

# FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT EDUCATION

This report is an excerpt from the 2015 Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools.

Ontario's public education system has a critical role to play in ensuring that First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students receive an excellent and culturally responsive education in schools where everyone has a chance to learn about their vibrant cultures and histories.

Ontario is home to more than one-fifth of Canada's Aboriginal population, and the vast majority of FNMI students (82 percent) attend provincially funded schools.<sup>3</sup>

While there is a vital national focus on issues of equity and school quality in on-reserve education, it is also urgent to ensure that Ontario's provincially funded schools are places of opportunity for Aboriginal students.

## A PROVINCIAL STRATEGY FOR IMPROVEMENT

In 2007, the province introduced the *First Nations Métis and Inuit Education Strategy and Framework*,<sup>4</sup> with a set of goals to be achieved by 2016:

- improve achievement among Aboriginal students;
- close the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students; and
- ensure all students have an understanding of Aboriginal cultures, experiences, and perspectives.

In 2012, Ontario's Auditor General raised concerns that the framework lacked both a detailed implementation plan and specific goals and performance measures.<sup>5</sup> This year, the provincial government released an implementation plan that includes a number of performance goals for:

- increasing the percentage of FNMI students who achieve the provincial standard on Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) literacy and numeracy tests and increasing graduation rates;
- increasing the the number of FNMI teaching and non-teaching staff;
- closing achievement gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous students;

## QUICK FACTS

- 82% of Aboriginal students in Ontario attend provincially-funded schools.
- 96% of secondary schools and 92% of elementary schools have some Aboriginal students enrolled.<sup>1</sup>
- 69% of secondary schools offer students or staff Aboriginal education opportunities, compared to 61% last year.
- 39% of elementary schools offer students or staff Aboriginal education opportunities, compared to 34% last year.
- 31% of secondary and 13% of elementary schools offer cultural support programs such as collaboration with a First Nation or Aboriginal community organizations.
- Despite an identified gap in teachers' knowledge and confidence teaching FNMI subject matter,<sup>2</sup> only 29% of elementary schools and 47% of secondary schools offer professional development (PD) to staff on Aboriginal issues.

- improving FNMI students' self esteem by collaborating with other provincial ministries "to develop an integrated approach to support their health, including mental health, and well-being";
- increasing collaboration between school boards and First Nations communities;
- improving educators' access to professional development; and
- building awareness among all students and educators about First Nations, Métis and Inuit issues, while building engagement with Aboriginal families and communities.<sup>6</sup>

School boards have also created action plans for work with FNMI students and communities. Twenty seven boards are using the provincial *Student Success Re-engagement* strategy to support hiring educators with FNMI sensitivity and community knowledge. As part of the strategy, these educators reach

out to FNMI students who have left school. In 2013/14, while only 456 FNMI students were contacted, more than double that number returned to school—an indication of the potential power of relationship-building and community connection within the work with FNMI communities.<sup>7</sup>

In her 2014 update, the Auditor General recognized the province had made significant strides in its Aboriginal education strategy and implementation planning. For example, more than 50 school boards now have First Nations, Métis and Inuit advisory councils. At the same time, she raised concerns that the implementation plan lacked detail and did not identify “obstacles faced by Aboriginal students or [outline] specific activities to overcome various obstacles.”<sup>8</sup>

A 2014 report from People for Education found that schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students lag behind the rest of the province in access to staff that are strongly linked to student engagement, such as librarians, health and physical education teachers, and music teachers. Although these schools have a higher proportion of students with special education needs, they are less likely to have special education teachers, and less likely to have access to key professionals such as psychologists.<sup>9</sup>

Neither the FNMI strategy nor the implementation plan addresses the resource gaps that may present challenges to the successful implementation of the FNMI Framework.<sup>10</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Our survey data and comments show a growing number of schools doing powerful work to support Aboriginal students and to support learning about FNMI cultures. However, while the percentage of schools offering a range of programs has grown, the majority of elementary schools (61%) do not offer *any* Aboriginal education opportunities.

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**We have a vibrant Aboriginal community here ... that supports us in this endeavour. There is still discrimination evident among some of our community members who are resentful of the work that we do at our school towards Aboriginal awareness. 53% of our students are self-identified First Nation: mostly Algonquin and Métis.**

*Elementary school, Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB*

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**We don't have any children who have identified as FNMI. We have, however, worked to ensure the voice of First Nations, Métis and Inuit culture is present and visible in our school. We have had students and staff do work around the Seven Grandfathers and have used that as a part of our re-visioning process for our school. We have also had an FNMI artist come in and work with our students to make that vision visible in our school. We have supported staff to access FNMI learning opportunities offered by our board. We continue to work on building this into our programming.**

*Elementary school, York Region DSB*

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## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR TEACHERS

Over the past decade, the province and school boards have worked steadily to integrate Aboriginal perspectives and experiences across the K-12 curriculum. To deliver this curriculum effectively, teachers need to be comfortable with teaching FNMI material. However, according to the province, and teachers themselves, many are unprepared or uncomfortable teaching Aboriginal education topics.<sup>11</sup> Professional development can be crucial to improving both school competencies and teacher capacity in this area.

