Chapter 1

Overview: Improving the educational experiences of Indigenous students

This chapter presents an overview of the factors and priorities identified in this study as critical to improving the educational experiences of Indigenous students. A number of factors support and enable significant, sustained improvement at system, community and school levels. These include respecting the rights and values of Indigenous students, setting targets with firm time frames, working closely with individual students and their families and communities, and collecting data to monitor progress over time. At the system level, three initiatives in particular should be included in any strategy to improve the education experiences of Indigenous students: providing high-quality early learning opportunities; supporting teachers and leaders to develop awareness, capability and confidence; and monitoring progress across key indicators at both system and school levels. At the individual school level, the combination of priorities used will differ depending on circumstances, but at a minimum, schools should focus on: quality and effectiveness of teaching; engagement with families; and direct support for students. The issues faced by Indigenous students go far beyond education, but it is education that provides hope and promise to address disparities, not only in educational opportunities but also a much wider set of inequities.

> **"*It's our responsibility to find the resources we need … these are children, who want to learn.*" (School principal, New Brunswick)**

Indigenous peoples are diverse, within and across nations. The Indigenous peoples in the three countries in this study, however, have experienced colonisation processes that undermined Indigenous young people's access to their identity, language and culture. At the same time, Indigenous children have not generally had access to the same quality of education that other children in their country enjoy. These two forces in combination have undermined the educational opportunities and outcomes of successive generations of Indigenous children and young people, at times with catastrophic effect.

The legacy of colonisation processes, including residential schools, means that improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Indigenous students is challenging and complex. The issues faced by Indigenous students go far beyond education, but it is education that provides hope and promise to address disparities, not only in educational opportunities but also a much wider set of inequities.

In a similar vein, education systems that have not been designed to recognise and respond to the needs and contexts of Indigenous students will take time to adjust. School leaders and teachers have not always been effectively prepared to teach Indigenous students, nor are they necessarily provided with the resources to help them develop their capabilities and their confidence.

There are no quick fixes in improving education outcomes for any group of students, and this is also true for Indigenous students. Evidence from improvements and successes that have been achieved for Indigenous students clearly point to strategies that are deliberate in intent, open and flexible in approach, vigilant in monitoring progress, and sustained in effort over time.

To achieve significant and sustained improvement

In investigating system-level improvements and those at a community or school level, we have identified a number of factors that support and enable significant, sustained improvement, as set out below.

Relationships and respect

A foundation for effecting positive change is to recognise and respect the rights, agency and value of Indigenous students, their families and their communities. Building effective relationships relies on mutual trust and respect. Schools that have achieved sustained improvements for Indigenous students recognise the key role of Indigenous parents, leaders and other community members and have actively built relationships with these important people in their students' lives. In some cases, formal agreements are reached between education leaders and Indigenous leaders, such as Education Enhancement Agreements in some Canadian provinces and territories. These set out common objectives and commitments, in terms of the expected provision of education for Indigenous students.

Deliberate intent

A common way to motivate and instigate action is to set targets for the level of improvements to be achieved within a given timeframe. Targets alone are not sufficient to achieve progress, but they have helped jurisdictions to address the question of "what it

will take" to achieve the objectives they set and to monitor progress over time. Without such targets, it is easier to focus only on the actions being taken, rather than the on impact of those actions.

Action on several fronts

It is not easy to address deep, intergenerational and systemic issues. Implementing only one or two initiatives or policy changes is unlikely to bring about significant improvements at a system level. In schools that have achieved significant improvements, a number of strategies and actions have been implemented, rather than any single response. This is also the case for achievement of system-level improvements, such as on participation and qualifications outcomes. Thus, it is a combination of actions that enables Indigenous students to be sufficiently supported to benefit from high-quality education, rather than only one or two policies or programmes.

At system and local levels

System-level actions are necessary, but they are seldom sufficient to change the educational experiences and outcomes of individual students. System-level efforts can initiate and enable change at the local level, but it is the quality, breadth and depth of the local provision that determine whether there is an impact on students. However, much can be done at the system level to support and incentivise school leaders and teachers to improve their approaches.

Working with individual students

To change the experiences of individual students, it is generally necessary to work directly with each student and his/her family or community. Individual needs are diverse and change over time, so it is often necessary to carry out continuous tracking at the school level, especially for students at risk of disengaging. In this way, schools and education advisors develop a better understanding of the barriers and risks that students face, barriers that may not be apparent without such individualised data.

