A Tyee Solutions Series

by Katie Hyslop

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES in FIRST NATIONS education

Tyee Solutions Society

Tyee Solutions Society is a Vancouver-based non-profit that produces catalytic, solutions-oriented journalism on social, economic and environmental issues of broad concern to Canadians.

First Nations and aboriginal youth, Canada's fastest-growing demographic, face the bleakest outlook for employment, addiction and risk of incarceration. Experts agree that better education is critical to breaking the cycle of poverty among aboriginal and First Nations communities. Yet, traditional Euro-Caucasian efforts to "educate" First Nations children through assimilation run a grim litany of cultural repression and ineffectiveness. Barely 50 per cent of Aboriginal students graduate from high school, according to census data, compared to 80 per cent of other British Columbians. Beyond the moral failure to provide all British Columbians with a quality education, the resulting loss in economic productivity and need for additional social assistance costs Canadian society billions of dollars a year.

For Tyee Solutions' multi-part, "Successful Practices in First Nations Education" series, education reporter Katie Hyslop spent eight months exploring the challenges and potential solutions for reforming native education. Hyslop traveled to Haida Gwaii, Adams Lake, Kamloops and back to Vancouver to learn from educators, experts, parents, students, elders, and language advocates what is working to promote both academic success and preserve culture. In her stories, she reports from communities that have improved grades by engaging elders and parents to help deliver curriculum rooted in the community's own history, language and traditional culture. Hyslop illuminates the innovations and potential solutions that may be models for other communities, reserve schools and public districts, as well as opportunities for federal and provincial governments to invest in aboriginal and First Nations education success.

This multi-part series was first published September – December 2011 on The Tyee. Articles have been republished in *Secwepemc News*, Wataway News, First Perspectives News, Raven's Eye/Windspeaker, *Teacher Magazine*, and others. Hyslop partnered with CBC Radio's "Daybreak North" program on a special four-part companion series titled "Nation Education" which aired September 6-9, 2011.

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Successful Practices in First Nations Education

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Cover photograph by Marvin Beatty at Chief Atahm Elementary School.

Field Notes

Katie Hyslop

For the past decade, the Aboriginal graduation rate in British Columbia has hovered around 50 per cent--30 per cent lower than the overall graduation rate. Some view this dismal record as Aboriginals' failure to measure up. The Tyee Solutions Society sees it as an education system that is failing Aboriginal people.

This failure hasn't happened in a bubble. The inability to produce an Aboriginal graduation rate on par with non-Aboriginal peers is a ripple effect from the residential school system, a national program that ripped children from their homes and families and forced them into European institutions.

Children at residential schools were beaten if they spoke their native language, sometimes sexually assaulted by their caretakers, and systematically robbed of their culture and childhood. With the last of those schools operating into the mid-1990s, generations of Aboriginal Canadians raised without parents or culture later faced insurmountable challenges raising their own children—or trusting an education system that damaged them so deeply. Combined (not coincidentally) with elevated rates of poverty and substance abuse, these lingering injuries make obtaining an education in a euro-centric school system a continuing challenge for Aboriginal children, to say the least.

But where there are challenges and failures, there are also solutions and successes. In Successful Practices for First Nations Education, I reported in detail about several education initiatives happening here in British Columbia, and a few from around the world, that have significantly improved Aboriginal peoples' educational outcomes.

One of the most successful of these initiatives is also one of the oldest in the province: the Chief Atahm Immersion school, British Columbia's premiere First Nations immersion program. Run by Secwepemc teachers and parents on the Adams Lake Reserve, near the community of Chase, best practices from the public system are mixed in the curriculum with the culture and history of the Secwepemc people.

"We think that if we offer a quality education here, [our graduates] will be prepared to go anywhere," says Robert Matthew, the principal at Chief Atahm. "And history has proven it's true. Our students here are well prepared for the public school Grade 11 and 12, and many have gone to university or colleges."

Public districts with high Aboriginal populations face the same challenges Chief Atahm tackles, but with greater restrictions. Thanks to a strict provincial curriculum, there is little leeway to offer education solely through an Aboriginal lens. But as our third story details, with over 60 per cent of

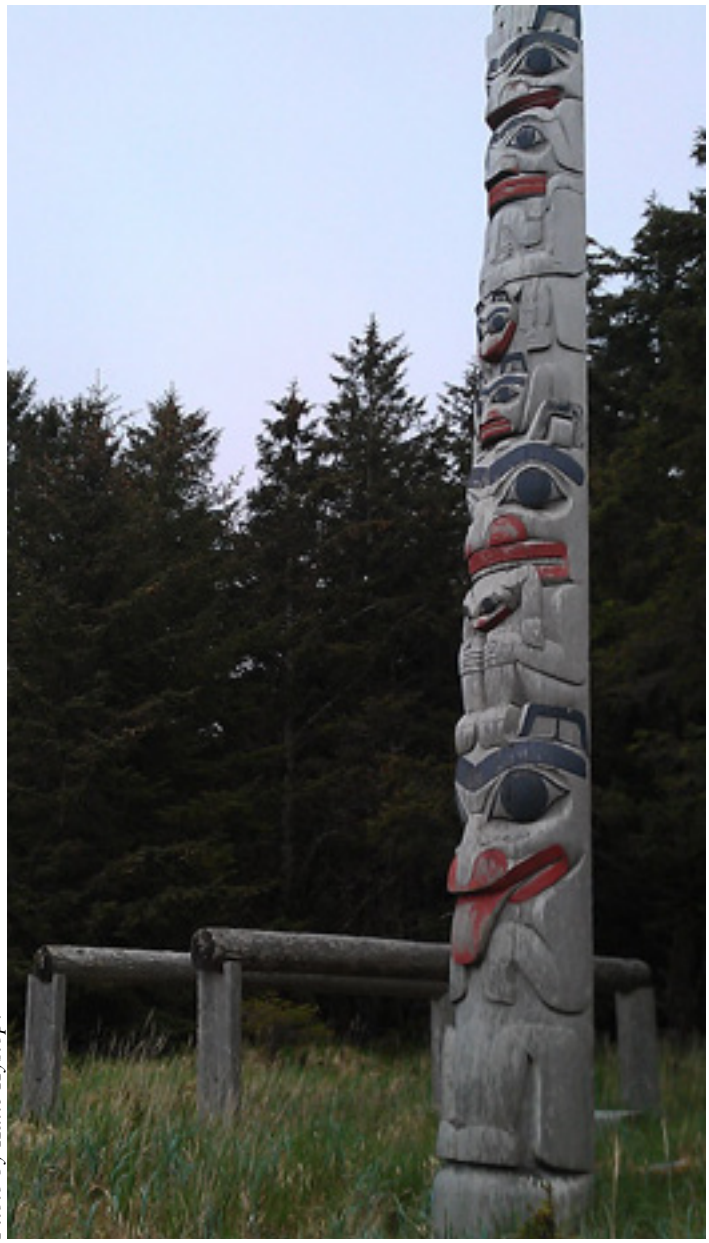

Photo by Katie Hyslop.

students in the Haida Gwaii district identifying as First Nations, the district got creative in the education they offer by using culturally responsive education.

"Whether you are a Science 9 teacher or a Grade 1 teacher, the idea is that you try and incorporate some aspects of [Haida culture] into what you're doing. And it can even be little things, like if you're counting in primary school, you know that the Haida had three kinds of counting: they had counting people, they had counting stuff, and they had counting people in canoes," says Angus Wilson, the Haida district's superintendent.

There are close to 2,000 Aboriginal students studying under the Vancouver School Board, and their graduation rates are even lower than the provincial Aboriginal average, fluctuating between 35 and 45 per cent in the last 10 years. The diversity of First Nations represented in Vancouver's cultural melting pot is too large for a single linguistic immersion program, making it difficult to provide culturally oriented education. But with one of the most comprehensive Aboriginal Education strategies in the province, and plans for an Aboriginal-based school in the next year, I needed to explore the growing debate among Aboriginal parents in this city between segregating students to enrich their Aboriginal identities, or grouping them with other students to prepare them for life in an increasingly multicultural country.

Without a language, however, much of a culture is lost. It's a dilemma facing most First Nations in B.C., where only five per cent of First Nations people are fluent in their native tongue, and at least eight out of 40 languages are "sleeping": without any fluent speakers. To better understand their challenges, I profiled the struggles of the First Nations Education Steering Committee, which wants to put more language in Aboriginal schools, as well as the First Peoples Heritage, Language and Culture Council, a body launched by the provincial government in the early 1990s to save Aboriginal languages.

If they are to succeed however, more money is needed. "We did a business plan, and on an annual basis it would be $32 million, just for the community portion of the language investment," says Tracey Herbert, executive director of the Language and Culture Council "I believe Australia invests over $260 million a year annually for their [Aboriginal] languages. [Its] government has taken their role seriously in terms of trying to make sure that people living there have the opportunity to learn their languages."

B.C. isn't the only place succeeding in Aboriginal education, however, and for this reason, the Solutions Society felt it was important to focus on successes outside of our province. Aboriginal public schools have sprung up across the country, many modeling themselves after the Edmonton public school board's Amiskwaciy Academy. And this year the four Inuit nations, in cooperation with federal and provincial governments, launched the National Strategy on Inuit Education with a goal of raising the dismal 75 per cent high school dropout rate among Inuit people.

To get a global perspective, I focussed on Hawaii. There, thanks to a government ruling in 1978 that gave native Hawaiians the right to be educated in their own language and culture, 21 Hawaiian-language immersion schools have opened. "The foundation of most immersion schools is to teach the language with the belief that without the culture you cannot teach the language," says Kau'ilani Sang, an educational specialist with the State Department of Education's Hawaiian Language Immersion Program. "If you look at the vision of most of the schools, they're trying to produce proficient Hawaiian language speakers by the time they leave in the 12th Grade."

Thanks to the Centre for Civic Governance, I was also able to take part in a presentation for B.C. school trustees based on our series, with speakers from Haida Gwaii, Adams Lake, and Vancouver detailing how they developed their Aboriginal education programs and the successes they have seen. This presentation provided the basis for the final piece in our series, on the importance of preparing and supporting teachers, so that they in turn can support a strong Aboriginal identity in their students.

"'Culturally responsive [education]' you can't flip through. It's the process, the process of building relationships. And building relationships with your students and your staff takes time," says Joanne Yovanovich, Aboriginal principal for the Haida Gwaii district.

Building such relationships between teachers and Aboriginal communities holds promise for providing First Nations, Metis and Inuit youth with the education they need to navigate this 21st century world. As importantly, my colleagues at the Tyee Solutions Society and I believe it may be the first critical step toward healing the wounds inflicted in our colonialist past that continue to stain our post-colonial present.

- Katie Hyslop

How Chief Atahm Elementary School Became a Success Story

'Develop wisdom, honour the spiritual.' Those principles guide a unique learning approach breaking through low expectations for First Nations achievement.

By Katie Hyslop
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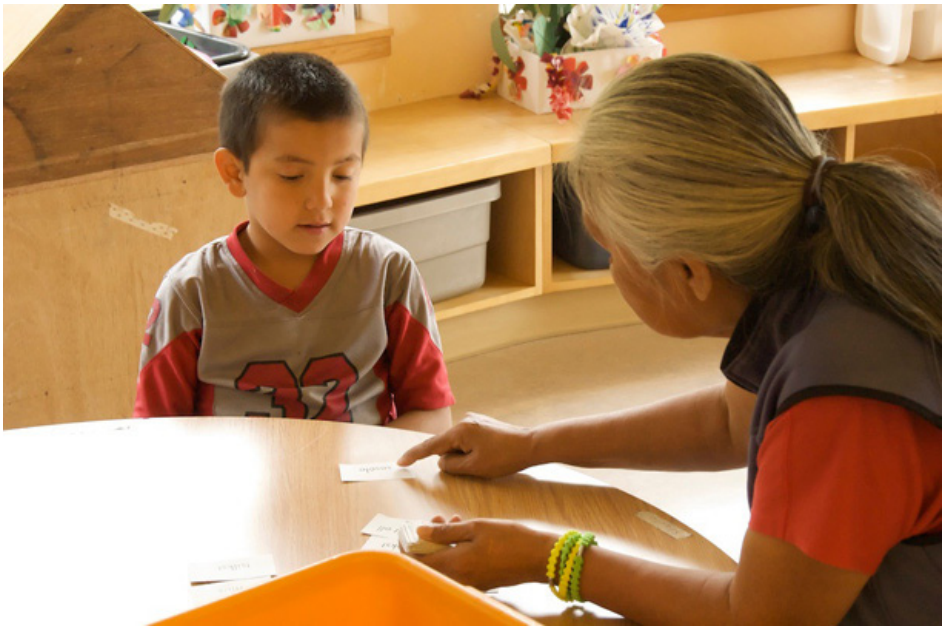
See the original story and others in the "Successful Practices in First Nations Education" series at http://www.tyeesolutions.org/?p=626

Chief Atahm isn't your typical elementary school. The teachers won't instruct in English until Grade 4. Curriculum is created by teachers and parents instead of the Ministry of Education. Here, hands-on learning means skinning a deer, collecting medicinal plants, or cleaning and smoking fish. It's one of the few Aboriginal immersion school programs in B.C. and -- celebrating its 20th anniversary this year -- the oldest.



