CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA

Fisher River Cree Nation

Innovative solutions toward improved postsecondary education experiences and outcomes

By Shauna MacKinnon

MAY 2016

Fisher River Cree Nation: Innovative solutions toward improved postsecondary education experiences and outcomes

ISBN 978-1-77125-286-7

MAY 2016

CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 205 – 765 Main St., Winnipeg, MB R2W 3N5
TEL 204-927-3200 FAX 204-927-3201
EMAIL ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

About the Author:

Shauna MacKinnon is Associate Professor at the Urban and Inner City Program, University of Winnipeg. She is a member of the Manitoba Research Alliance, heading the Education, Training and Capacity Building stream.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Fisher River Cree Nation and in particular Davin Dumas, Kelly Selkirk for assistance and feedback provided throughout the research process. Also thanks to University of Winnipeg student Geraldine Mcmanus for her assistance gathering stories through interviews with students, parents, graduates and other Fisher River members. And last but not least, thanks to the individuals who openly shared their stories with us. The wisdom drawn from your experiences are essential to improving programs moving forward.

MRA
MANITOBA RESEARCH ALLIANCE

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada
Canada

Executive Summary

Fisher River Cree Nation (FRCN) is located two hundred kilometers north of the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. As is the case with many First Nations, its membership is young and growing and this leads to many opportunities and challenges. In an age where postsecondary education and training is a basic requirement for meaningful employment, one challenge is ensuring that students have the tools they need to succeed in whatever they choose to do. FRCN has turned this challenge into an opportunity, testing new holistic approaches that support students in both locally delivered primary education and postsecondary education that takes students away from their community. Through recent initiatives including the integration of indigenous content and languages into curriculum at Charles Sinclair School and the introduction of transitional year programming for high school graduates wishing to obtain postsecondary education, FRCN continues to seek innovative ways to improve education and employment outcomes for its members.

Through assessment of program data and qualitative inquiry, this study describes what has worked well for FRCN, and the continued challenges and possible program responses moving forward. We conclude that a lack of funding to do what is necessary remains the fundamental challenge. We also note that the type of model used makes a difference. Small postsecondary learning environments where supportive relationships are nurtured have better results. There also needs to be greater openness to exploring alternative methods and paths toward improved education experiences and outcomes.

Introduction

Fisher River Cree Nation (FRCN) is located two hundred kilometers north of Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada. It is a small First Nation of 3798 members with 1937 of its members living on-reserve and the other 1861 members living elsewhere. It is also a young and growing community with a total of 178 births registered between 2011 and 2016. Fisher River has developed a reputation in Manitoba as a First Nation that is innovative, collaborative and continuously seeking new ways to improve the social and economic conditions of its members. It does so through multiple means including economic development to increase local employment opportunities for members, developing partnerships with other governments, educators and industries outside of the community, and through promoting excellence in education and training to ensure its members have the skills they need to succeed regardless of what they choose to do and where they choose to live.

Fisher River Cree Nation recognizes that its future and that of its members is integrally tied to education, from early years through the completion of high school and beyond. As such, FRCN has focused a great deal of attention on improving school curriculum and increasing high school graduation rates. At 90 percent, FRCN has among the highest graduation rates in all of Manitoba. As a result of this success, there has been an increase in the number of Fisher River members interested in pursuing postsecondary education. For the most part, this requires high school graduates to leave the community to attend postsecondary education institutions outside of the First Nation. FRCN knows that the transition can be extremely challenging for students. It is far too common for students to leave school and return home within the first six months of living away from home.

In an effort to reduce postsecondary recidivism, Fisher River established a 5-year pilot program called the "Enhancement Year Program (EYP)". The program ran from 2007 to 2011. It was built around the teachings of the medicine wheel, recognizing the need for holistic programming focused on meeting not only the intellectual needs of students, but also their spiritual, mental and physical needs. The program was designed to include partnerships with postsecondary institutions in Winnipeg, so students could connect with these institutions prior to their formal enrollment to ensure a more successful transition.

The EYP was initially designed as a pilot project, with the longer-term goal of integrat-

ing the most promising features into regular high school curriculum. Built into the EYP was a process to measure effectiveness so as to better understand how best to refine the EYP and "back track" it into the secondary curriculum. In 2011, the University of Brandon conducted a mixed methods study, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the EYP. This study highlighted successes and ongoing challenges, and provided recommendations for future planning.

The EYP ran from 2007 to 2011 and has since been replaced with the Enhanced Grade 12 (EG12) program. Aligned with the original plan, the EG12 has integrated what is believed to be the most important features of the EYP into high school curriculum, thereby eliminating the extra year that was central to the EYP.

The research described in this study builds on the earlier University of Brandon report, exploring outstanding research questions, and seeking to better understand factors contributing to the successful education outcomes that Fisher River Cree Nation has become known for, as well as continued challenges. Drawing on the experiences and perspectives of those interviewed, this report also provides some ideas for Fisher River Cree Nation to consider moving forward.

Methods

This report begins with an overview of the historical and contemporary context of Aboriginal people as it relates to education participation and outcomes. It draws on the University of Brandon study, describing some key lessons learned and how they were used to reformulate the EYP into the EG12 program. It also examines recent PSE enrollment and completion data to better understand the interests and trajectories of students. However the main focus of the paper is qualitative in nature, examining interview and focus group data and extrapolating potential policy and program ideas for future development.

This study was conducted in partnership with Fisher River Cree Nation and ethics approval was obtained through the University of Winnipeg Research Ethics Board. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with parents, staff, graduates and other Fisher River Cree Nation members. Interview questions were developed in collaboration with Fisher River Cree Nation. We also conducted a focus group with past and present educators. In total we spoke to eighteen people including nine individuals who went through the EYP as students and three parents of students who participated in the EYP. We also spoke with six teachers/administrators, four who had been involved in the EYP program and two currently involved in the EG12. In addition to being the parent of a student who went through the EYP, one person interviewed was involved in the early development of the EYP.

By conducting this research, our aim is to better understand:

- If PSE education attainment has improved and whether the EYP contributed to increased attendance and completion.
- Parent, student, educators and administrators perspectives about the end of the EYP and and EG12 program.
- Factors that have contributed to FRCN successful high school completion and postsecondary participation
- Continued challenges and potential new strategies
- Implications for future PSE enrollment, completion and transition to employment

Interview and focus group data was analyzed line-by-line, leading to the emergence of key themes that were later refined to those discussed in section 6.

Why this Research is Needed: Aboriginal People and Education in Historical and Contemporary Context

We believe this research can contribute to a base of knowledge aimed at improving social and economic outcomes for Indigenous people. The recently released Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada summary report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* (2015) outlines the continued overrepresentation of Indigenous people among those unemployed, underemployed and living in poverty, in part due to the legacy of residential schools. The TRC describes the reality of Aboriginal people as follows:

> Aboriginal people also have incomes well below their non-Aboriginal counter-parts. The median income for Aboriginal people in 2006 was 30% lower than the median income for non-Aboriginal workers ($18,962 versus $27,097, respectively). The gap narrows when Aboriginal people obtain a university degree, which they do at a far lower rate. Not surprisingly, the child poverty rate for Aboriginal children is also very high — 40%, compared with 17% for all children in Canada. The income gap is pervasive: non-Aboriginal Canadians earn more than Aboriginal workers no matter whether they work on reserves, or in urban, rural, or remote locations.
>
> The proportion of Aboriginal adults below the poverty line, regardless of age and gender, is much higher than that of non-Aboriginal adults, with differences ranging from 7.8% for adult men aged sixty-five or older, to 22.5% for adult women aged sixty five or older. The depth of poverty is also much greater, with Aboriginal people having an average income that falls further below the poverty line on average than that of non-Aboriginal adults, and their poverty is more likely to have persisted for a significant period of time. (TRC 2015: 147)

Among the 94 calls to action put forward in the report is a call to address inequities in education and employment outcomes.

