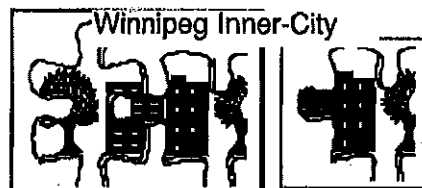


**Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-  
Manitoba**

# **Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools**

**by Jim Silver  
and Kathy Mallett  
with Janice Greene and  
Freeman Simard**

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**Research Alliance**

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# Executive Summary

In this study we investigate the educational circumstances of Aboriginal students in Winnipeg inner city high schools. The study is based on interviews with 47 Aboriginal students in Winnipeg inner city high schools, 50 Aboriginal school leavers, 25 adult members of the Aboriginal community, and 10 teachers, 7 of them Aboriginal. In addition, we conducted an extensive review of relevant literature.

Responses by Aboriginal people to our questions about their experiences in school reveal the existence of what we have identified as a cultural/class/experiential divide between Aboriginal students and their families on the one hand, and the school system on the other. The life experiences and cultural values of many Aboriginal students and their families differ significantly from what they experience in the schools, which are run largely by non-Aboriginal, middle class people for the purpose of advancing the values of the dominant culture. The educational system marginalizes Aboriginal students, does not adequately reflect their cultural values and their daily realities, and feels alien to many Aboriginal people. The incidence of overt forms of racism—name calling and stereotyping, for example—is high. Institutional forms of racism are common. The face that schools present to Aboriginal students is decidedly non-Aboriginal: for example, there are few Aboriginal teachers, and little Aboriginal content in the curriculum. These characteristics suggest to us an educational system that continues to be overly Euro-centric and even colonial—a concept that we elaborate upon in Part Two of the paper.

Aboriginal students experience the divide between themselves and the school system on a daily basis, and a good deal of what they experience in school is negative. Not surprisingly, many Aboriginal students resist and even reject this form of education. This is not the way in which this issue is generally understood. It is generally understood as being a problem of Aboriginal students failing in school, of their having a 'dropout' rate double that of non-Aboriginal students. But what follows from framing the issue as being Aboriginal students' failures in school is that it is the Aboriginal students who need 'fixing', and this inevitably leads back to the thinking that drove the residential schools, which is that Aboriginal culture is inferior, and that Aboriginal students must be 'raised' to the level of the superior culture. This approach has simply not worked. Aboriginal people do not and will not accept these racist assumptions. They resist such assumptions, and thus resist schools.

The evidence that we have gathered suggests to us that Aboriginal people want the education that is needed to enable them to participate fully in Canadian society and in their own self-governance, but they do not want to abandon what it is to be Aboriginal in order to do so. What Aboriginal people have said to us about the educational system is *not* that Aboriginal people should be forced to change in order to fit into and 'succeed' in school—this is what the residential schools attempted, unsuccessfully, to do—but rather that schools and the educational system generally need to change in order to better reflect the rapidly changing demographic and cultural realities of our community.

Making such significant changes will be a challenge, but the benefits to all of us in doing so will be significant. We conclude the paper by advancing recommendations that arise directly from what our interviewees have told us. These are recommendations that we consider to be reasonable and achievable, and which we believe are necessary for beginning the process of change that needs to take place in our educational system.

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# Part Three

## 3.1 Conclusions

The demographic data presented early in this paper provide evidence that dramatic shifts are underway in the socioeconomic structure and character of our city, and we believe that education will play a crucial role in determining whether we are successful in negotiating these shifts and upheavals. A recent Saskatchewan study, which calculated that by the year 2016, almost one-half (46.4%) of school-aged (5-17 years) children in the province will be Aboriginal, concluded that:

“...the present era represents the birth pangs of an entirely new society, because it is witness to a kind of renegotiation of relations between the defining peoples. Further, it can be argued that the principle context of this new contact period is that of education. The role of the school, humble as this might sound, could not therefore be cast in a more dramatic light....The role the school plays will determine the future and destiny of our province.....An opportunity of greatest significance lies before us---nothing more and nothing less than the forging of a new society” (Tymczak, 2001, p.25).

The same can be said, we believe, for Manitoba and specifically for Winnipeg. Indeed, these shifts in demographic realities are taking place in many large cities across North America, where people of European descent have become or are becoming a minority. These demographic shifts have enormous implications for education—for how we construct the curriculum, how we train teachers, and who gets trained to be a teacher, for example. Giroux, writing about the USA, argues that “... the cultural landscapes of our urban centres...” are changing such that those peoples previously seen as ‘the other’ and confined to the margins of everyday life are moving to the centre (Giroux, 1992, p. 111). Schools must reflect these real-world changes.

In Winnipeg this means that schools must become more Aboriginal. We believe that this means very significant changes to the educational system as a whole. In our recommendations we will emphasize those changes in the educational system having to do especially with who is teaching and what is taught. These are changes, we believe, that are achievable within a reasonable time frame. But our immediate focus on teachers and curriculum should not be seen as detracting from our view that it is the system as a whole that needs to change to reflect changing demographic and cultural realities.

