


*Indigenous Education:  
Walking on Both Sides of the River*

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Brief presented to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports



A blurred, low-angle photograph of a group of people walking on a light-colored floor. The image is out of focus, showing only the lower legs and feet of the individuals. The colors are muted, with shades of blue, grey, and white. The background is a soft, warm gradient of yellow and orange.

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## *Indigenous Education: “Walking on Both Sides of the River”*

Worldwide research has identified low school achievement levels among students from Indigenous cultures and there is a gradual movement to improve their situation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of the Canadian government has provided the impetus for the provinces to examine their practices and the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) congratulates the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports for joining this initiative.

The research literature and the media have identified a broad range of issues affecting the success of Indigenous children in schools. Some of these issues, such as the remoteness and inaccessibility of the communities, poverty, the scarcity and high cost of food, poor housing, and infrastructure problems, are outside the scope of educational solutions, although they combine to have a profound effect on educational outcomes. Social and medical services must be called upon to improve the circumstances that contribute to the educational success of Indigenous students, and we hope this will be facilitated in Québec by the provincial government’s Aboriginal Social Development Action Plan. Yet education is fundamental to any potential solution to Indigenous concerns and problems, and any changes to the situation of the 100 000 Indigenous people of Québec must start with the younger generation. Many of the issues affecting the students and their success or failure in school can be addressed by the school system and this brief will identify some of them.

In no way is this brief a prescription to “cure problems” in the Indigenous school system, so it does not contain recommendations, unlike most ABEE briefs. Rather, we will identify some of the issues that might contribute to the discussion of Indigenous education in Québec. We hope that some of the observations and recommendations we have made in earlier briefs regarding the Anglophone school system will be useful additions to the conversation, even though our perspective is influenced by differences between cultures and long-standing problems within Indigenous school systems.

The first requirements will be communication and consultation between the Ministry and the Indigenous population to find out what must be preserved and what needs to be done. We believe that the conversation has been one-sided for too long and that, as many others have also concluded, colonialism and paternalism have caused many of the current problems. The Québec government’s initiative in establishing a round table with the indigenous school boards and the proposed 2017 conference in Québec City to promote the sharing of experiences both sound like promising contributions to a two-way dialogue that involves indigenous leaders in an authentic way.

# 1. Learning from other jurisdictions

Of countries with indigenous populations, Australia is probably closest to Canada in that it has similar concerns and has proposed comparable solutions. Policy guidelines instituted in Australia in 1985 are worth quoting at length. A national committee setting policy wrote that an appropriate education for Aboriginal students:

- *builds on Aboriginal cultural heritage and world view*
- *uses Aboriginal learning styles accompanied by an appropriate pedagogy*
- *leads to personal development and the acquisition of the skills and learning needed for Australia today, and*
- *shares with Aboriginal people the responsibility for planning and implementation of policies on Aboriginal education.*<sup>1</sup>

Further:

*“... in the education of Aboriginal children, the community should influence the process of schooling including the curriculum, rather than the school moulding the outcomes of schooling for the community.... Education must be a process which builds on what we are by recognizing and developing our natural potential and cultural heritage [and]... allows us to take our place as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians with pride in our identity and with confidence that we can play our part in Australian society.”<sup>2</sup>*

With the substitution of “First Nations and Inuit” for “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander,” the same principles should be taken into consideration when decisions are made regarding Indigenous education in Québec, and these themes will recur throughout this brief.

Other provinces in Canada are developing curricula for Indigenous children in conjunction with their Indigenous populations, and these are being catalogued by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC).<sup>3</sup>

1 National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), *Philosophy, Aims and Policy Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*, National Aboriginal Education Committee, Canberra, Australia (1985), 5

2 *Ibid.*, 2-5

3 <http://aboriginal.cmec.ca/index.en.php>.

