

# Pathways for First Nation and Métis Youth in the Oil Sands

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# Map of Wood Buffalo<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Map courtesy of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

## List of Abbreviations

AAAP	Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program
ADCS	Athabasca Delta Community School (Northlands School Division)
AFN	Assembly of First Nations
AHRDA	Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreement (HRSDC)
AHRDS	Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy (HRSDC)
APCA	All Parties Core Agreement
ASEP	Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (HRSDC)
ATC	Athabasca Tribal Council
ATEP	Aboriginal Training to Employment Program (Alberta Employment and Immigration)
BEAHR	Building Environmental Aboriginal Human Resources
CPRN	Canadian Policy Research Networks
CEMA	Cumulative Effects Management Association (Wood Buffalo)
EI	Employment Insurance
ERCB	Energy Resources Conservation Board
FNMI	First Nation, Métis, and Inuit
FNTEP	First Nations Training to Employment Program (Alberta Employment and Immigration)
GED	General Equivalency Diploma
HRSDC	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (formerly Human Resources and Social Development Canada)
IEA	Indian Education Authority (Fort Chipewyan)
INAC	Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
IOP	Integrated Occupational Program
IRC	industry relations corporation
ISSP	Indian Studies Support Program
K and E	Knowledge and Employability (replaced IOP – Integrated Occupational Program)
MCFN	Mikisew Cree First Nation (Fort Chipewyan)
NAABA	Northern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association
NAIT	Northern Alberta Institute of Technology
PSE	post-secondary education
PSEAP	Post-Secondary Education Assistance Program
PSSSP	Post-Secondary Student Support Program
RAP	Registered Apprenticeship Program
RCAP	Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
TLE	treaty land entitlement
TOWES	Test of Workplace Essential Skills
UCEPP	University and College Entrance Preparation Program
WBML	Wood Buffalo Métis locals
WBPAT	Wood Buffalo Partners in Aboriginal Training

## Executive Summary

This study looks at the political, social, and economic influences on First Nation<sup>2</sup> and Métis youth's attitudes toward further learning and higher levels of education in the municipality of Wood Buffalo, Alberta, the site of rapid industrial development related to the oil sands in the past few decades. Linked to this, we explore some of the institutional and policy structures that support or hinder the ability of First Nation and Métis youth to find pathways leading to sustained employment with decent pay, good working conditions, and career potential.

The first five sections of this report set the context by presenting an historical overview of government-Aboriginal relations, a review of statistics related to education and training of the Aboriginal identity population in Canada and Alberta, recent literature focused on Aboriginal youth, and a description of relevant education and training policies and issues. The last two sections present our analysis of 65 interviews and focus groups involving 91 individuals, conducted between March and October 2008. Interview participants consisted of a number of Aboriginal community members, including youth aged 15 to 30 years; high school and college educators, including First Nation and Métis educators; representatives of government; leaders and staff members of local First Nation and Métis organizations; as well as individuals involved in various capacities with local agencies and corporations.

Our historical overview suggests that jobs alone are unlikely to eliminate the inequities experienced by Aboriginal communities – inequities that stem, in large part, from historical relations between governments and Aboriginal people. Further, while dependency and economic underdevelopment are unacceptable to Aboriginal people, increased economic development is also seen as problematic by some community members concerned over the growing environmental impacts, continued loss of cultural ways, and worsening social problems (e.g. lack of housing, homelessness, substance abuse) that have accompanied large-scale oil sands development in Wood Buffalo. It is important to acknowledge these tensions for First Nation and Métis youth when thinking about their pursuit of education and work pathways.

Statistics suggest that, while the Aboriginal identity population in Wood Buffalo is doing “better” in terms of educational attainment and employment than their counterparts in other parts of the province, it is noteworthy that they continue to lag behind Alberta's non-Aboriginal population. In research, the experience of First Nation and Métis youth is often analyzed from a deficit perspective; for example, authors have highlighted various factors adversely impacting Canada's Aboriginal youth, including low educational attainment and household income, high rates of teen pregnancy, high rates of incarceration, and high rates of residential and school mobility. However, this portrayal of youth is only useful, in our view, if understood within the context of historical colonization and contemporary uneven power relations and if accompanied by greater discussion of institutional opportunities and constraints.

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<sup>2</sup> In many instances, we use the term “First Nation” rather than “First Nations” in this report. This is to infer that the youth, people, students, individuals, schools, communities, reserves, etc. being referenced are associated with specific sovereign, distinct entities in the Canadian context. The term “First Nations” is a more general descriptor.

A look at federal and provincial policies and programs related to First Nations and Métis education and training suggests that, although there is a plethora of policies and programs, issues around access to and control over education and training persist for Aboriginal people. Further, outcomes do not seem commensurate with the level of investment by the various partners. In Wood Buffalo, industry has become an influential player in education and training due to its stated interest in developing capacity within local Aboriginal communities and working with them to develop a pool of skilled labour. However, increased reliance on industry partners appears to foster inequities within and across communities and to result in a more fragmented approach to education and training in the region.

Our interview data suggest other issues related to education and training as follows:

### **Challenges in K-12 Education**

*Quality of schooling* in Wood Buffalo is a key concern according to many of the First Nation and Métis interview participants with whom we engaged.<sup>3</sup> There is a perceived hierarchy of schools, with the small, northern schools operated by Northlands School Division being viewed as providing a low quality of schooling compared with those in larger centres such as Fort McMurray. Factors seen as contributing to the poor quality of education for First Nation and Métis students in rural schools include:

- Low expectations of teachers, lack of discipline/structure in the school
- School staff turnover; insufficient preparation of staff to teach in the province's small, northern schools
- Low levels of parental involvement both at home or in the school
  - Influences on parental involvement include the legacy of residential schooling and work demands on parents employed by industry
- Addiction issues in northern communities, which have an adverse affect on education for First Nation and Métis youth
- Inadequate educational facilities/resources in small communities, e.g.
  - declining student enrolments; underfunding of education
  - few staff with the expertise to deal with students who have special needs
- Too few Aboriginal teachers
- “Social pass” – promoting children to the next grade before they are academically ready
- Streaming of Aboriginal high school students into non-post-secondary courses

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<sup>3</sup> First Nations and Métis individuals make up a significant portion of our interview participants, composing a majority of the students, parents, and community members with whom we spoke. A portion of the education professionals and employers whom we engaged in the region are of First Nations or Métis descent, and representatives and staff of various Aboriginal organizations in Wood Buffalo are for the most part also First Nations or Métis individuals.

Various *challenges for First Nation and Métis youth in urban schools* were identified as key concerns by our interview participants. Some communities have no choice but to send children to a larger centre to access secondary schooling; Conklin, where presently there is no high school, is one such community. For many families, sending children to urban centres for education is undertaken with the presumption that it will lead to better results. However, several interview participants suggested that attending school in Fort McMurray or another urban centre does not necessarily ensure high school completion. Factors seen as contributing to poor educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in urban schools include:

- Young age of students when they leave their families and communities to attend high school
- Lack of resources (financial and other) to fully support youth who are staying in boarding homes
- Aboriginal youth's experiences of racism

*Inadequate career planning* is an important theme stemming from our interviews with educators and learners in Wood Buffalo:

- Students appear to be more focused on completing high school than planning for post-secondary education; students may be unaware of the consequences of their course selections.
  - More girls than boys state a desire for post-secondary education and professional careers.
  - There is a lack of professional role models for First Nation and Métis youth in school settings.
- First Nation and Métis students are aware of local employment/career opportunities, yet very few are in industry-related career preparation programs (e.g. the high school apprenticeship program) because they do not meet the entrance requirements.
- There appears to be a lack of career development opportunities overall for First Nation and Métis youth in Wood Buffalo.

## **Challenges in Post-18<sup>4</sup> Education and Training**

*Issues concerning upgrading* were voiced by many interview participants:

- There are large numbers of First Nation and, to a lesser extent, Métis high school leavers who engage in lengthy upgrading.
- There appears to be little recognition of prior learning in upgrading programs in the region.
- There are multiple funding sources that youth are required to navigate as well as differences in funding availability between communities.
- Stringent funding criteria of government programs and insufficient levels of funding relative to the cost of living are also concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> We use the term “post-18” to refer to education and training for youth aged 18 years or older.

*Control over education and training* is an issue in Wood Buffalo, reflected in part in the tensions between what communities see as their training needs and which programs are actually being provided. Other concerns regarding the control over education and training include:

- An over-reliance on industry to address specific training needs
- The need for not only upgrading, but college-level programs in communities such as Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, and Janvier
- An almost exclusive focus on job readiness, employability, and entrepreneurialism with few initiatives aimed at personal and community healing

*Other issues in post-18 education and training* mentioned by interview participants include:

- The need for more cultural programming
- Uneven access to funding/services across communities and Aboriginal groups (i.e. Métis students are not eligible for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC] post-secondary education funding)
- High staff turnover in Aboriginal organizations and college learning centres
- Lack of articulation (i.e. transferability) of college programs with other post-secondary programs
- Low program completion rates and employment rates, particularly for First Nation and Métis youth involved in short-term training

## **Challenges in Work**

*Gaining employment with large industrial employers* is important for many First Nation and Métis interviewees. Barriers to employment can be seen as related to:

- Industry tests (e.g. Test of Workplace Essential Skills [TOWES]), which often screen out individuals, even those with a completed Grade 12
- The low value placed on prior learning (e.g. no recognition for Indigenous knowledge, on-the-job work experience, or other informal learning)
- The need for a driver's license
- The requirement of drug testing
- The necessity of having to leave one's home community (housing and family support) for the purpose of work

Finally, there appears to be a predominance of *contract and labour* work for Aboriginal people in Wood Buffalo.

## Conclusion

Recognizing the complexity of the Wood Buffalo context, we offer the following observations based on our case study.

***Lack of knowledge:*** There is a need for more research pertaining to Aboriginal education, training, and work that is driven by the concerns of First Nation and Métis people. As noted in a report by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), there is a gap between Aboriginal perspectives and government reporting frameworks with respect to indicators of learning outcomes. These different perspectives suggest that current indicators may be irrelevant for Aboriginal peoples and therefore insufficient for informing government policy.

***Racism:*** There is a greater need to acknowledge and address the individual, systemic, and institutional racism faced by First Nation and Métis youth and adults in Wood Buffalo in formal education, training, and work.

***Capacity:*** There are evident inequities in the organizational capacity of First Nation and Métis representative groups as compared with governments and large multinational corporations in Wood Buffalo. Currently, capacity building in the region tends not to be a *bottom-up* process involving clarification of the assets that communities already have and strengthening members' capacity to act on their own values and priorities. Important for communities in Wood Buffalo are collaborative efforts that can address capacity differences through recognizing that maintaining relationships and partnerships requires persistence, effort, time, resources, and committed, skilled, and sustained leadership. Consultation and direct involvement with First Nation and Métis communities is critical to the development of effective programming, from project planning and inception to service delivery and evaluation.

***Holistic, integrative programs:*** Education and training should be conceived in terms of how they contribute to the needs of the whole person and community as well as their role in addressing economic needs (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). At present, there is little integration of education and training with other First Nation and Métis community development initiatives.

# Pathways for First Nation and Métis Youth in the Oil Sands

## 1.0 Introduction

This is the final report in Canadian Policy Research Networks' (CPRN) project on *Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market*. The purposes of the project are:

- To better understand the paths that young people take, from high school through to regular participation in the labour market.
- To identify institutional and policy structures that appear to support or hinder young people's ability to find pathways that lead to sustained employment with decent pay, good working conditions, and career potential.
- To examine attitudes and underlying values about the different pathways that are or could be available, how they are shaped, and how they influence choices.
- To develop policy options to improve the ability of young people to identify, select, and navigate pathways that lead to "success."

Eight studies in the series and a synthesis report have been completed and published as follows:

- *Career Development Services for Canadian Youth: Access, Adequacy and Accountability*, by Donnalee Bell and Lynn Bezanson, July 2006.
- *Pathways of Alberta Youth through the Post-Secondary System into the Labour Market, 1996-2003*, by Harvey Krahn and Julie Hudson, November 2006.
- *Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market: An Overview of High School Initiatives*, by Alison Taylor, April 2007.
- *Trading Up – High School and Beyond: Five Illustrative Canadian Case Studies*, by Mame McCrea Silva and Susan M. Phillips, May 2007.
- *Education-to-Labour Market Pathways of Canadian Youth: Findings from the Youth in Transition Survey*, by Darcy Hango and Patrice de Broucker, November 2007.
- *From School to the Labour Market in Québec: Analysis of Student Trajectories in Terms of Previous Learning Path and Early Labour Market Experience*, coordination by Jean-Claude Bousquet, February 2008.
- *Implementing the School-to-Work Transition in Québec*, by Pierre Doray, Louise Ménard, and Anissa Adouane, March 2008.
- *Connecting Supply and Demand in Canada's Youth Labour Market*, by Richard Brisbois, Larry Orton, and Ron Saunders, April 2008.
- *Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market: A Synthesis Report*, by Ron Saunders, September 2008.

While some of these reports have referred to Aboriginal youth in discussions of pathways for Canadian youth overall (e.g. Hango and de Broucker, 2007; Krahn and Hudson, 2006), none has focused specifically on Aboriginal peoples. This study addresses this gap. We look at the political, social, and economic influences on First Nation and Métis youth's attitudes toward further education and careers. Linked to this, we explore some of the institutional structures and policies that support or hinder the ability of Aboriginal youth to find pathways leading to sustained employment with decent pay, good working conditions, and career potential.

Our main research questions are:

- What is the impact of the high demand for workers in the Wood-Buffalo region in Alberta on First Nation and Métis students?
- What do First Nation and Métis youth know about the labour market and options for post-secondary education?
- Do youth feel they have a choice in careers?
- What plans do they have regarding further education and careers? What are the influences on these plans? Are there differences within and across communities?
- Do First Nation and Métis youth make trade-offs in working for industry? If so, what are these?
- Are the pathways for First Nation and Métis youth in communities in Wood-Buffalo different from those for youth in other parts of the province and country?
- What supports are in place for youth to complete educational requirements? Are opportunities similar for young men and young women?

### **1.1 The Case Site: Wood Buffalo, Alberta**

The regional municipality of Wood Buffalo is located in northeastern Alberta and is the largest municipality in Canada by area. Underlying this 68,454-square-kilometre (26,430 square miles) land mass lie vast oil sand deposits, also known as the Athabasca Tar Sands, helping to make the region one of the fastest growing industrial areas in Canada.

The population of the municipality more than doubled from 42,847 in 1999 to 89,147 in 2007. This includes the following urban and rural service areas that are the focus of this study: Fort McMurray (population of 65,400), Fort Chipewyan (1,007), Fort McKay (737), Anzac (714), Conklin (299), Janvier (178), and First Nation reserves (1,036).<sup>5</sup> It also includes a “shadow population” of 18,572 people. This shadow population includes individuals who reside in rural work camps or campgrounds and those who lived in hotels in Fort McMurray for a minimum of 30 days.

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<sup>5</sup> This information is from the municipal census 2007, accessed online at: [http://woodbuffalo.ab.ca/municipal-government/media\\_releases/2008/mar27.census.asp?subnav=161](http://woodbuffalo.ab.ca/municipal-government/media_releases/2008/mar27.census.asp?subnav=161).

The rapid growth has placed significant strains on the municipal infrastructure. There is a shortage of affordable housing, a lack of daycare facilities, significant numbers of homeless people, problematic access to medical care, and increasing levels of drug and alcohol abuse (Alberta Government, 2006; Archibald, 2006; Nichols Applied Management, 2006). There are also high employee turnover rates in the public sector, largely because of the high cost of living.

Aboriginal people made up 12.3% (6,465) of the population in Wood Buffalo (compared with 5.8% in Alberta overall) according to the 2006 Census (Statistics Canada, 2007). This is the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in any census metropolitan area/census area in the province and includes five First Nation communities represented by the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC), communities near reserves with large numbers of Métis represented by the Wood Buffalo Métis Locals Association, plus individuals of Aboriginal heritage whose membership is not with these five First Nations or Métis locals (e.g. non-status individuals or those with membership in a Métis group or First Nation elsewhere in Canada).<sup>6</sup> The Aboriginal population in Wood Buffalo is diverse; an increasing number of First Nation and Métis people in the region live in Fort McMurray and hold jobs not only in the oil sands industry but in positions ranging from professional ones in government/Aboriginal organizations to retail jobs in a fast-growing hospitality industry. A number of Aboriginal people in the region speak their Aboriginal language, and, while increasingly challenging in the context of large-scale industrial development, some First Nation and Métis people remain involved in harvesting and other self-sustaining activities.

