Setting the Stage

First Nations, Métis and Inuit education is the theme of this year’s fifth annual CTF President’s Forum. By most social and economic measures, the outcomes for Aboriginal Canadians – the youngest and fastest growing population in the country – continue to be considerably, and unacceptably, worse than for non-Aboriginal Canadians. Education outcomes are no exception. Aboriginal students continue to lag behind non-Aboriginal students in literacy and high school completion rates, as well as access to and completion of post-secondary education.

The Canadian Teachers’ Federation is committed to addressing these issues in full collaboration with Aboriginal communities. The CTF is also calling on the federal government to join us in committing to addressing Aboriginal inequality by:

- eradicating existing disparities in access to fundamental education, health, and child and family welfare services for Aboriginal families and communities.
- developing a comprehensive federal poverty reduction strategy for Canada in broad consultation with provincial and territorial governments, Aboriginal governments and organizations, non-governmental organizations and people living in poverty.

These two measures alone would go a long way toward addressing the underlying issues which are enormous roadblocks for Aboriginal communities who seek to give their youth every advantage they need to ensure a bright future. I look forward to hearing your views and perspectives as we work together towards the goal of achieving equitable and quality education for all First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

Mary Simon reminded us that to understand Aboriginal education it is essential to understand that residential schooling subverted the role of parents. She asked why is there a difference between the high value parents place on education and the students’ low attendance? Simon cautioned that in our zeal to transform education systems, we may have overlooked the role of family and the community. Recognizing the scope of the trauma caused by residential schools, school leaders must find new approaches to break down the psychological divide between our schools and our communities if we hope to keep Aboriginal children in school. The solution requires both an individual and collective response. Simon asked us to consider what parental/community engagement looks like in our communities.

Clément Chartier outlined the historical and current challenges facing the Métis in the Canadian school system. Education must prepare Métis people to participate in the economy of our nation and the world and must be firmly grounded in Métis culture. He stated the importance of basing decisions in solid data and identified challenges with disaggregating data to obtain information specific to Métis students. Mr. Chartier called for the provision of learning materials that respect and reflect Métis culture. He identified the need to work on a strategy that would lead to the creation of a Métis education act. Mr. Chartier called upon participants to work with the Métis Nation at the planned Métis Nation Education Seminar to be held in the fall of 2013.

Françoise Ducros stated that we are at a key moment in history – a time that we can work together to improve education on reserves. Educational improvements must be based on the premise that First Nations know what is best for their children so that they may fully participate in all that Canada has to offer. Ms. Ducros spoke about the proposed First Nations Education Act as a framework for better outcomes for Aboriginal youth. She called for the government to “get out of” contribution agreements and to provide a mechanism for predictable and sustainable funding. The proposed act must respect existing treaties and self-government agreements. She identified next steps of building on current successes and continued consultation.
DISCUSSION ROUND #1
What is one key message that you heard about the desired role of education for each Aboriginal group?

There were many similarities among the key messages identified by the groups during the morning discussion session. Key messages have been summarized and grouped into eight broad categories. Key points are generally expressed in the words used by the recorder. Categories and key points were not placed in any specific order.

Parental engagement
- Residential schools destroyed the parental skills for an entire generation; we must attempt to rebuild these skills.
- Get the parents involved with education and they will create a foundation on which to build success.
- Schools need to be more welcoming to students.
- There is an absence of parental involvement in developing policy and practice.

School and community engagement
- Specific needs of communities require flexibility in education programs.
- Develop relationships and involve schools and communities in education discussions, decision-making and all aspects of supporting students.
- At the school level we have a good deal of power to take an active role in identifying and addressing challenges in Aboriginal education.

Relationships
- Community and parental relationships are key to how students will engage with the school – embrace the identity of all students that come into the education context.

Addressing socio-economic needs
- Many communities are riddled with social problems – education may not be the priority when dealing with issues such as youth suicide.
- Children should not be living in poverty – need to address the unacceptably high level of Aboriginal child poverty.