For example, call to action number 10 states:

> We call upon the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:
>
> i. Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.

ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.

iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.

iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.

v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.

vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.

vii. Respecting and honouring Treaty relationships.

While Aboriginal high school completion and education graduation rates have improved in recent times — most recent data available from 2011 shows that the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians is shrinking — the discrepancy remains considerable. Fully 48 percent of Aboriginal people surveyed between the ages of 25 and 64 years completed PSE, compared to 64.7 percent of the non-Aboriginal population.

Also notable are the types of PSE completed. The percentage of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents with trades certificates was comparable with 14.4 percent of Aboriginal respondents holding a trades certificate compared with 12 percent of non-Aboriginal respondents. Those holding a college diploma were also comparable, with 20.6 percent of Aboriginal respondents reporting completion of a college diploma compared with 21.3 percent of non-Aboriginal respondents. There remains a significant gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people with a university degree — 9.8 percent of Aboriginal people reported completion of a university degree compared with 26.5 percent of non-Aboriginal respondents (Statistics Canada 2013). Increasing the number of Aboriginal people with university degrees is essential if we are to ensure more adequate representation of Aboriginal people in all sectors.

Aboriginal students are also more likely to drop out of PSE. Depending on the age group, the dropout rate has been reported to be thirty to over fifty percent higher than that of non-Aboriginal participants (Parkin and Baldwin 2009). Aboriginal students in PSE also tend to be older than non-Aboriginal students and women out number men by a 2:1 ratio (Statistics Canada 2013).

The differences described above are not surprising given the numerous barriers and challenges that Aboriginal students encounter. Poor socio-economic conditions, inequitable education funding, difficulties transitioning from First Nations environments to urban settings, and negative schooling experiences can pose many challenges that all too often lead students to withdraw. Fisher River Cree Nation knows all too well that participation in education can be particularly challenging for students who must leave their home communities to study in urban centres. For these students, adapting to city life and attending large universities with relatively few indigenous role models and students can be overwhelming and isolating. Their challenges are further exacerbated by the racism they regularly encounter.

In a recent study of racial discrimination in Canadian universities, researchers found that Aboriginal students experienced high levels of racism (Currie, Wild, Schopflocher, Laing, Veugelers, 2012). Huffman (2008) examined the university experience of Native Americans in the US and noted assimilationist policies as a central problem resulting in ambivalent attitudes toward education among Aboriginal people. He notes that years of "paternalistic and condescending educational philosophies and approaches" (p. 45) have contributed toward ambivalence, distrust, poor academic performance and early withdrawal. This response was reflected in a Manitoba based study of Aboriginal post-secondary learners that found students

to be struggling with "dispositional, situational, and systemic obstacles in their pursuit of post-secondary education" (Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001). Study participants reported factors including lack of self-esteem; racism and sexism; lack of role models; dislocation; poorly educated parents; lower incomes; difficult family circumstances; lack of academic preparation; childcare and other social support challenges as contributing toward a very daunting experience (p. 23–25). Huffman's study of Native American students across the US found similar issues. He emphasizes a complex combination of financial, social, psychological and academic barriers for "American Indian" learners. Conversations with representatives of trainers and educators in Winnipeg's inner city reveal similar obstacles. They note that their Aboriginal students generally come to them with very low literacy levels and a host of family challenges and responsibilities that seriously complicate their ability to complete their programs and move out of poverty. The experiences described above are consistent with the literature on colonization that describes a long process of destruction that has "affected people physically, emotionally, linguistically and culturally" (Smith, 1999, p, 69).

The very damaging effects of colonization exposed through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada provide further insight into the intergenerational impact of residential schools:

> In addition to the emotional and psychological damage they inflicted, one of the most far-reaching and devastating legacies of residential schools has been their impact on the educational and economic success of Aboriginal people. The lack of role models and mentors, insufficient funds for the schools, inadequate teachers, and unsuitable curricula generally taught in a foreign language — and sometimes by teachers who were also not proficient in the language of instruction — have all contributed to dismal success rates for Aboriginal education. These conditions were compounded for many students by the challenges of trying to learn in environments rendered traumatic by homesickness, hunger, fear, abuse, and institutionalized helplessness. The Commission has heard many examples of students who attended residential school for eight or more years, but left with nothing more than Grade Three achievement, and sometimes without even the ability to read. According to Indian Affairs annual reports, in the 1950s, only half of each year's enrolment got to Grade Six.
>
> Poor educational achievement has led to the chronic unemployment or under-employment, poverty, poor housing, substance abuse, family violence, and ill health that many former students of the schools have suffered as adults. Although educational success rates are slowly improving, Aboriginal Canadians still have dramatically lower educational and economic achievements than other Canadians (TRC, 2015, 145).

A 2004 report by Malatest and Associates examined the barriers to education for Aboriginal learners. They categorize barriers to education under four overarching themes that align with TRC findings. These include historical barriers, social barriers, cultural barriers and individual barriers.

The PSE experience for many Aboriginal students is also affected by an absence of Aboriginal role models. This extends beyond academic institutions to include role models within families and communities. Research shows that students are more likely to 'succeed' if their parents see value in education and encourage them in their studies (Patrikakou, 2008). But even when Indigenous students do well in high school, the transition to PSE can be overwhelming. Students often struggle to adapt to large urban environments and very large educational institutions where they can be "invisible" if they so choose. Racism, discrimination and cultural insensitivity are realities that Indigenous students deal with daily, adding further to the challenge. All of

these factors can lead students to perceive postsecondary education institutions as unwelcoming, sometimes hostile environments.

Financial barriers often deter students from participating in postsecondary education. For students relocating from First Nation communities, costs include tuition fees, books and supplies, but also the cost of housing and other living costs. Financial support for First Nations students exists in the form of the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) however the annual two percent cap on PSSSP funding, in place since 1996, has meant that fewer students can receive support at a time when the need for and interest in PSE grows.

The inadequacy of funding to First Nations for education, including early years through to postsecondary, is highlighted in the TRC summary report. For example, call to action number 11 calls upon the Government of Canada to "…provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education" (TRC 2015, 151). The result of the funding shortfall is that First Nations are unable to provide funding to all members who want to pursue postsecondary education. This often means that students who delay postsecondary education after high school, and those who did not 'succeed' in an initial attempt for all the reasons described above, are less likely to receive support when they are ready to try again. First Nations must make a difficult choice: do they reward students for doing well in high school by prioritizing them for postsecondary funding, even if they may not be emotionally and psychologically ready, or do they prioritize older students who may be 'ready' but who have more responsibilities that will create additional challenges? And regardless of 'who' they decide to support, how do they ensure that students not only have their financial needs taken care of, but other needs as well? These are the difficult questions Fisher River Cree Nation struggles with as it shapes and refines policies and programs within the context of limited financial capacity.

