



Reinterpreting Indian Control of Indian Education

**Accelerating Indigenous Educational
Achievement through Choice**

**By Joseph Quesnel
and Meredith Lilly**

About the authors



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Note to reader: Some words in this document may appear in blue and are underlined.
Clicking on these words will direct the reader to relevant sites or documents using your associated web-browser.

Executive Summary

- There are many indications that the federal government will be engaging in wide-reaching reforms to Aboriginal education.
- Most of the recommendations call for Native school boards or the creation of the equivalent of provincial education ministries for Aboriginals.
- These changes may be necessary, but it should be recognized that system-wide changes alone may not be enough to improve student outcomes, which is the end goal.
- Aboriginal education exists within a policy vacuum in Canada, as Ottawa is reluctant to establish guidelines or even an education system after the experience with the Indian residential schools.
- Although band authorities are supposed to provide education that is comparable to the provincial system, this is largely illusory, as there is no real enforcement of standards, and band councils are generally underfunded for education. Band schools also have a hard time recruiting and retaining veteran teachers.
- The Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS) in Alberta is Canada's only indigenous charter school, and it provides a good illustration of what is possible in Canada. (Charter schools are elementary or secondary schools that receive public money but are free from many public school regulations.) Despite challenges, the MECCS has come a long way, and it proves that indigenous teachings and educational accountability can work together.
- The United States has more experience with charter schools with an indigenous focus than Canada does. Some of them, such as the Native Hawaiian system, have proven results that can provide ideas for Canadian charter schools that have an indigenous focus.
- It is uncertain to what degree culture is part of a school's success. However, it is clear that culture, higher standards and accountability must all go together.
- To retain good teachers, Aboriginal schools must be able to provide arrangements wherein veteran teachers can return to their former jobs and where working in a reserve school helps to advance their careers.
- The sole emphasis should not be on bands running the schools. Independent, indigenous agencies ought to be able to sign charters with governments to run indigenous schools.
- The federal government in co-operation with a province should adopt more pilot projects where indigenous charter schools are created in appropriate places.
- For both on-reserve and off-reserve schools, the emphasis should be on allowing Aboriginal parents to choose the school that is best for their children. The funding should not always be given directly to band councils or even education authorities. If there are alternatives within the region, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) should work with all relevant parties to ensure that parents have choices and that the money follows the student.

Introduction



In 2008, AANDC reported that there were 115,527 First Nations youth and children who lived on-reserve and were in school. Of these, 59,929 attended First Nations schools, while 52,129 attended provincially funded schools. First Nations schools are operated by First Nations communities and are funded by the federal government rather than a province or territory, which is the case with other public schools. There are also provincially funded schools off-reserve that focus on Aboriginal or First Nations culture.

The *Indian Act* does address First Nations education, albeit in a very limited way. The education sections (114-122) detail the requirement for on-reserve children to attend the schools chosen for them by the federal Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. However, First Nations parents can sometimes exercise more choice. If they live close to a public district school, their children can go there. It is unfortunate that in many cases First Nations band councils are not amenable to this. They try to pressure the parents to keep their children in the band school, as their enrolment numbers are important to them.

“First Nations band councils ... try to pressure the parents to keep their children in the band school, as their enrolment numbers are important to them.”

Most Aboriginal education experts say that there is not much of an Aboriginal education system. Although the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs has the authority under Section 115 of the *Indian Act* to provide for and make regulations relating to standards for buildings, equipment, teaching, education, inspection and discipline in connection with Indian band schools, there are no effective regulations in place and the few regulations that exist are not enforced. These matters are often left to the school principal, education committee or authority, or the band council. This can be good if proper governance is in place, but it is often bad if the school is subject to local politics, which sadly is often the case.

It is important to understand the history of First Nations education in Canada. Until the release of “Indian Control of Indian Education,” a critical education paper by the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) in 1972, First Nations education was firmly controlled by the federal government and religious institutions,¹ and it was used to encourage the assimilation of indigenous youth into mainstream society. This is largely why the *Indian Act* permits the Minister to enter into agreements with provinces and religious organizations for them to run First Nations schools, and it does not allow the Minister to enter into agreements with First

Nations organizations (such as First Nations educational organizations or boards) to run their own schools. In 1972, none of these elements, such as educational organizations or Native boards, existed. The *Act* contains no substantive mention of the quality of the education provided or the rights of parents.

Where Aboriginal education experts say there is a “policy vacuum,” the vacuum is part of the legacy of the Indian residential school experience in that Ottawa is reluctant to interfere in band education, as it fears charges of imposing education on Natives in order to assimilate them.

