

**Response from the
First Nations Education Steering Committee & First Nations Schools Association
to the BC Ministry of Education's Proposed Directions for Graduation**

January 2013

The BC First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) are pleased to submit this initial response to the Ministry of Education's *Proposed Directions for Graduation* questions and power point presentation, as now provided on the Ministry's web site.

We understand that the Ministry is in the process of gathering broad public feedback, to be followed by more focused dialogue about graduation requirements. FNESC and the FNSEA appreciate the chance to share our preliminary input into this phase of the consultation process, and we would also welcome opportunities for further involvement as this important initiative proceeds.

Overall, FNESC and the FNSEA support the Ministry's expressed intention to build upon its "strong, stable system" in an effort to create "a more nimble and flexible one to better meet the needs of all learners." FNESC and the FNSEA fully recognizes the importance of flexibility in order to meet the evolving needs of students and communities, reflecting the significant changes that are taking place in terms of twenty-first century learning. Accordingly, we support many of the ideas and principles outlined in the Ministry's proposed directions, and offer additional suggestions for consideration.

However, we also believe that the changes that are being considered, while they may have the potential to make the system more fluid and less directed, also have the potential to increase existing challenges for First Nations learners and families unless specific supports are included, some of which may have to be mandated from the Ministry to be most effective. It is critical to ensure that any changes that are eventually implemented do not further marginalize First Nations students and families. As the Ministry is fully aware, there are currently numerous challenges related to First Nations education in this province, and any efforts to increase flexibility and choice should work to eliminate these challenges. Like the Ministry, FNESC and the FNSEA also want all learners, including First Nations learners, to have every opportunity to pursue their own unique goals according to their own strengths and circumstances. Yet, it must be remembered that the systems and processes that currently exist are not meeting the needs of all students equitably.

We therefore strongly hope that the recommendations we provide are given every possible consideration as the Ministry proceeds with this systemic changes to the Graduation requirements. We are confident that working together, First Nations and the Ministry of Education can ensure that the needs of First Nations learners, parents, and communities are met in a meaningful and effective way to improve the 54% graduation rate of Aboriginal students in BC, and to ensure that first Nations students graduating from the K-12 system have the skills and knowledge necessary to continue on with their goals, including post-secondary education and training.

Under the Tripartite Education Framework Agreement (TEFA), First Nations schools are significantly impacted by changes to Ministry of education policy and programs, and we need to closely monitor over time the impact of changes to the graduation program to ensure that they are effective.

Ministry Question 1:

What do you think are the core or essential things all students should know, understand and be able to do by the time they leave secondary school?

Response:

Strong Academic Expectations

FNESC and the FNSA acknowledge that the Ministry's background information regarding this issue reflects a holistic and comprehensive perspective of core skills and knowledge required by all students. The power point presentation that is now available on the Ministry's website states:

The Educated Citizen ...

- thoughtful, able to learn and to think critically, and who can communicate information from a broad knowledge base;
- creative, flexible, self-motivated and who have a positive self-image;
- capable of making independent decisions;
- skilled and who can contribute to society generally, including the world of work;
- productive, who gain satisfaction through achievement and who strive for physical well-being;
- cooperative, principled and respectful of others regardless of differences;
- aware of the rights and prepared to exercise the responsibilities of an individual within the family, the community, Canada, and the world.

Such a broad, inclusive perspective of students' needs and quality education are entirely consistent with continued assertions by First Nations peoples of the need for a holistic view of learning, FNESC and the FNSA also recognize that all of the components of an educated person outlined above are extremely important. In addition, we believe that First Nations learners must have an education that...

- ensures that they are confident in their self-identity, their families, their communities and traditional values, language and cultures;
- gives them the skills they need to thrive in contemporary society, including 21st century technological skills; and
- prepares them to access any opportunities they choose for higher learning, employment and life choices.