A Secwepemc elder works with a young student at Chief Atahm. Photo by Marvin Beatty.

Chief Atahm Immersion School is a one-storey building situated on top of the grassy plateau that is the Adams Lake reserve. Connected to the community of Chase by a bridge across Little Shuswap Lake, it's a 60 kilometre drive north-east of Kamloops. For a Kindergarten-to-Grade 7 school, Chief Atahm is rather small: only five classrooms for eight grades. But the grounds are vast. Like most schoolyards they include a fenced-in play area and a jungle gym. Unlike most, there's also a smokehouse out front for preserving deer meat and fish.

More than all of those however, Chief Atahm's teachers and parents say the school's most important element is its full immersion in Secwepemctsin. They say it produces students who not only have a good academic foundation but, equally importantly, are well grounded in their own culture. Entirely Aboriginal and parent-run, Chief Atahm offers hope to other Aboriginal communities struggling to prepare youth for 21st century life within the values and learning of their own culture.

"We think that if we offer a quality education here, [our graduates] will be prepared to go anywhere," says Robert Matthew, the principal at Chief Atahm for the past 16 years. "And history has proven it's true. Our students here are well prepared for the public school Grade 11 and 12, and many have gone to university or colleges."

Beyond a traditional education

There are 52 children currently enrolled at Chief Atahm, about a quarter of the children who live on the reserve. Their parents have the same goals any parent has for their child's education: literacy, numeracy, and problem solving. But they want something more. They want their children to grow up knowing who they are, where they came from, and why their identity should be a source of pride.

"We believe that everybody has unanswered questions of 'Who am I? How did I get to this place and time? How did my parents get here? Where do I live?'" says Matthew. "We deliberately ask those questions, then answer them within our school. By the time they leave, whether they're 13 years old or 16 years old, they'll have the [answer]: 'Who am I? You are Secwepemc!'"

Many of its students enter Chief Atahm from the Cseyseten Family Language Centre, a self-styled Secwepemctsin "language nest" for infants to four-year-olds. There, elders and teachers interact with toddlers only in their ancestral language.

Chief Atahm follows the same model for kindergarten to Grade 3, with instruction entirely in Secwepemctsin. The teachers run the gamut from proficient to fluent, so elders also sit in on classes, either offering language help or running their own lessons.

Unlike most reserve schools in the province, Chief Atahm doesn't follow the provincial curriculum. Instead teachers -- mostly veterans of the public system -- and parents adapt conventional classroom practice to involve aspects of traditional Secwepemc life: gathering roots and medicines, cleaning and smoking fish, singing and creating art. Students read books written in or translated into Secwepemctsin. They watch and listen as elders tell stories through audio and video recordings, speaking in Secwepemctsin about important places or traditional hunting practices.

"In Grade 4 in the public school, they do bean seeds in an egg carton," says Matthew. "We go out and study a real plant that has a stem, a flower, a root. We're observing nature and changes: that's science."

Building a nest

Chief Atahm is the brainchild of Kathryn Michel, a Secwepemc woman born and raised in downtown Kamloops. Michel's parents, Joe and Anna, spoke Secwepemctsin fluently but chose not to teach it to their nine children. Disciplined and abused herself for using it at residential school, Anna Michel thought it would prevent her children from getting into university.

Kathryn and her siblings attended public school, often the only Aboriginal kids in class. Although she did well there, Kathryn was keenly aware of her difference from the school's Euro-Canadian culture. But with few relatives in the area and parents who refused to speak their native language to her, Kathryn scarcely gave a thought to learning Secwepemctsin.

All the Michel children continued their education after high school. It was at the University of British Columbia where Kathryn's passion for her native language finally ignited. At a World Indigenous Conference on campus, Kathryn heard a young Maori woman from New Zealand give a speech in te reo Maori about the "language nest" concept.

"At the end of her speech," Michel recalls, "she said, 'A year ago I couldn't speak a word of Maori.' That really floored me."

The speech changed Michel's life path. On graduating she moved to the Adams Lake reserve, where her parents then lived, determined to start her own Secwepemctsin language nest.

"I made brochures up and I went door to door telling people, 'Please sign your child up for this language nest,'" Kathryn recalls. But she faced questions she couldn't answer: "'Well, where will it be?'... Oh, I don't know. 'What will it cost?'... Oh, I don't know.

"I had no answers."

Finally someone directed Michel to the public school's Grade 1 teacher, a woman who also lived on the reserve and had her own keen interest in its language. Janice Dick Billy had a very different reaction.

"I showed her what I wanted to do," Michel says. "And she took out notepaper and the next thing she says is: 'How much do you think you'll need? Sounds like you'll need to hire an elder. Sounds like you need to start a bingo.'

"Actually, she didn't say 'you need.' She said 'we need to.'"

The two convinced the band council to let them use an empty log building. Kathryn recruited her parents as fluent Secwepemctsin teachers, as well as several other prominent elders in the community. A couple of bingo nights later Michel and Dick Billy had their start-up costs.

'Giving power and responsibility to the elder'

Only Kathryn Michel, Janice Dick Billy and one other mother enrolled their babies in the fledgling language nest. And it was soon clear that no one involved knew how a language nest was really supposed to work. There was no internet, and it was too expensive to call New Zealand.

Michel opted to leave the day-to-day activities up to the elders. It turned out to be an inspired choice. "Giving that power and responsibility to the elder was the key to how it actually evolved into the Chief Atahm school and then a resilient program today," she says. "Its foundation was really the language and the cultural knowledge of our elders."

But as her own child got older, Kathryn faced a decision about where he would go to elementary school. Living just across the street from the local public school, she had seen white and Aboriginal children segregating themselves on the playground.

"My child is fair [skinned] enough to have had to make a choice of which side of the playground he wanted to play in," Michel says. "And I said, 'No five year old should ever have to be in that position to make that choice."

With their own children aging out of the language nest, Dick Billy and Michel pressed the Adams Lake band for money to start a kindergarten. When the band agreed, they named their new school after an ancestral figure whose children went on to be chiefs of the Little Shuswap and the Neskonlith Indian bands in the early 20th century. Dick Billy quit her public-system job to teach there.

Ten students enrolled in the first class. But not every parent knew what immersion meant, and some pulled their kids out after realizing nothing was in English. They feared their children would do even worse at Chief Atahm than in the public school, where Michel says graduation rates for First Nations children at the time were as low as two per cent. The Kamloops School District could not confirm these numbers as they did not have data that went back that far.

But Michel and Dick Billy adapted. "We said, 'We need to have a little bit more of a process here.' So we have an interview process [now], where we talk about what our visions are for the school, we talk about what parents' roles need to be, and parents sign a contract saying that they understand that and they agree with it," says Michel.

Maintaining the vision

The school grew, adding a grade or so each year until it reached Grade 10. But hampered by the lack of a science lab for chemistry or biology, it eventually pared back its classes and now ends at Grade 7.

Its ambitions remain undiminished, however: ensuring that kids leave school with a sound education and with a sense of pride in their heritage that was denied their parents and grand-parents through a century and a half of colonization and residential schools.

Parents and teachers have devised a vision and set of values for the school that emphasize community responsibility for raising each child, and the respect every student must have for themselves and others. These include a series of principles: we are all related; help yourself; take time for yourself; develop wisdom; and honour the spiritual.

"I think [in] public school and university, you do have to have some inner strength to survive," says Matthew. "So this is what we want them to have when they leave here, some kind of inner strength."

Chief Atahm has not kept records of how many of its students have gone on to graduate from high school. Nor has the federal government kept track of how students perform in schools on reserves. According to the Aboriginal and Northern Affairs website, the department is in the process of developing an Education Information System to track student progress, but it won't come online until Sept. 2012. A statement on their website about the current system says it "is a patchwork of systems that are not integrated and do not use a cohesive set of performance indicators. As well, the current focus of the information is related to outputs such as the number of students, grade level and age, rather than achievement, 'how students are doing.'"

Strength in language

Like most of the 34 Aboriginal languages still spoken in B.C., Secwepemctsin is endangered. Fewer than four dozen people still speak it fluently, and many are elderly. Not only does Kim Dennis, Matthew's administrative assistant, not know her own language, even her grandmother's knowledge of it did not survive her residential school experience.

Dennis wanted a different upbringing for her own three children. "I want them to know who they are, because I never did," says Dennis. "I want my kids to not be scared of who they are, that they are natives, and [to] know their culture."

Kathryn's mother and uncle still work at the language nest, and at Chief Atahm. Now 80, Anna now takes immense pride in teaching children their native language -- an act she once thought would ruin a child's education.

"These are our own children, our grandchildren, relatives, grand nieces and nephews," the elder Michel says. "We're all related, and it's so beautiful to be involved in their early years."

"Our language is the only thing that differentiates us from other brown people," she now recognizes. "If you look at our people, we could be Chinese or any other that were brown. Our language is the only thing that would label us as Secwepemc."

But fluency in Secwepemctsin is a hard goal to meet, especially when parents aren't fluent and kids revert to English outside of class.

"There's so many things in English around us that it's hard to motivate the kids: they say sometimes, 'Why learn it?'" says Matthew.

Roxanne Sampson, a former student at Chief Atahm, didn't see the value in learning to speak Secwepemctsin at first. By the time she got to public school she excelled in math and sciences, but struggled with English.

"We never learned English until Grade 6, we weren't taught it," she says. "When I went into high school I failed English a bunch of times."

But now an adult, Sampson's been surprised to find that Secwepemctsin opens doors for her, such as the one that led her to a job as a language teacher at a Secwepemc nursery in Kamloops.

Not every child will grow up to be a language teacher. But many educators, First Nations or not, agree that traditional languages encode the personal history and culture that students need to build strong, positive identities. Languages transmit ancestral knowledge, from traditional medicines to the meaning of land treaties being argued over in court today. Other non-cultural studies link early knowledge of more than one language to improved learning and achievement later in life.

But language and culture also evolve. Matthew and his staff strive to adapt the latest technology to keep kids interested in learning Secwepemctsin. "Elders have to learn how to work with the snowball mic hooked up to a laptop," he says, "same with students. Because once we got back to project-based learning with technology, the kids all light up again."

'We used to raise our kids ourselves'

Keeping Chief Atahm on track still takes as much labour as love. In addition to the initial interview, parents

commit to attend four meetings per year to discuss the school's philosophy, budget, activities, and curriculum. They're expected to help fundraise -- as a reserve school, Chief Atahm gets support from Aboriginal and Northern Affairs but still needs to raise about $100,000 each year to operate. As well, every year the school holds a three-day parent-teacher retreat to re-examine its vision and values.

But Kathryn Michel encourages Aboriginal educators and language advocates not to be daunted by the workload. "We forget to believe in ourselves, and in each other," she told a First Nations language education conference last May. "That's one of the strengths of Chief Atahm. We remember that we used to raise our kids ourselves, without asking another nation to help us. We were once a strong, vibrant nation on our own."

Ultimately, it's that strength Matthew hopes to instil in the children who pass through Chief Atahm's doors. Whether they move far afield and earn doctorates or finish high school and stay on the reserve, he hopes to see self-reliance and pride in being Secwepemc.

"My dream is to be driving through this reserve 10 years from now and finding one of my former students repairing his own porch," Matthew says. "Not phoning Indian Affairs, not phoning the band office, phoning anybody else, but doing it yourself."

As a metaphor for Chief Atahm's first-of-its-kind model of learning immersed entirely in ancestral language and culture, you could hardly do better.

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For more information visit www.tyeesolutions.org.

Comments received in response to "How Chief Atahm Elementary School Became a Success Story," on The Tyee.ca

Parent Involvement

"A key factor in the success of this school is/will be, involved parents. This is the same for non-native children. Schools seldom can make up for disadvantaged home lives, the more severe, the less chance of success. Much emphasis needs to be placed on the ability of parents to be responsible, functioning adults.

To me this is obvious, but it seems so often overlooked as a factor in the dismal success rates of aboriginal children in schools.

Cheers to those involved in this project."

Interesting Article

"From this report this project is doing good work in providing a sound basis for developing good, capable people whose education grounds them both in the knowledge of their history and the means to succeed in the current world and that of the future."

Early Learning

Here's a list of benefits for learning a language at an early age. While some might challenge the limited opportunity for use, depending on the neighborhood, learning French in high school has helped me understand English, grammar (remember subjunctive ?) and languages' structure. Second language unlocks the gates and makes sense of part of the world.

‘Most Teachers Don’t Know Who First Nations Are’

We all pay when Aboriginal kids aren’t given their best chance to learn.