When the National Indian Brotherhood released “Indian Control of Indian Education” in 1972, it led to a complete reversal of Aboriginal education policies. In reaction to a deliberately coercive legislative framework, Ottawa went the other way and did not get involved in Aboriginal education except to fund it.²

Aboriginal Affairs funds band councils or other First Nations education authorities, so they can pay for education from kindergarten through to adult learners who live on the reserve. Funding is achieved through agreements with the bands or other authorities that provide varying levels of autonomy.

When Aboriginal Affairs funds on-reserve schools, it requires comparability or transferability as a condition of payment, which means that the band councils are required to provide programs that are comparable to provincially recognized programs of study as well as ensuring that only provincially certified teachers are employed. The councils must also provide education standards that will allow students to transfer to other schools within the province in which they live. The problem is that this is often a very loose relationship, as students from band schools are often not transferable.

Children in reserve schools often have difficulty transferring to other schools or to post-secondary institutions, perhaps because they did not receive the basic skills that they needed.

The central problem is that there is no real mechanism for ensuring comparability. It is a requirement for the band councils, not the federal government. Many First Nations educators on the reserve will say that comparability does not exist, particularly when it comes to funding. Comparable funding means that band schools and provincial public schools receive roughly the same sums for similar enrolment figures. These educators insist that the 520 band-operated schools across Canada do not receive as much funding as comparable provincial public schools and that their federal funding has been capped unfairly despite a burgeoning youth population.³ Credible sources say the funding rates for band-operated schools are 20 per cent to 30 per cent below the rates of their provincial counterparts, which results in overcrowding and huge student to teacher ratios.⁴ Such underfunding presents problems for the creation of additional programs for students or even for basic necessities like libraries. While there is likely an underfunding gap that needs to be resolved, funding alone will not address the entrenched problems that largely stem from lack of governance, leadership and administration. Much more focus needs to be placed on governance and leadership. It is not actually clear to what extent the problems can be attributed to funding levels.

Rod Clifton, a recently retired professor of education at the University of Manitoba, said in a phone interview that the funding gap needs to be carefully considered. One would need to know the cost of salaries. Should they be identical to the salaries of off-reserve non-Aboriginal teachers who pay income tax, or should they be lower

because the on-reserve teachers do not pay taxes? Clifton notes that band schools are increasingly employing Aboriginal teachers, so this tax exemption affecting salaries point would be an important issue to consider as the take home salaries for Aboriginal teachers on-reserve may be comparable to those off-reserve when the exemption is taken into consideration. What about the taxes on the equipment or whether the support staff pay income tax? Clifton also stressed the importance of enrolment as a considering factor. For schools in Manitoba, count day is September 30, the day by which principals try to get as many children into school as possible because it is the day the provincial government counts the students and then determines the school funding for the next year. If a reserve school lost 20 per cent of its students between the beginning of the school year and September 30 and then another 30 per cent by the end of the year, it would seem that perhaps the school is funded at an appropriate level. Some would ask why should Canadian taxpayers pay for students who drop out before the end of September, and why should they pay the full cost for students who drop out before Christmas? These are important questions.

Robert Ouellette, program director at the University of Manitoba for the Aboriginal Focus programs, also identified staff recruitment and retention as problems. But, increasingly, Aboriginal students are becoming teachers and social workers and are filling these positions on the reserves.

First Nations reserves tend to get freshly graduated teachers. Eager for their first job, they are often unprepared for the adjustment required and often become discouraged. Band schools tend not to receive veteran teachers and often end up with a high turnover rate and a large number of inexperienced teachers who often want to leave after experiencing culture shock. Strategies such as those

Band schools tend not to receive veteran teachers and often end up with a high turnover rate and a large number of inexperienced teachers who often want to leave after experiencing culture shock.

provided in the last section of this paper are needed to retain veteran teachers at reserve schools.

Michael Mendelson, a recognized Canadian Aboriginal education policy expert, has argued that the problem is the lack of second and third levels of the education system. In the second level, schools boards provide support for local schools. The third level concerns ministries of education providing educational support services to boards and local schools, such as curriculum supports. Mendelson finds that the model of the village school that operates under the jurisdiction of the town mayor is long gone everywhere except for First Nations reserves.⁵ However, the town mayor or reeve did not always chair the school boards. In 1945, there were close to 2,000 school boards in Manitoba, and citizens who lived close to the schools were able to sit on the boards of trustees.

As Mendelson himself recognizes, viable school boards and ministries do not guarantee improved outcomes.⁶ The emphasis should not be solely on building systems; it should be on improving student outcomes. For this reason, indigenous charter schools should have to sign a charter to achieve concrete objectives in a five-year period. If they do not achieve their objectives, they could be closed, and the teachers lose their jobs.

His [J. Richards] research found that in the over 300 British Columbia schools he studied, Aboriginal students actually did better in schools with fewer Aboriginal students.

