

Aboriginals left behind in education, study shows

JOE FRIESEN [Globe and Mail](#)

October 29, 2008

The gap in high-school graduation rates for aboriginals and non-aboriginals has grown in recent years, while the percentage of aboriginal people with a university degree has increased only slightly compared with a massive boom among the general population, new research shows.

Both are troubling figures that indicate much more needs to be done in one of the great social-policy challenges Canada faces, according to a study published yesterday by the C. D. Howe Institute.

"Clearly, we're not doing well enough, and clearly, we should be highly concerned about it," said the study's author, John Richards, who teaches public policy at Simon Fraser University.

"A marginalized community, such as aboriginals, living in a modern economy can only escape poverty through an educational transformation."

Using data from the 2006 census, Professor Richards demonstrates that a high-school diploma makes any Canadian, whether aboriginal or not, nearly twice as likely to hold a job. But for aboriginal people aged 20 to 24, the group that most recently went through the Canadian school system, barely 60 per cent have completed high school, compared with nearly 90 per cent of non-aboriginals.

That rate drops to nearly 50 per cent among those that identify themselves as first-nations members, as opposed to Métis or Inuit, and declines to less than 40 per cent for those living on reserves.

In other words, while younger aboriginals have sought more education than previous generations, they have not kept pace with the increase in education among other Canadians.

"That's not good news," Prof. Richards said. "We're not talking about residential-schools survivors, we're talking about people who went through the school system in the last decade."

At the same time, the non-aboriginal population has been investing heavily in postsecondary education, nearly doubling the proportion of university graduates among the 25-to-34 cohort (to 30 per cent) compared with the previous generation. The proportion of aboriginal people with a university degree, meanwhile, has increased only slightly with the new generation: 6 per cent of those aged 45 or older have one, compared with 8 per cent of those 25 to 34.

The reasons for these gaps are many, Prof. Richards argues in the study.

For one, the aboriginal leadership of elected chiefs is disproportionately concerned with conditions on reserves, even though nearly 80 per cent of aboriginal children go to school off-reserve, he said.

Reserve schools, which are a federal responsibility, receive on average about 30 per cent less funding per student than schools financed by provincial governments, according to the Assembly of First Nations. They are also overseen by their individual band governments and subject to

internal political pressures. Provinces have also been reluctant to focus on aboriginal education because they see it as a federal responsibility, he said.

Prof. Richards, borrowing from the work of Michael Mendelson at the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, supports the idea of reserve schools being run by aboriginal education authorities, which would professionalize administration and provide leadership on curriculum and assessment.

An example has been negotiated in British Columbia, under the First Nations Education Steering Committee, which allows the federal government and first nations to consolidate education funding, and allows students to sit provincially certified examinations.

When schools that do well in handling aboriginal students are compared with those that struggle, whether in rural or urban settings, Prof. Richards argues that leadership at the administrative level is crucial.

"In the good school districts they pay attention to numbers. They know what's happening to their aboriginal kids. Are they dropping out or not? Are they doing well or badly? And what have the trends been over the last few years? Second, they look at curriculum. They add aboriginal components to the curriculum, and that helps. They often try to engage aboriginal elders in various ways," he said.

Aboriginal youngsters also tend to do better in schools where there are fewer of them, where the population is wealthier and where non-aboriginal students also fare better, he said.

In discussing the policy implications of his findings, Prof. Richards argues that low aboriginal education levels will have an impact on Canadian productivity and also will fuel poverty and racial tension.

"We're not talking here about a small fraction of the population," he said. "We better make a hell of a lot of improvement for the sake of the next generation."