

Education of Aboriginal Students

Background

According to the most recent Statistics Canada census data (2006), there are 242,000 Aboriginal people living in Ontario, primarily comprising three distinct groups: First Nation (158,000), Métis (74,000) and Inuit (2,000). The remaining 8,000 Aboriginal people classified themselves as “other.” Aboriginal peoples in Ontario have diverse languages, cultures and traditions. The census also identified that approximately 47,000 First Nations people live on reserves in Ontario; these are lands set aside for the use and benefit of a specific band or First Nation. There are a total of 133 First Nation communities in Ontario, each of which has its own government or tribal council. The delivery of education through schools on reserve is the responsibility of the First Nation and the federal government. The federal government is financially responsible for the education of First Nation students living on reserve, whether these students attend First Nation or provincially operated schools.

As shown in Figure 1, the 2006 census (the most recent definitive data on Aboriginal education) identified that only 62% of Aboriginal adults had graduated from high school as compared to 78% of the general population, a gap of 16%. The academic achievement gap is even more pronounced—as

high as 50%—for the youngest adult age group (aged 20–24). Only 39% of the First Nation people living on reserve in this age group had graduated from high school. This issue is all the more important considering that 46% of First Nation people are under the age of 25, as compared to the overall population where 32% are less than 25 years old.

The Ministry of Education (Ministry) administers provincially funded elementary and secondary education in Ontario and is responsible for developing the curriculum, setting requirements for student diplomas and providing funding to school boards. In 2006, the Ministry identified Aboriginal education as one of its key priorities, with a focus on closing the gap in academic achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by the year 2016. To meet this challenge, the Ministry released various policy documents and funded a number of initiatives intended to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students. Since 2006, the Ministry has provided \$170 million in funding to improve academic achievement levels for Aboriginal students and increase awareness of Aboriginal cultures for all students.

In January 2006, the Aboriginal Education Office (AEO) was created to provide co-ordination and leadership on Aboriginal education issues and initiatives. The AEO works in collaboration with Aboriginal communities and organizations, school

Figure 1: The Gap in Aboriginal High School Graduation Rates for Adults and Young Adults

Source of data: 2006 Statistics Canada census and Ministry of Education

Population Group	All Adults (2006)		Age 20–24 (2006)		# Enrolled in Provincial Schools (2010/11)
	% Graduated	Gap	% Graduated	Gap	
All Ontario	78	–	89	–	–
First Nations—on reserve	44	34	39	50	5,690
First Nations—off reserve	64	14	66	23	27,765
Inuit	59	19	66	23	700
Métis	70	8	81	8	18,245
All Aboriginal	62	16	66	23	52,400

Note: The percentage graduated is the percentage of the population group with a high school diploma. The gap in graduation rates equals the percentage of all people graduated in Ontario minus the percentage graduated in the Aboriginal group.

boards, other ministries and the federal government. Currently, the AEO employs 12 staff, including five regional education officers who work with Ontario's 72 school boards.

Research indicates that many Aboriginal students are faced with significant challenges that impact their achievement levels in school, such as high rates of poverty, substandard housing and poor nutrition. Equally important, many of these students live in areas with little prospect of future employment, which is often a demoralizing factor in taking their education seriously. In 2008, Health Canada reported that there is an extraordinarily high and increasing rate of suicide among Aboriginal youth. Although the Ministry of Education cannot resolve all of these issues, it can promote achievement in school to help Aboriginal students overcome these challenges.

Audit Objective and Scope

The objectives of our audit were to assess whether the Ministry and selected school boards have adequate procedures in place to:

- identify and implement initiatives to improve Aboriginal student achievement and to measure and report on the effectiveness of those initiatives; and

- ensure that transfer payments intended for Aboriginal education initiatives are spent for the purposes intended and allocated on the basis of student need.

Senior management reviewed and agreed to our audit objectives and associated audit criteria.

Our audit work was conducted at the Ministry's head office, primarily in the Aboriginal Education Office. We also conducted audit work at selected school boards and at a sample of elementary and secondary schools in these boards. The three boards we visited were Algoma District School Board (Sault Ste. Marie), Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (Peterborough) and Lakehead District School Board (Thunder Bay).

Our audit work included reviewing and analyzing ministry files, administrative directives, policies and procedures, and interviewing ministry staff. We also met with school board staff, including supervisory officers, principals and teachers. We researched Aboriginal education practices in other jurisdictions and solicited the opinions of First Nation education managers, First Nation Elders, the Chiefs of Ontario and the Métis Nation of Ontario. Our audit also included a review of activities of the Ministry's Internal Audit Services Branch relating to Aboriginal education. We reviewed the branch's recent reports and considered its work and any relevant issues identified when planning our audit work.

Summary

In 2006, the Ministry identified Aboriginal education as one of its key priorities with a focus on meeting two primary challenges by 2016: to significantly improve achievement among First Nation, Métis and Inuit students, and to close the significant student achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The Ministry also wanted all students to have an appreciation of Aboriginal cultures. In order to help achieve these objectives, the Ministry designed an overarching policy framework that endeavoured to identify Aboriginal students in Ontario, guide the development of appropriate support programs, periodically assess academic achievement and report on the progress made in implementing the framework. However, the Ministry needs to more actively oversee the implementation of this framework to demonstrate what, if any, progress has been made since 2006 in improving achievement among Aboriginal students and closing the achievement gap between them and other students in Ontario.