Sufficient effort to make a difference

The effort needs to be commensurate with the improvement goal and the size of the target population. For example, an Indigenous Worker based in one school, with a mandate to work with its students and their families and teachers, can have a significant positive impact, while spreading the same resource over a number of schools will not have the same impact.

Over a sustained period

The schools and jurisdictions in this study that have achieved sustained improvements have all pursued consistent objectives for at least a ten year period. The strategies followed to achieve the objectives have sometimes been refined or changed over this period, but the basic objectives have been retained. However, three to five years is a reasonable time frame in which improvements should be visible. If improvements are not seen in this period, it is likely that the strategies used are not sufficiently targeted to changes in practice, are not comprehensive or are not adequately resourced to make a difference to students' actual experiences.

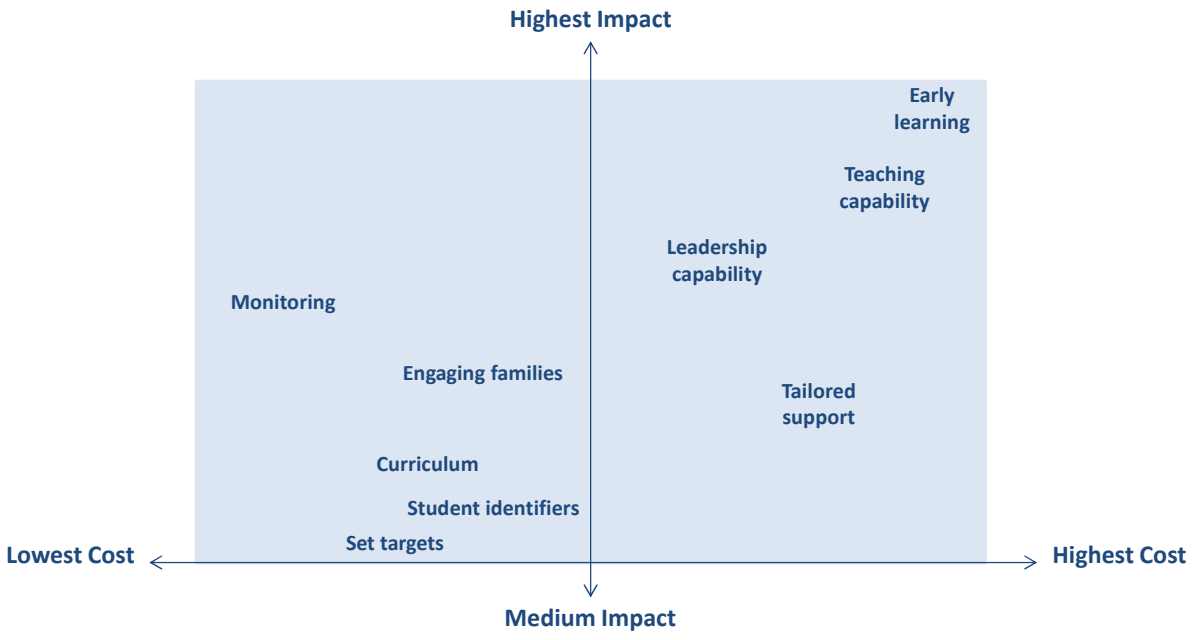
Data to monitor progress

Monitoring progress helps to see whether the package of initiatives in place has sufficient breadth and reach to affect student outcomes. This will demonstrate the value of the current strategies and also motivate any additional efforts that may be needed. Without data to monitor progress, it is easy to become convinced that progress is being achieved, especially if the new initiatives have wide support. The data also help to build capability at both system and school levels, in the expectations for success and the skills required to affect change. Such information can also build demand among parents and students, in terms of their expectations, voice and influence.

System-level priorities

Effort is needed at both system and school levels. In some areas, however, action can only be taken – or is best taken – at the system level. This can be because responsibilities match the role and mandate of the central agency rather than schools, or because it is more efficient to carry out actions centrally rather than locally. Drawing on the experiences and evidence of where improvements have been achieved in these Canadian provinces and territories and in New Zealand and Queensland, the study has identified a number of system-level priorities that have supported progress for Indigenous students. Figure 1.1 groups these according to the likely impact on student outcomes and likely cost[1].

Figure 1.1. System-level priorities supporting progress for Indigenous students, likely impact on student outcomes and cost



Each jurisdiction in this study is unique in terms of current pressures, initiatives already in place or in development, and the priorities of their Indigenous and education communities. Thus, the combination of priorities, policies and initiatives that each jurisdiction pursues must be a matter for each to determine in its own way.

