

**TOWARD A POLICY ON EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS
PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

**Reflections and recommendations on academic success and
school dropout, in particular for aboriginal women in
Quebec**

**Submitted to the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement
supérieur du Québec**

By

the Quebec Council of the CFUW

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Part of the mission of the Quebec Council of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), which comprises five associations, is to advocate for post-secondary education for women by granting scholarships or other types of need-based aid. In recent years, particular emphasis has been placed on education for aboriginal women. The *Association des femmes diplômés du Québec* (AFDU) has put a lot of time and energy into exploring this matter, and so we have taken it upon ourselves to submit this Brief.

After visiting many reserves, reading several proceedings, and holding numerous meetings, workshops, and interviews with advocates, including the director of the *Centre de développement de la formation et de la main d'œuvre huron-wendat* (CDFM) at Wendake, it became evident that, for aboriginal women, obtaining a secondary school or CEGEP certification is a difficult or even impossible task and obtaining a university degree is even more of one. We asked ourselves why this is the case. This document brings to light the basis of these obstacles and offers some solutions.

Aboriginal peoples have a different social and cultural baggage than us; this goes without saying. They have preserved their values, which should not be met with judgment. Their way of learning and their needs are different. It is important to evaluate, therefore, whether the conditions that are proposed for starting or continuing an education are adapted to their needs as a nation. To reiterate, this document is more specifically concerned with the future of education for young aboriginal women.

The phenomenon of school dropout emerges when students cannot envision the subject matter leading to a promising future. It can also occur when the choices presented to students are too far outside of their reach. The solution then becomes for students to distance themselves and follow other paths, ones that, as we know, can cause them to remain in an unhealthy or unpromising environment.

In the document published for the *Public Consultation on Educational Success, Axis II* calls for:

A favourable context for student learning, personal development and success

Our comments and the solutions we are recommending are relevant to this point. Firstly, here are a few examples of the same rhetoric we have been hearing for years.

At a roundtable discussion in 2010:

- **Ms. Désirée Nsanzabara**, analyst on the First Nations Education Council (FNEC) for the education system for First Nations in Quebec, painted a grim picture of the wide gap between opportunities in education granted to Quebecers compared to First Nations people, as evidenced by unequal subsidies, underfunded libraries, a lack of technological resources, a scarcity of stable teachers, a neglected deprivation index, and inadequate

lodging. She highlighted **the different educational approaches between Francophone or Anglophone Quebecers and First Nations youths on reserve, most notably for issues such as language, culture, identity, and pride of ethnic origin.** She used the final secondary school exam as an example of an obstacle for First Nations youth. The exam can be written in only French or English and, since both are second languages for these young people, **poor results and discouragement are inevitable.**

- **Ms. Marie-Laure Tremblay**, anthropology student, Vice President of the *Association étudiante autochtone* at Université Laval, and Aboriginal on her mother's side, studied the integration difficulties faced by female students upon arrival at university. She has observed that most of them abandon their studies after a semester or two, the main reasons being that **the three years it takes to obtain a bachelor's degree seem too long, and they want to return home as quickly as possible in order to participate in community life and maintain ties with their families and the Elders to preserve knowledge and customs. Many are single mothers who have had to leave their children to pursue their studies and, as a result, the distance becomes too difficult to bear.**

- **Ms. Nancy Etok**, who is of aboriginal origins, is a counsellor at the school in her 800-person village. In speaking about the 235 students in attendance from kindergarten to secondary five, **she made special mention of the immense encouragement, support and retention efforts made toward those who, for any number of social, familial, or personal reasons, abandon or wish to abandon their studies.** Some activities have been successfully launched, ones that are more concrete and more relatable in the students' communities of origin like hunting, fishing or artisan crafts, allowing these young people to remain in contact with daily academic learning, all while maintaining the integrity of their identity.

Regardless of the debate, the conclusion is always the same: **the unique education system in Quebec does not allow aboriginal people to pursue a fulfilling education.** It especially does not allow them to be independent and freely choose their own path. If the educational experience is difficult for most aboriginal people, then it is even more so for aboriginal women, who often become responsible for children at a very young age and must leave them to gain access to education and therefore a diploma.

A few facts:

- Certain northern schools have cancelled secondary four and five classes due to lack of funding, which gives students only one option for finishing high school: moving.
- The federal government does not offer any subsidies to aboriginal youths who enrol in vocational training programs like the ones offered in Quebec secondary schools.

- Most communities do not offer any adult education classes. We know, though, that young women in particular generally want to go back to school following a pregnancy.
- Exams are in French, which creates an insurmountable barrier to obtaining a secondary school diploma. Consequently, professional training programs are inaccessible and, eventually, welfare becomes the only option.
- Both federal and provincial governments have always passed the buck when it comes to sharing responsibilities and initiatives for improving existing conditions.

Our recommended solutions:

- The necessary funding must be granted so that vocational training can be **provided within aboriginal communities** themselves.
- As the federal government wants to maintain control over aboriginal people living in Quebec, it must fund vocational training programs like those offered in the province.
- Adult education must be made available **for aboriginal women** within their communities, affording them the option of returning to school after a pregnancy.
- It is imperative that the number of French teachers assigned to teach extra periods for aboriginal students be significantly increased so students may have a chance at passing the secondary five exam rather than almost certainly failing it.

Some supplementary information

Professional training: a condition for growth

A 2004 report from the Treasury Board of Canada stated that 58 percent of First Nations youth living on reserve and 41 percent living off reserve have not completed a secondary school education. Considering the growing demographic of aboriginal communities as well as labour and economic development needs on reserve, the situation became alarming. A conservative estimate suggests that 20 percent of the human potential of Quebec First Nations has been stagnating over the past fifteen years because of a lack of coordination between the federal Indigenous and Northern Affairs programs and other provincial programs.

Quebec's unique model

The enthusiasm with which vocational training programs in the Quebec school systems were met was not shared by First Nations communities. In the rest of Canada, trades can only be learned at a post-secondary institution, a college, or on the job. The Quebec school system organizes professional development in a unique way, but as it is

considered to be specific to a particular region, the federal government's funding programs, developed for all of Canada's First Nations peoples, offer neither services nor financial aid to students in secondary school vocational training programs.

Vocational training programs are not an option

Within the bands in question, 20 percent of individuals are either denied access to the necessary financial aid to pursue vocational training or cannot access skilled or semi-skilled trade training services within their communities. For students on reserve, vocational training is not an option. Only individuals who are involved with human resources development programs can be eligible for these benefits under certain conditions.

It is hard to imagine what justification the loans and bursaries programs have for denying financial aid to students in vocational training programs just because they are offered at a secondary school level. In a similar vein, it is difficult to grasp how the government could deny schools and school boards the resources needed to offer diversified educational programs that meet the needs of both adolescent and adult students.

Conclusion

Recently, the Minister responsible for Native Affairs, Geoffrey Kelley, stated that we must stop creating committees and doing the kind of research that yields no results but only hinders actions that would bring about real change and allow young Aboriginals to seek out a liberating education. We hope these wise words will be heeded and that, in doing so, dropping out will no longer be an option and will, indeed, be a thing of the past.

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