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Aboriginal School Success – A continuing focus

You have likely heard me talk in many places about the academic achievement of our students of Aboriginal ancestry. We have made tremendous progress with the success rates of Aboriginal students, particularly since we began to disaggregate data illustrating their achievement. We are the only province in Canada that collects data explicitly regarding Aboriginal achievement. Since 2001, Aboriginal students' school completion rates have improved from 42% to 48% - welcome improvement but still far short of our targets. One of the ways we seek to help more Aboriginal students be successful in school is through developing Enhancement Agreements between School Districts and Aboriginal communities.

The Ministry recently signed an Enhancement Agreement with School District No. 53 (Okanagan Similkameen) and the Aboriginal communities served by the district. The signing of this agreement was the 29th in the province since Enhancements Agreements were introduced. Several other districts are very close to completing an Enhancement Agreement, which values Aboriginal culture and heritage, and signifies the commitment to working with Aboriginal communities to improve the success of Aboriginal students. An additional sixteen districts have completed drafts; several of these are close to signing.

These districts have built strong relationships which require trust and a willingness to engage directly in conversations with their Aboriginal communities to identify priorities and find ways that work best for

Aboriginal students. A deeper understanding about the needs of Aboriginal students, impediments to learning and factors that influence the way in which Aboriginal students can learn most effectively is developed by fully engaging Aboriginal communities. Enhancement Agreements provide the opportunity for parents, educators, students and Aboriginal communities to work with the Ministry to ensure that Aboriginal students throughout the province continue to improve in school.

Ministry policy on Aboriginal education emphasizes the need for shared decision-making processes between school boards and Aboriginal communities. The process of developing and implementing an Enhancement Agreement must encourage and support the voice of Aboriginal communities so that the agreement can respect their values. Each school district, together with the Aboriginal communities which it serves, develops its own vision of success for Aboriginal students, defined in terms of student outcomes, so that progress can be measured. This vision of success takes a holistic view of the child to support intellectual, social and personal development.

When developing and implementing an Enhancement Agreement, each district needs to be mindful and respectful of the culture of the local Indigenous First Nations and cognizant of the cultural diversity that exists between Aboriginal communities. This diversity is reflected in the challenges that some districts have faced in developing their Enhancement Agreement. One urban district enrolls a high, transient population of Aboriginal students from many different communities, with no First Nations community or local Aboriginal organization within

the district. Another district has nineteen First Nations communities with three distinct languages and separated by considerable distances.

Schools have a key role to play in the development and implementation of the Enhancement Agreement. Since most learning takes place at the classroom level, it is important that administrators, teachers and support staff work with Aboriginal communities to develop goals and identify strategies that they will implement in the classroom. How these are incorporated into school plans should be discussed and communicated in schools and in the Aboriginal communities served by these schools. The leadership role of the principal in this process cannot be overstated.

School districts have seen encouraging results following the completion of their first 5-year Enhancement Agreements. Following are examples of these results:

- School District No. 73 (Kamloops/Thompson) achieved 85% of targets based on 26 target areas over the five year period from 1998-00 to 2003-04. These included significant gains for Aboriginal students in Grade 1 Reading and Writing, and Grade 2 Reading, Writing and Math; FSA Grades 4 and 7 in Reading, Writing and Math.
- School District No. 72 (Campbell River) experienced improvement based on FSA scores in Grade 4 Writing, Grade 4 Numeracy, Grade 7 Writing, and Grade 7 Numeracy. Graduation rates also increased over the same period between 1998-99 and 2003-04
- School District No. 42 (Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows) saw an increase of 24% in the graduation rates of Aboriginal students from 47% in 1998-99 to 66% in 2002-03. Targets were met or exceeded in Grade 4 Numeracy and in Grade 7 Reading and Writing with a 20% gain in reading from 64% to 84% based on FSA results.

- School District No. 79 (Cowichan Valley) Aboriginal students in Grade 7 have seen improvements in all three areas of the Foundation Skills. Dogwood completion rates also improved from 25% in 2001 to 35% in 2006.
- School District No. 68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith) high school completion rates for Aboriginal students have increased by 20 per cent since the district signed its agreement.
- School District No. 71 (Comox Valley) experienced improvement in Grade 4 Reading with an increase of 11% since signing its agreement in 2000. Grade 4 Numeracy increased by 28% from 56% to 83%, and Grade 7 Writing increased from 73% to 82%. Dogwood completion rates reached 62% in 2003 compared with 34.5% in 1997.

As improving the success of Aboriginal students is a key Ministry objective, and many school districts have identified this objective in their accountability contracts, it is expected that all districts will have completed an Enhancement Agreement by the end of the school year. In the interest of all Aboriginal students, districts must continue to work collaboratively with their Aboriginal communities to establish high expectations for Aboriginal students in the development and implementation of their Enhancement Agreements.