Wood Buffalo has been the site of oil sands development since the 1970s and, as a result of growth in this industry, has outperformed the rest of Alberta and Canada in terms of employment and unemployment rates in recent years (Brisbois and Saunders, 2005). As of 2006, more than a dozen multinational corporations were involved in oil sands development with numerous joint ventures established. Corporations with developments in the area include Syncrude, Suncor, Shell, Imperial Oil, Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Encana, Chevron, Synenco Energy, OPTI, and Nexen (formerly Canadian Occidental Petroleum Limited). Oil sands development budgets totalled \$8.8 billion in 2006, accounting for 62% of the value of all major projects in the province (Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry, 2006: 1). This development has therefore been described as “bigger than the Klondike and the California Gold Rush rolled into one” (Open Mind, 2006).<sup>7</sup>

Given the economic context in northern Alberta over the past several decades, one would expect to find excellent career opportunities for First Nation and Métis youth. Most large oil companies in Wood Buffalo have introduced programs to recruit and train Aboriginal workers, and some specify hiring targets. For example, Suncor set a workforce target of around 12% for Aboriginal employees based on regional demographics but actually employed between 7% and 8% in 2008 (personal communication, Suncor staff, May 2008). As part of the conditions for government assistance in

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<sup>6</sup> The five First Nations that compose the ATC are the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, Fort McKay First Nation, Fort McMurray 468 First Nation, and the Mikisew Cree. There are significant numbers of Métis living in Fort McMurray, Fort McKay, Fort Chipewyan, Chard (Janvier), Willow Lake (Anzac), and Conklin. The number of individuals considered non-status is unclear. There are very few Inuit in the municipality, and therefore we refer specifically to First Nations and Métis in the report.

<sup>7</sup> However, the pace of growth appears to be slowing due to the current recession as billions of dollars of oil sands and energy-related projects are being deferred by oil companies (Sankey, 2008).

its early days, Syncrude signed an agreement with the federal and provincial governments that required this corporation to help Aboriginal people find work within the oil sands operation (Slowey, 2008).<sup>8</sup> The company produces an annual Aboriginal Review that documents the company's Aboriginal relations activities (including education and training, and employment) within and beyond Wood Buffalo.<sup>9</sup>

In 1995, 79% of Syncrude's Aboriginal employees were skilled craft and trades workers (almost half of these were heavy equipment operators), 4.5% were semi-skilled manual workers, and 12.5% were professionals. No Aboriginal employees were in the top two occupational levels of management (Voyageur, 1997). In 2008, of approximately 65 Aboriginal hires between January and October, approximately 50 (77%) were heavy equipment operators and most others were in the trades (personal communication with Syncrude staff, October 2008). Most corporate employers in the municipality have set a minimum education level of Grade 12 for employment, in part to discourage youth from leaving high school early.

We began this case study by conferring with staff from the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) and Métis Local 1935 in Fort McMurray regarding our research plans.<sup>10</sup> Data collection involved visits throughout Wood Buffalo, including to the city of Fort McMurray, to each of the five First Nations, and to communities with significant numbers of Métis. Sixty-five semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving 91 individuals were conducted between March and October 2008. Participants included First Nation and Métis youth aged 15 to 30 years,<sup>11</sup> high school and college educators (some of whom are Aboriginal themselves), representatives from government, First Nation and Métis organizations, community groups and agencies, as well as large corporations. The majority of interviews (41) were audiotaped and transcribed. Data analysis involved two of the authors reading over the transcripts, sharing ideas about themes arising from the data, and selecting quotes that reflect these themes. The ATC and Wood Buffalo Métis provided input into the results of data analysis prior to our finalizing the written report. We attempted to speak to a broad range of youth in this research; however, there is an underrepresentation of those who are not engaged in education or work at all. However, other research participants were able to provide perspectives on this group.

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<sup>8</sup> Corporations are also likely to view relationships with local First Nations as an investment since the more established these relations are, the better the chances are of avoiding costly environmental hearings related to new developments (Slowey, 2008). Also see Voyageur (1997) for a discussion of the impetus behind Aboriginal employment initiatives.

<sup>9</sup> The 2007 Aboriginal Review was accessed November 2008 at [www.syncrude.ca/users/FolderData/%7B3932A7A4-6AE4-4E91-98D2-86BE6678E738%7D/2007\\_aboriginal\\_review.pdf](http://www.syncrude.ca/users/FolderData/%7B3932A7A4-6AE4-4E91-98D2-86BE6678E738%7D/2007_aboriginal_review.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> We have communicated with these groups at various times throughout the research, including in December 2008 to discuss the draft final report.

<sup>11</sup> We include a wide age range in the category of youth partly because, during the fieldwork, it was apparent that a number of older students were enrolling in upgrading to achieve their high school diploma. While we tried to adhere to this range, we interviewed one student who was 32 years old and in upgrading. The notion of linear transitions from a stage called "youth" to a stage called "adulthood" has been challenged by academic writers and warrants closer scrutiny in this context also.

## 2.0 Colonization and a Changing Relationship between Governments and Aboriginal People

In discussing shifting government-Aboriginal relations over time, Slowey (2008) suggests that “fur trade colonialism” gave way to “welfare colonialism” as the Canadian state turned attention to appropriating the resources of Canada’s North, thereby impacting the ability of Aboriginal peoples to remain self-sufficient. While the federal government has historically tended to play a large role in the lives of communities through the activities of Indian agents and social assistance programs, Slowey adds that, since 1985, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) has been transferring administrative control of education, law enforcement, commerce, health, and housing to First Nations in Canada. Today, the federal and provincial governments remain very active in the lives of Aboriginal people, in particular through the development of programs that encourage Aboriginal participation in the global marketplace, such as the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy (AHRDS). At the same time, there has been a noticeable shift from government provision of programs toward partnerships between First Nations, Métis, both levels of government, and industry.

For the Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN), the largest First Nation in the region, changing relations with governments is also tied to a treaty land entitlement (TLE)<sup>12</sup> finalized in 1986, a settlement that provided greater economic independence for the MCFN (Slowey, 2008). The history of this TLE provides a sense of changing government-corporate-First Nations relations in Canada’s West. Although Treaty 8 was signed in 1899, a number of First Nations did not receive full entitlement to land promised within the signed treaty. Mikisew Cree’s TLE was only settled in 1986 after negotiations that lasted 15 years. Slowey (2008) suggests that a settlement was spurred by provincial and federal government interest in creating a stable political environment in northern Alberta so that resource development and expansion could take place. The TLE awarded the MCFN 12,280 acres of land (none of which is in the oil sands) and \$26.6 million. Since signing the TLE, the MCFN has been expanding the scope of its governance. Although it is still a band within the Indian Act, not a formal self-governing First Nation, the MCFN signed a five-year renewable Canada/First Nations funding agreement in the late 1990s that allows the group to manage its budget with greater authority over program delivery and funding allocation (Slowey, 2008). The MCFN has also become a player in local industrial activity with its group of companies. The First Nation-operated businesses employ close to 200 local people, which translates into an annual impact on the community of roughly \$5 million (Slowey, 2008).

The nature and extent of land entitlements for Métis, a distinct Aboriginal people recognized by the *Constitution Act, 1982*, is less clear as the majority of case law and judicial and academic commentary has focused on the rights of First Nations peoples (Isaac, 2008). Less than a handful of decisions have been rendered by the Supreme Court of Canada expressly considering the rights of the Métis.<sup>13</sup> In the fall of 2006, the Métis in northeastern Alberta filed a statement of

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<sup>12</sup> TLE claims are a type of specific claim arising when a First Nation asserts that the Government of Canada did not provide the reserve land promised under treaty. In Canada, some First Nations have not received any of the reserve land they were promised; others have not received the correct amount of land.

<sup>13</sup> In Ontario, Steve and Roddy Powley, two Métis men, argued that section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* protects the right of Métis to hunt for food. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada, which ruled in favour of the Powleys in September 2003. In its decision, the Supreme Court found that the Métis community

claim against the federal and provincial governments for failure to consult in a meaningful way with the Wood Buffalo Métis locals and their member organizations, in the same manner as with other First Nation stakeholder groups. Specifically, the claim sought the development of a formal consultation approach such as the All Party Core Agreement (discussed below), which was signed by governments, industry, and First Nations associated with the Athabasca Tribal Council. Métis locals in Wood Buffalo express a desire to be part of a consultative working group in accordance with the Constitution of Canada so that they can pursue an intense examination of the cumulative effects of oil sands development for their members.

## 2.1 Changes to Way of Life for Aboriginal People in Alberta's North

Changes in relations between government and Aboriginal groups are closely tied to social and cultural changes in communities over time. For example, while the 19th century fur trade drew Aboriginal economies into the European economic sphere, Aboriginal peoples continued to rely on a mixed economy of hunting and trapping for personal purposes and commercial trapping related to the fur trade. However, Slowey (2008) writes that beginning in the 1920s, and especially after the 1940s, things began to change. Many Cree, for instance, were forced to seek wage-earning jobs due to reduced fur prices, increased competition for furs from White trappers, and government regulations that restricted access to game animals. More recently, a shift in the economy in the region to oil in the 1960s and 70s, and the global demand for these resources, has meant that First Nation and Métis people have been drawn into the economic agendas of governments, industries, and world markets (Slowey, 2008).

A number of our interview participants noted some of the changes they have witnessed as a result of fast-paced oil and gas development in the region. For example, a Métis woman from Conklin says this:

When we first lived here, we didn't have electricity or heating ... you know, having electricity and gas [now] your living situation becomes a lot easier but a lot of our traditional ways are not there anymore. Harder to go, to find a spot for berry picking, where we used to pick there's either a big pile of gravel or a cut line, you know? The land is so disturbed, it's unbelievable ... When I was growing up, my grandfather was a real trapper, he'd go out and for a month he'd stay out on his trap line and he'd come back with lots of fur. Then he'd go and sell his fur and bring back loads of groceries, and now I don't think a person can survive on trapping. The land is too disturbed.

She adds that younger people are growing up with this new reality but older people are "struggling with that." Similarly, an interviewee from Fort McKay suggests that, while the youth seem to have adapted to the current level of industrial development around them, older community members who are used to living off the land are concerned about being unable to do so, given that "half the trap lines are leased out to different companies now."

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in and around Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, has an Aboriginal right, protected by section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, to hunt for food. More recently, in January 2009, Métis harvesting rights were confirmed by the Manitoba Provincial Court in the case of *R. v. Goodon* (Henton, 2009).

The current economic context in Wood Buffalo presents a tension for many First Nation and Métis people in that, while dependency and economic underdevelopment are unacceptable, a future characterized by unfettered resource extraction is also unacceptable. For example, one Janvier resident comments:

I could work in gas and oil. But I don't want to. Because to me, I'd rather see my beautiful trees and the animals ... since I've moved here, I've seen less and less animals, less and less birds ... We have to move forward but do we have to move forward at the expense of our planet?

Our interviews confirm Slowey's (2008) suggestion that Aboriginal communities are somewhat internally divided over economic development strategies. A few interviewees questioned whether the environmental and social costs of rapid economic development are too high. In August 2008, Fort Chipewyan hosted an international "Water Keepers III" conference to discuss the impacts of tar sands development on water.<sup>14</sup> First Nation and other residents in Fort Chipewyan have raised concerns about the deteriorating quality and quantity of water and unusually high cancer rates in the community. The negative impacts of industry are also perceived as social, extending to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in terms of how work limits the time for community and family activities and how pressures in the region contribute to the relatively high rates of homelessness, substance abuse, and crime.

The Wood Buffalo Métis locals (WBML) have recently begun to more loudly voice concerns about development in the region. As participants in the Cumulative Effects Management Association (CEMA),<sup>15</sup> Métis have expressed concern about the social and environmental implications of oil sands development. However, according to a WBML representative (personal communication, December 2008), Métis in the region lack the organizational capacity to lay out their concerns in a meaningful way and also feel that industry representatives have too much voting power in CEMA.

Despite disparate views and differences within and across communities in terms of willingness and capacity to engage with industry, many Aboriginal residents of Wood Buffalo feel that industrial development will continue with or without First Nation and Métis people reaping economic benefits, and therefore there is a need to engage with industry. As noted, both federal and provincial governments have also promoted, and in some cases required, partnerships with industry through their policies and programs (discussed further below). But, as Slowey (2008) suggests, jobs alone will not eliminate the inequities experienced by First Nation communities, inequities that stem in large part from historical relations between government and Aboriginal groups. A combination of community development, access to training and jobs, institutional support, and community healing is proposed as a way forward (Slowey, 2008).

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on this conference, see [www.canadians.org/publications/CP/2008/autumn/CP\\_autumn\\_08\\_11.pdf](http://www.canadians.org/publications/CP/2008/autumn/CP_autumn_08_11.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> For more information, see [www.cemaonline.ca/](http://www.cemaonline.ca/).

## 2.2. A Long History of Residential Schooling

Government policies of assimilation enacted, in part, through education have had a lasting impact on First Nation and Métis communities. On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Harper, on behalf of the federal Government and all Canadians, sought forgiveness for a specific set of social policies by apologizing to former students of Indian residential schools in the House of Commons. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as part of the 2007 *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* to provide former students and anyone affected by Indian residential schools with an opportunity to come forward and share their personal experiences as part of the healing process.

In different historical periods, children in Fort Chipewyan have experienced schooling operated by the church, Indian Affairs, and the provincial government. Up until the 1970s, large numbers of Métis children were educated in the Anglican mission day school in Fort Chipewyan, a circumstance that allowed students to stay at home. Cree and Dene children, on the other hand, were required by legislation to attend Holy Angels Residential School, operated by the Grey Nuns and Oblates from 1874 until the 1970s. While not mandated by law, Métis children also attended Holy Angels Residential School. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families for the purpose of education served to disrupt the complex system of lifelong learning that had operated for generations within families and communities.

Aboriginal people in Wood Buffalo continue to see education as crucially important; yet, it is an area where there has been little devolution of control to First Nations. In 1985, the Mikisew Cree First Nation and the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation sought increased control over delivery of education, forming the Indian Education Authority (IEA) (Slowey, 2008). Two years later, the IEA signed a tripartite tuition agreement with the federal and provincial governments that allowed the Authority to administer tuition agreements and pay the province for education services provided by the Athabasca Delta Community School (ADCS), and to monitor and review the quality of education delivered. The power of the IEA has since been diminished, a factor that some interviewees identified as contributing to poor educational outcomes in the community.

A number of interview participants suggest that the effects of a long history of paternalistic education policies continue to be felt at the local level. For example, a long time non-Aboriginal resident of Fort Chipewyan comments:

From 1920 to 1969 the church operated [a residential school] here under federal policy ... Fast forward to 1973 when the mission was closed and people were forced to raise their own children then, for the first time in 50 years ... so there were no family models to build on. Kids had grown up in dormitories, bullied by the older kids and mistreated and underfed and everything ... Then in the late 60s, they started sending kids to Edmonton and places like that ... people my age, now in their late 50s, were so disillusioned by that experience – to spend 10 years here in the school and then be shipped off to the city to find out that you're five grades behind. And the racism was extreme in those days ... and at the same time, the economy collapsed so that by 1980 we had hit 85 to 90% unemployment. And with that came the alcoholism combined with the pent-up rage of generations of being oppressed ... Through that period I lost about 20 close friends who died drinking.

Another interviewee refers to the “lost Elders” and lost parents in communities that are the result of residential schools and discusses the school’s effect on her own life:

[C]oming from the residential school, you know, I was fearful of everything, fearful of expressing myself, fearful of even asking a question to anybody, just living in fear ... I was offered a job at Syncrude and I thought “Holy, I’m gonna make lots of money, I’m gonna be rich. And so I took the position ... and for the first six months I was there, not only did I feel bad about [the environmental impact of] what I was doing but I was also going through a lot of flashbacks from being in residential school. Because I had an employee number, and I was this number [at Syncrude]. And jumping on the bus at six o’clock in the morning, walking into the building, going up to my office, and I had a job description and my job description was only what I could do. But when you come from an Aboriginal community, job descriptions don’t mean very much because if you’re there and if you have time, you do it ... Anyway, I ended up never going back.

This history of schooling is one aspect of understanding some of the ongoing challenges in First Nation and Métis communities in Wood Buffalo since pathways for young people today are arguably shaped intergenerationally by past and present government policies and by the experiences of parents, grandparents, and other community members.

### **3.0 Relevant Statistics: First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Youth**

2006 Census data indicate socio-demographic features of the Aboriginal population<sup>16</sup> that are noteworthy in the context of this study. First, the Aboriginal identity population in Canada is much younger than the non-Aboriginal population – half of the Aboriginal population is under the age of 25 compared with one-third of the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2007). In the Wood Buffalo municipality, children and youth 24 years of age or under make up 44% of the Aboriginal population. Further, according to the 2001 Census, the birth rate of the “Registered Indian” population was almost double that of the Canadian population overall (Steffler, 2008). This higher rate is reflected in Alberta as well where the Aboriginal identity population grew 20% between 2001 and 2006.<sup>17</sup> A recent study suggests that one in four First Nation children and 22% of Métis children under the age of six lived with mothers aged 15 to 24 (compared with 8% of non-Aboriginal children), and 41% of First Nation children under six were part of a single-parent family (Statistics Canada, 2008b).

