



# MASS

MANITOBA ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

## Transforming Manitoba Public Education: A View to the Future

### MASS Position Statement on Aboriginal Education

Updated March 2013

**Manitoba and  
Winnipeg have  
been identified as  
having the greatest  
concentration of  
Aboriginal people  
in Canada.**

*Statistics Canada, 2008*

**The 2006 census  
indicates Aboriginal  
people represent  
15% of the provincial  
population and  
Aboriginal children  
(age 0 -14 years)  
represent 26% of  
the children in  
the province.**

**The proportion of  
Aboriginal children  
in this age group  
is projected to  
increase to 31%  
by 2017.**

*Statistics Canada, 2011*

#### I. Introduction

The Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) recognizes that Manitoba has a unique heritage and rich intellectual history due in large part to the contributions and achievements of Aboriginal people.<sup>1</sup> The fact that this heritage has been largely unacknowledged in the education system is in part responsible, MASS contends, for both our failure to meet the needs of Aboriginal students and our failure to forge a rich collective identity that honours that history.

The way forward must draw upon the knowledge and expertise found among Manitoba's Aboriginal people. We can be proud of numerous Aboriginal people in Manitoba who have taken the lead in many areas, including Elijah Harper on Meech Lake, Phil Fontaine on residential schools, Candace Sutherland on poverty and homelessness, Adam Beach in performance, and Murray Sinclair in justice, to mention a few. There is no limit to what can be achieved; the key is to create learning environments that embrace the story of the original people of this country.

MASS asserts that everyone in Manitoba benefits from Aboriginal Education. Aboriginal education provides an opportunity to become inspired and to learn about the importance of resilience and, like the sharing circle, all learners are invited in to take their place. There is room for everyone. An inclusive model of education will make us richer, gives us the fullest breadth that education can offer our students, and forges relationships that includes all of us. The incorporation of Aboriginal Education will result in the creation of an educational system as it was first envisioned here in Manitoba and a fulfillment of our history as a collective community.

*<sup>1</sup> Following the lead of the provincial government we have chosen to use the term Aboriginal which includes First Nation, Métis and Inuit people.*



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**Authors Glen Aikenhead and Herman Mitchell remind us that there are fundamental differences between the eurocentric approach to science that we find in our schools and the Aboriginal approach to science and that both approaches need to be part of students' education.**

*Bridging Cultures; Indigenous and Scientific Ways of Knowing Nature, 2011*

## II. Rationale

Aboriginal people, for a variety of historical and political reasons, have not been as well served by our schools as their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Aboriginal students are often made to feel isolated and alone with a diminished sense of self. They experience a separation between the school environment and the Aboriginal community. Their experience in the educational system reflects a long-standing, systemic denial of Aboriginal cultures, communities and traditions in Canadian society. This dissonance is often perpetuated by parents, many of whom have had less than positive, in many cases disastrous, experiences with schools. Parents experience understandable feelings of mistrust when dealing with the education system, and see little value in their child/children completing Grade 12. Others strongly support their children in getting an education but find dealing with the system frustrating and oppressive. As a result, many Aboriginal students do not finish school, never acquiring the skills necessary for employment and social mobility.

Many non-Aboriginal students graduate without any knowledge of, and competency in, Aboriginal cultures and traditions. They sometimes feel disconnected to the historical relationships of which they are a part (such as treaties) and feel little relationship to Aboriginal communities. This often leads to feelings of confusion and frustration and, at worst, racism when attempting to understand the historical and modern context of Manitoba and Canada.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students have not had adequate opportunity to learn, dialogue, and cooperate in constructing a shared future together. This is a missed opportunity, and a significant problem for students who

feel disconnected in what should be a shared society.

Modern extensions of traditional Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices have proven to be highly beneficial to today's world and should not only be acknowledged but also studied for the inherent values and principles they represent. Restorative justice, restitution, sharing circles, victim impact discussions, consensus decision making, environmental sustainability, as well as the development of a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity towards all learners are examples of traditional Aboriginal ways that contribute to Canadian culture and the global community.

Aboriginal Education provides both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students with the opportunity to develop strong skills of democratic citizenship and a knowledge of where they have come from and who they are.

## III. Principles

MASS proposes the following principles to guide us toward improving Aboriginal Education. As educators, we are committed to:

### **A. Find ways to live in harmony and balance in all aspects of one's being and with the universe itself through sustainable and generative relationships.**

Students are encouraged to examine the intricate details of these relationships and integrate them into everyday life. They provide not only the building blocks for Aboriginal cultures but also teachings that form the basis for sustainable lives and healthy communities. A central message is that everything is related and a dynamic part of a larger whole. Each individual life form, from the smallest organism to the universe itself, carries histories with and responsibilities to one another. Through participating in the processes of communication, sharing, and equal exchange, human beings can learn how to make decisions, interact with one another, and play a part in the interdependent circle of existence.