By Katie Hyslop
Published on September 7, 2011, by TSS media partner: The Tyee.
See the original story and others in the “Successful Practices in First Nations Education” series at http://www.tyeesolutions.org/?p=638

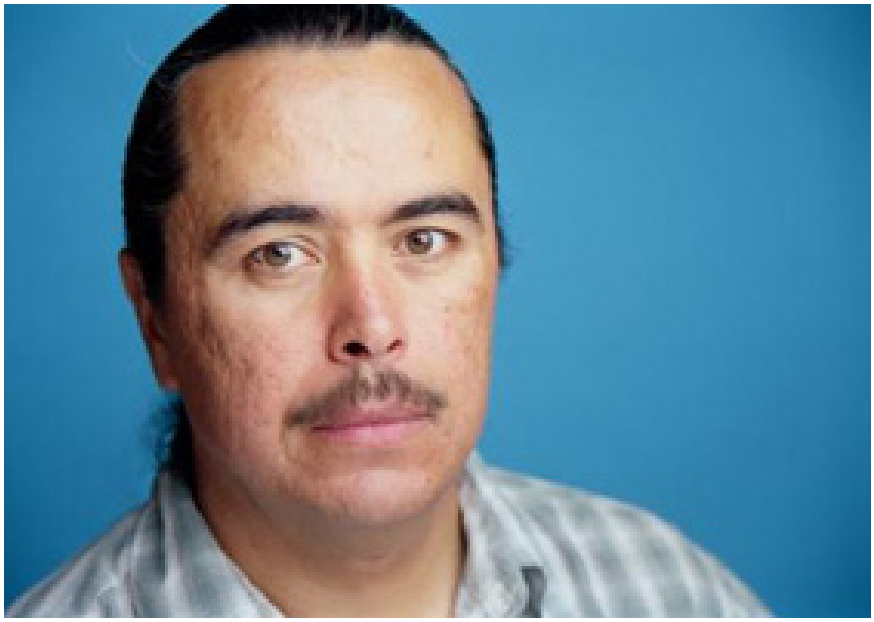
Only five per cent of British Columbia’s population has First Nation or Metis ancestry. But find yourself on Vancouver’s notorious East Hastings strip, and you could be forgiven for thinking the ratio was much higher.

The neighbourhood is no reflection of British Columbia’s entire Aboriginal population, nor is it where most live. What the disproportionately high First Nations and Metis population in the Downtown Eastside does illustrate, tragically, is the nightmare consequences of a singular social and political failure.

The historic cultural repression of residential schools, and a public school curriculum that ignores Aboriginal existence in Canada, have created generations of spiritually and financially impoverished individuals, bruised by a system indifferent to their needs, who often turn to addiction, crime or begging to survive.

More First Nations and Metis people live in British Columbia than any other province, and many are young. Just over one in 10 students going back to school this month in B.C. identify themselves as Aboriginal.

Yet for decades, their chances of emerging from Grade 12 with a diploma have been less than 50-50.



First Nations Education Steering Committee President Tyrone McNeil: Working on raising expectations teachers have for First Nations students.

The half who fail struggle to become self-supporting, let alone contributing members of the economy. For the rest of the taxpaying public, they represent millions, potentially billions of dollars in foregone labour and never-to-be innovations, while adding to the cost of healthcare, unemployment benefits, policing, and incarceration.

More education is intimately tied to higher income and a greater contribution to society as a whole. Failing to educate Aboriginal children, in other words, isn’t just

holding back those kids; it's holding back British Columbia as a whole.

Aboriginal 101

Sadly, little of this is new. Despite pumping money into studies, curriculum changes and Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements, the B.C. Ministry of Education has failed to move Aboriginal kids as a group any closer to the provincial graduation rate of 80 per cent.

Another 10,000 B.C. students are educated under the federal government's jurisdiction. They do no better, according to Aboriginal education advocates (no one currently tracks high school graduation rates from reserve schools, although Ottawa proposes to begin doing so next year). That's despite 20 years of big-sounding talk from the government.

In the wake of a standoff between members of the Mohawk nation in Quebec and the town of Oka -- and later the Canadian Armed Forces -- Ottawa struck a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Its 1996 report recommended Aboriginal-controlled education on reserves. Fifteen years later, most Metis and First Nations kids still attend schools run by the federal or provincial governments.

Here in British Columbia, a First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) has pushed for more Aboriginal content in the public curriculum. FNESC President Tyrone McNeil gives the province credit for supporting its efforts, culminating in the creation of 'First Peoples-10', -11 and –12: alternatives to traditional English courses that focus on Aboriginal literature. But not enough schools offer the course, and McNeil believes teachers need to be educated about Aboriginals, too.

"Most professional teachers don't know who First Nations are," McNeil told The Tyee Solutions Society. "That lack of knowing leads to an indifference and a bias that extends into low expectations for First Nations students.

"They simply don't expect our kids to pass or do well," McNeil believes. "So every time one of our kids puts up their hand or seeks attention in a classroom, too often they're disregarded. The teacher feels, 'Well, that student's going to fail anyway, so I'm going to pay attention to those kids that are likely to succeed.'"

Glen Hansman, second vice president of the B.C. Teachers Federation, admits there's a knowledge gap for the public system teachers when it comes to Aboriginal education. But he denies that teachers commonly discriminate against Aboriginal students.

"I don't think it's true across the board. Is it a phenomenon that occurs? Probably. Is it something that needs to be addressed? Absolutely," he said.

But Hansman says teachers and students rely on the Ministry of Education to provide resources and curriculum that would close that gap -- and so far the ministry isn't stepping up. "Teachers would welcome more opportunities for in-service [training] around Aboriginal education," he says.

"It would be great if teachers had at their disposal the resources, the learning outcomes and the curriculum, and the professional development available so they could be giving representative examples from [kindergarten] all the way through 12," Hansman argues, "instead of just talking about the Haida in Grade 4 and then it disappears.

"There are teachers who do that sort of work, but it's not as widespread as we would like, and that is because, in part, the resources aren't there. It's also because the leadership from the province and school districts isn't necessarily there."

Underinvesting in Aboriginal productivity

It's a lack of investment that could be costing British Columbians dearly in both obvious and more subtle ways.

On a national scale, the Centre for the Study of Living Standards estimates that Canada would be more than $54 billion richer in 2026, if by then Aboriginal education matched the level of non-Aboriginals in 2001. The boost would come from $36.5 billion in increased economic output, $3.5 billion of tax revenue and $14.2 billion saved in social spending.

To give that some perspective, the federal deficit in 2010-2011 was only $36.2 billion.

With Canada's overall birthrate barely at replacement levels, and births among First Nation and Metis families running at 1.5 times those among non-Aboriginals, the economy can ill afford to forego the potential of our population's fastest growing community.

But there are more altruistic reasons to desire more successful Aboriginal learning. Over half of the children currently in government care in this province are Aboriginal. The primary reason is neglect. They and their siblings and cousins are overrepresented in the youth justice system, as well as in the statistics for childhood obesity, malnutrition and diabetes.

There is little doubt that overwhelming poverty has contributed to low Aboriginal grades. But poverty doesn't just affect education; education can affect poverty. A more educated population is a wealthier one. The gap between wages earned by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in B.C. decreases with higher education.

Right to teach without the means

Last year, after much delay, Canada finally signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people. In doing so, the federal government affirmed that indigenous peoples have "the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning."

So far, only the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia and British Columbia's First Nations have secured that right in negotiation with federal and provincial governments. In 2006, McNeil's First Nations Education Steering Committee, the Government of Canada and Province of British Columbia signed agreements recognizing First Nations' jurisdiction over K-12 education on reserve. That authority includes qualifying students to move on to post-secondary education, establishing teacher training and certification standards, and developing a system to certify First Nations schools.

But turning that 2006 agreement into funding has frustrated the Steering Committe since. As previously reported in The Tyee, the organization thought it was close to an agreement last fall. But the federal Department of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs instead unveiled a three-part ultimatum. The Steering Committee's plans could take a funding cut; receive more funding but cede some jurisdiction back to the government; or continue to negotiate knowing that government would claw back from its financial support an amount equal to any funds that First Nations raised for education on their own. Meanwhile, Ottawa announced it would cut funding for internet connectivity for reserve schools.

In an email to The Tyee Solutions Society, Aboriginal Affairs Spokesperson Geneviève Guibert wrote: "Government sees taking First Nations own-source funding into account as an equal partnership with government for funding education." But FNESC maintains that funding for reserve schools is already 25 per cent lower than for off-reserve public education, and Ottawa's claw-back will not help close the gap.

Public versus private

McNeil's goal is to make First Nations schools better than public ones. After all, he says, why emulate a system that has failed their children? But not every Aboriginal child lives on a reserve. Most live in urban areas and attend public schools.

Of the province's 60 school districts, 52 have so far signed 'Enhancement' agreements with local Aboriginal representatives and the Ministry of Education. These let educators and Aboriginal communities collaborate to set goals and share decisions about Aboriginal education. But while some districts follow through on their commitments, the ministry doesn't discipline those that aren't so energetic.

"Some of the enhancement agreements are not doing very much, and some are doing excellent," says Paul Michel, director of First Nations Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia. "The ones that are doing excellent are the ones that are actually partnering up with Aboriginal leaders, so they have a real strong

sense of Aboriginal traditions and they're respecting the wishes of the communities. They're doing really well."

Michel's sister Kathryn managed to eke out an education in the public system before there were enhancement agreements. But she hated her experience as the only Aboriginal kid in her class so much, that later she co-founded Secwepemc-run Chief Atahm Immersion School on the Adams Lake Reserve.

She now believes it offers the best model for Aboriginal learning. "I don't believe a Secwepemc child can be educated in the public schools as they are today," Michel said.

Michel believes that holds true even for First Nations youth living off reserve. "I think it would be really hard [for such students] to connect to who they are, to their land and their language, when they live far away," she explains. "And I think the best thing that could happen is for these children to find out that there are communities still speaking the language, and they have a very large land base, and they have a culture."

Her husband, and Chief Atahm principal, Robert Matthew disagrees. While he swears by the Chief Atahm model, Matthew spent his first 15 years as a teacher and administrator in the public system, where he did see some kids succeed. But it didn't come without hard work from parents, teachers, and students.

"The public school is a demand-request system," he says. "You have to demand a quality education right from day one, [from when] your kid's five years old until they're 18 and in Grade 12.

"You can't go in there angry at teachers and blaming them for the residential schools and all the wrongs of the last hundred years, but you do have to go in there and make sure that teachers realize you want a quality education for [your] children, and you're requesting it and demanding it consistently from day one. If you don't do that, you're sunk."

One public school district is putting hard work into responding to that request from its parents on Haida Gwaii, where three-quarters of students identify as Haida. The next instalment in this special Tyee Solutions Society series will travel to Masset to see how that work is reaching out to Haida children, elders and culture -- and how the larger Haida community has received its efforts.

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Tyee Solutions Society *is a non-profit producing catalytic, solutions-oriented journalism on social, economic and environmental issues of broad concern to Canadians.*

For more information visit www.tyeesolutions.org.

Comments received in response to "'Most Teachers Don't Know Who First Nations Are,'" on The Tyee.ca

Would Removing Federal Jurisdiction Help?

I've often thought that some of the problems with health care on reserves could be addressed by integrating it with the local provincial systems. Reading this discussion made me think that there might be the same potential to improve aboriginal education, both on-reserve and off, by eliminating the separate federal jurisdiction.

Right now, education and health care on reserves are lumped together in federal government budgets and policy decisions as part of the obligation to "look after" (to use an intentionally paternalistic description) people on reserves. Decisions about delivery methods or budgets are isolated from the wider public discussion about the importance of these services, and from any policy innovations being developed in the larger provincial systems. The fact that the federal government doesn't even keep statistics on graduation outcomes is a sign that this separate system is unable to efficiently duplicate all the activities of the much larger provincial education systems.

But more than that, if all on-reserve education in BC was part of the provincial system, that influx of aboriginal students (and parents, teachers and administrators) would encourage the province to develop the aboriginal-sensitive curriculum and teacher-training which the people quoted in the article claim is lacking in the public system.

(Note, this suggestion wouldn't necessarily have to be in conflict with plans to increase local First Nation control of education delivery -- you could still have the equivalent of local school boards for each reserve or Nation. Although you could get into discussion elsewhere about how little power school boards have in this province...)

Welcome to Haida High

With a majority Aboriginal population, the Haida Gwaii school district is using their language, heritage and culture to reach and teach their students.

By Katie Hyslop
Published on September 13, 2011, by TSS media partner: The Tyee.
See the original story and others in the "Successful Practices in First Nations Education" series at http://www.tyeesolutions.org/?p=644

It's a sunny June 1 morning in Yan, an ancient Haida village on the northeast coast of the island of Haida Gwaii, British Columbia. Once home to two different Haida clans, all that's left of the village is a re-created Haida building, a few decaying totem poles, and the skulls of the people that died there lying just beyond the tree line. Abandoned by the Haida in the late 19th century, today the seaside site is crawling with teenagers.

Students from George M. Dawson Secondary School on a field trip to Yan, Haida Gwaii. Photo: Katie Hyslop.

It's field day for the students at George M. Dawson Secondary, just a 30-minute boat ride across Masset Inlet from Yan, in the community of Masset. Part end-of-year fun, part educational field trip, the Grade 8 to 12 students are learning about the history of the village with an archeological tour, cooking food how the Haida did by digging fire pits, and studying the sea creatures on the beach that Haida might have eaten.

With 75 per cent of the students at George M. Dawson identifying as Haida, chances are at least some of them are following in the footsteps of their ancestors.

The trip is a great example of how Haida culture is infused into the local curriculum, and it's complementary to the lessons they learned back at school, including reading Aboriginal literature, speaking Haida, and skinning deer or catching prawns.

