

B.C. native school a world apart – a much better world



JUSTINE HUNTER

**VICTORIA— From Wednesday's Globe and Mail
Published Tuesday, Apr. 12, 2011 8:12PM EDT
Last updated Thursday, May. 05, 2011 12:10PM EDT**

When Brenda Humchitt arrived in the remote B.C. island community of Bella Bella 30 years ago to help set up a native-run school, there were no high school classes in the village. Just before she retires this June, she expects to hand out Dogwood Diplomas to 26 high school grads.

Across the nation, such events are heartbreakingly rare. According to the Canadian Council on Learning, 61 per cent of on-reserve Indians aged 20 to 24 in 2006 hadn't graduated from high school; for off-reserve Indians in that age group, the dropout rate was a still-substantial 37.8 per cent, far higher than the 12.5-per cent dropout rate for non-aboriginals.

If you are an Indian, especially if you live on a reserve, the odds are quite literally stacked against you finishing school and breaking out of the poverty trap.

In explaining that trap, native leaders point to racist curriculums in public schools and low expectations for aboriginal students – but they especially decry unequal funding for reserve schools.

The Assembly of First Nations says the federal government, which is responsible for education on reserves, pays between \$2,000 and \$3,000 less per student than provinces pay to educate non-native students. The Bella Bella Community School has to contend with a similar funding gap: Its annual grant works out to about \$20,000 a student, \$2,000 less than the per-capita funding in the surrounding school district.

However, the Bella Bella school is a world apart – a much better world. Not one of the 200 students in the independent school has dropped out this year. And its historical dropout rate of 1.5 per cent is not only far below the overall aboriginal rate, but considerably below that of non-aboriginals.

What's more, students here are scoring higher than the B.C. average on provincial exams. The school has taken advantage of long-distance learning programs, and, in particular, new provincial programs that allow students to opt for aboriginal-influenced credits.

B.C. students can take First Peoples Grade 12 English, recognized by universities in B.C. as an equivalent to mainstream Grade 12 English. The difference is in the curriculum, which features aboriginal authors and subjects – the reading lists includes titles such as *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, *Monkey Beach* and *Keeper'n Me*. The results have been encouraging, with 80 per cent of students passing the provincial First Peoples English exam last year.

The course offerings have been expanded this year to include First Peoples English 10 and 11. The key, said Ms. Humchitt, is the freedom to place aboriginal experiences and culture at the centre of the curriculum.

“Providing that relevant education is huge,” Ms. Humchitt said.

The Bella Bella Community School goes beyond collaboration; it is immersed in the Heiltsuk culture of Campbell Island, on the mid-coast of B.C. It is built right into the foundation – the school building resembles an eagle in flight, its wings formed by two lines of classrooms.

The Heiltsuk won, in 1976, the right to take over their education system from Indian Affairs. It created what is now one of the largest aboriginal schools in B.C. What the school lacks in economies of scale, it makes up for with attitude: “We have consistently worked on raising our standards at our school,” Ms. Hunchitt said.

Shawn Atleo, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, echoed that sentiment in a recent interview. “We need first nations control of first nations education,” he said. That doesn’t necessarily mean a separate education system, he said, but aboriginal influence needs to shape reforms.