**At 29% percent, the rate of Aboriginal poverty is almost three times of Manitoba's overall poverty rate.**

*Statistics Canada, 2008*

**From an indigenous perspective, learning is ideally about becoming whole, complete, and balanced in mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical ways. A balanced person can fulfill her or his responsibilities within the interdependent context of family, community, ceremonies, and nature relationships.”**

*Aikenhead & Mitchell, 2011*

### **B. Create and maintain healthy yet diverse learning communities by providing authentic learning contexts for all of our students.**

First-hand knowledge gained by experiences and interactions with the natural world are crucial but so are many others, involving processes such as dreaming, hypothesizing, feeling, or artistic expression. These are only the first part of a journey in Aboriginal Education; the second is expressing what you have learned with one or more people. Through performance, dialogue and reflection, a community of learners is formed and the deepest meaning of any information can be found, leading to things such as laws and values. In Aboriginal Education, therefore, the full incorporation of the entire community of learners, their experiences and ideas, is of primary importance. *This principle is as true for school communities with Aboriginal students as it is for school communities where Aboriginal students are not present.*

### **C. Foster and support Aboriginal languages and cultures as they carry the oldest knowledge about life in Canada.**

For centuries in Manitoba, Aboriginal people formed their cultures, traditions, and communities through oral language, capturing key concepts through ancient forms of writing and drawing. Embedded within Aboriginal oral language tradition are unique teachings! Words and structures provide the oldest pathways into understanding particular geographies, and how the ties within them operate and exist. This unique and meaningful information is a central reason why Aboriginal elders, community advocates, and parents are so adamant in their desire to continue and revitalize their ancestral languages. This extends to traditional practices, ceremonies, and ties to specific places.

**In Manitoba, 38 % of Aboriginal people aged 25-34 years have no certificate, degree or diploma compared with 16% of the overall population. This is true despite indications that many Aboriginal youth leave school and return as adults.**

*Statistics Canada, 2008*

### **D. Instill and fulfill the beliefs of individual and community responsibility in every classroom in the province in the interests of the universal good.**

Communities are only sustainable if they are built upon relationships of ethical and equal responsibility to ensure mutual benefit. The good of the one therefore is predominantly meaningful in the context of the many. This encourages learners in Aboriginal Education to be grounded in their local cultural contexts, not to impinge on the rights and beliefs of others, and to share this knowledge collectively - so all can benefit. Another way of fulfilling this outcome is to gain fluency in an individual's specific traditions and histories and for others to recognize these as valuable and relevant.

## **IV. A Call to Action**

MASS affirms and values the contribution of Aboriginal knowledge and calls on all Manitoba educational organizations to:

- Ensure that the mandated Aboriginal perspectives and outcomes in the provincial curriculum are addressed in the classroom in a meaningful and culturally respectful way for all students.
- Infuse existing curricula with Aboriginal content.
- Ensure sufficient resources for the teaching of the mandatory outcomes in the provincial curriculum concerning Manitoba treaty education and the history of residential schools.
- Offer and promote specific courses in Aboriginal studies and languages.
- Promptly address stereotypical images of Aboriginal people in texts, media and in the general school environment.

**So that's where it comes from. It was the old Aboriginal idea of the circle. That changes radically the way we ought to be thinking about and therefore teaching Canadian citizenship, and the roots of Canadian citizenship. They do not lie in Britain; they do not lie in France; they lie in the people who were and are here, the Aboriginal people, and they're not linear, they're circular.**

*John Ralston Saul, 2011*

MASS believes that Aboriginal Education can be a vehicle for the cultural, political and economic renewal of Manitoba. We call on all educational organizations to:

- Affirm Aboriginal cultural knowledge and experiential learning systems in all aspects of the educational experience.
- Promote Aboriginal student success by creating opportunities for Aboriginal leadership in all educational settings.
- Incorporate experiential and land-based educational initiatives where appropriate.
- Promote Aboriginal student success by valuing achievements through scholarships, bursaries and partnerships with employers.
- Share the successes of existing Aboriginal Education initiatives.

MASS is committed to developing partnerships in order to create a system that is culturally responsible and engaging for all learners in Manitoba, at all levels. MASS calls on all Manitoba educational organizations to:

- Lobby the Federal government to bring the First Nations Education funding to par with public schools funding levels.
- Develop Aboriginal Education policy and promote research into Aboriginal Education and program development.

- Assist in the development of teacher education programs, educational assistant training and leadership training responsive to Aboriginal populations.
- Develop targets for hiring Aboriginal teachers, administrators and educational assistants.
- Examine school board governance models that more fully involve Aboriginal communities and knowledge keepers.

## **V. A Vision of the Future: Towards a Fully Inclusive Manitoba Education System**

MASS is committed to creating an educational environment where the principles described in this paper enrich the experiences of all learners, while supporting the ongoing development of Aboriginal learners. This commitment acknowledges the importance of stakeholders from a variety of communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in the governance of schools, development of curricula, and collaboration in pathways to a shared educational future. All citizens of Manitoba must be contributors to the process. Aboriginal peoples should have a say, much more than they have in the past, in defining the outcomes of success and achievement of all learners. The Manitoba education system should become a place where all are welcomed and our collective history is recognized.

Aboriginal Education cannot be reduced to any one best practice or any one learning community. It is a system of education for all Manitobans. Healthy Aboriginal communities require, indeed demand, the respectful and healthy participation of non-Aboriginal communities to co-create communities where all can benefit. Part of this is listening to and learning from knowledge systems embedded in the languages and practices of cultures and communities that have been here for a very long time. It is the hope of MASS that the Manitoba education system can become a sharing circle where all are welcomed, accepted, and acknowledged as integral parts of the whole.

The opportunity to produce critical thinkers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in an atmosphere of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical respect in the 21st century will be rewarding. Learning from one another in a system where all stakeholders are welcomed and acknowledged as valuable contributors will not only produce the most democratic and inclusive community Manitoba can be, but reflect the original vision Aboriginal communities introduced to settlers over 125 years ago.