

THE BC FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION SYSTEM

APRIL, 2013

INTRODUCTION

The need to promote greater success for First Nations students is well-documented. There is a considerable gap between the achievement of First Nations and non-First Nations students according to almost every performance indicator and at all levels of education. Accordingly, for well over fifty years First Nations have been making significant efforts to increase the success of their learners.

First Nations in BC are working in two primary ways to facilitate greater achievement levels for First Nations students.

1. Based upon the principles of First Nations control of First Nations education, and reflecting a commitment to providing their students locally-based, relevant, and high quality educational opportunities, First Nations have created their own schools, which are located within and operated by First Nations communities. Today, there are 130 First Nations controlled schools in BC, all of which are committed to providing quality instruction, sound academic programs, as well as supportive environments for children. The schools are founded upon First Nations cultures and languages, and they strive to reflect the values and traditions of the communities they serve.
2. Concurrently, recognizing that approximately two-thirds of First Nations students are enrolled in the public education system, which is overseen by the BC Ministry of Education, First Nations in BC have established respectful and effective working relationships with a range of public education stakeholders, resulting in numerous initiatives to support First Nations students. The efforts undertaken in that regard are described in detail in a separate document: *FNESC's Key Accomplishments: Creating Systemic Changes for First Nations Students in the BC Public Education System (updated November 26, 2012)*.

In order to support their schools in a meaningful way, First Nations in BC have established the foundation for a **BC First Nations Education System** – one that:

- reflects the unique visions, circumstances, and needs of First Nations communities, schools, and students; and
- involves relevant partnerships and complements the BC public education system, recognizing the importance of seamless transitions for students between First Nations schools and mainstream K-12 education settings, higher learning opportunities, and the world of work.

Overall, First Nations are working toward the implementation of effective First Nations school programming at the classroom, school, and provincial level, supported by mechanisms for collective support and thorough monitoring.

THE BC FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION SYSTEM – IN BRIEF

A. Establishing an Effective Infrastructure and System of Support

Recognizing the need for collective efforts to support sustained and consistent progress, First Nations have created their own provincial-level organizations that work to enhance the efforts of all First Nations to ensure greater success for their students – the *First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNEESC)* and the *First Nations Schools Association (FNSA)*.

B. Specific Components of the BC First Nations Education System

An emphasis on First Nations language and culture learning, as well as a focus on accountability and monitoring, are integrated as appropriate into all of the activities described below.

1. Promoting Instructional Leadership and an Infrastructure for Teacher Support: Building upon the importance of effective teachers and principals, the *FNSA Professional Growth Process (PGP)* promotes effective supervision for learning, which facilitates plans for supporting and monitoring principals' and teachers' professional growth.

2. Facilitating Effective School Planning: The collectively managed, community-based *First Nations Schools Assessment and Certification Process* leads to school plans for maintaining successful programs and addressing areas for improvement.

3. Providing Professional Development Support: FNEESC and the FNSA provide a broad range of *professional development events* for principals and teachers that are designed specifically to reflect the realities of First Nations schools. The FNSA is also promoting the *Professional Learning Communities (PLC)* approach, which involves teachers collectively identifying essential learning outcomes, developing common formative assessments, analyzing achievement, and sharing strategies and lessons to improve results. In addition, the FNSA and FNEESC organize a comprehensive *in-school coaching* initiative, addressing issues such as literacy, language and culture, and student assessment.

4. Supporting Capacity Building for School Boards: The FNSA and FNEESC are working to encourage effective educational decision-making through *coaching* based upon a *Handbook for First Nations School Boards*.

5. Promoting Evidence-Based Decision Making: A range of efforts are in place to promote the effective use of *standardized student assessment tools* to inform programming. Further, a *School Measures Project* has facilitated the annual collection and sharing of relevant data, which is now evolving into the *Data Records and User Management System (DRUMS)* – a system for managing student information at the school level and for analyzing and reporting aggregate data at the provincial level.

6. Addressing the Needs of All Students: FNEESC and the FNSA implement a comprehensive *Special Education Program* to assist schools in effectively supporting all of their learners.

7. Additional Information Sharing: In addition to the activities described above, FNEESC and the FNSA share a range of information and materials related to numerous other key issues.

THE BC FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION SYSTEM: DESCRIPTION AND RATIONALE

First Nations in BC have created their own education system based upon meaningful consultations with First Nations communities and schools, and reflecting extensive research and an ongoing review of effective educational practice, adapted as relevant to reflect the distinctiveness of First Nations schools and their learners.

