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Check against delivery

First I would like to frame some very concrete remarks with some higher level discussion of the broader purposes of our efforts—yours and mine in the area of postsecondary education. These comments pertain to the project of reconciliation in Canada.

Reconciliation is a process of renewing the relationship between governments, institutions and individuals and Aboriginal people and peoples to move toward one more equal and just. This process has been underway in earnest since 1982, although it also inspired the treaty-process, the recent apology by the Government of Canada for residential school removal and abuse.

Treaties would never have been entered into if Chiefs in the 1800s believed their children would go into residential schools and their language, culture and way of life would be the subject of a deliberate campaign of change to be like one side of that reconciliation process. Reconciliation is not assimilation. Mistakes can be costly (land claims, res schools compensation) but we must learn the lessons and not repeat them. Life is lived forward but understood backward and we must take the lessons of yesterday forward as we think about the responsibility for education outcomes today and into the future.

The values that a relationship of reconciliation builds on are respect, mutuality (like the treaties for those who have them), shared commitment to a better future, and peaceful settlement of disagreements without one side imposing its solutions on another anchored in greater understanding.

Education improvement is part of a reconciliation process as it involves better outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth but also recognizing that they are different and that is to be celebrated not eliminated. Aboriginal knowledge, languages and culture can be strengthened by all in the education system in Canada as it can be a system of support for reconciliation.

Postsecondary needs to be considered in that same context of reconciliation. Relationships will need to be built with First Nations, Métis and Inuit governments and organizations to ensure the students are well supported and achieve their full potential. Fostering those relationships may require some new skills for postsecondary

institutions. For example, dealing with First Nations band governments can be challenging when leadership changes every two years.

Addressing gaps in the social serving system (like the health care, primary and secondary education system and justice system) might leave Aboriginal families with a less supportive context for their child's educational achievement coming into postsecondary. Families might face poverty, racism, chronic disease issues, profound stress, social exclusion, poor nutrition and not having the resources or opportunity to provide an enriching early childhood experience during critical periods of brain development in the early years which impacts resiliency later.

What is one of the most critical touchstones of reconciliation in education? Moving beyond the approaches of the past that included, in the residential school era, an ideological belief in assimilation through denominational religious instruction. Moving toward, evidence based strategies to close the gap, open the opportunities, overcome vulnerabilities that are in some instances intergenerational, and good regular institutional and public accounting and information on progress.

What then might be the requirements of a research approach to understanding barriers, identifying strategies for removing the barriers and improving outcomes?

As many of you here know, this is a shortage of good data and outcome evidence on Aboriginal achievement and strategies to support improved outcome achievement. This must be overcome. I am not an expert on research but I would offer a bit of a shopping list (wish list to Santa I might call it) of where we can strengthen, coordinate and improve our effectiveness.

Some thoughts:

First and most important point is make sure you are identifying Aboriginal children in the public education system and monitoring their progress from early childhood education into postsecondary. Need trajectories, longitudinal studies.

1. Education outcomes for Aboriginal children must be monitored through good administrative surveillance data at the level of the child. Early learning instruments (annualized kindergarten entry level or sooner), and early screening for learning difficulties (hearing, vision, neurological or other disabilities—FASD issues).
 - a. Good data required on readiness to learn coming into kindergarten
 - b. Participation in preschool and early childhood education opportunities and whether these assist in readiness to learn, maturity, and other skills required as they come into the elementary system. (BC has started assigning personal education numbers to preschoolers attending “strong start” early learning centers to track impact by kindergarten with big emphasis on Aboriginal children.