Raising teacher awareness and capacity
- Need to build capacity for Aboriginal education among the teaching profession through teacher training programs and ongoing professional development.
- Giving teachers the opportunity to practice the requisite skills and gain the necessary confidence.
- Bridging programs for Aboriginal students to become teachers.

Educational needs
- There is a need for a holistic approach to Aboriginal education.
- Aboriginal history needs to be taught in a truthful and authentic manner.
- Recognition of traditional cultural values to be inherent within the school’s curriculum and practices and prepare at the same time for sustainable lives in “modern” world.
- Resources, curriculum, etc. have to be culturally meaningful and relevant.
- Need to “indigenize” our education system.
- Focus on building on the strength of the existing education system

Culture, Language and Values
- History and values need to be recognized universally in all schools with Aboriginal heritage – not just on a basic level but with depth!
- The loss of Aboriginal culture and language are critical issues to be addressed.
- Need to help children feel valued for who they are, their language and their culture, so they feel they belong.

Funding
- Funding of Aboriginal schools is inferior to funding for provincially funded public schools – need to address this funding inequity.
- Adequate funding for indigenous language training.
Elder Williams called the events of the day fascinating. He appreciated the substance of all of the presenters and the fact that they were well versed in what they had to say. All were saying, in so many words, that here is a golden opportunity to foster change. Participants were called upon to make our students understand what we were hearing here. We must develop a new and unique way of dealing with First Nations, Inuit and Métis history since the current situation is “the pits”. Williams referred to a fascinating world trying to interpret what has happened in terms of Aboriginal people. He cautions that the problems facing us are not going to be solved by the federal government as it takes more than money to foster change. It takes all of us working together in our communities. It takes a new way of teaching Aboriginal history and education that removes the current distorted understanding. “Change is not an insurmountable task – it just takes creativity.”

DISCUSSION ROUND #2
In what ways does federal government action provide for improved education for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students? What more must be done? What would successful assistance look like?

The federal government:
• Must respect all the treaties and other agreements between the Crown and Aboriginal people.
• Must treat funding for Aboriginal education as an investment not an expense.
• Must adequately and sustainably fund education at least to the level of provincially funded public schools, and provide additional financing to communities that have greater needs.
• Must adequately support the social infrastructure that impacts on education, including but not limited to a national child care program, reduction of income inequality, health care and other poverty reduction programs.
• Must provide supports, and then permit Aboriginal peoples to control their own educational system.
• Must meet their responsibility to better communicate and educate the general public on current and historical Aboriginal issues such as education funding. This education program must serve to correct the current distorted view of many Canadians.
• Must make connections with those they are trying to help. Consultation has to be meaningful, authentic and inclusive of all Aboriginal peoples.
• Must build authentic equal partnerships with provincial and territorial governments, including representation on the CMEC, in order to be privy to decision making regarding First Nations, Métis and Inuit education.
• Must take proactive and positive action as they have conducted enough studies and prepared enough reports.
• Must ensure that any form of accountability is based on a collaborative model, not something imposed.

By ensuring that the federal government meets its commitments, we will build on the strengths of Aboriginal communities and their traditions to create an education system that will create opportunities for success for all children. In the words of Gordon Williams: “if the outcome is the same, the difference might be you so let’s go out and make a difference for a different outcome”.

