

Aboriginal Education in Manitoba

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Executive Summary

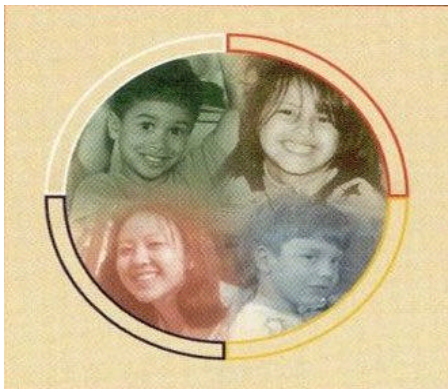
- Aboriginals make up 12% of Manitoba's population and 20% of Manitoba's school children and these percentages are increasing.
- Aboriginal people are faced with significant challenges in terms of labour-force participation, housing, health and education.
- Only 33.7% of aboriginal youth aged 15-29 have completed high school, compared with 62.7% of the general population.
- The Aboriginal Education Directorate (AED) is responsible for aboriginal school programming and has released an action plan detailing the government's initiatives in this area.
- Most of the AED's initiatives focus on increasing aboriginal content in the curriculum, improving heritage language studies, creating employment equity programs for aboriginals and re-structuring the workplace and post-secondary institutions to make them more accessible to aboriginals.
- While the goals of the AED are noble, its action plan contains significant oversights.
- No mention is made of ensuring that core subjects are taught rigorously and effectively. Standards tests would make it possible to evaluate progress in this area.
- It is not clear that an increased focus on aboriginal content will improve the high-school graduation rate. On-reserve aboriginals are significantly less likely to complete high school than off-reserve aboriginals—despite the fact that reserve schools almost certainly have more aboriginal content and programming.
- Heritage languages such as Cree and Ojibway are the mother tongues of a small minority of aboriginals, less than 2% of Manitoba's population. They are not languages that are used in post-secondary institutions or the workplace.
- Parents of all students should be able to choose the education their children receive. Not all aboriginals (particularly those who live in predominantly non-aboriginal areas) are interested in aboriginal-specific programming.
- Employment equity programs are short-sighted because they give the impression that aboriginals are not qualified for the positions for which they are hired. We should focus instead on ensuring that aboriginals are just as qualified as everyone else.



Introduction

With approximately 12% of its population designated as aboriginal, Manitoba has the largest proportion of aboriginals among Canadian provinces. The city of Winnipeg alone has as many aboriginal people as the Nunavut, Yukon, and Northwest Territories combined.¹ Population statistics also show that the aboriginal population in Manitoba and across Canada is growing at a faster rate than the rest of the population.

Demographic statistics also show that aboriginals are facing unique challenges in regards to health, labour force participation, housing and education. A disturbingly large percentage of aboriginals are non-participants in the labour force and this trend has remained relatively constant over the past twenty years. In addition, aboriginals have a life expectancy that is approximately seven years shorter than the average Manitoban. This difference increases to over ten years for on reserve aboriginals.²



Clearly, education is an important consideration for raising the standard of living among aboriginals. Unfortunately, despite attempts to make education more culturally relevant for aboriginals and the widespread introduction of native studies courses, graduation rates among aboriginals, particularly those on reserve, remain abysmally low.³

This report suggests that while providing culturally sensitive educational programming is always important, it has perhaps been a mistake for the provincial government to make this its primary focus. Rather than dealing with mistakes made in the past, this backgrounder looks at the state of aboriginal education today and suggests ways in which increased parental choice and enforcement of clear standards for *all* schools may help alleviate some of the current difficulties experienced by aboriginal students.

Demographic Profile of Aboriginals in Manitoba⁴

Manitoba has a total aboriginal population of about 130,000, which makes up approximately 12% of the province's total population. Of those 130,000 aboriginals, the majority (63.5%) are status Indians while the rest are a mixture of Métis, non-status Indians and Inuit. The population is relatively evenly divided up across the province. Approximately 35.5% of aboriginal people live in the city of Winnipeg, 36.5% live on reserves in Manitoba, while the remaining 28% are located in other urban centres or rural areas.

The average age of aboriginals is considerably less than the rest of the population. The percentage of individuals under the age of 15 is 20.1% in the general population, while over 37% of aboriginals fall into this category. Aboriginals make up approximately 20% of school-aged children in the province and in many school districts form a majority of the student population. Since fertility rates are higher on average among aboriginals than non-aboriginals, this percentage is likely to increase in the future.

Challenges Faced By Aboriginals⁵

The aboriginal population faces unique and significant challenges. Aboriginals have a life expectancy, for instance, that is approximately seven years less than the general population. Along with being plagued by a wide array of significant health issues (such as diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome), suicide rates are endemically large among the aboriginal population—particularly male youths. The death rate due to suicides is approximately five times greater in the aboriginal population than in the general population.