- c. Good data on school progress with regular testing and analysis of results (grades 4, 7, 9, 11, etc.)
 - d. Good data on comparing male and female advancement in elementary and secondary as clearly identifying a gender gap in achievement as research does emerge.
 - e. Data needs to be analyzed to identify vulnerable children geographically and also within school districts and consider whether strategies are there to support them.
 - f. Evaluation of strategies. BC has Aboriginal enhancement agreements with 40 of its school districts aimed at improving outcomes. Strong on the ground relationships are crucial to bring it down to level of child but also report up. Saskatchewan has agreements and some other provinces do as well so that school trustees, administrators as well as educators have priorities, accountability instruments, etc.
2. Postsecondary cohort needs to be better identified and evaluation conducted of whether or not they are provided with multiple opportunities to complete high school (where necessary) and enter postsecondary. Ontario context where there are approx. 250 000 Aboriginal people with more than half of that population under 25 years, you are dealing with a significant and growing cohort. With only 4000 students now enrolled in postsecondary, we can see the lost opportunity. Profound shortfall, and I can speculate that there would be approx. 30 000 students you are not serving.
3. Evaluation of what works to capture the lost cohort and improve the postsecondary readiness of the new cohort. The lost cohort should never be considered lost. Main profile of an Aboriginal postsecondary student in Ontario is a single mother. What would her concerns be and how would they inform research?
- a. Available housing and transportation support (can be a major issue in Ontario)
 - b. E-learning opportunities to permit students to spend some time in community transitioning into postsecondary programs.
 - c. Available supportive childcare and early childhood education opportunities
 - d. Transition and academic excellence and achievement supports
 - e. Inclusive student culture and environment. How can we measure inclusion—well good research on inclusion. Participation in student activities, events, willingness to reflect Aboriginal culture and traditions in the postsecondary institutions including visible signs of achievement and recognition (honouring past achievers, art, culture, elders programming, indigenous knowledge and curricula).
 - f. Using alumni for recruitment purposes and regular surveying of Aboriginal student population on their experience, ideas for

improvement and the continuous learning with Aboriginal students and communities

4. Evaluation of strategies to improve outcomes and achievement. What we need to pay closer attention to and formulate credible research plans with Aboriginal communities regarding:
 - a. Why is retention a problem in key areas?
 - b. Why are students concentrated into certain programs? How can they be encouraged to pursue all program areas?
 - c. What community accountability relationships are empowering of better outcomes? Is there a Service Plan for the postsecondary institution which has been developed with the local First Nations and Métis communities or governments which has been developed and approved at the Board of Governors level?
 - d. What institutional arrangements exist in support of community accountability and what resources are required to fund this activity?
 - e. While research is inconclusive on this point, some evidence suggests that Aboriginal culture and language supports within the postsecondary institution will play a protective role in keeping the student engaged, and promoting achievement.
 - f. Better evidence suggests strong link between academic support and achievement provided the academic support is modeled on excellence and norming achievement for the cohort and not norming failure.
5. Research is required on the economic impact of not developing the social capital of Aboriginal postsecondary students. Costs to the social determinants of health (chronic disease, availability of labour, etc) and continued intergenerational vulnerabilities. Need for investment must be documented through evidence.
6. What programs represent sustainable and effective change? University of Saskatchewan has some models here. ITEP, NLC with 35 years experience. Need refreshing and renewing but also provide some good evidence of social capital development in targeted areas. Tend to be the product of a few charismatic and effective leaders. Cannot be sustained without support and evaluation. Many of the programs across Canada do not collect or analyze data nor are they evaluated to determine if they are effective or responsive to improving outcomes.
7. Do not have a significant existing research foundation involving large cohort studies on outcomes and strategies. Needs to progress to that point eventually.
 - a. Example—Representative for Children and Youth for BC did a major cohort study of 30 000 children in care over a 8 yr period to evaluate education outcomes. For children in care, graduation rate

of 20%, for the Aboriginal children in care, graduation rate of 13%. This contrasts to a provincial high school completion rate of 80%. This group has a similar vulnerability profile as the group you are evaluating here. Huge disparities, but without the evidence could not move to strategies. Now engaged in rigorous and broad-ranging strategies to improve those outcomes, report on them and evaluate strategies for improvement. Regular reporting by government on those outcomes (annually or more often) has served to make public policy more responsive to an education gap largely ignored.

Leave it there to open the floor to questions and any suggestions.

Background notes

According to the 2006 census, there were 242,495 people in Ontario identifying as Aboriginal, 21% of the total Aboriginal population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2007). Of these, 158,395 identify as First Nations, 12,295 as Inuit, and 71,805 as Métis.