## 2. Sensitivity to and valorization of Indigenous knowledge, languages, and learning styles

*“The provision of culturally appropriate programming is acknowledged by Aboriginal partners and international research bodies as being imperative to child, family and community health.”<sup>4</sup>*

Like the English-speaking population across Québec, First Nations and Inuit communities constitute a diverse population with diverse needs. Although there are similarities among them and they share many of the same problems, Indigenous peoples are not a monolithic entity. Just as there are many different needs and concerns among urban and rural anglophone communities, different Indigenous populations have different needs. Decision makers cannot, for example, treat Cree, Inuit, Mohawk, Naskapi or Mi'kmaq as a single group requiring the same solutions to their issues, nor propose a single solution for people living on remote reserves and those living in or near large urban centres. Although we may make some generalizations for the anglophone and Indigenous contexts, as we have said in a previous brief on English education in Québec, one size does not fit all.<sup>5</sup>

First-language skills in Indigenous communities are in serious danger as the older generation dies and because of the influence of the English and French media. Indigenous people have suffered a loss of identity through the loss of the culture embedded in their languages. The Inuit communities of Salluit and Kuujuarapik have recognized this loss and the Kativik School Board is embarking on a curriculum renewal that will include a revision of its language teaching policy, so that this cultural heritage is not lost. The Cree School Board will be presenting recommendations in the spring of 2017 to make its curriculum more culturally relevant.

Even though it is important to maintain Indigenous languages as a way of preserving culture and community values, there is also a need for education in a second or third language. In the case of anglophones, this is reflected in the emphasis that school boards place on learning French. In an Indigenous community, the first language might be Inuktitut, Cree, Mohawk, and the second and third languages English and French. Students in the English-language school system have a bilingual education and the success rates at the end of secondary school are usually impressive. This has led ABEE to question why students in First Nations and Inuit schools only study their mother tongue in the early grades and then switch abruptly to the second language, when they could be following a bilingual program. This might be a valuable conversation to have with Indigenous curriculum developers.

Some second language instruction for Indigenous students is supported by Measure 30108-B, instituted in 2005 to support French language learning and the integration of Indigenous students into mainstream school boards.<sup>6</sup>

It appears that more support is needed for language development and teaching, since educators have pointed out to ABEE that the delay in language development is a large component of students' failure in the mainstream system. In an earlier brief,<sup>7</sup> ABEE proposed that early identification of language problems, followed by appropriate and timely intervention, would be beneficial to students in the English school system. Resources to identify and correct delays in the students' second language are needed, although the corrective measures must also respect the need to maintain the first language.<sup>8</sup>

4 Government of Northwest Territories, Government of Nunavut, *The Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past – Seeking Reconciliation – Building Hope for Tomorrow* (2013), 23.

5 Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport ABEE, *One Size Does Not Fit All: Distinct Solutions for Distinct Needs* (Québec, MELS, 2013) [http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site\\_web/documents/autres/organismes/CELA\\_onesize\\_A.pdf](http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/autres/organismes/CELA_onesize_A.pdf)

6 Measure 30108-B (2005), [http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site\\_web/documents/saacc/autochtones\\_dev\\_nordique/Broch.autochtoneang.pdf](http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/saacc/autochtones_dev_nordique/Broch.autochtoneang.pdf) “Projects should first focus on implementing the measure for the support of French language learning (francization), as defined in the basic grants for educational activities in the youth sector.” 10.

7 Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, ABEE, *Keeping the Door Open for Young English-speaking Adults in Québec: Language Learning in English Schools and Centres* (2016), 11.

8 See Section 7 for one example of a successful community-based early intervention program for Indigenous children in Winnipeg.



Education is the key to empowering Indigenous people to stay in their communities, or to return to them after college and university as professionals and entrepreneurs, but it must also give them the option of moving away and contributing to the wider community, if that is their choice. In the words of an Alberta Elder, this means: “Education for children to walk on both sides of the river.” This implies the need for balance between a culturally relevant curriculum and the standard school curriculum.