Proactively Seeking Solutions: Establishing the Enhancement Year Program

Fisher River Cree Nation continues to revise policies and programs in an effort to improve education outcomes. Their efforts have resulted in improved high school graduation rates with current levels between 93 and 95 percent. For certain, this is to be celebrated, but it has also created new challenges. The success has led to an increasing number of students wishing to enroll in postsecondary education at a younger age, and this comes with a host of challenges.

With a higher number of members proceeding to post secondary education directly from high school, FRCN turned its attention to assessing PSE student progress and outcomes. After reviewing education statistics between 2002 and 2006, Fisher River Cree Nation was concerned that a high number of students were not completing their PSE studies. The review (FRFN 2011) showed that out of 45 graduates from the Charles Sinclair School:

- 3 students had graduated from a program, 2 of whom were continuing in another PSE program
- 3 students continued in the same program.
- 5 students did not complete the initial program they enrolled in but were enrolled in a different PSE program
- 23 students began a PSE program but did not complete
- 11 students did not enroll in any PSE program after graduation

The above data, as well as student grades and attendance data showed FRCN that many of its students were struggling in institutions and adjusting to life outside of the community. Fisher River Cree Nation was concerned with these outcomes for the individuals involved as well as the health and wellbeing of the broader community.

As a community committed to continued improvement, the findings inspired FRCN to develop the Enhanced Year Program (EYP) pilot project. FRCN concluded that it needed to take a more holistic approach, focusing attention beyond academics to prepare students socially, mentally and spiritually. This, they believed, would help make the transition to large impersonal institutions, and especially those in Winnipeg, much easier as it would provide students with the new tools needed to survive and thrive.

As noted by one individual involved in the development of the EYP:

> …. a lot of times we had kids back here by Christmas and just feeling their self esteem was affected… their parents didn't feel good about it and it affected the whole community…that's why we really thought we needed some way to enhance and build them up…getting them to feel that they could do it."

To better understand how they could improve supports for students, FRCN education administrators met with formerly funded students, education institutions and others to determine what was standing in students' way and how they might be better supported. Consistent with research on the experience of Indigenous students described earlier in this report, FRCN found students to be struggling with a number of social, financial, emotional and spiritual issues (FRCN 2011). A team of educators and other FRCN members tasked with developing a program response agreed that students would be best served by remaining in the community, participating in an intensive 'extra' year beyond high school before enrolling in PSE. The team believed that a transitional year program would better equip students to adapt to education environments and urban life. An EYP team was established to further review the existing literature on barriers and best practices; develop EYP content; negotiate partnerships with PSE institutions; and develop a set of guidelines and supports.

Overview and Assessment of the Enhancement Year Program

The Enhancement Year Program was developed to align with the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is a symbol commonly used in North American Indigenous cultures to teach Indigenous values and beliefs. While it may be uniquely interpreted across different tribes, the core values of its teachings remain consistent. The Medicine Wheel is often based on the four cardinal directions with each direction representing a different philosophy within the context of the circle of life. Individuals are seen in the broader context of the environment and the community. The Medicine Wheel has been used in various ways to incorporate traditional Indigenous knowledge and methodologies into the learning process (Hill, 1999; McKenzie and Morrisette 2003; Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2002). Pedagogical approaches that integrate the teachings of the Medicine Wheel are consistent with Batiste's (2013) approach to decolonizing education. Decolonizing pedagogical approaches built from Indigenous ways of knowing are important because they begin from an understanding of the damaging effects of colonization and the need to "unlearn and learn — to unlearn racism and superiority in all its manifestations…" (161). Decolonizing pedagogies can help Aboriginal learners situate their journey, including both that which has been positive and that which has been negative, within this context. They provide an opportunity to challenge some of the most damaging aspects of colonization, namely the rewriting of history through the eyes of the colonizer and the "internalization and the acceptance of the dominant discourse that marginalizes the culture of the colonized and exalts the colonizers cultural values as universal" (Adyanga Akena 2012, 604).

Fisher River First Nation designed the EYP program around the Medicine Wheel with the aim to "find a balance between supporting students (hand-holding) and student independence (letting go), with the broader goal to "increase self-reliance (2011, 5). Aligned with the Medicine Wheel, the EYP integrates spiritual, social/emotional, intellectual, and physical elements of development throughout the course of the program. Courses included an orientation and interpersonal communications through what they refer to as a "Life Skills" program. Other courses included Computers, Career Studies,

and Introduction to College, Math and Academic Writing. It also included two courses to be taken at Red River College (Aboriginal History 1 and Aboriginal World Issues 1) during a two-month period where students relocated to Winnipeg under the supervision of the EYP coordinator. This was an important element of the program, providing students with a taste of what life in Winnipeg would be like.

The EYP was initially established as a pilot project with the long-term objective of 'backtracking' the program into the regular K-12 curriculum. It operated on an annual budget of $289.2 thousand with the majority of funding through various FRCN budgets. The then provincial government Council on Post Secondary Education (COPSE) and federal government Indian and Northern Affairs Canada provided 4 year funding in the amount of $100,000 (COPSE) and $173,000 (INAC). Other partners provided various supports throughout the project (FRCN 2011, 8).

A review of the EYP was conducted for Fisher River Cree Nation in 2011 through the University of Brandon. The review showed progress on a number of indicators while also noting some continued challenges. The report highlights the following findings:

"Buying In":
The review describes some initial challenges in student and broader community support for the EYP. Some students didn't like that they were required to take an additional year of programming before attending PSE. They believed that they should be able to proceed directly through to PSE just as students had done in the past. However after the initial year students, parents and the broader community began to accept the benefits of the EYP.

The Effects of Fixing "Bottle Necking":
Fisher River First Nation has experienced the phenomenon they describe as "bottle necking" at the grade 9 level. Assessments showed that a significant number of students had fallen behind by the time they reached this level. Some would drop out and others would proceed more slowly through, graduating at an older age than is the norm. Because Charles Sinclair School began to focus attention on those students stuck in the 'bottle neck' at grade nine, students began to move through more quickly, graduating at a younger age. This meant that students going through the Enhancement Year Program were younger (17 and 18, as opposed to the previous average age of 21). While this was a positive and intentional outcome of FRCN's education efforts, it also had implications for the EYP and student transition. For example, students may have been academically ready at a younger age, however in some cases they were less psychologically and spiritually ready to be away from their families.

Learned Helplessness and Dependence:
As a result of the younger age of students moving into postsecondary education, EYP staff found it common for students to have a difficult time making decisions for themselves, having become accustomed to relying on family and others in the community to 'take care of them' and solve their problems for them. EYP staff found it common for students to lack initiative in pursuit of PSE opportunities aligned with their interests. Some students seemed reluctant to advocate for themselves and had expectations that others would do this for them. As a result of this finding, the EYP further developed programming to focus on building independence.

Addictions:
At time of the EYP evaluation, addictions issues continued to be an issue for students. Poor attendance and withdrawal from the program have been associated with drug and alcohol use. Gambling, and in particular VLT addiction, has also been identified as an issue. Addiction issues are a symptom of deeper issues, and in the case of Indigenous people, associated with intergenera-

tional effects of colonial policies and programs (TRC 2015). The EYP, and now the EG12 program continue to focus on decolonizing pedagogies and practices aimed as exposing the root causes of addictions and working with participants to resolve them.