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<sup>16</sup> Three census questions refer to Aboriginal status: (1) Are you North American Indian, Métis, or Inuit? (2) Are you a member of an Indian Band or First Nation? (3) Are you a Treaty or Registered Indian as defined by the Indian Act? The Indian Act governs status for First Nations people in Canada and status can be gained or lost depending upon a range of circumstances (Steffler, 2008). Also noteworthy is that a small number of First Nations do not participate in the census. Part of the growth in the Métis population in recent years can be attributed to an increase in the number of people self-identifying as Métis (“ethnic mobility”). Thus, with respect to the census, it is important to note that Aboriginal “identity” is not fixed.

<sup>17</sup> This information was presented by Doug Norris at a Statistics Canada conference in Edmonton called “Strength in Numbers” in March 2008.

As authors of previous CPRN pathways reports suggest (Hango and de Broucker, 2007; Krahn and Hudson, 2006), educational attainment for Aboriginal groups is lower than for the overall population in Canada.<sup>18</sup> However, it is important to break this down by group and location since 54% of Aboriginal people lived in urban areas in 2006. When considering the percentage of individuals aged 25 to 34 with a post-secondary diploma (including a trade certification), First Nation members living on-reserve were least represented (around 28%), followed by First Nation members living off-reserve (40%), Métis (47%) and the non-Aboriginal population (63%). Correspondingly, the proportion of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit individuals in Alberta without a high school diploma was higher than for the non-Aboriginal population, although again, this varies by group and location (Table 1).

**Table 1. 20- to 24-Year-Olds without a High School Diploma, 2006 Census, Alberta<sup>19</sup>**

First Nation living on-reserve	67%
First Nation living off-reserve	46%
Métis	29%
Non-Aboriginal	16%

Comparing the educational attainment of Wood Buffalo’s Aboriginal identity population aged 25 to 34 years with the Aboriginal identity population in Alberta overall (Table 2), it is clear that a lower percentage (22.3% in Wood Buffalo compared with 33.3%) had no certificate, diploma, or degree in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Not surprisingly, given the nature of employment opportunities, a higher proportion of the Aboriginal identity population aged 25 to 34 years (17.8% in Wood Buffalo compared with 12.4% in Alberta) had an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma. Approximately two-thirds of the holders of this certification in Wood Buffalo were male. Conversely, fewer males than females in Wood Buffalo (4% compared with 8.4%) had a university certificate or degree.

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<sup>18</sup> A recent report by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) focuses on redefining success for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, arguing that measures like educational attainment alone are not reflective of the holistic, lifelong nature of learning as it is perceived and practised by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Holistic lifelong learning models are currently being created for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; at present, these learning models are “living documents that will be revised and adapted as First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, organizations, institutions, researchers and governments continue to explore the models’ efficacy as tools for positive change” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007: 18). We acknowledge the limited focus of this report on formal education and paid employment and the need for a broader perspective in research related to Aboriginal learning.

<sup>19</sup> This information was provided by Nancy Zukewich at a Statistics Canada conference in Edmonton called “Strength in Numbers” in March 2008.

**Table 2. Educational Attainment, Aboriginal Identity Population Aged 25-34 in Wood Buffalo and Alberta, 2006**

	Wood Buffalo			Alberta		
	% of Total	Male	Female	% of Total	Male	Female
No certificate, diploma, or degree	22.3	15.8	28.4	33.3	35.5	31.3
High school certificate or equivalent	32	32.7	31.6	25	25.8	24.3
Apprenticeship or trades certificate	17.8	22.8	11.6	12.4	16.5	8.4
College, CEGEP, or other non-university certificate or diploma	20.8	22.8	20	19.6	15	24
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	1	2	0	2.9	2	3.8
University certificate or degree	6.1	4	8.4	6.7	5.1	8.2

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada (2008a).

The most common field of study for the male Aboriginal identity population aged 15 and older in Wood Buffalo was “architecture, engineering and related technologies,” with almost three-quarters of their educational credentials in this area (Statistics Canada, 2008a).<sup>20</sup> For females, the most common field of study was “business, management and public administration,” although a smaller proportion of credentials (just under one-quarter) was in this area. The top three occupational categories for Aboriginal people in Western Canada were sales and service; trades, transport, and equipment operators; and business, finance, and administration (Luffman and Sussman, 2007). Aboriginal people were overrepresented in occupations requiring a high school diploma or less and underrepresented in occupations requiring a university degree. In 2006, the most common occupational category for men aged 15 and older in Wood Buffalo was “trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations” (including 55.5% of males), while, for women, the most common category was “sales and service occupations” (35.7% of females) (Luffman and Sussman, 2007).

In Alberta overall, the unemployment rate for the non-Aboriginal population aged 25 to 54 in 2006 was much lower (3.1%) than the rate for First Nation (17.5%), Inuit (8%), and Métis individuals (5.9%).<sup>21</sup> And while educational attainment for the Aboriginal identity population is higher in Wood Buffalo than in Alberta overall, their unemployment rate is still higher than the rate for the non-Aboriginal population. For those aged 25 to 54 in 2006, the unemployment rate was 2.5% for non-Aboriginal individuals compared with 7.8% for Aboriginal individuals. There are also gender differences within the Aboriginal identity group – the unemployment rate for females aged 15 years and older in Wood Buffalo was 11.5% compared with 5.4% for males (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Significant gender differences also appear with respect to average earnings in 2005, with Aboriginal identity females aged 15 or older who worked full time for the full year only earning, on average, 64.7% of the earnings of Aboriginal identity males. The median income for women was 38.9% of that for men (\$23,039 compared with \$59,285).

<sup>20</sup> It would be important to know whether short-term training programs are included in these statistics since such inclusion would skew results.

<sup>21</sup> This information was presented by Dr. Ali Abdelrahman at a Statistics Canada conference in Edmonton called “Strength in Numbers” in March 2008.

In sum, it is apparent that Aboriginal individuals in Wood Buffalo are generally doing better in terms of education, employment, and earnings than their counterparts in other areas of Alberta and Canada, although there are clear gender differences. However, there continue to be differences in educational attainment and unemployment rates when we compare Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups overall, and this report highlights some reasons for these differences.

## 4.0 Literature Review

A troubling picture of Aboriginal youth emerges in recent literature produced by the federal government. For example, the Policy Research Initiative (Government of Canada, 2008) produced a special issue of the *Horizons* periodical called “Hope or heartbreak? Aboriginal youth and Canada’s future.” It contains several short articles that address continuing challenges for Aboriginal youth and communities as well as promising programs (e.g. The National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, National Aboriginal Role Model Program).

An overarching theme in the *Horizons* research is that, while there have been improvements in socio-economic conditions, educational attainment, and life expectancy over the past two decades, there is still a gap in the quality of life for Aboriginal youth (and adults) relative to Canadians as a whole. Various authors point to low educational attainment and household income (Guimond and Cook, 2008), high rates of teen pregnancy (Guimond and Robitaille, 2008), high rates of incarceration (Corrado, Cohen, and Watkinson, 2008), and high rates of residential and school mobility (Clatworthy, 2008; Aman and Ungerleider, 2008) as factors adversely affecting Canada’s Aboriginal youth. In general, these authors tend to see Aboriginal youth as a group “at risk.”

Turning from problems to remedies, several *Horizons* authors offer specific suggestions for addressing inequities, such as making secondary education more affirming of Aboriginal identity formation and facilitating re-entry into education; providing mentorship programs; expanding opportunities for Aboriginal adults to obtain needed educational qualifications and occupational training; developing projects for urban Aboriginal youth focused on health, life skills, and personal development; and providing education programs to reduce substance abuse and to develop positive early identities. Also discussed are broader strategies such as taking steps to preserve heritage culture and developing a comprehensive, long-term, and sustainable approach to First Nations government and community development.

Within the “Hope or heartbreak?” report, differences in recommended strategies are related to some extent to differences in analyses. Some authors refer to both historical and continuing causes of the “well being gap” facing Aboriginal youth and communities. For example, Brant Castellano (2008: 8-9) suggests trauma transmitted over generations as an important factor affecting well-being:

The shocks of epidemics, displacement from lands, depleted food supply, suppression of ceremonies and languages, and the loss of children to residential schools and child welfare agencies reverberate through tight knit communities, provoking adaptive and maladaptive responses.

She highlights that today “Aboriginal communities continue to labour under the administrative burden of fragmented, short term programs with separate reporting obligations to multiple agencies.” Continuing institutional constraints that affect the achievement of well-being also need to be recognized (see also Taylor and Steinhauer, 2008). Focusing specifically on youth, Brant Castellano argues that young people have to deal with the continued denigration of their culture and ongoing racism in their encounters with non-Aboriginal society (see also St. Denis and Hampton, 2002). From this perspective, there is a need to understand some of the statistics cited in this report (e.g. high school completion) within the context of the ongoing marginalization of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian society.

It is clear that further documentation of “the problems” facing Aboriginal youth in their school-to-work transitions is only useful if accompanied by greater discussion of historical and contemporary social, political, and economic relations among groups, acknowledgement of tensions and contradictions pertaining to values, and frank discussion about institutional opportunities and constraints. Also needed is a critical look at quantitative measures that focus on the learning deficits of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit youth. A major limitation to measuring success in learning by focusing strictly on the cognitive domain is that it largely ignores the experiential learning of Aboriginal people: specifically, that which takes place outside of the formal classroom (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).

## **5.0 Current Policy Context**

Canadian national policy regarding adult and worker skills training has historically been permeated by the tension between the federal and provincial/territorial levels of government. On the one hand, the constitutionally established jurisdiction of the Canadian provinces over education has been interpreted to include adult training. On the other hand, the federal government has responsibility for unemployment insurance (now called “employment insurance” or EI) and funds adult skills training through that program ... The 1996 commitment to devolve training to provincial and territorial authorities notwithstanding, the federal government explicitly retained jurisdiction for adult training to members of targeted groups, including Aboriginal peoples (Brisbois and Saunders, 2005).

The unique legal and constitutional positioning of Aboriginal peoples, originating in treaties and various other historical links, means that the federal government has a fiduciary relationship with Canada’s original peoples. However, in practice, the jurisdictional tensions between federal and provincial levels of government with regard to education and training affect First Nation and Métis people. The majority of First Nation and Métis youth in the Wood Buffalo region are educated in provincial schools, the former with federal funding, and both provincial and federal governments have programs aimed at training First Nation and Métis individuals. As a result, there is a patchwork of programs.

Both levels of government (provincial and federal) share a common interest in providing Aboriginal peoples with the tools to participate in the global marketplace. Slowey (2008: 20) describes the recent shift in government policy from “entitlements to partnerships” as very evident in Wood Buffalo. While she suggests that this move may assist in self-governance for

First Nations, Altamirano-Jiminez (2004) counters that efforts to configure a market citizenship for Aboriginal peoples in Canada is about shifting the discourse from one based upon inherent rights and Aboriginal sovereignty to one based upon market needs and neo-liberal economics. Both Slowey and Altamirano-Jiminez agree that “market self-determination” may lead to “have” and “have not” groups, particularly as industry becomes more influential in partnerships. Because governance structures, policies, and programs provide an important context for looking at youth pathways, we provide a brief description of key institutional features in Wood Buffalo.

## 5.1 Partnerships between Government, Industry, and First Nations

The All Parties Core Agreement (APCA) reflects an arrangement between government, industry, and First Nations in Wood Buffalo. A three-year agreement signed in 2002, and recently extended to 2010, the APCA replaced the previous Athabasca Tribal Council-Athabasca Resource Developers Agreement. The APCA involves several large industry players, the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC), and three levels of government (federal, provincial, and municipal). It focuses on addressing the impact of oil sands activities on the five First Nations affiliated with the ATC. Funding is provided by the different sectors; for example, the agreement provides funding to each First Nation in Wood Buffalo for the establishment of industry relations corporations (IRCs) that report to Chief and Councils on all issues related to industrial development (Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2007). IRCs in each of the five First Nation communities negotiate socio-economic agreements with individual oil sands corporations, and these agreements then form part of a corporation’s project application to the Energy Resource Conservation Board (ERCB). Some First Nation groups are more active than others in developing IRC agreements. For example, Fort McKay has had an IRC longer than some of the other communities (since the late 1990s) and, because of the First Nation’s location in the epicentre of oil sands development, tends to also have more agreements overall (interview notes, First Nation staff member). The APCA itself is not a formal socio-economic agreement; rather, it is an “issues management process” (interview notes, industry staff member). Expected results from the APCA agreement include an increase in the number of socio-economic agreements between First Nations and corporations, an increase in First Nations’ access to industrial development opportunities, and an increase in consultation and understanding between industry and First Nation communities.

To address training needs, the partners of the APCA established a Sustainable Employment Committee that developed labour pool and labour market analyses as the first step in building and implementing a training and employment strategy. Labour pool analyses were conducted in 2003 and 2006. The *2003 Labour Pool Analysis* “attempted to address why First Nations are underemployed<sup>22</sup> and unemployed in the region” given that Wood Buffalo was “one of the fastest growing regions in Canada” (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005a: 78). This analysis involved a survey of 877 participants aged 18 to 64 from the five ATC First Nation communities. Of this group, approximately 11% were in school or training, 55% were employed, and approximately one-third were unemployed. Of those working, 57% were seeking to upgrade while the remainder were satisfied with their employment (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005a: 11).

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<sup>22</sup> The authors of the report define “underemployed” as those who are seeking to upgrade their current employment status (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005a: 7).

Of the 448 participants who were either employed and seeking to upgrade or unemployed, almost two-thirds had less than Grade 12, one-quarter had Grade 12 or a GED,<sup>23</sup> almost 6% had some post-secondary education, and 2% had a university education (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005a). The main barriers to employment identified by these participants were as follows:

- Lack of required education
- Lack of skills
- No driver's license
- No transportation
- Family care<sup>24</sup>

The most common occupational goals for participants in the 2003 ATC labour pool analysis involved skilled technician (e.g. heavy equipment operator, process/power engineer) and trades occupations. There were some gender differences in occupational goals, with more males than females interested in trades and skilled technician jobs while more women were interested in professional work. It is also noteworthy that just over half of these participants did not have occupational goals (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005a: 30), suggesting a need for career development services.

The education level of participants was correlated with their employment status in the ATC analyses; three-quarters of the unemployed who were seeking employment had less than a Grade 12 education. The most common aspiration for unemployed participants was skilled technician work, followed by trades, and general labourer. On the other hand, over half of the employed participants who were seeking to upgrade worked as labourers and aspired to skilled technician and trades work. Again, more women than men aspired to professional occupations. These gender differences in educational aspirations and in labour market outcomes (earnings and occupations) are relevant for policies related to education and training.

The labour pool analysis conducted in 2006 (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2007) involved a survey of 825 participants aged 18 to 64 from the five ATC First Nation communities. Findings suggested that almost two-thirds (63%) had less than Grade 12 or a GED, another 20% had completed Grade 12 or a GED, and the remainder had some post-secondary education. As in the 2003 survey, of the 324 who were unemployed, almost three-quarters had less than Grade 12 or a GED. The 2003 and 2006 labour pool analyses therefore confirm that low levels of education are a significant barrier to employment. Survey results also suggest that there is demand for further education and a need for career development services in communities.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The GED, or General Equivalency Diploma, involves a high school equivalency test.

<sup>24</sup> Women were only 37% of this sample of 448; this might explain why "family care" was not mentioned as often as other barriers.

<sup>25</sup> Presently, there are no labour pool analyses available for Métis individuals in Wood Buffalo.

The *2005-2015 Labour Market Analysis* looks at the existing and projected jobs in Wood Buffalo (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005b). It notes that there is high demand for trades and skilled technical workers (particularly heavy equipment operators and process operators), which require a GED or Grade 12 completion. There is also high demand by contractors and the service sector for unskilled workers. While First Nation businesses were expected to create over 3,000 new and replacement full-time and part-time jobs between 2005 and 2015, job creation overall was expected to be around 10 times that figure.<sup>26</sup> The main occupational demand of First Nation businesses was for general labourers, trades people, skilled technicians, and professionals. However, it was acknowledged that the most critical factor affecting employment opportunities in the oil sands is the price of oil (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005b: 18). Since oil prices dropped by about two-thirds from highs of above \$147 US per barrel in July 2008 to around \$40 US per barrel at the end of January 2009, the predictions from 2005 will no doubt need to be adjusted.

The labour market analysis notes that the recruitment and retention of First Nation employees can be challenging because of lack of work experience, low skill levels, transportation barriers, and social issues (e.g. alcohol and/or drug addiction). As noted above, the oil sands industry has adopted the policy that all employees need a minimum of a GED for a full-time permanent position at an oil sands plant (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2005b: 20). Given the education gap experienced by First Nation peoples as reported in the labour pool analysis and census data, policies and programs related to education and training are therefore important.

Although lacking the kind of relationships with corporations provided by an IRC, Métis individuals are thought to be faring better than First Nation individuals in terms of securing oil sands employment opportunities (personal communication, representative of a Wood Buffalo Métis local, December 2008). However, it is believed that formalized agreements and a long-term commitment from industry and government toward education and training would mean more high skilled jobs for Métis people.