The learning style of Indigenous students has been described as constructivist in nature<sup>9</sup>, an interesting observation in the Québec context where the school curriculum is based in constructivism. But apart from its constructivist foundation, the prescribed Québec curriculum is based on the acquisition of knowledge and most of it can be taught from a context-free perspective. This is not appropriate for many Indigenous people. Indigenous knowledge is certainly rooted in traditions different from those of “Western” knowledge, and these differences, the different learning styles and the local situations in remote communities suggest that place-based education would be an appropriate strategy to incorporate into an Indigenous curriculum.

There is clearly a need for flexibility. The rigid system of curriculum, classroom process, and timetabling has not met the needs of many Indigenous students and could be modified to be more appropriate to First Nations and Inuit ways of learning and living. Emphasis on the local context and more care for the socio-affective domain need not detract from the content needed to obtain qualifications. Recognizing the needs and learning styles of Indigenous students provides a great opportunity for education to focus on the students, rather than bending the students to the existing system.

On a very practical level, the system for identifying students must be corrected. Children throughout Québec receive a permanent code when they start public school, unless they are in a band school, because band schools fall under federal, rather than provincial, jurisdiction<sup>10</sup>. Since Indigenous students tend to move in and out of the public system, or return to their northern communities if they have come south for their education, the lack of a permanent code makes it difficult to track their academic success and to determine the funding to which the schools are entitled.

9 Judith Elaine Hanks, *Investigating the Correspondence Between Native American Pedagogy and Constructivist Based Instruction* (paper presented at the American Education Research Association Convention, New York, April, 1996). Retrieved from (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED401086).

10 In spite of this, 84% of band schools in Québec follow the MEES curriculum and write the corresponding examinations.

### 3. *Involvement of community members and Elders, and communication with parents*

Given the oral nature of Indigenous knowledge, the Elders play a key role in transmitting knowledge and in preserving community traditions and heritage. These could gradually be lost as non-Indigenous influences impinge on traditional ways and as Elders die. Any plans to develop the education system for Indigenous students should involve close consultation with Elders to answer the question: What is to be preserved?

The generation immediately after the Elders constitutes another group of community experts. Often educated in non-Indigenous schools, these leaders are highly qualified in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous traditions. They are well equipped to advise and to make decisions about education in their communities and should be consulted and supported.

Some parents are well informed about the programs and supports available to their children (such as those offered by the Kativik School Board), but many are not. Educators in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous schools told ABEE that parental involvement is often minimal and quite difficult to establish. The difficulty may arise from the parents' own bad experiences in school, their natural reticence or from a feeling of inadequacy in speaking to non-Indigenous people. One contributor to this brief said: "We need to work much harder to develop trust with the parents of these children."

Anglophone students in English-language schools do not become fully bicultural unless they are exposed to activities and cultural events conducted in French both in and out of school, and ABEE has recommended that this type of exposure take place.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the standard school day (9 a.m. to 3 p.m.) is not long enough to support Indigenous students through the

existing educational process. There is a need for activities in the community, whether organized sports or social or cultural events, to supplement students' experiences in school. Such activities would also help solve the problem of boredom, which can lead to inappropriate and destructive behavior among young people. A more flexible curriculum could incorporate some of these activities into the school day. Otherwise, subsidies for out-of-school activities and community facilities in remote Indigenous communities would contribute to the students' well-being and self-esteem.

The Community Learning Centres (CLC) network provides an example from the English school system of the successful involvement of community members with their neighbourhood school, providing mutual benefit to both. CLCs respond to the needs of their school communities in a wide range of contexts. They develop experiential educational activities for students and involve community "elders" in the process. CLCs attached to schools with significant Indigenous populations are already involved in initiatives to teach non-Indigenous students about historic and contemporary Indigenous issues. They do this by promoting Indigenous-themed projects in the schools and encouraging partnerships with nearby First Nations communities, including making connections with Elders. The CLC Provincial Resource Team supports schools that develop Indigenous-themed projects and projects that promote reconciliation, connecting schools to organizations that lead such projects.