Attendance and Retention:
Related to the above, student attendance and retention continued to be a challenge at the time of evaluation. This is a common challenge among PSE students in general. Adjusting to the reality that there is nobody monitoring your attendance, as is the case in high school, and that you are responsible for the choice to attend or not attend, can take some getting used to. The EG12 program emphasizes to students that class attendance is critical to getting good grades and completing programs.

Quantitative Assessment of Impact on Student Success:
EYP statistics suggest the program had an impact on student 'success'. Between year 2007 and year 2011, 107 students graduated from high school with 69 completing the EYP program. Of the 69 students who completed the EYP, 5 graduated from PSE and are now employed. Another 34 continue to be attending PSE. Although the review showed that the EYP made a significant difference for students, limited resources dedicated to the program means that FRCN would need to proceed with its original plan to take what they learned from the EYP and integrate the best features of that program into regular curriculum. While an argument could have been made to continue with the EYP, FRCN had insufficient resources to sustain the model.

In 2013 FRCN introduced the Enhanced Grade 12 (EG12) program to replace the EYP. The EG12 is mandatory for all students graduating from Charles Sinclair School wishing to obtain post-secondary education funding from FRCN. Students in the EG12 take two dual-credit courses in FRCN (Life Skills and Career Development) and two dual-credit courses in Winnipeg. During the months of May and June, EG12 students live in Winnipeg under the supervision of the EG12 coordinator. They are enrolled in two first year courses at the University of Winnipeg (Academic Writing and Intro to Studies). Also while in Winnipeg students are provided with an orientation to living in the city and are introduced to the various services available there. The purpose is to give students a head start and to eliminate some of the anxiety and practical challenges that students experience when transitioning from their small First Nation to a large urban centre.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

In 2015 Fisher River Cree Nation partnered with the Manitoba Research Alliance to assess progress since the 2011 review. They were particularly interested in the perspective of students, parents and teachers related to the EG12 compared with the EYP. FRCN believed additional research could strengthen their understanding of the factors contributing to student success, continued challenges and improvements in programming moving forward. It can help them to make better-informed decisions when assessing student readiness and making difficult decisions on which students to 'fund'. This is increasingly important as the number of students seeking financial support exceeds the amount of funds available.

Assessing readiness involves much more than looking at a student's grades and school attendance. It is complicated by the fact that First Nation student realities are often more complicated. Although FRCN has had an increase in younger students proceeding through to PSE after high school, it remains the case that Aboriginal PSE students in general tend to be older than non-Aboriginal students, often returning to school as adults and often after having started their families. It is not uncommon for students attending PSE to have children and other responsibilities beyond those that are the norm for PSE students. In part as a result of having more complicated lives than their non-Aboriginal student peers, Indigenous students often take longer to complete their programs. For example, between 2001 and 2015 FRCN provided funding for a total of 226 students. The average age of these students was 32.7 years and the average number of years between grade 12 graduation and completion of a PSE program was 10.77. It is also notable that the number of female PSE students was more than double that of male students — during 2001 and 2015 FRCN supported 151 female students compared with 75 male students. This is consistent with experiences elsewhere that show a higher number of Aboriginal women obtaining university degrees compared with Aboriginal men.

It is also more common for Indigenous students compared with non-Indigenous students attending PSE to have children and/or other dependents. Of the nine students interviewed for this project, eight were female and six had young children at home. One parent noted this as particularly challenging for those who do not have access to childcare. "…What I've seen from my own daughter's classmates is that some couldn't

come to school because they didn't have a babysitter, they didn't have a consistent babysitter."

The context described above has implications for FRCN policy and program development. For example, if data show that older students are more likely to succeed, but take a longer time to complete, FRCN might consider prioritizing older students in part-time studies over longer periods. However if they do so, they will need to consider the implications for younger students. Through interviews and focus groups we hoped to better understand some of the student realities described above, their implications for PSE readiness, the EG12 and other potential programs and supports.

What Fisher River Cree Nation Members Told Us: Key Themes

Beyond Academics — Building Confidence Through the "Life Skills" Program

Educators, administrators and parents interviewed talked about self-confidence as a factor they believed to be as important, if not more important, than academic readiness. They found that even students who excel academically can quickly fall behind in larger urban located postsecondary institutional settings if they don't have the confidence needed to adapt to an environment very different from what they have known. The "Life Skills" program and its emphasis on decolonization and cultural reclamation has played an important role in helping students to develop a strong sense of identity and pride. Those interviewed told us this about the importance of self-confidence:

> Yeah, self confidence issues…it wasn't academic, they had the skills, they could do it if they could function within a different society than what they were used to… that was our biggest challenge- trying to figure out how to help them [build confidence].
>
> …It's how they're feeling inadequate if somebody else is very vocal in class and they have things to say but they don't want to voice it cause they don't want to appear that "oh I'm dumb."

This experience is not unique to FRCN students. Many Indigenous students studying in settings dominated by middle-class, non-indigenous students who tend to be more vocal and confident have described issues of self-esteem and confidence. One reason for this is the insidious, internalized impact of racism. One indigenous university student described it like this:

> When I saw all of the white students I thought [they] would think I was just a dumb Indian…so I was afraid to speak up.

In response to this concern, one focus group participant said:

> I think that Life Skills was the most important piece in that regard…we tried to address that… looking at themselves, who they are, what they're capable of and all the things that they seemed to be lacking…

While there was a sense that the Life Skills program is essential for students before they begin to focus on choosing a career, educators also thought that exposing students to different ca-

reers and the skills required for those careers was important to begin in earlier years. Grades 7 and 8 were suggested as a good time to start so that students would think about the kinds of courses they would need to take to reach their career goals. Knowing that students would likely change their focus, exploring careers can be revisited again after students develop further through the Life Skills program.

All but one of the students interviewed spoke positively of the Life Skills component. Even those who did not continue on to PSE after completion felt that the Life Skills program had helped them to believe in themselves and take pride in their identity as Indigenous people.

Parental Involvement and Support

Another key theme emerging from the interviews was the issue of parent involvement, encouragement and support. Educators, students as well as parents raised this as extremely important. Parental engagement is also consistently identified as an indicator of ''success' throughout the research on education attainment. Research consistently shows that students who have parents committed to education are more likely to complete high school and continue through a postsecondary program (Patriakakou 2009). But for parents who have had negative experiences with school, engagement does not come easy. As noted by one educator:

> How do I get parents involved? How do I get them to the point where they feel comfortable having certain conversations that maybe other non-indigenous successful post-secondary students' parents have [with their children and teachers]?

Educators believe that the lack of parental engagement can be attributed to a variety of factors. For many, it is the distrust in education as the promised ticket out of poverty. The legacy of residential schools and other negative school experiences have left many parents distrustful. But educators and administrators also point to the issue that parents see education as solely the responsibility of educators.

> …for some, it is the opposite of distrust. They hand their children over to the school, trusting that they will do what they need to do to get their children through. They don't see a role for themselves and often don't have the skills, or don't believe they have the skills, to help them and encourage them through school because they didn't not have this from their own parents.

Another factor noted by educators was the issue of parents over protecting their children – fearing for them when they leave the safety of the community to attend PSE in the city.

