



A lesson to learn; Success awaits native students who are willing to stay in school

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Aboriginal leader Phil Fontaine has invited Canadians to "take action to make poverty history" by joining natives in Friday's Day of Action.

As the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations has observed, it takes an average of 13 years to resolve a specific claim under Ottawa's claims process and there's a backlog of more than 1,000 cases.

Fontaine estimates that the total value of these unresolved claims ranges between \$2.6 billion and \$6 billion.

"Land is part of the answer to building strong First Nations economies and strong First Nations citizens," he said earlier this month.

True. But what good is land and billions of dollars if there is no critical mass of educated natives to chart a path for the future?

While there are plenty of native success stories, there simply aren't enough of them. Educators, native leaders and the business community are bending over backwards to give young aboriginals the opportunity to succeed. Alas, staggering numbers of natives continues to drop out of school, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

A recent study by the **Canadian Policy Research Networks** comparing innovative trades training programs in five high schools underscores the severity of the problem.

Researchers looked at high schools in Oakville, Ont., Fort St. John and Kelowna in B.C., and Olds and Wabasca in Alberta.

All the schools are doing well except for Mistassiniy school in Wabasca, a small mostly aboriginal community in northwest Alberta.

Attendance

"Retention and attendance of students is a major concern of the community," says the study, noting that when researchers visited the Grade 6 to 12 school on Dec. 3, 2006, there were only 300 out of 480 students in class -- a grim 62% attendance rate.

As well, only 20% of students finish Grade 12, the study adds. Most of the students live on surrounding reserves.

The hamlet of Wabasca, ironically, is located in the Municipal District of Opportunity.

In contrast, 87% of the 2005-06 cohort of students at Olds junior-senior high school, north of Calgary, completed high school in three years. And the average attendance rate is 95%.

High school graduation rates are also high for students at Rutland Senior Secondary School in Kelowna.

Because the B.C. job market is sizzling, students at North Peace Secondary School in Fort St. John, such as those enrolled in the carpentry program, have a "seamless entry" into the workforce, says the report.

There's such a shortage of workers that recruiters show up at the school at dismissal time to offer the kids jobs.

And many students at White Oaks Secondary School in Oakville told the researchers they might not have finished high school if it wasn't for the opportunity to learn a trade.

All five schools offer exceptionally good trades training programs. Why, then, are young aboriginals in Wabasca continuing to drop out of school?

What more can we possibly do to convince natives to stay in class? The median age in Wabasca is 24, compared to 38 in Oakville. The future belongs to aboriginals, but what form that future takes is up to them.

"In many cases, cultural background influences the career aspirations parents have for their children," the report observes.

It points to alcohol and drug abuse at home, as well as "little or no parental supervision" as contributing factors in the failure of so many Mistassiniy school students.

Money alone will not secure prosperity for Canada's natives. Dreams must be nurtured at home.

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