

The CHAMBER.

Improving Indigenous Education in Ontario

Authored by the Timmins Chamber of Commerce

Co-sponsored by the North Bay and District Chamber of Commerce, the Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce and the Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce

Issue

Workforce shortages are among the most significant challenges for Ontario businesses, and it is widely recognized that Canada's Indigenous people – the fastest-growing population in the country – must be a key component of Ontario's strategy.¹ While educational attainment for Indigenous people has been on the rise, more must be done to ensure that all Ontarians have the education and training needed to succeed in a modern economy.

Background

This diverse population has typically had lower educational levels than the general population in Canada. Results indicate that, while on the positive side there are a greater number of highly educated Indigenous peoples, there is also a continuing gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Data also indicate that the proportion with less than high school education declined, which corresponds with a rise of those with a post-secondary education; the reverse was true in 1996. Despite these gains, however, the large and increasing absolute numbers of those without a high school education is alarming.²

More must be done to close attainment gaps in Indigenous education: almost half of the Indigenous population of working age has some form of post-secondary qualification³, as compared to the two-thirds of the non-Indigenous population of the same age.⁴ Additionally, 10 percent of the working-age Indigenous population has a university degree, as compared to the non-Indigenous population's 26 percent.⁵

Bridging this gap would have a considerable economic impact: if the education and labour market outcomes of Indigenous Canadians were to reach the level of the general population by 2026, government spending would drop by \$14.2 billion, while increasing Indigenous income by \$36.5 billion.⁶

As the provincial government is responsible for education of the Indigenous population living off reserve, Ontario's efforts to address these responsibilities falls within the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework. It allows for enhanced investment in and collaboration between the various components of the provincial education system serving Indigenous students. It also places much-needed emphasis on the unique learning styles and cultural perspectives of Aboriginal students in provincial curricula, assessment practices, and professional teacher development.

Another key element is the presence of nine Aboriginal Institutes (AIs) in Ontario, which represent vital stakeholders. These organizations deliver accredited post-secondary programs in partnership with colleges and universities through unique, culturally-sensitive delivery models that blend face-to-face learning with online courses and independent study.

¹ Kirkup, K. (2017, October 25). Canada's Indigenous population growing 4 times faster than rest of country. Retrieved from <https://globalnews.ca/news/3823772/canadas-growing-indigenous-population/>

² Gordon, C. E., White, J. P. (2014). Indigenous Educational Attainment in Canada. The International Indigenous Policy Journal, 5(3). Retrieved from: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/iipj/vol5/iss3/6> DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2014.5.3.6

³ Ibid.

⁴ Statistics Canada, "Educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada", National Household Survey 2011

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Drummond, D., Sharpe, A., Murray, A., & Mask, N. (2017). The Contribution of Aboriginal People to Future Labour Force Growth in Canada (pp. 1–36). Ottawa, ON.



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Despite their key role, they remain outside the Ontario post-secondary system. Unlike provincially accredited colleges, they do not receive government capital or operational funding, instead receiving only funding for program delivery. The 2015 Ontario budget temporarily sought to address this issue, with a three-year funding envelope and a commitment to develop a policy that permanently brings the Als into the post-secondary system. Following through on this commitment is crucial, as it will bolster AI's long-term sustainability.

In November 2017, the provincial government passed the Indigenous Institutes Act, 2017 that provided a funding mechanism for provincially funded Als and incorporated them into the post-secondary system.⁷ While this is encouraging, it is time for the government to act on these intentions and begin providing funding.

Further support must also be provided through better access to data. While national census data provides some perspective, there remains a significant lack of information about whether Indigenous post-secondary education and training needs are being met in Ontario.

Among other areas, there is insufficient data on issues such as enrolment, graduation rates, and program effectiveness – information which is required to establish baselines and measure progress on the academic achievement of Indigenous learners.⁸

As Shawn Atleo, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations states, “this work is simply too important to walk away and abandon our students to the next round of discussions, to tell them they will have to wait. We owe it to ourselves, our children and our nations to make our best efforts to achieve our lifelong goal of First Nations control of First Nations education.”⁹

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce calls on the Provincial Government to:

1. Strengthen implementation of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework by allocating the financial resources necessary to ensure consistent funding of Framework priorities.
2. Fully implement Indigenous learner reporting mechanisms at both the system and institutional levels to allow for collection of the type of reliable data needed to set baselines and measure progress on academic achievement.
3. Act on commitments for working with Aboriginal Institutes to develop a policy to sustainably deliver operational funding and incorporate them into the provincial post-secondary system.

⁷ Indigenous Institutes Act, 2017. (2018, November 19). Retrieved from <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/17i34a>

⁸ Council of Ministers of Education Canada, “Key Policies in Aboriginal Education: an Evidence-Based Approach”, 2013 http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/295/Key-Policy-Issues-in-Aboriginal-Education_EN.pdf

⁹ Atleo, S. (2014, April 12). First Nations Education Act 'must act as a bridge'. CBC News. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/shawn-atleo-first-nations-education-act-must-act-as-a-bridge-1.2607454>

