

## **HOPE FOR FIRST NATIONS LIES IN QUALITY EDUCATION**

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Listen carefully to the elders in any one of our more than 600 First Nations communities across Canada and the message is clear: High-quality education for our children is the key to overcoming the devastating effects of a past informed by residential schools, serial reports with unmet results and an epidemic of broken promises.

The federal government's 2008 apology was another "high hopes" moment for us, but behaviour is what counts. If education is the key to the future of our children, it has become clear that it will take non-governmental efforts to illustrate what is possible with modest resources properly focused on things that matter.

Walpole Island First Nation School is a case in point, but first a word about the challenges.

In many First Nations schools, it's a struggle just maintain the status quo when it comes to student success. We can see evidence of this in the auditor-general's 2004 statement, which noted that even if First Nations educational systems were on par with provincial schools, it would take 28 years for native students to catch up to their non-native counterparts. Since then, that 28-year gap has widened.

Ontario elementary schools receive on average \$11,000 per student to fund their education. Schools that operate on-reserve receive approximately \$6,000 per student from the federal government. This is the disparity usually highlighted in discussions about the differences between provincial and First Nations education systems. The feds do not provide funding for our libraries, computers, extracurricular activities, data management systems, native languages, principals, education directors, professional development, development of culturally appropriate curricula or special education.

So the steepness of the hill to success for us is clear. It is daunting but with help of the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, spearheaded by former prime minister Paul Martin, our school — including staff, students and their parents — is full of well-founded hope and enough initial success to fuel our journey. At Walpole Island First Nation School, most of the key ingredients were already in place: students who want to learn and support from their families and community. But there were key ingredients missing.

Provincial school boards provide enormous resources for their schools: math coaches, literacy coaches, teacher mentors, case management specialists, behaviour management coaches, a vast array of special education professionals, and a web of networking professionals.

We had none of this until the Martin Initiative provided us with support similar to a school board's. This includes an array of committed superstar educators and key specialists, including a literacy expert seconded from the Peel District School Board who has provided support, direction and inspiration. She integrated into our school as a team member and supported us from within.

Added to this mix of professional advisers is badly needed administrative support to co-ordinate it all. Research has proven over and over that the biggest determining factor in students' literacy success is teacher excellence. Our training is focused on supporting teachers and creating capacity within our school to enhance teacher effectiveness.

As they say, the proof is in the pudding. Provincial testing (EQAO) is done in every school in Grades 3 and 6. Most First Nations do not participate in this testing process because they have to pay for the tests.

EQAO is one tool used to determine school success. The Martin Initiative provided the opportunity for us to chart our progress.

How are we doing? Well, after a few years, our Grade 3 students have gone from 20 per cent reading at grade level to 39 per cent; from 40 per cent writing at grade level to 79 per cent; and in math, from 36 per cent of our students at grade level to 64 per cent. The progress of our Grade 6 students is equally impressive. It should be noted that many of our students are now achieving at a higher level than most other students in Ontario! Our students are marching forward with confidence.

Do I think Canada will commit to an equal playing field for First Nations education any time soon?

There is little evidence in sight. What little support we do receive from the feds has been capped for the last 20 years, with no increase to allow for inflation, let alone to imagine an even playing field.

Our hope is that strategic investments from non-governmental leaders can create success models that can point the way. It is not just about the money First Nations' education efforts require. It is also about how the money is spent.

While non-governmental partnerships should never replace the role of government, they can point the way to success so that perhaps, someday, our federal government can run to the front of the parade and implement a new funding model invented by others.

*Steve Styers is principal at Walpole Island First Nation Elementary School in Wallaceburg, Ont.*