

# Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Student Success

*Leadership through Governance*





*"Lift is achieved facing into the wind."*

This report examines some of the key issues surrounding the education of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and proposes a governance framework that school boards can use to improve student results.

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## Executive Summary

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### **Introduction and purpose**

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA), along with the Government of Alberta and Aboriginal communities, has placed priority attention on addressing the achievement gap of Alberta's First Nations, Métis and Inuit (Aboriginal) learners.

Alberta's school boards play a vital role in achieving the vision of the Alberta government with regard to the education of Aboriginal children.

This report examines some of the key issues surrounding the education of Aboriginal students and proposes an evidence-based governance framework that school boards can use to improve student results. In this, the framework attempts to capture good governance practices generally while the related strategies apply these governance practices to the education of Aboriginal students.

### **The demographic context**

Alberta's Aboriginal population (2006 census) is 250,000, an increase of 23% in five years (2001-2006). Aboriginal peoples represent about 7.5% of the total Alberta population. The Aboriginal population in Alberta is growing significantly faster than the non-Aboriginal population. Approximately one Aboriginal child in five currently attends on-reserve schools; four in five attend off-reserve schools.

### **The achievement gap**

An examination of the achievement gap that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners underscores the need for strong affirmative action on the part of school boards.

While younger Aboriginals are seeking more education than previous generations, they have not kept pace with the increase in education among other Canadians. The magnitude of the education gap, in the view of some, is prohibiting Aboriginals from exercising a realistic choice between leading a traditional lifestyle and a lifestyle integrated with other Canadians.

### **Factors negatively affecting First Nations, Métis and Inuit student achievement and success**

An understanding of key historical and socio-economic factors negatively affecting Aboriginal student success helps set the stage for the important work of school boards relative to addressing student achievement. These include the troubled history of residential schools and socio-economic factors such as poverty, social conditions and housing.

## School boards – providing the necessary leadership through governance

### *Governance matters*

The success of an organization can be directly linked to the leadership of its governance board. For school boards, organizational success, in large part, means improvement to student learning outcomes.

### *Applying principles of good governance*

The following five principles provide a useful framework for school boards that are intent on improving student results generally and Aboriginal student results in particular. The principles are:

1. Legitimacy and voice
2. Direction
3. Performance
4. Accountability
5. Fairness

A discussion of each principle, together with specific school board practices that implement the principles, provides guidance to improving student results. The body of this report provides examples from Alberta school boards related to each of the governance principles.

### **1. Legitimacy and voice**

Applied to the context of this report, this principle addresses the importance of meaningful engagement of the Aboriginal community and of its' involvement in, and ownership of, decisions that affect the education of Aboriginal children. Simply, this principle underscores the importance of giving voice to the Aboriginal community.

Alberta's school boards engage in a number of practices that help give voice to the Aboriginal community in a context that creates a sense of belonging and helps build understanding, cultural awareness and trust.

### **2. Direction**

The principle of direction speaks to the importance of an organization's strategic vision, to the importance of having a broad and long-term strategic plan (Education Plan) that details purpose, goals and measures, along with a sense of what is needed for the accomplishment of school jurisdiction goals. Results for all students, including Aboriginal students, are improved when school boards use a policy governance model, create a shared vision centered on students and their learning, exercise focus and discipline and provide choice to parents.



### 3. Performance

The performance principle is anchored in the notion of producing results that meet needs while making the best use of resources. School boards positively influence student performance when they engage the local Aboriginal community in a dialogue about local factors that present barriers or contribute to success, provide the resources for individual student supports, establish high standards, put priority on optimizing internal talent and build relationships and partnerships.

### 4. Accountability

In addition to being accountable *to* their communities by virtue of their elected status, school boards are also accountable *for* the provision of quality educational services through the policies, structures and resources that they put in place. School boards improve student learning when they, together with their Aboriginal community, define and measure success, track progress and use resulting data to “move and improve.” They also create staff accountability mechanisms that hold staff accountable for student results.

### 5. Fairness

The governance concept of “fairness” is grounded in principles of transparency and equity. In operation, fairness is not about identical treatment for all but rather about addressing needs. This report provides “fairness” guideposts that school boards can use when considering policies and practices that impact Aboriginal learners and their communities. These include transparency, inclusiveness, innovation, learner-centered, collaboration and results orientation.

### Conclusion

School boards who take seriously the challenge of improving Aboriginal student achievement face all of the challenges found in improving student learning outcomes generally, plus the challenges and opportunities associated with closing the Aboriginal student achievement gap in a context that builds understanding and incorporates the values and worldview of local Aboriginal communities.

The realities and depth of the Aboriginal student achievement gap will take a united and combined education system effort, spanning from the home to the community to the classroom to the boardroom to the Ministry. School boards can improve student achievement by a cumulative and disciplined process; step by step, action by action, that, in sum, add up to excellent results. This is the challenge facing Alberta’s school boards, a challenge in which failure is not an option, a challenge they are capable of meeting.

## A. Introduction and Purpose

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The term “Aboriginal people” refers to the descendents of the original inhabitants of North America as defined in the *Constitution Act* of 1982. Section 35(2) of this Act defines Aboriginal people as the “Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.” These three separate peoples have unique languages, cultures, beliefs and heritages. This report uses the terms “Aboriginal” and “First Nations, Métis and Inuit,” as appropriate, when referring the original inhabitants of North America.

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) is committed to assisting Alberta’s school boards address student achievement gaps and inequities where they exist. In particular, ASBA has placed priority attention on addressing the achievement gap of Alberta’s First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.

The ASBA believes that the Aboriginal student achievement gap must be addressed head-on by Alberta’s school boards and dealt with in a transformative fashion so that improvement in student results can be achieved.

Alberta’s school boards share with First Nations elders a strong belief in the important place that education has in shaping a brighter future for all. On May 21, 2008, this belief was articulated when the Chiefs of Alberta’s Treaties No. 6, No. 7 and No. 8 signed an historic document relating to the rights, in part, of First Nations children to an education that prepares them for active citizenship. Principle 7 of this agreement reads:

The child is entitled to receive an education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgment, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society.

In the words of the three Treaty Chiefs, “These words must never be broken, so long as the sun shines, the rivers flow and the grass grows.”

The Alberta government has also placed high priority on Aboriginal student success, recently incorporating this issue as one of the four goals of the current Alberta Education Business Plan. In addition, the Alberta First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy framework, released in 2002, is shaped by five priority strategies, these being:

- Increase First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner access to post-secondary and other adult education and training opportunities and support services.
- Increase the attendance, retention and graduation rates of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students attending provincial schools.

- Increase the number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers and school/institution personnel.
- Facilitate the continuous development and delivery of First Nations, Métis and Inuit courses and professional development opportunities for aspiring and existing administrators, teachers/instructors and school/institution personnel.
- Build working relationships that will contribute to quality learning opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.

Alberta's school boards play a vital role in achieving the vision of Alberta's Treaty Chiefs and the Alberta government with regard to the education of Aboriginal children.

This report examines some of the key issues surrounding the education of Aboriginal students and proposes an evidence-based governance framework and related strategies applicable to the Aboriginal community that school boards can use to improve student results. In this, the framework attempts to capture good governance practices generally, while the related strategies apply these governance practices to the education of Aboriginal students.



## B. The Demographic Context

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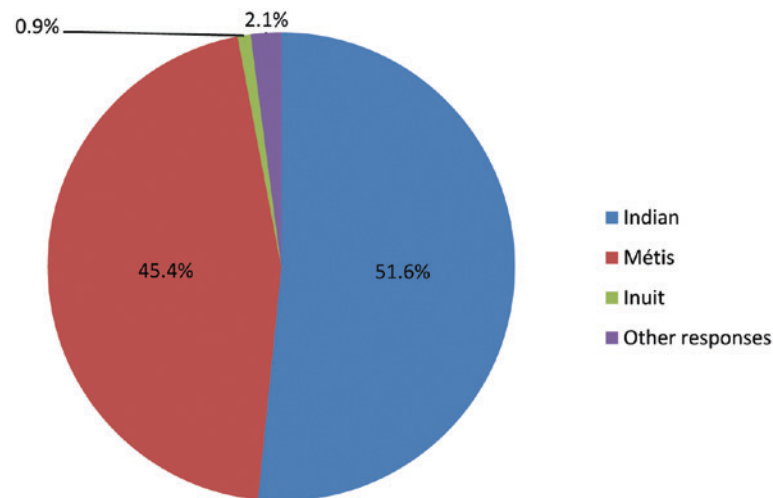
A brief overview of Aboriginal demographics in Alberta helps provide context and scope to the educational challenges and opportunities faced by Alberta's school boards.

Some key demographic facts regarding Alberta's Aboriginal population provided by Statistics Canada (census 2006) and the Government of Alberta include:

- Alberta's Aboriginal ancestry population (see figure #1) is about 250,000, an increase of 23% in five years (2001-2006).
- The Aboriginal population in Alberta is growing twice as fast (23% growth since 2001) as that of non-Aboriginal Albertans (10% growth). According to Statistics Canada, the fast growth is credited to high birthrates and more people identifying themselves as Aboriginals.

