Key Components of First Nations Students Success

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I will start this keynote address with two fundamental questions: How do we define First Nations student success? What are our philosophical or conceptual foundations for attaining this success? I will answer the first question and then the second one will follow. For the first question, many people often say "we will know success when we see it. So let's wait!". The problem with this attitude of mind, however, is that it does not provide us any objective guidlines for what we are supposed to do now or for our future action plans. As well, it may be difficult to recognize First Nations students success unless we have defined it clearly in advance. That said there are ways we can define First-Nations student success such as:

1) **Graduation Rates**. The rate or proportion of grade 8 and 12 graduates. The idea is to find out any increases over a period of time and use the percentage increase as a mark of student success. It is argued that high school graduation rate is very important because there is a positive relationship between high school graduation and students' life prospects[1] in our techno-capitalist society. Also student graduation from grade 12 provides a foundation for admission into apprenticeship training and participation in post-secondary programs.
2) **Retention Rates**. The rate or proportion of student retained at every grade level in the k-12 education system as opposed to dropping out. This is the proportion of students that has been retained in the schools until their grade 12 graduation. This definition of student success relates to graduation rates in that the more students that are retained through the grades, the more that will graduate from grade 12,
3) **Achievement Rates**. The rates of achievement in numeracy and literacy as measured by either formative or summative assessments. Terminal report cards and other teacher initiated testing or benchmarks are examples of formative assessment.Obvious summative assessments that come into mind are the Canadian Achievement Test (CAT) and Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO) testing in mathematics and literacy. I must say right away that I am hardly a fan

[1] Greene, J.P. (2001). *High school graduation rates in the United States*. New York, NY: Manhattan Institute of Public Policy
National Governor's Association (2005). *Graduation counts: A report of the National Governor Task Force on State High School Graduation Data*. Washington, DC: Author

of summative testing, especially the large scale ones I have already mentioned. They do not by any stretch of my imagination inform instructional practices or professional reflection. On the contrary, they are demonstrably suitable for managing public impression about the school system and for sorting students into artificial categories. In addition, they often report general or average results which makes it impossible to match students to their individual performance result for the purpose of designing remedial or other support programs for those who need them.

4) **Prepartion Rates**. The graduation, retention, and achievement rates may not be enough measures of First Nations student success. We may like to go further than just being content with surface stuffs. We may want to know the number or percentage of students "prepared" sufficiently for high school (in the case of grade 8 students), post-secondary education programs, apprenticeship training programs, employment (wage-employment or self-employment) or citizenship. This measure traces the life pathways of students after school graduation. It may seem practically impossible to trace the life pathways of grade twelve graduates than it is with grade eight graduates. However, with little information management techniques we can trace what happens to our grade twelve students once they have graduated and left the school house.
5) **Engagement Rates**.The degree or extent of student engagement with schooling. There are many ways to conceptualize student engagement with schooling. However, researchers refer to student engagement with schooling in two ways: the psychological and behavioural dimensions[2]. The psychological dimension relates to student sense of belonging at school, acceptance of school values, having good relations with teachers and peers, and the belief that education is important for personal growth and economic purpose[3]. The behavioural dimension has to do with participation in school academic and non-academic activities. This includes attendance at school and classes on time, completing homework assignments or projects, and participating in

[2] Finn, J. D. and Voelkl, K. E**.** (1993). School characteristics related to student engagement. *Journal of Negro Education* 62(3).
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Goodenow, C. and Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends= values to academic motivation among adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education* 62(1): 60–71.
Goodenow, C**.** (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in Schools* 30 (January), 79–90.
Johnson, M. K., Crosnoe, R. and Elder, G. H**.** (2001). Students' attachment and academic engagement: The role of race and ethnicity. *Sociology of Education* 74: 318–40.
Voelkl, K. E**.** (1995). School warmth, student participation, and achievement. *Journal of Experimental Education* 63(2): 127–38.
Voelkl, K. E**.** (1996). Measuring students identification with school. *Educational and Psychological Measurement,* 56(5): 760–70.
Voelkl, K. E**.** (1997). Identification with school. *American Journal of Education* 105 (May): 294–318.
[3] Johnson, M. K., Crosnoe, R. and Elder, G. H**.** (2001). Students' attachment and academic engagement: The role of race and ethnicity. *Sociology of Education* 74: 318–40.

extracurricular activities. As it can be seen, student engagement is critical to student academic achievement, retention, preparation and graduation rates. Yet it is the most neglected rate for assessing First Nation student success.

6) **Bicultural Competency Rate**. The bicultural competence rate has to do with the proportion of First Nations students know and understand their own culture, histories and languages as well as the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture they interact with on a daily basis. First Nations students are compelled to be bicultural – participants in their own culture and that of the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. It is important how well the school system prepares its First Nations students to attain this competency. More often than not, our observations and interactions with these students indicate monoculturalism- they are competent in the Anglo-Canadian culture and not in their own. This leads to self-esteem and self-confidence problems in First Nations students, noting that our society has deep historical and contemporary patterns of group differentiation and discrimination.