## **5.2 Elementary and Secondary Education**

### **5.2.1 First Nations Education (INAC)**

Recent reviews of the governance, infrastructure, and funding of First Nations education suggest that changes are needed (Morgan, 2002; Breaker and Kawaguchi, 2002). Morgan's principal recommendation is that the federal government "recognize First Nations' inherent jurisdiction over education" (p. 3). Citing the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Morgan argues for a move toward First Nations developing their own policies on educational goals and standards, administration of community schools, tuition agreements, and the purchase of provincial or territorial services (p. 12). To do this, she recommends that the federal government increase the funds that are available to First Nations for education initiatives and develop more flexible and responsive funding arrangements (p. 63). Similarly, Breaker and Kawaguchi (2002) argue that "substantial new resourcing and a new education management strategy are required to achieve high school education parity in the next 10 years" (p. 2). They add that better data

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<sup>26</sup> The Northern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association (NAABA) in Fort McMurray had approximately 80 full Aboriginal business members and 110 associate members (interview notes, NAABA staff, May 2008). Most companies were related to the construction sector.

management is also necessary since research pertaining to First Nations education is “primarily anecdotal in nature” (p. 2).

The need for changes in governance and attention to funding inequities were echoed by a representative from Treaty 8 (interview, September 2008). There are 17 First Nation-controlled schools in Treaty 8 with over 2,500 students; however, only one of these schools is located in Wood Buffalo (Dene High School run by Chipewyan Prairie First Nation). Most First Nation and Métis students in the region therefore attend provincial schools. The funding provided by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) for the education of First Nation students flows from First Nations to the province through tuition agreements. However, some individuals are concerned about these agreements and “want to see a level playing field” between provincial schools and First Nation schools “with the same kinds of opportunities, working with the same kinds of resources” (interview, September 2008).

For example, while provincial school funding in Alberta has reportedly increased by 47% over the past 10 years, INAC funding for First Nation-operated schools has only increased by 25% (personal communication, Treaty 8 staff, December 2008). Concerns are therefore expressed that First Nation-operated schools are expected to do the same work with significantly less financial resources than their provincial counterparts. Further, the funding gap may well act as a disincentive to establishing First Nation-operated schools. To address these issues, a Treaty 8 interviewee argues that a renewed, more respectful relationship is needed between First Nations and federal and provincial governments, one that acknowledges First Nations as equals to government, as sovereign bodies with rights stemming from treaties (interview, September 2008). The history of educational provision in some communities in Wood Buffalo suggests that respectful relationships are uncommon. For example, a long-term resident of Fort Chipewyan says that education in the community has been a site of ongoing struggle rather than co-operation among the players (interview, June 2008).

### ***5.2.2 Provincial Education (Alberta Education)***

In spring 1999, a review of the 1987 Native Education Policy was initiated by the government of Alberta. Following public consultations, a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) Education Policy Framework was released in 2002. Five priority strategies are identified in this framework:

- Increase FNMI learner access to post-secondary and other adult education and training opportunities and support services;
- Increase the attendance, retention, and graduation rates of FNMI students attending provincial school;
- Increase the number of FNMI teachers and other staff;
- Facilitate the development of FNMI courses and professional development opportunities for administrators, teachers, and other personnel; and
- Build working relationships that contribute to quality learning opportunities for FNMI learners (Alberta Education, 2008).

A progress report produced in 2008 describes current actions and work to date in a variety of areas, including the development of teaching resources, sharing of “promising practices,” teacher preparation and professional development opportunities for teachers, and efforts to increase parent and community engagement.

As part of the FNMI initiative, Alberta Education established the Aboriginal Learner Data Collection Initiative. Since September 2004, it has been mandatory for school registration/application forms to include an Aboriginal identity question, although according to Alberta Education (2005), “FNMI self-identification remains a problem in some jurisdictions,” perhaps because of parents’ concerns about how data will be used. The department’s stated intent for gathering these data is to obtain greater information that can assist in improving outcomes for Aboriginal students. Alberta Education’s funding framework also includes a per-pupil allocation for FNMI students above the base per-pupil funding based upon this self-identification.

### **5.2.3 School Districts in Wood Buffalo**

As noted above, the majority of First Nation and Métis students in Wood Buffalo attend provincial schools. Students in the city of Fort McMurray attend schools within Fort McMurray Public School District or Fort McMurray Roman Catholic Separate School District. Students in other communities attend schools that are part of Northlands School Division. In Anzac (52 km southeast of Fort McMurray), Métis and Fort McMurray First Nation students attend the Anzac Community School until Grade 6 (enrolment of 108) and then are bused to Fort McMurray for junior high and high school. In Janvier (102 km southeast of Fort McMurray), students from Chipewyan Prairie First Nation attend Father R. Perin Catholic school (enrolment of 80) until Grade 9 and then proceed either to Dene High School (enrolment under 25), which has operated for five years as the only First Nation-operated school in the ATC, or are boarded in Fort McMurray while they attend high school.

In Conklin (166 km southeast of Fort McMurray), Métis students attend Conklin Community School until Grade 9 (enrolment of 31) and then are boarded in Fort McMurray or just south of the region in Lac La Biche for high school. In Fort McKay (34 km north of Fort McMurray), Métis and First Nation students attend Fort McKay School (enrolment of 81) up to Grade 9 and then either enrol in the community’s e-learning high school program or are bused to Fort McMurray to attend high school. Finally, in Fort Chipewyan (271 km north of Fort McMurray), Métis students and those from the two First Nations (Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and Mikisew Cree First Nation) attend Athabasca Delta Community School from Grade 1 to Grade 12 (enrolment of 227). From the interviews, it was apparent that a number of students from Fort Chipewyan leave the community to access schooling at some point in their K-12 journey.

Table 3 compares results from the three provincial school districts that educate students in Wood Buffalo. Measures reported in Table 3 are part of Alberta Education’s “accountability pillar” for the 2006/07 school year.

**Table 3. Selected Measures for Wood Buffalo School Districts, 2006/07**

	<b>Fort McMurray Catholic</b>	<b>Fort McMurray Public</b>	<b>Northlands</b>	<b>Provincial Average</b>
Dropout rate	3.9	4.9	18.6	4.7
High school completion rate (three-year)	75.2	70.1	22.9	70.4
PAT <sup>27</sup> : Acceptable	80.0	74.8	39.7	76.9
PAT: Excellent	18.7	14.9	2.9	19.1

Clearly, the results produced by Northlands School Division are much poorer (higher dropout rate and lower three-year high school completion rate) than for districts in Fort McMurray and the province overall. Given the high proportion of First Nation and Métis students in the district,<sup>28</sup> Northlands has stated a renewed concern regarding the education of Aboriginal students. Related to this, in the division’s three-year plan from 2008 to 2011, staff recruitment (retention/turnover) and infrastructure are identified as priorities.

Staff turnover was also raised as a key issue in our interviews with parents/guardians. For example, in Fort Chipewyan, half of the 13 staff members had resigned at the end of the 2008 school year (interview notes, school staff, June 2008), while Conklin had an even higher turnover rate (over 100% during the school year) (interview, school staff, June 2008). The high turnover in staff was attributed by interview participants to the idea that Northlands is a training ground for new teachers from cities such as Calgary and Edmonton. The feeling is that, once these new teachers have a year or two of experience under their belt, they will leave for jobs back in the larger urban centres. Other issues contributing to staff turnover were thought to be the ill-preparedness of newly graduated educators to teach in isolated and small northern communities, the lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of non-Aboriginal teachers, and the uncompetitive salaries in communities with a higher than average cost of living.

Although Fort McMurray school districts perform better in terms of the province’s accountability pillar, there are challenges for students who self-identify as FNMI there also. For example, the graduation rate for Grade 12 FNMI students in Fort McMurray Roman Catholic Separate School District in 2005/06 was 58.3%, which is very close to the 59% high school graduation rate for FNMI students in Fort McMurray Public School District in 2007/08 (personal communication, school district staff, November 2008). However, in addition to not being able to account for those who do not self-report Aboriginal identity, this rate does not account for students who left high school in Grade 10 or 11. Further, a look at enrolments by course stream indicates that,

<sup>27</sup> PAT stands for Provincial Achievement Test. PATs are taken by students in provincial schools in grades 3, 6, and 9 in language arts and math. PATs in social studies are taken in grades 6 and 9, and in science, in Grade 6 only. Alberta Education’s accountability pillar summary for school districts included a weighted average of PAT Acceptable and Excellent scores.

<sup>28</sup> Northlands Division has the highest proportion of FNMI students in the province, at approximately 95% of the student population, according to a representative from Alberta Education (personal communication, December 2008). While we acknowledge the limitations of using only the “accountability pillar” measures of learning success for FNMI students (cf. Canadian Council on Learning, 2007), Aboriginal peoples state a desire for “two ways of knowing” and, therefore, these measures are an indicator of problems within the formal education system.

although the proportion of FNMI high school students in the public school district in 2007/08 was 14.9%, they represented 32.6% of high school students in “Knowledge and Employability” (K and E) courses – a stream that leads to a certificate (requiring 80 credits) rather than a high school diploma (requiring 100 credits) (personal communication, school district staff, November 2008). Similarly, although the proportion of FNMI students in the Catholic school district in 2007/2008 was 11.4%, they represented 31% of students in K and E courses (personal communication, school district staff, November 2008). Therefore, students who identify as FNMI are clearly overrepresented in tracks that do not lead to post-secondary education.

### **5.3 Post-Secondary Education (PSE)**

INAC’s post-secondary education program has two components: the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) and the Indian Studies Support Program (ISSP). The latter supports PSE education programs and institutions specifically designed for First Nation and Inuit students and is less relevant for this report than the PSSSP.<sup>29</sup>

#### **5.3.1 Post-Secondary Student Support Program (INAC)**

In 1977, support for registered/treaty Indian and Inuit students was formalized by the federal government through the creation of the Post-Secondary Education Assistance Program (PSEAP). In 1989, the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) replaced the PSEAP. The objective of the PSSSP is to “provide financial assistance to registered/treaty Indian and Inuit students to gain access to post-secondary education and to graduate with the qualifications and skills required to pursue individual careers and to contribute to the achievement of Indian self-government and economic self-reliance” (INAC, 2005). The University and College Entrance Preparation Program (UCEPP) is part of the PSSSP and provides financial support to registered/treaty Indian and Inuit students who are enrolled in university and college entrance preparation programs offered by post-secondary institutions that provide courses required for entrance to degree and diploma credit programs (INAC, 2005).

An evaluation report of the PSSSP was released in 2005. It notes that the need for the PSSSP is evident since PSE participation rates for First Nations between 1986 and 1996 increased but remained roughly 10% lower than for other Aboriginal students and 14% lower than for Canadian students (INAC, 2005: iii). However, the demand for funding has exceeded resources to the extent that 3,575 students were deferred each year between 1999 and 2002. The report also found that guidelines for the PSSSP living allowances were 14 years out of date; students received, on average, between \$500 and \$4,000 less per academic year than they were paying in living expenses. Furthermore, student allowances were below the national average established under the Canada Student Loan program. The report concludes that the program has therefore evolved from a universal support program into a cost-shared program over time. The authors recommend the establishment of funding levels that support the policy and collection of data that would allow a fuller assessment of the program. However, recently there have been concerns among Aboriginal leaders, students, and many others that an existing INAC review of the program that provides

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<sup>29</sup> At the time of writing, there are no tribal colleges in the Wood Buffalo municipality.

grants to Aboriginal students for PSE will result in the elimination of the grant-based system and bring Aboriginal students into the Canada Student Loan program.<sup>30</sup>

In practice, the PSE program provides funding for students to pursue programs that have a Grade 12 requirement (personal communication, ATC staff, November 2008). Therefore, students who wish to pursue a trades program for which completion of Grade 10 is the minimum requirement cannot be funded. Students who have not completed high school and wish to pursue upgrading are eligible to apply for UCEP funding for up to one academic year. Since most students require more than one year of upgrading and students living on reserves are ineligible for living allowances from Alberta Works (see below), this restriction impacts access. The duration of other program funding depends on the program length (e.g. four years of funding for an undergraduate degree). Funding for the PSSSP has been capped at 2% annual growth since 1996. Thus, between 2005 and 2007, the demand for funding by ATC members was greater than the supply, resulting in a wait list. However, the demand dropped off in the 2007/08 year. Of the 13 students accessing ATC post-secondary education funding in 2007/08, around half were enrolled in university programming (personal communication, ATC staff, November 2008). A couple of the First Nations in Wood Buffalo supplement the federal PSSSP funding.

Although recognized as a collective of distinct Aboriginal people, with rights yet to be fully determined and thus guaranteed under section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, Métis do not have access to a post-secondary student support program similar to that available to First Nation and Inuit students. This was raised as an issue for Métis students by a representative of a Wood Buffalo Métis local (personal communication, December 2008).

### **5.3.2 Post-Secondary Education (Alberta Advanced Education)**

There is no university in Wood Buffalo, although Keyano College in Fort McMurray offers “collaborative undergraduate degrees” with the University of Alberta in nursing and education and with the University of Calgary in social work. Athabasca University, through the provision of distance learning, is also an option for university-level studies. Beyond Wood Buffalo’s borders, college choices include Portage College in Lac La Biche or Grande Prairie Regional College in Grande Prairie. The Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT), based in Edmonton, has a mobile trailer (Trades in Motion) that provides pre-trades and trades training in communities and in camps. However, despite the various options, Keyano College is the most convenient choice for most Aboriginal students since it operates learning centres in a number of First Nation and Métis communities. These centres, in operation since the 1990s, offer high school upgrading programs for students over 18 years of age. Keyano has also developed a couple of programs specifically for Aboriginal students – the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program (requiring high school completion) and the Environmental Monitoring Program (requiring completion of Grade 10).

Of the 1,324 Aboriginal students enrolled at Keyano College between 2005 and 2008, 40% were enrolled in upgrading programs and almost two-thirds were female (personal communication, Keyano College staff, April 2008). Fifty-one percent of Aboriginal students attending Keyano were Status Indians, 31% were Métis, 16% were non-status Indians, and 2% were Inuit (personal

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<sup>30</sup> See *Slave River Journal* (Bell, 2009).

communication, Keyano College staff, April 2008). Just over one-quarter were sponsored by a First Nation and 42% paid for their own education.

## **5.4 Training**

### **5.4.1 Federal Training Initiatives**

The Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC))<sup>31</sup> is designed to expand the employment opportunities of Aboriginal people across Canada. Aboriginal organizations who participate in five-year Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements (AHRDAs) are responsible for designing and delivering employment programs and services best suited to meet the unique needs of their communities. These programs include labour market interventions, programs for youth and persons with disabilities, creation of child care spaces, etc. The current agreements (AHRDAs) were scheduled to end in March 2009 but were recently extended to March 2010.

AHRDAs provide funding for First Nation and Métis people to access training for employment programs that are one year or less in duration, including the final year of upgrading programs. Across the province, it has become increasingly common for the Métis Nation of Alberta to fund the final year of a two-year college or four-year university program through its AHRDA agreement. The Métis Nation of Alberta holds the AHRDA for the non-settlement Métis in Alberta and designates responsibility to six regions in the province. For those living in Wood Buffalo, the regional office is located outside of the region, in Lac La Biche, Alberta; however, an AHRDA office for Métis people has been in operation in Fort McMurray at times during recent years.

Each First Nation in the ATC has an AHRDA coordinator who oversees the agreement in the community. AHRDAs are meant to meet the employment and training needs of a wide range of individuals; however, according to an AHRDA coordinator in one of the First Nation communities, “the majority of clients who come through my office are ‘high risk’” (interview, May 2008). In addition to employment programs and services to adults, AHRDA also provides youth funding, which tends to be used for summer student employment programs in Wood Buffalo (interview, May 2008).

The Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP) initiative (HRSDC)<sup>32</sup> was launched in 2003 as an \$85 million five-year labour market initiative to maximize training and job opportunities for Aboriginal people in major economic development projects across Canada. ASEP relies on strong partnerships forged between Aboriginal groups, the private sector, federal/provincial and/or territorial governments, labour, and educational institutions. To be considered for funding under ASEP, projects were required to clearly demonstrate a solid partnership arrangement and to set out a comprehensive multi-year training-to-employment plan. Wood Buffalo secured funding and developed a group called Wood Buffalo Partners in Aboriginal Training (WBPAT).

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<sup>31</sup> Information about this program was available on the following website, accessed October 19, 2008: [http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/employment/aboriginal\\_employment/strategy/index.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/employment/aboriginal_employment/strategy/index.shtml).

<sup>32</sup> Information about this program was available on the following website, accessed October 19, 2008: [www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/employment/aboriginal\\_training/about\\_asep/fact\\_sheet.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/employment/aboriginal_training/about_asep/fact_sheet.shtml).

WBPAT received \$5 million over five years to coordinate training to employment of Aboriginal people aged 18 years or older in Wood Buffalo. It focused on specific occupational areas such as process operator, power engineer, mine operations, and trades (interview, WBPAT representative, May 2008). The project closes March 2009, and WBPAT hopes to continue the initiative with industry funding. Although the federal government website states that ASEP and AHRDAs are complementary initiatives, an industry participant suggested that they were perceived to compete with each other for clients and funding (interview notes, November 2008). In this interviewee's view, there was also insufficient federal support for the capacity building required for this partnership to succeed.