Figure #1: Composition of Alberta's Aboriginal population

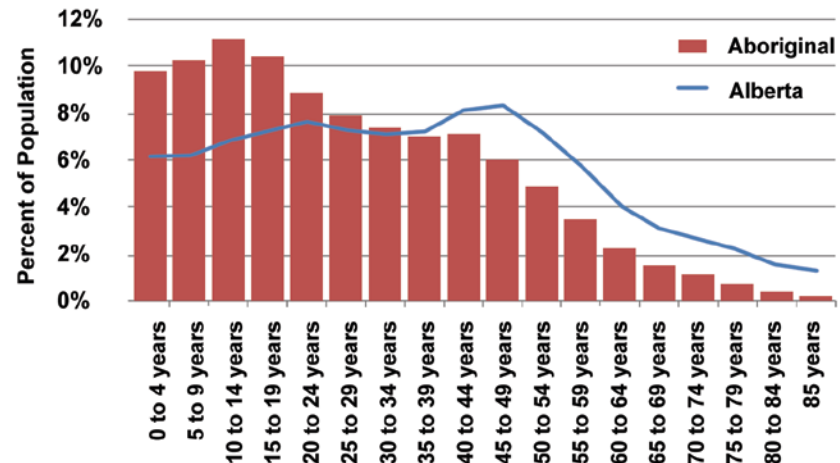
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*Source: Government of Alberta, Nov. 2010 (Based on Statistics Canada 2006 census)*

- Alberta has Canada's third-largest Aboriginal identity population, the majority of whom (63%) live in urban areas.
- Alberta has one of the youngest Aboriginal populations in Canada. About a third (31%) of Alberta's Aboriginal population is less than 14 years of age compared to 19% for the non-Aboriginal population (see figure #2).

Figure #2: Alberta's Aboriginal Population Age Characteristics



Source: Statistics Canada; 2006 Census, Aboriginal Data

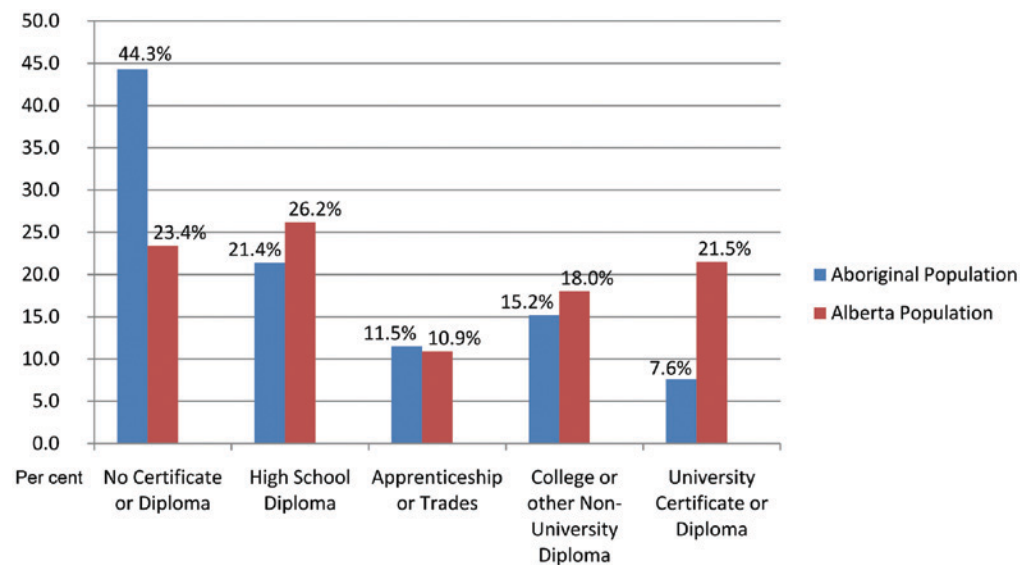
- Alberta's First Nations population (registered under the federal Indian Act) is 105,777 with 37% living off-reserve.
- There are 48 First Nations and 134 reserves in Alberta (2010) comprising 1.95 million acres. Alberta's First Nations reserves are all founded pursuant to one of three treaties; treaties No. 6, No. 7, and No. 8. Treaty 6, which was signed at Carlton and Fort Pitt in 1876, covers central Alberta and Saskatchewan. Treaty 7, which was signed at the Blackfoot Crossing of Bow River and Fort Macleod in 1877, covers southern Alberta. Treaty 8, which was signed at Lesser Slave Lake in 1899 covers portions of Northern Alberta, BC, Saskatchewan and part of the Northwest Territories.
- Among First Nations children living on-reserve, about one third attend provincial schools (Richards, 2008).
- Alberta's Métis population is 85,000; the largest Métis population in Canada. Most (88%) live in major urban centres.
- There are eight Métis settlements in Alberta, comprising 1.25 million acres. This is the only recognized Métis land base in Canada. Approximately 8,000 people are members of these settlements.
- Alberta is home to about 1600 people who have identified themselves as Inuit.
- Approximately one Aboriginal child in five currently attends on-reserve schools; four in five attend provincial schools (Richards, 2008).

Given the demographics briefly outlined above, it becomes apparent, for the foreseeable future, that Alberta's school boards will see a growing number of Aboriginal students enrolled in provincial schools as compared to non-Aboriginal students. As these children enter the labour market they will also make up a larger proportion of the working-age population.

## C. The Achievement Gap

A brief examination of the achievement gap that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners underlines the need for strong affirmative action on the part of school boards. Alberta's Aboriginal population trails the general Alberta population in the level of formal education achieved (see figure #3).

Figure #3: Level of Formal Education Achieved



Source: Statistics Canada 2006 Census

Younger Aboriginals are seeking more education than previous generations but they have not kept pace with the increase in education among other Canadians. The magnitude of the education gap, in the view of some, is prohibiting Aboriginals from exercising a realistic choice between leading a traditional lifestyle and a lifestyle integrated with other Canadians (Richards, 2008).

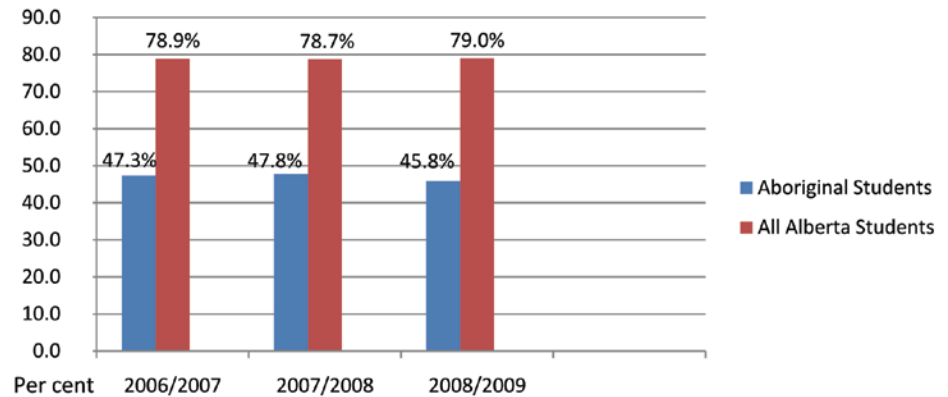
A recent University of Lethbridge study (Gunn and Pomahac, 2009) paints a rather bleak picture of this achievement gap. The study notes that while the widening gap in educational attainment is experienced across Canada, it is especially problematic in the western provinces.

Alberta Education, since the recent implementation of the Aboriginal Data Collection Initiative, has tracked the performance of the province's Aboriginal students using the measures of its "Accountability Pillar". While the types of measures and their appropriateness for Aboriginal learners has been the point of some debate in Alberta, the current accountability pillar results, at present, are the only source of comparative data available to Alberta's school boards and schools. These measures provide a snap shot of the provincial performance of Aboriginal students compared to the non-Aboriginal population.

The provincial 2008-09 Alberta Education *Annual Report* provides the first public reporting of results by Aboriginal population. Some key facts reported in the 2009/2010 Alberta Education *Annual Report* include:

- The dropout rate for Aboriginal students (11.2%) is more than twice as high as the rate for students overall (4.3%).
- The high school completion rate (five-year) of Aboriginal students is lower than the rate for all Alberta students (see figure 4).

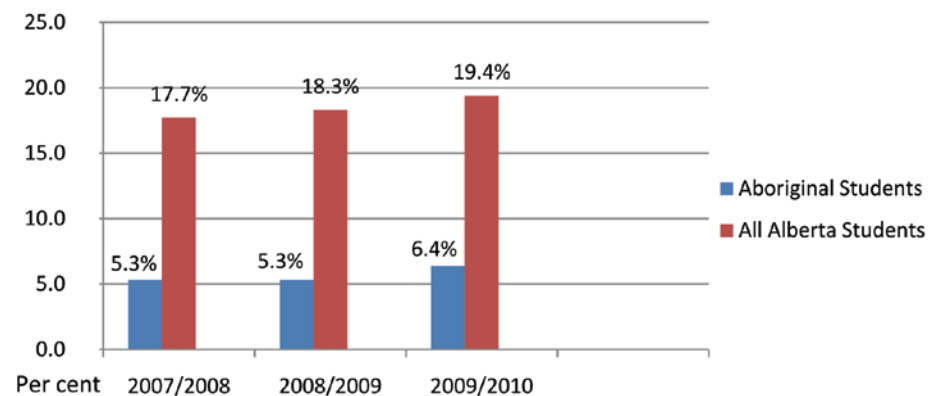
Figure #4: Comparative Five-Year High School Completion Rates



Source: Alberta Education Annual Report 2009/2010

- Percentages of self-identified Aboriginal students in Grades 3, 6 and 9 who achieved standards on Provincial Achievement Tests have consistently trailed the results achieved by all students. At the standard of excellence, results on provincial achievement tests by students in grades three, six and nine are as follows (see figure #5):

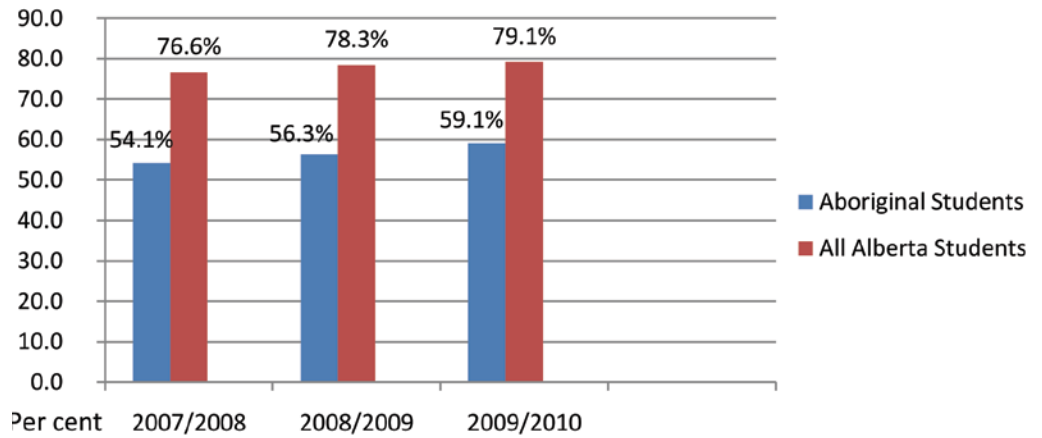
Figure #5: Percentage of Students Achieving the Standard of Excellence on Provincial Achievement Tests (Mathematics and Social Studies excluded)



