



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Students on the move:

Ways to address the
impact of mobility among
Aboriginal students

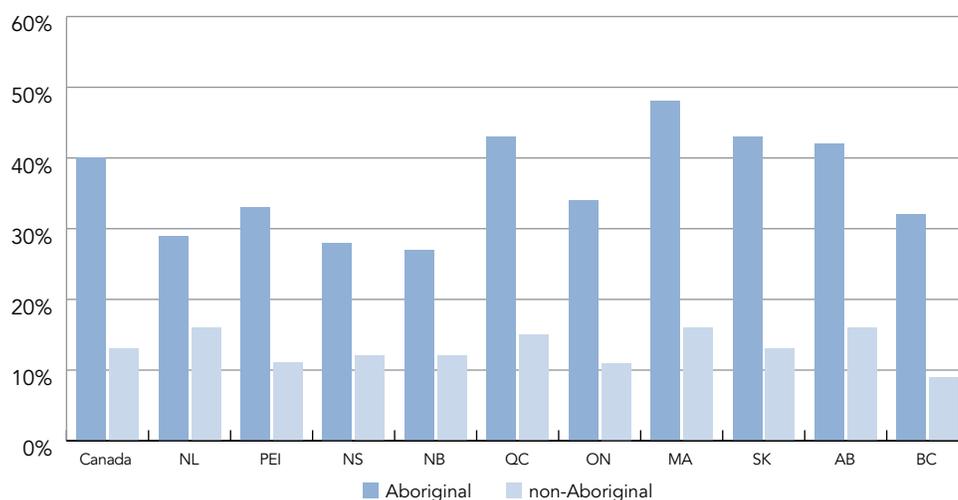
May 15, 2008

The high-school completion rate for Aboriginal students continues to fall well short of the Canadian average. Recent research has highlighted student mobility as a major barrier to successful high-school completion. Low completion rates among Aboriginal students in families who move more frequently point to the need for greater school support for these students.

High-school completion rates among Aboriginal students

Across Canada, high-school completion rates are dramatically lower for Aboriginal people than for non-Aboriginal people. Among 20- to 24-year-olds, 40% of Aboriginal people do not have a high-school diploma, compared to just 13% for non-Aboriginal people (see Figure 1).

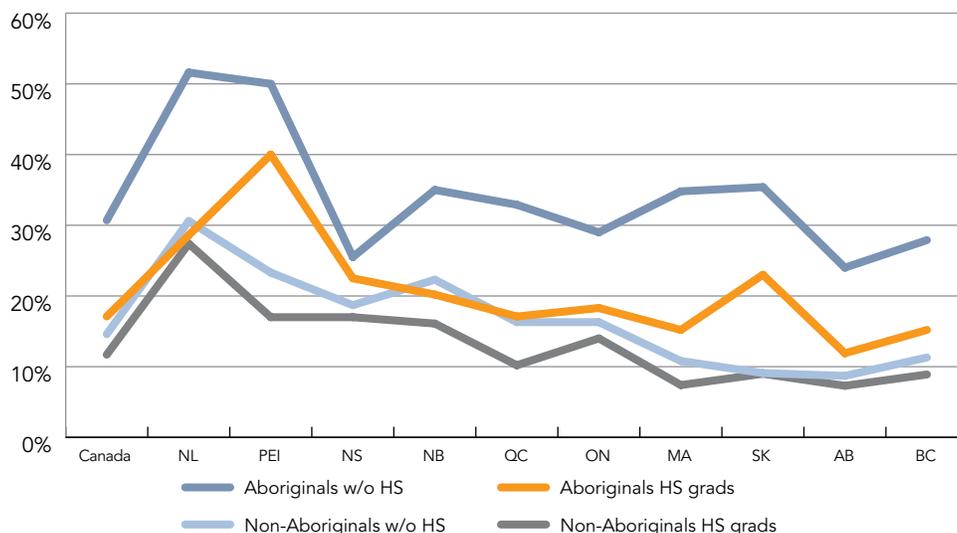
Figure 1:
Proportion of 20- to 24-year-olds without a high-school diploma, by Aboriginal identity



Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2006, Catalogue no. 97-560-XWE2006031.

Aboriginal adults without a high-school diploma are at an even greater disadvantage in the labour market than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Among 20- to 24-year-old Aboriginal people, unemployment rates are 14 percentage points higher for high-school dropouts than for high-school graduates. For non-Aboriginal people, unemployment rates are only three percentage points higher for high-school dropouts than for graduates (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:
Unemployment rates among Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals with and without high-school diplomas



Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2006, Catalogue no. 97-560-XWE2006031.

Mobility among Aboriginal students

Several factors have been identified to explain low high-school completion rates among Aboriginal people—or, arguably, to account for the degree to which Canada’s educational systems are failing Aboriginal students.¹ These factors include: poverty among Aboriginal families;² fear and mistrust of formal education resulting from direct or indirect experiences with residential schools;³ overt racism (e.g., stereotyping and name calling);⁴ institutionalized racism (e.g., over-representation of Aboriginal youth among students labelled with behaviour disorders);⁵ and cultural and class barriers between school staff and Aboriginal families.⁶

In addition to these factors, recent research conducted in British Columbia suggests that mobility is a significant factor contributing to school failure among Aboriginal students.⁷ Aboriginal families tend to be more mobile than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Data from the 2001 Census of Canada⁸ indicate that, in the 12 months prior to the census, 22% of Aboriginal people had moved at least once, while this was true for only 14% of non-Aboriginal people.⁹ In the previous five years, 51% of Aboriginal people had moved at least once, compared with 42% of non-Aboriginal people.¹⁰

Data from British Columbia reveal the consequences of mobility for the high-school completion of Aboriginal students.¹¹ For the Aboriginal cohort that started high school in 1998, graduation rates were highest among those who were the least mobile and lowest among those who were the most mobile (Table 1).