#### **5.4.2 Provincial Training Initiatives**

##### First Nations Training to Employment Program (FNTEP) and Aboriginal Training to Employment Program (ATEP) (Alberta Employment and Immigration)<sup>33</sup>

Like the ASEP program, the FNTEP and ATEP support the development of partnerships between Aboriginal communities, industry, and government to support occupational-based training and work experience projects that lead to employment for Aboriginal people. FNTEP partnerships are to assist unemployed or marginally employed First Nation members (primarily living on-reserve) to gain the necessary skills training and/or work experience in projects that will allow them to obtain and maintain long-term employment, while ATEP encourages partnerships involving either Métis or First Nation organizations. Programs involve full-time training initiatives (minimum 25 hours per week) of 3 to 52 weeks in duration and involve contracts signed with the Aboriginal or tribal organization based on proposals developed by the FNTEP or ATEP partnership. For example, WBPAT was funded provincially from the FNTEP as was the Aboriginal Environmental Monitoring program delivered by Keyano College.

##### Aboriginal Development Branch (Alberta Employment and Immigration)

The Aboriginal Development Branch was established in 2006 to improve Aboriginal participation in the economy and economic development capacity building in Aboriginal communities (Latter, 2008). 2007/08 priorities included initiatives related to entrepreneurial training, labour force planning, economic development, and corporate governance. Initiatives targeting Aboriginal women and youth focused on developing entrepreneurship and employability skills through training and mentoring, promoting school retention, and fostering enterprise education. Like other government initiatives, partnerships involving government, industry, and Aboriginal communities are encouraged as is ensuring better linkages between skill training, employment, and economic development.

##### Alberta Works and Student Finance (Alberta Employment and Immigration)

The goals of Alberta Works include helping unemployed people find and keep jobs, helping employers meet their need for skilled workers, and helping Albertans with low incomes cover their basic costs of living. It does this through four program areas: employment and training services, income support, health benefits, and child support services.

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<sup>33</sup> Both of these programs were established in 2003. Information about these programs was available on the following website, accessed November 24, 2008: [http://employment.alberta.ca/hre/ets/reg/Display.asp?EntityCode=HLEVEL\\_2&EntityKey=10436](http://employment.alberta.ca/hre/ets/reg/Display.asp?EntityCode=HLEVEL_2&EntityKey=10436).

To qualify for Alberta Works funding, one must be “underskilled,” that is, lack a high school education and be unable to maintain long-term employment, and have income below a certain level. Students who apply for upgrading to complete their high school diploma are usually eligible for funding for tuition, books, and a living allowance (which varies according to one’s family income status). Students living on reserves are not eligible to receive the living allowance but may receive funds for tuition and books. First Nation students may qualify for INAC’s PSSSP funding for up to one year.

Through Alberta Works, funding is provided for a maximum of 30 months, including 20 months of upgrading<sup>34</sup> and 10 months of funding toward a post-secondary program (e.g. college certificate or diploma program). To maintain funding, students are required to meet attendance and academic achievement guidelines. For example, Alberta Works’ attendance policy allows five unexcused absences in a year and 15 excused absences (with a doctor’s note).<sup>35</sup> Students are required to pass all courses they enrol in; if they fail a course, they lose Alberta Works funding for four years. This is a concern, given the challenges many upgrading students face in Wood Buffalo (personal communication, Keyano staff, November 28, 2008).<sup>36</sup> Given the higher than average earnings and cost of living in Wood Buffalo, another concern is that living allowances are too low (personal communication, Keyano staff, November 28, 2008).

#### Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Program (AAAP) (Provincial and Federal Governments)

The AAAP began as a five-year program initiated by various departments of the federal and provincial governments in partnership with industry, Aboriginal organizations, and educational jurisdictions.<sup>37</sup> The goal was to increase the number of Aboriginal people who successfully complete apprenticeships; pilot programs were started up in three areas in Alberta including Fort McMurray. Recently, the federal government withdrew its funding,<sup>38</sup> but the provincial government has provided a two-year funding commitment to the AAAP in two centres, including Wood Buffalo (as one of its apprenticeship initiatives through the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Department).

In 2008, 21 journeypersons are said to have graduated in Edmonton and Fort McMurray from the program (interview notes, government staff, May 2008). Most apprentices are in their late 20s, live in Fort McMurray, and work for small contractors (including 10 Aboriginal businesses). Before entering the AAAP, applicants must successfully complete the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) if they want to work at Syncrude or Suncor; undergo a criminal record check, drug and alcohol test, and medical test; possess a driver’s license; and undergo safety

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<sup>34</sup> At Keyano College, this includes Academic Foundations, which is equivalent to Grade 6 to 9, and College Preparation, which is equivalent to Grade 10 to 12.

<sup>35</sup> Apparently, Alberta Works will be allowing colleges to monitor student attendance using their own attendance policies in the future (personal communication, Keyano staff, November 28, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> In fall 2008, the number of students at Keyano College accessing Alberta Works was 30, of whom around 90% were Aboriginal (personal communication, Keyano staff, November 28, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Information about this program was available on the following website, accessed November 24, 2008: [www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/news/2002/September/nr-AboriginalApprenticeship.asp](http://www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/news/2002/September/nr-AboriginalApprenticeship.asp).

<sup>38</sup> According to a representative from Service Canada, the federal funding for the AAAP was intended as limited term, seed funding (personal communication, January 16, 2009). Further, other programs like AHRDA and ASEP (which funds a program similar to the AAAP called Tradewinds to Success) were seen as addressing similar needs.

training (interview notes, government staff, May 2008). The most common trades for apprentices are electrician, instrumentation technician, welder, millwright, steamfitter/pipefitter, and insulator.

## 5.5 Industry Education and Training Initiatives

While governments provide the majority of funding for education and training, industry in Wood Buffalo has also become a significant contributor, for example, through IRC agreements with First Nations. At the elementary/secondary education level, corporations have funded early literacy and high school programs in First Nation and Métis communities. For example, the e-learning high school program at Fort McKay (licensed from Sunchild E-Learning) is fully paid for by industry, and a Sylvan learning program provided in Anzac resulted from one year of corporate sponsorship. Different corporations have also subsidized upgrading expenses such as living allowances for Keyano learning centre students.

Industry also funds post-secondary programs at Keyano College; for example, industry pays the student expenses for the Aboriginal Environmental Monitoring program. Similarly, industry will cover costs for a pre-apprenticeship program currently being developed for 40 First Nation and Métis students in Wood Buffalo communities (interview notes, Keyano staff, October 2008). One interviewee states that “no other college would have the financial support to do what we do” at Keyano; “our partnerships are more with industry than government now” (interview, Keyano staff, March 2008). This individual goes on to report that the college has developed a corporate college mentality that is very entrepreneurial. In addition to programs at Keyano College, large industry players also sponsor the training of other providers (e.g. an environmental monitoring program delivered by BEAHR<sup>39</sup> in Fort Chipewyan, a life skills program delivered by the Paudash Group in Chipewyan Prairie).

Four issues emerged from interviews regarding the expanding role of industry in education and training. First, the focus of adult education in Wood Buffalo on training for employment was seen by some interviewees as narrowing the range of educational programming and associated career choices available to individuals. Second, inequities in access to education and training across communities were thought to be a growing problem since different communities had differing levels of capacity and interest in engaging with corporations through IRCs. As one example, Métis have yet to enter into such an agreement and therefore have far less access to industry resources. Third, concerns were voiced by industry representatives about the increasing expectations placed on them to supplement, and to some extent replace, government delivery of education and training programs. In particular, the sustainability of this approach was questioned by some industry representatives. Fourth, although the APCA could play a role in coordinating an integrated regional approach to education and training for First Nation communities, interview participants suggested that competing agendas among and within partner groups (First Nations, governments, and industry) made this challenging. Individual corporations, in particular, preferred to develop their own partnership initiatives with individual First Nations and governments rather than working collectively through the APCA. The result of this, combined with governments’ contract-based approach, is arguably a more fragmented, “ad hoc” approach to education and training.

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<sup>39</sup> Building Environmental Aboriginal Human Resources (BEAHR) provides “culturally appropriate environmental curricula” (see [www.beahr.com/bli/public\\_aboutus.aspx](http://www.beahr.com/bli/public_aboutus.aspx)), while the Paudash Group provides a “Life Enhancement and Empowerment program as an initial step for Aboriginal people prior to their entrance into a training program, employment, post-secondary studies or educational upgrading” (pamphlet).

## **6.0 Major Work and Learning Issues for First Nation and Métis in Wood Buffalo**

While we acknowledge that there are many “success” stories regarding youth who have completed high school and/or post-secondary education and found rewarding work, many First Nation and Métis youth in Wood Buffalo face significant challenges despite the economic boom in their backyard in recent years. A discussion follows of some of these challenges as well as a brief discussion of alternative ways to think about issues related to elementary and secondary schooling, post-secondary education and training, and transitions to work.

### **6.1 Challenges in K-12 Education**

#### **6.1.1 Low Quality of Schooling**

Concern over a low quality of schooling is a major theme arising from interviews with a wide range of individuals in Wood Buffalo.<sup>40</sup> To a great extent, there is a perceived hierarchy of schools in the Wood Buffalo region, with the small, rural schools operated by Northlands School Division in Conklin, Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, and Janvier being seen as providing a poor quality of education and those in larger centres like Fort McMurray (as well as Lac La Biche and Edmonton) being seen as providing a higher quality of education. From this perspective, sending a student outside of the community for education is presumed to result in better long-term results:

I was born and raised here (Fort Chipewyan) ... lived here until I was 15, moved away for high school, to Fort McMurray, graduated in 2002 ... There were about five of us [who moved for school]. You know what? Out of all the people that I grew up with, cause we went from kindergarten to high school, it was pretty much that the people that moved away were the only people that finished high school.

I'll be moving out of here [Fort Chipewyan] anyways this fall ... I'm moving to McMurray to start high school ... My brother wants me to get a better education there.

I lived in Fort Chip until I was 17 and then I decided to tackle Grade 12 in Fort McMurray, which was kind of a culture shock. Big change for me, growing up in a town of 1,000, 1,200 maybe, to a school that holds 1,200 to 1,500. The first couple of months of the adjustment were pretty hard. But luckily, I knew some people out there which made it a lot easier. There was about three other students that came out with me. None of them survived more than three months, I think it was. And then they all came back to school in Fort Chipewyan.

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<sup>40</sup> In a synthesis of research findings pertaining to the perceived quality of local schools in Wood Buffalo, including public, Catholic, and First Nation-controlled schools, represented are the perspectives of teachers, school administrators, school district board members, industry representatives, employees of First Nations, tribal council employees, college staff, and community members as well as the voices of First Nations and Métis youth.

Evident in this last statement is that, while some students are successful in completing high school when moving out of the community, many others are not. Often, students end up returning home and, if possible, to the school in their home community.

Sending youth outside of the community for schooling is often a decision made or influenced by a parent or guardian. For two of the youth quoted above, family was seen as key to their completing high school. In one case, the student's family made the move to Fort McMurray for educational reasons. In the other case, the student was able to stay with her sister in Fort McMurray. Moving with their family or having relatives to live with while attending school in town appears to be an important factor in high school completion. A teacher of Aboriginal heritage described sending her son out to a larger centre for education even though she taught in the small, local community: "I knew that he needed to crack down on homework and the teachers there, myself included, we don't expect homework to come back on a regular basis, and whether that's my fault or the parent's fault, it's so intertwined."

Lack of parental involvement was seen by some interviewees as a factor in the quality of schooling available in small communities. As noted earlier, the lack of involvement by some parents/guardians can be understood in terms of the legacy of residential schooling in the Wood Buffalo region. But in communities such as Fort McKay and Fort McMurray, the lack of engagement may also be due to adults working long hours and/or shift work. An employee of the Fort McKay First Nation explained that "kids are missing that supervision." This person was not alone in referring to the social "costs" of economic growth, as exemplified in these comments:

A lot of parents work so their kids are on their own ... with all the money in the world, that doesn't matter if you don't have a good community support (Friendship Centre staff).

[Drugs] are a ramification of the money and in some cases, of parents working so kids do what they want to do ... we've got a lot of kids in crisis and we've got a lot of things because of industry and the financial wealth, there's a price to pay for that too (school staff, Fort McKay).

Some interviewees also suggested that schools do not reinforce structure or discipline. For example, a parent in Fort Chipewyan speaks about his eight-year-old daughter:

I'd rather her be out [of the community] and go to school ... Here, it's kinda, they let them get away with whatever ... More people in this community should be donating [time in the school].

A high school graduate and representative of one of the First Nations in Fort Chipewyan also saw the school as lacking discipline:

I think the teachers are good, I think it's just the discipline, the discipline of the kids. I remember 10 years ago when I was going to school, I had a lot of respect for my teachers and it seemed like a lot of the students did. And I don't know where that respect went in the last 10 years or so.

It would be easy to blame parents for the lack of discipline in schools; however, our analysis suggests that this is but one outcome of the general underperformance of schools in the region when it comes to First Nation and Métis students. This chronic underperformance has impacts, specifically the loss of community members:

[O]ur youngest daughter demanded to leave this town when she was 14 because she wanted a good education. It's very common for families to leave when their kids get about 12 or 13 (resident of Fort Chipewyan).

Rather than move, two adults who expressed concern with the quality of schooling in their small communities are actively trying to do something about it. One stated, "I'm on the school board and the new board is looking at better ways of doing things and getting better education for the kids." The other was of the opinion that "sometimes the kids are being pushed out and they're not ready ... they need to invite the parents in ... let them see what [the school's] doing. I don't find that's happening."

The single First Nation-controlled school in Wood Buffalo was not seen to be a viable educational solution even though the Chipewyan Prairie First Nation encourages parents to send their children there because of the poor success rate in the "town" school. A parent who made the decision to send her daughter to high school in Fort McMurray explains:

I want my child to have a good education and not just credits ... Until I know that's happening, I'm not putting my child in [the First Nation school] ... I hate it that [my daughter] has to be away. But what am I supposed to do, they need their Grade 10 Phys Ed, they need 100 credits. And I don't want to just give them credits, I want them to earn them. Because when they get out in society, nothing is given to anybody ... [The First Nation school] has to prove that they're not just a drop-in centre.

On the surface, this statement appears as an indictment of the First Nation-run high school, yet one of the challenges this school must respond to is students coming from the provincial feeder school who may not be at grade level. A First Nation employee, and young parent, was critical of the "social pass" system that is used in the off-reserve provincial school where First Nation members are educated up to grade 9:

[The community school] has social pass; that's where even if you don't go to school the full year and if your mark is not good, because of your age, they pass you. I really don't believe that's right, I really think that should be taken out, because that's setting the students up for failure. You know, if you're in Grade 8 because you're 16 years old and they pass you on to Grade 9 or to Grade 10 then you don't have the skills to complete the next level ... And then the student gets discouraged and, of course, fails, right? Drops out ... My daughter, she got a social pass last year and I disagreed with this ... I see it as pushing the student out of the way, you know, let's get the students out of here and fill the spot with somebody else. That's how I see it. And then when they go to the high school ... their marks are not good because they haven't finished the previous [grades].

It is therefore clearly a “catch 22” as both the local Catholic school as well as the First Nation-operated school are seen as failing to meet educational standards. For students, finding out they are “behind” when they enter school in Fort McMurray can be a demoralizing experience:

I wouldn't want to go to school here [Conklin] ... Because, when I was going to school here till Grade 6 and [then] went to Fort McMurray to a public school, my learning was 2 years behind ... So, what I was learning here when I was in Grade 6 – I was doing Grade 4 work. And that's what they [school in Fort McMurray] said and I was surprised ... [I felt] dumb ... I was two grades behind and then I had to start off from their Grade 4 work and catch up to Grade 6 ... I had to do that Grade 6 all over again in Grade 7 but they made me go ahead because of my age ... so I had to do Grade 6 and 7 work at the same time.

This student subsequently dropped out of school. One parent confirmed that students who are behind in grade level and are expected to catch up while adjusting to town and a new school frequently end up dropping out. A Conklin youth who is not yet 18 years old stated: “[E]verybody that went to school in Fort McMurray ... all dropped out, everybody that I know. And some of them have kids.”

A First Nation employee in Fort McKay noted that the quality of schooling is regularly being questioned by community members: “Especially coming from an Aboriginal community and Northlands School Division, people have the mentality that you're about two years behind [going to high school].” But as noted, while many parents in small communities opt for sending their children elsewhere, for instance to Fort McMurray schools, the results are not necessarily more favourable:

People are saying they don't want to send their kids [to Fort McKay school] because it's not up to standards. [Yet] Fort McMurray is not working for [Fort McKay] students. Of those 13 students that get bused in, their attendance and completion rates are atrocious; like, I think people should be worried ... Many of the Fort McKay adults and people who are involved in education ... feel that their kids are being placed into K and E [Knowledge and Employability] programs ... Of the 13, there are three or four that are in the regular programming ... I do wonder about what we do at [this high] school because some of these students have been bused in since Grade 6, 7 or 8 ... If a student hasn't been attending class, ... they'll put them in the ACE program, Alternative Choices Education ... it's all modularized but when you get anything like that, you have to be an independent learner ... But these students aren't independent ... they don't do work on their own very well (Fort McMurray educator).