Many of the recommendations that we believe flow from our findings require action on the part of the provincial government, given that the provinces have the constitutional responsibility for education. Therefore, although our study focussed on Aboriginal students in Winnipeg inner city high schools, at least some of our recommendations have to be couched in terms of the province as a whole.

Our recommendations arise directly from what we have been told by Aboriginal high school students and school leavers and community members in the interview questionnaires and the focus groups, and are supported, we believe, by the considerable body of literature that now exists on Aboriginal education. Before setting out our recommendations, we want to make two preliminary observations.

First, there are four areas, in addition to those included in our recommendations, where we believe, based on our findings in this study, important changes could and should be made. We

are not including these in our recommendations because we want to focus on the recommendations that we believe to be of the highest priority. Nevertheless, we want to make very brief mention of these four areas because we believe they are worthy of further investigation and consideration. The first is the importance of those schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students making extra, innovative efforts to reach out to Aboriginal parents, including efforts that reach the community as a whole, like community feasts, and including strategies that have been tried elsewhere that involve teachers going into the community to meet with parents in the parents' homes. The second is the importance of adult learner centres, given that Aboriginal people are more likely than non-Aboriginal people to return to school after the usual high school age, and given what appears to us, from our cursory observations of adult learner centres in the course of conducting this study, to be the high degree of effectiveness of at least some of these institutions. The third is the possibility of developing a community economic development strategy around inner city schools, by attaching to such schools early childhood education programs like Aboriginal Head Start, literacy programs for parents, and high quality after school programs, each with a hiring strategy aimed at employing more Aboriginal people. There is very strong evidence that these programs are educationally effective, and there is especially strong evidence that educational attainment is strongly correlated with socioeconomic status, and thus jobs. The fourth is the importance of developing the programs needed to enable more Aboriginal high school students than is now the case to find part-time jobs while still in school, given the evidence that Aboriginal students are much less likely to be employed while at school than non-Aboriginal students, and that many Aboriginal students would like to be employed but are having difficulty getting a first foot in the door in the labour market. It is our opinion that each of these four areas is important from an Aboriginal educational attainment point of view, and each is worthy of further investigation.

Second, the three broad recommendations that we do make—to turn out a great many more Aboriginal teachers, to add a considerable additional amount of Aboriginal content to the teacher training programs, and to integrate much more Aboriginal content into the existing high school curriculum—are listed as three separate recommendations, but are much better thought of as three inter-related parts of an integrated strategy, the ultimate goal of which is broad systemic change. Producing more Aboriginal teachers is useful in itself, but is much more effective if these Aboriginal teachers have come through a teacher training program which has provided them with an understanding of colonialism and the Aboriginal experience, and is much more effective if the curriculum these teachers are working with is infused with Aboriginal content. Similarly, infusing the high school curriculum with Aboriginal content is useful in itself, but is much more effective if those who teach it are knowledgeable about Aboriginal matters, and is more useful still if the number of teachers who are Aboriginal is proportionate to the number of students who are Aboriginal. Thus we see these three recommendations as an integrated package, and we see them as the achievable starting points for significant systemic change, the outcome of which would be an educational system in which Aboriginal cultures and people are fully acknowledged, respected, and represented.

We wish to add that we know that there have been many studies of Aboriginal education in the past, and relatively little action has resulted. The Auditor-General of Canada, for example, when reporting recently on the state of Aboriginal education in Canada, said the following:

“According to one First Nations organization, education for First Nations has been studied for over 20 years. This includes at least 22 studies between 1991 and 1999 in one departmental region....None of the study reports that came to our attention was accompanied by a departmental implementation plan that identified how and by whom the necessary remedial action would be taken” (Canada, 2000, pp. 4-9, 4-10).

It is not within our mandate to identify how and by whom the necessary remedial action will be taken. It is, however, our task to set out what we believe, in broad terms, to be the necessary remedial action. In the following recommendations we seek to do that, by setting out the package of changes that we think, based on our interviews and the existing literature, is of the highest order of priority, and is the most likely to be achievable within a reasonable time frame.

## 3.2 Recommendations

In our discussions with the Aboriginal people whom we interviewed, many offered some variant of the view that 'the whole educational system needs to change'. We believe that there is a sense in which this is true. The educational system is not now meeting the needs of large numbers of Aboriginal students, and therefore it needs to be changed. The specific recommendations that follow are, in our view, the steps that are most likely to be achievable in the immediately foreseeable future, and that are most likely to lay the foundation for the kind of long-term systemic change that is needed if the educational needs of Aboriginal people are to be met. These changes must be implemented with the full participation of the authentic Aboriginal leadership, as has been recommended by the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

### ***RECOMMENDATION #1: The Centre for Urban Aboriginal Education***

We recommend:

- a. That in order to assist in the process of ensuring the timely implementation of these recommendations, and to ensure that the Aboriginal community has the organizational means by which to promote its educational interests and aspirations, there be established in Winnipeg a Centre for Urban Aboriginal Education.
- b. That the Centre for Urban Aboriginal Education be:
  - i. an independent body;
  - ii. governed by the Aboriginal community;
  - iii. provided with a secure financial base;
  - iv. mandated to provide leadership and organizational capacity for the Aboriginal community in the on-going process of effecting positive changes to the educational system.