There are, however, three system-level initiatives in particular, discussed below, that we believe should be included in any strategy to improve the education experiences of Indigenous students:

- providing high-quality early learning opportunities
- supporting teachers and leaders to develop awareness, capability and confidence
- monitoring progress at system and school levels across key indicators.

Early learning

Indigenous children are more likely to not participate in ECEC and have a later start in school than other students. This means a potentially powerful lever to lift student achievement is not being used to full effect. The provision of high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) that is responsive to the needs of individual children and their families, can significantly lift students' achievement levels in later schooling. This is the single most powerful lever for achieving a step change within a generation.

Models of ECEC that respond to children's needs and that are located within Indigenous communities do exist within the Canadian jurisdictions that participated in this study. Making such provision available for as many Indigenous children as possible should be a priority for all jurisdictions in their efforts to boost the educational outcomes of these students.

An example of such an approach is a centre in North Winnipeg (Manitoba) that is targeted to children with multiple risk factors. The centre is located at the heart of an impoverished, predominantly Indigenous community. The centre follows an Abecedarian model of early development and learning, which is an intense, individualised, relations-based approach. Families are an integral part of the programme, which includes home visits by centre staff and encouraging parents' involvement in the centre. The centre also actively recruits and trains local staff, resulting in lower turnover than would otherwise be the case and greater trust between parents and staff.

Supporting teachers and leaders

Every school we visited for this study that was achieving sound results for Indigenous students had a highly effective and committed school principal and teachers who were doing whatever it takes to support students in their learning, but they were doing it on their own. The research team did not meet one school that had teamed with any other school to learn from one another or to accelerate progress.

Progress will be faster if school leaders and teachers can learn from one another, and if their professional preparation and ongoing professional development effectively prepare them for all the students they are required to work with. Some jurisdictions specify expectations for teachers and school leaders, some provide tailored professional development, and others support schools to work together to improve student outcomes. These efforts can make a difference, if they affect the practices of teaching and learning at the level of individual teachers and students.

An example from New Zealand where progress has been achieved, including for Indigenous students, is through the Learning and Change Networks. Schools voluntarily work together to boost student achievement in particular learning areas. The programme involves teachers from different schools interrogating data from their own and other schools, classroom observations across schools, involvement of students' views on their learning, and persistence in achieving mutual goals over a number of years. This collaborative approach has led to a New Zealand-wide initiative, Communities of

Learning, to incentivise and assist more schools to work together for the benefit of their students. Communities of learning aim to enhance the quality of teaching, education career pathways for teachers and education leaderships.

Monitoring progress

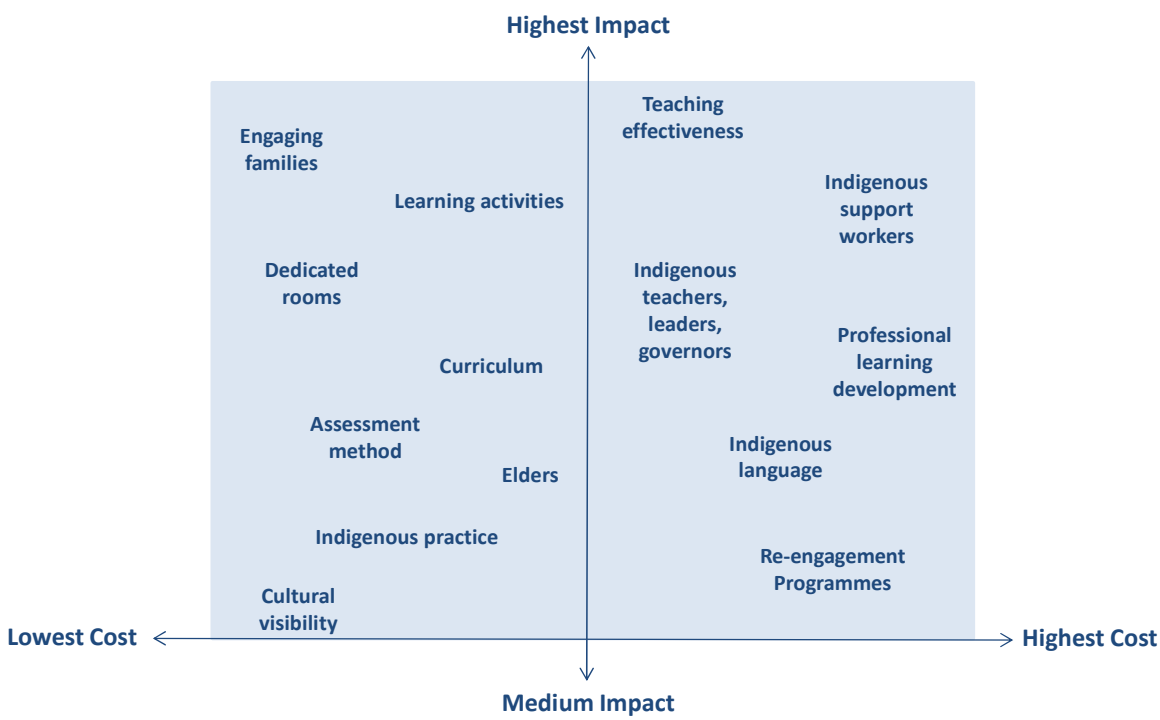
It is essential to monitor progress to be able to make adjustments to the suite of policies and other initiatives being implemented. Data on overall outcomes such as participation and completion rates can only be produced at a system level, rather than at the level of individual schools. Thus, an overview of the nature and rate of progress is only possible if central education agencies take responsibility for this.