Source: Alberta Education Annual Report 2009/2010

At the acceptable standard, results on provincial achievement tests by students in grades three, six and nine are as follows (see figure #6):

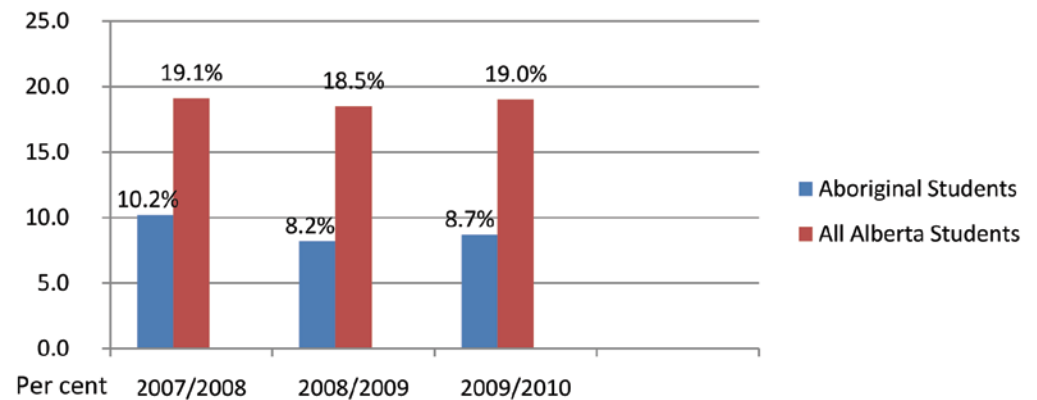
Figure #6: Percentage of Students Achieving the Acceptable Standard on Provincial Achievement Tests (Mathematics and Social Studies excluded).



Source: Alberta Education Annual Report 2009/2010

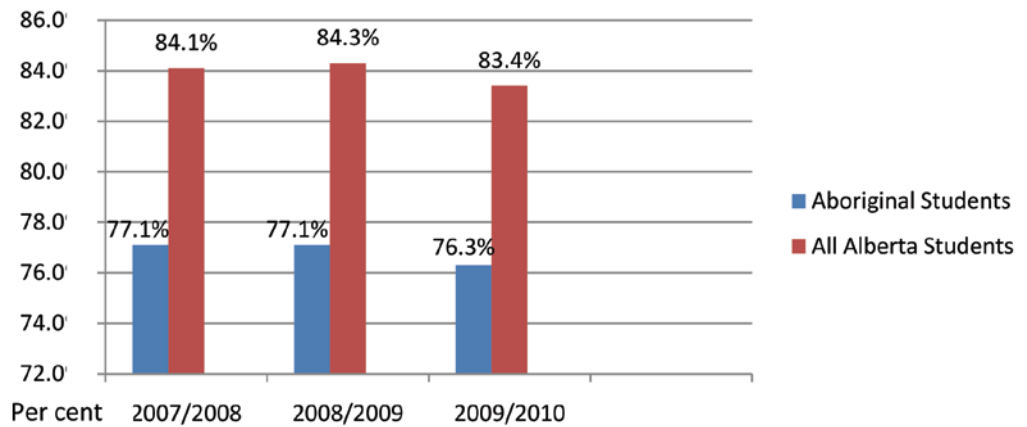
Aboriginal students have consistently trailed the provincial average for achievement in grade twelve diploma exams (see figure #7 and #8).

Figure #7: Percentages of Students Writing Diploma Examinations who Achieved at the Standard of Excellence (Chemistry 30, Physics 30, Social Studies 30 and 33 excluded)



Source: Alberta Education Annual Report 2009/2010

Figure #8. Percentages of Students writing Diploma Examinations who Achieved at the Acceptable Standard (Chemistry 30, Physics 30, Social Studies 30 and 33 excluded)



Source: Alberta Education Annual Report 2009/2010

In addition, provincial measures assessing eligibility for Rutherford Scholarships, transition to post secondary and preparation for employment show lower results for Aboriginal students than for students overall.

In summary, the achievement gap evidenced by the above measures is a clear call to action for all of Alberta's school boards. Quite simply, Alberta's school boards, given their mandate, have both an ethical and statutory responsibility to deal with obvious inequities that are evident in Aboriginal learner results in Alberta's public school system.



## D. Factors Negatively Affecting First Nations, Métis and Inuit Student Achievement and Success

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An understanding of key historical and socio-economic factors negatively affecting Aboriginal student success helps set the stage for the important work of school boards relative to addressing student achievement.

### **The residential school factor – a troubled history**

Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo believes that First Nations need to take more control of education, in part to counter the damage done by the Indian Residential Schools system, which saw thousands of native children taken from their communities and forced to forsake their language and culture. Chief Atleo maintains that “we have to be directly involved in making sure that, unlike residential schools; the school system not only prepares children for the market economy but reconnects them with family, language, culture and land. That is what the residential schools sought to disconnect our people from, and we have been suffering those consequences now for several generations” (Edmonton Journal, December, 6, 2009).

This sentiment is echoed by Rob Reimer, Chair of Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. In Mr. Reimer’s view:

I think from a non-Aboriginal perspective, what I have seen and what I have really noticed and what has changed me, personally, is a growing awareness and knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people, both First Nations and Métis, and the challenges that they face.

First Nations students are not just another group of children at risk. First Nations are the only group that didn’t immigrate to this country. And they are the only group that we have tried for 400 years to separate from their history, from their religion, from their language and from their culture. We tried our damndest to separate them from everything that they knew. We have not attempted that with any other ethnic group. We haven’t tried that with Chinese-Canadians, not with Indo-Canadians, not with any other group. We are left with a majority of First Nations people who don’t know their own language, their own history or their own culture, and we wonder why they fear authority, why they mistrust school and why they mistrust the white community. We blame First Nations people because some have issues with unemployment and substance abuse. After we have systematically attempted to destroy them, the wonder is that there are so many who are healthy, so many who maintain their traditional ways and beliefs. We owe it to our First Nations to do everything that we can to restore their pride and to help them and their children move forward (January 13, 2010 Task Force meeting).

While education in Canada for Aboriginal students has come a long way since the residential school experience, its impact continues to be felt by many families and communities.

### Socio-economic factors

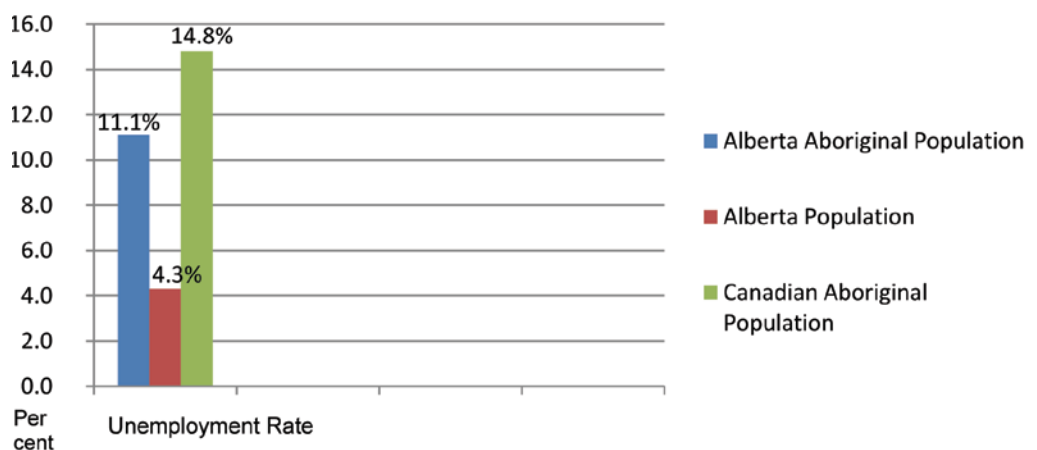
Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) acknowledges that education is just one part of the problem and "while First Nations and Métis value education, the success of their children depends on a number of related factors including housing, social conditions and poverty" (p. 85).

A recent British Columbia study of the socio-economic variables that impact student achievement found, for example, family income and parental education level as the most important among socio-economic variables and that improvements in socio-economic status are associated with improvement for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in school performance (Richards, 2008).

The Sullivan Report, similarly, argues "unless the health, social, and economic conditions of Native lives are generally improved, the problems of language development and lower-than-average educational attainment levels will regrettably remain a part of the Native experience at school" (Bell, 2004, p. 38).

Census 2006 indicates that the unemployment rate of Alberta's Aboriginal population trails the provincial average although it exceeds that of the Canadian Aboriginal population (see figure #9).

Figure #9: Alberta's Aboriginal Unemployment Rate



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census

The recently released *Premier's Council for Economic Strategy* (May 2011) contains a sense of urgency when it argues that "we must accelerate action on ensuring the growing population of Aboriginal young people can benefit from

the opportunities this province can offer and contribute to the province as skilled and productive workers, engaged citizens and future leaders” (p. 6).

While school boards have significant community leadership responsibilities, addressing the economic, social and employment issues is largely outside the mandate of school boards and the public education system, yet these factors continue to have a direct negative impact on the achievement of Aboriginal children in school.

