

# Employment and Literacy Issues of Canada's Aboriginal Population



*National Skills Upgrade 2014*

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## Foreword

This paper offers a cost-effective way to overcome the literacy challenges that face Aboriginal people in Canada today.

While some may consider the following pages to be critical the paper was not written with that intent. Indeed, the author is extremely thankful for the energy and dedication of community groups, Aboriginal organizations and literacy volunteers who commit their lives and skills to help others.

## Canada's Literacy Crisis

Many Aboriginal people live in poverty. The disparities between the standard of living in First Nations and Inuit communities and that of non-Aboriginal communities continue to grow, in large part because of differences in literacy levels.

Federal, provincial and territorial governments must make it a priority to improve the relatively low literacy of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, the cost to address literacy rates is minimal compared to the money Canada will need to spend 10 or even five years from now on major social services if the country fails to take remedial action on Aboriginal literacy issues.

## Elevating Canada's Global Position: Education is Key

Following the Government of Canada's official apology in June 2008 for the injustices of Canada's residential schools, governments must now move forward and provide relevant education to Aboriginal people across the country. Policies must be remodeled and inequities corrected if real change for the Aboriginal population of Canada is to be achieved.

### A Unique Opportunity

The unprecedented growth rate of Canada's Aboriginal population is five times higher than non-Aboriginal with half of the population under 25 years of age.

From an economic standpoint, this reality provides a unique opportunity for training young workers to replace an aging Canadian workforce about to retire. Over half-a-million Aboriginal young people will come of age to help grow Canada's economy over the next 10 to 15 years.

Harnessing this potential will take strong leadership and a focused commitment on the part of government and tribal leadership. Adequate resources will need to be made available and inspiring attitudes need to be encouraged. Equally important, achievable goals must involve Aboriginal community buy-in as governments cannot succeed alone.

### Community Challenges

As the *Canadian Issues Themes 2009* report confirmed, Aboriginal communities are typically rural and isolated. In fact, three out of five First Nation communities have limited or no link to an urban centre; as compared to similarly small non-Aboriginal communities in Canada which have at least one moderate or strong connection to an urban centre. As many as 140,000 Aboriginal people live in distant rural locations and 100,000 have no link to an urban centre.

## Facts for Reflection

.....  
**45 percent** of Aboriginal adults do not have any educational qualifications,  
more than double non-Aboriginal rates

.....  
**50 percent** of First Nations people leave secondary school without any qualifications

.....  
**50 percent** of First Nations people live on reserves where there are  
two times more high-school dropouts than off-reserve

.....  
The average income of people living on-reserve is \$14,000  
compared to the average \$48,000 income of non-Aboriginal people in Ontario,  
the province with the largest Aboriginal population

## Living Conditions

The 2001 Census identified 307 First Nations communities with a population of 250 or more. The average population of these communities was 487. The largest had 5,000 residents.

Regardless of size, many Aboriginal communities are impoverished. According to Census 2006, Aboriginal people continue to be three times more likely to be unemployed than non-Aboriginal people. Moreover, 50% of all children on reserves are being raised in poverty.

One in eight Aboriginal houses contains two families, and one in five houses is seriously overcrowded. Indeed, Aboriginal households are four times more likely to be overcrowded than non-Aboriginal homes. To make a bad situation worse, one in three Aboriginal houses needs major repairs.

## Children in Care

At the same time, Aboriginal communities suffer from family dysfunction. One in 10 Aboriginal children is taken into care, compared to one in 200 of non-Aboriginal children.<sup>1</sup> And the suicide rate among Aboriginal youth is six times higher than among non-Aboriginal youth.

This problem stems, in large part, from the lack of role models and poor literacy in too many Aboriginal households. So long as Aboriginal households struggle with literacy issues, social change will not be possible.

<sup>1</sup> Grand Council Chief of the Anishinabek Nation Patrick Madahbee in an interview on APTN (August 5, 2009).

## Justice versus Injustice

Aboriginal people are six times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Aboriginal people. Representing only 3.1 percent of Canada's total population, Aboriginal people account for 21 percent of the country's prison population at a cost of \$2.5 billion dollars annually. This negative cost could grow to as much as \$4 billion per year by 2019, as Aboriginal incarceration rates are projected to grow to more than 25 percent of Canada's total prison population. Furthermore, the \$95,000 it costs per year to incarcerate one individual could effectively educate 10 people.

Research reveals that 65 percent of prison inmates cannot read or write. Education and the development of literacy skills is therefore a vital crime prevention measure.