Since CLCs have proved successful in bringing together community members and schools, it seems that they could contribute to the development of helpful relationships between these two parts of Indigenous communities.

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11 ABEE, 2016, 11.

## 4. Alternative paths to success

Section 2 of this brief proposed that Indigenous students would be better served by a more flexible education process and there are examples of innovative ideas that incorporate content and methodology more appropriate to the students' talents and interests. One such idea is an arts-based program developed in the Cree School Board:

"The Cree School Board launched an arts residency program for high school students at Mistissini's Voyageur Memorial School in September. Dubbed the Mikw Chiyâm project, the program is a collaboration between N'we Jinan Records founder David Hodges and CSB Deputy Director General, Serge Béliveau. The two have teamed up with Art Education masters students Katie Green and Melissa-Ann Ledo to develop and implement the new curriculum with hopes of eventually expanding to other communities.

Mikw Chiyâm means to "move forward without hesitation." The program consists of four intensive, seven-week residencies for students from Secondary 1 to 4 aimed at increasing student retention by promoting Cree and individual identity through artistic expression. Successful applicants explore a different form of art each school term – music, visual arts, drama/multimedia and dance.

'[Mikw Chiyâm] students are learning to appreciate who they are; how they can contribute in their own environment but also finding their own voice,' [Béliveau] emphasized. 'They're building talents they already have or sometimes discovering talents they may not have even known about. It's allowed them to become taller, reassured and self-confident in their abilities and we have statistics that show improved attendance and better overall marks. When that happens you're already becoming a young role model in your immediate community.'"<sup>12</sup>

In a recent evening of exhibition and performance, these talents were clearly in evidence and students' grades and perseverance in school have improved in tandem. Mikw Chiyâm is currently in three communities and because of the successes it has produced so far, there are plans to extend it to two more communities.

*"The act of leaving school is part of a longer-term process of disengagement and only one step in reclaiming education at a later date."*<sup>13</sup>

What can be done to get dropouts back to school? We commend the Québec government on its commitment to build four adult education centres to serve Indigenous students, for funding vocational training programs, and for including adult education in Measure 30108-B. Vocational education is proving to be successful in keeping people in the communities by providing the skills they need to be successful. A commitment to attendance is often a problem for adult students in small northern villages, since returning students may be parents of young families. They are helped by ancillary services, such as family housing, day care, and travel allowances, where these exist, but may still take many years to complete a program if family issues interrupt their studies and they are in need of financial as well as emotional and pedagogical support.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nationnews.ca/9932-2/>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cea-ace.ca/blog/kate-tilleczek/2015/06/4/don%E2%80%99t-call-me-dropout>.

## 5. Issues in Indigenous and non-Indigenous environments

The educational needs of Indigenous schoolchildren are not the same everywhere. One of the most obvious differences is that between students educated on reserves or in the far North, and those (one-third of all Indigenous students) educated in non-Indigenous schools with predominantly non-Indigenous populations. Each situation has its opportunities and its challenges.

Children who leave home to be educated in non-Indigenous southern schools face other problems. For all young people, transitions between educational levels are critical times. In southern Québec, schools often arrange visits for elementary students moving to secondary schools, or secondary school students moving to CEGEP. For Indigenous students from northern communities, entering secondary school often involves moving to another community, leaving family and friends, and boarding with non-Indigenous families. The children miss their communities, their culture, and the contact with their families. This puts great pressure on children of 12 or 13 years of age and they need much support if they are to succeed. They, like all children, need a “significant adult” in their lives and they benefit from mentoring from both teachers and peers, as well as from arts and athletics programs to help give them a sense of belonging. Their integration must be fully embedded in the school’s culture and supported by resources in the school.