Some of our more significant observations regarding Aboriginal education in Ontario were:

- In 2007, the Ministry released the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Framework), which includes 10 performance measures intended to gauge the success of ministry, school board and school efforts to improve the academic achievement of Aboriginal students. Although the Ministry has reported some success on several of these measures, five years after the release of the Framework the Ministry has not quantified any of the 10 performance indicators so that progress could be objectively measured, nor has it required that the school boards individually evaluate and report on these performance measures. None of the three boards we visited had done so.
- Since the Ministry did not have an accurate and reliable mechanism to identify Aboriginal students in the Ontario school system, in 2007 it released *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students*. This policy guide assists school boards in developing Aboriginal student self-identification policies whereby students are given the option to formally identify themselves as First Nation, Métis or Inuit. At the time of our audit, less than half of the estimated Aboriginal student population in Ontario had self-identified. Improved progress on this self-identification strategy would enable the Ministry and boards to better target funding and periodically benchmark the academic progress of Aboriginal students.
- Five years after announcing its intention to significantly close the gap in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, the Ministry has still not established a baseline or even a starting point from which to measure the gap. Therefore, we requested that the Ministry provide us with the most recent student data, including Grade 10 credit accumulation for self-identified Aboriginal students. Accumulation of credits toward graduation is one of the primary indicators of student success in high school. We noted that only 45% of the self-identified Aboriginal Grade 10 students were on track to graduate from high school, compared to 74% for all students in the Grade 10 population. This brings into question the Ministry's ability to meet its goal of significantly closing the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by 2016.
- Even though an Aboriginal organization engaged by the Ministry in 2009 reported that consistent implementation of the Framework is necessary to make systemic change, we found that it was largely left up to each board to decide how it would

implement the Framework. The emphasis placed on this varied at the three boards we visited. For example, one of the school boards we visited had successfully implemented the self-identification policy as virtually all of its Aboriginal students had self-identified. This board was using student achievement data to identify challenges unique to its Aboriginal population and was implementing specific strategies to address these challenges.

- Although the early education of many First Nation students is provided by reserve schools, which are the financial responsibility of the federal government, many of these students eventually transfer into the provincial system. Given limited per-student funding, on-reserve schools have generally not been able to provide the quality of education found in provincial schools; studies suggest that these students may be several grade levels behind when they transfer into the public system. Although the Ministry does not measure this, our analysis of Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) data found that only half of on-reserve students attending provincially funded schools passed the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test in the 2010/11 school year, compared to the provincial average of 83%.

OVERALL MINISTRY RESPONSE

Too many Aboriginal students do not achieve the academic success we want for all students. Addressing this education attainment gap is a top priority for the government of Ontario. We are pleased that the Auditor General shares our commitment to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

The Ministry of Education (Ministry) and boards, working with First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities, share the view that significant progress has been achieved, and that conditions for future success have been established

through progressive collaboration and specific supports. Some boards have made progress in implementing supports for Aboriginal students and recent evidence reveals specific instances where the achievement gap has been reduced. The Ministry agrees with the spirit of the Auditor General's recommendations and will continue to develop and implement strategies targeted to improve Aboriginal student success within the context, philosophy and approach outlined in the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*.

The Ministry's Framework is based on *Ontario's New Approach to Aboriginal Affairs, 2005*, which charts a new course for a constructive, co-operative relationship with the Aboriginal peoples of Ontario to develop productive partnerships, collaborate on key initiatives and achieve real progress on shared goals.

The Ministry, with its partners, has put in place the necessary foundation for success in keeping with our overall student achievement strategy: building relationships and capacity within the sector; designing and developing data collection mechanisms; and analyzing and implementing evidence-driven strategies to support advancements in student achievement.

When considering evidence-based strategies and reporting, it is important to understand Aboriginal peoples' perspectives on the school system, including the intergenerational mistrust resulting from residential school experiences. Ontario respects Aboriginal and treaty rights protected by Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. This is why the collection of Aboriginal student data must continue to be voluntary and confidential.

Moving forward, the Ministry will pursue a path that builds on demonstrated successes, in partnership with communities, school boards, the federal government and Aboriginal partners, to support First Nation, Métis and Inuit students across the province.

Detailed Audit Observations

POLICY GOALS, IMPLEMENTATION PLANS AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Policy Goals and Planning

In June 2005, the government of Ontario released *Ontario's New Approach to Aboriginal Affairs*, which outlined a number of initiatives aimed at achieving real progress on shared goals with Aboriginal people. In line with this approach, the Ministry identified Aboriginal education as one of its key priorities, with a focus on meeting two primary challenges by the year 2016: to improve achievement among First Nation, Métis and Inuit students; and to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy, retention of students in school, graduation rates and advancement to post-secondary studies.

In 2007 the Ministry released the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*

(Framework). The Ministry considers the Framework to be the foundation for delivering quality education to all Aboriginal students who attend provincially funded elementary and secondary schools. Figure 2 shows the Ministry's three goals and the 10 performance measures it intends to use to gauge success, as outlined in the Framework.

In order to be truly effective, the Framework recognized that it was necessary for the Ministry to develop an implementation plan to guide its activities and assist school boards in meeting the broad objectives in the Framework. Although the Ministry has engaged in some preliminary implementation planning, five years after the release of the Framework, the Ministry has still not developed a formal implementation plan. In our opinion, such a plan should identify the key obstacles faced by Aboriginal students and outline specific activities to overcome various obstacles. This was exactly the process we found the Ministry had used in our recent audits of school safety programs and student success initiatives, both of which had achieved

Figure 2: Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Goals and Performance Measures

Source of data: Ministry of Education

Goal	Performance Measure
High levels of student achievement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Significant increase in the percentage of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students meeting provincial standards on province-wide assessments in reading, writing and mathematics 2. Significant increase in the number of First Nation, Métis and Inuit teaching and non-teaching staff in school boards across Ontario
Reduce gaps in student achievement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Significant increase in the graduation rate of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students 4. Significant improvement in First Nation, Métis and Inuit student achievement 5. Significant improvement in First Nation, Métis and Inuit student self-esteem 6. Increased collaboration between First Nation education authorities and school boards to ensure that First Nation students in First Nation communities receive the preparation they need in order to succeed when they make the transition to provincially funded schools 7. Increased satisfaction among educators in provincially funded schools with respect to targeted professional development and resources designed to help them serve First Nation, Métis and Inuit students more effectively
High levels of public confidence in public education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Increased participation of First Nation, Métis and Inuit parents in the education of their children 9. Increased opportunities for knowledge sharing, collaboration and issue resolution among Aboriginal communities, First Nation governments, and education authorities, schools, school boards and the Ministry of Education 10. Integration of educational opportunities to significantly improve the knowledge of all students and educators in Ontario about the rich cultures and histories of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples

some success. For these programs, the Ministry had formulated a strategy, devised a detailed plan, and measured results along the way to ensure that progress was being made. In contrast, the Ministry could not demonstrate how it was systematically implementing the Framework. Instead, we were informed that most of the Ministry's activities could be matched to at least one of the 10 performance measures. However, these performance measures were developed to assess the success of the Aboriginal education strategy and do not contain the detail necessary to guide ministry or school board activities.