> They see their role as protector, so if their child is struggling some parents say, "okay come home", because — it's not rescuing — it's more that this is how they define what parenting is. If it's hard, then you come back to the cocoon of the family and we will take care of you...

For a large number of families, parental support is particularly difficult due to financial circumstance. Many families are on social assistance and don't have the financial means to visit their children in the city and/or to provide them with financial assistance. First Nation students learn very quickly when they move to the city that they are not playing on a level field. One parent, whose son completed a college degree and is now employed in a well-paying stable job said his son told him: "We're not even close to being on the same playing field as the non-native community." He noted that urban non-aboriginal students "come to class in their own vehicles, have paid parking outside, live with their mom and dad, have cell phones…they all have cell phones and I have nothing".

This parent said he was fortunate to have been able to support his son financially as well as emotionally. He was able to go to the city when his son called because he was lonely. And he was able to provide him with additional fi-

nancial support so that he could afford a decent apartment. This is not the situation for most First Nation students. He said that some parents fear so much for their children that they discourage them from attending school:

> Especially the ones that are on welfare that never got an education themselves…it's really hard for them to support it…their self-esteem is so low, they have no knowledge of what to do and then thinking that their children are better off to never ever leave the reserve….they sometimes sabotage…

He emphasized the role of residential schools in this process:

> It's hard to get support from people who've been through residential schools or children of people that have been through residential schools, to have faith [in education]…parental involvement is absolutely essential. Community, community support and involvement is absolutely essential.

In his final comments about what is important, he emphasized "culture". When asked to expand he described how he believed that fully integrating indigenous culture into the school curriculum…immersing children from an early age is the foundation necessary for everything else.

Another parent believed strongly that her engagement made a significant impact on her children, giving them a "strong foundation". She noted that in the case of her eldest daughter, it also helped that she attended school at the same time and could help her daughter. She too noted that it makes a big difference if parents are able to financially support their children when they relocate to the city for PSE. However she emphasized that this is not the reality for many families: "Some parents just don't have the resources…we have big families out here…"

One parent who had 2 children who completed the EYP and were on track to graduate from Red River College spoke about the importance of parental engagement and valuing education. She noted that for her family, education was always a priority. She and her siblings graduated from high school "education was always the first thing on our plates, our parents always encouraged us, so I continued that with our own children, we never let our children give up".

Perspective on the Enhancement Year Versus Enhanced Grade Twelve programs

When asked about the EYP compared with the new EG12 model, the majority of interview participants expressed a preference for the EYP. Parents in particular felt that the EYP was important because it provided students with an extra year to mature before leaving home. One parent also felt the EYP was helpful to parents. She noted the stress that parents are under as they worry about their children when they move to the city to attend school. This she noted is something that parents in the city don't have to go through.

> Young adult children in the city don't have to worry about getting an apartment, unless they want to…they can stay at home with their parents, they still have their network of people, family, friends, they've grown up their…our students don't have that….[they have] isolation, separation, loneliness…

She also emphasized that students are protected from many social realities at home: "Here we are sheltered. We're sheltered from racism, we're sheltered from discrimination."

She went on to describe her daughter's friend's experience with racism in the classroom at university:

> "yeah, I'm sure it has a big impact …I know it has because I remember reading my daughter's friend's [Facebook] statuses sometimes about things that would be said in classrooms to her, sometimes not directly to her, but to one of her friends who really looks native."

One mom expressed concern about students leaving home at such a young age: "cause some of the kids they graduate when they're like 17, they're just babies still, to me" said one mom. One parent described the EYP as "my buddy to help me help my kids be successful in school and get them ready for moving out of the community." Another parent was adamant that the EYP model built around an extra year is essential given what they know about the many challenges their children face as they move from youth to adulthood. He believes the only reason that the community has moved to the EG12 model is financial — it simply does not have the resources required for the EYP model. He agreed that the EG12 is the next best option, but added:

> It won't be the same. You know, it just hurts me that they have stopped it, they [youth] want it. Everyone wants it, but the money's not there for it…[with the EYP] they're given another year to mature, they get a year to grow up, they a year to become more self-sufficient… and now we're shipping them off at 17–18 years of age to Winnipeg, at least they had one more year to grow up…it's absolutely required, absolutely required… it's so sad that we have to, it's at the expense of our post-secondary success. Because many times you know these kids and I seen it with my son, if they get beaten up once you're not going to get them off that reserve again…off at 18 years of age, they take a lickin out there, a bad lickin…

When asked to respond to these comments, one staff agreed that it basically gets down to financial capacity, stating that while it would be ideal to maintain the EYP model, finances make it impossible. She also noted: "we were aware of this when we designed the EYP and that is why we had a long term plan to build the EYP curriculum back into the main curriculum."

Redefining 'Success'

An important theme noted by FRCN administrators and inferred by parents and students, was the issue of 'success'. In relation to education, the term 'success' is most often equated to completion of an education trajectory based on western values and a linear view of education and employment. Administrators interviewed noted that they have come to redefine the meaning of success to better reflect their values as a community. Success begins with students "knowing themselves". So as noted by one FRCN administrator "students self-identifying that they're not ready at this time to pursue post-secondary, to us is a success." All too often students enter PSE because they believe that is what they are supposed to do. But if they aren't ready and focused on a goal, this and the additional challenges for students relocating from their small-safe community to a large urban centre often results in students not doing well and or dropping out completely. So one element of success for educators is to ensure that students are able to decide what is right for them and to respect their decision to not attend PSE and/or to delay the decision. As described by one administrator, redefining the meaning of success means that students "knowing this about themselves is [now viewed as] a success."

The 'indicators' of success beyond completion of PSE in a prescribed number of years were noted as important. Participants in one of the focus groups stated that qualitative indicators are also important: " part of the success, beyond measuring numbers and percentages, are things like self-esteem, feeling better…qualitative things." They too emphasized that 'success' for some students is knowing enough about themselves to know when they are not yet ready to attend PSE.

This is not to say that participants completely ignore completion rates and other statistics — they recognize their value. But they have come to view them in the context of a broader assessment of success while also being cognizant that more broadly defining success must not result in lowering of expectations. They also believe that the desire to maintain high gradu-

ation rates and move students immediately to postsecondary must not come at the expense of student health and wellbeing. If programs that lead students to assess their own readiness have the effect of delaying postsecondary education, research participants believed this to be completely acceptable.

The Path Through Education is Not Always Linear

As important as it is to include courses like career planning in curriculum, the reality is that many students will likely change their career paths as they become more mature and develop confidence in their abilities. It should be said that this is not unique to First Nation students, but rather consistent with the experience of non-Indigenous students as well. Gone are the days when students graduated from high school or PSE and remained in the same career for the duration of their work lives. For First Nation students, who have often been exposed to fewer opportunities, and as noted by one education administrator "have far fewer professional mentors and networks" it is not surprising that students often change paths along the way. For example, one student said she would like to take a computer course to help her in her current job, but she also said she has a bigger dream. She said a trip to Red River College made her think that a career as a dental hygienist would be of interest. But she thought that she might want to begin as a dental assistant to ensure that the choice was right for her. So while this single parent has immediate plans practical for her situation, she has bigger plans for the future, to attend school in Winnipeg to become a dental hygienist and to return to practice in her community. But she learned through her participation in the EYP that she wasn't ready for that yet.

