain which classroom interventions work and why they work.

Ontario Student Assistance Program

Given that access to financial support for post-secondary education is a persistent barrier for many Indigenous students, free tuition for students from households who make under \$50,000 will certainly have positive effects for many students who struggle to pay for their post-secondary education. Since the latest results of the 2016 Census of Population reveal that Indigenous peoples living off-reserve in Ontario earn less than non-Indigenous peoples living off-reserve—the median income of Indigenous peoples living off-reserve in Ontario in 2016 was \$26,877 compared to \$33,797 for the non-Indigenous population—Indigenous students may be more likely to qualify for free tuition under these new changes.

However, despite an expansion of the grants given to low income students, there will continue to be barriers faced by Indigenous students who do not have other sources of funding to supplement their OSAP funds.

Take as an example, the following two hypothetical situations:

A First Nations student who is finishing high school this year and will be entering the 1st year Bachelor of Science at Queen's University this September with the following additional characteristics: no children, parents alive, not disabled, will be living on their own for university, has no RRSP and no additional assets, parents divorced, income of parent with whom they currently reside is \$30,000, 2 other siblings in family who are not yet old enough to attend a post-secondary institution, \$5,000 in additional funding from an outside source (for example, the post-secondary student support program). This student is eligible for a \$9,200 grant to keep and a \$6,700 loan to repay under the new OSAP guidelines.

The same student would be eligible for a \$9,200 grant and a \$7,100 loan if they did not have the \$5,000 of additional funding. Thus, based on an

estimated total cost of schooling of \$19,413, the student without the additional funding source would not be able to cover the costs of their education without working while in school to supplement their funding. This student would be at further risk of not completing their program since OSAP is available for a maximum of 8 academic terms, i.e. 4 years. To the extent that Indigenous students often cite time constraints as a reason for leaving post-secondary programs—perhaps because of a need to work to supplement their funding—extending the number of academic terms available under OSAP could also be beneficial.

How to move forward

Note: *any of the following recommendations must always be implemented in consultation with Indigenous communities throughout Ontario.*

Two of the ways in which the provincial government can facilitate a response to the calls to action put forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are outlined below.

Better data collection, implementation of potential policies in a way that lends itself to causal evaluation, and greater access to administrative data for researchers

The Ministry of Education’s initiative to develop an identity-based tracking system will certainly aid in evaluating whether or not specific interventions assist in increasing education related outcomes where achievement gaps have been identified. However, these interventions must be implemented gradually and in such a way that lends itself to causal evaluation in order to know whether a specific program is helpful. For example, in addition to consultations with students, parents, community members, another method that can be used to quantify the effects of culturally relevant curriculum on academic outcomes is to introduce the new curriculum in a subset of classrooms (a “treatment” group), leaving the other classrooms as a “control” group. With the new tracking system, student outcomes in “treatment” classrooms could be compared over time and in relation to “control” classrooms.

In addition to the Ministry of Education's goal of working with education partners, they should also seek to develop relationships with researchers who may be able to assist in analyzing the administrative data. The province of British Columbia has led the way along this front among the provinces by developing an infrastructure that makes identity-based data available to researchers, policy makers, and other organizations. By expanding the access of this administrative data to include researchers a range of questions have been approached from several different perspectives. For instance, one paper by economists at Simon Fraser University has shown that Indigenous students tend to perform better when they are in a school with a greater portion of Indigenous students, suggesting that perhaps a larger share of Indigenous students may reduce the incidence of racism, or provide support for cultural identity. This in turn indicates that more needs to be done to fight racism in schools and to support cultural identities—like, for instance, the Ministry of Education's proposed culturally relevant curriculum.

This recommendation would contribute to the call to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to eliminate educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, it would also help to improve education attainment levels and success rates, and it would assist in our understanding of which aspects of culturally appropriate curricula are most beneficial for the success of Indigenous students.

Increase accessibility to post-secondary education

The incoming government of Ontario should revise the OSAP algorithm so that Indigenous students are able to cover their entire costs of schooling, even if they do not receive outside assistance from the federal government and if they take longer than 4 years to complete a bachelor's program.

Prior to 1989, the federal government provided full funding for First Nations and Inuit students to attend the post-secondary institution of their choice. The program went through substantial cutbacks in 1989, which I show in a recent working paper resulted in a decline in post-secondary attainment—primarily driven by those attending colleges. In addition, since 1997, the federal government has capped increases in post-secondary program spending at 2% per year—a cap that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said his government



will erase. This lack of financial assistance for Indigenous students has left many without adequate funding to complete their post-secondary studies.

By increasing the OSAP funding for Indigenous students, the provincial government will help ensure that any Indigenous student who wishes to attend a post-secondary institution will have the means to do so. Finally, providing financial assistance for post-secondary education also commits the provincial government to honoring the Treaty right to education outlined in the historic Numbered Treaties—the treaties that paved the way for the colonization of Western Canada—which benefitted both the federal and provincial governments alike.

This recommendation directly addresses the call to action to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, as well as the call to honor Treaty Rights.

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