Further analyses of the mobility data reveal that structural school changes (e.g., moving from a middle school to a senior high school) are not associated with any concomitant drop in completion rates. On the other hand, school changes resulting from a family move are associated with large decreases in completion rates, regardless of whether school changes occur within or between school districts (Table 2).

Lesson in learning: Easing the effects of mobility among Aboriginal students

The effect of mobility on Aboriginal students' high-school completion rates suggests that the educational system is not currently meeting the needs of mobile students—and particularly of mobile Aboriginal students.

In Australia, the Department of Education has taken steps to identify best practices developed by schools to support mobile students.¹² These practices are likely to be effective in Canadian contexts that, like Australia, have large numbers of mobile Aboriginal students. These practices include:

Fostering positive attitudes toward student mobility. Schools have adopted this approach based on the assumption that optimistic thinking builds resilience and self-efficacy in students who are able to rise to the challenges of school change. Successful practices involve celebrating the arrival of new students, giving new students the opportunity to share their experiences of moving, and fostering a school culture that emphasizes the importance of welcoming new students and helping them fit in as quickly as possible. Other schools have embraced a positive attitude toward the realities of student mobility by emphasizing their willingness to accept students for any length of time—even if students are likely to remain in their new communities for only a brief period.

Table 1: Number of School Changes and Completion Rates in the '98 Aboriginal Cohort

Number of School Changes (High School Only)	Percentage of '98 Aboriginal Cohort	6-Year Completion Rate (Graduation June 2004)
No School Changes	32%	56%
1 School Change	37%	49%
2 School Changes	20%	28%
3 School Changes	10%	17%
4 School Changes	3%	11%

Source: Aman 2007

Table 2: School Completion Rates and Location of School Change in '98 Aboriginal Cohort

Number of School Changes (High School Only)	Percentage of '98 Aboriginal Cohort	6-Year Completion Rate (Graduation June 2004)
No School Changes	32%	56%
School-Structure School Change	18%	58%
Within-District School Change	20%	28%
Between-District School Change	30%	30%

Source: Aman 2007

Developing strategies for successful enrolment, transition and induction. These strategies include establishing contact with new students and their parents before students arrive at their new school. Some schools hold orientation days, welcome assemblies, social events for new students and their families, and enrolment interviews that include the student as well as his or her parents. To ensure a smooth transition over the longer term, some schools allocate buddies to new students; monitor their transitions and adjustments; and conduct review meetings with students, parents and teachers in the weeks following initial enrolment.

Transferring student information. In general, schools rely on parents to gather and transfer relevant documentation and information. However, schools that put proactive administrative systems in place generally have more complete records for their mobile students. These systems include making direct contact with new students' previous schools. Exit schools can play an important role in ensuring that records follow mobile students. For example, when a student leaves, some schools make contact with the new school to ascertain that the student has enrolled and that all necessary records have been transferred. Other schools foster relationships with schools to which their students frequently transfer, allowing for smoother communication and transfer of records. To address the needs of mobile students, some schools have developed systems that allow them to provide assessments and reports at any time of year for students leaving the school.

Building flexibility to meet learning needs. In the primary grades, some schools have adopted mixed grade classes which allow mobile students to be placed in classes that are at the correct age level, while still allowing for students' individual learning needs to be met. Other schools adjust school hours or allow flexible attendance to encourage participation and attendance among intermittently mobile students. Some schools focus on literacy and numeracy, using various assessment tools to gauge the abilities of students arriving at the school and providing additional support for those with poor skills. Other schools maintain "hands on" projects—such as bike maintenance programs and vegetable gardens—to encourage mobile students to attend school. In some cases, the principal makes home visits to each new student's family to acquire information about the student's learning needs and to encourage a relationship with the school.

The identification of school change as a significant factor in the educational careers of Aboriginal students should not be construed as a problem that rests with students or their families. The factors driving mobility among Aboriginal families are poorly understood and unlikely to change in the near future. It is important, therefore, to work toward a clearer understanding of this phenomenon and for schools to implement practices to improve educational outcomes for mobile students.

References

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- ⁷ Aman, C. & Ungerleider, C. (2008) Aboriginal students and K-12 school change in British Columbia. *Horizons* 10(1), 31-33. Accessed April 25, 2008
- ⁸ Mobility data from the 2006 Census are not currently available.
- ⁹ Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2001. Aboriginal Peoples of Canada. Accessed April 25, 2008.
- ¹⁰ Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2001. Canadians on the Move and Five-Year Mobility Rates. Accessed April 25, 2008.
- ¹¹ Aman, C. (2006). *Exploring the influence of school and community relationships on the performance of Aboriginal students in British Columbia public schools*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of British Columbia.
- ¹² Hotton, J., Monk, K. & Pitman, S. (2004). *Students Move 2: Best Practice Approaches and Case Studies from Australian Schools*. Accessed April 25, 2008.