**The development of literacy skills is critical to help parents help their children. As First Nation leaders have clearly articulated time and again, empowering parents is fundamental to breaking the cycle of poor education and its impact on community health, housing, wages and criminality.**

## Public Support for an Aboriginal Literacy Solution

*The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* 1984 report on Visible Minorities demands that government policies promote the equitable participation of all individuals in shaping Canadian society.

For Canada to realize its full potential, it must address the disparities of its Aboriginal peoples. As prize-winning author **Paul Collier** was quoted as saying in the *Globe and Mail*<sup>1</sup>, "if we don't get serious about building the bottom up, we're building a social nightmare for our children."

**Judith Maxwell**, former head of the Economic Council of Canada, agrees. In the *Globe and Mail*, she said, "We don't have the luxury of time on our side. We need real solutions that will address Aboriginal disparities."

**Christie Blatchford** went even further and said, "the cycle of despair for many Aboriginal people is a stain both on Canada's reputation and notion of social justice." Most Canadians concur. Canada must invest in the wellbeing of Aboriginal people if it is to assume its place as a world leader.

Canadians want to be respected as a country that recognizes culture, tradition and equality. Some three million Canadians who live abroad actively help spread Canada's influence in the world.

Canadians donate \$7.3 billion dollars to foreign aid, and send an additional \$20 billion to friends and families living abroad each year. This same generosity of spirit should encourage governments to take the steps necessary to fund and improve Aboriginal statistics.

After all, "[Aboriginal] people," Collier said, "are ready, willing and able to play their part in Canada's economic future."

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1 The *Globe and Mail*. *Turning A Social Liability into an Economic Asset*, April 7th, 2008

## **The ArrowMight Program: A Solution Custom-designed for Canada**

Following the presentation of the Greenlight Literacy Program at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) in New Zealand in 2005, Seven Generations Education Institute in Ontario requested that a similar program be developed for the Aboriginal people of Canada.

In 2006, the Aotearoa Institute Maori Charitable Trust (AI) formally agreed to help create a program that would be applicable to not only Aboriginal people, but also all English-speaking Canadians. The new ArrowMight Program reaffirmed AI's belief that education should be accessible to all people irrespective of colour, race or creed.

Acting on the advice of Canadian accountants, AI then established *ArrowMight Canada*, a wholly-owned subsidiary of AI in New Zealand, to fund the project. Through ArrowMight Canada, AI committed more than \$15 million CDN to research, evaluate, develop and pilot the ArrowMight Program.

With respect to the program's content, AI obtained vital assistance from Cuban educational experts, as well as Canadian specialists and Aboriginal consultants.

### **A New Approach to Learning**

ArrowMight Canada has prepared a comprehensive, easy-to-follow home-based literacy, Essential Skills and employability training program to ensure that students achieve the Level 3 competency needed to function in a modern economy.

The program consists of four modules designed for all English and bi-lingual English speaking Canadians, allowing the whole family to participate. The curriculum is presented in a step-by-step approach using HD-DVDs for TV and multi-media lessons with supported workbooks, visual images and colourful graphics that make learning interesting and easy. In this way, the program meets the needs of many who do not respond well to classroom settings.

A unique feature of the program is that it is 'Canadian' in content, providing instructional examples that are part of everyday life. Additionally, based on experience of poor writing skills in the program in New Zealand, the ArrowMight Team developed a *Guide to Cursive Writing* Workbook to further improve the writing skills in Canada.

### **Validated Results**

The Community Facilitator is locally hired and trained to enroll students, conduct face-to-face assessments and accurately record student progress and contacts. The goal is to achieve an 85% pass rate in each module. Any student dropping out is replaced to keep numbers active through to completion. Module 1 – 3 resources are provided at no additional cost for replacement students.

Assessments and student progress is documented into the ArrowMight Learning Management System (LMS), providing accountability to funders and providers. As well, a longitudinal survey tracking graduate students for up to two years, providing evidence of employment, salary and education gains is recorded in the LMS.