Inuit children who have been immersed in Inuktitut language often arrive in southern schools with weak language skills. Of even greater concern is the fact that some of the students suffer from social problems caused by the living conditions in their home communities, problems that affect their learning and make it difficult for them to fit into the non-Indigenous school environment. Early intervention by the host schools will better their chances of succeeding in the mainstream system. The Kativik School Board provides extra tutoring support in English and French for children who come south, and even children who are significantly delayed in their learning are usually able to catch up quickly. While the host school board receives money from the Kativik School Board as well as from the government<sup>14</sup> to help students’ integration, language development, and remediation, in many cases this is insufficient and the school administration must take funds from other sources to supplement it. The greatest need is for ancillary help, since these students have many learning and social problems and are scattered throughout the school boards. It would be helpful to have a resource person in every board where there are a significant number of Indigenous children, to help coordinate all the various services and support they need.

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14 On the Island of Montréal, this comes from the CGTSM.

Indigenous students probably receive a broader education with more subject options and opportunities if they move south, and school boards with substantial Indigenous populations put measures in place to try to support them. One of our interveners said that non-Indigenous teachers need to be better prepared to receive these children and more open to their needs, starting during teacher education programs and continuing with professional development to sensitize them to the needs of Indigenous children. Another said: “No matter what we do, it never seems like enough,” adding, “most of our bigger cases are carrying some very heavy baggage that they have trouble overcoming in order to clear the path for academic success.”

Native Friendship Centres in urban areas, such as those in Montreal and Maniwaki, provide support for Indigenous people displaced from their communities for employment, health issues, or education. At the CEGEP level, John Abbott College has had a program to train Inuit nurses for many years, along with support for the students on campus. Recently, it has developed an “Indigenous initiative,” that combines support for integration, pedagogical support, sociocultural activities, a decolonized curriculum, and reconciliation activities.

One possibility would be to offer more secondary education within the indigenous communities, but the anglophone community has faced the problem of offering a full slate of secondary courses with limited resources and small numbers of students in remote school boards. Some of the innovative practices developed by these boards, such as the CLC network, could provide praxis models for Indigenous communities.

Accessibility to education in remote areas could be improved with an extensive technological infrastructure to make distance education more available. But, as we have already stated with reference to the English school system,<sup>15</sup> this would need an investment in technology so that remote communities have improved access to adequate broadband speed, and the development and distribution of more distance education offerings. Again, developing such courses would need the input of Indigenous experts.

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15 Québec, ABEE *Quebec Schools On Line: Opportunities for English-Language Education*, (Québec, MELS, 2014).

## 6. Teacher education and retention

In Indigenous communities, it is difficult to attract and retain well-qualified teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, integration aides and behavior technicians. Some non-Indigenous teachers fit well into the northern communities and adapt to the differences involved in living in remote locations with few amenities and a high cost of living. But most teachers who move north are ill-prepared for the life and the culture they are entering. They find the conditions too difficult and neither accept the ways of the community, nor are accepted by it. The Cree School Board estimates that there is a turnover of 20% of teachers and 50% of principals each year, causing instability in the school and its community and a loss of faith in the viability of importing teachers from the south. This suggests the need for more Indigenous teachers and auxiliary staff to provide services in the communities, but there are reports that many of those currently in service are poorly trained. To address this problem, McGill University has developed a Graduate Certificate program of five courses for non-Indigenous teachers who plan to teach in Indigenous communities.

The program will cover topics such as cultural socialization, culturally appropriate teaching strategies, second-language teaching and the history of Indigenous cultures and peoples. The first cohort is expected to enter in the fall of 2017.