That being said, in places such as British Columbia and Nova Scotia where Native bands have built organizations and support structures, there seems to be some effect on graduation rates.⁷ However, the cause and effect relationship is not certain, as other important variables need to be considered and controlled for.

Indigenous alternatives, such as independent, magnet or charter schools are neglected options. Most importantly, all options must be considered within an environment of choice for Aboriginal parents. This must also mean Aboriginal students, including those living on-reserve, have the option of attending public schools in their region.

Choice may mean that the best option, in a parent's view, is a local non-Aboriginal school. John Richards, a recognized expert in Aboriginal education at Simon Fraser University's School of Public Policy, in a paper prepared for the C.D. Howe Institute, argued that the disproportionate social problems faced by Aboriginal students (poverty, single parent families) can have a 'negative peer effect' that brings down scores.⁸ His research found that in the over 300 British Columbia schools he studied, Aboriginal students actually did better in schools with fewer Aboriginal students.⁹

A voucher-type system could be available if

band councils allowed on-reserve children to go to off-reserve schools and if the money followed the children. This would make schools more accountable, as there would be competition between the schools for the children.

Non-profit agencies or individuals who are dissatisfied with the conventional public school system often run government-authorized charter schools.

The main point, however, is that they have a charter and are accountable for making sure that the objectives outlined in the charter are achieved. As such, these schools are freer to experiment with different teaching techniques and approaches. In exchange, they are accountable for producing results in accordance with their charters. Some examples are the [Calgary Arts Academy](#), the [Calgary Science School](#) and the [New Horizons School](#), which focuses on gifted children.

Due to the ability of these schools to tailor their programs to students and the schools' track records of working well for disadvantaged groups (to be discussed later), these options should be taken more seriously as a way of injecting choice and improving outcomes for Aboriginal students. Charter schools sign the charter first and then are able to select the students who can attend.

Changes coming

Major changes to Aboriginal education are in the works. The release of a Standing Senate Committee report on Aboriginal education this past December and the just released February 2012 report from a national panel (officially called the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education) that investigated the state of First Nations education point to comprehensive change. The aim would be to reform the entire system of education delivery to Aboriginals.

Some news columnists reported that there is an appetite among Conservative Party insiders¹⁰ for a *First Nations Education Act*, indicating that the speculation about comprehensive change could prove correct. It would appear that this proposed act is roughly patterned on the Senate committee report mentioned previously, and it would focus on building Native school boards.

Many of the current recommendations out there say “professionalization” of the First Nations education system is key. The creation of Native school boards (which currently do not exist, except in some form in some provinces) is one major idea that is floating around, but it is not entirely clear how a Native school board would be different from a band council supervising a school. Reforms to the funding formula for band-operated schools are also on the agenda, although, as mentioned previously, it is not clear that insufficient funding is the issue.

Our purpose is not to address these impending changes but to argue that the changes should ensure that they provide school choice for Aboriginal parents, which should include the option of charter schools.

Any reform to Aboriginal education must recognize that the band-operated public school is not the only model available. This paper looks at the indigenous charter school as a possible model for further exploration, both on-reserve and off-reserve.

Given that a large proportion of First Nations and Aboriginal people (which includes Métis and Inuit) live in urban areas, there exist tremendous opportunities for indigenous charter or independent schools. Although the schools would focus on indigenous students, they would not be closed to non-Aboriginal students. Likely, these charter schools could be paid for through a special direct tuition agreement with Aboriginal Affairs and work with the provinces on curriculum standards. This is similar to the Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School. The policies of choice affect urban Aboriginals as well (some ideas for charter schools would work better in urban areas as opposed to some of the more isolated First Nations).

The aim would be to reform the entire system of education delivery to Aboriginals ... it would focus on building Native school boards.

Case study of a hidden gem: Mother Earth's Children's Charter School

Alberta is the only province to stress radical choice within its education policies. However, other provinces, including Manitoba, have some room for choice. Manitoba allows students to go across divisional boundaries to attend school, and the money follows the students. Alberta's Catholic and public schools are funded within the system.

Measures to increase school choice began in the 1970s when the Edmonton Public School Board received government permission to introduce an open boundaries (parents could send their children to any school as long as there was room) policy. In the late 1980s, Alberta amended its *School Act* to allow boards to establish alternative programs, which specialize in areas such as language, culture, teaching philosophy and religion. Alberta allowed charter schools in 1994, and in 1996, it removed boundary barriers in all provincial school jurisdictions. As stated earlier, charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate within the public system, but they have relative freedom from its rules and regulations. They sign a charter with the government that ensures certain results are achieved. In Alberta, charter schools are operated by a society or company in accordance with Section 31 (1) of the *School Act*. Applicants who wish to establish a charter school could include parents, teachers or community members. Applicants must become incorporated as a society or registered as a company in accordance with the *School Act*. They are subject to review and charters are signed for five years at a time.

