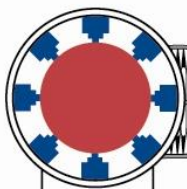


“Strengthening Aboriginal Girls’ and Women’s Success”

Submission by the

Native Women’s Association of Canada

**Prepared for the
Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)
Summit on Aboriginal Education
February 24, 2009
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan**



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The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) appreciates the invitation extended to meet with the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada at this Summit on Aboriginal Education. NWAC has worked for over 34 years to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of Aboriginal women. It is critical that the unique circumstances of Aboriginal girls and women are addressed by developing and implementing educational policies and systems that meet their needs and which will, by extension, also benefit their families and their communities.

NWAC is aware of the lower educational attainment and completion outcomes achieved by Aboriginal peoples as a population in comparison with those achieved by non-Aboriginal Canadians. NWAC is also aware of the somewhat paradoxical situation that exists whereby Aboriginal women, who face greater levels of gendered racism, who hold greater responsibility for child rearing, who earn lower incomes and who have a greater exposure to violence and other social ills, still achieve slightly better outcomes in terms of secondary and post secondary enrollment and graduation rates than Aboriginal men. This achievement attests to the strength and determination of Aboriginal women to overcome multiple barriers: but it in no way should be seen as an excuse to lessen our attention to their needs or to remove them from our primary consideration. Educational opportunities must exist for girls and women from head-start programs to advanced university degrees.

The following short to medium term measures are organized to correspond to the priorities established for the Summit, and represent the key concerns specific to the needs of Aboriginal girls and women that NWAC brings forward to this gathering. Addressing these issues will assist the CMEC to meet its short term goals of encouraging and building support for partnerships and improved relationships, as well as its longer term goals of eliminating the gaps in academic achievement and graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Socio-economic factors

NWAC holds that success in education and training is dependent on, not merely influenced by the conditions experienced by the individual related to their housing, their health and their ability to meet their basic physical and social needs. Any measures implemented to improve educational outcomes must address the linkages between these outcomes and the basic human needs of the individual. Research has clearly shown that children cannot effectively learn if their environment is deficient in the key areas of housing, nutrition, health and general welfare, and programs have been developed to assist children who are facing these deprivations. It stands to reason that the achievements of adult learners are influenced by these same factors, and must also be addressed.

The work implemented between the CMEC and the Forum of Labour Market Ministers is a positive step, as one outcome of improved educational attainment and completion may be a greater involvement of Aboriginal women in the Canadian labour market. NWAC suggests that similar partnerships should be established with Ministers responsible for health, housing and social welfare to address the multiple ways in which these portfolios are inextricably linked to success in education and training. Transformative change will result through the development of measures that address the important linkages between all aspects of socio-economic well-being of Aboriginal girls and women.

Finally, NWAC emphasizes that any characterization of lifelong learning for Aboriginal peoples inherently contains educational and social aspects: it is a concept that relates to an integrated way of life rather than a restricted subset of education and training measures. For this reason, it is necessary to address socio-economic factors in the planning, development and implementation of any measures related to education and training.

Jurisdiction over education

NWAC recognizes that the issue of jurisdiction over education and training encompasses several interrelated elements. First, it is agreed that partnership is a key element of successful planning, designing, decision making and implementation, and that the full inclusion of Aboriginal women is an integral and required element of a full partnership process. Along with the inclusion of Aboriginal women as full partners in these processes, it will be necessary to utilize gender based analysis and approached to ensure that the differing needs of male and female students, and especially of adult students, are appropriately addressed. Strategies that do not address the gender-related differences in situation and needs between male and female students will fail to achieve the outcomes desired.

A second element of jurisdiction is the need to ensure that there is an adequate representation of Aboriginal women at all levels of the education and training structures – from inclusion in local school boards and advisory groups to a full presence at provincial, territorial and federal boards and decision making tables, such as this one. Inclusion of women at all levels respects Aboriginal women’s place as the first teachers of children and the many responsibilities for the well being of the family and the community that Aboriginal women hold.

Finally, while issues of jurisdiction need to be discussed, NWAC suggests that basing future policies on ‘Jordan’s principle’ or similar measures may be the best way forward. Past approaches which were based on restrictive interpretations of responsibility and accountability have not resulted in good outcomes: creative responses which address the needs of all governmental partners while seamlessly meeting the needs of the learner and the learner’s family are necessary.