The issue of streaming Aboriginal students in Fort McMurray schools was mentioned in a number of instances, for example:

[My daughter] has struggled because of the culture shock, going to town, big city, and staying with someone else, and not the support ... They don't help you when you go in because we're from outside, they don't direct us. Sometimes they'll put

kids right in IOP [Integrated Occupational Program]<sup>41</sup> ... My daughter, I put her in all [academic stream] subjects and the math was difficult for her. But we didn't have help, like I wish there would have been more help. And I find when our children do go to town, they're looked down on ... it's like they're put to this side, ok, you're Aboriginal, you go over there.

A young person who left Fort Chipewyan and graduated from high school in Fort McMurray also noticed that many Aboriginal students were being placed in IOP courses, as did a parent in Fort McKay: "I think it's the high schools not pushing the Aboriginal students and pushing them aside and putting them in these independent learning programs or IOP." According to the statistics provided by the school district, (see Section 5.0 above), Aboriginal students are disproportionately represented in the non-college bound Knowledge and Employability (K and E) program, the program that replaced IOP. A First Nation staff member at Fort McKay shared these thoughts about the process and impact of streaming:

Schools offer special programming for Aboriginal students [K and E program] and I believe that it's having the reverse effect than the original intent since it once again separates Aboriginal students from mainstream students ... With every Aboriginal student that goes into Fort McMurray, I think the individual teachers and administration see them as a potential candidate for the K and E program ... they get put into that program because they don't do well in Grade 9 so rather than repeat Grade 9 they put them into this K and E program. The students develop really poor work and study habits because it's learn at your own pace and what teenager will bust their butt if they don't have to? ... Grade 9 is a streaming year ... They're in this program [K and E] that has a huge stigma attached to it. It diminishes their self-esteem.

This individual, like the parent cited above who is critical of the practice of "social pass," sees a connection between the practice of moving students to the next grade even when they are not at grade level and the student later dropping out. An educator working at a small, community school that buses students to town, mentions the issue of streaming as well as racism, attendance problems, and home issues as factors impacting student performance in town schools:

There's racism, it's hard for [students living on-reserve] to fit in [to Fort McMurray high schools] ...I think [education] gets watered down for them because people assume they can't do it ... Some of these kids do struggle academically, some of it's because of non-attendance, some of it's because of home, some of it, it's the best we could do for them. But they get labelled, they're coming in from [Fort] McKay so it's straight into IOP<sup>42</sup> which is now called K and E, Knowledge and Employability.

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<sup>41</sup> The Integrated Occupational Program was the forerunner to the Knowledge and Employability program and similarly led to a high school certificate rather than diploma.

<sup>42</sup> A participant from another community also refers to the stigma associated with the Integrated Occupations Program (IOP), recalling instances during high school when she heard racist slurs such as "Indians on Patrol" directed at Aboriginal students enrolled in the IOP. In this participant's view, the racism in "town" school persists but is less overt than in the past.

A resident of Fort McKay mentions that some Aboriginal parents are beginning to challenge the streaming of their children.<sup>43</sup>

While parents/guardians decide to send their kids to “town” school for perceived better schooling, when youth are put into boarding situations the results are often disappointing. One teacher at a large high school in Fort McMurray shared the following:

Janvier parents ... their students have to be boarded out here ... and it's very frustrating for them ... [they] send their kids to Fort McMurray because of concerns about quality of education in Janvier, [however] their attendance and success in class are not being met so then they're pulled out of the boarding home.

Some of the issues around access to and quality of schooling can be seen as related to other issues affecting small northern schools.

### **6.1.2 Small Northern School Issues**

In addition to the loss of valued community members, a number of individuals linked the quality of schooling in local communities directly to staff turnover in the school. For example, in a school with only four full-time positions, the acting principal shared that in 2007/08, the school “went through 13 staff and three principals.” This temporary administrator also shared that “it represents a huge culture shock for many [teachers] who come here and they're not equipped psychologically.” Related to this, a community member stated that “Northlands [school division] has been an issue since day one ... [a] training ground for teachers, no continuity.” An 18-year-old Fort Chipewyan resident, looking to complete high school by upgrading at the local learning centre, says that teacher turnover is a significant issue and that, in her experience, teachers often left because:

They just couldn't take it anymore ... It made me feel bad. Some of the teachers broke down ... Like they get so stressed out – they just [say] forget it ... [It's] rough for them out here.

A parent whose child currently attends the Athabasca Delta Community School in Fort Chipewyan says the high rate of teacher turnover impacts student learning: “You really can't learn anything when new teachers are coming in all the time because everybody teaches it a certain way.” Another factor that may impact student learning is staff composition; there were very few First Nation or Métis instructors in community schools, “town” schools, Keyano learning centres,<sup>44</sup> or Keyano College's main campus.

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<sup>43</sup> One response of schools is reportedly to stream more on a course-by-course basis rather than, for example, placing a student in all K and E courses.

<sup>44</sup> For example, at the time of our interviews, there were no First Nations or Métis instructors working at learning centres in communities. A Keyano staff person estimated that overall, there was about 11 full-time Aboriginal staff out of a workforce of approximately 400. A local high school had four Aboriginal teachers of approximately 75 staff.

Another issue that looms large for small northern schools is declining student enrolments. The principal at a small local school states: “My Grade 7 class next year is one student. Five years ago it was a class of 10. What happened to those kids?” When schools with an already small student population lose numbers, it has a direct impact on resources. In Fort Chipewyan, concerns were raised by one participant that the local school could offer science but had no lab in which to do practical work. As a result, many students seek funding to go to school in Fort McMurray to obtain courses that they can’t access in the community school. Parents of students with special needs may also seek services elsewhere.

The paradox is that the greater the number of students who leave for educational reasons, the more resources are not available for the school because of the per-pupil funding system. For example, a youth noted, “If you take a trip around to other communities, you can actually see the deterioration of the schools because a lot of the time, that’s where they have to take their funding away from [to operate].” An industry representative also commented that, although Fort Chipewyan would like to offer the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP), “they just don’t have the facilities at the school. They just re-opened the industrial arts program two years ago ... but [the school district] definitely needs to expand it.” A youth from Fort Chipewyan who plans to attend high school in Fort McMurray looks forward to having more elective options “because we don’t have too much in our school.” Limited options in the community school seem to reinforce the decision to attend “town” school.

Métis students in Conklin, on the other hand, have no choice but to move to a larger centre to attend high school since there is no high school program in the community.<sup>45</sup> These students either have to arrange to stay with someone they know (family or friend) or enter into a boarding situation. Due to very high housing costs in Fort McMurray, the amount allocated for room and board was recently increased by Northlands School Division from \$500 to \$1,000 per month per student (which might still be considered low). Some other problems associated with boarding students in town are described by this grandparent:

[T]hey have to leave home at an early age, 13, 14, after Grade 8 and go out and board somewhere, sometimes with strangers and go into a school with 700 [or more] kids and the adjustments that they have to make are not easy, coming from a small school ...they need a lot of support and that’s missing for the kids. They do have financial support for their boarding home, [the school district] Northlands pays for that ...but there’s something missing.

This interviewee touches on issues that were raised by other individuals when discussing student boarding situations throughout the region. We heard a number of stories where students “did not last in town school.” A parent whose daughter was boarding in Fort McMurray for Grade 10 stated:

[Teachers] don’t care that [my daughter] lives out of town, you know? If you pass you pass, if you don’t you don’t ... You’re mature enough; you should know how to do this. She’s 14 years old, how mature is a 14-year-old?”

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<sup>45</sup> A decision was recently made to add one grade per year in order to bring the Conklin school up to Grade 12.

In addition to an expectation of maturity, youth are not always comfortable living in someone else's home, as described by this individual:

Living in a boarding home where you just can't help yourself to food anytime you want and then there's rules you need to go by, and telephone [access] ... like you can't use the phone for as long as you want, you just can't go into the fridge anytime you want and make yourself something. For me it was tough.

In some cases, students who drop out are prohibited from returning to high school, having exhausted several options for schooling or boarding in town. When this happens, the question becomes "What do young people do?" As one interviewee stated, "Students can't go to upgrading until they're 18 years old." A number of individuals pointed to drug involvement as one outcome of having no school involvement: "If they don't succeed in school, a lot get into drug dealing."

While the preceding discussion has focused on challenges, there are some inspiring initiatives under way in various communities. To address the high drop-out rate for Aboriginal students in town schools, Fort McKay First Nation has implemented Sunchild e-learning, an "alternative education program" developed for Aboriginal students (Narine, 2008).<sup>46</sup> The e-learning program is "open to anybody who's a Fort McKay resident whether they're Métis, First Nation, or Caucasian" (interview, Fort McKay staff person). This interview participant opines that it is an "excellent program" with "mostly older mature teachers who are online" in real time with the students. In her view, the program has the benefit of being connected to the community. For example, the program mentor has a personal relationship with parents and communicates with them regularly, students can work on special projects (e.g. one student is designing, delivering, monitoring, and evaluating a program for the local wellness centre), and there are opportunities to include Elders in students' educational process.

The Fort McKay First Nation also supports strategies that seek to improve teacher retention at the local Northlands-run school, for example, providing housing for teachers and providing practicum placements for Bachelor of Education students from the University of Alberta. This latter initiative provides an opportunity for interested candidates to learn more about teaching Aboriginal students and offers the chance for the school to recruit appropriate candidates. This is a significant improvement over hiring practices that rely on telephone interviews with applicants (a practice that occurs in Northlands School Division, according to an interviewee). The Fort McKay First Nation plans to build and operate its own K to 12 school, which would not only allow students to attend high school at home, it would give the community more control over educational approaches and content (Fort McKay staff).

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<sup>46</sup> The Sunchild program has 350 students in 23 reserves across Alberta and the Northwest Territories (Narine, 2008). These students reportedly have a "greater than 70% course completion rate" compared with the less than 20% rate reported for on-reserve schools.

There are also important community-driven initiatives both inside and outside of schools. For example, the Nunee Health Authority in conjunction with Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotions<sup>47</sup> and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has initiated a community-based project that facilitates, guides, and supports the healing journey of individuals impacted by the residential school experience. Also, the community of Fort Chipewyan has recently organized summer leadership camps for youth, and a new healing program geared toward students and families is set to begin at Athabasca Delta Community School in the current school year (interview, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation staff). Moreover, after waiting four years for replacement of the collapsed arena in Fort Chipewyan, community members have recently secured the means to have it rebuilt. All of these efforts can be thought of as evidence of attempts at the local level to develop more holistic learning models within communities (cf. Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).

### **6.1.3 *Narrow Horizons and Limited Choices***

As part of this research, we asked First Nation and Métis youth in high school or college upgrading programs about their further education and career plans. We also asked instructors in schools and colleges about their students' aspirations. Given the challenges in completing high school for a significant proportion of First Nation and Métis youth in communities outside of Fort McMurray, it was not surprising that many were adopting an incremental step-by-step approach to education and training (see also Taylor and Steinhauer, forthcoming). A high school educator says "generally the students are bound for college [Keyano] or they're just so focused on getting their Grade 12 diploma that they're not thinking of where they're going for post-secondary education."

According to an Aboriginal educator, the short-term horizons of First Nation and Métis youth in Wood Buffalo are not dissimilar from the horizons of non-Aboriginal youth in the heated economic reality of Wood Buffalo: "I think they're just like any other teenager in that they only look two or three years into the future" (high school teacher, Fort McMurray). However, if a student is enrolled in academic stream courses that keep further education options open, uncertainty about their future career is arguably less problematic than when a student is placed in a K and E program or other stream that limits future educational and work options.

Our interviews also point to gender differences, with more young women expressing interest in post-secondary education and professional careers (also suggested in the ATC labour pool analysis). For example, of a group of five female interviewees who are working toward their Grade 12 diploma through college upgrading, two wanted to pursue social work or youth work (because of their experiences with foster care or group homes), two planned to pursue business programs, and one planned to open a business after completing Grade 12. Of the four who planned further education, three planned to attend the local college first and one planned to attend college in Edmonton. Only one mentioned her longer-term goal of transferring to university to complete a business degree and then working in a bank. These women, three of whom had children, ranged in age from 23 to 32 years. Their prior work experience included cashier, waitress, janitor, heavy equipment operator, and child care worker. For two of the

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<sup>47</sup> Nechi is a unique training facility located near Edmonton, Alberta, that deals with addictions healing from an Aboriginal perspective.

women, their previous work experience as janitor and heavy equipment operator prompted them to return to school in order to qualify for more satisfying work.

In general, students who were attending high school in Fort McMurray seemed to have less concrete plans than older youth regarding future education and work. They were, however, very aware of local employment opportunities. As one teacher comments:

Most of our [Aboriginal] students aren't going to post-secondary ... some do go to upgrading at Keyano College, some work at jobs that don't require high school completion ... on average, it takes them about five years to graduate ... They talk about driving on those big trucks, it's mainly trades-oriented, a lot of welders, pipefitting.

An interview participant from Chipewyan Prairie similarly comments:

All [youth] think about is industry. All we ever hear about is power engineering. There's nurses out there, there's doctors, there's dentists, there's environmental, there's accountants. They only see the big bucks in working as a power engineer or whatever, but some are not suited for that. It's being pushed down their throat ... I hear it from industry, I hear it from schools. And I find that sad because there's so many other things. I would like to see more Aboriginal teachers.

The fact that a number of First Nation and Métis people from the local area work in the oil sands industry, coupled with industry's highly visible involvement within schools through sponsorship activities and programming, means that students are well aware of the activities of this sector. For example, an interviewee from Fort Chipewyan referred to the incorporation of industry safety certification training into a Grade 7 science class, commenting, "I'm really shocked at how much industry has influence in our education system." A high school teacher in Fort McMurray also highlighted that industry was an important partner in career development activities and in sponsoring extracurricular programs. However, a few interview participants raised the concern that students may be exposed to a narrow range of career options as a result.

Further, it does not appear that First Nation or Métis students are accessing programs that may help them clarify their education and career plans. For example, the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) is a provincial school-to-work high school transition program that allows students to earn hours toward an apprenticeship while also earning a high school diploma. It is popular in Wood Buffalo and potentially guides youth into well-paying jobs related to the oil sands. However, as a high school teacher in Fort McMurray states:

[Aboriginal students] don't go into RAP because the criteria you have to meet to be a RAP student, for many of them, it's too big of an expectation to have ... attendance, and grades ... with career opportunities, you hear that we make it available to all students, we don't discriminate, but the reality is that there's only a certain population that do go ... Aboriginal students aren't involved.

An employee with a large oil sands company concurs with this view:

Aboriginal students don't usually meet the entrance requirements for the RAP and [health] internship<sup>48</sup> programs ... RAP requires a lot of work from the students, they have to have good attendance, marks at a certain level, they have to work and go to school at the same time, so it takes a lot of support from family and a lot of commitment from the students.

The unclear aspirations of youth may therefore be tied to a lack of career development opportunities as well as a lack of role models. As noted, many Aboriginal workers are often found in lower skill occupations such as camp attendant, janitor, or labourer. Limited horizons may also be linked to the economic reality that, with the construction boom, workers have been able to make a reasonable living without completing high school in Wood Buffalo, as noted by this high school teacher:

Some of the Janvier kids I talk to have said, "My brother doesn't have Grade 12 and he owns a business." Like they think it's just so easy to start a business.

A First Nation staff person in Fort McKay concurs:

For the major companies you need to have your Grade 12. But there are contractors on site that don't require Grade 12. So you do see that pattern where in Grade 10 they say, "I can go and make \$40 an hour being a truck driver"... "Why stay in school when I can make just as much money as my dad does?"

Also raised was the idea that First Nation students may believe that if they stay out of school for a year and they're over 18, "they can go back to upgrading at Keyano and get paid" to complete high school (Fort McKay staff). While some may choose an extended route to high school, there are clearly problems with this strategy, discussed below. For the many students who attempt to complete high school on schedule, a major factor impeding them appears to be the poor quality of schooling offered to students in Wood Buffalo's small community schools.

An educator from Fort McKay describes another reason for a low high school completion rate: "the correlation between education and employment in this area is not as strong" as in other parts of the country. Similarly, another interviewee states:

Success [here] is based on monetary gain rather than on prestige or academic position ... When you think about it, a young business entrepreneur can in a short time be making a million dollars. The other sort of challenge [to career planning] is who do you know in Fort McKay that is a nurse, a doctor, a lawyer, that's a band member? So the lack of models – there is certainly not a lack of work ethic or employment.

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<sup>48</sup> The health internship programs provide opportunities for high school students to gain summer work experience in health services while earning work experience credits toward their high school diploma. These programs are coordinated provincially by an organization called CAREERS the Next Generation.

The “hot economy” in Wood Buffalo resulting from the recent construction boom, which is unlikely to continue at the same pace given the current recession, appears to act as a “pull” for students who already feel “pushed out” of formal schooling. However, those who find that the work they can get without a high school diploma is insecure (or unsuitable for other reasons) commonly return for upgrading and/or further education in order to attain more sustainable employment.