Alberta removed taxing authority from school boards and implemented a model in which funding follows the student. Alberta has also been much more open to supporting parents who send their children to fee-charging private schools, increasing funding to 70 per cent of the per-student funding that the province offers to public schools.

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School opened in the fall of 2003 and is Canada's only recognized indigenous charter school. MECCS operates across the North Saskatchewan River near Genesee, Alberta, (about 30 minutes southwest of Stony Plain) in a former boys' school. It offers programs to 100 students from kindergarten to Grade 9 and has 21 staff members. About 95 per cent of the student population is First Nations and 5 per cent is non-Aboriginal. Approximately 80 per cent of the students come from Paul First Nation, with the other 20 per cent coming from other communities including Enoch Cree Nation, Onoway, Alberta Beach, Warburg and Edmonton.

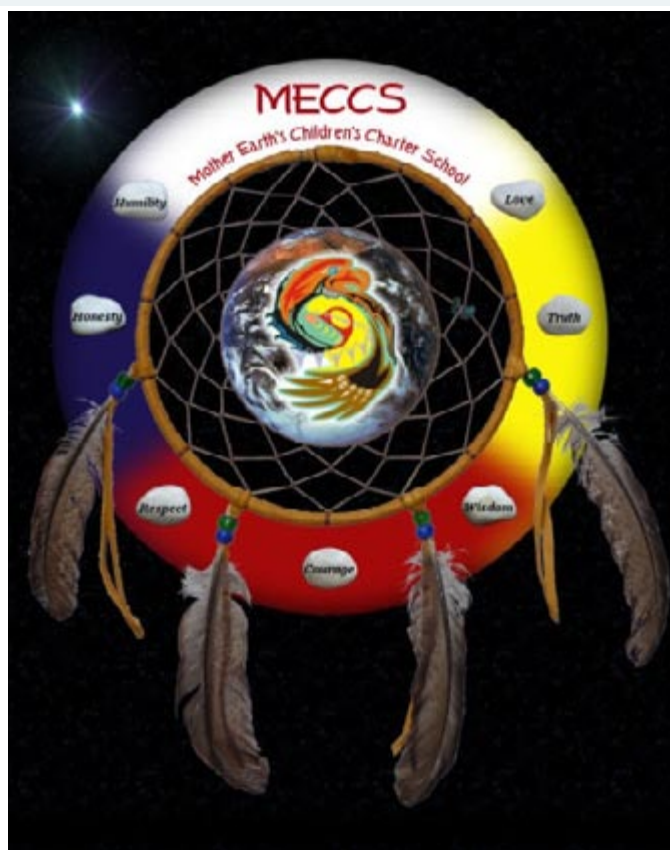
For approximately six years, the school operated out of a strip mall and two detached portable units surrounding a cement tarmac. Now, the school operates in the former Saint John's School of Alberta, which is a 53,800 square foot school that includes an elite 11,000 square foot gymnasium built in 2003. The gymnasium cost \$1.5-million, and the late Ralph Hole donated it. The school sits on property that is over 100 acres and allows for land-based education initiatives. Students partake in outdoor and cultural activities on a huge land base.

The school's charter has two main goals:
 1) achieving the students' academic potential, which implies that each child will have improved academic achievement, and,
 2) spiritual connectedness, which means the students will understand that their spirits connect with the world around them. The focus is on good academic outcomes within a strong cultural curriculum.

MECCS has a unique funding formula. Aboriginal Affairs covers the tuition of on-reserve students (who account for about 80 per cent of students) and the provincial Ministry of Education covers the tuition of off-reserve students. Unfortunately, the tuition agreement with Aboriginal Affairs does not cover transportation, so MECCS goes into deficit every year (about \$200,000) to ensure that its students are able to attend school.

The Friends of MECCS Education Foundation (FOMEF) was established in early 2010, incorporated in May 2010 and obtained charitable status in October 2010. The purpose of the foundation is to ensure the long-term sustainability of the school. Thus, FOMEF seeks financial support from independent and corporate donors in a capital campaign to purchase the school's current facility and land. Thus far, the school has received funding from sponsors such as Enbridge and TransAlta toward the facility purchase. It also received funds from Enbridge to support a subsidized hot lunch program for students. The foundation is also seeking to use the facility as a cultural retreat centre in order to develop multiple revenue streams with which to sustain the school.

MECCS is administered by an independent board, which is responsible for governing the school in accordance with the *School Act* and Charter Schools Regulation, the charter agreed upon by Alberta Education and the Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Society By-laws.



The school [MECCS] is aware of the disadvantages that exist within the student population and incorporates this awareness into the policies for their education team.

The board establishes policy, ensures the school meets the goals set before it, approves the annual budget and annual financial statements and monitors the school's adherence to its charter.