According to the Framework, Aboriginal education must be integrated into the school board planning process. School boards in Ontario must be guided by the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement, a document that helps teachers, principals and school board staff plan and implement strategies to improve student achievement. The Ministry acknowledged that, although 40 out of Ontario's 72 school boards had included an Aboriginal education component in their improvement plans, it did not have a formal process in place to review these or other board plans. The Ministry could not provide us with any documentation to demonstrate that it had reviewed these board plans or assessed the degree to which the Framework has been implemented at each school board.

To assess the Aboriginal education planning process at the school board level, we reviewed the improvement plans for the past three years at the three boards we visited. We found that one of the boards made no reference to Aboriginal education, while another board listed Aboriginal cultural activities and events that it planned for that year. The third board set specific targets that focused on Aboriginal student achievement, one of which was to increase by 10% the number of Aboriginal students who were successful on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). However, none of these boards specifically mentioned the Framework or identified any of its 10 performance measures in their improvement plans.

An Aboriginal organization engaged by the Ministry in 2009 to obtain feedback on the implementation of the Framework had reported that, although consistent implementation is necessary to make systemic change, implementation of the Framework appeared to be dependent on the individual in charge of Aboriginal education initiatives at the school board. Similarly, based on our visits to the three boards, we concluded that there was a need for greater ministry co-ordination and guidance.

Performance Measurement and Reporting

In 2007, the Ministry committed itself to report publicly every three years on the implementation of the Framework according to the 10 performance measures. It released the first progress report in the fall of 2009, titled *Sound Foundations for the Road Ahead*, to provide an update on the progress made since 2007 in implementing the Framework. However, much of the discussion provided in this progress report was of a very general nature and did not quantify any of the 10 performance measures or identify any specific targets to be used to assess progress against these measures.

For this first progress report, the Ministry engaged two Aboriginal organizations to solicit community feedback on the Framework, and also worked with an independent research team to obtain feedback from students, parents and school boards. Additionally, the Ministry sent out surveys to all school boards.

We reviewed the reports from the independent research team and the two organizations that the Ministry used to support its progress report. We noted that of the 1,200 students interviewed, only 111 had self-identified as Aboriginal students. Additionally, almost half the students interviewed were from the Ottawa region and 90% were from Catholic school boards, which represent only 30% of Ontario's elementary and secondary school student population. The research team noted that these and other sampling concerns limited the amount of reliable data collected. Clearly, an unrepresentative

or inadequate sample would compromise the integrity of any related conclusions or inferences in the progress report.

A second progress report on the implementation of the Framework was scheduled to be released in the fall of 2012. However, in May 2012 the Ministry could not provide us with a draft of any progress it may have made on the report and stated that the report is now scheduled to be released in early 2013.

At the board level, we noted that two school boards we visited recently began to assess their status with regard to the Framework. This was the first time both of these boards had undertaken such an assessment since the Framework's release in 2007. In October 2011, one of these boards prepared a document that identified what it has already done and is planning to do to implement each of the 10 performance measures. In March 2012, the other board was asked by the Ministry to perform a self-assessment to determine how well that board has implemented the 10 performance measures. We noted that this process was not consistent among all regions and, in general, each board operated autonomously in the degree to which it implemented specific strategies to address the Framework and assessed the success of its strategies.

The Framework's three goals and 10 performance measures were developed to enable the Ministry and school boards to assess progress made toward improving achievement among Aboriginal students and closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Overall, we found that, five years after the release of the Framework, neither the Ministry nor the boards we visited had measured progress in relation to the Framework's performance goals or set any measurable targets so that progress could be measured. As a result, there is little province-wide information to indicate what, if any, progress has been made in improving educational success among Aboriginal students and closing the achievement gap between them and other students in Ontario.

RECOMMENDATION 1

To help Aboriginal students succeed in school and reduce the gap in student achievement as outlined in the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Framework), the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and school boards should:

- develop specific implementation plans that identify and address the key obstacles faced by Aboriginal students and routinely review and update these plans to assess what progress is being made; and
- include in these plans specific goals and performance measures as outlined in the Framework and objectively measure and report aggregate results to determine whether any progress is being made toward improving Aboriginal student outcomes.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry agrees that implementation plans are necessary to support initiatives going forward to close the achievement gap. Initiatives to support Aboriginal student achievement must be holistic and leverage evidence-based strategies developed in supporting the student achievement agenda.

The Ministry will do the following:

- Release a preliminary progress report and draft implementation plan in fall 2012 to engage key partners on strategies for progress against the Framework's performance measures, in order to close the achievement gap between First Nation, Métis and Inuit students and all students.
- Release the second progress report on the implementation of the Framework in spring 2013. The report will include an implementation plan up to 2016.
- Align the implementation plan with other key government commitments and investments that are designed to provide

targeted supports for Aboriginal youth, such as Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy.

BOARD RESPONSE

All three boards agreed with this recommendation. One board noted that its process of setting specific plans, goals and performance measures assists it in measuring student learning over time, and that such efforts have resulted in improvements for Aboriginal students, particularly in primary reading and writing. The board noted that it would continue to work on further improvements, specifically in the area of junior mathematics. A second board's plans included strategies to close the achievement gap and provide specific supports for Aboriginal students. This board stated that it has shared student achievement results internally with staff and with each band, and that beginning in 2012 it would share aggregate data publicly in its director's annual report. The third board cautioned that the number of students who had self-identified was very low for some grades, and measuring achievement over time with such a small group may not result in reliable data. The board noted, however, that such information was still useful to support students by focusing on tiered intervention and differentiated instruction. This board also noted that annual planning allows it to validate systemic learning and, moving forward, it will more closely align planning with student learning and teacher needs.

