

## Achieving Funding Parity for First Nations Education

(Submitted by Timmins Chamber of Commerce)

– Adopted by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce

### Issue:

The lack of a coordinated, long-term approach for funding aboriginal education has led to a two-tier education system in Ontario. Without government intervention to address the funding inequality, the discrepancy in educational attainment between Ontario's aboriginal and non-aboriginal populations will only increase. The government must take concerted steps to address this issue in order to ensure that our First Nations population can contribute in a meaningful way to the future of Ontario's economy.

### Background:

The skills shortage is one of the most immediate and pressing challenges facing Ontario. The rapid turnover of technology and ever expanding network of data and information which underpin the knowledge economy have led to a reevaluation of the importance of knowledge to the economic process. There is a growing awareness that success in global value chains requires both more advanced knowledge to enable a higher degree of economic specialization, and more elastic knowledge to facilitate continual technological upgrading and organizational innovation. For Ontario, this means that by 2031, 77% of workers will be required to have a post-secondary degree - a significant increase from the current attainment rate of 60%. An aging population and intense global competition for skilled immigrants will require Ontario to significantly increase education and labour force participation by its domestic population in order to meet the growing demand for skilled labour.

There is a particularly strong rationale for focusing efforts on First Nations communities. As it stands, there is a significant gap in educational achievement between Ontario's Aboriginal and non-aboriginal populations. According to the 2006 Canadian Census, 38 per cent of the Aboriginal population has some type of post-secondary education, compared to 51 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population. The contrast is greatest in terms of university education. While 26 percent of the mainstream population has a university degree, only nine percent of aboriginal people have achieved this level of education. At the same time, Canada's First Nations population is growing by 29 percent per year, making it the fastest growing population in the country. Given these realities, Aboriginal education must be at the centre of Ontario's strategy for addressing the skills shortage.

Under the existing federal division of power, responsibility for First Nations education is shared by the provincial and federal governments. Responsibility for aboriginals living on reserve formally rests with the Federal Government, while the provincial government is responsible for the population living off reserve. Across Canada, approximately two-thirds of the aboriginal population lives off-reserve, and two-fifths of K to 12-aged children living on reserve attend a nearby provincial school. With roughly four out of five aboriginal children enrolled in a provincial school, the provincial government has a crucial role to play in providing First Nations students with the

education and life skills to make the successful transition into post-secondary education and ultimately the workforce.

At the federal level, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) uses the Band Operated Funding Formula to determine funding levels for First Nations communities. This formula, which is based on multiplying the number of students by a tuition rate, has not been updated since 1996. In practice, it results in a glaring discrepancy between community-operated and provincial schools, with students living on reserve receiving on average \$2,000 less than students enrolled in the provincial system. This discrepancy directly impacts First Nations' ability to acquire and maintain the level of resources and salaries provided by the provincial system. As a result, First Nations students are at a major disadvantage to their provincial counterparts when it comes to preparedness for post-secondary education.

Provincially, an unwritten policy of assimilation has slowly given way to recognition on the part of policy-makers that aboriginal students face a unique set of circumstances in relation to educational attainment, which requires targeted resources and programs to equip them with the skills required for success. In 2007, the provincial government took a major step towards acknowledging the importance of First Nations culture and values to mainstream education through adoption of the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework. This policy created the strategic framework for enhanced investment in and collaboration between the various components of the provincial education system serving First Nations students. It also placed much-needed emphasis on the unique learning styles and cultural perspectives of aboriginal students in provincial curricula, assessment practices, and professional teacher development.

As per the goals of the new Framework, the Ministry of Education's Aboriginal Education Office has introduced a number of funding envelopes for school boards to support their capacity to enhance the learning experience of aboriginal students. These programs are one time funding agreements which are not part of the core funding framework. Individual schools may get a portion of the funds— if they're lucky, but the existing funding model stops short of the terms and conditions required to facilitate a sustainable flow of resources and long-term planning on the part of system partners. In addition, aboriginal leaders have expressed concern that because implementation ultimately falls to school boards, programs will not achieve their intended objectives. In the experience of many stakeholders, school boards will take proactive measures when they have access to specific "First Nations programming dollars", but curtail programming when specific envelopes run out.

Similar concerns have been expressed in the case of aboriginal Post Secondary Education (PSE). Ontario's aboriginal institutes form an integral part of the provincial PSE system, integrating accredited university and college programs with the social and cultural traditions of First Nations communities. Aboriginal institutes receive funding from both the federal and provincial governments. However, the institutes do not have access to the other funding envelopes that are available to mainstream colleges and universities for expenditures such as operations, program development and delivery, research, and capital investments. Due to the lack of secure and adequate funding, over the past 5 years, the number of aboriginal post secondary education students fell from 27,000 to 23,000, which is the reverse scenario of what needs to happen if Ontario is to effectively counteract the skills shortage.

In November, 2010, Canada approved the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 14 of the Declaration states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

In light of Canada's international obligations and the pressing need for skilled labour across the economy, it is imperative that the Ontario government take immediate action to begin closing the education gap between First Nations communities and the general population.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

##### **The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:**

1. Heed the recommendation of the Canadian Auditor General to embark on comprehensive, long-term planning in co-operation with the Federal Government and First Nations political leadership and education organizations to achieve an integrated, stable, and adequately resourced framework for funding appropriate programs, services, and resources to close the education attainment gap between the First Nations and mainstream populations.
2. Strengthen implementation of the Aboriginal Education Policy Framework by identifying and earmarking additional financial resources at the provincial level to ensure a steady and sufficient supply of funding for Framework priorities.
3. Build the capacity of Ontario Aboriginal Institutes to become sustainable and responsive education institutions through ensuring equality between Aboriginal Institutes and mainstream colleges and universities in per-capita funding from all sources.

