



Increasing High School Graduation Rates for First Nations Living On-Reserve to Reduce Poverty

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Overview

It is common that First Nations living on-reserve must leave home to pursue high school with little support, resulting in graduation rates for First Nations on-reserve substantially below non-Indigenous Canadians. Lack of education increases the risks of perpetual poverty and evidence shows that Indigenous students value cultural support, which can improve graduation rates. Supports should be in place for students entering high school to make informed decisions for their future.

Introduction and Context : The Link Between Poverty and Education

Canada's colonial history follows dependency theory, creating wealth for settlers by exploiting Indigenous resources (Mckay, 2004). Colonialism and forced assimilation policies led to social exclusion by destroying measures of wealth Indigenous¹ peoples value such as cultural expression (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2020). This began a circle of impoverishment for Indigenous peoples in monetary and non-monetary measures (health, education, housing and nutrition (World Bank, 2017)). According to Amartya Sen, poverty encompasses structural barriers to basic capabilities, which includes education (Banerjee et al., 2006). Today, 44% of First Nations on-reserve population live in low-income households, compared with 14.4% of Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2021). Education is one essential element to eradicating all forms poverty.

First Nations are responsible for the education of on-reserve students and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) provides funding (Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), n.d.). ISC's mandate is to work collaboratively for improved access to services and empower independent services delivery by Indigenous communities. Improving access to educational inequities is core to ISC's purpose.

In 2019, ISC implemented new policies with First Nations, increasing funding for on-reserve students on par with provincial school funding (Barbour & LaBonte, 2023). However, less than 40% of First Nations living on-reserve have a high school diploma, compared to 93% of non-indigenous Canadians due to structural barriers, resulting in social inequity for further opportunities (Assembly of First Nations, 2022).

Without action, risks for First Nations living on-reserve to remain part of the core poor in Canada will persist.

Challenges of On-Reserve High School Education

Only 44% of on-reserve schools offer grades 11 and 12 (Assembly of First Nations, 2022). To obtain a high school diploma, students as young as 13 living on-reserve face the difficult decision to either drop out of school to stay home or leave their communities to continue their education (Assembly of First Nations, 2022, Casey, 2023).

Connection to culture has been described by Indigenous students as important for their academic success (Bighead, 2008). However, Nicholas St Germaine & Alanah Jewell (n.d.) show that students away from home for education feel culture shock and alienation with Western culture. With little support, many students are left

¹ *Indigenous* encompasses Canadians of First Nations, Metis and Inuit descent. Most research is conducted on Indigenous populations as a whole as opposed to one subset. In addition, limited research is available regarding First Nations living on-reserve.

feeling “terrified and alone” (Casey, 2023). Students experience social exclusion losing connection to their language and culture that is so valuable to their communities resulting in mental health issues and substance abuse to cope. Mental health is directly connected to academic success and Indigenous students are more likely to suffer mental health disorders (Nicholas St Germaine & Alanah Jewell, n.d.).

An innovative program, the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), which recruits university student mentors to provide advice and support for mentees in high school, has been successful. This program takes a participatory approach which has seen success in other development contexts (Chambers, 2005) by actively involving Indigenous students in high schools and universities to understand their priorities and model programs around their needs. By having Indigenous mentors and students partnered, delivering programming that maintains cultural pride and safety and is developed by Indigenous peoples, graduation rates have increased by 19% (Harwood et al., n.d., P.42).

Implications for Policy

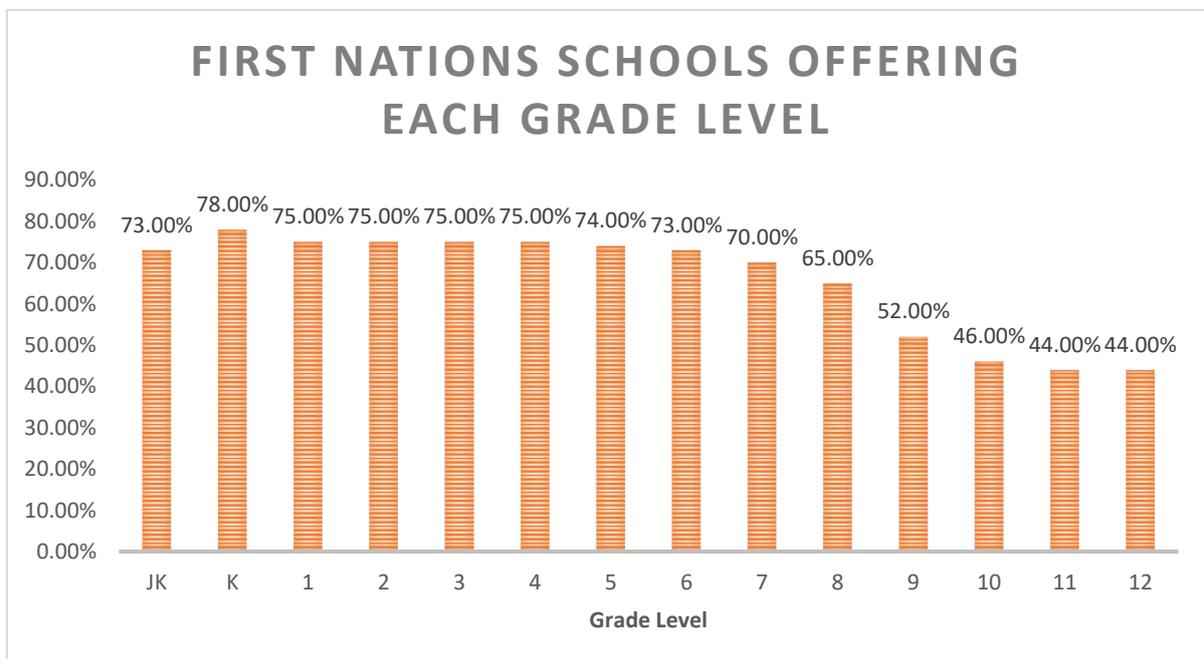
Education reduces risks of chronic monetary poverty by creating opportunities to leverage education for improved living standards (World Bank Group, 2015, p.74).

ISC must prioritize programs to support Indigenous students to transition into and throughout high school, particularly grades 9-12, when many students must leave their communities (Figure 1).

Recommendations

- Provide funding to enable an Indigenous-led mentorship program modelled after AIME
- First Nations communities with a need will have a community coordinator to match students and mentors starting in grade 7 or 8 to enable students to make an informed decision on their future before they reach an age where they may need to leave home.

Figure 1: Adapted from Assembly of First Nations, 2022, P.1



References

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- World Bank Group. (2015). *Global Monitoring Report 2014/2015: Ending Poverty and Sharing Prosperity*. https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/gmr/gmr2014/GMR_2014_Full_Report.pdf

References Above from Course Material

Week 1 reading

- Mckay, J. (2004). Reassessing development theory: modernization and beyond. In *Key Issues in Development by Kingsbury, Damien* (pp. 45–66). Palgrave Macmillan.

Week 2 reading

- Banerjee, A. V., Bénabou, R., & Mookherjee, D. (2006). Chapter 1 Measuring Poverty. In *Understanding Poverty* (pp. 3–16). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195305191.001.0001>

Week 2 lesson

- World Bank. (2017). *Monitoring Global Poverty: Report of the Commission of Global Poverty*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/353781479304286720/pdf/110040-REVISED-PUBLIC.pdf>

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