VOLUNTARY, CONFIDENTIAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Student Self-identification

Historically, one of the obstacles related to focusing education supports on Aboriginal students is that

the Ministry and school boards have not been able to identify these students in the Ontario school system. As a result, data could not be aggregated to develop programs, report on results achieved, or identify areas for improvement. Consequently, in April 2007, the Ministry released *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students* (Building Bridges) as a guide provided to school boards to assist in developing policies for voluntary Aboriginal student self-identification whereby students would be given the option to formally identify themselves as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit. Board implementation of the self-identification policy was not mandatory but the Ministry encouraged all school boards to develop such a policy.

The Ministry did not have a formal process in place to oversee implementation of self-identification policies at the school board level. As of May 2012, although 68 of Ontario's 72 school boards had implemented a self-identification policy, less than half of the estimated Aboriginal students had self-identified (23,000 out of 52,400). The Ministry stated that the recent implementation of the policy at many boards was one of the primary reasons why only 44% of the estimated number of Aboriginal students had self-identified.

We reviewed data pertaining to self-identification at all 72 school boards and identified 18 boards that had not shown a significant increase in the percentage of students self-identified over the previous three years. In addition, another 30 boards had identified less than 20% of their estimated Aboriginal student enrolment. In contrast, virtually all the estimated Aboriginal students in 16 other school boards had self-identified, indicating that it was possible for these school boards to successfully implement a policy that encourages their Aboriginal students to voluntarily identify themselves.

At two of the three school boards we visited virtually all of the estimated Aboriginal student population had self-identified. During the first year of policy implementation, one of these boards had identified 150% of the number of Aboriginal students estimated by the Ministry. This board

attributed its achievement to creating a successful awareness campaign prior to implementation. Furthermore, this board has received only two minor complaints from parents pertaining to student self-identification, which it addressed to the parents' satisfaction. At the third board we visited only about 50% of the estimated Aboriginal student population had self-identified. This board stated that it was unaware of the Ministry's estimate of the number of Aboriginal students in its schools and the Ministry had not provided them with the estimate. We believe that boards would find such information useful to help them to assess progress in identifying their Aboriginal students.

In July 2011, the Ministry surveyed school boards to assess progress to date in the implementation of the self-identification policy. More than 66 boards responded to the survey, and many provided recommendations that they thought would be useful in increasing the success of this policy. The boards wanted to see more ministry involvement in the process, with assistance such as a public awareness campaign, direct communication with Aboriginal communities, and standard materials for boards to use. Currently, each board independently develops its own materials, such as brochures for parents outlining the policy. Some boards find this challenging, as they need to ensure that information is correct and culturally appropriate. Boards also recommended that the Ministry provide more support in sharing best practices province-wide. One of the school boards we visited mentioned that boards are struggling to create effective strategies and approaches to implement the self-identification policy even though they have consulted with each other to obtain ideas on how to best implement a policy.

Teaching and Non-teaching Staff Self-identification

The Framework also outlines the need for a significant increase in teaching and non-teaching Aboriginal school staff. These individuals can act

as mentors and role models, share their Aboriginal culture, and help foster an environment where Aboriginal students can reach a high level of achievement. In 2008, the Ministry met with the Ontario College of Teachers to develop a self-identification process for teachers of Aboriginal descent. In 2009, the College reported to the Ministry that teachers need to understand what self-identification information would be used for and how any potential concerns would be mitigated. The College also noted that the successful implementation of teacher self-identification may take many years and both short- and long-term implementation plans are needed.

At the time of our audit, the Ministry still did not have any plans to encourage school boards to implement an Aboriginal staff self-identification policy. Also, at the time of our audit the Ministry had not formally gathered any information on the number of boards that had implemented an Aboriginal staff self-identification policy or gathered any data on the number of staff who have self-identified.

One of the school boards we visited implemented a voluntary self-identification policy for its Aboriginal staff members in 2008. This board has experienced success, as many of its staff who self-identified have become resources to reach out to Aboriginal students. We noted that the trustees at another school board we visited recently passed a motion to develop a similar policy. Following our discussions with this board, it expressed interest in contacting the first board to obtain a copy of its staff self-identification policy to help in its own policy development.

RECOMMENDATION 2

To obtain the population data necessary to better develop specific support programs, report on results, and identify opportunities to improve Aboriginal student achievement, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) should:

- develop standard communication tools and disseminate best practices to assist boards

in successfully implementing an effective student self-identification process; and

- develop a policy guide for self-identification by Aboriginal teaching and non-teaching staff and oversee the effective implementation of this policy.

Both the Ministry and school boards should exercise effective oversight to help ensure that the student self-identification policy is being successfully implemented in Ontario schools.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry agrees that it is necessary to support self-identification efforts and commends the significant progress that boards have made thus far in building trust with Aboriginal families choosing to participate in the initiative. A multi-pronged approach that further engages boards and Aboriginal partners is required.

The Ministry will do the following:

- Implement a communication strategy to support all boards in strengthening their Aboriginal student self-identification policy implementation by spring 2013.
- Provide support to all boards in the development of board-specific strategies regarding the continued implementation of Aboriginal voluntary self-identification policies throughout the 2012/13 school year.
- Continue to work with education partners, including those representing teaching and non-teaching staff, to discuss the feasibility of the development of a policy guideline for voluntary staff self-identification, by the end of the 2013 calendar year.

BOARD RESPONSE

All three boards supported the recommendation, with one board noting that sharing best practices regarding the implementation of voluntary self-identification would be very helpful, especially regarding appropriate and effective

use of the data. This board noted that the majority of its eligible students had voluntarily self-identified, and this number continues to grow in step with the changing demographics of its community. A second board stated that it supported the development of communication tools that can be used as exemplars to augment present self-identification processes. The third board stated that its self-identification policy had been in place since 2007, with almost 100% participation of its Aboriginal students. The board noted that it had positive results in implementing its staff self-identification policy and was willing to share its communication documents.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In order to assess progress toward the goals of improving student achievement and closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student achievement by the year 2016, the Framework noted that it will be important to have reliable and valid data. In addition, Aboriginal student-specific data is needed to support performance measurement and reporting. To evaluate progress, the Framework included three performance measures that directly assess Aboriginal student achievement and require student-specific data to measure:

- significant increase in the percentage of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students meeting provincial standards on province-wide assessments in reading, writing and mathematics;
- significant increase in the graduation rate of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students; and
- significant improvement in First Nation, Métis and Inuit student achievement.

