

## Third Annual Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Forum

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Advanced Education Minister Murray Coell  
Vancouver  
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I want to thank Larry Grant for welcoming us here to Musqueam traditional territory for our third annual Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Forum, and I want to thank all of you for coming today.

I'm pleased to have the opportunity to spend the day working on what I know will be another productive and interactive forum. A wide array of stakeholder groups are represented today. In fact, 250 people have attended the forums in the last two years.

Just getting that number of people in one room sends a clear message: Together, we are committed to creating a bright future for Aboriginal learners in B.C.

That commitment exists throughout government as we build a new relationship with Aboriginal people and First Nations in British Columbia. The Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation is responsible for outlining the vision and principles of that new relationship. But all levels of government share a role in ensuring we continue to build momentum towards our goals of trust and understanding, respect and reconciliation.

We saw a major development in November when the First Ministers of Canada, the Premier and national Aboriginal leaders met in Kelowna to secure the Transformative Change Accord. Though there has been a change in the federal government, we have reason to be very optimistic about plans to move forward.

In the coming months, we can expect to hear more about the commitment made to improve the quality of life on and off reserve over the next five years. Other priorities include health, housing and economic opportunities.

It also includes closing the education and skills gap that has existed for so long. The federal government has committed to cutting that education gap by half over the next 10 years. That means increasing the number of graduates by 14,800 over the next five years, and producing a total of 37,000 more graduates in the next decade.

Clearly, the Ministry of Advanced Education has a large role in any plans that affect students. Everyone in this province should have the tools to participate in the economic and social fabric of our society. My ministry is responsible for making sure that those tools are accessible and meaningful so that Aboriginal learners have the same opportunities as everyone else.

Let me tell you about some of the things we have been working on.

Just over a year ago, Advanced Education, along with several other signatories, signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding. Many of those signatories are represented here today: the First Nations Education Steering Committee and the First Nations Summit; the Metis Nation of B.C. and the United Native Nations Society; the B.C. University Presidents Council, University College Presidents, and College Presidents; the Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, and the federal government. This groundbreaking MOU confirmed our commitment to work together to improve levels of participation and success for Aboriginal learners in post-secondary education and training in British Columbia.

Last June, we released the review of Aboriginal post-secondary education programs, services and strategies in B.C. The review informs decision-makers in the post-secondary system about Aboriginal needs. And it identifies gaps in programs and services, which we can begin to address.

Since 2001, the Ministry of Advanced Education has provided about \$7.8 million to fund 150 Aboriginal special projects. More than 3,400 Aboriginal learners have benefited from these programs. In September, government increased funding to \$1.8 million for 36 new projects. That was a 22 per cent increase.

The primary purpose of the special projects fund is to increase participation, success and retention rates for Aboriginal learners in British Columbia. The courses and programs offered through these projects reflect Aboriginal training priorities in areas such as justice, trades, teacher training, health, indigenous studies, adult education, social services, natural resources and administration. The result of the projects is that many post-secondary institutions now include and deliver Aboriginal-focused programs as part of their regular course content.

The Ministry of Advanced Education also has several projects underway designed to increase the number of Aboriginal high school graduates going on to higher education. On that we're working with the Ministry of Education to link data sources, resulting in better information on student flow from K-12 to post-secondary education.

But breaking down the barriers to education also means looking at the health of the population. One way that government is committed to understanding the health issues facing Aboriginal people is through the creation of a unique research chair at the University of Northern British Columbia. This past February, Premier Campbell announced the Donald B. Rix B.C. Leadership Chair in Aboriginal Environmental Health. The province has invested \$2.25 million through the Leading Edge Endowment Fund. Dr. Laurie Chan will hold the chair at UNBC, and his research will focus on the relationship of between the health of Aboriginal people and their environment. The results will identify health risks in the population so that prevention and diagnosis can be improved.

There have been several other announcements of Aboriginal leadership and innovation chairs, as well as other program developments across government. But these examples represent the broad spectrum of both existing projects and the latest cross-government initiatives. And they bring us to our work here today.

Building on the consultation and work to date, we have developed a proposed Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Strategy, and we want to get your feedback on it today. Deputy Minister Moura Quayle is going to provide much more detail on the strategy, but I want to touch on the six key elements that form the purpose of why we are here today. They are:

- Seeking additional funding to establish a sustainable and accountable funding mechanism for Aboriginal post-secondary education by developing Aboriginal post-secondary enhancement plans.
- Getting Aboriginal representation at institutions at the governance level.
- Developing a system-wide standard for data collection and tracking.
- Determining new performance measures focused on Aboriginal achievement.
- Working with the federal government to gain further support for Aboriginal learners.
- And finally, revising the Aboriginal policy framework to reflect the strategy so the two work in concert to move us forward towards those goals to increased participation and success rates.

This is an ambitious strategy - one that we envision will be an important part of the Transformative Change Accord. It is through the consultation process at our forums, and because of the willingness of many of you here today, that we are now at this crucial point.

You are driving this strategy because you know what is needed to respond to the challenge of providing support and increasing the number of Aboriginal learners in post-secondary education.

Again, we ask for your wisdom and guidance moving this strategy to the next stage. With the strategy in place, we can develop the framework and ultimately achieve the goals within it.

We know that the Aboriginal population is growing at a faster rate than any other population, and that 50 per cent of that population is under 25 years of age.

Employment statistics do show modest increases. But the unemployment rate for Aboriginals is still almost triple that of non-Aboriginal people in Western Canada. The exception to this higher unemployment is Aboriginal people with higher education, who are employed at the same rate as non-Aboriginals.

With B.C.'s economy continuing to build momentum and the need to increase our workforce, the opportunities for Aboriginal people in B.C. are limitless.

I appreciate you joining us for this forum. I look forward to spending today with you and hearing your perspectives on how to progress. Working together, we can harness our shared commitment to overcoming community disadvantages, and dismantle the barriers that hinder Aboriginal people from sharing in the bounty that this great province has to offer.

Thank you.