It is interesting to note that parents interviewed were open to their children taking their time to explore different education options. One parent said that she was not disappointed when her daughter withdrew from her program. She lost a friend to suicide and was not focused on her education. "...so I'm glad she's taking this year off, then she can reground herself, refocus and hopefully she'll benefit from the year off." Another parent said she believes it is okay to "start off small and work your way up." This parent believes that it is good to have a goal and "big dreams" but it is okay to work toward them slowly. "I'm not saying don't dream big, I'm just saying, be realistic."

Trusting Relationships

Relationships, while not always defined as such, was a consistent theme that has implications for programming at the PSE level. The FRCN Postsecondary Education Coordinator emphasized that developing trust with students is an important priority for her because "[students] will not come to you if they don't trust you." She went on to note that she was once asked by a well-meaning worker at a postsecondary education institution, "what do your students need?" she said she thought about that for a bit and responded "They need relationships." The challenge with existing resources available to students at postsecondary institutions is that while they take great effort to ensure that students know about the services, they are less proactive than they might be in establishing relationships with students. This can be a challenge in large institutions, yet critically important and especially so early on to ensure that students are provided with every opportunity to get the help that they need before falling behind.

Fisher River First Nation — Education Moving Forward

Central to Fisher River First Nations success is the openness to change and adapt policies and programs as needed. This was something that

both past and present employees emphasized in our interviews. They said that this requires a 'team' approach among administrators, teachers and others committed to improving education outcomes and they see themselves as a community constantly seeking new and improved policies and practices. One example provided was recent reflections on how to deal with students who have been approved for funding but determine they are not ready to attend PSE. If they are to celebrate this self-awareness as success, then policies need to be changed to align with this thinking. Current policy is such that students who decide not to attend are placed at the bottom of the list, therefore there is little incentive to delay education if that is what a student determines they need to do. Focus group participants suggested that changes might be made so that students who choose not to attend remain at the top of the lists for the following year. This policy change would better align with their philosophy that students should not be pushed to attend PSE if they are not ready because this all too often sets them up to fail. However, they need to be provided with an incentive to delay their schooling when it makes sense to do so, including opportunities to explore their interests and options. These are issues and potential solutions FRCN will need to explore as it moves forward. Another issue that FRCN is grappling with according to those interviewed, and described by one person as "the next big issue" is the transition from education, training to employment. Focus group participants said that many graduates have difficulty finding jobs and when they do, many find it difficult to adapt. This is consistent with other research describing challenges pertaining to employment attainment and retention (TRC 2015, MacKinnon 2015, Howard, Edge and Watt, 2012). Employment and income inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada continues to be significant. Focus group participants felt that more needs to be done to help both employer and employee with the transition to work through work placement practicums and financial incentives for employers. They also spoke of the need to address racism in the workplace. One parent illustrated this continued concern by describing his sons response to racism in his work environment — he "learned to survive in his job by pretending to be white".

Leadership and Commitment — It Takes a Village

Educators noted the importance of having political leadership that supports their work, establishes clear policies, and is committed to hiring the best people and trusting in them to do what is needed. They also said that teachers must be committed to a more holistic approach. Focus group participants attributed much of Fisher River's success to consistent, strong and supportive leadership and a willingness to work together toward a shared goal:

> I think it's the people working together. And like the school board, the Chief and Council do not interfere, but they certainly support…we're working together an have the support of chief and counsel [and more generally] the committed dedicated compassion of teachers, good financial management as well as an openness to new ideas, good planning and evaluation…it's the ability to work together for the better of the community…there's no magic, it's just people working together for a common purpose.

Feeling valued in this process was also seen to be important. Being part of a monthly team meeting was seen to be an instrumental part of the process of continuously evaluating and working to make improvements. One parent, who also works in the FRCN Employment and Training program, noted the importance of collaboration across programs when developing the EYP:

> We all had to work together and that's what we do in Fisher River, Fisher River Authority couldn't have done the EYP on their own, it

> took everybody, the Employment and Training Program, the Social assistance Program, you know our high school, our resources, our health centre with the NNADAP, their drug and alcohol people, their mental health people, you know the healing centre, Women Healing Centre… we brought a lot of people together and that was what it took.

Another parent, who is also an assistant in the school, spoke about the role of education beyond the school and the school term. As an example she described the community literacy camps operating during the summer months.

Academic Standards — Falling Behind

Some students and parents expressed concern that Fisher River graduates are not adequately academically prepared for postsecondary education. A concern that "grade 12 graduates are not at a 'grade 12' level" compared with urban students was raised. Another parent said she liked that Charles Sinclair School considered attendance in addition to academic performance, "so if you're not going to be attending, well, you're not going to get your credit, so students are beginning to realize that, like there's no 'social' passing." Another parent, who was very supportive of the EYP, expressed concern that students were being "pushed through" high school with the knowledge that the EYP program would "pick up the slack". Although pleased to know that FRCN has among the highest graduation rates, this parent raised concerns that students do not have the academic skills necessary to excel in PSE. He said that EYP testing showed some grade 12 graduates to have a reading level of grade 6. He attributed this to underfunding for First Nation schools that leads to "pushing them through school". This parent shared his experience with his own children who were behind their peers when they transferred to a school in Winnipeg. He believed the EYP was helpful in this regard because it provided students with an opportunity to upgrade in essential areas. This parent was skeptical about the plan to 'backtrack" the EYP into regularly curriculum, stating: "I just don't see how they can jam all that, all that extra knowledge into them." He was extremely supportive of the EYP and in particular the Life Skills course, noting the importance of traditional teachings. He said:

> Hopefully some traditional knowledge to help them bring up their self-esteem, some knowledge about how we lost all this stuff… self esteem is big…we got to be proud of being Indian, but we don't know how to be Indian (chuckle) we don't know what it means to be an Indian because we had it all taken away by residential schools and all this other stuff that happened to us….

Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous Pride

Traditional teachings were central to the EYP and from the perspective of one parent, the component that is most important to give students the confidence and strength to succeed. He said, "Kids give up too easily because they don't believe in themselves…. they're so easily beaten, they give up, they just… cause they're not proud enough." This parent believes strongly that the key to success for youth is to have a strong sense of pride in themselves as Indigenous people as the basis of building their self esteem and confidence.

Other Challenges

Several additional issues were raised that demonstrate the complexity of challenges facing students. The difficulty finding safe, affordable housing for students when they leave the community to study was raised often. This was said to create much stress for students as well as parents. Addiction issues were raised as a concern with one parenting emphasizing "there is still a high, high rate of drug use in our community…. people don't want to talk about it but it's there."

She believes that the community is doing all it can to provide recreational and other activities for youth as a preventive measure, yet drug and alcohol abuse continue to be a problem. This parent attributed the issue to a 'lack of parenting' and 'fellowship' through positive means including either "traditional" teachings or belonging to a "church" community.

Moving Forward

A review of various literature on Indigenous experiences with postsecondary education, assessment of FRCN data, and interviews and focus groups with FRCN members led to the following ideas that are believed to merit further discussion and consideration.

It should be noted that a limited number of FRCN members participated in this study and each self-selected to participate. Those who participated bring a perspective based on their personal experience and values, and most who participated in interviews and focus groups place high value on education and are engaged parents, teachers or students. However it is also notable that even though we spoke with engaged parents and students interested in PSE, there was an awareness of the challenges yet to overcome. It remains the case, for example, that while Indigenous enrollment in universities is higher than ever before, many students don't make it through their first year.