The Ministry collects information from schools and school boards through a secure, web-enabled system called the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS). The Ministry also acquires data from third-party sources such as Statistics Canada and the Education Quality and Accountability Office

(EQAO), the Ontario government agency that performs standardized testing of elementary and secondary school students. Once collected, the data is run through various quality assurance processes, personal information is removed, and the data is stored as the authoritative source of education data. Our assessment showed that OnSIS is relatively up to date, as data is submitted, verified and finalized three times annually. However, the Ministry does not currently use this data to periodically produce standard reports to assess the progress made in achieving the goals of the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*.

Five years after identifying the challenge of closing the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, the Ministry has still not determined the size of the gap. Further, the Ministry has not established a baseline or even a starting point from which to measure the gap. The Ministry has also not decided when it will begin measuring and reporting on Aboriginal student achievement, nor has it decided what “significant” means in its performance measures, such as to see “significant improvement in ... student achievement.” Finally, the Ministry has not developed specific targets in connection with the performance measures as required by the Framework.

The Ministry stated that it has not begun to assess the gap because, in its opinion, the 44% of students who have self-identified are not sufficiently representative to compare their achievement results with the results for the non-Aboriginal student population. However, the Ministry has

still not determined the number of self-identified students it considers to be enough before it will begin measuring and reporting on Aboriginal student achievement.

The Ministry has also not analyzed Aboriginal student achievement data for the province as a whole, with the exception of some preliminary analysis in 2011 that focused on six school boards. Therefore, we requested that the Ministry provide us with data including EQAO results as well as Grade 9 and 10 credit accumulation numbers for all self-identified Aboriginal students in the provincial school system. Accumulation of credits toward graduation is one of the primary indicators of student success in high school. Using these two data sources as a means to analyze student achievement, we noted that, for 2011, a significant achievement gap continued to exist between self-identified Aboriginal students and the rest of the student population. We also noted that this gap tends to increase as Aboriginal students make their way through the educational system, as shown in Figure 3.

The Ministry annually reports the graduation rate for the entire student population, but it does not calculate a graduation rate for Aboriginal students. The Ministry advised us that it will begin to report on the graduation rate for Aboriginal students following the 2013/14 school year. The most recent information available, the 2006 census, identified that 65.5% of Aboriginal adults aged 20–24 had graduated from high school compared to 88.4% of the non-Aboriginal population of the same

Figure 3: Comparison of Student Achievement Data, 2010/11 (%)

Source of data: Ministry of Education

Measure	All Students	Self-identified Aboriginal Students	Gap in Aboriginal Student Achievement
Grade 3 EQAO: achieved provincial standard*	69	52	17
Grade 6 EQAO: achieved provincial standard*	68	49	19
Grade 9: 8 or more credits earned	83	63	20
Grade 10: 16 or more credits earned	74	45	29

* Overall average of the percentage of students who achieved the provincial standard on the reading, writing and mathematics tests.

age—a gap of 23%, as shown in Figure 1. Our analysis of the credit accumulation data for 2011 shows that only 45% of the Grade 10 self-identified Aboriginal students were on track to graduate from high school, compared to 74% of all other students—a gap of 29%. These statistics, while not conclusive, would certainly indicate that the Ministry faces significant challenges in meeting its 2005 stated goal of closing the gap in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by 2016.

One board we visited analyzed on a regular basis indicators such as Grade 9 pass rates, and Grade 9 and 10 credit accumulation numbers. From this type of analysis, the board identified that Aboriginal students were having difficulty passing Grade 9 physical education. As a result, it introduced culturally relevant games and activities. This example shows that analyzing good data can uncover previously unsuspected barriers to achievement. We also noted that this board sets measurable targets specific to Aboriginal student achievement. For example, in the 2011/12 school year the board aims to increase the percentage of self-identified Aboriginal students who achieve 12 or more credits by the end of the first Grade 10 semester from 26% to 40%.

We also researched data collection and analysis at various other school boards in Ontario and noted that one of the larger boards found that 80% of its Aboriginal students did not meet the EQAO provincial standard on the Grade 6 reading, writing or math assessments and, in general, Aboriginal students were highly at risk academically. This board reported that it used such information to assess the gaps in student achievement and better target its support programs.

Our review of public reporting on Aboriginal student results in other jurisdictions revealed that the two provinces with the second and third largest Aboriginal populations behind Ontario report on Aboriginal student achievement results annually. British Columbia's Ministry of Education publishes an annual report that provides information about Aboriginal student performance at both the prov-

incial and school district levels. Alberta Education reports on academic performance measures for Aboriginal students directly within its annual report. These measures include indicators similar to those contemplated in the Framework, such as the level of achievement on province-wide standardized testing and high school graduation rates.

RECOMMENDATION 3

To help assess the progress being made toward achieving the goals and performance measures outlined in the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and school boards should:

- establish a baseline with respect to the goals and performance measures identified in the Framework and set measurable, realistic targets; and
- periodically review progress made with regard to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student achievement so that additional or alternative strategies can be implemented where necessary.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry agrees that it is essential to measure and track progress being made toward achieving the goals and performance measures outlined in the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. The Ministry's approach is consistent with lessons learned in its successful student achievement agenda. The Ministry now has a larger and more representative subset of Aboriginal student self-identification data. For the next phase of reporting in 2013 and moving toward the target of closing the gap by 2016, the Ministry will engage with Aboriginal communities to develop a reporting approach that best fits the current Ontario context.

The Ministry will do the following:

- Engage with key First Nation, Métis and Inuit partners in fall 2012 regarding its approach to public reporting of the Aboriginal student

self-identification data in the second progress report.

- Release baseline voluntary Aboriginal student achievement data in spring 2013.
- Review First Nation, Métis and Inuit student achievement progress annually.
- Continue to support boards and engage Aboriginal partners in developing targeted strategies to support Aboriginal learners.
- Share best practices and refine implementation processes with boards in the 2013 progress report.