"The kids participate in the Haida language and activities that we have: drawing, cleaning fish, cleaning deer meat, working on clams, working on prawns. [We're] always trying to keep our kids involved with the bounty that's around us, like the food we get from the ocean, from the land, from our language," explains Marni York, the Haida language assistant at George M. Dawson.

In the past decade the Haida Gwaii School District has made efforts to incorporate more Haida culture and language into the curriculum, recognizing both the damages assimilation has caused Aboriginal Canadians and that best practice dictates teaching kids from a base of their own culture.

But there is still a tangible, inescapable tension between maintaining an Aboriginal identity and getting an education that, for all intents and purposes, still assimilates Aboriginal children into the larger Canadian society. And a public education system where the majority of teachers are Caucasian and turnover is high means the district's efforts to incorporate Haida culture into the curriculum receive mixed reactions from the island's Aboriginal community.

'Three kinds of counting'

The ministry of education allows for only 10 per cent local content in their curriculum. But district superintendent Angus Wilson encourages teachers to put in as much local information and context as they want provided learning outcomes are met, even going so far as to hold workshops for teachers about incorporating Haida culture into the classroom.

"Whether you are a Science 9 teacher or a Grade 1 teacher, the idea is that you try and incorporate some aspects of it into what you're doing. And it can even be little things, like if you're counting in primary school, you know that the Haida had three kinds of counting: they had counting people, they had counting stuff, and they had counting people in canoes," he says.

"It's a separate counting system, and that leads into an interesting discussion about why traditionally it was important to be able to count people in canoes."

Schools on the island offer Haida language classes before they offer French, using core funding for the course instead of funding targeted at Aboriginal students. First Peoples 12, an Aboriginal alternative to English 12, isn't offered -- there isn't enough demand -- but English teachers at George M. Dawson alternate classics like 1984 with Raven's Cry, a book about the affects of colonization on the Haida people.

Marine biology students at Queen Charlotte Secondary in Queen Charlotte Village, Haida Gwaii, take their classes outside to the beach and learn Haida names for the local marine life they see there.

"What I seek to avoid is a thing I call window dressing, where [we say:] 'Doesn't this look native?' and actually make it 'Are we pedagogically teaching in a different way?' And I think that since 2000, that's something that we've gone a long way toward embracing," says Wilson.

Revolving door for teachers

Haida Gwaii is an island on the northwest coast of British Columbia. A popular tourist destination in the summer with its towering trees, inlets littered with tiny islands, and wave-beaten shoreline, it's still pretty isolated from the rest of the province. Trips in or out are made by plane or by boat, and the lack of protection from the cruel Pacific winter winds means it takes a certain type of person to call Haida Gwaii home.

Given this, it isn't surprising that in the past there have been high teacher turnover rates in the district.

"The first year I taught," says Lorrie Joron, principal of George M. Dawson, "the kids were like, 'I don't have to listen to you, you're not going to be here next year.' I guess it was pretty much a revolving door, and teachers didn't stay for more than two years." She moved to the island from Ontario 22 years ago and has served as principal of the high school for the last five years.

"So I was like, 'I'm staying, just to prove you wrong,' and now I've got kids in here that are children of the kids I taught."

Despite the revolving door, most of the teachers are from off-island, and most are Caucasian. In the entire district there are only four Aboriginal teachers, although at least 40 per cent of the support staff are Aboriginal. Nevertheless, Joron says her teachers are committed to including Haida culture in the curriculum.

"They have a really, overall strong relationship with the kids, and that probably makes the biggest differ-

ence. It takes awhile for the kids to build trust in the adults in the building."

Conrad Russ is a senior at George M. Dawson, set to graduate a few weeks after the trip to Yan. He's less than impressed than his principal with the Haida culture and language he receives at the school. "It's not as much as I'd like to see," he says. "[I'd like] more culture-based things like canoeing, carving, drawing, all this art stuff. Singing and dancing, and stuff. It would be pretty fun."

Like many of his fellow classmates, mainly non-Aboriginal people have taught Russ for his entire life at school. He knows life would have been different if he had had more Haida teachers.

"I'd be way more connected [to the island] for sure. I'd know a lot more than I do. There's still lots to learn, so it'd be a lot better in my mind," he says.

There aren't that many Haida teachers available to fill the teaching jobs on the island, however. The local band councils encourage Haida youth to obtain education degrees, and this year two young Haida people returned to the island after completing their teaching degrees at the University of British Columbia. But there aren't teaching jobs available for them.

'Aboriginal life doesn't run on a school calendar'

Some members of the Haida community have seen the school's efforts pay off. Florence Lockyer, education co-ordinator for the Old Massett Village Council, says she's seen graduation rates improve for the Haida students compared to 20 years ago.

"This year we have, again, in the graduating class a dozen Haida students who are all graduating with their Dogwoods [B.C. Certificate of Graduation]," she says.

Lockyer is a member of the Haida Education Council, comprising representatives from the school board, and the education co-ordinators for the island's two Haida councils: Old Massett Village Council, and Skidegate Band Council on the Skidegate reserve on the southern end of the main island. The Haida Education Council previously negotiated the local education agreement, which determined responsibilities for educating reserve children in public schools, and is currently finalizing the draft of the district's Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement, an ongoing accord between the local Haida governments, the ministry of education, and the school board to improve Aboriginal education in the district.

Lockyer says the relationship between the district and the Haida governments' is better than it used to be. But she believes the district could be doing a lot more culturally responsive education.

"Like if there was a topic in math that you could incorporate anything related to Haida culture or being Haida, then that would somehow make that lesson more culturally responsive than if you used, as an example, rather than counting pigs on a paper you would be using agates from the beach as counting markers," she says.

And a rigid school calendar can interrupt the flow of Aboriginal life. For some families this means academics come second to cultural or family obligations.

"Aboriginal life doesn't run on a school calendar, and sometimes traditional activities like food harvesting will interrupt the academic year, and will either leave some students way behind or just out of the picture," says Lockyer.

George M. Dawson Secondary language teacher Colleen Williams is worried about the amount of language in the school, too. A Haida woman from Old Massett, she's not fluent and relies on help from a local elder to teach her classes. With only three hours of language instruction per week, most of which is spent documenting the elder speaking, Williams doesn't foresee her students ever becoming fluent without a change in the program.

"Having a one-year, full-on immersion, like say we had all the Grade 8s full-on [in] immersion for their first year: then it would work. But right now it's not ever going to work," she says.

Tension between, and within, communities

Not every Haida person is upset with the district's progress. Joanne Yovanovich is the Aboriginal principal for the district, and a Haida woman. She says sometimes

the district's efforts to do more are hampered by the Haida community.

"In sciences people would like to do plants and [traditional Haida] medicines, and that one gets a little gray for us. Knowledge holders don't really see it as something that's shared and taught in school, and they have valid concerns about cultural appropriation where all of a sudden somebody's making and selling ointment using the knowledge," says Yovanovich.

"So there's that tension all the time of what is enough and what is acceptable, how many different groups of people do I need to talk to for approval to do this activity or not."

Still Yovanovich admits there aren't enough teachers adopting the Haida culture in their curriculum. She believes there needs to be a philosophical shift among school faculty to recognize the value of Aboriginal knowledge. But at the same time Yovanovich warns against teachers taking on subjects they don't know.

"Jumping into doing 70 per cent of what you do is centred around Haida culture, if you don't know anything about it, you're doing more damage than good in lots of ways," she says.

Wilson would like to see more Haida in the curriculum, too. But he thinks creating Aboriginal-centred curriculum for secondary students is going about it the wrong way: Haida students should be learning about their own history much, much earlier.

Teach First Nations, first

"We seem to be throwing a lot of stuff in at the upper level, like this is First Nations 12, First Peoples 12, and not that those are bad courses at all but it would be better in a way if it was First Nations 3 and First Peoples 3, if you see what I mean. And then you're much more comfortable learning about feudal Europe or Japanese automotive industry or whatever when you're in high school," he says.

Wilson and his district aren't waiting for the ministry to come around to this way of thinking. They're starting their first Haida immersion kindergarten program this fall at Tahayghen Elementary in Queen Charlotte Village. If the program is successful, they'll expand it to Sk'aadgaa Naay Elementary on the nearby reserve of Skidegate next year. But in an email to The Tyee Solutions Society, Wilson says even this development has critics in the Haida community.

"I had a very lengthy (but pleasant) phone call from a Haida woman (at home, on a Saturday) requesting that we reconsider the Haida Immersion issue," he wrote.

"In her view it: a) put too much stress on children learning a complex language; and b) created a racially charged atmosphere and too much emphasis has been put on racially/culturally based education that actually undermines the life success for Aboriginal kids."

It's unlikely an immersion school will be the silver-bullet solution to a century-and-a-half old struggle to both maintain an Aboriginal identity and succeed in the Canadian school system. Nor is it much likelier that any school district can please everyone in its community.

But increasing the presence of Aboriginal language, culture and heritage in the Haida Gwaii curriculum may help narrow the gap, and hopefully bring closer a time when Aboriginal children find it far easier, even natural, to imagine graduating from school.

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Comments received in response to “Welcome to Haida High,” on The Tyee.ca

Haida

I think its wonderful there is a shift in First Nations. But unfortunately in any culture there is no full return to past ways. We must find the balance to help us function as best as we can in this day and age.

If each Nation finds it important to re-introduce and educate their young in past culture then it must happen. However if one chooses to leave their community and seek work else where then one will have to be educated in the system we presently have. It is impossible to meet the needs of all cultural criteria in Canada. However I strongly believe cultural development must come from the community, from those that are knowledgable in it. That the community organizes and develops a program that could be implemented daily along with the school day. This is where balance must prevail. The school boards role would be to provide the funding to pay elders, artists, healers, fisherman, etc. to educate their children and somehow this knowledge can be incorporated within the education system. That the two work together fluidly, creatively, supportively and most of all to meet the needs of the children.

Please Share

It should be abundantly clear to everyone that western culture is eating itself and that indigenous ideas have long term lasting power. Keep it, share it, for goodness sakes please share it with the rest of us as much as possible - Canada needs it.

Amidst the Big City, an Aboriginal Public School?

Vancouver's school board sees potential in a school designed from curriculum up to appeal to urban First Nations youth.

By Katie Hyslop
Published on September 14, 2011, by TSS media partner: The Tyee.
See the original story and others in the "Successful Practices in First Nations Education" series at http://www.tyeesolutions.org/?p=650

Chrystal Tabobandung is typical of most Canadians with Aboriginal heritage. The 31-year-old mother left her home, the Wasauksing First Nation reserve near Parry Sound, Ontario, at the age of 19 to pursue a higher education --first in Toronto and then Vancouver.

First Nation child attending ceremony at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. Photo: Joseph Boltrukiewicz.

According to the 2006 Census, more than half of Canadians who identify themselves as Aboriginal lived in urban areas. Almost a third were under 15, but their median age was 31 -- the same as Tabobandung. And like her, most moved from remote birthplaces in search of education, jobs or the services and amenities of city living.

Although her two biological children were raised in the big city, Tabobandung is also mothering her partner's three kids. They have a background similar to her own: living on an even more remote Ontario reserve from 2007 until 2010. Their rural schooling put them behind in reading and writing, an issue they share with many kids who leave rural areas for the big city.

But Tabobandung believes in their abilities and knows with hard work they will catch up. At the kids' Vancouver public school, she finds, the "teachers are dedicated to working with them to bring them up to grade, to where their reading and writing skills should be." In fact, Tabobandung says that for all her children, who range in age from eight to 15, "[I have] very consistent and open communication with the teachers. We put a plan in place and we work together to ensure the success of the children's academics in the classroom."

Vancouver is touted as one of the more culturally diverse cities in the country. Its Aboriginal population is no different: people from First Nations across the

province and the country live here. This multi-cultural heritage is one reality making it difficult to provide the kind of culturally-focused education found in reserve schools like Chief Atahm or in smaller public districts such as Haida Gwaii. The Aboriginal community is physically spread out, too, with over 40,000 families living in cities throughout the Lower Mainland identifying themselves as First Nations.

Nonetheless the Vancouver School Board (VSB) thinks the answer may lie in a one-of-a-kind Aboriginal school designed from the curriculum up to reflect an Aboriginal world-view. Proposed earlier this year, the school would adopt the principles of the district's much-lauded Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement with local First Nations, be taught by Aboriginal and Aboriginal-aware teachers, and involve parents, elders and community in the decision-making process.

For all its apparent wish-list features though, the Vancouver Aboriginal School has met a mixed response. Some Aboriginal parents welcome any alternative to the public system's long-standing failure to meet their community's academic needs. Others simply appreciate the District's efforts to involve the Aboriginal community in every step of its planning.

But not everyone's a fan. Where admirers see special attention, others see segregation. They fear the effects on a child's socialization if they are removed from the reality of one of the most multicultural cities in the country and offer them a ghettoized educational experience with students only like themselves and an academic system that expects less of them.

Aboriginals are far from the first demographic in British Columbia to envision a school dedicated to a specific history and culture. French and Mandarin immersion classes are already held in public schools. Independent and private schools represent a wide spectrum of religious beliefs, from Catholic and Evangelical Christian, to Sikh, Muslim, and Jewish schools -- all partly funded by taxpayers. Likewise, parents have long debated whether it's better to teach children within their traditional culture, hopefully preserving a sense of identity and passing on cultural knowledge, or to integrate them within the larger society through a public-school education.