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Board is comprised of seven volunteer members elected from among the parents of children attending the schools as well as interested community members. Board members meet monthly, serve overlapping five year terms and participate in Board Committee deliberations.

The school is aware of the disadvantages that exist within the student population and incorporates this awareness into the policies for their education team. The Friends of MECCS Education Foundation Introduction provides a backgrounder for MECCS that reads as follows:

We also recognize that many students are affected by socioeconomic challenges, dysfunction, and abuse, intergenerational effects of residential schools, addictions, poverty, unemployment, and isolation from their culture. MECCS was designed to provide a safe and caring place whereby these adversities are acknowledged but not seen as impediments for student success.¹¹

This could certainly help given that charter schools tend to have their highest benefit among disadvantaged students (which we will discuss later).

If Aboriginal students face greater challenges personally or at a family level, charter schools have the incentives and flexibility to deal with such challenges.

This study's author visited and interviewed some administrators and teachers at MECCS. Although it is not an immersion school, qualified teachers provide regular language instruction in Cree and Stoney, the two dominant indigenous languages. Moreover, in combined classrooms, posters show Cree and Stoney words as well as how to count in Cree and Stoney. Jim Cardinal, a Cree instructor and the school's guidance counsellor, entered a class to go over Cree words and numbers with the students, and then he told them a traditional story. Visible references to the Seven Sacred Teachings and the Medicine Wheel are evident throughout the classrooms (in the form of posters and on the chalkboards) and are clear signs that staff and students take indigenous teachings seriously.

Indigenous teachings are interwoven throughout the school curriculum and routines.

The principal, T.J. Skalski, acknowledges the challenges that the school has faced to get where it is today. Identifying herself as "the fifth principal in five years," Skalski mentions the school's "trials and tribulations" with its board of directors (including having an official trustee appointed by the Minister of Education, as the existing board was in turmoil). Skalski also admits that there were challenges with the politics of the board (people with political agendas sat on the board and created problems for the school), but these problems seem to be ironed out.

Conflicts with nearby Paul First Nation have been a problem because MECCS receives funding from Aboriginal Affairs. Resentments have built up, as the band thinks it should be the only educator of First Nations students from the community. Some would argue that if the band school is losing money to the charter school, this may be expected and even valued, as it creates an incentive for improvement.

For most of its existence, the school has been undergoing significant challenges that affect its ability to deliver on its academic mission. Thus, regular student assessment scores have been low, although there have been notable improvements in some areas,

In an interview, MECCS Superintendent Ed Wittchen said of current student achievement:

Our outcomes have traditionally been very low. We have had students attend [the school] who have an already-existing poor record of achievement and students have had backgrounds of challenging social issues which has acted as a barrier to learning for many of them. Teaching them to read is our highest priority.

Wittchen stressed, however, that the majority of students come from nearby Paul First Nation where graduation rates are also very low. Although assessment scores for the Paul band school were not available at print time, anecdotal accounts are that the band school is underperforming.

He also mentioned a situation in which student transience is a major concern, as “over 60 per cent of our students have been new to our school in the past eight months.” Maintaining a consistent record and tracking student achievement, therefore, is much more challenging within this environment. It is a success to have the student population stay in school.

Ensuring that the school is accommodating cultural backgrounds and not alienating any indigenous traditions was also a tough balancing act, although it seems there has been evolution in this area. Aaron Bird is the new cultural mentor for the school. He is Cree and Stoney.

He talked about the cultural initiatives the school has been embarking upon. He just announced the signing of new guidelines regarding culture in the school. Bird emphasized that the guidelines will try to underscore all First Nations traditions within the school and that the school wants to move away from telling students that there is only one traditional way to do things. There is a focus on establishing that “we are a Native school, not a reserve school. We also serve the off-reserve population and we do accept students from different places that [sic] come with their own traditions.” This includes non-Aboriginal students, which make up five per cent of students.

It is quite clear that MECCS has assembled a caring and close group of teachers and staff. It is also evident that the school has created a close-knit community. Regularly eating meals together reinforces the sense

of family-like closeness between students and staff.

It is not fair to judge MECCS just yet or reach conclusions about its future. The school faces extraordinary challenges and is emerging from past governance issues. According to Wittchen, the school had to let go some older teachers who were not performing to expected standards. The school is emphasizing classroom performance assessments and is making literacy its top priority. Considering its potential and all that the school has achieved, it is worthwhile to wait and see how MECCS does in the future. It is important to recognize that the school has persevered despite tremendous obstacles, and it is well positioned for success. With a working model in place, it is possible to conceive of more indigenous charter or independent schools in Canada.

The school [MECCS] is emphasizing classroom performance assessments and is making literacy its top priority. Considering its potential and all that the school has achieved, it is worthwhile to wait and see how MECCS does in the future.