BOARD RESPONSE

The boards agreed that this recommendation was very important, with one board stating that data collection and analysis are critical to improving achievement, life chances and life choices for Aboriginal students. This board went on to note that although individual boards can use their own data to compare their Aboriginal student results over time, they have limited access to provincial results for comparison purposes. A second board stated that it had already implemented additional, alternative strategies to support Aboriginal students and that a review of its data since 2008 demonstrated a continual increase in achievement for Aboriginal students. The third board stated that while data collection and analysis would be very important, the small sample size that it gathers would make the correlation between the impact of board initiatives and student achievement unreliable.

FUNDING

Since the inception of the Ontario *First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* in 2007, the Ministry has allocated \$170 million, primarily to school boards, for Aboriginal programs over and above regular school board funding. Almost \$129 million has been provided through the First

Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement, and the remaining \$41 million was for Framework implementation funding, as detailed in Figure 4.

First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement

In 2007, the Ministry introduced the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement to support the goal of improved Aboriginal student achievement as outlined in the Framework. This funding (per-pupil amount) is intended to help boards offer and expand Native Language and Native Studies courses and support programs to assist Aboriginal students.

The goal of Native Language courses is to instill Native students with pride in their ancestral language and to motivate them to use it to communicate in their daily lives. Native Studies courses are aimed at providing all students with a broad range of knowledge relating to Aboriginal history and cultures, and are offered at the secondary school level to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. We found that the number of students enrolled in both Native Language and Native Studies courses has increased since the supplement was introduced in 2007.

We reviewed the per-pupil amount, which is the largest component of the First Nation, Métis

Figure 4: Total Ministry Funding for Aboriginal Education Programs, 2006/07–2011/12 (\$ million)

Source of data: Ministry of Education

	Funding
Education Supplement	
Per-pupil amount	60.0
Native Studies	38.0
Native Languages	30.6
Total	128.6
Framework Implementation	
Implementation funding	35.2
Alternative Secondary School Program	5.6
Total	40.8
Total Funding	169.4

and Inuit Education Supplement. The per-pupil amount is allocated to school boards based on the estimated Aboriginal student population as derived from the 2006 Statistics Canada census. One of the school boards we visited had identified, through the self-identification process, 50% more Aboriginal students than the number contained in the Ministry's estimate. This illustrates that the information the Ministry is using to estimate the number of Aboriginal students at each board may not be up to date and may not be reflective of the actual student population. Consequently, if funds had been allocated on the basis of the actual Aboriginal student population, this board would have received significantly more per-pupil funding than it received.

The Ministry intends that school boards will target this funding to local needs in support of activities linked to the Framework's goals and performance measures. However, the Ministry has not placed any specific stipulations on this funding or provided any formal guidance on how the funding is to be spent. According to the Ministry, this provides boards with the flexibility to determine how best to allocate resources. In addition, although the Ministry may have discussed program spending with board representatives, there is no documented evidence of such discussions and there is no formal report-back process from the boards of any confirmation that the funds have been used to support Aboriginal students.

All three school boards we visited could provide us with a brief explanation of how they had spent the per-pupil funds. They informed us that the funds were used for purposes such as paying salaries for Aboriginal support workers, funding professional development for teachers, and providing resources for students making the transition from on-reserve schools to provincially funded schools. However, as is consistent with all ministry grants for student needs, boards are not required to formally track these expenditures to verify that the per-pupil funds were used for the benefit of Aboriginal students. In addition, the Ministry has not performed any formal analysis on the \$60 million

in per-pupil funding to determine if this funding has had any impact on Aboriginal student achievement.

Framework Implementation Funding

Framework implementation funding to school boards is provided to support Aboriginal student achievement and help boards implement the Framework. Initiatives under this program include self-identification policy implementation, student success projects, professional development for teachers and student transition programs. School boards must submit proposals to the Ministry for projects they plan to undertake and, upon project completion, are required to submit a report detailing project outcomes.

We reviewed the proposal selection process for a sample of eight boards and found that there was little documented evidence of proposal prioritization by the Ministry or that a formal scoring system was used to rank proposals. Also, we were informed that ministry staff discussed proposals with each other, but these discussions were not documented and justification for rejecting proposals was not apparent or communicated to the school boards we visited. In addition, there was no evidence that funds were allocated on the basis of either the Aboriginal student population at each board or documented need. In fact, of the boards we reviewed, the board with the fewest Aboriginal students received more funding than the board with the greatest Aboriginal student population. On a per-student basis this worked out to \$347 and \$73, respectively.

We reviewed a number of project report-backs to the Ministry and found that the reports did not include indicators of success even though such indicators had been defined by the boards in their proposals. Some of the indicators of success noted in proposals were to increase Aboriginal student credit accumulation and participation in extra-curricular activities. Although the project completion reports discussed the perceived overall impact of the projects, none of the reports reviewed directly

addressed the result indicators noted in the related original project proposals.

We also reviewed the Alternative Secondary School Program within Native Friendship Centres, which provides individualized and culturally appropriate supports to help Aboriginal students complete their secondary school diploma if they have previously dropped out of school or have fallen behind because of life circumstances. The program is a working partnership between 11 friendship centres, which are not-for-profit corporations mandated to serve the needs of all Aboriginal people, and their nearby district school boards. The district school board is required to provide teachers and course materials for the program.

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC), a provincial organization representing the collective interests of friendship centres, provides administrative oversight of the program. The OFIFC flows approximately \$90,000 in ministry funding to each friendship centre annually. The OFIFC collects and sends to the Ministry financial information and program outcome reports. These reports demonstrate that the funds were used by the centres for the purposes intended and provide information on the centres' relevant successes and challenges including enrolment and exit information, diplomas and certificates awarded, and credits attempted and granted. We reviewed the report-backs for the past three years and noted that the OFIFC had submitted all the reports as required by the Ministry. In addition, a 2009 ministry evaluation of the program found that there were increases in student achievement, credit accumulation and school retention rates.