Despite the potential benefits of professional development, only 47 percent of secondary and 29 percent of elementary schools report that they offer professional development around First Nations, Métis and Inuit issues.

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**We have Aboriginal students who attend our school from a neighbouring Reserve. Teachers are often afraid to teach cultural issues due to lack of information or familiarity with cultural ways. We try and engage Elders and teachers from the reserve, but we don't have a lot of success getting them to come to school.**

*Elementary school, Superior North CDSB*

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In places where professional development is offered, there are examples of outstanding work. In one large-scale effort, 22 school boards with high percentages of Aboriginal students developed an extended Collaborative Inquiry project. The project involved board staff, principals and teachers working with community members and elders. Boards reported that, as a result of the project, teachers are now more comfortable teaching FNMI content and exploring indigenous teaching approaches, and there are stronger relationships between the schools and local First Nations communities.<sup>12</sup>

## **NATIVE STUDIES AND NATIVE LANGUAGE PROGRAMS**

Over the last two years, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of schools offering a Native Studies program. The program is often interdisciplinary, and provides an in-depth chance to explore Aboriginal cultures, the history of colonialism, and current issues.

- 47% of Ontario secondary schools now offer Native Studies programs, compared to 40% last year.
- 11% of secondary schools, and 4% of elementary schools offer Native language programs.

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**We have a 0.5 FTE Native Studies and Language teacher at our school who teaches students about Ojibwe culture and language. She incorporates traditional drumming, guest speakers, etc., into her program, but also adds the First Nations culture and language to our school-wide programs (i.e., character education program). We also have the exciting privilege of having our local Chief and Council provide funding for an EA to support the students from the reserve while at school. This is a very exciting opportunity for our students.**

*Elementary school, Near North DSB*

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## **CULTURAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS**

In more and more schools—especially in northern Ontario—cultural support programs provide a mix of support and cultural enrichment to all students, and particularly help support the well-being of Aboriginal students.

- 31% of secondary schools and 13% of elementary schools have a cultural support program.
- 27% of secondary and 10% of elementary schools report they consult with local communities on policies and programming around FNMI issues.

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**HUGE successes.... over 30 students involved in our weekly cultural support program, elders involved, tutors involved, ceremonies and cultural teachings.**

*Secondary school, Near North DSB*

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According to the principals who provided comments, cultural support programs can involve a range of activities, including nutrition programs, tutoring and mentoring, “land-based programs,” traditional skills development, and counselling.

A number of schools report having a particular space in the school with a focus on Aboriginal culture—a classroom, an office or resource centre, or a garden.

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**The Bi'waase'aa program with an Aboriginal worker runs an after school program, works individually with students during the day, runs a Little Eagle program for 8 students 3 times a year, and runs a snack/lunch program.**

*Elementary school, Lakehead DSB*

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## **MAKING FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT CULTURE VISIBLE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: SPEAKERS, CEREMONIES AND EMPLOYMENT**

Many schools ensure that students have access to First Nations, Métis and Inuit perspectives through guest speakers and ceremonies, pow-wows, events tied to Aboriginal awareness month or National Aboriginal Day, drumming groups, and artist residencies.

- 45% of secondary schools and 20% of elementary schools report having guest speakers.
- 20% of secondary schools and 8% of elementary schools report hosting ceremonies.

In 2007, the FNMI Policy Framework called for a “significant increase in the number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit teaching and non-teaching staff in Ontario school boards.” This goal was echoed last year in the Ontario Public School Boards’ *Charter of Commitment on First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education*. It continues to be difficult to track progress in this area because there are no provincial guidelines for staff self-identification. As a very small first step, this year the province introduced a tool to help assess boards’ progress on developing Aboriginal Staff Self-Identification policies.