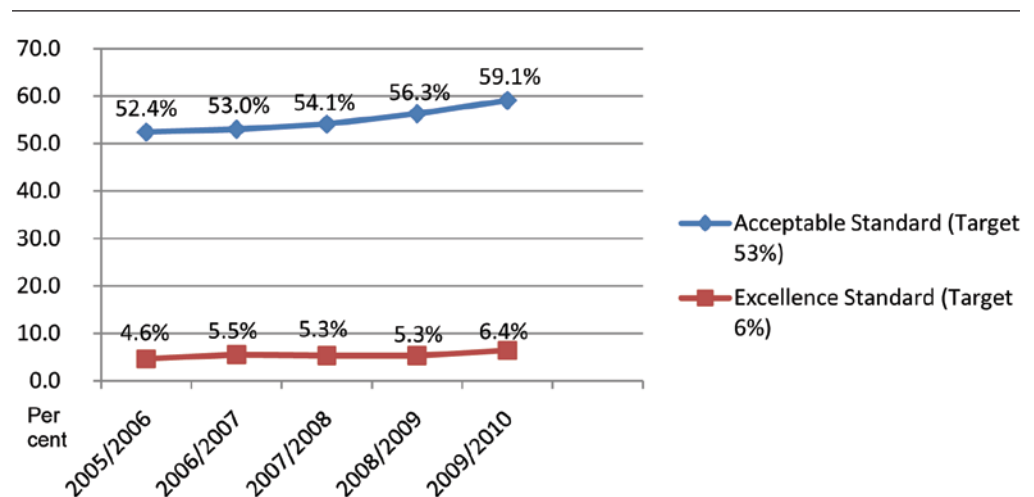
School boards can, however, provide leadership that positively impacts Aboriginal student learning.

Largely due to the work of school boards, there has been substantial progress in educational attainment achieved over the last 20 years by Aboriginal peoples in Alberta. Gains have occurred in the areas of education achievement levels, labour force participation and employment rates. Between the 1996 and 2001 census, for example, there was an increase of 63 per cent in the number of Aboriginal people graduating from university and a 46 per cent increase in the number graduating from college.

While Aboriginal achievement rates in most cases are still below those of non-Aboriginal people, results in Alberta are trending upward.

An analysis of overall percentages of Aboriginal students who achieved standards on grades 3, 6 and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests (see figure #10) indicates that Aboriginal student performance, as measured by the achievement tests, is improving over time and has, in fact, surpassed Alberta Education targets.

Figure #10: Overall Percentages of Aboriginal Students who Achieved Standards on Grades 3, 6 and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests



Source: Alberta Education Annual Report 2009/2010

The future holds hope. According to Lea Switzer, past trustee for Lethbridge School District #51, “There is the understanding and deep realization that in order for positive and effective change to occur, there must be an acceptance of the past and all its warts, but also a profound necessity to not continually carry the baggage of yesterday in order to foster, create and nurture a vibrant and successful future” (personal email, February 2, 2010). Her thoughts echo the words of Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard who observed that life is lived forward, but understood backwards.

## E. School Boards – Providing the Necessary Leadership through Governance

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### **Governance matters**

The success of an organization can be directly linked to the leadership of its governance board. For school boards, organizational success, in large part, means improvement to student learning outcomes. A quick review of recent research underscores this point:

- The OECD (2008), in its study of the educational systems in 22 western countries, has found that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning.
- The U.S. Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (2006) has found a statistically significant relationship between district leadership and student achievement.
- A recent C.D. Howe study of the best performing British Columbia provincial school districts found that Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal performance gaps were either positively or negatively impacted by district leadership and governance practices (Richards 2008).
- Similarly, best practice studies in Aboriginal education by Bell (2004) and Fulford (2007) found good governance and leadership as the success factor identified most often by researchers.

Quite simply, governance practices matter. School boards, by employing effective governance practices and focusing on student learning, can overcome many of the historical and socio-economic factors that negatively affect Aboriginal student performance. Good governance practices can both “raise the student achievement bar” and “close the student achievement gap”.

The balance of this report proposes a framework and related research and best practice strategies that school boards can use to meet the challenge of improving Aboriginal student results.

### **Applying principles of good governance to the challenge of closing the gap for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students**

The Canadian Institute on Governance (IOG) defines governance as the art of steering an organization; as the process whereby strategic goals are set, key relationships are maintained, the health of the organization is safeguarded and an account is rendered for organizational performance (<http://www.iog.ca/>). Simply, governance is about leadership, relationships and goals, with good governance characterized by strong leadership, positive relationships and shared goals.

The IOG has created a model centered on five principles that research and best practice see as core to good governance.

These five principles provide a useful framework for school boards intent on improving student results generally and Aboriginal student results in particular. The principles are:

- 1. Legitimacy and voice**
- 2. Direction**
- 3. Performance**
- 4. Accountability**
- 5. Fairness**

A discussion of each principle, together with specific school board practices that implement the principles, provides guidance to improving Aboriginal student results.

### **1. Legitimacy and voice**

The principles of legitimacy and voice underpin democratic institutions. They speak to the importance of all citizens having a voice in decision making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their intention.

Applied to the context of this report, this principle addresses the importance of meaningful engagement of the Aboriginal community and of its involvement in, and ownership of, decisions that affect the education of Aboriginal children. Simply, this principle underscores the importance of giving voice to the Aboriginal community.

Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) emphasizes the critical importance of this voice. The Commission argues that the best approach for the future is to give Aboriginal people more direct control of the education of their children. The Commission maintains:

Dramatic improvements in Aboriginal education and the outcomes for children are unlikely to happen unless Aboriginal people have control and all components work together to address the need for change. The Commission heard that Aboriginal people are tired of being “done to.” In spite of the best intentions of people in the education system, Aboriginal people – especially parents, elders, and community leaders – need to be empowered to take “ownership” of and responsibility for the education of their children (p. 86).

School boards that adopt a “power with” rather than “power over” approach to Aboriginal communities and genuinely engage parents and Elders in the education of their children can overcome feelings of deep-seated mistrust of the education system.



What, then, are some strategies that school boards can use to help engage the Aboriginal community and give it a voice in decision making?

*a. Building understanding, cultural awareness and trust*

School boards serious about engaging their Aboriginal communities in meaningful ways begin by consciously using strategies that build understanding, cultural awareness and trust.

Lessons learned from a number of successful Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects point to the importance of educating teachers, staff, and non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal cultures, history, and language. AISI projects have taught us that Aboriginal children bring to school unique traditional knowledge from their culture and language and that students and adults feel valued when they see this culture and language accepted and honoured. This lesson of understanding can be applied to the classroom, the school and the school system.

School boards model the way when they engage in their own learning and awareness journey.

Many of Alberta's school boards intentionally attempt to help all students and staff understand Aboriginal culture and language. These jurisdictions argue that it is a misconception to target such exercises solely at Aboriginal students as it is important for non-Aboriginal students and teachers to reach an understanding of Canadian Aboriginal heritage in order to create a culturally sensitive school environment.

The Calgary Board of Education, for example, outlines what the building of understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal cultures for all students includes:

- valuing Aboriginal students, their culture, and contributions;
- celebrating the diversity of Aboriginal cultures;
- teaching the historical significance of Aboriginal peoples and cultures;
- incorporating accurate and appropriate Aboriginal history and culture in the curriculum;
- supporting broad student participation in Aboriginal sporting, social and cultural activities;
- acknowledging and valuing the unique cultural, historical and economic circumstances of Aboriginal students; and
- showing respect for Aboriginal peoples and cultures (Calgary Board of Education Administrative regulation 3079).

Alberta's Aboriginal population is very diverse and, as such, generalizations about all Aboriginal communities are difficult to make. This diversity underlines

the importance of local school boards gaining an awareness of the culture, language and history of local Aboriginal groups.

Edmonton Public Schools, for example, in its consultations with its Aboriginal community, identified the following beliefs and values as important aspects of Aboriginal culture and worldview:

- recognize the unique place of Aboriginal people in Canada;
- recognize the importance of Elders;
- have high academic expectations for Aboriginal students;
- recognize the importance of relationships;
- follow a holistic approach (whole child in context of family);
- recognize importance of spirituality (but recognize this is the domain of the Elders);
- support use of ceremonies;
- permit use of sweetgrass and practice of smudging in the schools;
- establish policies that reflect the Aboriginal way of knowing;
- follow Aboriginal protocols;
- recognize National Aboriginal Day;
- consult with Aboriginal community on an ongoing basis;
- work from a strengths perspective rather than a deficit perspective; and
- commit to eradicating racism (Trustee Aboriginal Task Force; Second Interim Report, 2007).

Alberta's school boards use a number of ways to build understanding and awareness. Some, like Medicine Hat School District No. 76, have created interpretive centres. The Medicine Hat School District No. 76 "Legacy Room Interpretive Programs" are comprised of two fully equipped interpretive centres available to all students and staff of the district. Teachers can select topics and crafts based on curriculum needs and grade level. The legacy rooms are used to complement or augment existing classroom activities and provide hands-on activities and visual history.

Medicine Hat School District No. 76 also sponsors an annual "History in the Hills" event that celebrates the culture and history of the Cypress Hills. The event showcases First Nations and Métis culture by providing an on-site exploration of a University of Calgary archaeological dig site. It also provides students an opportunity to sample fry bread (bannock), observe preparation of traditional foods and watch hide tanning demonstrations. Students also have an opportunity to take part in a traditional round dance, see how a tepee is raised and play some traditional Aboriginal games.

Other school jurisdictions, such as Buffalo Trail Public Schools, host Aboriginal authors like David Bouchard and provide time at schools for presentations, story telling and readings. In Buffalo Trail, author Bouchard addressed 3500 students as well as parents and, in the view of the school district, the celebration of the Aboriginal culture combined with a celebration of reading and writing was a very successful activity.