RECOMMENDATION 4

To better ensure that funding is allocated based on the needs of Aboriginal students, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) should:

- consider basing per-pupil funding on more current and reliable Aboriginal student

enrolment data, as this could result in a more equitable funding allocation;

- where funding is allocated in response to board proposals, document the underlying rationale for the funding and communicate to boards the justification for accepting or rejecting their proposals; and
- implement report-back processes not only to demonstrate that funds are spent for the purposes intended but also to obtain information on the success of different types of support programs boards are undertaking.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry agrees to consider the review of existing funding mechanisms and reporting procedures. Other funding sources will continue to be leveraged to support Aboriginal student achievement.

The Ministry will do the following:

- Examine the feasibility of remodelling the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement based on available Aboriginal student self-identification data.
- Work more closely with boards to support their efforts to promote Aboriginal student self-identification.
- Ensure that all boards receive feedback on their proposals, that enhanced reporting processes are put in place by 2013, and that impacts on student achievement are consistently evaluated as part of the proposal evaluation and reporting processes.

FIRST NATION STUDENTS LIVING ON RESERVES

First Nation Schools

The education of First Nation students living on reserve is the financial responsibility of the federal government. Through Aboriginal Affairs and

Northern Development Canada, the federal government provides funding directly to First Nation bands to deliver education programs and services. There are 118 band-operated schools on reserves in Ontario (80 elementary, 7 secondary and 31 alternative schools). The Ministry informed us that approximately 12,700 Aboriginal students attend First Nation schools.

The Ministry's 2009 progress report, *Sound Foundations for the Road Ahead*, identified that there was a significant disparity between the level of funding targeted for the on-reserve schools by the federal government and ministry funding for provincial schools. In 2011, the Chiefs of Ontario reported that federal funding was approximately 65% of per-student provincial funding. Research suggests that this difference in funding has resulted in schools on reserves being unable to pay competitive salaries to teachers or purchase adequate, up-to-date resources for students. This has resulted in on-reserve schools often not being able to provide the quality of education found in the provincial school system.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) may enter into agreements with First Nations to test students enrolled in band schools. In the 2010/11 school year, 39 out of 118 First Nation schools participated in EQAO provincial standardized testing. These tests help First Nation communities assess whether students in their schools are meeting provincial standards. We analyzed the most recent EQAO results and found that, for participating First Nation schools, there was a gap on average of 40% from the provincial average for Grade 3 and Grade 6 students in reading, writing and math. These results reaffirm a 2004 report by the Auditor General of Canada and other studies that suggest that these students may be performing at a level several grades below that which is appropriate for their age.

The Ministry has identified early learning as crucial to student success. Even though education for students who live on reserves is a federal responsibility, many of these students eventually transition

into the provincial education system. We inquired if the Ministry has worked with the federal government to promote early learning for First Nation students and were informed that, due to jurisdictional matters, the province does not have a mandate to implement programs or undertake research or assessments with regard to students in on-reserve schools. Nevertheless, in the 2012 budget, the government stated that Ontario is prepared to work together with First Nation communities and the federal government to share the province's expertise in delivering education, provided the federal government supplies the necessary funding for on-reserve First Nation education.

Tuition Agreements

According to the Ministry, there are approximately 5,700 First Nation students who live on reserves but attend provincially funded schools. Many of these students attend provincially funded schools because the reserve does not have a secondary school. Since funding for these students is paid by the federal government to the band council, these students are not considered to be pupils of the school boards and therefore the Ministry does not pay the cost of their education. Therefore, boards are required to charge band councils tuition fees through negotiated tuition agreements. Although the Ministry releases annual fee regulations that outline a base tuition fee, school boards may charge a fee in excess of this amount for services such as special education programs or specific supports. Amounts charged in excess of the base tuition fee must be agreed upon by the school boards and First Nation communities as part of the tuition agreement.

The Ministry does not keep track of the tuition agreements in place between the school boards and First Nation communities in Ontario. However, the Ministry estimates that there are approximately 166 tuition agreements and that school boards collect about \$60 million per year from First Nation communities to educate reserve students in provincially funded schools.

We identified that there should have been a separate tuition agreement in place with each of the 25 First Nation communities sending students to the three school boards we visited. However, we noted that there were only 13 agreements in place; four agreements had expired, and there were 12 instances where no tuition agreements existed. Nevertheless, we tested a sample of invoices billed by school boards to First Nation communities and found that the appropriate base tuition fee was charged and paid where no agreements existed and, in general, First Nation communities were up to date with payments. However, in one case we found that the school board was charging in excess of the base fee where it had no authority to do so, since a negotiated tuition agreement did not exist. The First Nation community paid the school board the base fee, but the school board continued to bill excess fees that totalled \$1.3 million over the last three years. The representative responsible for education at this First Nation community indicated that the inability to agree on the amount being charged in excess of the base fee was the primary reason a tuition agreement had not been signed.

There are currently no standard ministry policies or procedures in place pertaining to tuition agreements. The Ministry, the federal government, the Chiefs of Ontario and four school board associations have been working together since 2009 to develop tuition agreement guidelines. Rough drafts of these guidelines had been distributed to the school boards we visited. However, two of these boards were having problems negotiating tuition agreements. Both these boards suggested that if standardized template agreements could be developed and agreed upon by the Ministry, the federal government and First Nation communities, this would greatly facilitate the process for local boards.

Transition of Students to the Provincial School System

First Nation students may experience many challenges when they transition from a school on a reserve

to a provincially funded school—typically moving from a primary school on the reserve to a provincial secondary school. For example, some students living in remote northern communities leave their families to stay with host families in urban areas to attend secondary school. This may cause emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological challenges for the student. As part of the Framework implementation funding, the Ministry provides funding for transition projects intended to assist school boards in providing supports to First Nation students who live on reserve but attend provincially funded schools.

In the 2011/12 school year, the Ministry provided each board with up to \$50,000 for Aboriginal student success projects, including transition projects. We reviewed the transition projects approved over the last three years for the boards we visited and noted that they often include assigning a lead teacher for First Nation students and setting aside a room for these students to meet. One of the school boards we visited had a formalized Aboriginal transition program that included welcome kits, assigning a special teacher to transitioning students, and offering Grade 9 and 10 transition courses. Overall, we noted that the implementation of transition programs was at the discretion of the boards.