A. Establishing an Effective Infrastructure and System of Support

Recognizing the need for collective efforts to support sustained and consistent progress, First Nations have created their own provincial-level organizations that work to enhance the efforts of all First Nations to ensure greater success for their students.

Over two decades ago, First Nations in BC created *the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNEESC)*, a First Nations controlled, provincial-level organization intended to promote quality educational opportunities for all First Nations learners in BC. FNEESC works on behalf of all First Nations in BC, with a Board that includes almost 100 First Nations representatives. FNEESC undertakes research, promotes information sharing, and provides a common voice for First Nations in discussions with government and other education stakeholders.

The First Nations Schools Association (FNSA), formally established in 1996, represents and works on behalf of First Nations schools in BC. Approximately 98 percent of the 130 First Nations schools in BC are members of the association, which has a mandate to support schools in creating effective, nurturing, and appropriate educational environments that provide students with a positive foundation in all academic areas, including language and culture learning.

Through FNEESC and the FNSA, First Nations in BC have made significant progress in establishing the foundation for a comprehensive, integrated First Nations Education System that will contribute to First Nations' efforts to build healthy, self-sufficient, sustainable communities.

B. Specific Components of the BC First Nations Education System

1. Promoting Instructional Leadership and an Infrastructure for Teacher Support

In BC, First Nations school and community representatives have long recognized the importance of promoting the effectiveness of teachers and principals in First Nations schools.

For example, a wealth of evidence indicates that the position of the principal is critical to school effectiveness – perhaps even more so in schools that operate within challenging circumstances. Over the last half-century, academics, practitioners, and researchers from every field of study have concluded that leadership is a central variable in the equation that defines organizational success. There is parallel evidence that leadership is a central ingredient — and often the keystone element — in school success, as defined in terms of student achievement.

Research also shows that teachers truly matter. Numerous studies demonstrate persuasively that instructional quality has perhaps the greatest potential effect on academic achievement. Although a school may have excellent facilities and curriculum, student success requires skilled and caring teachers. Good teachers promote learning and capture the hearts and minds of students.

Relevant Initiative:

The ***FNSA Professional Growth Process (PGP)*** is intended to ensure appropriate and consistent supervision for learning in First Nations schools in BC. Building upon collaboratively developed standards for teachers and standards for principals in First Nations schools, the PGP emphasizes a thorough, supportive process for identifying priorities for improvement and monitoring principals' and teachers' effectiveness and demonstrated progress. FNEC employees visit participating schools to mentor principals in undertaking their leadership and supervision for learning role, facilitating ongoing teacher growth.

The PGP has quickly become one of the most successful of the FNSA's support initiatives. Beginning only four years ago as a pilot project in eight schools, this year over sixty schools expressed interest in participating in the process. Further, of the principals who responded to a survey used to evaluate the PGP implementation last year, one hundred percent felt that their ability to fulfill their instructional leadership role improved as a result of the project.

2. Facilitating Effective School Planning

Critical among the responsibilities of the school's leadership is knowing what the community and families expect for students, establishing and maintaining a clear purpose for the school, and ensuring that the school's goals are met. Governing agencies must set the direction for the school's future, involving careful, thoughtful and inclusive planning, as well as the implementation of mechanisms to continually evaluate the progress being made.

Relevant initiative:

First Nations schools in BC have created a collectively managed, community-based ***First Nations Schools Assessment and Certification Process***, which involves a review of school programming in order to develop a Growth Plan, outlining activities for maintaining successful programs and addressing areas for improvement. The schools ultimately are visited by an FNSA-appointed External Review Team, which offers feedback on the assessment findings and Growth Plan. Interested schools also may request that they be "certified" by the FNSA, requiring that the schools meet a set of standards that were established collectively by First Nations schools in BC.

Almost all First Nations schools in BC have participated in the project at least once, and have indicated that the process helped them to identify strengths and challenges, plan for growth, and maintain accountability.

In addition, FNEC and the FNSA support schools that complete the School Assessment Project by providing them a School Growth Plan Grant in the year following their Assessment Project completion. Schools use that funding to support activities that are directly identified in the School Growth Plans from the previous year. In addition, a team of coaches hired and trained by

the FNSA assists the schools in ensuring that the Growth Plan Grants are used as effectively as possible.

3. Providing Professional Development Support

As described above, research shows that teachers matter. But research also shows that teachers differ significantly in effectiveness, and the expertise of a school's teaching staff depends to a large extent on quality professional development. Teachers in First Nations schools, who often work in significant isolation, have particularly noted the importance of professional development opportunities, suggesting that it is easy for them to become "isolated and unaware of the latest educational trends." In those circumstances, providing access to high quality, appropriate support and opportunities for professional learning can actually help to retain teachers who might otherwise become frustrated and leave for other employment.