Fisher River Cree Nation's success in terms of high school graduation rates is in great part a result of its concerted effort to learn from past challenges and build on success. The EYP is an example of how the challenge of transition to PSE was identified and addressed. Changes made to integrate the EYP into regular programming through the EG12 program were made not because the EYP wasn't working, but because the EYP was not financially sustainable. The majority of those we spoke with said that their preference would have been to continue with the EYP as a transition year program. While the EG12 program is a good compromise, the issue of students continuing to have difficulty transitioning to PSE and the reality that the average age of students enrolled in PSE is far older suggests that in general, younger students might not be ready for the transition. This is likely a function of many factors but it should not be perceived as a failing on anyone's part. Rather than focusing on this as a "negative", a more positive approach might be to accept the reality that the PSE trajectory for First Nations students is often different from that of their non-indigenous and urban peers. Looking at in this way presents room for creating alternatives.

Funding

Ideally First Nations should be provided with more funding from the federal government to allow them to implement and sustain programs

like the EYP. One parent spoke of what he believed to have been critical to his success in obtaining a university degree, arguing this to be central to moving forward. He said that " support, support" was what got him through. He attended university through one of Manitoba's PSE ACCESS programs. This program provided comprehensive supports, but also had significant expectations of students at the time that he attended. When asked about the factors he believed to have contributed to his success at university he specified "adequate funding, adequate supports and handholding." He had high praise for Fisher River Cree Nation's postsecondary education coordinator, but also recognized that there are limits to what she can do: "You know, I love her and she's the hardest working person I could ever wish for our community, but we need three or four of her." He went on to describe the ACCESS program at the University of Manitoba as it was twenty-five years ago when he attended:

> …you know like, I had to meet in my first half a year, with a personal counselor every two weeks for the first six months, I had to go sit down and I had to put it in my timetable and I had to show up cause I wasn't funded by the band, I was funded by [ACCESS], so they held that over you to force you to come, but it was the greatest benefit.

He also said that he had to meet regularly with an academic advisor and this helped keep him on track with his studies. He noted that the education coordinator simply does not have the time to meet with every PSE student as often as needed.

The EYP, ACCESS, and other such programs can be effective for those students needing extra support to successfully transition to postsecondary education, especially when it takes them to large impersonal institutions in large urban centres. In the absence of and in addition to funding increases, there may be other solutions. One such solution for those students wishing to attend university might be to introduce students to university through a small off-campus program as an entry point from which they can broaden their options.

Small is Preferred, but Big is the Reality

Many Aboriginal students, and especially those coming from First Nations, do better in environments that are small, safe and supportive — where professors and staff know their names and are familiar with their lives. The importance of 'relationships' was identified in this and other studies as particularly important (MacKinnon 2015, Silver 2013) however building-trusting relationship can be difficult in large impersonal institutions. For example, a student might find the courage to ask for help, but by the time they walk down the long hall to their professors' or advisors' offices, they often lose that courage and take the first exit out of the building. Many students quickly learn that they can be invisible if they choose to be in large institutions where they know very few people, and where teachers don't know them and so rarely miss them if they don't attend class.

Small PSE programs can help. They provide limited options however they can provide a gateway for students — an opportunity to become more familiar with postsecondary education cultures, expectations, and the various options available to them. Examples of such programs are located in Winnipeg's North End (See MacKinnon and Silver, in review). Urban Circle Training Centre and the University of Winnipeg Urban and Inner City Studies (UICS) program, the University of Manitoba Inner City Social Work program are examples of small programs offering different postsecondary education opportunities in small interactive settings. In the case of UICS, a department in the University of Winnipeg Faculty of Arts, it is common for students to use UICS as a gateway into university. The program exposes students to university studies and expectations, while also introducing students to critical urban

issues such as poverty, exclusion, racism and the effects of colonization. The classes are small and diverse with a much higher percentage of Indigenous students than is the norm. Students are encouraged to share their diverse experiences and get to know their classmates. It is common for students to develop friendships and support systems that they take with them to the main campus. Many develop relationships with advisors and professors, who continue to support them as they expand their horizons beyond the safety of the Selkirk Ave. campus. Many students choose UICS as a major toward a Bachelor of Arts degree, while others choose UICS courses as electives offered in a small, safe and supportive environment where they establish supportive relationships with other UICS students, faculty and advisors that they maintain when the move on to the main campus. Three Fisher River students are currently majoring in UICS and one recently completed the UICS two-year certificate program and has since found employment. For students new to Winnipeg, the Introduction to Urban and Inner City Studies class is a good way to better understand life in cities including the many divisions and challenges that continue to exist. It is also a good way to build networks. Transitioning into university through a program like UICS could potentially provide some of what the EYP program offered without a financial cost to FRCN. This is an option FRCN may wish to explore.

Stepping Stones and 'Gap-year' Programs

One important and potentially controversial question emerging from this research is: Are the pressures and challenges facing recent high school graduates significant enough to encourage them to delay PSE? If so, might new approaches such as the idea of a structured "gap year" be explored (O'Shea 2011). For example, for those grade 12 graduates wishing to attend PSE, but not quite 'ready', could delaying PSE for one year to participate in a structured community service program provide students an opportunity to further develop, mature and better prepare for PSE? Understanding the issues, challenges and realities of students provides an opportunity to explore these and other ideas.

As described in section six, one suggestion raised in the interviews was the need for options other than PSE to accommodate those not ready for postsecondary education as well as those not academically inclined. Suggestions included community-based education and vocational opportunities and other programs that could be seen as "stepping-stones" to work or education for those uncertain of what they want to do. One person described this as "short-term programs that may not be the end goal, but could help students work toward longer-term goals when they are ready."

One individual put forward the idea of exploring the potential merit of a "gap year" program. A gap year is often described as an intentional break in an educational career, usually taken after completion of high school. Past research showed that students who delay PSE after leaving high school are less likely to enroll later. Bozick and DeLuca 2005 (as cited in Wells and Lynch, 2012) found that students who delay at least one year are 64 percent less likely to complete than those who enroll immediately after high school. Other research shows that completion rates drop further the longer the delay. This research has led many parents and educators to shy away from recommending students interrupt their schooling by taking a 'break'. However, other research is showing an increasing number of students to be taking a gap year and finding it to be highly beneficial. Moreover, a structured gap year that provides youth with an opportunity to 'give back' to their community can help students develop as young adults with a sense of purpose and greater knowledge of what their interests are and what they would like to do moving forward (O'Shea 2011). While the majority of literature on gap year experiences

focuses on the experiences of white middle-class students volunteering abroad, there are locally focused alternatives that may suit communities like FRCN well. As noted earlier in this paper, the experience for many Indigenous students is very different therefore the research on the effects of delaying postsecondary education may be not be as relevant for Indigenous students. More research is needed to better understand the implications, positive and negative, for Indigenous students considering delaying, and in particular those residing in First Nation communities. Because the research suggests that what students do in between high school and PSE enrollment is important, a structured program rather than simply taking a year off would be a preferred option. This would be consistent with the research that shows a gap year experience can be highly beneficial for students when the time is used as a form of experiential learning.