We reviewed provincial supports for transitions in other jurisdictions and found that Alberta and Manitoba had created a number of resources to help educators with student transitions. For example, Manitoba Education has released a policy guide to help school boards identify specific student needs and develop transition plans. We noted that one of the Ontario school boards we visited was drafting a secondary school entrance form for First Nation students that includes sections pertaining to educational background (such as attendance, report card marks, standardized testing results and strengths in school), as well as any health issues or behavioural concerns.

First Nation Student Self-identification

In the 2007 Building Bridges policy guide for student self-identification, the Ministry identified four groups under which Aboriginal students could identify: First Nation (off-reserve), First Nation–Tuition Paying (on-reserve), Métis and Inuit. However, in October 2011, the Ministry eliminated the distinction between on- and off-reserve First Nation students. The Ministry explained that it had eliminated this distinction because some students were experiencing self-esteem issues in self-identifying, some parents did not understand the distinction, and school staff found it difficult to have students change their identification when they moved on and off the reserve. The Ministry stated that these concerns had been informally reported to it. However, the Ministry did not assess more formally whether these concerns were representative of the First Nation community as a whole or attempt to alleviate potential concerns before eliminating this distinction. The Ministry advised us that the data is still maintained internally and therefore its ability to target programs to meet the needs of all Aboriginal students would not be impaired.

On-reserve First Nation students experience unique challenges as they transition to schools in the provincial system. With a significantly greater achievement gap, we believe students living on reserve continue to need to be identified separately so the Ministry, school boards, schools and First Nation communities can target specific supports to meet their needs. One of the school boards we visited during our audit was reviewing its self-identification policy and planned to include the First Nation on-reserve category. This board had determined that student supports can be better targeted if the board collects and analyzes student achievement data for on-reserve students separately.

Even though the Ministry does not analyze student achievement data with respect to on-reserve students, we found that these students continue to have difficulty transitioning into provincially

funded high schools. For example, in the 2010/11 school year only half of on-reserve First Nation students attending provincial schools passed the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, compared to the provincial average of 83%. This indicates that all stakeholders, including the Ministry, school boards, the federal government and First Nation communities, need to work more effectively to ensure that the needs of these students are identified, as more targeted support programs may be required to ensure that they are given an equal opportunity to succeed.

Tripartite Agreements

Since 2009, the Ministry has been engaged in discussions with the federal government and First Nation communities to formalize education agreements designed to promote collaboration between all parties on initiatives to improve First Nation student outcomes. One of these agreements, the Education Partnership Program, is a federally led initiative where First Nation communities submit proposals to the federal government to help advance First Nation achievement in both First Nation and provincially funded schools. The program supports partnerships between First Nation and provincial officials who share expertise and services, and co-ordinate learning initiatives.

Joint initiatives with the federal government and First Nation communities to improve the academic achievement of students living in First Nation communities will not be implemented until the agreements have been finalized. However, as of April 2012, the education agreements that the Ministry has been discussing since 2009 with the federal government and First Nation communities had not been finalized.

Eight other provinces, including British Columbia, have signed tripartite education agreements with the federal government and their First Nation communities. British Columbia has had an agreement in place since 1999 and reports annually on Aboriginal education results. It reports that over the

last five years (2006/07–2010/11) it has reduced the gap in high school graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by 6%.

RECOMMENDATION 5

In order to improve educational outcomes for First Nation students living on reserves, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and, where applicable, school boards, should:

- develop standardized template tuition agreements and guidelines that can be used by all boards and periodically monitor whether valid tuition agreements are in place with all bands;
- take a more proactive role to encourage boards to share best practices to assist with the transition of students from on-reserve schools to the provincial education system;
- separately measure the effectiveness of initiatives implemented to address the unique challenges faced by on-reserve students attending provincially funded schools; and
- continue to participate in and more proactively engage in tripartite agreement discussions with the federal government and First Nation organizations.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry agrees that support for First Nation students is essential to close the achievement gap. The Ministry recognizes that the treaty and Aboriginal rights of First Nations people are recognized and affirmed in Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, and the treaties are a fundamental part of the relationship among the First Nations, Canada and Ontario. Therefore, the Ministry will develop its approach to any reporting that may reflect on on-reserve schools in partnership with First Nation communities.

The Ministry will do the following:

- Release the tuition agreement resource guide by the end of the calendar year

2012. Included in the guide are suggested examples of key provisions to be included in any agreement. The Ministry will continue to work with First Nation and district school boards to support their negotiation processes.

- Identify and share best practices in the development and implementation of targeted initiatives to support First Nation, Métis and Inuit student achievement, including transition programs, in spring 2013.
- Create and implement successful evidence-based targeted programs, based on proven success.
- Develop and enhance successful transition programs for students moving from schools on reserve to provincially funded schools in partnership with boards and First Nation communities.
- Report on provincially funded activities undertaken by boards and the Ministry to support student transitions.
- Continue to work with First Nations and the federal government to finalize and implement tripartite agreements as negotiations proceed.

BOARD RESPONSE

All three boards recognized the importance of helping students with the transition from reserve schools to the provincial school system. One board noted that it would support any practice that encourages integration and the fair treatment of all students within a strong, accountable system. A second board noted that ongoing dialogue as well as newsletters and orientation sessions helped smooth the transition for its students. The third board noted that many of its First Nation students leave home, live in a boarding home and move to a large secondary school all at the same time. The board stated that, in addition to the supports currently in place, it has implemented a new program designed to provide

academic supports, a safe space with a caring adult and a way for students to contact home.

In regard to tripartite and tuition agreements, one board noted that expediting efforts to finalize the tripartite agreement with the federal government would be very helpful to school boards. A second board stated that the development of a common tuition template agreement may be problematic, since this board serves several First Nations with very different tuition

agreements and formats. The third board stated that it agrees with the concept of standardized templates for tuition agreements but has found that First Nations are reluctant to sign new agreements until there is a consensus among all First Nations. The board noted that it would continue to meet with its First Nation partners with the goal of finding mutually acceptable agreements that serve their communities and students in the best possible manner.