For Aboriginal students, a difficult choice has been made even harder. With less than 50 per cent of Aboriginal kids in Vancouver schools graduating each year, it is old news to parents or teachers that something needs to change.

But with B.C.'s last residential school having closed its doors only 25 years ago, and years of government promises to improve Aboriginal academic outcomes having come to little, it's understandable that First Nations and Metis parents are at best cautiously optimistic about an Aboriginal-focused school, and at worst entirely against it.

Lower graduation rates in the big city

Big city life comes with big city problems. Lynda Gray, executive director of Vancouver's Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA) , sees these issues first-hand in the roughly 7,000 Aboriginal youth who come through her doors each year. The association's office, in the heart of the Strathcona neighbourhood, is just blocks from social housing projects Gray says are filled with First Nations families. "In the city, our kids have much higher rates of extreme poverty, more homelessness, more going to school on empty stomachs," says Gray. "If they don't have money to catch a bus and they have to go to school 20 blocks away, then they either have to walk or they get there two hours late."

Urban poverty isn't unique to Aboriginals, nor is it the reality for all indigenous families in Vancouver. But a lack of representation in curriculum, the absence of indigenous faces among staff and teachers, a not-so-distant history of colonization and in many cases family legacies of forced assimilation in residential schools, are uniquely challenging for Aboriginal students, their parents and the teachers who would like to see them flourish.

Gray's case for enhancing Aboriginal content in schools has as much to do with correcting the collective record of our country's experience, as with improving indi-

vidual grades. “As the first people of this country, it’s really important that our reality, and the true history of how that country was formed up until present day, should be reflected in the curriculum, so that [it’s] not whitewashed from history,” she says. “And most kids are socialized in school. If we’re invisible there, we tend to be invisible everywhere else.”

Gray estimates the high school graduation rate for Aboriginals in Vancouver to be as low as 20 per cent. The school board says it’s drifted between 32 and 46 per cent over the past decade, ending nearer the low end of that range at 35 per cent in 2008-09. But even the board’s relatively generous estimate of the graduation rate of Vancouver-area Aboriginals is significantly lower than that for B.C. as a whole -- itself an unimpressive 50 per cent.

Gray supports the idea of an Aboriginal school mainly by default: in an effort of generations where everything else has failed, a single-purpose school is at least something that hasn’t been tried. Something that might, at last, work.

“Anything that provides equal opportunity for our kids to learn in a safe, welcoming and nurturing environment is a good thing,” she says, adding that she’s ‘cautiously optimistic’ about the idea and the school board’s implementation of it. “[But] it must have meaningful input from the First Nations community on the planning, development and implementation. Meaningful, in that we’re involved at every level.”

Scott Clark has been heavily involved in the public education movement as well as the urban Aboriginal community. He acts as spokesperson for both the Alliance of Parents and Partners to Lobby for Education in British Columbia (APPLE BC), a group of public education activists that sprang up last fall during the Save Our Schools movement, and Aboriginal Life in Vancouver Enhancement (ALIVE), a non-profit organization working to improve the lives of urban Aboriginals.

A father of three whose youngest is entering Grade 4 this year, Clark attended both the board’s school closure meetings and some of the Aboriginal focus school meetings. He was impressed with how well the board engaged the community’s views, especially over school closures. “I think the Vancouver School Board model of community consultation really set a new benchmark for how governments should work, because they set up a really dynamic process where, for the first week, they went to each of the schools in the evening time and provided the information, and really allowed the community members to discuss their concerns and raise their issues,” says Clark.

In considering the new Aboriginal focus school, he adds, the board, “did another pretty intensive consultation process with community members, parents, stakeholders like teachers and other professionals. And from that point they made the decision to proceed on creating an Aboriginal working group on what an Aboriginal school/comprehensive strategy for the district would look like.”

Aboriginal consultation in education ‘critical’: VSB

This isn’t the school district’s first flirtation with an Aboriginal-focused school. A similar idea was floated in 1995 but lost steam over fears there weren’t enough Aboriginal students to attend or sufficient parental support. The district’s First Nation and Metis student population, roughly 2,000 kids, hasn’t changed. But the district believes their parents have come round to the proposal.

In January the district revisited the idea of a “focus school,” holding four forums with students, parents, community members and district staff. A total of 167 people attended at least one forum, offering feedback and suggestions for the school. The VSB recruited UBC Education Prof. Jo-ann Archibald to both facilitate the forums and write a final report. (The Tyee Solutions Society tried to contact Archibald for an interview, but was unsuccessful by press time.)

The report outlines the Aboriginal view of a holistic education, one which forum members suggested the school should adopt. This view takes into account the spiritual, recognizing connections between the land, people, culture and learning; the emotional, where pos-

itive feelings and empowerment are just as important as good grades; the physical, referring to governance structure and decision making as well as physical fitness and health; and the intellectual, devising a new curriculum that meets academic standards but includes Aboriginal history and culture taught through an Aboriginal lens.

The public citizens who attended the forums held strong views that enrolment in such a school should be voluntary, and open to non-Aboriginal students too. They also requested a new, Aboriginal-inclusive curriculum for the entire district.

Since then, the VSB has hired a liaison worker to reach out to the Aboriginal community. It's establishing a working group of community members, parents, students and district stakeholders to set short and long-term goals for the school's development. And it's set a target: the aim is to open the school's doors -- on a grade range yet to be decided -- by September of 2012.

"Aboriginal education is a high priority for the board," says VSB Superintendent Steve Cardwell. "And we are doing a number of strong directions with respect to our Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement and this further enhances that direction."

And Cardwell appears to share at least one of Gray's concerns for the school proposal: "It's critical for us to continue consultation with the Aboriginal community as we move forward."

'Something less'

For Ontario transplant Tabobandung, living on the border of the Mount Pleasant and Strathcona neighbourhoods just blocks away from Queen Alex and Britannia schools, both have been a part of her community in every sense of the word. She's been actively involved since she joined the Parent Advisory Council at her kids' school, Queen Alexandria Elementary, three years ago.

Since then Tabobandung has also served on the board of APPLE BC, and was active in last fall's Save Our Schools campaign to keep five Vancouver community schools open, sharing the microphone with NDP MLAs Jenny Kwan and David Chudnovsky, the latter also a former president of the BC Teachers' Federation.

But Tabobandung was disturbed when her eldest's new school, Britannia Secondary, suggested her daughter be transferred to an alternative program because of behavioural problems. Tabobandung says the school had previously tried to deal with the issue within the normal classroom, until they found out her daughter was native. Fair-skinned with a non-Aboriginal last name, Tabobandung claims her teachers previously thought her daughter was Caucasian. But Tabobandug claims when they found out she was native, they suggested she join the 8J/9J alternative program for inner city youth who experience difficulties in mainstream schooling.

"I would say probably 65-75 per cent of the Aboriginal youth that go to Britannia, [it is] suggested that that's the preferred program for them," says Tabobandung, who disagrees with the whole idea of separating Aboriginal kids from others. "I'm very skeptical about [Britannia's] socialization of Aboriginal kids," she says.

Tabobandung and her partner decided the segregated program wasn't the answer for their daughter, feeling the school only suggested the program to her because of her Aboriginal heritage. She doesn't believe an entire school for Aboriginal children is the answer, either. "My concern would be we are living in a multicultural, vast, society," she says. "And if in high school we subject our youth to only being taught in a First Nations environment, they will never learn the social skills to interact with other races."

Sherry Small, program director for the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, echoes Tabobandung's experience -- and her skepticism of 'alternative' education streams. Small's two daughters, part First Nations, part African-American, both experienced difficulty in school. But Small claims it wasn't until teachers learned they were half native that remedial programs were suggested.

Emphasizing that her views don't represent the centre she works for, Small accuses the district of systematically diverting First Nations and Metis youth into second-class education. "I guarantee you," says Small,

"that the school system is offering our children -- as soon as they find out they're Aboriginal -- something less."

It's not an uncommon view in Vancouver's Aboriginal community. Some parents who attended VSB's aboriginal school forums admitted to not identifying themselves or their children as Aboriginal, "for fear of being labeled with learning problems and then treated as having 'deficits.'"

Small read the report but, like Tabobandung, did not attend the forums. And like Tabobandung she doesn't support the Aboriginal school idea. "As soon as you take one whole group away from another, that's segregation, she objects. "And I don't believe in dividing people based on people-issues. That's not a real honour of diversity."

Small says she likes the Enhancement Agreement, but sees the Aboriginal school as a device to allow the district, teachers and the educational establishment to back away from incorporating more First Nations and Metis culture across the board -- into teacher training as well as curriculum.

"No matter how well you develop a curriculum, no matter how well you develop your institution, the teachers that walk in are the ones that need to change," she says. "It's mandatory in the curriculum to teach First Nations studies, but [teachers] can't because they're not taught [about First Nations]."

Correcting the curriculum

Both Small and Tabobandung believe the answer to improving Aboriginal outcomes is changing everyone's school experience to include more Aboriginal history and outlook. It would not only serve to make Aboriginal children more comfortable in the public system, they argue, but help reduce racism against Aboriginals by teaching other children about First Nation cultures and backgrounds. "I think the Enhancement Agreement calls for us to be more inclusive and not segregated, to learn about the real, true history of Aboriginal people of Canada," says Small.

Tabobandung cites her son's experience at Bob & Kay Ackles YMCA Nanook House child-care centre as an ideal model for an inclusive public education. She liked how that school's director incorporated many different cultures into the curriculum in a way young children could understand. "For African American history month, they learned about Rosa Parks and all of these different people. They made the curriculum and content suitable for children in daycare!

"If a supervisor can do that for a day care," she says, laughing, "we've got to be able to do that for children in elementary and secondary."

In that regard Gray, and the majority of those who participated in the VSB's forums, agree: "The First Nations community, our culture and our traditions, a lot can be drawn from that in the curriculum," says Gray. "Say in science: you can learn about fish, or you can learn about the waterways, a lot of the things that our ancestors used to practice on a daily basis. A lot of our people still have that knowledge."

She dismisses fear that the school will be a form of segregation, and suggests that anyone who lets that stand in the way of accepting it doesn't understand the abject failure of the mainstream public school system to graduate Aboriginal children.

But they may come around as they better understand the proposal, Gray thinks. "We found at the forums that people come in and say things like, they didn't want it because of this. Then they hear something and they go 'Oh, that's great. I never thought it was going to be that, I thought all our kids are going to be forced to go there'. Once they have the actual knowledge, then there's a different attitude. I think if [parents] understand that it's going to meet provincial standards, that they'll have a different point of view."

School system only half the battle

Clark is impressed with both the VSB's Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement and its track record in consulting with the community at large. "What is good about the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement is

that it's comprehensive in its scope about the need to work with the children, the families, the community and the school," he says. But that doesn't mean he's necessarily going to send his son to the school once it opens: "It wouldn't be in his community," Clark explains. "There's a solid network in place where he is now."

Vancouver's Aboriginal School remains more high concept than bricks and mortar reality. The VSB hasn't determined where the school will be, or what grades it will deliver -- though forum participants leaned in favour of a kindergarten-to-Grade-12 school. For her part, Gray believes it should be at MacDonald Elementary in Strathcona, and run from kindergarten to Grade 7. Slated along with four others to be closed last fall, MacDonald is at about 40 per cent capacity -- and four-fifths of its students are Aboriginal, Gray notes.

"The community has a really good relationship with that school," she says. "They feel safe. This is the hub of the native community here. There's about 15 different social housing buildings that are around here, so people can easily get to the school, even if they're poor they can walk there."

But convenience to that cluster of First Nations and Metis families would put a school in Strathcona out of the way for many other Aboriginal families across the Lower Mainland.

Nor, Clark argues, should the burden of improving Aboriginal learning fall solely on the shoulders of the public school system. "We can't just pin all the blame on education," he says. "We think we can just dump our kids on the school system, and they're going to fix everything. That's wrong. Education is a lifelong process. And it's time we as parents and as a community take ownership over the impact of mainstream media, popular culture and constantly be working with our children."

With the district set to continue discussions with the Aboriginal community and urban Aboriginal organizations this fall, meeting a September 2012 deadline could be tight. It's clear however that whatever final decision awaits the focus school, parents of Metis and First Nations heritage seeking a better educational future for their kids, and the Vancouver School Board itself, both know they can only find a solution by working together.

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Tyee Solutions Society *is a non-profit producing catalytic, solutions-oriented journalism on social, economic and environmental issues of broad concern to Canadians.*

For more information visit www.tyeesolutions.org.

Comments received in response to "Amidst the Big City, an Aboriginal Public School?" on The Tyee.ca

Separation is a Slippery Slope

As a young Aboriginal woman who went through the education system in BC I can comment on the sense of isolation and not belonging to the mainstream Canadian culture I was surrounded by. Even in grade three Social Studies I knew "some white guys" didn't discover North America. While I can understand why a separate educational program with an Aboriginal-based curriculum might be appealing, I feel that this is not the right approach to help foster acceptance and integration of Aboriginal identity in mainstream Canadian culture. Rather, I hope people consider further integration of Aboriginal-based curriculum into mainstream education.