## **IMPROVING SELF-IDENTIFICATION LEVELS—AND BUILDING SUPPORT FOR ABORIGINAL EDUCATION**

In order to focus resources, understand levels of need, and assess achievement, it is vital to have accurate information about the number of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in provincially funded schools. This information can only be accessed when students self-identify.<sup>13</sup>

All boards have a voluntary, confidential self-identification policy. Last year, the province reported that, compared to census estimates, only 44 percent of Aboriginal students had self-identified to their schools—a figure that has increased dramatically in five years but is still very low.<sup>14</sup>

Some boards, through very active efforts, have been able to achieve high levels of self-identification. In the Lakehead DSB, for example, over 20 percent of the total student population have self-identified as Aboriginal—above census estimates of 15 percent.<sup>15</sup>

In their survey responses, many principals point to self-identification as a major challenge. Amongst other things, principals mentioned that the historical significance of self identification, and challenges in building trust amongst community members, elders, and parents as challenges to getting student to self-identify.

### **NEXT STEPS**

**Ontario has made great strides in both its Aboriginal education policy and in real change “on the ground” in schools. To ensure real and long-lasting change, more needs to be done:**

- the province should continue to work in partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities to develop broader measures of success beyond EQAO scores;
- all teachers—new and current—should be provided with the background and understanding they need to deliver strong curricula and programs focused on Aboriginal history, culture and knowledge; and
- the province should support the development of resources and practices to foster greater connections between families and schools.

**Discrimination, trust, and historical legacy all are critical obstacles to the success of Aboriginal students. They are also reasons why all students need opportunities to learn about Aboriginal cultures and ongoing experiences.**

# NOTES

- 1 Educational Quality and Accountability Office analyzed 2006 census data to provide a demographic profile of each school.
- 2 Dion, S.D., Johnston, K. and Rice, C.M. (2010) *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board*, Toronto. Link: <http://ycec.edu.yorku.ca/files/2012/11/Decolonizing-Our-Schools.pdf>. Accessed April 30, 2015.  
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- 3 Ministry of Education, Ontario (2013) *A Solid Foundation: Second progress report on Ontario's First Nations, Métis and Inuit Framework*. Toronto: Government of Ontario, p.11, citing preliminary data from Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey.
- 4 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2007) *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework*. Toronto: Government of Ontario.
- 5 Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2012). Education of Aboriginal Students, Chapter 3, Section 3.05. In *2012 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario*. Link: [http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en12/305en12.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en12/305en12.pdf). Accessed May 28, 2015.
- 6 Ministry of Education, Ontario (2014) *Implementation Plan: Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework*, Ontario. Link: <http://www2.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/aboriginal/OFNImplementationPlan.pdf>. Accessed: April 30, 2015.
- 7 McCready, C., Ministry of Education, email communication, May 25, 2015.
- 8 Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2014). Education of Aboriginal Students, Follow-up to VFM Section 3.05, 2012 Annual Report, Section 4.05. *2014 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario*. Link: [http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en14/405en14.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en14/405en14.pdf). Accessed May 28, 2015.
- 9 Gallagher-Mackay, K., Kidder, A. and Methot, S. (2014) *First Nations, Métis and Inuit: Overcoming gaps in provincially funded schools*. People for Education. Toronto, ON. Link: <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/First-Nations-Métis-and-Inuit-Education-2013.pdf>. Accessed February 15, 2015.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Dion, S.D., Johnston, K. and Rice, C.M. (2010) *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Board*, Toronto. Link: <http://ycec.edu.yorku.ca/files/2012/11/Decolonizing-Our-Schools.pdf>. Accessed April 30, 2015.  
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- 12 Dion, S. (2014) *The Listening Stone: Learning from the Ministry of Education's First Nation, Inuit and Métis- Focused Collaborative Inquiry Project*. Toronto: Council of Ontario Directors of Education.
- 13 Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2012). Education of Aboriginal Students, Chapter 3, Section 3.05. In *2012 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario*. Link: [http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en12/305en12.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en12/305en12.pdf). Accessed May 28, 2015.
- 14 Ministry of Education, Ontario (2013) *A solid foundation, Second Progress Report on the Implementation of the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, Toronto, ON.
- 15 Transcripts, Standing Committee of the Legislative Committee on Public Accounts. November 6, 2013. Link: [http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/committee-proceedings/committee\\_transcripts\\_details.do?locale=en&Date=2013-11-06&ParlCommID=8961&BillID=&Business=2012+Annual+Report%2C+Auditor+General%3A+Education+of+Aboriginal+Students&DocumentID=27412#P154\\_26253](http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/committee-proceedings/committee_transcripts_details.do?locale=en&Date=2013-11-06&ParlCommID=8961&BillID=&Business=2012+Annual+Report%2C+Auditor+General%3A+Education+of+Aboriginal+Students&DocumentID=27412#P154_26253). Accessed May 28, 2015.



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