An accumulating body of research indicates that First Nations students' self-esteem is a key factor in their school success.[4] Where the school curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and adminitration fail to honour "who they are and where they have come"[5], this most often leads to negative self-esteem and confidence crisis in First Nations students.

Some policy-makers, educators and parents, for obvious personal values, may prefer to view First Nations students success purely from a quantitative point of view. In this case, achievement scores in numeracy and literacy and 8 and 12 graduation statistics are the most important. This is because of the so-called objective ways of measuring them. It is also believed that achievement scores are a demonstrable evidence that can be used to build public confidence in public education[6]. The other success indicators such as student preparation, engagement, and bicultural competency rates rates may be viewed as subjective, because their measurement is based on perception information collected from stakeholders such as students, teachers, parents and community members. However, I feel that we have to look at First Nations student success in a more holistic way in order to fit it into First Nations worldview. We have to have a clear-

[4] Antone, E. (2003). Culturally framing Aboriginal literacy and learning. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 27(1), 7-15
Kanu. Y. (2002). In their own voices: First Nations students identity and some cultural mediators of their learning in the formal school system. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 48(2), 98-119

[5] Gamlin, P. (2003). Transformation and Aboriginal Literacy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 27(1), 2-6.
Van der Way, D. (2001). Exploring multiple serendipitous experiences in a first nations setting as the impetus for meaningful literacy development. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 25(1), 51-69.

[6] Levin, B. (2007). *A strategy for large-scale improvement in education*: The Ontario approach. Paper presented at 21 Century Curriculum: Taking Bearings, Sydney, Australia, November 12 and 13

definition of what we mean by an educated First Nation person and use that definition to inform us about how to view or measure First Nations student success.

Key Components of First-Nations Students Success (CFNSS)

Regardless of how we look at First-Nations student success, it has to be grounded in some framework. This framework is what I call components or anchors of success. They provide a conceptual foundation for visioning, planning and strategizing First Nations students success. The components, from my perspective, are the same whether we take the so-called objective or subjective view of student success. The following diagram illustrates the five components and their interrelationships: numeracy, literacy, governance/leadership, educator development, and parent/community partnership are all important for First-Nations students:

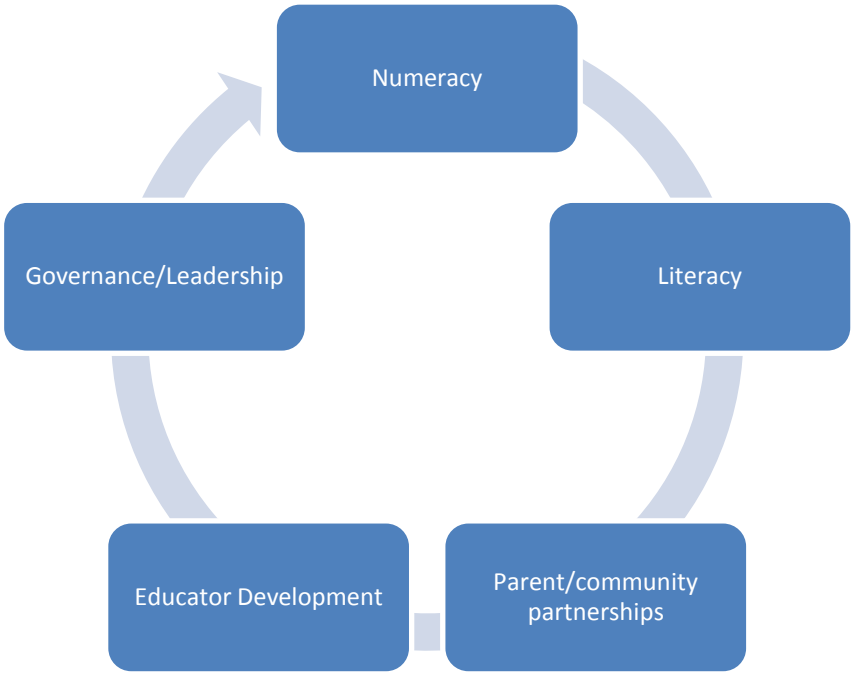

Figure 1: Key Components of First-Nations Student Success (CFNSS)

As the diagram illustrates, each component is interrelated with the other components. For instance, any achievement in numeracy depends on an improvement in governance/leadership, literacy, educator development, and parent/community partnership. Certainly, any numeracy improvement in First Nations student success needs, first and foremost, governance/ leadership to develop a vision/plan and strategies to implement and monitor the plan. Numeracy improvement also depends on literacy improvement, because students should be able to express themselves in communicating the results of their problem-solving activities, reading charts, graphs, diagrams and tables. Principals and teachers also need appropriate knowledge, skills and new attitudes to implement the numeracy plan in their

classrooms. Principals have to provide teachers support and leadership in culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. Parent/community cooperation is also needed for a numeracy and literacy strategy to be successful. That is why the components are in interdependent relationship with each other.

Defining the Key components of First-Nations Student Success (CFNSS)

This section gives a conceptual definition of each of the five key components of First-Nations student success (CFNSS).