Overall in Canada, an increasing number of the Aboriginal population is living in urban areas rather than on reserve. In Ontario in 2006, 70% of First Nations people lived off reserve, with 76% percent of these living in urban areas; 46% in Census Metropolitan Areas (urban areas with populations larger than 100,000) (Statistics Canada, 2007).

In Canada, almost half of the Aboriginal population (48%) is under 24 (Statistics Canada, 2007). According to Statistics Canada (2006) projections, Ontario will continue to have the highest absolute number of Aboriginal peoples into 2017. This suggests that into the next decade Ontario will continue to have a youthful and growing Aboriginal population that has the potential to go to postsecondary education.

A recent report commissioned by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (Educational Policy Institute, 2007), estimated that there are approximately 4000 Aboriginal students currently in Ontario universities (about 1% of the total university student population); and at least 4500 Aboriginal students currently in Ontario colleges (between 2 -3 percent of the total college student population).

Other sources report the numbers to be higher. In 2006, universities reported through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that 2% of all first year university students in Ontario identified as being Aboriginal. In 2007, the College Applicant Survey reported approximately 4% of all students applying to colleges as identifying as Aboriginal.

In general, there has been an increase in the attainment rates of Aboriginal students in Canada. Between 1996 and 2001 both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal populations increased their attainment rates by 3 percent overall. However, the gap in postsecondary education attainment between the Aboriginal population and the non-

Aboriginal population has remained constant at about 15 percentage points (Indian and Northern Affairs, 2004).

Institutional Programs

Although postsecondary education attainment rates are improving (Rae, 2005; Malatest, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2003), it is also true that high school graduation rates for Aboriginal peoples continue to lag behind the general population (Mendelson, 2006), possibly explaining much of the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal postsecondary education participation rates. This situation makes early outreach programs particularly important for Aboriginal youth in encouraging and supporting their path to postsecondary education (Homes, 2006)¹. In a recent report for the Caledon Institution, Michael Mendelson (2006) suggests that Aboriginal youth who complete high school may be just as likely to go on to postsecondary education as youth from the general population².

Once an Aboriginal student is accepted into a postsecondary program, they may face unique barriers to retention and completion. In a 2004 literature review commissioned by The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF), R.A. Malatest (2004) listed some of those barriers as cultural, demographic and geographic, individual and personal, and financial.

In response to the growing understanding of the importance of Aboriginal participation in postsecondary education, and the awareness of the unique challenges facing Aboriginal students, Ontario universities and colleges are developing innovative and creative programming to attract, retain and graduate Aboriginal students. In Ontario, colleges in particular seem to be doing a good job of attracting, enrolling and graduating Aboriginal students (Mendelson, 2006).

Some of this institutional programming is done with the support of the provincial government's Aboriginal Education Strategy (AES) funding. Some of these programs have been developed in response to the provincial government's increased emphasis on access for under-represented youth in Ontario postsecondary institutions; and much is done in response to community needs and the growing understanding in the postsecondary sector that increasing Aboriginal participation is a sector-wide priority.

The 2002 CMEC paper (Malatest, 2002), identified a number of themes that seemed to be present in successful programs: community delivery, access programs, partnership with Aboriginal communities and mainstream educational institutions, Aboriginal control of education, and student support that addresses Aboriginal needs. These themes could be used as starting points to assess Ontario programs.

¹ David Holmes in his inventory of university programs for Aboriginal students calls this process "pro-active recruitment".

² It should be noted that this is a rough calculation; data for Aboriginal students in postsecondary education is incomplete and unreliable.

Finally, as a note on methodology, the CMEC paper highlighted some of the challenges in this type of exercise, such as the lack of good data to evaluate the success of current programs³. Therefore, the methodology used to gather information will most likely need to be both quantitative, to the extent it can be, and qualitative, involving some form of interview process or survey tool to collect information on promising practices.

³ Most recent reports on the state of Aboriginal access to postsecondary education in Canada make reference to the lack of good data in this area.