The labour force participation rate among aboriginals designated as living in First Nations is only 47%, compared to 68% among non-aboriginal populations. While the non-aboriginal unemployment rate in Manitoba is 6%, it is 31% among First Nations aboriginals. Unfortunately, these low numbers are almost identical for aboriginals living in the City of Winnipeg. The high unemployment rate is not solely due, it seems, to the isolated location of many reserves.

As the average income of aboriginals is considerably lower than that of the general population, home ownership rates among aboriginals are very low – 26.3% of aboriginals reside in owner-occupied housing, compared with 77.6% of non-aboriginal people. In addition, 27.1% of aboriginals live in housing which is need of “major repairs,” compared with 9.6% of the non-aboriginal population.

Out of all the provinces, Manitoba has the smallest percentage of aboriginal youth aged 15-24 that attend school. Aboriginal youth are only 74% as likely as non-aboriginal youth to be enrolled in school. Among aboriginals between the ages of 15-29, only 33.7% have completed high school, compared with 62.7% of the general population. Even more disturbing is the fact that 12.4% of aboriginal youth have not even completed Grade 9, compared with 1.9% of the general population.



Clearly, the challenges faced by aboriginals are significant and need to be addressed. Ensuring that aboriginals have greater access to a high quality education should certainly be a primary objective.

Current Government Policy on Aboriginal Education

The Manitoba government has recognized for some time that aboriginal people face significant challenges in regards to education. Largely in response to this, the Aboriginal Education Directorate (AED) was established. This branch of the Department of Education is responsible for the leadership and co-ordination of departmental initiatives in aboriginal education. Their vision is the full participation of aboriginal people in society and their mission is the inclusion of aboriginal education and training in all departmental activities.⁶

In recent years, the AED has been the recipient of significant funding increases. The budget for the Directorate was \$600,400 in 2003, which represents a 60% increase from 1998. In contrast, the Administration and Finance branch (of which the AED is part) has only received a 13% increase over that same period of time.⁷ It is clear that the government supports the objectives of the AED.

Inclusion, rather than assimilation, is a stated goal of the AED. As an example of this, a main objective of the Directorate is the transformation of post-secondary institutions and workplaces into places which affirm the needs of aboriginals. To achieve this, the AED advocates substantial employment equity measures in order to ensure “proportional representation” of aboriginals in the workplace and in post-secondary institutions.⁸



The AED has also advocated more aboriginal-specific curriculum programming—both for aboriginals and non-aboriginals. Ultimately, this means that aboriginal perspectives will be built into relevant curriculum programming. Another large component of this objective is the expansion of aboriginal language courses such as Cree in public schools. It is believed that schools need to play a role in keeping these heritage languages alive and functional.⁹

Another objective of the AED is the recruitment/retention of aboriginal staff within the Department of Education and the general school system. The number of aboriginal teachers will be increased

and trained more effectively while the Department of Education will make an effort to recruit and retain aboriginal staff.¹⁰

To sum up, the AED's goals are:

- More aboriginal content in the curriculum for all students.
- The expansion of heritage language courses.
- An emphasis on retaining traditional aboriginal culture and integrating it into classroom instruction.
- Making workplaces and post-secondary institutions more accessible and accepting of aboriginals.
- Hiring and retaining aboriginal people in teaching positions and within the Department of Education.

Problems with the Current Strategy

The goals of the AED are laudable and are a sincere effort to address many of the problems faced by aboriginal students. However, the AED's action plan has problems, and some important areas have been completely overlooked.

- 1) *Nowhere does the AED action plan talk about the importance of ensuring that schools with aboriginal students teach the core subjects rigorously and effectively so that aboriginal students can acquire basic skills in numeracy and literacy.***

The current government has effectively eliminated compulsory standards testing in Manitoba (except at the Grade 12 level). This means we have no objective criteria to assess the quality of instruction in schools with a large number of aboriginal

students. Further, given the difficulty that northern reserve schools have in recruiting new teachers, we have no means to discover whether these schools have been able to hire and retain quality teachers, or whether they are effective in teaching the core curricula. A measurement tool to assess exactly where levels of achievement stand for these students would answer both questions.

The omission of this topic from the AED's action plan is a reflection of the fact that objective performance measurement in schools is not a priority for the provincial government. This is unfortunate, because *all* students in Manitoba need to have literacy and numeracy skills in order to function adequately in society.