### ***RECOMMENDATION #2: Aboriginal Teachers***

We recommend:

- a. That the provincial government, working closely with the Aboriginal community, immediately prepare and implement a plan designed to produce enough Aboriginal teachers that in 10 years from now, the proportion of teachers in all Winnipeg and all Manitoba school divisions who are Aboriginal will be at least equivalent to the proportion of students in those school divisions who are Aboriginal.
- b. That the plan include at least the following measures:
  - i. That a specific and significant proportion of the spots in each year's incoming class in the Faculties of Education at the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg be allocated to Aboriginal students. A version of this is done in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba, where 25% of incoming students each year must be Aboriginal, or immigrants, or people with disabilities. It is done at the Winnipeg Education Centre as well, where the incoming class must reflect the population of Winnipeg's inner city.

ii. That increased, targeted funding be made available to the Faculties of Education specifically to enable them to put in place the supports that would be needed to meet the academic needs of a significantly increased number of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal student counselling and advising services are already stretched to the limit at the two universities, so that to enable more Aboriginal students to graduate as teachers, more Aboriginal student services staff would be needed. For the University of Winnipeg Faculty of Education, this might best be done by extending the already proven Access model to the University of Winnipeg, since the UW does not now have specific funding for Access programming. The Access model is intended to provide access and necessary supports to those students—Aboriginal students included—who have historically been structurally excluded from university.

iii. That increased, targeted funding be made available to the Faculties of Education specifically to enable them to put in place the kind of aggressive recruitment strategy that would be needed to encourage much larger numbers of Aboriginal students to embark upon careers in education. This would require that Aboriginal staff from the two Faculties of Education or from Aboriginal Student Support Services go into rural and city high schools and elementary schools to talk about the value of teaching as a career, and the opportunities available for Aboriginal students in education. It may also require the development of various strategies—mentoring, for example, or 'laddering' from job to job—to prepare Aboriginal people in the community to qualify for admission to Faculties of Education.

iv. That a program be devised which would enable Aboriginal people now working as teaching assistants to earn credits toward a Bachelor of Education degree based on their work in classrooms as teaching assistants. This would shorten the time during which classes would have to be taken at the Faculties of Education at the University of Manitoba or the University of Winnipeg, and would be likely to increase the number of Aboriginal people who would seek to graduate as teachers.

### **RECOMMENDATION #3: *The Training of Teachers***

We recommend:

a. That the provincial government make available to the Faculties of Education at the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg sufficient additional, targeted funding to enable those faculties to make the changes in their course offerings and the additions to their staff that are necessary for the specific purpose of ensuring that all prospective teachers who are trained in Manitoba are familiar with the colonial experience of Aboriginal people in Canada.

b. That the funding be targeted in such a way as to enable the Faculties of Education to do, at a minimum, the following:

i. To hire additional staff to teach courses in Aboriginal history, culture and spirituality, and in colonialism and racism, with the very strong preference that these additional staff members be Aboriginal people.

ii. To design courses in Aboriginal history, culture and spirituality, and in colonialism and racism, and in anti-racist education.

c. That all prospective teachers seeking certification to teach in Manitoba be required to have taken at least one course in the Faculty of Education with specifically Aboriginal content, as recommended by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

d. That targeted funding be made available to all Manitoba school divisions specifically to enable them to provide a wide variety of professional development opportunities for existing teachers to become more aware of Aboriginal issues.

**RECOMMENDATION #4: The High School Curriculum**

We recommend:

- a. That the high school curriculum in Manitoba, and in particular in those school divisions with a significant Aboriginal student population, be thoroughly revamped in a way consistent with the recommendation of the Aboriginal Teachers Circle: "The total integration of Aboriginal perspectives in all areas of the curriculum" (Fitznor, 1997).
- b. That this include at least the following:
  - i. Significant changes to the English, Social Studies and Science curriculums such that Aboriginal content be totally integrated, and such that the use of Aboriginal content be mandatory for teachers rather than optional as is now the case.
  - ii. The addition of more courses with specifically Aboriginal content: Aboriginal History, Aboriginal Culture, Aboriginal Literature, and Aboriginal People and the Colonial Experience, for example.
  - iii. The development of Elders-in-the-schools programs in those schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students.
  - iv. The development of Aboriginal artists-in-the-schools programs in those schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students.
  - v. The development of anti-racist courses.