Still other jurisdictions, like Edmonton Public Schools, hire consultants to provide advice and assistance to district staff and students regarding effective practices, strategies and resources for Aboriginal students. Many Alberta school jurisdictions hire liaison workers to provide individual support to students and to help link home, school and community.

### *b. Creating a sense of belonging*

Another lesson learned from successful AISI projects is the importance of creating a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students, parents and other adults in the public school system. While good schools employ strategies that benefit all students, schools focused on closing the Aboriginal achievement gap intentionally create a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students. These students know that they are valued in school and that they have much to contribute to the school environment.

Creating a sense of belonging for the Aboriginal community at the school jurisdiction level is equally important.

Some school boards, for example, include Aboriginal Elders or members of the Aboriginal community in key school board celebrations and events such as graduations, socials or workshops. Elders often present the invocation or bring greetings on behalf of their communities. The physical presence of Elders at key school jurisdiction celebrations helps reinforce the message of inclusion and belonging.

Other school jurisdictions such as Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools, Fort Vermilion School Division and Holy Family Catholic Regional Division choose to have an Aboriginal representative as part of the school board makeup. This strategy actions Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) recommendation that "where significant numbers of First Nations parents send their children to provincial schools off-reserve; they have a role in the governance of those schools and the school jurisdictions responsible for the schools their children attend" (p. 88).

The ASBA, similarly, is planning to enhance Aboriginal representation at the ASBA Board of Directors' table because of its belief in the importance of creating belonging by providing a direct voice.

Still other school boards look for ways to engage in strategic partnerships with community Aboriginal groups or actively involve the Aboriginal community in strategic planning or relevant policy or program deliberations.

Edmonton Public Schools, for example, consults with an external Aboriginal Advisory Committee composed of Aboriginal agencies and organizations. Feedback from this advisory committee was used to help create the school jurisdiction's Aboriginal Education Policy framework (Appendix B).

Some school boards, such as Edmonton Catholic Schools, use a "Council of Elders" to help guide policy and program decisions. The Edmonton Catholic Schools' website describes the Council of Elders' role as:

The primary role of council is to provide guidance and the sharing of cultural knowledge with Edmonton Catholic School Trustees, district leadership, staff and students. The council will consist of ten elders from within the city and to include membership from the surrounding rural areas. Recently, the council submitted an Action Plan to the Edmonton Catholic School Trustees as part of the process that formalized the Council of Elders, the first council of its kind in Alberta. The District now has a strong link with the Aboriginal community. This role of the elders will include:

- An on-going relationship based on support with the Board of Trustees and superintendent;
- To provide cultural information to the district, staff and students;
- To foster a link between the Aboriginal community and the Edmonton Catholic School District;
- Support for Aboriginal students and their families.

Finally, at the provincial level, the recently created Alberta First Nations, Métis and Inuit Partnership Council (2008) aims to achieve the goal of dialogue and involvement of Aboriginal leadership in the delivery of education to Aboriginal students. This provincial leadership initiative provides a model for school boards wishing to more actively engage local Aboriginal communities. The creation of an advisory council or direct representation on a school board by an Aboriginal representative sends a clear message that Aboriginal values, worldviews and opinions are respected and that these are reflected in the decision making processes of the board. Most importantly, the research tells us that such genuine involvement of the Aboriginal community will have positive results for students.

## 2. Direction

The principle of direction speaks to the importance of an organization's strategic vision, to the importance of having a broad and long-term strategic plan (Education Plan) that details purpose, goals and measures, along with a sense of what is needed for the accomplishment of school jurisdiction goals. It also speaks

to a broad governance approach that incorporates best practice strategies such as a policy governance model, a shared student centered vision, choice and parent engagement. Successful organizations, once they have established their direction and purpose, also exhibit the focus and discipline to stay the course.

#### *a. Policy governance model*

The research regarding high performing school jurisdictions supports a policy governance model for school boards (Togneri and Anderson, 2003).

The policy governance model stresses a governance role that emphasizes policy development, goal and standards setting, strategic planning, and frequent monitoring of system and individual school progress in relation to district plans and priorities.

School boards functioning in this mode hold the superintendent responsible for routine administration of the school system, for implementation of system plans, and for reporting on progress, but avoid direct involvement in managing the school system.

Effective boards understand this oversight role and do not get caught up in day-to-day actions within the organization. Davis Campbell, Executive Director of the California School Boards Association, maintains that all too often, school board members are like firefighters on the ground, battling the flames, when they should be in a helicopter above the fire, able to see how extensive the blaze is, which way the wind is blowing, and where the resources need to be deployed.

The ASBA encourages school boards to adopt a policy governance model, something which many school boards in the province have done.

#### *b. A shared vision centered on students and their learning*

Successful school boards establish a “shared” vision, purpose and goals for the school jurisdiction crafted in terms of student learning and achievement. They include relevant stakeholders, including staff and parents, when developing these “non-negotiable” goals for the school jurisdiction.

Red Deer Public Schools, for example, uses an extensive community and student engagement process to arrive at its strategic plan. Development of the plan includes consultations and discussions through:

- town hall meeting with high school students;
- town hall meeting with community stakeholders;
- consultation with school administrators;
- board planning retreat; and
- review by senior administration.

Successful school jurisdictions make a “conscious choice” to focus their jurisdiction on improvement to its fundamental purpose: students and their learning. They work with their superintendent to take steps to align jurisdiction resources to support jurisdiction vision and goals. In short, successful school boards, once they have clearly defined the purpose of the school jurisdiction, take steps to ensure that “form”, or structures and processes, follow.

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools is an example of a school jurisdiction that has made a conscious choice to establish priorities based on students and their learning. Its two priorities are:

- Improve the academic success of all students; and
- Enhance the success of First Nations students and encourage the active involvement of their families.

This “conscious choice”, according to Collins (2001), is the factor that separates organizations that achieve mediocre results from organizations that achieve great results. His analysis of nearly 6,000 articles and more than 2000 pages of interview transcripts led him to the simple conclusion that “greatness is not a function of circumstance”... but rather... “a matter of conscious choice” (p. 11).

School boards that want to improve Aboriginal student achievement make this a conscious choice, a non-negotiable goal. They ensure that staff and resources are allocated to this priority and determine the measures that will be used to track progress towards its accomplishment.

The inclusion of a new goal in Alberta Education’s current three-year business plan – Success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students – helps guide school board efforts to improve Aboriginal student achievement. This goal is a clear call to action for all school jurisdictions in Alberta.

### *c. Choice*

A key driver of educational programs in Alberta is the principle of choice. Most school boards in the province have embraced the benefits of program choice and, as such, provide a number of program and school options for parents and students.

Alberta’s Commission on Learning (2003) supports the principle of choice and recommends that Aboriginal parents continue to be provided with choices for the education of their children.

Richard’s (2008) study of British Columbia school jurisdictions with good Aboriginal student performance cautions about concentrating Aboriginal students in one or a few schools. Study findings indicate concentration has lowered academic outcomes across the province for Aboriginal students. The study recommends providing Aboriginal parents with information about academic performance of schools and enabling them to choose a “good school”.



Edmonton Public Schools is a good example of an Alberta school jurisdiction that provides choice to all students, including Aboriginal students. Edmonton Public Schools believes that diverse programs of study support its mission statement by giving parents and students different paths to achieve academic and personal success. Because of this belief, Edmonton Public Schools offers more than 30 alternative programs, such as Aboriginal education, academics, Christian education, languages, performing and visual arts, and science. Because of this choice, parents of Aboriginal students can choose a neighbourhood school for their children to attend, a school that emphasizes the arts or other specialty, or schools like Awasis and Amiskwaciy that emphasize Aboriginal culture and language.

#### *d. Engaging and involving parents*

Parents are the first and primary educators of their children. As such, schools and school systems exist to support the child-rearing and education efforts of parents in a mutually beneficial partnership. Aside from the obvious practical and ethical reasons for engaging and involving parents in the school system, parental involvement also has demonstrated positive effects on student learning. Jeyns (2005), in his meta-analysis of the research surrounding parent involvement, has come to the following conclusions:

- Parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement outcomes.

In summary, the academic achievement for children whose parents were highly involved in their education was substantially higher than that of their counterparts, whose parents were less involved.

- Some parental involvement strategies impact student learning more directly than others.

Jeyns found that the aspects of parental involvement that required a large investment of time, such as reading and communicating with one's child, and the more subtle aspects of parental involvement, such as parental style and expectations, had a greater impact on student educational outcomes than some of the more demonstrative aspects of parental involvement, such as having household rules, and parental attendance and participation at school functions.

- Parental expectations are very important.

Quite simply, parental expectations (or lack of) shape a child's experience in school. Children raised in an environment of high expectations generally do better academically than children raised in environments of low expectations.

- The effects of parental involvement hold for racial minority children.

The results for studies assessing the effects of minority student parental involvement found positive effects of this involvement across all racial and ethnic groups.

- Parental involvement programs work.

The research indicates that, on average, parental involvement programs work. As expected, the influence of these programs is not as large as the impact of parental involvement as a whole. This is because parents already enthusiastic about supporting the educational progress of their children will, on average, tend to help their children more than parents whose participation is fostered by the presence of a particular program.

Given these findings, school boards would be well served by a policy framework that supports parent involvement and parent education.

#### *e. Focus and discipline*

Focused school jurisdictions have a limited number of defined priorities that are clearly articulated, collaboratively developed and effectively communicated.

Much of the literature regarding school improvement and effective school jurisdiction practices speaks to the importance of focus. Waters and Marzano (2006), for example, in their meta-analysis of studies linking district leadership and student achievement, emphasize the important role that school boards play in ensuring that the jurisdiction goals for student achievement remain the top priority and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals.

Collins (2005) makes a strong point for focus accompanied by discipline. He argues that the “non profits” are “in desperate need of greater discipline – disciplined planning, disciplined people, disciplined governance, disciplined allocation of resources” and that the main point in *Good to Great* (2001) is to attain piercing clarity about how to produce the best long-term results, and then exercising the relentless discipline to say, “no thank you” to opportunities that detract from this main purpose.