However, while supporting those broad principles about what students should know, ***we also want to emphasize the importance of ensuring that all students are provided a strong foundation in academic achievement.*** Currently, far too many First Nations students are leaving school without the academic skills and credentials they need to pursue a full range of advanced education and career opportunities. The Ministry's Foundation Skills Assessment results highlight on-going concerns related to First Nations students' literacy and numeracy rates. Lower overall participation rates in post-secondary-recognized English, math, and science courses are also problematic. Therefore, while understanding the need for a broad perspective of student success, FNESC and the FNSA maintain that there must be a strong focus on ensuring that all students are building the *full* range of competencies – including a strong academic core – in an equitable way.

A key component of the strong academic core is the meaningful integration of a First Nations strong language and culture component for First Nations students to ensure that they receive a relevant

and holistic educational experience that respects the unique identity of First Nations peoples in Canada.

On-going Collaboration with First Nations Communities

In addition, FNEC and the FNSA support the suggestions included in the Ministry's documentation related to a need to focus on the community, including promoting learners' involvement in the community, and preparing them for life after K-12. Ensuring that all First Nations learners are able to remain connected to their homes and communities, and can contribute to their Nations after they complete their education, is critical. In order to facilitate this, the Ministry of Education should work in partnership with First Nations at provincial and local levels to support the economic needs of the communities in terms of education and training. At the same time, there should also be a focus on ensuring that those students who choose to leave their communities to pursue employment or further education are fully prepared to do so.

We believe that addressing this issue requires on-going and full collaboration with First Nations to ensure that efforts specifically relate to First Nations communities. This can be supported through the collaborative development, implementation and monitoring of effective Local Education Agreements (LEAs) and Enhancement Agreements (EAs).

Knowledge and Understanding of First Nations Cultures and Histories

Consistent with the Ministry's background information, First Nations have long-asserted the importance of ensuring that **all students leave the BC education system with a reasonable and meaningful awareness of First Nations peoples and cultures.**

We also support the stated objectives that guide the work of the Ministry of Education:

- Aboriginal voice is increased in the Provincial education system.
- Knowledge of Aboriginal language, culture and history is increased throughout the Provincial education system.
- The Provincial education system provides for focused leadership and informed practice for increasing Aboriginal student success.

How ...

- Increase Aboriginal voice by involving Aboriginal people in educational planning and decision-making at all levels;
- Increase the knowledge of Aboriginal languages, cultures, histories and pedagogy for all students and teachers (as this will benefit both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students); and
- Use informed practice to help Aboriginal students succeed.

The principles outlined in these statements must be clearly articulated in any new graduation requirement program, and need to be monitored over time with measurable deliverables.

While the move to reduce the prescribed learning outcomes in courses allows for greater flexibility in the classroom, it could also easily allow for even fewer opportunities for all students to develop knowledge and understandings about First Nations cultures and histories in BC. Currently, optional courses in Aboriginal studies such as FNS 12, EFP 10, 11, and 12 have very low enrollment and are

often not even offered in most schools. We must work collaboratively with our partners to increase enrollment in these courses.

Developing and understanding of First Nations perspectives and knowledge in the education system would serve as an important step to begin to address ignorance, indifference, bias and misunderstanding of First Nations peoples and cultures, and a more in-depth knowledge of First Nations people and histories would provide all students with a foundation for developing mutual understanding and respect. **Therefore, we strongly encourage the Ministry to require that a course in Aboriginal studies be a part of graduation requirements for all students in BC.** If the Ministry considers a move away from specific course requirements to a focus on demonstrated learning, there should still be a clear requirement for all graduating students to demonstrate a reasonable awareness of the First Nations in BC, as this would be a meaningful step toward reconciliation, honouring the commitments made by the province of BC in the New Relationship and Transformative Change Accord.

First Nations content in course/subjects should be throughout the K/12 system to ensure there is a deep understanding and success for all students enrolled in the mandatory Aboriginal studies that are part of the graduation requirement. We note that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has a number of recommendations for education that need to be discussed and addressed here in BC. These recommendations should also be taken into serious consideration in the graduation program requirements.

Ministry Question 2:

Beyond the core, how could pathways for choice or exploration be provided?

Response:

FNESC and the FNSA agree that increasing choice for students is beneficial, recognizing the growing possibilities for career and life choices. However, while supporting the potential benefits that could result from increased choices of “pathways,” it is critical to ensure that First Nations students are not streamed or directed in limited ways.