Numeracy- This relates to the following:

(1) Understanding of the number system and confidence to use it;

(2)A repertoire of calculation skills/strategies for addressing aspects of the physical world: counting, measuring, locating, designing and explaining;

(3)Ability to solve number problems in a variety of contexts (e.g. school, home, workplace, shopping, community, etc.); and

(4) A practical understanding of how information is collected, analyzed and presented in graphs, diagrams, tables, and chart. It also includes the ability to read and make sense of such presentations in terms of self, work and community[7].

Literacy- This includes the following skills and knowledge:

(1)The ability to read and make sense out of written, printed and electronic materials;

(2) The ability to write and communicate meaningfully through a variety of methods;

(3) Awareness of the sound of language and its relationship with letters;

(4) A mastery of vocabulary, spelling and cultural use of language;

(5) Knowledge of the language, culture and history of First-Nation people; and

(6) Ability to participate confidently meaningfully in community/society affairs.

Governance and Leadership- Governance establishes and maintains a structure (policies, rules, decrees, and declarations) within which the school system operates. Governance is not leadership per se; instead, it creates the condition through which highly effective education leadership can be exercised throughout the school system.[8] For this reason, governance exercises indirect influence on student learning and achievement.[9] Despite its numerous meanings, educational leadership relates to any set of activities [10] that enhances teaching and increases student learning and achievement. Governance and leadership involves the following:

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[7] Ginsburgh, L., Manly, M., Schmitt, M. J. (2006). Components of Numeracy. National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy: Cambridge, MA. Retrieved on February 18, 2011from: http://www.statlit.org/pdf/2006 GinsburgManlySchmittNCSALLnumeracy.pdf

[8] Plecki, M.L., McCleery. J., and Knapp, M.S. (2006, October). *Redefining and improving school district governance*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

[9] Plecki, M.L., McCleery. J., and Knapp, M.S. (2006, October). *Redefining and improving school district governance*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

[10] Bell. D., Anderson, K., Fortin, T., Ottomann, J., Rose, S., Simard, L. and Spencer, K. (2004). *Sharing Our success*: *Ten case studies in Aboriginal schooling*. Kelowna, BC: Society for Advancement of Excellence in Education (SEE).
Fulford, G., Daigter, J. M., Stevenson, B., Tolley, C., and Wade, T. (2007). *Sharing our success: More case studies in Aboriginal schooling*. Kelowna, BC: Society for Advancement of Excellence in Education (SEE).

(1) ***Formulation of vision*****:** Having a clear, challenging mental picture about possibilities for improving First-Nations education. A vision clarifies purpose and direction and prompts passion.

(2) ***Collecting and analyzing information***: observation, interaction, interviews, document reviews, statistics, questionnaire, etc.;

(3) Direction setting: Establishing shared goals (preferably long-term), objectives and purposes and communicating them to Stakeholders[11];

(4) ***Resource identification, mobilization and Allocation***: Getting the necessary financial, technological, human and time resources to achieve the shared goals/objectives. The leader should be a good diagnostician in order to identify what resources are needed to achieve a plan or goal;

(5) ***Influence exercising***: motivating and providing incentives (discipline or persuasion) to induce organizational members and other stakeholders to work toward attaining those shared goals; and

(6) ***Monitoring, supporting and providing feedback*** on the plan (e.g. teaching and learning process).

Educator Development- Educators (principals, teachers, teaching assistants etc.) are key players not only in the education process but also in any education reform[12]. Educator development entails:

(1) Ensuring that principals, teachers and other staff members have the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to implement the shared goals of schooling;

(2) Establishing professional learning communities to encourage sharing of ideas, teaching strategies, leadership approaches, teaching materials, curriculum, etc.; and

(3) Providing information to educators and allowing them to participate in developing goals/objectives and implementing strategies in the school as well as in the classroom.

Parent/Community Partnership[13]-consists of:

(1) Participation of parents and community members in setting goals/objectives to be achieved;

(2) Getting parent/community input into any decisions affecting their children; and

(3) Getting community support/cooperation in implementing and monitoring goals/objectives.

The components of First-Nation student success (CFNSS) offer us a critical foundation, as I have already stated earlier, to vision, plan and strategize how best to achieve or contribute to the educational success of First-Nation students success. Though the CFNSS is not exhaustive, it provides the compass we need at the moment as we focus on student success. Thank you for attending this conference and listening to me. I hope that with your commitment we can improve First-Nation student success. It is now time for questions, comments, suggestions, etc.

[11] Alig-Mielcarek, J.M. (2003). *A model of school success: Instructional leadership, academic press and student achievement*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Ohio, U.S.A: The Ohio State University.

[12] Fullan, M. and Stiegelbauer, S. (1991). *The new of meaning of education change (2nd ed.*). New York: Teacher College Press

[13] Reham, H. (2010). *Closing the achievement gap for Aboriginal learners living off-reserve: Key policy issues*. Aboriginal Education Colloquium. University of Saskatchewan, March 15-16