ELDER GORDON WILLIAMS
Tying it all together

Elder Williams called the events of the day fascinating. He appreciated the substance of all of the presenters and the fact that they were well versed in what they had to say. All were saying, in so many words, that here is a golden opportunity to foster change. Participants were called upon to make our students understand what we were hearing here. We must develop a new and unique way of dealing with First Nations, Inuit and Métis history since the current situation is “the pits”. Elder Williams provided a summary of the key messages delivered by each of the speakers and added to our understanding by providing a personal reflection or story. The long shadow cast by the residential school system was exemplified through the story of a family who sent their young daughters to work the streets – a decision they would not have made had they known what love and family were. These things had not been taught in the residential schools and could not be taught by their family. Williams referred to a fascinating world trying to interpret what has happened in terms of Aboriginal people. He cautions that the problems facing us are not going to be solved by the federal government as it takes more than money to foster change. It takes all of us working together in our communities. It takes a new way of teaching Aboriginal history and education that removes the current distorted understanding. “Change is not an insurmountable task – it just takes creativity.”
Sheelah McLean stated that Idle No More teaches us that indigenous sovereignty is part of our history. Educating Canadians about racism and inequality is another important aspect of this movement. Through her research she found that teachers often struggle with deficit-thinking – the idea that oppressed communities need to change to fit into the school system. Anti-racist / anti-oppressive education locates the problem of racism and inequality as stemming from specific policies and practices based on ideas of difference. She also found that students feel empowered to discover that social and economic policies are at the root of inequality as it can shift their worldview. A major research finding was that not talking about these issues in our schools has a large impact in normalizing inequality and poverty faced by Aboriginal people. Anti-racist education serves to humanize communities that have been dehumanized by racist and colonial policies. Unfortunately, it is frequent that only the small percentage of students who reach the upper post-secondary level receive anti-racist education. The teacher training process and ongoing teacher education within the school system need to improve in order to better support teachers who feel ill-equipped to deal with these issues. Teachers have a critically important role to play in changing attitudes and worldviews.

The key message focused on the need for peace and harmony. They asked us to consider the language of conflict in favour of understanding the “indigenization” of education systems we must abandon our perception of Aboriginal people is often based on a comic depiction of the “heavy” issues facing Aboriginal peoples with the “light” of the contribution to society and the beauty found in the language of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. As an example, she defined the Ojibwe word for Canada as the land, everything you see around you has the heart of the Creator. Dr. Toulouse reminded us that our perception of Aboriginal people is often based on a comic depiction of an image based on just 25 of the 500 nations. As educators, we are called to ensure that the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs of each child are met in a successful education system. Curriculum must be grounded in the cultural context of the students. The key message focused on the need to transform the “how” and “what” we teach, in order to facilitate First Nations, Inuit and Métis student success. In talking about the challenges created by the shadow of both residential schools and federal day school, we were reminded to use humour to bring light to a dark time.

Shelly Tootoosis and Michael Gatin
Reflections from a teacher organization

“You can’t be the doctor if you’re the disease”. With this quote Shelly Tootoosis and Michael Gatin challenged participants to be change-makers. Ms. Tootoosis described the journey of the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation as it relates to First Nations, Métis and Inuit education; a path that has been grounded in: teacher needs, relationships with First Nations and Métis individuals and authorities, council resolutions, organizational policy and inter-organizational collaboration. Through this historical journey she provided insight on how we might engage in working to address the needs of Aboriginal education in our own teacher organizations. Michael Gatin expressed frustration at the fact that nothing is changing. He called on us to work toward change that builds on existing Aboriginal knowledge that has yet to be tapped. To advance the “indigenization” of education systems we must abandon the language of conflict in favour of understanding the need for peace and harmony. They asked us to consider how our identity as individuals impacts our work in creating a “new order” that is socially just. We were also asked to reflect on what teacher organizations’ work would be if the purpose of education was to restore justice.
DISCUSSION ROUNDS

All education partners have a role to play in ensuring success for all Canadian children and youth. What can we do together to improve educational success for Métis, Inuit and First Nations students?

Groups identified many similar ways in which we should get involved in ensuring greater success for Aboriginal children. Key points are generally expressed in the words used by the recorder and were not placed in any specific order.