Funding and resources

NWAC's overriding concern around funding and resources is that these should be universally available, regardless of the learner's place of residence or First Nation affiliation. Specific measures regarding funding and resources supported by NWAC include:

- Ensuring families can acquire educational supplies for their learners
- Ensuring learning supports for students with disabilities are available
- Covering the real cost of transportation, daycare, housing and general living costs while individuals are in education or training programs
- Ensuring living, daycare, disability and transportation allowances etc. are available to extended family members who are learners or who are providing care for learners (i.e. for children living with a grandparent or for a grandparent who has returned to school while responsible for the care of grandchildren)
- Ensuring children and adults with special needs or disabilities at all levels of education and training are able to purchase or access equipment, personal support assistants or other supports as necessary
- Providing supports and programs that address the needs of parents, children, relatives and families as an integrated unit, rather than for the child alone in isolation from their family
- Ensuring improvements to create barrier-free environments for learners with disabilities are available in a timely manner.

Data

Data measures need to include elements that gauge in the fullest sense "quality of life" as well as measures that focus more narrowly on educational achievement levels. Specific elements that should be included are:

- Aboriginal language retention and cultural awareness
- Level of family involvement with children
- Level of family involvement with the educational facility, program or institution
- Increase in volunteer participation in education or training
- Increase in community involvement in education or training
- Level of approval of the individual, family and community of the educational facility, program or institution
- Measurement of socio-economic condition of students and their families
- Measurement of competencies acquired through a variety of means.

Standards of success should be developed in conjunction with Aboriginal women, men and communities, and must take into consideration the capacity of the individual as well as their full range of physical, mental, spiritual and emotional needs.

NWAC suggests that the limited improvement achieved to date in Aboriginal achievement and completion rates may reflect successes related to easier goals or a subset of the population: additional improvements may be increasingly difficult to achieve as more intractable issues are addressed. Implementing a focus on measures that address Aboriginal girls' and women's issues may be beneficial, as this population has already demonstrated a determination to succeed in spite of multiple barriers. Aboriginal girls and women may show quick results from lower levels of intervention, or may show greater results for equal interventions.

Challenging our assumptions about education, training and learners

NWAC has identified some areas in which we suggest all partners involved in education and training should check and challenge our assumptions about learners and their needs.

First, the 'stages of life' approach to education, training and learners must be reviewed, validated, and adjusted as necessary. Aboriginal peoples, and Aboriginal girls and women in particular, may not experience the stages of life at the same age, and in the same order as the general Canadian population. This means that Aboriginal learners' needs may be very different from those of the 'average' Canadian student. This is especially critical to those attending post-secondary and post-graduate education and training. Assumptions about supports, family composition and individual needs based on the average student are likely to be a poor fit for Aboriginal women, thus reducing their access to education and training and becoming in themselves one more barrier to success that they must surmount. Measures that should be implemented include:

- Removing age restrictions placed on funding for education or training measures, as well as on employment opportunities linked to learners, such as co-op placement funding, summer student funding, and wage subsidies to employers to hire students
- Removing restrictions that exclude some family members (i.e. grandmothers, aunts, sisters) from receiving supports commonly targeting parents if these individuals are acting in a care-giver role to the learner

Second, the use of distance learning is not important only to individuals who reside at a geographical distance from educational facilities. Aboriginal women who live in urban centres where there are already existing educational facilities may instead access distance learning because it is more flexible in terms of start dates, lack of mandatory attendance at a specific location, better access to tutors and learning materials, and variable course length. All of these features are valuable to women who are learning while working, raising a family or meeting other obligations, whether they live in the city or in an isolated or rural environment. An increased use of technology, self-directed and modular training, distance learning, and other non-traditional forms of education and training will improve access and achievement for Aboriginal women, whether they live in rural, isolated or urban centres, because it enables them to better balance their learning with their other life responsibilities.

Conclusion

NWAC is committed to working in partnership with the federal, provincial and territorial governments to promote and support improved outcomes in education and training for Aboriginal girls and women. We commend your involvement and your commitment to ensuring that this process includes the voices of Aboriginal women. The strong Aboriginal women who have achieved educational outcomes have experience and knowledge to apply to this partnership. Aboriginal women who have children or other family members enrolled in educational and training activities know what supports they and their families need to succeed. NWAC looks forward to continuing to work with the CMEC and other relevant governmental ministries, departments and organizations to improve education and training measures, which will ultimately assist Aboriginal women to create and maintain strong families and strong communities.