Focus and discipline are the keys to the Grande Yellowhead Public School Division improvement effort. The jurisdiction has moved from over twelve (12) priorities and significant measures to three priorities: improving student learning, building leadership capacity, and enhancing internal and external communication. Grande Yellowhead Public School Division believes that without this focus, too much is attempted, resulting in diffuse efforts and frustrated staff.

Given the above, school boards that are intent on improving results for Aboriginal students will explicitly and intentionally include this non-negotiable

goal as part of a small handful of goals for the school jurisdiction. Resources will be assigned to support this goal and discipline will be exercised to ensure that other actions do not detract from this priority. Communication from the board and superintendent will reinforce the importance of the school jurisdiction priority on improving achievement for Aboriginal students.

### 3. Performance

The performance principle is anchored in the notion of producing results that meet needs while making the best use of resources.

Research and best practice related to improving results for school jurisdictions points to a number of broad strategies that school boards have at their disposal to improve performance. These broad performance strategies would positively impact Aboriginal student learning.

#### *a. Understanding local barriers to and strategies for success*

Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) deals extensively with challenges to Aboriginal student success but cautions that Alberta's Aboriginal population is very diverse and, as such, generalizations about barriers that affect all are difficult to make. Additionally, a number of AISI projects find that engaging all sectors of their community in genuine dialogue about barriers and possible approaches to improving Aboriginal student results is an important stepping stone to success (Gunn and Pomahac, 2009).

Given the above observations, it becomes apparent that Alberta's school boards would be well served by a "genuine dialogue" with their Aboriginal community and Elders about local factors that impact positively or negatively on student learning and success. Not only would such a conversation demonstrate responsiveness, it would help build understanding and trust and help shape possible improvement strategies.

Edmonton Public Schools, for example, created a trustee Aboriginal Task Force in 2007 that spent significant time and resources consulting with Aboriginal parents, students, agencies and Elders as a first step to establishing its Aboriginal learning policy. Key messages received by the task force included:

- Values: Comments from the groups tended to be grounded in a set of beliefs that focused on valuing important aspects of Aboriginal culture and respecting Aboriginal peoples.
- Curriculum and programming: Comments reflected support for programming that responded to the needs of Aboriginal children and youth rather than expecting these children and youth to fit the system.
- Support systems or networks: The participants underscored the need for the district to recognize that many Aboriginal students are faced

with issues related to poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse and life in group homes or foster homes. They also mentioned that housing, transportation and meeting other basic needs are pressing issues for many Aboriginal families. This led to discussions regarding the need to collaborate with others in the community to enable success in school.

- Staffing: The importance of having Aboriginal staff throughout the system and having all district staff be knowledgeable about Aboriginal peoples was often cited as necessary for the academic success of Aboriginal students.
- Achievement and testing: While the Aboriginal community is unique in many ways, they share commonly held aspirations for academic success for their children. Aboriginal parents and students voiced their hope that all Aboriginal students have positive school experiences, graduate from high school and have access to a full range of post-high school opportunities. They advised that they valued schooling approaches that recognized children and youth in context of their family and community and considered the cognitive, emotional and spiritual aspects, approaches that are not always well served by some current testing practices.
- District rules, regulations and practices: Questions were raised about the rationale for, and the applicability of, some current district rules or practices. Also, a number of suggestions were made for modifying practice. (The complete task force report can be accessed at [http://epsb.ca/board/march13\\_07/item08.pdf](http://epsb.ca/board/march13_07/item08.pdf))

### *b. Individual student supports*

Each student, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, presents at school with his/her unique background, talents and skills as well as challenges. Successful schools and school districts embrace this variety and “personalize” learning experiences and learning supports for each student. Alberta’s high school completion strategy asserts that personalized learning is a cornerstone to improving high school completion rates for all students.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that when minority students feel understood and supported first as a *person*, and then as a *student*, they are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to drop out (Gunn and Pomahac, 2009). For Aboriginal students, this means creating a sense of belonging, and a sense of cultural pride.

Additionally, helping students build strong positive alliances and make good life choices is essential for Aboriginal students as peer influences, both positive and negative, can affect school experiences and success.

In summary, continued emphasis on the personal-affective domains for Aboriginal learners prior to an academic focus is crucial (Gunn and Pomahac, 2009). For this reason, school boards need to consider allocating resources that provide personal support to Aboriginal students. Personal support approaches often mentioned in the literature and incorporated by many Alberta school boards include mentorship programs for students and liaison officer, social worker and counselling support.

### *c. High standards*

Effective school jurisdictions have high expectations and set high standards for both students and staff. They believe in students' potential to learn, while providing multiple levels of support in a holistic manner to meet students' social, emotional, spiritual and physical needs.

In addition to holding high learning and academic performance standards, successful school jurisdictions also take seriously the issues of student attendance, behaviour and well being.

### *d. The right people*

Successful school boards establish ends through their vision, goals, strategic plan and policies but understand that it is jurisdiction staff that makes the accomplishment of the vision and goals a reality.

Because of this belief, they place priority and allocate resources to developing the knowledge and capacity of jurisdiction professional and support staff. In short, they create a framework to optimize internal talent.

Fullan (2005) argues that this capacity building is fundamental to sustaining improvements in student performance. Jurisdictions in the forefront of development promote "learning in context" – not just through workshops but also through daily interactions in cultures designed for job-embedded learning.

While school boards generally operate under the principle of their superintendent as their one employee, they do provide leadership to jurisdiction human resource practices and processes through their policy framework.

In short, hiring the right people and providing them sufficient direction, resources and support to do their jobs is probably the biggest lever a school board has in improving student learning.

What guidance does research and best practice provide regarding "the right people?"

- Superintendent of schools

The superintendent of schools plays a pivotal leadership role in a school jurisdiction. The role is the key bridge between a publicly elected board and the staff hired to turn the board's will into reality. The role requires significant leadership, communication, educational, governance and interpersonal skills. In the opinion of many school boards, hiring the right superintendent is one of the most important decisions a board can make.

Given the nature of the role, it is important that the board has a positive and effective relationship with the superintendent. Houle (1989) describes an appropriate relationship as follows:

The normal day-to-day relationship between the board and the executive is that of a responsible partnership...Like all intimate human bonds, this one is filled with points of possible tension and difficulty. Just as nobody can write a prescription that would make all marriages happy, so no one can suggest a formula for a universally successful board-executive partnership. While it is true that, in most cases, the board is both legally and actually the dominant partner, the arbitrary exercise of power over its executive by a board should be considered a last resort, a signal that something has gone very much awry.

And further:

Both the board and the executive will be helped in their relationship with one another if each of them understands the need for the other to be capable and powerful. Curiously enough, some people have the idea that the board-executive system is merely a safeguard against the weakness of one or the other of the two parties. They argue: if you have a strong board, you don't need a strong executive, and if you have a strong executive, you don't need a strong board. This 'seesaw' principle may be true for short periods of time, but in the long run it is fatal to sound operation. Analysis of the leading institutions in society suggests that an institution flourishes only when it is conducted by both an effective board and an effective executive – and when both are able to work together (p.35).

In addition to the benefits accruing from an effective and mutually supportive working relationship, the length of superintendent tenure is also positively correlated with student achievement in the school jurisdiction. Waters and Marzano (2006), for example, found that length of superintendent tenure in a district positively correlates to student achievement and that these positive effects appear to manifest themselves as early as two years into a superintendent's tenure.

Given the central strategic and operating importance of the role, the superintendent's support of and commitment to closing the Aboriginal student achievement gap is fundamental to improving results for learners.



Once they have hired their superintendent, effective school boards consciously work to build and maintain an effective working relationship with their CEO. They do this by establishing clear role responsibilities, reporting requirements and support mechanisms such as training opportunities. Effective school boards also regularly evaluate their superintendent and use this opportunity to provide direction and feedback to the superintendent. Annual evaluations provide an excellent opportunity to report and reflect on progress of jurisdiction Aboriginal learners.

- Principals and teachers

Aboriginal student achievement is in part related to the type of school a student attends. Unfortunately, Aboriginal students, in many schools, report feeling marginalized within the school setting. Specifically, they perceive an expectation of failure, a lack of care and concern, and they cite poor relationships with fellow students and teachers (Gunn and Pomahac, 2009).

Successful schools overcome feelings of marginalization and resulting poor performance. They take a leadership role in developing positive, supportive relationships with Aboriginal students, parents and communities. They create a welcoming and supportive environment for Aboriginal students, they hold high expectations for achievement and success, they provide language and cultural programs and they provide personal supports to students so that success can be achieved.

Successful schools are led by capable and caring principals and energized by teachers and the instructional and student assessment practices they employ. The quality of their training, their depth of experience and knowledge of subject matter; their expectations, their ability to form positive relationships and their cultural understanding of their students and communities positively affect student performance and behaviour (Bell 2004).

Successful schools are also staffed by a number of Aboriginal teachers.

Finally, successful schools help students understand that they are not going to give up on them or allow them to be distracted from school; that they know them and are available to them throughout the school year; and that they want them to learn, do the work, attend class regularly, be on time, express frustration constructively, and stay in school and succeed.

#### *e. Relationships and partnerships*

The Aboriginal worldview is characterized by a holistic perspective, which views family and community as extensions of the school. This holistic worldview emphasizes connections amongst people and community organizations as opposed to separation.

A number of successful AISI projects have incorporated this worldview and emphasize the need to create bonds of trust, care, and mutual respect between schools and Aboriginal communities.

Other studies have found that relationships are strengthened when schools are actively available for community events after the regular school day. In successful Aboriginal schools, school gyms are used for after-school sporting events and feasts and celebrations such as Remembrance Day, Christmas, and National Aboriginal Day. In these schools, classrooms are made available to local organizations for a variety of programs such as health clinics, Boys and Girls Clubs, Junior Achievement, and community meetings (Fulford, 2007).