Indigenous charter schools in the United States

The United States has more experience with charter schools than Canada does. The first U.S. charter school opened in 1992. Since then, the number of charter schools has grown to more than 4,000 in 40 states, and the schools serve more than 1.2 million students. The results are mixed. The American Federation of Teachers states, "There is no charter school achievement advantage."¹² The Friends of Choice in Urban Schools in 2011 stated that charter school students outperform their traditionally schooled peers.¹³

Some of the best data indicate that the results for charter schools are mixed and unreliable due largely to their short existence.¹⁴ RAND, a renowned non-partisan American think tank, emphasizes the trade-offs involved in comparing different school systems. Also, it needs to be emphasized that charter schools can go out of business if they are run poorly or if they perform poorly. No poorly performing public school has ever closed, but the *No Child Left Behind Act* attempted to provide consequences for lower performing schools.

RAND undertook a major study of charter schools in eight states. Its researchers tackled some of the most prevalent assumptions about charter schools: They skim the best students from public schools; they reduce resources for those schools; and they provide no real improvement in student outcomes.¹⁵ Drawing upon longitudinal data from Chicago, San Diego, Philadelphia, Denver, Milwaukee and the states of Ohio, Texas and Florida, the research team put some assumptions to rest. They found that charter schools do not generally draw the top students from public schools as is often assumed by

many critics, and they found no conclusive evidence that charter schools affect achievement in nearby public schools. Their results should assuage some of the potential fears of First Nations school staff who may worry about the introduction of an indigenous charter or independent school within reach of the community. Test scores are on average similar to that of public schools, but the researchers found that charter high school students had a higher probability of graduating and attending college than did those in non-charter schools.¹⁶

Of particular interest is the benefit that charter schools bring to economically and otherwise disadvantaged groups. Achievement in terms of standardized results is higher for students at schools that serve disadvantaged students. A major 2011 study by Mathematica Policy Research, a non-partisan research firm, found that charter middle schools that serve the most economically disadvantaged students—especially in urban areas—were more successful than those charter schools that tended to serve only the most advantaged.¹⁷ The variation in achievement is also wide between different charter schools. While the Mathematica study found that on average student achievement in reading and writing was not different from public schools, it concluded: "[T]hese averages mask wide variation across individual charter schools in their impacts."¹⁸ It further concluded that simply increasing the number of charter schools might not change overall student achievement. However, if we could figure out what makes the best charter schools successful and promote those attributes, student achievement could be improved.

Methemática's results present a very strong argument for urban indigenous charter schools that cater to a wide Aboriginal population, including perhaps Métis and urban Inuit. These charter schools would be much more likely to be urban based, as there are more difficulties in establishing them in rural and isolated areas, although this is not inconceivable, as many rural U.S. reservations have charter schools.

These observations should be of interest to Aboriginal populations that are underprivileged and often subject to more life challenges than other populations.

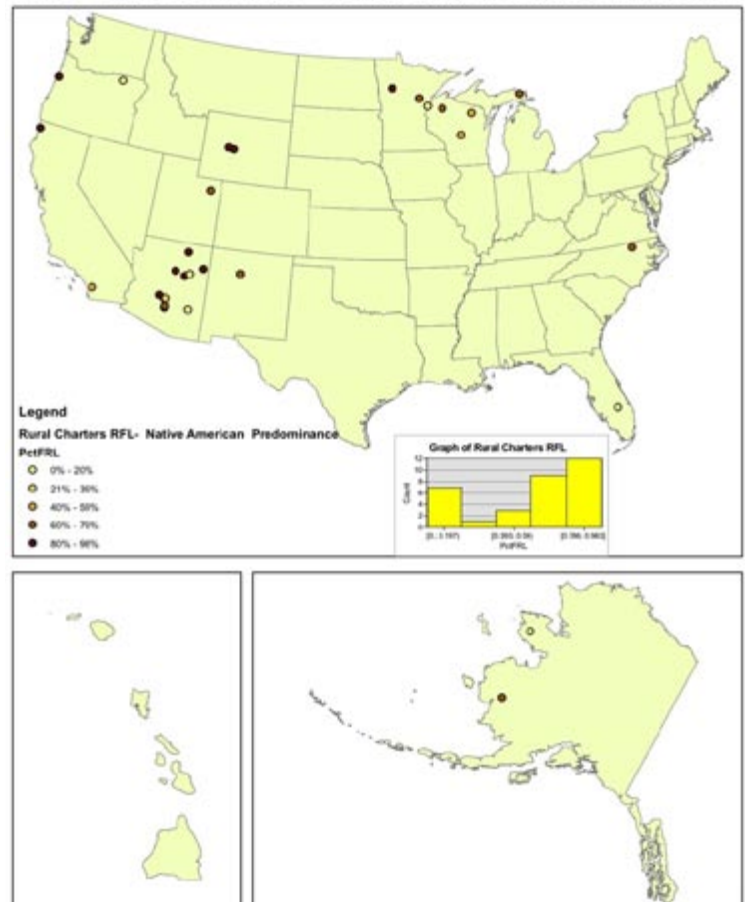
Native American communities recognize the ability of charter schools to deliver results for their students. Reservation students face lower rates of academic achievement and lower graduation rates, just as the students on Canadian reserves do.