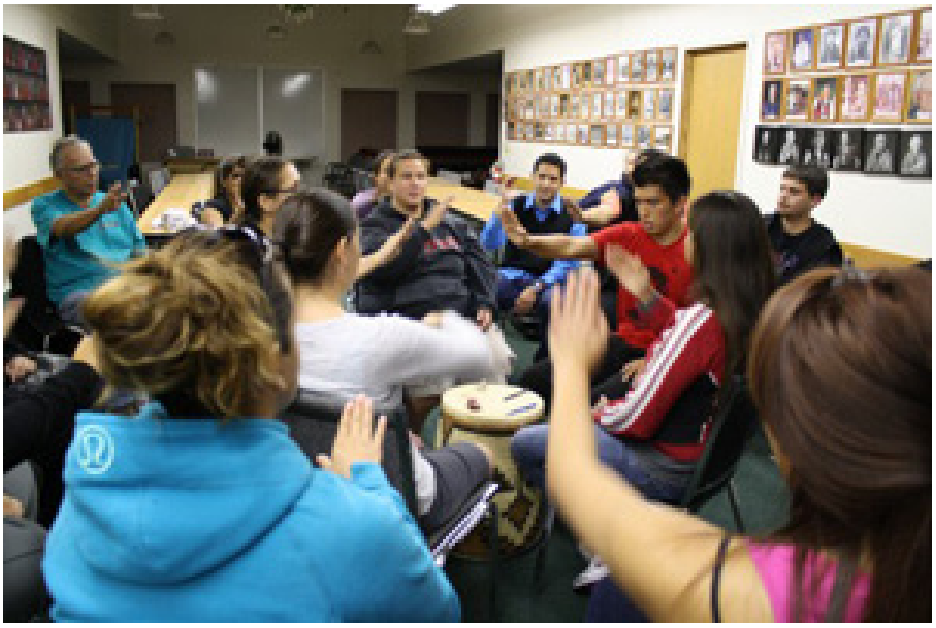
Our cultures have a lot to offer Canadians and our young people, Aboriginal or not, need to be raised to accept differences. Separation does not, in my mind, enhance non-judgement, a key to facilitating inclusion and acceptance between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Canadians within communities and within society. New Zealand portrays a good example in that even at the university level all students, regardless of their culture or heritage, can study in the Maori language. It is time we re-write our history books to closer represent the truth and allow future generations to learn from our past mistakes so that they may not be repeated. In Peace...

Giving Aboriginal Students Words of Their Own

More than a village, it takes a living language to educate a child. Aboriginal educators say BC's government is letting endangered tongues die.

By Katie Hyslop
Published on October 11, 2011, by TSS media partner: The Tyee.
See the original story and others in the "Successful Practices in First Nations Education" series at http://www.tyeesolutions.org/?p=657

Deborah Jacobs doesn't think it's possible for an Aboriginal person to really know themselves, their identity as an indigenous person, if they don't know their own language.



Class learning Squamish language. Photo courtesy SquamishLanguage.com.

"There are some people who have very little retention of a huge part of their identity, that is the language and the knowledge that comes with the ways of knowing if you're a Squamish person," for example, says Jacobs, a middle-aged Squamish woman and co-director of the languages subcommittee of the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), a B.C. organization that pushes for better Aboriginal education and provides assistance to reserve schools.

"Current research tells us that children who are educated in multiple languages are, by far, much more successful in school," Jacobs notes. "If we had resources [FNESC] would be looking at democratizing [language] so it is the right of every citizen within our nation to be educated [in their language]."

Jacobs and her colleagues have been working for over 20 years to strengthen and sustain First Nation's speech in B.C., home to 60 per cent of Canada's Aboriginal languages. And they're failing. Only 32 of the province's 40 languages are currently active. The other eight are "sleeping," meaning there are no native speakers left.

That's despite the efforts of the First People's Heritage, Language and Culture Council, a provincial Crown Corporation created in 1990, "to assist B.C. First Nations in their efforts to revitalize their languages, arts and cultures." In its most recent Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages last year, the Language

and Culture Council found barely 5.1 per cent of First Nations British Columbians are fluent in their own languages -- languages that all could speak 120 years ago. Even semi-fluent speakers make up only 8.2 per cent of the population. Perhaps more discouraging to advocates, just 11.1 per cent are making any effort to learn.

The fear of losing culture along with language isn't unique to Canada's indigenous populations. The Canadian Constitution Act granted francophone minorities nationwide the right to publicly funded French education in 1982. Since that time, the Government of British Columbia has granted public funds to Punjabi schools, started Mandarin bilingual programs in larger school districts, and offers classes in Greek, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish and Korean, all at public expense, with at least the partial aim of preserving the cultures of immigrants who relocate to Canada.

None of those languages is as near to extinction as are many Aboriginal ones, whose fluent speakers are dying faster than the young can learn their native tongue. Without this knowledge, Aboriginal leaders argue, Canada's Aboriginal people lose a part of their history and a part of themselves, finally delivering on the goal of the residential school system.

Canada formally recognized Aboriginal Canadians' rights to teach their children in the own language when we endorsed the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples last year. But the government funds and resources that do go towards Aboriginal language revitalization are paltry compared to what the francophone population receives for their public schools. A clear difference between the two issues, however, is that the provincial and national purse strings are held by people who don't speak Aboriginal languages and who, language advocates insist, don't understand, the loss to Aboriginal culture and knowledge if these languages are allowed to disappear.

Jacobs spoke to the Tyee Solutions Society in an empty ballroom at the Coast Plaza Hotel and Suites in downtown Vancouver. She was taking a break from a conference -- the seventh FNESC has held -- on the confluence of languages, cultural heritage and the future of aboriginal people and communities. The event was packed -- despite the fact it was taking place two weeks into summer break. The overflow attendance of close to 300 people, mainly language teachers, was a long way from the first conference in Prince George in 2004, where only a few dozen showed up.

'Elders are the professors': Jacobs

"What has changed," Jacobs explained, "is the elders." For many who went through residential schools in the last century, helping now to preserve and pass on native languages is, "very much a healing process," she says. "These are people who were born wrapped in their first language, and there was incredible disruption going to residential school." Now those same elders represent the largest population of fluent language First Nations speakers. The Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages calculates 52.4 per cent of fluent Aboriginal language speakers are over 65 years old, and another 39 per cent 45 to 65.

Elders are the majority of language teachers, and only they can determine if a speaker has achieved fluency. But children are the future of languages: over 70 per cent of people learning first languages in the province are under 24 years of age. And with the introduction of "language nests" (early childhood programs where children hear only the traditional language), government-run Head Start early childhood programs that incorporate Aboriginal languages into curriculum, and even Aboriginal language classes at Aboriginal and some public schools, opportunities for children to learn their own language have improved in the past 20 years.

It's still not enough, says Tracey Herbert, executive director of the Language and Culture Council. "First Nations people are still not in charge of the education of their children," Herbert observes. "We don't get to make a lot of decisions or policies with regard to the education of our children and how money is spent. That's still being determined by other people, who, quite frankly, don't have a lot of knowledge about indigenous languages and may not value them."

Herbert believes that with fluent elders being lost to many First Nations families, schools must take up the role of saving languages. She points to the Chief Atahm

Immersion School, on the Adams Lake reserve, as an example of getting it right, but says most schools don't have the appropriate funding to cover the resources or hire the teachers to instruct language in a meaningful way.

And as important as they may be to revitalizing languages, schools cannot rely solely on fluent elders who are steadily aging out of their teaching years. Some post-secondary institutions in the province are taking on the task of training new generations of teachers in Aboriginal languages. The University of Victoria, for example, offers diploma and graduate certificate programs in indigenous language revitalization through its faculty of education. Herbert's Council aims to expand these programs to all post-secondary institutions in the province to increase access for B.C. Aboriginals to language training.

Even in those teacher-training programs however, elders remain the authority. It's a stipulation Jacobs and FNESC have impressed upon the BC Federation of Teachers and post-secondary partners. When it comes to training and certifying language teachers, they believe elders are the only experts who can attest to a speaker's competence in an Aboriginal language.

"[Elders] are the doctors, they are the professors, of the language," Jacobs believes. "So only [they] can determine whether or not a teacher has a proficiency."

The French Connection

Gerald Fallon believes what's good for francophone ought to be good for Canada's First Nations, too. The University of British Columbia professor of indigenous studies says the guarantee of a publicly funded French education for francophone children outside of Quebec in the Canadian Constitution Act should be copied for the country's Aboriginal population.

"If you want your culture to evolve, your language has to be at the centre of your curriculum, [as the] medium that was used to generate all that knowledge," Fallon explains. "Because if you take it out of the equation, then what you're doing is you're translating [the traditional language] into English. The Aboriginal perspective of how society should work, and why we have education, and what it means to be Aboriginal, is lost."

The Language and Culture Council argues that losing a language is more than the loss of one perspective on society: it also depletes an Aboriginal individual's sense of cultural identity, health and well-being, and robs them of traditional knowledge on physical, spiritual, and mental well-being.

Francophone Canadians not only have the right to have their children taught in their own language, provincial governments pay for French immersion programs and even entire schools that are open to non-francophone students as well. In B.C. alone, nearly 40,000 students were enrolled in a French immersion program in the 2006-07 school year. That's fewer than the 61,828 students who self-identified as Aboriginal in the public system in 2009-10 -- a numbr that itself does not include another 10,000 Aboriginal kids attending reserve schools in B.C. The province doesn't keep track of how much money goes into French immersion programs in BC, but in 2007-08 the federal government gave the province $9.1 million for French programming, at least half of which goes towards French immersion programming.

Fallon believes the same degree of support should exist for Aboriginal languages, too. "Aboriginal language should be a part of any curriculum for Aboriginal students, and it should be included as a choice for non-Aboriginal students, depending on the context. Like, I know in northern Saskatchewan we have some non-Aboriginal students going to Aboriginal schools in order to learn Cree," says Fallon who is not Aboriginal himself but wrote about preserving languages as co-author of the book, First Nations Education in Canada: Progress or Gridlock.

French isn't the only language and culture accommodated by the B.C. government with schools of its own. Independent Punjabi schools first opened in British Columbia in the early 1980s in an effort to protect the Punjabi language -- spoken by close to four per cent of British Columbians today -- as the vessel of Sikh

religion and culture. In all, the province spent $258 million in 2009-10 to support 345 independent schools (although not all are based on a language other than English or French).

Moving beyond bilingual mentality

The Government of B.C. does provide some support for the preservation of Aboriginal languages, conspicuously through Herbert's Council, which owes its existence to the 1990 First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Act.

"It's hard to be a nation or a distinct society if you don't have a language," the Council's executive director says. "And it was brought to the government's attention [at the time of the Council's creation] that languages were declining, and it would be imperative in terms of treaty [negotiations] and all that, to ensure that languages were revitalized and available for First Nations people.

"Because it wasn't a natural phenomenon that led to the decline of languages," Herbert points out. "There was a direct attack on Indigenous languages through the residential school system and the removal of children from their families and communities." In response, she recalled, the Social Credit government of the day, "felt that the best way to contribute to the wellness and well-being of indigenous peoples was to contribute to language revitalization."

The provincial government still gives the agency $1.45 million per year for language services. Those include one program that pairs fluent speakers with learners for up to 300 hours of one-to-one instruction over a year. Another, FirstVoices, is an online database that records, documents and archives Aboriginal languages for reference. The organization also receive $1 million a year from the New Relations Trust, a trust fund set up by B.C. First Nations, and is anticipating $700,000 from the federal government this year -- $500,000 more than they have received in the past.

But if B.C.'s vanishing first languages are to live on, the Council says much more money is needed. "We did a business plan, and on an annual basis it would be more like $32 million, just for the community portion of the language investment," Herbert says. She doesn't feel the sum is out of line, compared to other places. "I believe Australia invests over $260 million a year annually for their [Aboriginal] languages," she says. "I think [its] government has taken their role seriously in terms of trying to make sure that people living there have the opportunity to learn their languages."

But British Columbia isn't about to go outback on education spending any time soon. Asked whether it anticipated any boost in spending on Aboriginal language preservation in future, the Ministry of Education replied by email: "Since 2001, this government has provided over $13 million to the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council for First Nations language and cultural revitalization. This level of funding has continued even through tough economic times."

While the federal government has funded the Council in the past, it does not fund language programs in Aboriginal schools. To get such programs off the ground, reserve schools must fundraise in their community or apply for small grants through the Council or philanthropic organizations.

Jacobs says all Canadians ought to question Ottawa's unwillingness to fund First Nations language instruction. "Canada still adheres to a fallacy that there are two founding nations and two founding languages," she says, "and we know this not to be correct at all."

Jacobs suggests that darker, or at least more cynical, motives may exist for federal inaction. "We saw the residential schools, in which language was most definitely to be obliterated, destroyed by any means necessary," she recalls. "So you ask, we've had Stephen Harper apologize [to residential school victims] and here we sit on what, the third, fourth year of that apology? And still nothing significant has happened. There are just words without any action behind those words."

Can money resurrect the dead?

