

Intelligence MEMOS



From: John Richards and Parisa Mahboubi
To: Provincial Ministers of Education
Date: March 16, 2018
Re: **LET'S GET SERIOUS ABOUT INDIGENOUS STUDENT OUTCOMES**

As education ministers, you realize that Indigenous students present the largest ethnic group facing serious academic gaps – in terms of failure to complete high school and in terms of learning outcomes. You also realize that fewer than half among “registered Indians” (those with the right to live on-reserve) actually do so, and that among those on-reserve most of their children attend provincial high schools.

Census data show the current level of educational attainment. For example, the 2016 census showed that among young First Nation adults, ages 20 - 24, 75 percent living off-reserve have completed high school, but only 48 percent living on-reserve have done so. This compares with 92 percent among non-Indigenous young adults.

In our new report for the C.D. Howe Institute, we set out the case for adding a question inviting Indigenous students to identify themselves in the forthcoming 2018 round of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). At no additional cost to your provincial treasury, you will be better able to assess Indigenous relative to non-Indigenous student outcomes in your province, and furthermore, you will be able to assess Indigenous student outcomes in your province relative to those in other provinces.

The PISA has become a crucial benchmark for measuring student performance in three core subjects (reading, math, and science) among a large sample of secondary students, age 15. All OECD member countries and 35 other countries participated in the previous round, in 2015.

In an industrialized, high-income country such as Canada, escape from poverty requires children to complete, at a minimum, their secondary education and that the instruction be of decent quality. Unfortunately, weak K–12 education outcomes persist in Canada among Indigenous students. There are many reasons for this, one of them being the quality of provincial schools.

Canada undertakes no comprehensive tracking of learning outcomes in the core subjects among Indigenous students. The Pan-Canadian Assessment Program has performed some assessments of Indigenous outcomes in core subjects at a provincial level, but the data are fragmentary, and provide little socio-economic evidence on Indigenous students.

An Indigenous indicator in provincial samples for the 2018 round of PISA would provide evidence for Indigenous students comparable across provinces and other OECD countries, and enable tracking results over time. To date, six provinces have agreed to add a voluntary question to their respective 2018 PISA samples. Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia have decided not to do so. They should reconsider.

The reluctance of Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to adopt an Indigenous identifier is a missed opportunity to measure and understand the most significant gap in Canadian K–12 education levels. Certainly, K-12 education concerns more than the three core subjects evaluated by the PISA. In particular, provincial schools have an obligation to prepare a culturally relevant curriculum for Indigenous students.

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