Multiple U.S. states have charter schools with an indigenous focus. Data as recently as 2007 says there are over 50 American Indian charter schools, with about 20 on reservations, according to the Center for Education Reform, a think tank in Washington. In Minnesota, Arizona, Wyoming, Alaska and Hawaii, Native American tribes have created charter schools on their reservations. These schools allow for the adoption of culturally centred curriculums and innovative teaching techniques, and they insist on results and a framework of accountability. Not all are as successful as people would like, but their presence provides multiple examples from which to draw and for trial and error to see what works.

Research conducted at the Kamehameha Schools in Hawaii shows statistically significant increases for cultural charter school students in math and reading, school climate, parental involvement, teacher/parent expectations, responsibility, sense of community, and decreases in absenteeism.¹⁹

The challenge is to import some of these successful ideas into a Canadian Aboriginal context, both on- and off-reserve, to produce positive results.

Rural Charter Schools - Native American Predominance



Source: *Charter Trends: Charter Schools in Rural America*, Dr. Charisse Gulosino, December 2011. Available online at <http://charternotebook.org/82703097>.

These schools allow for the adoption of culturally centred curriculums and innovative teaching techniques, and they insist on results and a framework of accountability.

Cultural component and success

This study is agnostic on the degree to which culture plays a role in accelerating Aboriginal academic achievement. Culture is likely important in forming identity and in feeling connected and valued, but academic achievement must be the focus. While some studies seem to indicate that school curriculum, practice, and programs that value and incorporate indigenous knowledge are successful in increasing Aboriginal student success and academic achievement,²⁰ there are some case studies of schools, especially in urban settings, where success was achieved without a heavy emphasis on culture.

Calvin Helin, the First Nations author, lawyer and businessman from British Columbia, in his 2006 book *Dances with Dependency* recounted the experience of Grandview/Uuquinak'uuh Elementary School in East Vancouver.²¹ Located in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Vancouver, the school's population is about 50 per cent Aboriginal, with the remainder from immigrant families coming from disadvantaged families. In 2001, only 22 per cent of Grade 4 students passed a reading test; 63 per cent passed a writing test; and 42 per cent passed a numeracy test. A new principal, Caroline Krause, brought in a new regime and gained the support of the community, and by 2004, 88 per cent of Grade 4 students met or exceed expectations in reading, writing and numeracy. She complained about Aboriginal children being put into segregated programs that were long on cultural sensitivity and hugs but very short on literacy. She thought the problem was that there were no demands placed on the children, and they knew they were failing. The staff rejected a culturally centred curriculum for Aboriginal students and imposed high expectations on everyone.

Of course, such an approach contrasts with some Native American charter schools such as the Hawaiian indigenous system, where culture is emphasized and results can be high. Even in Canada, there are successful schools such as the Chalo School in B.C.'s Fort Nelson First Nation that achieve great results and place culture front and centre within the school and its curriculum. The Chalo School is independently run by an education authority that works closely with Fort Nelson First Nation community members, and it follows the British Columbia curriculum. To what extent is its success due to independent governance, great leadership and its commitment to regular performance assessments? It is hard to know. What is clear is culture should not overshadow the education mission of a school. Culture and high expectations as well as innovative and independent governance must all go together. The tendency to coddle students or to condescend to them exists, and it must be avoided. Having high expectations and providing culture and identity can go together, although one should not presume that an 'indigenous' charter school or independent school is solely going to concentrate on delivering different culture content. It bears mentioning from before, drawing from the research of John Richards at Simon Fraser University quoted earlier, that sometimes a school that is mainly Aboriginal can have negative peer effects that draw down some scores, so this could mean that sometimes it's better to have some Aboriginal students in schools where the majority is not Aboriginal. Then again, the example from the East Vancouver school shows that sometimes these effects could be countered with a rigorous program. The point being that an environment of maximum choice would help discover that.

Conclusions

This study does not assume that charter schools are an overnight solution or a panacea and that is why this study emphasizes that reforms to any Aboriginal education system allow for choice. Choice must mean that Aboriginal students, both on-reserve First Nations and urban Aboriginals, are not trapped in underperforming schools. The advantage of charter schools, by their nature, is the allowance for ample trial and error. They can also be closed if the charter is not fulfilled. The obvious advantage to parents is the freedom of choice and the added flexibility of small independent schools to find solutions that fit within the local context and circumstances. However, this would be within a predominantly reformed public system for all Aboriginal students.