The professional development opportunities that are relevant for each school must be determined according to the unique needs of the school and its staff. No single strategy will always work in every school, for every teacher, all of the time. In fact, many professional development programs actually include several strategies in one theme, such as a workshop that provides formal learning combined with complementary teacher coaching and/or time with colleagues to discuss and plan for ongoing implementation of the skills learned.

Further, there is a growing consensus of researchers and practitioners that systemic, ongoing teacher professional development is more effective than traditional one-time workshops. Research concludes that teachers are more likely to change their teaching practices when professional development is directly linked to the program they are teaching and the standards and assessments that they use. In this regard, schools are increasingly looking to coaching and other relationship-based professional development strategies to improve the skills and performance of teachers and school leaders. Coaching often involves subject-matter expertise and designations such as literacy, math, technology, and data coach.

Relevant Initiatives:

FNESC and the FNSA provide a broad range of ***professional development events*** for principals and teachers that are designed specifically to reflect the realities of First Nations schools, including an annual Principals Short Course, provincial conferences, and workshops on a range of topics identified by First Nations schools as important. Those traditional forms of professional development are then complemented by in-school support.

For example, the FNSA is promoting the ***Professional Learning Communities*** (PLC) approach as a key element of school professional development efforts. PLCs involve teachers meeting regularly to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set goals, share strategies, and then create lessons to improve results. Such an approach represents truly embedded professional development. The FNSA supports this initiative through ongoing gatherings of schools that are using the model to facilitate a sharing of experiences and provide relevant information about PLCs and related instructional strategies. In addition, the FNSA uses webinars and in-school support to promote the PLC efforts.

Further, the FNSA and FNEC have devoted significant resources to support a comprehensive ***in-school coaching*** initiative, including direct assistance from individuals with expertise in literacy development, language and culture programming, student assessment, and school governance.

4. Capacity Building for School Boards

The critical role of school governing agencies in promoting school success is well-recognized.

Relevant Initiative:

The FNSA and FNEC are working to provide school boards with information to support effective educational decision-making through ***coaching*** based upon a comprehensive *Handbook for First Nations School Boards*.

5. Promoting Evidence-Based Decision Making

Today, there is a growing recognition of the need to use data to inform decision-making and provide clear evidence of what is happening in schools, including monitoring instructional and program effectiveness, meeting school planning needs, and maintaining accountability to parents, communities, and funding agencies.

A plethora of researchers have highlighted the range of benefits that can result from thoughtful efforts to measure educational success. Data — another name for information, whether quantitative or qualitative — can help educators decide what actions to take to improve instruction, change practice, or reform schools. Data provides quantifiable proof of what is happening in schools, taking the emotion out of difficult decisions and providing substance for meaningful, ongoing dialogue with the community.

Reflecting that research consensus, FNEC and the FNSA are pro-actively supporting schools in thoughtfully using student assessment data and other clear sources of evidence for the purpose of program and achievement monitoring, informed decision-making, and identifying needed instructional improvements.

Relevant Initiatives:

As described above, the FNSA and FNEC organize ***in-school coaching*** for school staff, including direct mentoring and assistance with the implementation of student assessments, as well as coaching on how to effectively review and analyze student results in order to inform instructional choices.

On a very practical level, the FNSA has organized a number of in-service and training workshops and has provided financial assistance for the purchase of ***recommended standardized student assessment tools*** – Ages and Stages Questionnaire, Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills, and Canadian Achievement Test 4.

Also, as mentioned above, one of the foundational activities undertaken when implementing the ***Professional Learning Communities*** (PLC) model is reviewing in detail curricular standards and learning outcomes, carefully and collaboratively dissecting the standards and determining

which are the most essential. Additionally, the teams of teachers working together through the PLC initiative are developing common formative assessments to closely monitor whether students are actually learning and whether the outcomes are being met.

Further, since 2003, implementation of the ***School Measures Project*** has supported First Nations schools' efforts to annually collect and share with the FNSA data related to their operations and results being achieved – information that is used to inform collective efforts, maintain accountability, and contribute to the growth of First Nations schools.

Additionally, since 2010, FNEC and the FNSA have been developing the ***Data Records and User Management System (DRUMS)*** – a system for managing student information at the school level and for analyzing and reporting aggregate data at the provincial level. DRUMS was designed by First Nations schools in order to meet individual school needs and to inform programming at the local and collective level.