The guiding principles of a program developed by a cooperative process between the University of Victoria and the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in Northern Saskatchewan to prepare early childhood educators contain many of the basic principles of a successful educational program for Indigenous students of all ages: It is community-based and co-constructed by curriculum experts and community Elders; it incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and learning; it opens up access to further education while valuing traditional knowledge; and it focuses on education with the involvement of other community services.<sup>16</sup>

In Québec, McGill University has developed a program that follows the same principles and is being implemented for Mi'kmaq students in Listuguj. This is the first time a Bachelor of Education program in Canada has been completely community-based, eliminating the need to dislocate students to attend on-campus courses. Their proximity has enabled the cohort of 16 students to form a cohesive support group, and they can benefit from community help with child care and emotional support. The community has enough members with higher degrees to constitute most of the program instructors. Success in the 120-credit program will qualify the graduates to teach anywhere in Québec, although most of them plan to teach within their community.<sup>17</sup>

Programs such as these acknowledge the importance of Indigenous teachers, not only because of their knowledge of local culture and values, but also because of their communication style and knowledge of how their students learn. They also acknowledge the need to include Elders in the development of the teacher education curriculum, for the same reasons.

16 First Nations Partnership Programs, *Generative Curriculum Model*, accessed at <http://www.fnpp.org/gcm.htm>.

17 Wendy Dawson, *A Bachelor of Education for Mi'kmaq students*. <https://www.mcgill.ca/education/files/education/gaspe-spec-bachelor-of-ed-w40.pdf>

## 7. Coordination with other ministries, such as Health and Social Services

While education is the key to future success, it cannot be addressed in isolation. There is a need to break down silos between agencies and for communication and liaison between services to accommodate the needs of the whole child. Cree and Inuit health boards provide a model for coordination and cooperation between educational services and others in the community, such as health and mental health services, social services, and justice agencies. ABEE described in an earlier brief<sup>18</sup> an initiative between the CHSSN and CLCs that was of benefit to the community at large where it was applied. Such initiatives could provide models for remote regions, where they are desperately needed, but will require the allocation of funds and resources. A 2015 report stated that: “In Québec, 2% of the child population is Aboriginal, and 10% of the children in care are Aboriginal.”<sup>19</sup> The same report called for a coordinated approach among service providers (p.12) and based on the research consensus on the importance of (among other factors) “early childhood development and education” (p.14) to protect vulnerable children, it identified an educational initiative in Winnipeg that has shown social benefits. Not only do children in the program acquire literacy skills at an early age, their parents also learn and there is a positive impact on the families’ social situation.

“The Abecedarian pilot project is an early childhood development program in Winnipeg’s Lord Selkirk Park community, an inner-city housing development. Using the Abecedarian approach, the pilot project incorporates learning into day-to-day adult-child interactions that are tailored to the needs of each child. Activities focus on social, emotional and cognitive areas of development but give particular emphasis to language. The majority of participating families are Aboriginal and provided input into program planning, including establishing a traditional Aboriginal parenting group led by an Elder....Early results from the Lord Selkirk Park project indicate that participating Aboriginal children made considerable gains in early language development. Since research shows that poor early literacy and language development is associated with other risk factors (e.g. conduct problems) for child abuse, good outcomes from this project can reduce the risk of participating children being placed into the child welfare system.”<sup>20</sup>

18 ABEE, *We Are Accountable to the Students: Success and retention in English-language Schools* (Québec, MELS, 2015)

19 Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group. *Aboriginal Children in Care*. Report to Canada’s Premiers. July 2015, p.7

20 *Ibid.*, p. 16



## 8. Racist attitudes in the mainstream population

Lasting improvements in Indigenous peoples' living conditions can come about only if they are led by an Indigenous population well-educated in its traditional ways, balanced by preparation for the needs and realities of the 21st century. Indigenous people educated in this way must be supported by a non-Indigenous population that is correspondingly well-educated in Indigenous culture. Lack of knowledge breeds suspicion. Knowledge of the ways of other communities reduces fear and suspicion of the "other" and fosters understanding. In the words of one ABEE member, "Getting to know your neighbour. It's as simple and as complicated as that." Teaching non-Indigenous children about Indigenous history and culture is one way of reducing the latent racism that Indigenous people have identified as a contributing factor to their conditions.