Herbert believes that all 40 Aboriginal languages, and their 59 dialects, could still have a vibrant future in B.C. She cites Hebrew, as a good example of a language that's been revived from decline.

She calls the conference-goers who crowded the Coast Plaza hotel this summer, "champions for these languages." Many, she adds, "have been working in languages for 30-40 years and won't retire because they need successors and people to pass their language down to. So yes, absolutely, with an investment supporting these experts, our languages could be saved and brought back."

The numbers, Fallon counters, say otherwise.

"[Aboriginal people] will have to decide if they have the resources," he says, "because the average size of a band is 700 people. So do they have the critical mass to generate everything they need to offer all those services, including linguistic services and the teaching staff and so on, in all the band schools?" he asks. "That's a huge problem."

There are areas, such as Vancouver Island, where nations are large enough, Fallon says. They could easily create their own school districts using just one language. But whatever is tried, time for some endangered tongues is running out. The Language and Culture Council's report forecasts that the last of the fluent speakers of B.C.'s first languages will go silent in just five years if adequate funding is not reached. We will all lose not only a language, but a part of British Columbia's Aboriginal knowledge, identity and culture.

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Comments received in response to "Giving Aboriginal Students Words of Their Own,"on The Tyee.ca

...Delusional History

The arrogance of the Anglo-European culture is world renowned, not only from contact here. Indeed, throughout the old colonial world, from China to Burma, India and throughout British colonial Africa, even though "the Whiteman" was an infinitesimal minority, the vast majority steadfastly refused to speak the Native languages of their "subject" people. It was "the colonials" or "subject" people who were expected to speak the tongue of the "civilized English" conqueror. They even lived apart in their own enclaves of privilege, where the "majority" had better not be caught walking the streets... and [had] better give way to the White man/woman's approach.

Only a minority [of European settlers in North America] ever even attempted to learn the Native languages, during the brief period they were still insecure about their presence and how they would be received. Once they understood that the Natives in their majority were in fact very tolerant, and that they had little to fear, all that quickly changed.

It is necessary to understand "real" not "imaginary" history. And we still have a "just" peace, recognizing their nationhood and unique rights, to make with the Natives of this country. What we have even yet is a kind of apartheid rather than true equality.

And it is this same Anglo-European Colonialism now attempting to re-establish itself across the Middle East and Africa today.(Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan etc.)

A World of First Nations, Learning

Outside BC, how other indigenous people, and other jurisdictions, are building a record of academic success.

By Katie Hyslop
Published on October 12, 2011, by TSS media partner: The Tyee.
See the original story and others in the "Successful Practices in First Nations Education" series at http://www.tyeesolutions.org/?p=661

British Columbia may have one of the largest aboriginal populations in the country, but it isn't the only province whose first peoples are struggling to reconcile the history of colonialism, forced assimilation and abuse found in the residential school system with the need to educate and prepare their children for life in the 21st century. Nor is ours the only post-colonial government yet to find the right formula for helping those populations get an education.

But that has meant that many of the ideas being implemented by indigenous educators in B.C. today were taken from other First Nations, across Canada and the world, who are struggling with the same task. Inspiring innovations reported earlier in this series, such as balancing education and culture through the development of language nests and immersion schools, are the result. Here are a few more examples of successful or promising programs that indigenous people and public governments nearby and around the world are using to increase academic success.

Alberta leads the way in aboriginal-focused schools

Alberta has the third highest population of aboriginal people in Canada, and it's growing fast: the demographic jumped 23 per cent to nearly 250,000 people from 2001 to 2006. It's also the youngest population, with almost one-third of aboriginals less than 14 years old, making up almost nine per cent of children under the Edmonton public school board. But according to Assistant Superintendent Bruce Coggles, that percentage should be a lot higher.

Students at Amiskwaciy Academy in Edmonton. Photograph by Amiskwaciy Academy.

"There's a fairly significant number of First Nations students that for whatever reason choose not to self-identify. They just want to be mainstream students

and not want to be part of a sub-group within a system," says Coggles. "Even if we're aware that they're First Nations, they're not part of the population that's tracked."

This applies to aboriginal academic rates, too, so the district doesn't calculate aboriginal graduation rates. Nonetheless, in 1999, the district knew aboriginals weren't graduating at a high enough rate, and were dropping out far too often.

"We just felt we were losing too many students, and had to find a means or a strategy to increase our success level. We know it's a growing part of our population, and we just weren't satisfied with the results. So we were looking at alternatives," says Coggles.

The school board created an aboriginal task force to find solutions. One of the standout programs this created is Amiskwaciy Academy, an aboriginal-focus Grade 7 to Grade 12 school -- the first of its kind in Canada.

Located in the old Edmonton Municipal Airport terminal in city's centre, Amiskwaciy Academy opened in 2002 to all students in the district, although the approximately 300 students currently enrolled are all First Nations. There are two elders attached to the school who provide spiritual guidance and student counselling; there's a sweat lodge. Classes are offered on aboriginal drumming, where students have the chance to make their own drums. And every school day starts with a Cree song and a drumming circle for all the students, teachers and staff in the main foyer of the school.

There are aboriginal-focused options for curriculum, but unlike more rural areas, Coggles says most of the students at Amiskwaciy are urbanized and don't connect to indigenous traditions in the same way as their rural peers. "You make assumptions about heritage and assume that there's interest and knowledge in all the traditional ways. There isn't always. So rather than make things mandatory, there's opportunities for students to choose options that can have more traditional content in it," he says.

Initially, the school put more emphasis on recognition of culture and traditions, as well as providing kids with positive role models by hiring a majority of aboriginal teachers -- approximately two-thirds of the faculty. The aim was to improve student self-esteem and attendance, and then move on to academics. But Coggles says it's time to switch focus to academics, "because [Amiskwaciy's graduates] have to be able to put their results beside the other high schools and show that their results can be just as good as anybody."

That could mean fewer aboriginal teachers in the future. "At this point," says Coggles, "we're kind of saying the first thing we need is really strong teachers in their subject areas, and if we can get that person and have them First Nations as well, then that's the best of both worlds. But the first and more important thing is to have highly qualified teachers."

Again, Edmonton public school board doesn't track aboriginal academics, so there are no numbers to prove students in the Amiskwaciy program are improving. But Coggles sees signs of success. "We've gone through a few growing pains in getting it established, but we've got more stability," he says. "We're pleased that we're moving in the right direction, but we've got a ways to go yet."

Hawaiian schools make a comeback

At about the same time that British Columbia began forcing First Nations parents to send their children to English-only residential schools, much the same thing was happening in Hawaii. Native Hawaiians were forced into public, English-speaking schools starting in 1896, when their language -- Ōlelo Hawai'I -- was made illegal. Although there are differing accounts of what this meant -- some sources assert that Hawaiian language newspapers continued to be published while others claim parents were reprimanded for speaking the language to their children -- the ban succeeded in reducing Ōlelo Hawai'i from the island's predominant language, to one spoken today by six per cent of the population, according to the American Community Survey. But that's not an entirely accurate number as

there are no statistics available on the number of fluent speakers versus those that know a few words and phrases.

What's clear is that until their language was outlawed, native Hawaiians had maintained a very successful education system on their own, says Kau'ilani Sang, an educational specialist with the State Department of Education's Hawaiian Language Immersion Program.

"Hawaiians have had 'schools' since before Western contact," Sang says. "The imposition of Western beliefs on education, and the banning of the Hawaiian language in schools, led to a demise of one of the most literate nations in the world, with thousands of text documents written in Hawaiian by Hawaiians," she wrote in an email to Tyee Solutions Society.

A change in the state constitution in 1978, however, not only made Ōlelo Hawai'i an official state language, it also mandated a state duty to provide natives with education in their own language and culture. Within a decade, the government began operating Hawaiian immersion schools. Today there are 21 such schools within the public education system, as well as immersion early childhood education and university programs.

The 21 immersion schools integrate indigenous Hawaiian language, culture and history into the curriculum and are taught by a majority of indigenous teachers. In order to teach there, educators must complete a teaching degree, a four-year language program and a Hawaiian studies degree.

"The foundation of most immersion schools is to teach the language with the belief that without the culture you cannot teach the language," Sang says. "If you look at the vision of most of the schools, they're trying to produce proficient Hawaiian language speakers by the time they leave in the 12th Grade."

Only about 2,000 students are enrolled in the 21 schools. With a native Hawaiian population of 80,337, most children go to mainstream schools where teachers are unprepared to include native language and culture in the curriculum. It's just one of the drawbacks to operating a native education system as a subset of the larger public education system.

"It's limited to the preparedness of those on staff," says Sang, "to be compassionate towards trying to revitalize Hawaiian language. And because we're confined to different federal and state laws, our vision for what we're trying to do sometimes gets pushed to the side. So when it comes down to decision-making, there's a lot of advocacy that goes on outside of the system to try and get the system to understand what we're trying to do. And that's the difficult part, because while the system is required to do the job they don't necessarily have the skills or the buy-in to make the right decision."

There are pluses, however, like access to facilities and Department of Education infrastructure. And the program is working: students are leaving the program as fluent speakers, although there are no statistics on indigenous graduation rates in Hawaii, either.

"I'm pretty confident that the success rate in terms of graduation is relatively high -- I almost want to say 100 per cent. I haven't heard of any teacher or student [who] has failed, but I have heard that students have dropped out," says Sang.

Parental support of education is key: Simon

When it comes to the vitality of traditional language, the Inuit are the exception to the rule: as of 2006, 69 per cent of Inuit could converse in their language, with half speaking it regularly at home. But the majority of Inuit children attend public schools, where the main language of instruction is English or French. This hasn't resulted in a loss of traditional language, but it does prove difficult for students whose first language is Inuit.

Struggles with language only add to the socio-economic issues facing many Inuit families, such as poverty, overcrowded housing, substance abuse and physical and sexual abuse. As a result, 75 per cent of Inuit never finish high school, some of the worst academic outcomes in Canada.

Inuit leaders from across the four Inuit Arctic regions which span northern Canada from Labrador to the Yukon -- Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut -- came together with the federal, provincial and territorial governments to develop a National Strategy on Inuit Education, released in mid-June.

The strategy calls for mobilizing parent support for education, increasing bilingual (Inuit and English or French) curriculum and instructors, investing in early education, providing external social supports to students, investing in Inuit-centred curriculum and resources, establishing an Inuit writing system, creating an Inuit university and improving methods for measuring and assessing student success.

Mary Simon, president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national organization representing the Inuit, has targeted results within a decade. "We hope that within five to ten years we will significantly close the gap in high school graduation rates with southern Canada, and experience a corresponding increase in the number of Inuit who graduate from university," Simon wrote in an email to Tyee Solutions Society.

The strategy puts particular emphasis on parental support, saying Inuit organizations and public governments can only do so much to encourage academic success. The rest is up to parents, to motivate and support their child's participation in the school system.

That can be a challenge for some families. "Parents who had negative experiences with the residential school system," Simon observes, "are less likely to be supportive of their children in the current education system. Our National Inuit Education Strategy wants to address this issue by engaging parents in the education of their children, and working with parents to ensure support for students in school."

The plan is still in its early stages. A National Centre for Inuit Education is set to open this fall, followed by the appointment of an Inuit education secretariat to develop the implementation plan, dictating who is responsible for what actions, and its cost. But Simon is confident that will be accomplished by early next year.

Nation to First Nation education aid

Canada's federal government has, to be generous, ground to make up with the country's aboriginal population. It was the Federal Crown that partnered with Christian organizations to introduce residential schools as an overt and nearly successful attempt to erase the "Indian" in children by severing them from their language, culture and families. With the exception of some publicly funded private schools, churches are out of the game today, but the feds still oversee aboriginal education on reserves. And if indigenous education advocates are right, the system they're running is still failing First Nations kids.

That may, finally and perhaps, be about to change. This past June, the Government announced a new partnership with the Assembly of First Nations: a Joint Action Plan for aboriginal education to start with a national panel discussion on that that should entail. The panel has two indigenous representatives -- George Lafond, former chief of the Saskatoon Tribal Council and former special assistant to the federal minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Caroline Krause, an aboriginal educator formerly with the Vancouver school board and the University of British Columbia's faculty of education -- and one Caucasian, Scott Haldane, president and CEO of YMCA Canada.

The panel has already begun travelling across the country, speaking with aboriginal parents, children, chiefs, councils and elders; regional and national First Nations organizations; the private sector; the provinces; as well as any interested private parties. They're expected to deliver two reports: a mid-way progress report, and a final report with recommendations by 2011.

Here in British Columbia, aboriginal education advocates give the provincial government some credit for recognizing before their federal counterparts that education is something aboriginals need to be involved with. Victoria has made Aboriginal Education Agreements -- pacts signed between school boards and local native governments specifying aboriginal content in school -- mandatory for all 60 B.C. school districts. The Ministry of Education has introduced First Na-

tions English, social studies, and math courses. And they've signed an agreement with the First Nations Education Steering Committee and the federal government that says aboriginals have the right to teach their own children. They even passed an act to solidify the agreement.

"The inclusion of authentic aboriginal histories and knowledge throughout the B.C. curriculum enriches the educational experience of all students. Culturally relevant learning allows for the inclusion of local traditional knowledge, histories and aboriginal languages and is key to improving success and achievement for aboriginal students," a Ministry of Education spokesperson told Tyee Solutions Society via email.