It is no surprise then, that research and best practice studies of successful Aboriginal schooling point to the importance of positive working relationships both within the school jurisdiction and between the school jurisdiction and parents, community agencies and other external partners (Fulford, 2007, Alberta Education, 2007, Gunn and Pomahac, 2009).

Internal school board relationships and working procedures also have an indirect positive or negative impact on student learning. Where school board members are factionalized and embroiled in conflict amongst themselves and with the superintendent, the portrait of the role of the board in reform is negative (Anderson, 2003).

In summary, school boards positively influence Aboriginal student performance when they engage the local Aboriginal community in a dialogue about local factors that present barriers or contribute to success, provide the resources for individual student supports, establish high standards, put priority on optimizing internal talent and build relationships and partnerships.

#### **4. Accountability**

School boards are one of Alberta's oldest forms of grassroots democracy. Established by the Northwest Territories Ordinance before Alberta became a province, school boards have over 100 years of history of being elected and accountable to local communities. In addition to being accountable *to* their communities by virtue of their elected status, school boards are also accountable *for* the provision of quality educational services through the policies, structures and resources that they put in place.

##### ***a. Defining success and tracking progress***

Higher performing school jurisdictions define, in collaboration with their Aboriginal community, what success for students looks like and the measures and data that will be used to track progress towards this success. They track student performance as trends over time and in comparison to the results of

larger populations. They use monitoring data to guide decisions regarding improvement strategies, allocation of resources, professional development, and programming.

The research evidence regarding effective school and school system practices strongly supports this emphasis on data and assessment for learning and accountability. Richards (2008), for example, in his recent study of British Columbia school districts that achieve good Aboriginal student results, found that these districts place more emphasis on Aboriginal student outcomes than in the lower-performing districts; they make more consistent use of data on student outcomes; they are more prone to set measurable targets for improvement; and have achieved more involvement of Aboriginal leaders and parents in school success. While all school districts in British Columbia must collect specified data for provincial reporting purposes, those that achieve the best results for students are more systematic in monitoring a broader range of performance measures, such as attendance, and use this exercise to push for district-wide and school-based improvements. Lower-performing districts, on the other hand, are less likely to make data public or to use it to target specific improvement strategies.

In Alberta, the recently introduced Aboriginal learner data collection initiative and “Accountability Pillar” reporting are important steps in providing schools and school boards with local and provincial Aboriginal student performance data.

While Alberta Education’s “Accountability Pillar” provides useful system, program and individual learner assessment information, some Aboriginal organizations argue that care must be taken to align performance measures with unique Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning. They maintain that the Aboriginal worldview emphasizes a holistic education which encompasses spiritual, physical, social, emotional and cognitive development and that measures of success must reflect this holistic view.

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), for example, suggests that historically, learning in First Nations communities was not separated from everyday life and that learning was viewed as a lifelong process. This connection of learning to living is simply yet profoundly expressed by Elder Danny Musqua: “We were put on this earth to learn; learning is what makes us human beings” (Tunison, 2007).

The CCL recognizes that Aboriginal learners have unique perspectives and diverse ways of knowing which must be considered when creating meaningful educational experiences and measures of success for Aboriginal students.

Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) maintains that the goal for Alberta's education system is to have Aboriginal students achieve the same levels of success at school as non-Aboriginal students in an environment where their cultures and values are respected and reinforced.

Given this, school boards that take seriously the challenge of closing the Aboriginal achievement gap will need to give considerable attention to the question of defining Aboriginal student success and creating measures, in addition to Alberta's provincial accountability pillar measures, that track progress towards desired outcomes. An integral part of this important exercise, of necessity, involves conversations with the local Aboriginal community about what success looks like for Aboriginal students and the measures that can appropriately be used to track and assess progress.

Edmonton Public Schools, for example, after significant consultation with the Aboriginal community and Elders, established an Aboriginal Learning Policy (Appendix B) in May 2007. This policy and related administrative procedure guides the jurisdiction approach to the education of Aboriginal students and includes the following measures:

- Success in completing identified actions
- Improvement in achievement
- Improvement in attendance
- Improvement in retention
- Decrease in expulsions
- Increased parental involvement
- Increased availability of services and resources
- Increased staff participation in cultural awareness
- Increased staff diversity

Of significance for Alberta's school boards is that Alberta Education has recently implemented an Aboriginal learner data collection initiative in an effort to better track and record Aboriginal student numbers and performance in Alberta schools. This student performance data is a fundamental stepping stone to improving the educational achievement of Aboriginal learners.

#### *b. Using data to “move and improve”*

Accountability systems are created not only to gather and provide information on district performance in order to hold all levels of the system from the classroom to the boardroom accountable for progress towards district goals, but also to serve as a powerful learning and improvement tool.

Maguire's study (2003) of four consistently improving Alberta School jurisdictions, for example, reaches the conclusion that a model school jurisdiction uses performance data to improve school jurisdiction practices:

The cycle of assessment, analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring of outcomes is evident throughout the jurisdiction. Data from multiple sources are routinely considered, disaggregated, and analyzed for their implications for instructional practice and the allocation of resources. There is a structured program to build assessment literacy among all members of the jurisdiction community, and as a consequence staff members approach the consideration of assessment results from a collaborative, reflective perspective. Teams of teachers and administrators, both within and across schools, regularly work together to identify strengths and areas of concern and develop plans and strategies to address them (p. 139).

Researchers from both inside and outside of education offer remarkably similar conclusions about "learning from data" as the best path for sustained organizational improvement. The recent C.D. Howe (2008) study of school jurisdictions in British Columbia that showed higher than expected Aboriginal student performance found that a feature of successful districts is their use of performance measurement data, both to celebrate the achievements attained and to exert continued pressure for further improvement. The study also found that lower-performing districts, on the other hand, were less likely to make data public, presumably for fear that the results would be used as a means of shaming specific schools and the district as a whole. The study concludes that access to clear pictures of student performance is necessary in setting measurable goals and in strengthening ownership over their realization.

### *c. Personal accountability mechanisms*

Successful school jurisdictions have systems in place that hold teachers, principals and jurisdiction level staff (including superintendents) accountable for student learning and progress. The Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA), for example, in its listing of effective school board practices, maintains that an effective board annually evaluates its own corporate performance and that of the chief executive officer. Part of this evaluation, of necessity, would need to focus on the goals and outcomes that have been set by the jurisdiction for student performance in general and Aboriginal student performance in particular.

School board policy, in addition, would guide the evaluation of all staff and link this evaluation to progress towards established school jurisdiction goals.

In this, the concept and practice of "performance management" is a framework increasingly used by both the private and public sector to improve organizational

performance. Successful organizations know that it's the performance of people that makes the difference in achieving organizational results and that outstanding people performance does not just happen but must be planned for, continuously discussed and constantly developed.

Performance management is a process of planning to ensure that the organization and all of its subsystems – processes, departments, teams, employees, etc. – are working together in an optimum fashion to achieve the results desired by the organization (McNamara 1999). In a performance management system, every employee completes an annual performance plan with goals, measures and targets that link to organization or department business plan goals.

The Alberta government uses this process with its civil service. It defines performance management as an ongoing process of planning, developing, coaching, providing feedback and evaluating performance.

The Alberta government performance management framework serves as a model worthy of consideration by school boards intent on creating an accountability framework and culture focused on results for students. (A more complete discussion of this framework is available on the Government of Alberta website <http://www.chr.alberta.ca/performance/common-perf/perf-mgmt-for-mgrs.pdf>).

A school jurisdiction intent on improving results for Aboriginal learners would use a performance management system to align jurisdiction efforts behind this key priority.

## 5. Fairness

The governance concept of “fairness” is grounded in principles of transparency and equity. In operation, fairness is not about identical treatment for all but rather about addressing needs.

What guideposts can school boards use when considering practices to address the concept of fairness to Aboriginal learners and their communities?

The Alberta government *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* outlines key principles that help serve as a sound “fairness implementation guide” for school board actions aimed at improving results for Aboriginal students. While some of these principles underscore other comments made in this report, a brief review of the principles, taken together, helps capture guideposts useful for school boards. In summary, these principles are:

- Transparency

What this means: First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents are aware of and have ease of access to information concerning all aspects of their children's education.

- Inclusiveness

What this means: First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents and communities have meaningful opportunities to participate actively in decisions that directly impact their children's education.

- Innovation

What this means: Outcomes for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners are improved by initiatives that recognize and model best practices.

- Learner centred

What this means: Programs designed primarily for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners are learner-centred and culturally respectful. First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners have access to culturally sensitive support services. First Nations, Métis and Inuit people will have no less access than other Albertans to information about educational choices and opportunities.

- Responsive and collaborative

What this means: First Nations, Métis and Inuit community knowledge is sought and programs designed primarily for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners are developed in collaboration with Aboriginal communities.

- Results oriented

What this means: Innovative, practical and measurable strategies and actions are supported, monitored and reported on.

School boards that use these principles to help guide their efforts model not only priority to student learning but also acceptance, understanding and respect of the Aboriginal community.

Holy Family Catholic Regional Division uses the following Aboriginal story to illustrate the importance of acceptance and respect:

The white man is a very important person. He is the color of snow and snow is made from water, and no living thing can go without water. So he is very important. The black man is also very important. He is the color of the night or darkness and no living thing can go without rest. So he is very important. The yellow man, the Oriental, is also important because he is the color of the sun and no living thing can grow without the warmth of the sun. And the Indian people are also important because we are the color of the mother earth from which all things grow. So we are all important people and we all need each other. So we must learn to live with each other (Holy Family Catholic Regional Division website).



## F. Conclusion

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School boards who take seriously the challenge of improving Aboriginal student achievement face all of the challenges found in improving student learning generally, plus the challenges and opportunities associated with closing the student achievement gap in a context that builds understanding and incorporates the values and worldview of local Aboriginal communities.

The realities and depth of the Aboriginal student achievement gap will take a united and combined education system effort, spanning from parents to the community to the classroom to the boardroom to the Ministry.

