

# Tackle race, history head on to improve student achievement, critics say

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Year after year, school boards receive reports echoing what many before them have concluded — that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students don't achieve as highly, or graduate as often as the average Alberta student.

Educators often call it the “achievement gap” — a large, measurable difference in how Indigenous students fare in school compared to students overall.

While leaders say the achievement gap is a problem they want to resolve, some observers say another major gap is the way people talk — or don't talk — about racism in schools.

Research has shown racism is one of the main reasons Indigenous students leave school early, said Rebecca Sockbeson, an associate professor of education policy studies at the University of Alberta who studies anti-racist education and Indigenous knowledge systems.


## Teacher gap, not student gap, professor says

Referring to students' "achievement gap" puts kids, not the system, under the microscope, she said.

"We need to back up from that question and think," she said. "It's really a teacher development gap."

Although teachers are well-meaning, their unawareness can manifest in lower expectations of Indigenous students, or lessons that don't take their experiences into account, she said.

**Accountability Pillar Overall Summary**  
Annual Education Results Reports - Oct 2017  
Province: Alberta (FNMI)



| Measure Category  | Measure  | Alberta (FNMI) |                  |                     | Measure Evaluation |                        |            |
|---|--|----------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------|
|   |  | Current Result | Prev Year Result | Prev 3 Year Average | Achievement        | Improvement            | Overall    |
| Safe and Caring Schools                                       | <a href="#">Safe and Caring</a>                          | n/a            | n/a              | n/a                 | n/a                | n/a                    | n/a        |
|   | <a href="#">Progress of Studies</a>                      | n/a            | n/a              | n/a                 | n/a                | n/a                    | n/a        |
|   | <a href="#">School Quality</a>                           | n/a            | n/a              | n/a                 | n/a                | n/a                    | n/a        |
| Student Learning Opportunities                                | <a href="#">Drop-Out Rate</a>                            | 5.8            | 6.1              | 6.7                 | Intermediate       | Improved Significantly | Good       |
|   | <a href="#">High School Completion Rate (3 yr)</a>       | 53.6           | 50.2             | 47.8                | Very Low           | Improved Significantly | Acceptable |
| Student Learning Achievement (Grades K-9)                     | <a href="#">DAST - Accessible</a>                        | 51.7           | 52.4             | 52.1                | Very Low           | Maintained             | Concern    |
|   | <a href="#">DAST - Excellence</a>                        | 6.7            | 6.3              | 6.3                 | Very Low           | Improved               | Issue      |
| Student Learning Achievement (Grades 10-12)                   | <a href="#">DAST - Accessible</a>                        | 77.1           | 76.1             | 76.3                | Low                | Maintained             | Issue      |
|   | <a href="#">DAST - Excellence</a>                        | 15.7           | 10.2             | 10.2                | Low                | Maintained             | Issue      |
|   | <a href="#">DAST Exam Participation Rate (A+ - Exam)</a> | 21.8           | 20.7             | 20.3                | Very Low           | Improved               | Issue      |
|   | <a href="#">Richardson Scholarship Eligibility Rate</a>  | 34.2           | 31.9             | 31.9                | n/a                | Improved Significantly | n/a        |
| Preparation for Lifelong Learning, World of Work, Citizenship | <a href="#">Transition Rate (3 yr)</a>                   | 31.8           | 33.5             | 33.3                | Very Low           | Declined               | Concern    |
|   | <a href="#">Work Preparation</a>                         | n/a            | n/a              | n/a                 | n/a                | n/a                    | n/a        |
| Parental Involvement  | <a href="#">Citizenship</a>                              | n/a            | n/a              | n/a                 | n/a                | n/a                    | n/a        |
|   | <a href="#">Parental Involvement</a>                     | n/a            | n/a              | n/a                 | n/a                | n/a                    | n/a        |
| Continuous Improvement  | <a href="#">School Improvement</a>                       | n/a            | n/a              | n/a                 | n/a                | n/a                    | n/a        |

Data collected by school districts across the province show First Nations, Métis and Inuit students graduate less frequently and have lower performances on provincial exams than the average Alberta student.

Sockbeson was part of a team that developed a now-compulsory course for U of A education students that helps them work more effectively with Aboriginal students. They teach future teachers what racism is, what feeds it, how it's embedded in systems, and how it led to residential schools that stripped Indigenous children from their homes and attempted to eliminate their culture and languages.

Many of the province's 50,000 teachers will be underprepared for new teacher expectations taking effect in September 2019 which require educators to be able to teach about First Nations, Métis and Inuit world views and cultural beliefs, treaty areas and agreements, Indigenous history and more.

The depth they need can't be taught in a single professional development session, she said.



Student Keisha Laboucan, left, receives instruction from Archbishop O'Leary graduation coach Donita Large in the school's Braided Journeys program. It has helped to improve graduation rates in Edmonton Catholic schools. Greg Southam / Edmonton Journal

Sean Gray would have liked to hear more nuanced history lessons in high school, and had more lessons outside. The 18-year-old University of Alberta student graduated from Blessed Oscar Romero High School last year, and said teachers discussed cultural genocide as if it had no bearing on Indigenous people today.

The “achievement gap” still exists because her generation is coping with the long-term consequences of discrimination and oppression, said Gray, who serves on the Enoch Cree Nation’s youth advisory council.

She learned that history in the school’s Braided Journeys program, where a graduation coach made her feel comfortable, welcome, and helped her gain confidence.

With looks of disgust, people sometimes complained about the smell of smoke from smudging ceremonies at the school, she said.

“I think lots of systems are in denial about racism, and they think that it doesn’t exist,” she said.

‘If you’re not mentioning it, you’re not addressing it’

As a mother of four sons, Ufuoma Odebala-Fregene can empathize.

The community organizer said black students experience similar marginalization and “microaggressions” in schools, such as lower expectations.

Last month, she told the Edmonton public school board its strategic plan on First Nations, Métis and Inuit education was flawed for failing to include the word “racism.”

Administrators said they have confidence in the plan — the approaches are backed by a recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Edmonton public school board chairwoman Michelle Draper said she was heartened by the report’s finding that steps schools take to bolster Indigenous student achievement in school also help all students enrolled.

Schools should be tackling racism against all visible minorities, Odebala-Fregene said in a February interview, by collecting the same data on other minorities they collect for Indigenous students.

“If you don’t measure, you can make any excuse,” she said.



Student Rodney House peers through a frosted school bus window when he and his classmates from the Paul First Nations school had a field trip to Edmonton in 2011. John Lucas / John Lucas/Edmonton Journal

## Racism ‘intolerable’ in public schools

Edmonton Public Schools does tackle racism by name with a multicultural policy, a diversity day coinciding with the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and partnerships with community groups, spokeswoman Carrie Rosa said in an email earlier this month.

The board policy says racism is “intolerable” and can negatively affect students’ education and careers.

“No one is denying that instances of racism could exist in our schools,” Rosa said.

Setting the success of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students as a priority doesn’t come at the expense of other students, she said.

The school district has previously said collecting race-based data has “potentially more harmful impacts than being helpful.”

“We believe kids are kids regardless of race, gender, faith,” Rosa said.

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