Yet critics say it's still not enough. The provincial government doesn't provide enough funding to adequately support language revitalization programs, for one concern. Few students enrol in First Nations-focused courses in secondary school, in part critics say because the ministry has failed to inform parents and students that the course credits qualify for post-secondary admission. And Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements may be mandatory, but there is no system in place to hold districts to their promises or to measure their progress.

Aboriginal British Columbians are confident they have the knowledge and skills to educate their own children, but not the resources to do so. After years of broken promises from post-colonial governments, matched by broken lives for thousands of First Nations and Métis British Columbians, what's common to these stories of collaboration is that, while indigenous people may have the know-how to bring their children out of the academic shadows, it's much easier on all of us if they don't have to do it alone.

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Tyee Solutions Society *is a non-profit producing catalytic, solutions-oriented journalism on social, economic and environmental issues of broad concern to Canadians.*

For more information visit www.tyeesolutions.org.

Comments received in response to "A World of First Nations, Learning," on The Tyee.ca

Language

My granddaughters are First Nation, aged from six to ten years, attending public school in Campbell River. Their mother, my daughter-in-law, speaks SOME Ehatis, but says she is far from fluent. She is a survivor of Residential school and still struggles with the scars from that horrendous experience. My granddaughters will be given French classes, year after year of French, but there is no Ehatis being taught, no Moachat, no Muchalat, and very little of anything which could be deemed to be "cultural".

There's something wrong with that. And I don't think it's an accident.

My take on it is that it's just an extension of the policy of extermination and assimilation which has been imposed on FN people for the 300 years the Europeans have been here.

Instead of mourning the fact so few people are still fluent in these languages we should celebrate the fact that anyone at all has managed to resist the invaders so well, for so long.

My family is originally from Scotland and northern England. Not one of us can speak Gaelic. My grandfather did but didn't teach any of his children or grandchildren. While he cursed the "sassenach" and toasted the "king over the water" and gave us his very flawed version of history, his main emphasis was that we become very skilled in the language of the mainstream.

I'm not sure the old guy was completely correct. I don't feel badly that I don't speak Gaelic, but it does bother me that my granddaughters will grow up not knowing more of their maternal culture and language.

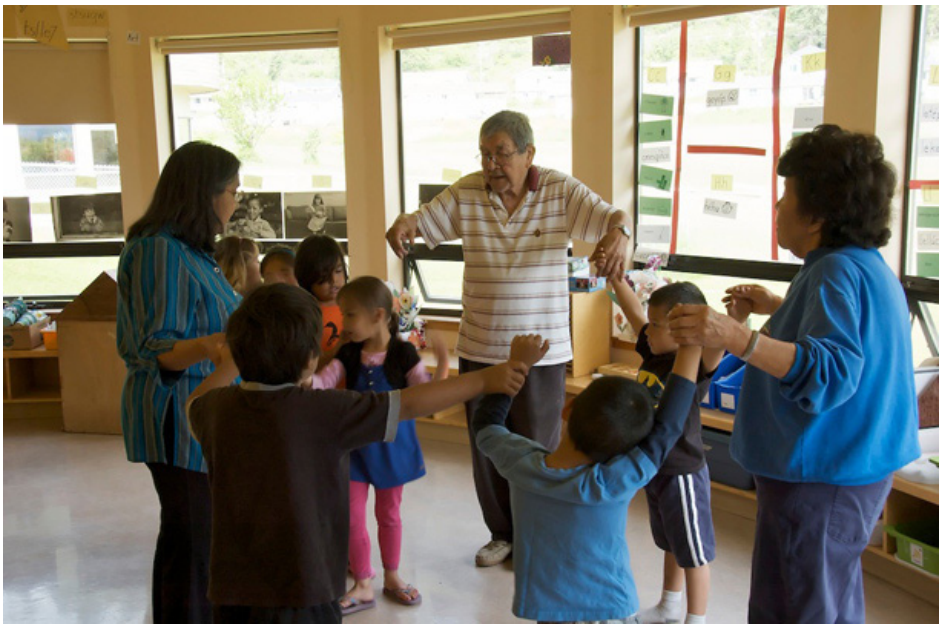
The saddest part of all is that we could do better. We could do MUCH better. If we've got enormous sums of money for bullets and bombs then surely to gawd we have money for education and culture for all people. When I was in Switzerland I met kids as young as ten who were fully fluent in four languages. I guess they're just a lot smarter than we are, eh? Makes me wonder just how dumb we are!

Aboriginal Success Starts With Teachers

Support for teachers key to student achievement, say Aboriginal administrators.

By Katie Hyslop
December 27, 2011
See the entire "Successful Practices in First Nations Education" series
at http://www.tyeesolutions.org/?page_id=231

In early December, 50 B.C. school trustees, Aboriginal education advocates and educators gathered in downtown Vancouver. In a reversal of their usual roles, they met to learn: from successful practitioners of Aboriginal education.



Students at Chief Atahm Elementary, where a unique curriculum includes gathering roots and medicines, cleaning and smoking fish, singing and creating art, with elders often showing the way. Photo by Marvin Beatty.

Sponsored by the Centre for Civic Governance and based on the Tyee Solutions Society's series on successful practices in Aboriginal education, the event offered promising answers to questions that series raised, like: How, in a decade of mediocre aboriginal graduation rates, has Haida Gwaii doubled its number of Aboriginal graduates in the past five years? How do students manage to graduate from Chief Atahm elementary school with knowledge of Secwepemctsin, a First Nations language that was all but dead 20 years ago? And how are inner-city Aboriginal kids learning how to garden, and through that activity understanding the importance of healthy eating, living, and learning, despite residing in a neighbourhood marked by poverty, unsuitable housing, and unhealthy fast-food options?

The secret, it turns out, is proper support for teachers.

Educators agree children learn best in an environment that supports them physically, mentally, and emotionally. That can't be offered without teachers who know and care about what conditions best nurture learning—and children. But according to speakers from Chief Atahm, Haida Gwaii and Vancouver, in order to provide such support to children, teachers also need to be supported too.

As Chief Atahm principal--and a former teacher--Robert Matthew knows, teaching catties a heavy responsibility: "I have the power in my little school to have an environment: what do (children) see when they come in, what are they taught, what are the values? It's scary,

because this is the most precious thing, this trust that parents have of giving me their children and trusting that I'm going to do the best job."

Shadows from a dark history

The influence of residential schools imposed on Aboriginal people in the last century continues to be felt. Athough it's been 30 years since the heyday of those institutions, and the last residential school closed in the 1990s, their effects echo on amongst Aboriginal children today, reflected in family poverty, isolation from their culture and disillusionment with the education system.

But the point of the residential schools, says Principal Matthew, was to eradicate Aboriginal culture. To fight back, Matthew says, educators must do now work to do the opposite: create a positive Aboriginal identity in schools. The best way to do that, he adds, is by supporting teachers.

"This is our policy, this is our goal, this is our vision (at Chief Atahm)," he told the Vancouver audience. He urge the educational establishment to step up with its support for cultural affirmation "Fund it. Give them the in-service [support]. If you want [teachers] to teach it, you have to teach the teacher. Give them top-notch, high-quality learning resources."

In the case of Chief Atahm, funding provided by the federal government (which has jurisdiction over such on-reserve schools) is often not enough to cover the expenses of running a kindergarten to Grade 7 school, particularly one with the technological resources and language programming this Secwepemc institution provides. It’s thanks to volunteer fundraising--largely by parents—that Matthew ensures his teachers receive the best and most up-to-date resources possible.

Keeping curriculum up to date is important, too. In Matthew’s view, the best way to ensure the future for Aboriginal children is better than the past, is to make sure they aren't being taught the same way as they were in years gone by. That means checking what's being taught in your schools, particularly for offensive materials: "Check on the learning resources in your classroom and in your resource centre. Do we need words like 'squaw' and (books like) *Sign of the Beaver*? No, we don't. Throw that stuff out. How about 'savages'? We see it on every page of *Copper Sunrise*," Matthew says. "Just because it's an award-winning book in New York City or London doesn't make it a good learning resource."

As an example of how educators can reach students who may feel alienated, Matthew recalled a young Aboriginal boy who hated both the all-white school he attended and his teachers. Matthew visited the boy with a well-chosen gift, and remembers the transformation. "I bring (him) this book, *We Are The Shuswap*. He opens it. Lo and behold there's his grandmother in the book. It changed his life instantly, and mine. He wouldn't let go of the book, he had to show it to everyone--it didn't matter that everyone also had the same book. Then suddenly school was okay, teachers were okay, social studies was okay, everything was okay... from one picture in a text book!

“If that can happen,” Matthew asked, “can we make school a reflection of the good part of the community? This is what we try to do at this school."

Change takes time

Unlike Chief Atahm, where teachers and parents design the curriculum, the teachers of Haida Gwaii are provided with a provincial Ministry of Education curriculum that puts little emphasis on Aboriginal learning in the grand scheme of learning outcomes. Although the district encourages teachers to use more Haida culture and history in their teaching, teachers that want to lead more culturally responsive classes are often left to their own devices.

Teachers often ask Joanne Yovanovich, Aboriginal principal for the Haida Gwaii district, for pre-packaged help with the cultural element in their class preparation. “'Joanne, I want to know how to teach about canoes. I need the book on it,'” is a plea she often hears. Her response is to say, “Well, go find out what you need to know about canoes, and then go back [to the class]. Be-

cause they want the ease of being able to flip through [the pages of a book], and 'culturally responsive' you can't flip through. It's the process, the process of building relationships. And building relationships with your students and your staff takes time."

The district administration is doing what it can to provide culturally responsive teaching to the 60 per cent of its students who are Aboriginal, most of them Haida. But forcing teachers to change, or adopt a new practice, hasn't worked in the past. Peer example has a better chance. "When teachers start seeing success in other classrooms, they're more apt to get on board with that," says Yovanovich. "That's what we've found, anyway. So the manner in which we present changes to staff is really important." In fact, some Haida students have even run professional development workshops for teachers on culturally responsive education.

Other symbolic changes include Haida names for all six of the schools in the district; Haida flags flying on school flag poles; taking students out on the land for lessons and fieldtrips; and bringing in outside resources, like the Haida Heritage Centre staff, or aboriginal educators from the University of British Columbia. The district has already produced one education resource of its own, an alphabet book focusing on the Haida experience called *B is for Basketball*, (basketball has become a big deal for Aboriginals in northern B.C.), and it's working on a new culturally responsive math book, in conjunction with UBC and the Haida Heritage Centre.

"Culturally responsive seems to happen easier within language arts programs, and sometimes easier in science, but math was another one that our teachers kept saying 'math is math. It's a pure subject. It's a culture-free subject,' and yet when you look at our students in math, it's low scores there," says Yovanovich. "We had teachers meet, throughout the year, with people coming up from UBC, and they figured out how to think about math, and then we offered a [culturally relevant] math course, and from that we also created [the] book based on canoe math."

Although it's a challenge to get every teacher to try new things, Yovanovich hopes the district's Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement, set to be signed with the Haida bands this February, will encourage island teachers to make classes more culturally responsive.

Grow relationships with your teachers

Grandview/¿uuqinak'uuh is an inner-city school, and although Principal Gloria Raphael emphasizes that it's not specifically geared towards Aboriginal children, like most inner-city Vancouver schools, children from First Nations and Metis families make up a large part of the population. But instead of focusing on the deficits children and their families face in the region, when Raphael joined the school three-and-a-half years ago she worked with the teachers to develop a school vision that focuses on healthy growth and learning.

"My first perceptions were of a school culture that was built around dependency and deficit," she told her Vancouver audience. "It seemed clear that in order for the needs of these students to be met by the school community, I needed to develop a more responsive and relevant approach to working with the children and the families at the school."

Teachers and staff adopted an Earth School model, in which each year is dedicated to a different element: water, sky, forest, and earth. They took over a little-used community garden already on school property. "We developed a four-year action plan that was integrating the earth concepts into the curriculum," Raphael recalls, "and this plan supports continuous improvement for all of the children on a daily basis. Over time, we continued to work broadly on processes that developed clear understanding among teachers and parents and the professional associations on how to create positive working relationships."

Teachers worked together and with the children to keep the gardens growing and in the curriculum. One teacher, Lori Prodan, took it upon herself to design a collection of lesson plans based on the garden, called *Greening Grandview: Outdoor Experiential Learning Activities*, ensuring kids' work in the garden met ministry-mandated learning outcomes. The activities build self-reliance among students who face the numerous hardships of inner-city living, whether it's unstable

housing, addiction at home, food security, and other affects of poverty, and teachers who have been supported to educate students outside of the classroom.

"Supporting teachers is very important to giving teachers the ability to do what they think is right, and to shift beliefs and attitudes amongst our staff," says Raphael, lauding the hard work and collaborative nature of her staff.

Regardless of how long teachers have been outside of their own teacher-training classrooms, educators can adapt new methods and models of teaching to bring successful Aboriginal education practices into the mainstream. But the message for those educating treachers, school trustees and government officials, is that for change to come, teachers need support, whether it's funding texts, technology, language study—or a plot of dirt. Without it, there's only so much success a teacher can grow on their own.

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