## Unemployed statistics: Aboriginal focus

**ArrowMight Canada assessed at-risk population\*: 240,000–270,000**

Province/Territory	Aboriginal population	Percentage of total population	Percentage of unemployment	Estimated Numbers of adults at Levels 1 & 2
Alberta	188,000	6.4	11.2	50,000
British Columbia	196,000	5.0	19.7	54,000
Manitoba	175,000	17.0	18.2	40,000
Ontario	242,000	2.0	13.0	70,000
Saskatchewan	142,000	15.0	18.2	32,000
Quebec	108,000**	1.5	15.6	1,000
New Brunswick	18,000	2.6	20.8	3,000
Northwest Territories	26,633	50	20.1	5,000
Nova Scotia	24,000	2.75	15.8	4,000
Nunavut	25,000	80	23.7	5,000
Newfoundland and Labrador	23,430	5	30	6,000
Yukon	7,590	25	21.9	3,000
Prince Edward Island	1,730	1.0	17.5	500
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1.2 million</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>273,500</b>
Expected number of participating adult learners				<b>240,000+</b>

Source: 2006 Census

\* Another report by Data Angel 2012, Page 170, *Aboriginal Literacy Markets* assessed literacy needs at 255,600 adults

\*\* Of the 108,000 Aboriginal people in Quebec, 104,000 are Francophone and 4,000 are Anglophone. A Francophone version of the ArrowMight Program can be developed subject to funding availability.



## Closing the Gap for Aboriginal People

250,000 adults at Levels 1 & 2 to achieve functional literacy Level 3

The problem of low literacy and high unemployment are endemic within households. This provides the best opportunity for a home-based program to educate two or more people for the cost of one.

Providing the opportunity to study at home using the TV as a family with adults helping each other is both innovative and exciting. Children too, can learn to understand the vital importance of a good education in preparing for their own futures. This provides an additional opportunity to turn around the disparities of low education outcomes of many First Nations Schools on Reserves.

‘With the escalating cost of education the gap is widening – not closing.’

To reduce unemployment levels and help replace thousands of Canadians due to retire, the Federal Government has proposed a bold approach: a \$15,000 per learner program with Federal, Provincial or Territorial, and Employers each contributing \$5,000 to assist people into employment.

Using this proposed solution, the cost for training 250,000 Aboriginals unemployed on low salaries or not working multiplied by \$15,000 would equal \$3.75 billion to achieve similar outcomes to match the rest of Canadian society.

## ArrowMight: A Solution

ArrowMight believes accommodating 250,000 learners could be achieved by providing the program to a maximum of 150,000 Aboriginal homes. Thus, 100,000 learners could receive Essential Skills and basic employability training for **no extra cost**.

ArrowMight Canada also believes that the cost of the Federal Program could be reduced by half eliminating possible employer reluctance to participate and encouraging them to take on new up-skilled employees instead.

ArrowMight as a Community Delivery Model can reach up to 250,000 Aboriginal adults for a total cost of \$1 billion; achievable in a four-year time frame for a modest \$250M annually.

## **Closing the Gaps: Policies for Maori in New Zealand**

For over a half century prior to 1998, the participation rate of Maori in post secondary education was only half that of non-Maori.

By 1998, three Maori Universities (Wananga) had been established to dramatically address this education gap. By 2003, full-time Maori post-secondary enrollments exploded by more than 30,000, reaching 50% higher than non-Maori. As well, Maori unemployment dropped from 27.5% to 10% — only four points higher than non-Maori.

This success was achieved when Maori finally received comparable and adequate funding for their own educational institutions. By 2005, Maori programs on several fronts brought the Government's closing of the Gaps Policy to an end with Maori achievements now well ahead of Canada's Aboriginal population.

### **A National Skills Plan:**

**Provides a unique opportunity for both Canada and Aboriginal people to create real change.**

These dramatic results in New Zealand confirm the belief that effective change does not take long when empowering policies are put in place.

The Federal Government's National Skills Plan 2014 could provide an opportunity for both Canada and Aboriginal people to create real change within a short time frame with a focus on 250,000 Aboriginal adults to achieve functional literacy Level 3 and gain employment outcomes capable of increasing potential returns by \$5 billion annually.

## Frequently Asked Questions about ArrowMight

### **Q Where does the ArrowMight Program originate?**

A It is based on the Cuban *Yo si Puedo* program that has been used in Latin America. Since 2002, Cuba has taught some five million people to read and write and has received recognition and numerous UNESCO awards. At 98 percent, Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates in the world, twice the current Canadian literacy rates.

### **Q How can an imported program work in Canada?**

A Only the methodology is imported. This 'Made-in-Canada' program is designed for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal bilingual and English speaking Canadians.

### **Q Who designed the ArrowMight Program?**

A ArrowMight Canada brought together an international team of thirty experienced adult education specialists including First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

### **Q Who funded the program?**

A Aotearoa Institute (AI), a Maori Charitable Trust in New Zealand funded the development of curriculum, resources, management system and pilot.



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