- We need to break the silence and have courageous conversations, recognizing that people are still uncomfortable with the context; we need to look closely at ourselves challenging the notion that it is “their” problem.
- Defend human rights and dignity wherever possible.
- Lobbying for change within provincial curriculum starting with K-12 (indigenizing curriculum) so that Aboriginal content is embedded and not an add-on.
- Engage parents in their children’s education.
- We need to validate what we are currently doing that is positive. Finding ways to share the successes. There is a need to shift our thinking and language from a gap/deficit model to an alternative model. We need to be aware of the language we hear and the language we use.
- We need to strategize with rigorous research to back up our statements.
- Ensure the Aboriginal voice is represented at all levels, including in teacher organizations, including stronger partnerships with indigenous organizations such as tribal councils.
- There is a need for all of us to learn more about the history and culture of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.
- Educate the decision-makers in our respective teacher organizations.
- Ensure teacher organization policies, guidelines and principles are respectful of all peoples.
- Tailor teacher pre-service and in-service education needs to focus on the delivery of age/grade-appropriate teaching with respect to these issues.
- Necessity for teachers to be able to access professional development, enabling them to increase their knowledge and communicate culturally sensitive information.
- CTF – commitment to invite the federal/provincial/territorial governments to the table to develop a plan of action for improving educational success for indigenous Canadians; direct involvement of indigenous peoples in every step of the process.
- Educators need to visit Aboriginal communities and experience what life is in them. Encourage youth exchange projects for inclusion.
- Need to recognize and value traditional knowledge and skills in our post-secondary institutions.
- This is a societal issue – education has a role to play but the responsibility extends beyond education. Canada needs to address our social justice issues to reflect the image the international community has of us. Those with the highest need have little access to social services.
- We need to continue to collaborate, communicate, commit and, at every venue and with every connection we make with others, seek to educate and question. We all have someone to whom we can pass this message.
- As part of our regular practice to ensure that we are being culturally sensitive, that CTF promote the recognition of original land.
- Given the natural character of teachers as tireless advocates of social and natural justice, teachers can make this happen. We can’t wait or depend on the political sphere.
- We need to incorporate Aboriginal ways of learning to improve public education for everyone.
- The Elders have taught us that if our hearts and intentions are in the right place it is important to act even if all of the plans are not fully in place.
- Recognize the impact that teachers and teacher organizations can have on changing practice, and use that power to effect change.
- Share resources that have been or will be developed.
- It’s all about relationships and connections and taking the time. Teachers investing time in getting to know individual students.
- Indigenous peoples have sought to understand the euro-centric view. Now it is time for them to be understood.
- Appreciate - realize the need for making changes; advocate – encourage others to help us make the changes; educate – learn more about Aboriginal history and culture.

Elder Gordon Williams
Tying it all together

Elder Williams once again provided an eloquent summary of the day’s events that was fortified with personal reflections. He commented that Sheelah McLean expressed clearly the concept of racism and that it is still alive and well. Although some think it does not exist in Canada, those who experience racism know that it does. Racism is part of the colonial process of our country and we have been sweeping it under the rug for years. Elder Williams used a person story of racism to exemplify how it is an important part of our reality. “We have to start teaching it from grade 1 to university.” In the inspiration from the classroom session, it was clear that the students weren’t encumbered by societal norms and were not afraid to speak the truth. They were not ashamed to name the abusers. Students explained that although they stayed in the best home on the reserve it was still in poor condition and they could not drink the water. They could only imagine what condition the other homes were in. The questions often focus on why the educational attainment of Aboriginal students is not as high, but maybe we should be taking into account that, for some, their basic needs are not being met. When talking with Aboriginal students about their challenges, Mr. Williams explained that they are no less intelligent than anyone else. The only limitations they have are the ones they place on themselves. Referring to Pamela Toulouse’s presentation, he indicated that sometimes we need to use humour as it helps creates trust. With respect to Shelly Tootoosis and Michael Gatin’s presentation, Elder Williams referred to the statement, “you can’t be a doctor if you are the disease”. Elder Williams emphasized that if you have the ability to dream, you have the ability to succeed and that we should not be limited by what other people think we can do. In closing he stated that more advocacy and collaboration is needed at all levels. There is no lack of information regarding First Nations, Métis and Inuit education; it’s more a question of putting it into action. All speakers were positive about the future. He left us with the following message: “We leave with a different perspective, a challenge to go forward and do the best we can to improve First Nations, Métis and Inuit education.”