6. Addressing the Needs of All Students

Throughout the past several decades, there has been increasing attention paid globally to issues effecting children with special educational needs, recognizing that children with special needs – like all children – require an appropriate education to help them achieve to their full potential and become contributing members of the communities in which they live. Because of their differences, however, students with special needs often require adaptations or adjustments of school programs and services in order to develop to their maximum capacity. It is also widely acknowledged that teachers and other school personnel require significant support in order to effectively implement special education services.

Relevant Initiative:

FNEC and the FNSA implement a comprehensive ***Special Education Program*** to assist staff in First Nations schools in effectively supporting all of their learners. That program includes in-school coaching, telephone support line, facilitating a sharing of student assessment expertise and assistance, professional development support, and facilitated access to a range of specialist services.

7. Additional Information Sharing

In addition to the activities described above, FNEC and the FNSA strive to share information and materials related to a number of additional key issues.

For example, school principals are concerned with the overall functioning of the school, including ensuring that it is operational for the commencement of each school term and has a full school staff in place. Principals also manage the school budget and ensure that the funding available will allow the school to operate for the duration of the school year. Principals are responsible for establishing timetables, and they generally oversee discipline, ensure school safety, organize regular staff meetings, and maintain the school's record keeping, busing system, and instructional supplies.

In addition, the increasing use of technologies in schools places new responsibilities on principals and teachers. Principals, for example, must ensure that teachers and students are provided with access to equipment that is appropriate, relevant, and effective. The range of new technologies and new educational software programs that are available can make it challenging to decide what to purchase and for what purposes. In making these decisions, it is important that principals collaboratively explore how technology can facilitate and enhance learning, and decide as a school staff which tools to purchase and how to use them. Such discussions, however, raise a range of interesting questions, including how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can improve the quality of teaching and learning, and how the ICT learning curve might impact the curriculum.

In addition, the power of new technologies as learning tools raises important new challenges in terms of adequate training and knowledge. Teachers must be comfortable with technology to use it at all, and teachers who are fluent with technology are more likely to use it effectively. Principals and teachers need meaningful support to become fluent in using technology in order to enhance instruction and help students develop thinking and problem-solving skills

Relevant Initiatives:

To address the significant range of issues of importance to First Nations schools, the FNSA and FNEESC publish a number of ***relevant resources***, including a Principals Handbook, a School Governance Capacity Building Handbook, a Record Keeping Handbook, an Employment Handbook, and a Policy Handbook.

In addition, curriculum development efforts are being implemented as possible given resource availability, particularly in relation to language and culture. More work, however, is still needed in this area.

A research and consultation process also is underway to determine appropriate requirements for a relevant First Nations graduation diploma, involving the identification of standards that are unique for First Nations schools but equivalent to those of the provincial system.

FNEESC and the FNSA are directly addressing the needs of schools in the area of ***teacher recruitment and retention*** through the implementation of professional development workshops, and through partnerships to enhance First Nations schools' access to web based networks and expertise focused on employment advertising.

Finally, FNEESC and the FNSA have established a new ***toll-free technology support line*** to support First Nations school staff who require assistance in the area of information and communications technology. Further, reflecting the trend toward 21st Century Learning, current technology and connectivity support is being used to promote collective course offerings through distance learning approaches.

C. Summary

Limited resources means that not all of the necessary programming for a complete BC First Nations Education System is currently in place. For example, First Nations have not been able to address language and culture, information and communications technology, and curriculum development to the extent that is needed. First Nations also face a critical shortage of funding in terms of key infrastructural issues, including Operation and Maintenance, transportation, and capital.

However, First Nations communities and schools have identified what needs to be done to support quality First Nations education in First Nations schools in BC, and have established meaningful partnerships to enhance an understanding of and commitment to First Nations education issues in the public education system, as well. Measurement, program monitoring, and evidence-based decision-making are clearly inherent in many of the initiatives described above.

FNESC and the FNSA strongly believe that the initiatives described above represent the most meaningful and important efforts possible in terms of planning, supporting school success, and being accountable for improved student achievement. Critically, FNESC and the FNSA consistently build upon an understanding that school and classroom programming, collective efforts, and the collection and use of information must respect the unique context and goals of First Nations communities and schools.

First Nations in BC are prepared to take on more responsibility for their education system, but continued progress will require at least two things:

- ***adequate awareness and recognition of the programming in place and the flexibility needed for the continued development and implementation of First Nations standards for First Nations education; and***
- ***sufficient, sustained, and secure funding that will support First Nations as the BC First Nations Education System continues to evolve, reflecting advancements in educational research and knowledge, as well as the changing priorities of schools and students.***