Data collection and monitoring can also be combined effectively with education targets, creating an accountability mechanism for the performance of the system as a whole in relation to Indigenous students. Indigenous Elders we spoke to in the course of this study proposed such an accountability system as a way of establishing system-level responsibility for Indigenous student outcomes. An example of such a mechanism is the annual "Closing the Gap report" produced by the Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

School-level priorities

The line of sight to each student is much clearer at the local level than from a system-level perspective, as are the quality and effectiveness of the teaching strategies applied in each classroom. In addition, schools are able to engage with Indigenous families and communities in a more relational and ongoing way than system-level initiatives can do. Using the lens of likely impact and cost, Figure 1.2 below summarises the priorities we would expect schools to consider to boost education outcomes for Indigenous students.

Figure 1.2. School-level priorities to boost education outcomes for Indigenous students, likely impact and cost



Again, just as the circumstances of each school will differ, the combination of priorities used at an individual school level will and should differ. At a minimum, however, we believe schools should focus on:

- quality and effectiveness of teaching
- engagement with families
- direct support for students.

Quality and effectiveness of teaching

There are many aspects to high-quality and effective teaching in different settings. In the context of Indigenous students, we found that teachers' expectations of students' capability and success are critical to whether students progress well or not. Teachers are sometimes unaware of the assumptions they are making about their students, especially if there are cultural or linguistic differences between themselves and their students. However, such assumptions can change when teachers become aware of their preconceptions, including the impact these have on their students.

Teaching can be enhanced through the deliberate selection of learning activities, curriculum content and assessment mechanisms. These can be used in many ways to make learning more relevant and engaging for Indigenous students and to build their confidence and competence.

Engaging families

Where respect, trust and positive relationships have not always been part of historic or recent experiences, families are likely to be wary of engaging with school staff. However, where bridges are built and mutually respectful relationships are formed, the benefits for students can be significant. Schools that work alongside parents as partners achieve gains in student well-being, participation, engagement and achievement.

There are a number of successful models of how schools have effectively engaged families in their children's education. The most effective are those that link schools with parents on education goals for individual students and where parents are supported to play a very active role in their child's learning.

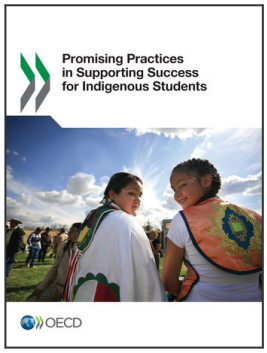
Direct support for students

There are many ways to provide direct support to individual students. A model that works well for schools with a number of Indigenous students is Indigenous Support Workers. Such staff can effectively address barriers faced by Indigenous students and identify opportunities to increase their engagement and success in education. More specifically, such staff can contribute to ensuring the regular participation of Indigenous students, supporting teachers in building sound relationships with Indigenous students and their parents, initiating new curriculum resources, and leading professional development for teachers and whole-of-school activities.

Schools with few Indigenous students or without the resources to hire an Indigenous Support Worker can obtain some benefits from sharing an Indigenous Support Worker with other schools or use other means, such as engaging the support and advice from Indigenous Elders and other community leaders, and through distributing responsibilities across existing staff.

Note

1. Note that the relative impacts and cost of each priority and their position in the Figure 1.1 draw on findings in this study, other OECD research and an assessment of this range of information by the authors of this report.



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