The preceding discussion suggests that First Nation and Métis youth currently lack information regarding a broad range of careers, career development opportunities, and programs that link learning in school to learning in work in a meaningful way. A new initiative being planned by the Northern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association (NAABA) is a mentorship program matching members with junior high school students (interview, NAABA representative). The idea behind this program, part of the shifting patchwork of programming for First Nation and Métis in Wood Buffalo, is that it may encourage awareness by youth of the steps involved to accomplish specific work-related goals.

## **6.2 Challenges in Post-18 Education and Training**

College upgrading programs are the primary focus of Keyano College learning centres in First Nation and Métis communities in Wood Buffalo. As noted above, 40% of 1,324 Aboriginal students who attended Keyano between 2005 and 2008 were enrolled in this type of program (e.g. academic foundations, college preparation, general high school equivalency).<sup>49</sup> Although we acknowledge perspectives like that of a long-time Fort Chipewyan resident, who states that “Keyano [learning centre] has saved a lot of people ... without Keyano we’d have another 100 people chronically unemployed,” interview participants overall suggest that there is room for improvement in terms of access to further education and training programs and a need for greater control over program content and delivery.

Interview participants, including Keyano students and instructors, First Nation staff, and industry representatives, emphasize two key areas (explored below) in relation to post-18 education and training programs in Wood Buffalo:

- Different perspectives on community learning needs, and
- Challenges for students (e.g. meeting prerequisites for programs, funding availability and sustainability, lack of prior learning assessment, continuity of learning, and the labour market value of some credentials).

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<sup>49</sup> Approximately one-quarter of Aboriginal students at Keyano were enrolled in other certificate or diploma programs related to local industry (apprenticeship, mine/process/heavy equipment operator, power engineer, truck transportation, business administration), 21% were in health and family services, and 3% were in university studies or pre-university programs (personal communication, Keyano staff, April 2008).

### **6.2.1 Community Learning Needs**

In our discussions with interview participants about what they see as the community's learning needs, it became apparent that communities have different levels of demand for different types of education and training and that there are different ideas about the needs of clients and how these can best be addressed. For example, Keyano learning centres operating in Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, Anzac, Janvier, and Conklin focus primarily on upgrading, yet a few interviewees suggested that some communities (e.g. Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay) may be running out of people to upgrade. Given our previous discussion about continuing high rates of early school leaving, this is unlikely to be the case. However, interviewees make clear that there is also a growing demand for college certificate and diploma programs in communities.

For example, a First Nation staff person says:

I was on that Keyano education community board, we were going to have the evening classes, what happened to that? So now we're going to start pushing that again. Because there's a lot of us, I'd still love to go back [to college], but I wouldn't want to leave home, because I have two kids here, and my house is here. There's a lot of people, a lot of women here that want to do that.

This individual also shared that NAIT was planning to offer an eight-week culinary program and said that "when the community heard about that, a lot of women were really excited ... we can actually do something here, without leaving home, without leaving their families behind." Trades training in communities is thought of as desirable since apparently few Aboriginal students go into apprenticeship programs at the main college campus in Fort McMurray despite their interest in trades careers (personal communication, Keyano staff). Citing this growing demand for post-secondary education and training, several interview participants suggested that there needs to be greater access in communities to a wider range of programming.

At the same time, this would not necessarily address the issue of people having to leave communities to gain sustainable employment. For example, an individual involved in WBPAT states:

[An Aboriginal] community may want a particular training program. So then I go into the community and meet with the AHRDA coordinators and say "okay justify this, where are they going to work if we offer a program?" Many want to work in their community, but that's not sustainable employment. So we say, "You need to leave your community, come live in Fort McMurray, or take a camp job and then you come home on your time off." It may be a priority for band members but it's not sustainable over the long run if they're not willing to leave.

This interviewee adds: "The mandate [of WBPAT programs] is to sustainable employment so you can't just better their life, you'd better put them in a job at the end of it."

In contrast, an educator has a somewhat different vision for education in communities:

Programs should be culturally relevant, visual and hands on ... The college should do more cultural and language programming so students can learn who they are as opposed to trying to bring the “mainstream” education to the communities (Keyano staff).

These two interview excerpts suggest a tension between instrumentally focused, industry-driven education and training and that which is more learner and community focused. Another interview participant also highlights this imbalance:

I would say Alberta’s [adult education] is more vocationally oriented than any of the other provinces, but then you have Fort McMurray oil sands area which is the extreme of that ... It’s the difference between public education and quasi-corporate education.

In addition to tensions between academic and vocational education in Wood Buffalo, a key overarching tension in the region relates to questions about the place of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing for thinking about work and learning. As this Keyano instructor suggests:

When I think Aboriginal education, I think of it as maintaining the incubator for cultural development. If that is the focus, we’re not really doing it [in learning centres].

Given the “corporate college mentality” reportedly adopted by the local college and the pressure from government programs that focus on job readiness, employability, and entrepreneurialism, the space for alternative visions of education and training is small.

A number of interview participants suggest that instrumental, “mainstream” education and training is not working for many First Nation and Métis youth, and is especially unlikely to work for the “multi-barriered” clients who are not engaged in education, training, or work. Programs that address underlying issues stemming from the historical and ongoing oppression of First Nation and Métis people are seen by some interviewees as necessary in order for the community to move forward more positively. For example, a First Nation staff member suggests that a life skills program offered in the community for people with addictions is “the best thing that ever happened.” She adds: “In life skills you identify the barriers, it’s like continuing care, it’s there for you all the time if you want to go back.” Another interviewee who attended the Holy Angels Residential School is also a strong advocate of life skills type programs because of her own personal experience with a 32-week program:

In the mainstream I was so afraid and when I went into the life skills program I think the first two months was just learning about me and being able to express myself, being able to not have that fear any more, knowing that I was amongst friends and people were trying to help ... And when I went into the life skills program, I learned how to cry ... and it was almost like the tears were melting some of the hardness that I had built up ... And I learned how to express myself ... so I really believe if it wasn’t for that program, I don’t think I would be who I am today ... And for a lot of our Aboriginal people, you know, I really believe that they need to have a program that builds that foundation, to be able to know how

to express themselves, to feel that they're worth it ... everything always focuses on industry now and the big demands they have here and sometimes they tend to forget that, hey, we still need to cater to the grassroots people.

The larger issue that arises from the voice of interview participants seems to be about who controls education and training in communities and to what ends. A key premise of the three models of holistic lifelong learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007), developed in consultation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, is that the purpose of learning is to “develop the skills, knowledge, values and wisdom needed to honour and protect the natural world and ensure the long term sustainability of life” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007: 18). This broad view of learning is arguably eclipsed by policies focused strictly on short-term formal education and training programs for employability.

### **6.2.2 Challenges for Students**

But even if we accept a more limited view of learning, involving preparation solely for paid work, the system is still not measuring up. A low quality of initial schooling has implications for post-18 education and training in Wood Buffalo. Interview participants identified various institutional and personal challenges facing students who are interested in pursuing college upgrading programs through Keyano learning centres or at the main campus in Fort McMurray. These challenges, discussed below, include difficulties transitioning to a post-secondary system of education, challenges dealing with multiple funding sources with different and sometimes conflicting rules about eligibility, and issues arising from lack of prior learning assessment. Students in communities have limited access to programs and quality facilities, and there are questions about the labour market value and articulation of some college programs for Aboriginal students.

#### The Cycle of Upgrading

We heard that the transition to college upgrading is often demoralizing because students are required to take a college placement test that determines their current academic level in various areas. Often, students place lower than they anticipate and, hence, are required to do a longer than expected upgrading program in order to complete high school equivalency. When applying for college level programs, some students also find that they lack the prerequisites for entrance into these programs:

When [students from communities] first apply, we do a placement test on them to see what level are they really at ... I find a lot of our people that are coming back to upgrade as adults have a really low level ... And it takes them probably two or three years before they can achieve their Grade 12 equivalency ... And even for the high schools in Fort McMurray, a lot of students graduate and as long as you have 100 credits you can get your Grade 12. A lot are coming out with maybe a 50% in English, a math 24 which is kind of like dead end, and when they come out they're so proud because they have courses they've completed and it all adds up to 100 ... [But] when we look at their transcripts and they want to go into power engineering ... then it's kind of back to upgrading again (Keyano staff person).

There seemed to be little recognition of prior learning at Keyano, and many students feel they are being “pushed back” when they enter upgrading within the college system (Fort McKay educator).

### Funding Challenges

Challenges for students are exacerbated not only by a patchwork of education and training programs but also by a medley of funding options. For example, current sources of funding for college upgrading include the provincial government (the Alberta Works program that funds both First Nation and Métis students) and the federal government (through AHRDA, which in some cases funds Métis and First Nation students, and the PSSSP, which funds First Nation students only). AHRDA is administered separately by Métis and First Nations in Wood Buffalo. The PSSSP is administered by the ATC in conjunction with the five First Nations in the region. Despite a seeming plethora of funding options, there are restrictions on various sources of funding: for example, Alberta Works will pay tuition, books, and living allowances for eligible First Nation, Métis, and non-status students living off-reserve, but only tuition and books for First Nation individuals living on-reserve;<sup>50</sup> the PSSSP will only fund students in their final year of upgrading; and AHRDA can only provide limited funds for tuition and books.

Despite the multiple funding sources, an AHRDA coordinator in a First Nation community comments:

The money that is available for upgrading is very low and the requirements are so stringent that [clients] don't always stay on the programs ... If you fail one course, your funding is cut off [by Alberta Works] ... I've had a few that just got so frustrated with the lack of money that they would just drop out.

An employee of one of the five First Nations in Wood Buffalo confirmed that Alberta Works funding is tied to attendance and that “they're really strict, so that makes it difficult for the person.” According to Keyano staff, “If you don't pass your upgrading in three semesters, you're done. You have to wait another four years before you can access Alberta Works money.” A First Nation single parent in an upgrading program at Keyano's main campus said she received funding from Student Finance (Alberta Works) in her first year, but this was discontinued because she missed too much school because of illness and lack of child care. In her second year, she worked full time while going to school to make ends meet. Now into her third year, she has received AHRDA funding support but notes that “there's a lot of pressure” attached to this funding. She is on probation and must pass her courses to qualify for further support.

The level of funding provided can be challenging for students who live in Fort McMurray given the high cost of living and scarcity of student housing. There are also differences in the levels of funding allocated by different First Nations for upgrading and training, which is partly a result of the extent to which they rely on government funding versus dollars from industry (e.g. through IRC agreements). Accessing funding for upgrading is generally more difficult for the Métis given their exclusion from the PSSSP. In addition, at the time of this study, there was no Métis

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<sup>50</sup> For First Nations students living on-reserve, federal social assistance is often used as a living allowance for those in upgrading programs.

Nation of Alberta AHRDA office in Fort Chipewyan, so Métis individuals were forced to go to Fort McMurray to access the program.

Interviewees suggest that AHRDA training dollars are too limited. For instance, in describing an environmental monitoring program, an AHRDA coordinator comments:

If I had to rely on government funding, I wouldn't have been able to do [the program]. I had looked into grants but we [as a First Nation] don't have a non-profit charitable tax number.

First Nations therefore are increasingly reliant on industry funding (e.g. through IRC agreements) to supplement government funding. There is also a tendency for both First Nation and Métis groups to deliver shorter training programs because they are usually less costly. While there are clearly more resources allocated toward First Nations and Métis education and training in Wood Buffalo, the shifting array of funding options affirms what the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) highlight in their *Report Card of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples at 10 Years* – that there is “no *sustained* investment in meeting the basic needs of First Nations communities, or in addressing key determinants of health/well-being” (Assembly of First Nations, 2006: 2, our emphasis). In the area of education, the AFN Report Card highlights many unfulfilled promises, resulting in a score of mostly F's in areas that include the following: universal recognition of education as a core area of Aboriginal self-government; the development of Aboriginal control over education; support for an integrated early childhood funding strategy; an increase in federal funds for post-secondary education to meet demand; and federal, provincial, and territorial collaboration with Aboriginal governments to establish and support post-secondary institutions controlled by Aboriginal people.

#### Access to Quality Resources and Facilities

As in the K-12 system, Keyano learning centres lack learning resources and face difficulties in attracting and retaining staff. Interviewees point out that community learning centres are only open September to April, have few staff, and have only basic facilities:<sup>51</sup>

I don't think they're used well enough ... they're closed during the summer ... but there again you need staff ... you could have workshops and programs, correspondence courses over the Internet (former Keyano staff).

I was the eighth learning centre instructor in nine years ... There were years that they could not get instructors” (Keyano staff).

Reasons given for high turnover in the learning centres were lack of compensation for travel to communities, lack of resources in learning centres compared with the main campus, and lack of appropriate instructor background and experience. Similarly, First Nations and the ATC have difficulty retaining staff because of their inability to pay competitive salaries. For example, one AHRDA coordinator observes that three people came and left the position in the 18 months prior to her hiring.

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<sup>51</sup> For example, most learning centres are located in trailers with limited space and equipment. One instructor spoke about problems with the facility maintenance (heating, plumbing) that made the environment less conducive to learning.

## Articulation and Value of Programs

Other issues of concern for interviewees pertain to labour market outcomes associated with programs and mobility across post-secondary programs. For example, the recognition by industry of the Aboriginal Environmental Monitoring certificate (based on a nine-month program) was questioned by some interview participants. Since a high school diploma was not a prerequisite for this program, there were also concerns about articulation with other PSE programs. Similarly, concerns were raised that particular training programs, including those that are AHRDA-funded, were “setting [students] up to fail because a lot of them are not even at the level that they can pass the [apprenticeship entry] tests ... I think they just want to fill the seats ... I don’t think any of [those who participated in a pre-trades program] are working” (AHRDA coordinator). This individual also referred to a program to train certified protection officers: “Ten graduated and four gained employment.” In such cases, questions were being asked about the reasons for poor program outcomes and, more particularly, the specific challenges for youth in their transitions to work.

The preceding discussion suggests several concerns about access for First Nation and Métis youth and adults to upgrading and PSE in Wood Buffalo. While Keyano learning centres provide upgrading programs, interviewees note a growing demand for other PSE programs. In addition, there appeared to be a lack of prior learning assessment in education and training programs generally, which is likely to discourage candidates who may possess valuable informal knowledge and skills. Keyano staff spoke of trying to address some of the access issues by working with partners to increase connectivity and public access to computers in communities. There was also talk of opening Internet cafés that would allow community members to use computers in the evening.

Our analysis of interview data suggests also that it is important that communities identify their own education and training needs (rather than having them identified by industry or government) and take greater control over provision, acknowledging the current constraints imposed by a variety of government funding programs. It is not clear what would help to make the patchwork of federal and provincial government programs more responsive to individual and community needs—in some contexts outside of Wood Buffalo, the idea of individual training accounts has been discussed as a way of allowing people to take greater control over their training. Currently, some First Nations are taking progressive action on education by supporting (with funding and educational leaves) opportunities for their staff to access further education and training opportunities. More use of prior learning assessment by colleges also warrants further exploration as a way of expanding access to formal education and training programs.

### **6.3 Challenges in Finding “Good” Work**

The Aboriginal recruitment officer [from a large oil company] came to the school and I set up interviews. There were 10 interviews that were set up, not one of my students made it through. They had their Grade 12, they have their diploma, they have to do a [trades entry test] or something like that ... they had to have a driver’s licence. So you know what I mean? Like there’s one hoop after another and some of them, that first hoop, just getting a Grade 12 diploma is going to be huge (Fort McMurray teacher).

[This year] we have one student graduating in Grade 12 [from the band school] ... Last year we had three graduates ... we're trying to identify why can't these graduates get a job? ... They're not successful because when they're tested for the diploma, we still find that they're testing at a lower level so some of them actually go back for upgrading ... We have a lot of oil and gas industry around here that always require some kind of testing. So last fall, I think we had 12 that tested [TOWES] at Syncrude and only two passed ... It's discouraging for students. You've got your Grade 12 and then when you're tested, you're at Grade 7, Grade 6 level, well, what is wrong here? Obviously something is wrong. Why do I have my diploma, yet I get tested at a Grade 6 or 7 level? (First Nation staff person).

I have a lot of industries coming saying "I want to hire this percentage of Aboriginal people and so I send them a whole whack of resumes and I don't hear back from them" (AHRDA coordinator).

The above quotations suggest the frustration felt by those working with First Nation and Métis youth who find it difficult to secure sustainable and rewarding jobs, despite the fact that Grade 12 has been promoted as "the ticket" to such employment with the large companies. When we asked what kind of work most people in the community are doing, a common response was "for a lot of our people, it's like labour jobs first" (Keyano staff). Labour work is generally contract work with limited opportunities for training, and no benefits, pension, or job security. Two interviewees elaborate on reasons for the prevalence of Aboriginal people in this occupation:

There's a lot of labour work [in the community] ... But if they want to go into some kind of trade then they don't have that opportunity ... if you want to get into an office job or something then you need certain skills and not everybody has them ... There's lots of work but not everybody's trained for it ... [Also] this community has a lot of drug and alcohol problems and that's kind of in the way for a lot of people (Conklin resident).<sup>52</sup>

Winter time, more people get jobs, labourers and that. But who always wants to be labouring? ... There's a lot of people that could do a lot more. Like maybe they have their Grade 12 but they have a hard time doing tests. They freak out (Chipewyan Prairie resident).