As the Ministry’s annual data collection makes clear, too many First Nations students are currently not being encouraged to explore a full range of “pathways.” As an example, within the 54% of Aboriginal students who graduate, a disproportionate number of First Nations students complete their education with a school leaving certificate rather than a Dogwood. First Nations students are proportionately over-represented in alternate programs, and they are disproportionately taking courses that are not eligible for post-secondary entrance or for a range of career options.

FNESC and the FNSA fully recognize the benefits that can be gained by appropriately supporting students in pursuing various options, including trades and training, high quality apprenticeship programs, and other post-secondary possibilities. However, structures must not be put in place that will limit students’ potential. It is ***imperative*** that all students – especially First Nations students – are effectively supported in making choices that are right for them, and that high expectations are maintained equitably for all learners.

Specifically, First Nations must be fully involved in developing and monitoring clear mechanisms and data review processes for monitoring how “pathways for choice” are affecting First Nations students. There also must be strong efforts to ensure that all education system personnel are aware of the problems that now exist in regard to streaming, as well as the potential for continued, or increased marginalization of First Nations students.

Generally, there must be a stronger commitment to helping **all** students to achieve to their highest potential. Of particular importance is the need to ensure that the graduation program contains mechanisms to address the needs of vulnerable students on the school system. Experiences and concerns shared by First Nations students, parents and families, and well-supported by data reported through the annual How Are We Doing? report, all demonstrate that Aboriginal students are currently marginalized and not fulfilling their potential. Aboriginal male students in particular are achieving far too limited success – even less so than Aboriginal females. In addition, Aboriginal students are disproportionately enrolled in almost all special education categories, particularly behavior disabilities – at almost four times the general rate.

Another vulnerable group, children in care, must be considered in any graduation program. As of 2010-2011, the graduation rate for all children in Continuing Custody Orders was at 40%; the graduation rate for Aboriginal children in care was below 35 %; and the graduation rate for male Aboriginal children in care was less than 30%. It is imperative that any graduation program take into account, and begin to address these critical issues.

The Ministry must guard against systemic bias directed toward First Nations students. Too many First Nations students are put in the non-academic stream because of their colour, how they dress, or where they live. They are not placed based on their skill and knowledge. In addition, too often, schools move First Nations students to non-academic class to fulfill their class size and class composition goals.

Ministry Question 3:

To be successful in and after school, students need to develop these five cross-curricular competencies: communication, critical thinking, creative thinking and innovation, personal responsibility and well-being, and social responsibility. How do you think students could demonstrate these competencies?

Response:

It is clear that if the graduation requirements and choices for students become more flexible, there will be a need for new ways of assessing the range students' final competencies, as opposed to relying on course completions alone. FNEC and the FNSA recognize the benefits that can be gained by exploring multiple assessment approaches, such as portfolios of learning, student self-assessment, exemplars for cross-curricular competencies, and new methods for demonstrating learning. Any assessment of the competencies will need to be done with the contexts of the students in mind, and exemplars should include respectful examples that incorporate First Nation knowledge and understandings.

As the role of individual teachers will likely increase as the emphasis may shift from course completions to students' demonstrations of learning, efforts must be made to ensure that all teachers are aware of the specific issues that affect First Nations students' educational success – including the continued existence of racism in society and lack of understanding of First Nations peoples and cultures. It is therefore critical that all educators in the system are prepared and supported to develop their awareness, knowledge, and understandings of First Nations peoples and cultures in BC.

Ministry Question 4:

How could student learning be communicated to students, parents/guardians, and post-secondary institutions/employers?

Response:

As the Ministry considers a shift from “reporting” to “communicating student learning,” we assert the need for a clear indication of the plans being made to support the engagement of First Nations parents in educational programming. First Nations in BC have long expressed concern about the need to increase the involvement of First Nations parents in the education system. In spite of the widespread evidence of the importance of involving parents as partners in the education of their children, a well-documented range of factors make it less likely for First Nations parents to be meaningfully involved in their children’s education. As greater flexibility and more complex reporting and assessment processes are implemented, there is a significant risk that First Nations parents (and possibly all parents) may find it increasingly difficult to monitor their children’s progress, and ensure that they stay on track for accessing future opportunities.

Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration is the challenge presented by low internet connectivity in many First Nations communities. An emphasis on technology to access student information/ reporting may be problematic for parents and care-givers who do not have equitable access to technology.

Currently, far too many First Nations students are either leaving school early, or working through the K-12 education system only to find that they complete school without the credentials and skills they need to pursue their goals. Currently, 4% of Aboriginal students leave school with School Leaving Certificates compared to only 1% for non-Aboriginal students. The results of this situation are detrimental not only for individual students and their families, but also for entire First Nations communities, and the BC post-secondary education system. **It is critical that high expectations for First Nations students are maintained, and there must be clear ways to monitor and ensure that those expectations are being met.** The demand for upgrading programs for young adults who have left the K-12 system only to find that they need additional educational support because they are not equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to proceed with their goals in post-secondary education or training represents a significant challenge, and a serious and unnecessary financial burden to First Nations learners and families.

The changes now being contemplated for the graduation requirements have the potential to make this situation even more pronounced, emphasizing the need for continuous, systemic mechanisms for engaging and meaningfully informing First Nations students and parents about graduation requirements and pre-requisites for higher learning. Addressing this issue may require more effective and specific counseling services for First Nations students and parents so that they are able to make relevant decisions throughout their educational path, ensuring that students do not complete grade 12 without the skills and credentials that are appropriate for their future plans. Addressing this issue could also involve more pro-active efforts by school district staff to work in partnership with community-based First Nations Education Coordinators to ensure that they are fully equipped to support families and students as they make important decisions in their educational journeys. A spot light must be maintained on First Nations data as found in such documents as the HAWD? report. Without such public accounting First Nations will continue to be marginalized.

Ministry Question 5:

How would you design an awards program to recognize student success in a personalized learning environment?

Response:

We understand that in January 2012, Ministry staff convened a focus group of senior staff in five school districts to consider the future of a provincial awards program. The group suggested the following changes:

- revise the provincial awards program to better align with personalized learning
- divert scholarship funding from passport to education and the provincial exam scholarship to the district/authority award,
- renew scholarship criteria to focus on all aspects of student success
- develop criteria with enough flexibility to reflect unique district and community priorities

FNESC and the FNSA recommend that in any further considerations of this issue, there should be specific consideration of ways to increase access of First Nations students to provincial awards. In particular, we support a stronger focus on awards to encourage and fully recognize the contributions made by First Nations students to their communities, as well as their efforts to learn about their languages and cultures. There is also a clear need to ensure that there are not systemic barriers stemming from low expectations of Aboriginal learners. Currently, approximately 2% of the general school population is designated “gifted”, while slightly more than 0% of Aboriginal students receive this designation. These statistics demonstrate the need to increased awareness and understanding of First Nations peoples and cultures by all people in the education system.

Also, recognizing historic inequities, as well as the financial barriers many First Nations families face in helping their children attend higher educational opportunities, school districts must work more closely with First Nations communities to ensure that increased numbers of First Nations students are successful in accessing awards programs. Associated activities could include better promotion of any opportunities that exist, developing awards criteria that are more relevant to First Nations students and communities, and ensuring that there are scholarships specifically directed for First Nations students. For many awards and scholarships there is a citizenship component that often speaks to volunteering. Some School Districts do not recognize our First Nations students volunteering in their communities and we have to ensure this is promoted and recognized by all Districts.

What is key, overall, is that the final bullet highlighted above – “develop criteria with enough flexibility to reflect unique district and community priorities” – be interpreted with a strong emphasis on a range of communities, specifically including First Nations communities, and that district priorities not take precedence over those of any communities.

We are confident that with increased collaboration between the Ministry of Education and First Nations, especially parents, we can see increased results in terms of higher graduation rates and post-secondary education and training readiness for First Nations students. This collaboration, along with the effective implementation of TEFA and Jurisdiction, will effectively support First Nations learners in BC and enhance the delivery of quality education in BC.

Once again, we thank the Ministry of Education for the opportunity to provide these initial suggestions, and we look forward to further involvement in the ongoing consultation efforts.