Another significant advantage of charter and other independent schools is their proven ability to help disadvantaged groups. While public schools have a certain path-dependence (path dependency refers to the tendency of a past or traditional practice or preference to continue even if better alternatives are available) that caters to the status quo, charter schools can build success in marginalized groups.

In the end, all Aboriginal students will be served by schools that are accountable and dedicated to great governance and leadership. Local band schools should be strengthened and given proper resources and ideally governed by arms-length authorities. First Nations or Aboriginal students in the cities should not be confined by the neighbourhood school any more than anyone else is. The emphasis should be on excellence and choice, and if that means allowing on-reserve or off-reserve students to attend other schools within a region, then so be it. Governments should certainly be prepared to help them exercise that choice.

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Recommendations

- Many bands have problems recruiting and keeping teachers. They often get new teachers who have not had much experience. Recruiting and keeping veteran teachers, even for a short time, would help improve the student experience and perhaps allow some of the younger, often local teachers to receive mentoring. However, this could also mean teachers who have the personality for or an interest in these isolated First Nations and their students. It could even be younger teachers who have the aptitude, personality and empathy to deal with these challenging reserve environments. Provincial education ministries could set up a program whereby veteran teachers or teachers who have the aptitude and empathy work in Aboriginal schools for a defined period, with bonus pay and a guarantee of job protection when they return home.
- Whatever changes the federal government introduces, the emphasis should not be solely on band control of band schools. That is not the only way Indian control of Indian education should be interpreted. Even if First Nations school boards are introduced, local school authorities should be at arm's-length from band politicians. Education authorities should focus exclusively on improving education and outcomes.
- We need to rethink what we mean by Indian control of Indian education. It should not only mean band governments or education authorities associated with band governments. There ought to be room for independent agencies that wish to sign a charter with a governing body, whether with the federal government, a provincial government or a band government, to deliver an education and be accountable for the results. The growth of these independent agencies starts with more provinces adopting legislation to allow charter and independent schools. These schools, which must be operated by independent, indigenous-led agencies, could then sign charters with the province to deliver education. The federal government is the level with the constitutional and legal authority to deal with First Nations regarding education. The Crown, acting through AANDC, should explore, whether working alone or with provincial authorities, starting a conversation about establishing charter schools. They can focus on indigenous culture and spirituality or they can focus on indigenous students who have an interest in specific subjects such as art or science or even sports activities such as hockey. It would also be quite sensible for indigenous charter schools located in more-rural areas to focus on trades such as mining, forestry or the energy sector. First Nations students could learn about the local industries in order to work within them. This could mean that communities can actually retain young people for the long term.

- Aboriginal Affairs, either alone or in co-operation with a province or with industries and corporate sponsors, should engage in a pilot project with an independent agency to create indigenous charter schools. Mother Earth's Children's Charter School should not be the only indigenous charter school. The pilot schools could be created on larger First Nations land or near an urban centre and one or two First Nations so that the schools could be supported by Aboriginal Affairs. It should also be the case that smaller First Nations may opt for their only school to be a charter school. This would mean that an independent, accountable agency, in consultation with the local community, would establish its charter schools with whatever level of government is most likely to deliver the provincial curriculum within an indigenous or local context.
- In any reform, there should be limits to the ability of First Nations band councils and education authorities to restrict the school choices for First Nations families. In B.C.'s on-reserve Status Indian system, the band council or the education authority receives the education funds directly. The council or authority can withhold payments to the local school district or even an indigenous or otherwise charter school when parents want to send their children to them rather than the band school.

Aboriginal Affairs should experiment with transferring funding to parents who can exercise choice if it is available. This also should include allowing on-reserve or off-reserve First Nation students to opt for private schools or homeschooling as options. Aboriginal Affairs should also do its utmost to cover transportation costs for students to travel to another school, whether it is a public school, a charter school or an independent school. Public schools that have a large number of First Nations students should be obligated to work with the local First Nations in incorporating indigenous content and even some staff.

- Comparability: equipment, labs, libraries, etc. Aboriginal schools should have the basic standard tools to educate their pupils.
- The federal government should contract with provincial authorities or devolve to them the power to inspect, approve and shut down, when needed, school facilities that do not conform to established standards or that consistently fail to meet their targets or mandates.

Endnotes

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Further Reading

January 2012

Money should follow the student

By Michael Zwaagstra

<http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/4034>

October 2011

Standardized testing is a good thing

By Michael Zwaagstra

<http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/3939>

December 2008

More culture not necessarily the answer

By Joseph Quesnel

<http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/2520>

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www.fcpp.org