2) *There is no evidence that increasing aboriginal content in the curriculum will result in an improved educational experience for aboriginal students.*

While the provincial government has gone to great lengths to rewrite portions of the curriculum to add more aboriginal content, this is unlikely to make a substantial difference in terms of academic performance or the high-school graduation rate. If it were making a difference, on-reserve aboriginals might be reporting a higher graduation rate than off-reserve aboriginals, since their schools are more likely to have aboriginal content already. However, only 25.2% of on-reserve aboriginals (ages 15-29) have completed high school, compared with 33.7% of off-reserve aboriginals.¹¹

3) *Expanding heritage language courses for aboriginal dialects is costly and of dubious practical use.*

Among aboriginal people in Manitoba, English is the most common language in use (65%), followed by Cree (18%), Ojibway (8%) and French (4%). At home, the most commonly spoken language is English (76%). This means that just 2% of the population of Manitoba uses Cree as a mother tongue, while less than 1% have Ojibway as a mother tongue.¹²

Whatever importance aboriginal dialects may have as a cultural tool, they are not languages utilized in most workplaces or post-secondary institutions, or in the wider society. Schools have difficulty even finding teachers who can speak any of these languages, and this also makes their inclusion in curricular programming highly unpractical.¹³

Perhaps time in the school day would be better spent focusing on languages that *are* utilized in general society, such as English or French, as well as on ensuring that students are literate and numerate. Certainly it makes no sense to use these minority dialects as core teaching languages. Since aboriginal elders are primarily the individuals who speak aboriginal dialects, heritage language instruction should be left to them, whether outside regular school hours or as a special feature in schools with large proportions of aboriginal students.



4) *The assumption is made that all aboriginal students would benefit from an education based upon traditional aboriginal values. The AED report makes no mention of the preferences of aboriginal parents and/or students.*

As noted earlier, the aboriginal population is spread out across Manitoba. While many aboriginals live on reserves and in parts of Winnipeg with a predominantly aboriginal population, many do not. The assumption that *all* aboriginals are interested in an education that stresses traditional aboriginal values has no basis in fact. What about aboriginals who are raised in non-aboriginal homes and choose to adopt the values of the community in which they reside? Why does the AED assume that, simply because of their racial history, they must fit within a specific cultural setting?

Aboriginal parents should be given more say over the education their children receive. While in some cases this may mean additional aboriginal content, in other circumstances it might be to provide funding so that these children can attend another school. Out of the fifteen reserves with the lowest Grade 9 completion rate (50%), eleven are reserves that are accessible only by air.¹⁴ If schools on reserves are unable to provide a quality education, then parents should have the option of sending their children elsewhere, with the expense paid by the Department of Education. The same should be true for *all* parents.

5) *Employment equity programs for aboriginals create more problems than solutions, as they give the impression that aboriginals are not satisfactorily qualified for the positions in which they are hired.*

Rather than promoting proportional representation of aboriginal persons in training programs or the workplace, the AED should promote a solid skills-based curriculum for *all* students, including aboriginals. If all people in Manitoba receive a quality education, this levels the playing field and makes it more likely that different cultural groups will be proportionately represented in the workforce and post-secondary institutions.

Conclusion

The problems faced by aboriginals are serious and in need of a long-term strategy. However, the solutions proposed by the AED within the Manitoba Education Department are short-sighted and inadequate. They focus too much on retaining past cultural beliefs and languages and too little on the literacy and numeracy skills needed to function in modern society.

A better policy would enable aboriginals to receive a high-quality of education. To create a level playing field for aboriginal children, we should:

- Use standards tests to ensure that core subjects are being adequately taught;
- Allow all parents to choose the school in which they wish to enrol their children;
- Use time otherwise spent on impractical heritage languages to focus on core language arts; and
- Drop the unwarranted assumption that all aboriginal students will benefit from a curriculum based upon traditional aboriginal perspectives.

Aboriginals are an integral part of Manitoba's society and, along with everyone else, need to receive a quality education.

About the Author



Dennis Owens is the Frontier's Senior Policy Analyst. A descendent of homesteaders near Portage la Prairie, he graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 1970 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science. Over a 20-year career in the transportation business, he rose to the position of operations manager of a Winnipeg-based firm. Since then he has researched and written about Canadian public policy issues for a variety of organizations including the Manitoba Taxpayers Association and the Prairie Centre. His specialties at the Frontier Centre include municipal issues, public education, healthcare and aboriginal policy. His frequent exposure in electronic and print media has included a regular commentary on CBC radio and articles printed in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *National Post*.

Footnotes

¹ Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, *Aboriginal People in Manitoba 2000*.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Manitoba Education and Youth, *Aboriginal Education Directorate*, available at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/about.html

⁷ Manitoba Finance, *Provincial Budgets, 1998-2003*

⁸ Manitoba Education and Youth, Aboriginal Education Directorate, *Aboriginal Education and Training Framework*, available at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/strategy/AET_framework.pdf

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Proactive Information Services, *Western Canadian Protocol Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Culture Programs: Aboriginal Languages Consultation Report*, April, 2001

¹⁴ Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, *op. cit.*