*"Indigenizing education means that every subject at every level is examined to consider how and to what extent current content and pedagogy reflect the presence of Indigenous/ Aboriginal peoples and the valid contribution of Indigenous knowledge. Such an examination would shift the focus from remediating deficits in Aboriginal students to addressing bias and omissions in the educational system."*<sup>21</sup>

At present, the instruction of non-Indigenous Québec students in the history and culture of Indigenous peoples is often restricted to a few key events in Québec history: Indigenous peoples' involvement with Jacques Cartier, the death of Jean de Brébeuf, the James Bay Agreement, etc. The establishment of a National Indigenous History Month by the Canadian government smacks of tokenism and merely opens up the curriculum to more topics to be covered, rather than providing the foundation for a substantial, on-going treatment of issues, as envisioned by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report. The suggestion to include Indigenous history in the new secondary-level history curriculum is a good one but all subjects in the curriculum—such as language arts, music, drama, dance, geography, ethics and religious culture, the contemporary world—can (and should) also address Indigenous content at all age levels.

In developing curriculum materials, it is not enough to insert a unit into the curriculum that treats Indigenous people as just another minority group. This trivializes the content and further devalues Indigenous knowledge. The secondary school history curriculum has been criticized for inserting the contribution of minority language groups as an afterthought. Indigenous people have an even greater claim to a full consideration of their knowledge and culture in the curriculum and this consideration can and should be a part of subject matter at all levels.

One school developed an interesting project that recognized the value of Indigenous culture in instruction addressing the whole school population. About 29% of the students in Pierre Elliott Trudeau Elementary School in Gatineau are First Nations children. The school held its first powwow in May 2016: Indigenous children wore traditional clothing, sang, danced and drummed to celebrate their culture in the presence of their peers<sup>22</sup>. The performative nature of this event could have been construed as tokenism, except that the school has developed a variety of in-school activities for the Indigenous student population and the powwow, conducted by the children and their families, was an extension of these initiatives. The long-term goal was to develop an example of embedding Indigenous culture in an urban school. The activities have continued during this school year and the school plans another powwow for the spring of 2017.

21 <http://www.cca-ace.ca/blog/marlene-brant-castellano/2014/06/2/indigenizing-education>

22 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/gatineau-school-powwow-1.3582832>



Several years ago, one Montréal school tried to establish a PELO program in Inuktitut that would be open to all students, both Inuit and non-Inuit to sensitize non-Inuit students to Inuit culture. Although the idea was a good one, it has been difficult to find a teacher of Inuktitut who could be available regularly. This year, no one has been found to teach this program. As an alternative, an effort has been made to hold cultural days in which students learn about the Inuit life.

In another school in the same school board, spiritual care and community involvement animators have taken on the role of sensitizing non-Indigenous students to Indigenous culture. They have organized powwows, invited speakers from the various communities and prepared traditional food.

Some provinces have made efforts to develop curricula and resources that address Indigenous culture <sup>23</sup>and Québec is cooperating with them and learning from their experience through a collaborative website set up to share the materials.

One of the most comprehensive sets of curriculum materials for schools was developed by representatives from the governments of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut in 2013 to teach about the residential school system. One of the interesting features of these materials is the respectful and thoughtful way they address the sensitive issues that may emerge. As an example:

“If/when you invite a former residential school student to discuss their experiences with students, it is important to give careful consideration to whom is being invited and to what experience they have sharing in their stories. Some former residential school students may not be ready to share, or be interested in sharing. Similar to what could happen with a war veteran or holocaust survivor, the issues that may be opened up during class discussions may trigger memories that are difficult to deal with for the presenter. Teachers need to:

- solicit advice from school and community resource people to ensure that the environment is safe for all concerned;
- ensure that the former student is a good match for the kinds of activities conducted in the school;
- ensure that the former student has experience talking about the issues; and
- ensure that they have access to support people following their discussions with the students, if necessary or helpful.”<sup>24</sup>

23 See, for example, <http://aboriginal.cmec.ca/index.en.php> for a list of resources identified by CMEC as best practices

24 *The Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past – Seeking Reconciliation – Building Hope for Tomorrow*, second edition. [https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/resources/northern\\_studies\\_10\\_teaching\\_guide.pdf](https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/resources/northern_studies_10_teaching_guide.pdf), 4.