This report provides a governance framework and related strategies that school boards can use to improve Aboriginal learner results.

Closing the achievement gap will also take time, persistence, courage, appropriate resource allocation, and discipline. In short, it will take leadership.

Evidence from research and best practice does not point to a singular optimum strategy or “silver bullet” reform; rather, the evidence supports comprehensive leadership exercised through a suite of promising strategies. Collins (2001) comes to a similar conclusion in his study of companies that make the transition from “good to great.” He observes that the good to great transformations never happen in one fell swoop, that there is no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no wrenching revolution. Good companies become great companies by a cumulative and disciplined process – step by step, action by action, decision by decision, that, in summary, add up to excellent results.

This is the challenge facing Alberta’s school boards, a challenge in which failure is not an option, a challenge they are certainly capable of meeting.

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## Appendix A: Definitions

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(from Alberta's First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework)

1. **Aboriginal peoples:** The descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 defines Aboriginal peoples to include First Nations (Indians), Inuit and Métis peoples. The Constitution does not define membership in First Nations (Indians), Inuit and Métis groups. First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples have unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. Aboriginal peoples is also a term used in other parts of the world to refer to the first inhabitants of a given area.
2. **Elder:** Any person regarded or chosen by an Aboriginal nation to be the keeper and teacher of its oral tradition and knowledge. This is a person who is recognized for his or her wisdom about spirituality, culture and life. Not all Elders are “old”. An Aboriginal community and/or individuals will typically seek the advice and assistance of Elders in various areas of traditional as well as contemporary issues.
3. **First Nations:** This term, preferred by many Aboriginal peoples and the Assembly of First Nations, refers to the various governments of the first peoples of Canada. First Nations is a term preferred to the terms Indians, Tribes, and Bands that are frequently used by the federal, provincial, and territorial governments in Canada.
4. **Métis people:** People of mixed First Nations and European ancestry who identify themselves as Métis people and are accepted as such by a Métis leadership. They are distinct from First Nations, Inuit or non-Aboriginal peoples. The Métis history and culture draws on diverse ancestral origins such as Scottish, Irish, French, Ojibway and Cree.
5. **Inuit:** Aboriginal people in northern Canada living generally above the tree line in the Northwest Territories, northern Quebec and Labrador. The Inuit are not covered by the Indian Act but the federal government makes laws concerning the Inuit.

## Appendix B: Edmonton Public Schools' Aboriginal Learning Policy

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### **Edmonton Public Schools Board Policies and Regulations**

CODE: IAA.BP

TOPIC: Aboriginal Education

EFFECTIVE DATE: 22-05-2007

ISSUE DATE: 24-05-2007

REVIEW DATE: 05-2012

### **Definition**

Aboriginal is defined as First Nation, Non-Status, Métis, Inuit, who are descendents of the original inhabitants of Canada.

Aboriginal community refers to Elders, families, parents/guardians, children and other representatives of the Aboriginal children who attend Edmonton Public Schools.

### ***Philosophical Foundation Statement***

As Indigenous peoples of North America, the Aboriginal community has a unique historic relationship with Canada. This policy acknowledges their role as the first peoples.

Edmonton Public Schools recognizes the significant historic contributions of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures. The district also understands the important role that the Aboriginal community plays today and into the future.

Edmonton Public Schools honours and believes in the ability of Aboriginal students. It respects the desires and aspirations of Aboriginal students to achieve success in schooling and in life. The district believes the success of Aboriginal students is a shared responsibility and is committed to working in partnership with the Elders and the Aboriginal community to build an educational environment that honours Aboriginal peoples and their cultures and is responsive to the needs of Aboriginal students.

Edmonton Public Schools and the Aboriginal community recognize the need to strengthen program delivery for Aboriginal students by:

- Enhancing the educational experience of all Aboriginal students within the district.
- Establishing and maintaining positive interactive relationships based on trust between Edmonton Public Schools and the Aboriginal community.
- Establishing learning environments that respect and include Aboriginal peoples and their cultures.

- Providing quality educational opportunities that support success for all Aboriginal students in school and in life.

Edmonton Public Schools and the Aboriginal community also recognize the need to increase understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal cultures among all students and staff by:

- Valuing, honouring, and respecting, Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and learning.
- Recognizing displacement of Aboriginal peoples in Canada as an historical fact that contributes to a sense of ongoing grief and loss felt within the community.
- Addressing individual and systemic racism and its negative impacts on learning.
- Considering the whole child approach (spiritual, emotional, physical and mental) to teaching and learning.

Edmonton Public Schools seeks to improve the success of Aboriginal students while respecting their goals of schooling. It recognizes the need to develop and maintain mutually supportive relationships with Elders and the Aboriginal community and to increase knowledge, understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal cultures among all students and staff members in order to operate in a manner that is inclusive of Aboriginal ways of knowing.

#### **A. Respect and Recognition**

1. The Board recognizes the traditional and fundamental importance of Elders in the Aboriginal Community.
2. The Board supports actions which acknowledge and promote understanding, respect and recognition of Aboriginal values and cultures.

#### **B. Community Involvement**

1. The Board values an ongoing relationship with Elders and the Aboriginal community in our schools and across the district.
2. The Board recognizes the need to work collaboratively with families, community agencies and organizations to maximize opportunities for Aboriginal student success in schooling and in life.

#### **C. Staffing and Professional Development**

1. The Board expects all staff to understand and respect Aboriginal values, beliefs and cultures.
2. The Board supports the active recruitment of qualified Aboriginal staff in all classifications to develop a workforce which is representative of the communities within its jurisdiction.



#### **D. Achievement**

The Board is committed to supporting and empowering Aboriginal students to improve their achievement and high school completion in order to reach their full potential.

#### **E. Curriculum**

The Board supports the infusion of Aboriginal outcomes in the core curriculum to promote better understanding of, and knowledge about, our Aboriginal peoples by all students.

#### **F. Programs and Programming**

1. The Board, as an advocate of choice, supports the provision of Aboriginal culture and/or language-based alternative programs based on interest.
2. The Board expects that supportive learning environments for Aboriginal students will be provided in all schools.

#### **G. Assessment**

1. The Board supports the use of a range of bias-free and culturally appropriate assessment instruments and practices.
2. The Board is committed to finding culturally appropriate and meaningful ways to demonstrate growth of students.

#### **H. Enhanced Supports for Learning**

1. The Board recognizes the value of early learning to enhance literacy and numeracy growth opportunities.
2. The Board recognizes the importance of transition programming to support students moving from school to school, division to division, and to post-secondary or the world of work.

*Reference(s): IAA.AR - Aboriginal Education*

# Appendix C: Calgary Board of Education Administrative Regulation 3079 – Aboriginal Education

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3. Aboriginal cultures
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9. Effective date

## Preamble

WHEREAS the Constitution Act of Canada, 1982, recognizes the rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

## 1. Purpose

The purpose of this regulation is to improve the success rate of Aboriginal students and to increase the understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal cultures for all students.

## 2. Measures of success

Improving the success rate of Aboriginal students includes

- a. increasing the graduation rate for Aboriginal students,
- b. improving the educational achievement of Aboriginal students in all subjects in all grade levels, particularly at the elementary level,
- c. increasing the completion rate in subject areas critical for accessing post-secondary education and employment options,
- d. improving literacy,
- e. increasing and maintaining the interest of Aboriginal students in school,
- f. supporting Aboriginal student participation in sporting, social and cultural activities, and
- g. empowering Aboriginal students to reach their full potential.

### **3. Aboriginal cultures**

Increasing the understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal cultures for all students includes

- a. valuing Aboriginal students, their culture, and contributions,
- b. celebrating the diversity of Aboriginal cultures,
- c. teaching the historical significance of Aboriginal peoples and cultures,
- d. incorporating accurate and appropriate Aboriginal history and culture in the curriculum,
- e. supporting broad student participation in Aboriginal sporting, social and cultural activities,
- f. acknowledging and valuing the unique cultural, historical and economic circumstances of Aboriginal students, and
- g. showing respect for Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

### **4. Role of the school community**

The school community will acknowledge its collective responsibility to support and implement this regulation.

### **5. Role of service units**

1. Decisions made at a system level will
  - a. honor and respect Aboriginal cultures, and
  - b. reflect an understanding of this regulation and its implications.
2. Superintendents and Directors will ensure that Service Units identify and address individual and collective learning needs to enable them to contribute to these regulation outcomes.
3. Service Units will plan and implement strategies, measures, appropriate regulations and procedures, and services to support schools in achieving these regulation outcomes.
4. Regulatory procedures must not inhibit, create barriers, or otherwise violate Aboriginal students' access to quality education and a supportive environment.

### **6. Principal's role**

The principal with the support of the service units and the school community must ensure the school addresses

- a. improving the success rate of Aboriginal students, and
- b. increasing the understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal cultures for all students,

through related outcome measures and results included in documents such as school improvement plans, annual reports, and progress reports.

### **7. Teacher's role**

1. Teachers will identify and address the teacher's own individual learning needs to enable them to contribute to regulation outcomes.
2. Teachers will incorporate strategies in their planning, teaching and assessment which specifically address the needs of Aboriginal students in their classes which enhance understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal cultures for all students, pursuant to Section 4, Ministerial Order - #016/97, Regulation 4.2.1: Teaching Quality Standard Applicable to the Provision of Basic Education in Alberta.

### **8. Advisory council**

The Superintendent of School Support Services will ensure that an advisory council is established to guide the implementation and application of this regulation.

### **9. Effective date**

This regulation comes into effect on September 1, 2000.

*Approved: May 17, 2000*

*Re-issued: February 15, 2003*

## Acknowledgements

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This report was prepared under the direction of the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) with guidance from the ASBA First Nations, Métis and Inuit Task Force. Task force members include both ASBA and partner organization representatives.

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*“Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.”*  
– Sitting Bull

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