Companies like Syncrude and Suncor use TOWES as a screening tool for employee recruitment for specific entry level positions partly as a way of filtering the "hundreds of applications a week [received] from individuals seeking employment ... to ensure they had the sufficient skill levels required for specific jobs" (Brisbois and Saunders, 2005: 25). However, these authors acknowledge that some stakeholders in Alberta felt that "the test may screen out qualified candidates who simply did not perform well on the TOWES test but that otherwise might be highly skilled individuals" (Brisbois and Saunders, 2005: 25). This is confirmed by an AHRDA coordinator in Wood Buffalo who comments, "I've had individuals 40, 50 years old who have 15, 20 years experience operating heavy equipment. They cannot get a job because they don't have their diploma."

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<sup>52</sup> It is noteworthy that this participant worked as a teachers' aid in the local school for 32 years. In a few cases, participants worked in such para-professional positions because they lacked a university degree.

The lack of recognition of prior learning may thus lead to a waste of talent. For example, a young Métis man in his mid-20s from a small community who quit high school in Grade 10, refers to some of his uncredentialed knowledge as follows:

One of the things I was always into was mechanics, and I rebuilt engines before, and transmissions, so I've got a bit of knowledge but I'd like to increase it, like take it further.

He also spoke about his experience in pipefitting (without trade certification):

We were doing wellheads, you just look at the wellhead and you just picture it in your mind, how it's gonna go together, then you just measure out your pipes, cut them, thread them, get all our pieces, it's pretty easy, straightforward.

However, such informal knowledge currently appears to go unrecognized in education and training – this young man would have to take three or more years of upgrading to complete his high school diploma (a prerequisite for trades training).

Further, our discussions with industry representatives suggest that even testing at a Grade 12 level is no guarantee of core employment with large companies:

The jobs now are increasingly technical in nature and Grade 12's not going to get you anything. It's a minimum requirement. If you want to be an equipment operator, for example, [we look for] someone who's gone through a [college] program or who has 10 years experience in a relevant field. But I mean, you can't even hire secretaries now unless you've got your business administration diploma or certificate. These are amazingly complex industrial worksites ... And most of the labour, janitorial, all that sort of low skill level stuff is all contracted out.

Similarly, although one of the oil companies sponsored an environmental monitor program in Fort Chipewyan, trainees will not be employed by this company without further education:

Environmental monitor is the beginning stage, [environmental] tech is then a two-year or four-year program. And from there, they go to University of Victoria if they want to get their degree ... that's the kind of people [my company] needs to hire.

Therefore, First Nation and Métis youth are often required to lower their expectations in the workplace, as this First Nation employee suggests:

My niece is a Grade 12 graduate. She got hired on to do some computer analysis or something and then later I heard that she was doing janitorial work ... and I was really upset to learn that.

The above quotations raise important questions about access for First Nation and Métis youth to “good” jobs and whether much has changed in the past decade and a half (Voyageur, 1997). While work opportunities with large companies may be limited, some First Nations have created companies that employ their own members. For some youth, employment with a First Nation-owned company can be more attractive than working for a multinational, as this young First Nation woman describes:

I worked on the scale [at Syncrude], I weighed the trucks as they came in ... The money was good definitely. I can't complain there ... but the atmosphere ... And after working there for a year, never again. I'm never working at another plant site again ... It's just, I don't know how to put it, because I'm a girl, right, and it's mostly guys, it's like, I don't know how to put it nicely. [*Just sexism?*] Oh yeah. [*So what are the differences between working with Syncrude versus the band company?*] The support is just unbelievable [at the First Nation-owned company]. It's like a nice tight-knit family, you know what I mean?

However, as an AHRDA coordinator suggests, “working for big companies is more secure, the benefits are better, training opportunities are better, but getting your foot in the door may not be an easy thing.” Given the current recession in Canada and low oil prices, we might expect the door to close even further in the near future.<sup>53</sup> It is apparent from our interviews with a range of players in Wood Buffalo that, although the education and training of First Nation and Métis people has arguably become a lucrative industry,<sup>54</sup> the outcomes in terms of a translation into “good” jobs are often disappointing.

The preceding discussion suggests that formal educational credentials pose challenges for First Nation youth to finding stable, rewarding work with opportunities for mobility. Although a high school diploma has been constructed as the “ticket” to this kind of work, large employers appear to see it as insufficient for many jobs. Given this education-jobs gap (cf. Livingstone, 1999), it seems apparent that, although industry has become a more active partner in determining the provision of education and training in First Nation and Métis communities in Wood Buffalo, it might do more to ensure that community members gain employment and not simply employability skills. For example, one possibility might be for corporations to sponsor bridging programs for those who have Grade 12 but do not meet the TOWES threshold. For Métis groups without IRCs, there has been even less involvement in economic development in Wood Buffalo. Additionally, for both First Nation and Métis individuals, issues around how industry can better accommodate them once they are hired continue to be of concern. For example, a few companies provide “fly-in” programs from Fort Chipewyan to plant sites, which allow employees to continue to live in their home community. This kind of initiative is promising, but there appears to be more work to do in this area. While acknowledging their location within a competitive market, First Nation companies also appear to have an important role to play in adopting policies and practices that support Aboriginal employees in their growth and development.

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<sup>53</sup> Also to be expected in a recession are decreased employment opportunities with First Nation-run companies whose large contracts are primarily with large industry players.

<sup>54</sup> As a college participant acknowledges, academic upgrading has been a “good money-maker for college systems across Canada.”

## 7.0 Summary of Key Issues and Future Directions

### 7.1 Key Issues

The preceding discussion highlights some of the influences on First Nation and Métis youth's attitudes toward, and experience of, further education and career planning. The multiple perspectives shared with us point to some of the institutional structures that support or hinder the ability of First Nation and Métis individuals in Wood Buffalo to find sustained employment with decent pay, good working conditions, and career potential.

Our initial research questions were:

- What is the impact of the high demand for workers in the Wood-Buffalo region in Alberta on First Nation and Métis students?
- What do First Nation and Métis youth in the municipality know about the labour market and options for post-secondary education?
- Do youth feel they have a choice in careers?
- What plans do they have regarding further education and careers? What are the influences on these plans? Are there differences within and across communities?
- Do First Nation and Métis youth make trade-offs in working for industry? If so, what are these?
- Are the pathways for First Nation and Métis youth in communities in Wood-Buffalo different from those for youth in other parts of the province and country?
- What supports are in place for youth to complete educational requirements? Are opportunities similar for young men and young women?

In responding to these questions, we organized our discussion in terms of challenges in K-12 education, post-secondary education and training, and work while acknowledging the historical context of government relations with First Nation and Métis groups. We suggest that youth's plans regarding further education and careers are shaped by their prior experiences in compulsory education – experiences that often included tough trade-offs (e.g. staying in communities or moving to try to access a perceived higher quality of schooling), racism, and feelings of failure. The large proportion of First Nation and Métis youth and adults entering upgrading at college signals a failing K-12 education system.

A number of youth who feel “pushed out” of the provincial school system simultaneously feel the pull of the labour market, which no doubt has been stronger in Wood Buffalo than in other parts of the province and country. Although completion of Grade 12 has been encouraged by large employers, it has been possible to find well-paying “unskilled or semi-skilled” contract work without a diploma. The duration, cost, and lack of guaranteed labour market benefits of upgrading appear to create further disincentives to high school completion. But despite this, interviewees suggest that many youth return to formal education, often after working in low-skilled positions for a period of time. Some want to obtain more highly skilled positions, while

others would like to change their career path entirely. As suggested by the Athabasca Tribal Council labour pool analyses, there appear to be some gender differences in career aspirations, with young women being more interested in professions and males being more interested in technical programs.

Most youth are influenced in significant ways by local labour market opportunities because of the highly visible presence of large oil companies in schools and the local college and because of the growing number of education/training partnerships involving industry, government, and First Nations. As a result, some interviewees voiced concern that the range of possibilities presented to youth has been too narrow and instrumentally focused. Further, opportunities for education and training appear to differ across communities because of differences in their levels of engagement with industry and differences in corporate players' and their needs. Métis youth have less access to post-secondary funding and to some services provided to First Nations. Youth may also be required to make crucial trade-offs since the pursuit of further education and career mobility often requires them to leave their communities and to accommodate to corporate workplaces.

Some financial supports are available for youth to complete upgrading and other education and training programs, although these were more limited than expected given the wealth in the region. In particular, resources from the federal government (e.g. PSSSP, AHRDA) and provincial government (e.g. Alberta Works) were seen by some participants as inadequate given the great demand for education and training from communities and the high cost of living in Fort McMurray. As a result, industry appears to be playing a larger role in funding and therefore in determining the type of training to be provided in First Nation and Métis communities. One concern with reliance on industry funding, however, is that the resource sector in Alberta has historically been characterized by volatility. Further, while private-public partnerships have the potential to increase the commitment of all "stakeholders," these partnerships may, at the same time, reduce the accountability of individual groups regarding expected outcomes.

## **7.2 Future Directions: Alternate Ways of Thinking about Aboriginal Education, Training and Employment**

Rather than providing specific recommendations for the different groups involved in education, training, and employment in Wood Buffalo, we conclude by offering some observations based on our research in the region.

### ***7.2.1 The Importance of Aboriginal Perspectives***

There is a fundamental lack of awareness on the part of most Canadians about Aboriginal peoples – about the effects of a long history of colonization, recent processes of decolonization, and Indigenous philosophies and systems of knowledge, ways of teaching and learning, doing, and being. There remains an urgent need for non-Aboriginal researchers, academics, teachers, policy-makers, decision-makers, and leaders to acknowledge First Nation, Métis, and Inuit histories and perspectives. This requires a deep commitment by individuals working toward the betterment of Aboriginal education, training, and work given that very often, as in the municipality of Wood Buffalo, there is a lack of research driven by the concerns of First Nation and Métis people and supported by the work of Indigenous scholars.

### **7.2.2 Considering Racialized Oppression**

Related to a lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal histories and perspectives is a generalized failure to recognize persistent and systemic racism in educational and work contexts. Similar to Aboriginal youth who testified to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) consultations over a decade ago (RCAP, 1996), First Nation and Métis youth and adults in our study say they experience racism and exclusion from contemporary mainstream society. In a broad literature review, St. Denis and Hampton (2002) identify racism as a significant obstacle to the education and employment of Aboriginal youth in Canada. Yet, denial of racism at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels means that little scholarly or policy attention has been paid to this issue, a factor St. Denis and Hampton say has helped to perpetuate racism. Many of the forms of racism talked about by interviewees (e.g. racist remarks, low expectations and streaming, the denial of professional support and/or attention, and rules and procedures that facilitate educational failure) align with forms of racism as highlighted by St. Denis and Hampton. The effects of this oppression are a lack of self-esteem in students, a self-fulfilling prophesy of low attainment, and social marginalization and isolation. All of these things were mentioned by various interviewees in our study. Just as in many other Canadian contexts, in Wood Buffalo there appears to be little desire to explicitly focus on combating the racialized oppression of First Nation and Métis students in formal education, training, and work.

### **7.2.3 Coordinating and Addressing Differences in the Capacity of Partners**

Longstanding issues concerning the recognition of treaty and Aboriginal rights (individual and collective) and aspirations to self-determination and inherent rights to self-government remain unresolved in Wood Buffalo. There are also tensions around jurisdictional roles and responsibilities, the portability of rights, and the delivery of programs and services for First Nation and Métis people. Our research suggests that the lack of coordination within and between provincial and federal education and training programs aimed at Aboriginal peoples presents challenges for service providers and clients. In addition, regional and national Aboriginal governing bodies and organizations have for decades identified the need for basic infrastructure, resources, and long-term sustainable funding in order to address various gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

In Wood Buffalo, there are obvious differences in the organizational capacity of First Nation and Métis communities as compared with governments and large multinational corporations. As a reviewer of this report notes, given this uneven power, governments have a role to play in mediating partnership relations. To address such differences, it is necessary that capacity building be *bottom-up* and based on identifying the assets that communities already have and strengthening members' ability to act on their values and priorities. A renewed relationship between partners must address capacity differences and recognize that building relationships and partnerships requires persistence, effort, time, resources, and committed, skilled, and sustained leadership. Attention to the processes that underlie the building of collaborative relationships is therefore critical (cf. Rural Development Institute, 2008).

Further, engagement at the community level (involving all segments of First Nation and Métis society, including youth) may provide further insight into why programs have not been successful and how positive change may occur. Consultation and direct involvement with First Nation and Métis communities is viewed as critical to the development of programs, from project envisioning and inception to service delivery and evaluation (cf. Sinclair and Pooyak, 2007).

#### **7.2.4 Holistic, Integrative Programming**

The complex social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues facing Wood Buffalo's communities go largely unaddressed in a system of education and training that is largely focused on the technical skills required by industry. For example, despite a long history of colonization, today, initiatives focused on individual and collective healing make up a very small proportion of the resources directed at "developing" Aboriginal people. There also seems to be a reluctance to develop a coordinated and comprehensive framework to address work and learning issues for Aboriginal people at the national and provincial levels.

Over a decade ago, in response to fragmented and reactive programming, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) called for a national Aboriginal youth policy that would involve Aboriginal groups as equal partners. Key program areas for Aboriginal youth identified by the RCAP included education, justice, health and healing, sports and recreation, and support programs for urban Aboriginal youth. Goals included active participation in decision-making processes, development of leadership potential, awareness of culture and traditions, enhanced self-esteem and confidence, learning the value of working together, cross-cultural dialogue, and training and employment toward self-government. Involving Aboriginal youth in the development of policy was seen as the first step to their empowerment.

More recently, efforts have been made to identify holistic lifelong learning models for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). While acknowledging diversity within and across Aboriginal groups, these models share a vision of learning as a "holistic process that integrates all knowledge and experience throughout each stage of life" (p. 29). Aboriginal learning understood as lifelong, experiential, rooted in language and culture, spiritually oriented, communal, and involving the integration of Aboriginal and Western knowledge extends beyond current measures of success used by policy-makers. Current measures of learning success fail to monitor knowledge, skills, and abilities across the full spectrum of lifelong learning. The Canadian Council on Learning authors suggest, therefore, that Aboriginal people be granted the opportunity to establish an alternative vision of learning and well-being and that non-Aboriginal Canadians appreciate this as an essential human endeavour that can serve to benefit all Canadians.

Schools and post-secondary institutions have a responsibility to support FNMI communities in their efforts to develop and implement holistic models of learning and to collaborate in addressing challenging transitions between institutions. Programs that encourage and support youth and adults to re-engage with formal education at different times, that promote mobility to more advanced programs, and that recognize and credit prior informal learning could be part of a broad, comprehensive, and integrated set of policies that address the holistic learning needs of youth, as suggested by a reviewer of this report.

### **7.2.5 Learning in the Workplace**

Our research suggests that industry is playing an increasingly larger role in education and training in Wood Buffalo. However, opportunities continue to be limited for FNMI youth, and large employers clearly share some responsibility for this. Part of addressing the current “jobs gap” involves finding collaborative ways to bridge life skills and more technical education and training programs as well as recognizing and valuing the prior informal learning of potential employees. Large employers may also be able to influence their contractors to support programs that better address the learning needs of Aboriginal youth and adults. Providing internship programs and work experience, offering positions specifically for FNMI youth, as well as providing essential skills training for adults are initiatives worth considering. As the holistic learning frameworks of the Canadian Council on Learning suggest, learning that is thought of as holistic, as lifelong, as experiential, as rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures, as spiritually oriented, as a communal activity, and as integrating both Aboriginal and Western knowledge is key to preparing citizens for work and the world.

### **7.3 Postscript on the Research Process**

Meaningful engagement with Aboriginal communities and individuals requires attention to particular ethical practices as identified by Section 6 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1998<sup>55</sup>). Collaborating with communities on the research question and design, selection of participants, data analysis, and dissemination of research results requires a significant investment of time and resources.

We appreciate the financial support of Canadian Policy Research Networks and hope that one outcome of the current report is growing recognition of the importance of the long-term, sustained effort required for truly collaborative research with Aboriginal communities. In the realm of work and learning, such an approach, actively involving Indigenous scholars, is key to broadening the scope of research and ensuring that inquiry encompasses the holistic attributes of Aboriginal learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Due to time and resource constraints, this is not something we were able to fully address in this report. Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) identification of important approaches (4 R’s) underpinning Aboriginal students’ success in higher education are important for thinking about research with Aboriginal communities. *Respect* for Aboriginal cultural integrity, acknowledgement of the *relevance* of Aboriginal perspectives and experience, relationships that are *reciprocal*, and opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to exercise *responsibility* are fundamental to the research process and can lead to a better future in work and learning more generally.

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<sup>55</sup> This statement is currently under review.

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