Two other interesting features of this curriculum are that it is designed for all students in the two territories and that it is a mandatory course for all students to graduate.

*“Two studies of the curriculum have indicated that students and teachers reported increased empathy, critical thinking skills, ethical awareness, and decision-making strategies.”<sup>25</sup>*

Student exchanges allow students from different cultures to experience each other’s way of life and projects such as Péli’qan have helped francophone and anglophone students develop a better understanding of each other. It would be especially valuable for non-Indigenous students to have some experience of the realities of living in the far North of the province to give them some understanding of the difficulties experienced by Indigenous students. The Central Québec School Board (CQSB) conducted a very successful exchange for its students, arranging for them to travel to Schefferville for a basketball tournament and to get to know their peers in the Indigenous communities in the territory of the Cree School Board. Given the distances involved, travel costs were high, but the mutual learning made it worthwhile and worth funding.

At the university level, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) has developed a course on “Indigenous ways of knowing.”<sup>26</sup>

In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Report, McGill University has instituted the Provost’s Task Force on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education, “engaging and collaborating with Indigenous communities to identify, explore and advance ideas, initiatives and plans that will embed Indigeneity in the life and activities of the University while seeking to enhance the presence and success of Indigenous students, faculty and staff at McGill.”<sup>27</sup>

25 *The Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past – Seeking Reconciliation – Building Hope for Tomorrow*, second edition. [https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/resources/northern\\_studies\\_10\\_teaching\\_guide.pdf](https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/resources/northern_studies_10_teaching_guide.pdf), 20.

26 <https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/abed101/indigenous-ways-of-knowing/>

27 [https://www.mcgill.ca/provost/files/provost/20160901\\_ptisie\\_tor\\_1.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/provost/files/provost/20160901_ptisie_tor_1.pdf)

## 9. Conclusion

*"None of us alive today are responsible for the decisions of those who crafted the laws that made some lesser than others. We did not write the Indian Act or build residential schools. We did not pass out pock infested blankets or exile whole populations of people to patches of land or steal one generation from another. This is not our doing, and, it is the history of our land. We share this history now. All of us who were born here or choose to live here: this is our shared history. We share these stories just as we do the beautiful, compassionate stories of our past."<sup>28</sup>*

Many of the problems in First Nations communities can be traced back to colonialism, to the forced removal of children from their communities, and to the paternalism of central governments. While we cannot go back and right these wrongs we can move forward and the education of all Canadians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can play a key role in this progress. It has taken a long time for the wrongs perpetrated on Indigenous communities to have the effects we now see, and change will be constant and on-going. We hope that the current concern for the condition of Indigenous people will also be on-going. Iroquois tradition speaks of making decisions based on their impact on the seventh generation. We can put into place an education system for all children in Québec so that this generation is the first of seven generations to enjoy self-actualization and fulfilling lives.

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28 <http://www.cea-ace.ca/blog/brooke-moore/2014/06/5/learning-through-empathy>

## *Individuals consulted for this brief*

- **Jim Howden**, Director, Office of First Nations and Inuit Education, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University
- **Geoffrey Kelley**, Minister Responsible for Native Affairs and MNA for the riding of Jacques-Cartier
- **Wusua Mitchell**, Principal, Dorval Elementary School, Lester B. Pearson School Board
- **Erik Olsthoorn**, Coordinator of Student Services, Lester B. Pearson School Board
- **Martin Quirion**, Consultant in Aboriginal Affairs, Direction des services aux autochtones et du développement nordique, ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur
- **Chris Smeaton**, Superintendent of Schools, Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Separate Regional Division No 4, Lethbridge, Alberta





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