From the perspective of many Indigenous cultures, a gap year program focused on exploring four central questions about who I am , where I come from, where I am going and what my purpose is in this world — can help students develop a stronger sense of who they are and what they wish to 'do' as a career (MacKinnon, Klyne and Nowatzki, in review). However more research is needed to determine if there is a gap year type program that might be designed for First Nation students aligned with Indigenous teachings that emphasize holistic development. Questions to consider include: Is there potential to design a locally-focused gap year program that might allow students to develop a strong sense of identity while also contributing to their communities? Might students be encouraged to spend a year 'giving back' to their community and be later rewarded through PSE funding? Could financial resources be found to provide students with a living allowance while they participate in a gap year internship program?

The literature suggests that this is an idea worth exploring. Research by O'Shea (2011) concludes that students participating in a structured gap year program made "significant gains in personal, civic, moral, and intellectual development. O'Shea also concluded that a gap year can be highly beneficial and can "help universities to form not just good future employees, but citizens of character." King (2012) argues that the gap year experience is particularly helpful as a means for young people to "undertake forms of identify work within the context of higher education: ie. to help them better understand who they are and where they want to go.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine effectiveness of Fisher River Cree Nation education programs and supports, to determine where improvements might be made and propose new ideas for Fisher River Cree Nation to consider in future. A review of the literature and assessment of qualitative and quantitative data collected through this and past studies suggest that Fisher River Cree Nation was on the right track with the Enhancement Year Program. It provided participants with an opportunity to "undertake identity work" and to better prepare them for PSE. Integrating the EYP into regular programming through the Enhanced Grade 12 program is a good compromise given the financial constraints however it is by all accounts, a second best scenario. Nonetheless, limited resources provide an opportunity to explore other options and those mentioned above are a few examples to consider.

On a final note, it is important to note that there seems to be agreement in Fisher River Cree Nation that there is no single solution to improving postsecondary education outcomes. This is consistent with other research that describes the continued structural barriers to education (MacKinnon 2015; MacKinnon and Silver 2016; Silver 2013; Malatest et al 2004; MacKinnon, Klyne & Nowatzki 2016). Helping students from an early age to develop basic skills, language and culture, self-esteem, confidence, pride in identity and an enthusiasm for learning will give them a good start. But even when this is done, Indigenous students have obstacles that non-indigenous and especially urban middle class students do not have. Programs like those discussed within this report can only help to level the playing field.

References

Adyanga Akena, F. 2012. Critical analysis of the production of western knowledge and its implications for Indigenous knowledge and decolonization. *Journal of Black Studies* 43(6): 599–619.

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). 2011. *Trends in higher education: Volume I – Enrollment*. Ottawa, ON: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

Batiste, M. 2013. *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing.

Brendtro, L.K., M. Brokenleg, S. Van Bockern. 2002. *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future*. Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. 2010. *A literature review of factors that support successful transitions by Aboriginal people from K-12 to postsecondary education*.

Currie, C.L., T.C. Wild, D.P. Schopflocher, L. Laing, P. Veugelers, 2012 Racial discrimination experienced by aboriginal university students in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 57(10):617–25.

Educational Policy Institute (EPI). 2009. *The postsecondary students supports program: An examination of alternative delivery mechanisms. A report to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada*.

Fisher River Cree Nation (FRCN). 2011. *Enhancement year program (EYP) Report*. Fisher River Board of Education. Unpublished document used with expressed written permission of the Fisher River Board of Education.

Gordon, C.E., and Jerry P. White. 2014. Indigenous educational attainment in Canada. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 5(3).

Hill, D. L. (1999). *Holistic learning: A model of education based on Aboriginal cultural philosophy*. An unpublished MA thesis, Adult Education, Saint Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

Howard, A., J. Edge, and D. Watt. 2012. *Understanding the value, challenges, and opportunities of engaging Metis, Inuit and First Nations workers*. The Conference Board of Canada.

Huffman, T. 2008. *American Indian higher educational experiences: Cultural visions and personal journeys*. New York: Peter Lang.

King, A. 2011. Minding the Gap? Young people's accounts of taking a gap year as a form of identity work in higher education. In *Journal of Youth Studies*. 14(3), 341–357.

MacKinnon, S. 2015. Making the case for an Aboriginal labour market intermediary: A community-based solution to improve labour market outcomes for Aboriginal People in Manitoba. In *Manitoba Law Journal* 37(2).

MacKinnon. S. 2015. *Decolonizing employment: Aboriginal inclusion in Canada's labour market*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

MacKinnon, S., Nowatzki, J. & Klyne, D. 2016. Participatory Evaluation Research: The CEDA Pathways Story. In *Community Based Particpatory Research and Public Policy Change: Stories from the Field*. S. MacKinnon (ed.). Unpublished - In review.

MacKinnon, S. & Silver, J. 2015. Decolonizing for Equity and Inclusion in Winnipeg's North End. In *Social Equity and Inclusion in Cities*. Kladowsky, F. Siltanen, J. Andrew, C. eds. Unpublished-In Review.

Malatest & Associates Ltd. 2004. *Aboriginal peoples and post-secondary education. What educators have learned*. Montreal, QC: The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Mackenzie, B. and Morrisette, V. 2003. Social work practice with Canadians of Aboriginal background: Guidelines for respectful social work. In *Multicultural social work in Canada: Working with diverse ethno-racial communities* (Vol.2). Alean Al-Krenawi & J. R. Graham (Eds.). Don Mills: Oxford University Press.

Mendelson, M. 2006. *Aboriginal peoples and postsecondary education in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: The Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Niu, S. and Tienda M. 2013. Delayed enrolment and college plans: Is there a postponement penalty? In *The Journal of Higher Education*, 84(1), 1–25.

O'Shea, J. 2011. Delaying the Academy: A gap year education. In *Teaching in higher Education*. 16(5), 565–577.

Parker, P. Duineveld, J. Salmela-Aro, K. Thoemmes, F. (2015). I wish I had (not) taken a gap-year? The psychological and attainment outcomes of different post-school pathways. In *Developmental Psychology* 51 (3) 323–333.

Parkin, A., and Noel Baldwin. 2009. *Persistence in post-secondary education in Canada: The latest research*. Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Patrikakou, E. 2009. *The power of parent involvement: Evidence, ideas, and tools for student success*. Centre on Innovation and Improvement. Available at: http://education.praguesummerschools.org/images/education/readings/2014/Patrikakou_Power_of_parent_involvement.pdf.

Silver, J. 2013. *Moving forward giving back. Transforming Aboriginal education*. Winnipeg: Fernwood.

Sloane-Seale, a., l. Wallace, and B. Levin. 2001. Life paths and educational and employment outcomes of Disadvantaged aboriginal learners. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* 27(2): 15–31.

Smith, L. T. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Statistics Canada. 2013. *2011 National Household Survey*.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). 2015. *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future. Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Canada: TRC.

Wells, R. and Lynch, C. 2012. Delayed college entry and the socioeconomic gap: Examining the roles of student plans, family income, parental education, and parental occupation. In *The Journal of Higher Education* 83 (5), September/October. 672–694.

CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 205 – 765 Main St., Winnipeg, MB R2W 3N5
TEL 204-927-3200 FAX 204-927-3201
EMAIL ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
WEBSITE www.policyalternatives.ca