

Auditor General of Québec

November 2024

Educational Success of Indigenous Students

OBSERVATIONS

SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
COMMISSIONER

Translation of the *Observations de la commissaire au développement durable* annexed to the *Rapport du Vérificateur général du Québec à l'Assemblée nationale pour l'année 2024-2025*, November 2024



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ACRONYMS

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation
and Development

UN United Nations

HIGHLIGHTS

These observations are complementary to the Auditor General’s audit report titled *Educational Success of Indigenous Students*. They provide an opportunity for the Sustainable Development Commissioner to set out her views on sustainable development issues. The information presented is not based on audit work carried out in this area with the Ministère de l’Éducation, school boards or school service centres.

QUESTION FOR DECISION-MAKERS

How can education, as a vehicle for transmitting Indigenous cultural heritage, contribute to:

- **the socioeconomic well-being of Indigenous peoples?**
- **seeking solutions to environmental issues?**



Valuing **Indigenous cultural heritage** in education



through **pedagogical strategies** (e.g., inclusion of Indigenous perspectives) and **organizational strategies** (e.g., staff training)



supports the **educational success** of Indigenous students.



Principles of the *Sustainable Development Act*



UN Sustainable Development Goal



Background

1 In the Government Sustainable Development Strategy 2023–2028, the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec and the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur state that education is a key issue in sustainable development because it constitutes the main source of social and economic equity, in addition to being an essential mechanism in promoting environmental awareness among individual citizens and in society as a whole. The strategy also reminds departments and agencies of the importance of working with Indigenous nations, communities and organizations to develop measures that reflect their realities, according to their visions of sustainable development.

2 In its performance audit report, the Auditor General reveals shortcomings in the effectiveness of measures aimed at improving school-related factors in the educational success of Indigenous students attending the Québec public elementary and secondary school system (general education in the youth sector). This situation is a cause for concern given that, as the audit report indicates, since 2006, Québec has had a higher rate of Indigenous people without a certificate or diploma than all Canadian provinces combined, and is the province that has seen the least improvement.

3 An education that values Indigenous cultural heritage can contribute to the educational success of Indigenous students, which in turn can generate social and economic benefits for both Indigenous peoples and society as a whole. Furthermore, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, adopted in 2007, recognizes that respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment.

4 At the end of my observations, I raise a question that should be of interest to decision-makers:

How can education, as a vehicle for transmitting Indigenous cultural heritage, contribute to:

- **the socioeconomic well-being of Indigenous peoples?**
- **seeking solutions to environmental issues?**

Educational success

This is a global development process that goes beyond academic success (graduation and certification) and takes into account a person's overall intellectual, cognitive, social and physical potential. For Indigenous peoples, perseverance is an important dimension of educational success, whose ultimate goal is to achieve a better life for oneself, one's children, family or community.

Sustainable development issues

5 In 2006, the Québec government adopted the *Sustainable Development Act*, one of whose aims is to enhance the Administration's accountability in terms of sustainable development, notably through the controls exercised by the Sustainable Development Commissioner. This Act specifies that in order to better integrate the pursuit of sustainable development into its areas of intervention, the Administration is to take 16 principles into account when framing its actions. Two of these principles are directly related to these observations:



- According to the **protection of cultural heritage** principle, the identity of a society is reflected in its cultural heritage, and cultural heritage components must be identified, protected and enhanced, taking their intrinsic rarity and fragility into account. There are many and various forms of Indigenous cultural heritage. While establishing a single definition is difficult, this definition should nevertheless include both tangible heritage (e.g., objects, dwellings, foods) and intangible heritage (e.g., languages, practices, knowledge, ceremonies). These components have an intrinsic value for the well-being of Indigenous peoples because they are culturally meaningful and connected to shared memory. They can be inherited from ancestors or created by today's people as a legacy for future generations. In education, valuing the diversity of cultural heritage can contribute to its protection, as well as being a factor in bringing students closer together and ensuring exchange and understanding among them.



- The **participation and commitment** of citizens and the groups that represent them are necessary to define a concerted vision of development and ensure its environmental, social and economic sustainability. In the program of action for sustainable development adopted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the United Nations (UN) recognized that Indigenous peoples have developed knowledge of their lands and natural resources over many generations, and that such knowledge contributes to promoting sustainable development. In this program, the UN states that governments should affirm the rights of Indigenous peoples to use their experience and understanding of sustainable development to play a part in education.

6 In 2015, the UN adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. The present observations are linked to one of these goals:



- UN **goal 4** is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. To achieve this, the UN underscores the importance of ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including Indigenous peoples (target 4.5). Strategies aimed at creating an environment conducive to the educational success of Indigenous students can help reduce educational inequalities.

Importance of education for valuing and protecting Indigenous cultural heritage

7 Over the years, several commissions of inquiry have asserted that government measures have had, and continue to have, an impact on Indigenous cultural heritage.

8 For example, the *Indian Act*, adopted by the Canadian government in 1876, is a consolidation of earlier legislation, including the *Act to encourage the gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes in this Province* (1857)¹ and the *Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians* (1869).² The reports of various commissions of inquiry state that these laws were originally intended to strengthen the process of assimilation and sedentarization of Indigenous peoples.

9 In addition, the Canadian government began establishing residential schools for Indigenous children in the 1880s, including 12 residential schools and residences in Québec from the 1930s onwards. Most residential schools ceased to exist in the 1970s. In 2008, the Canadian government acknowledged that the “two primary objectives of the Residential Schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.”

10 Reports from the commissions of inquiry state that history has thus led to a distrust among a large number of Indigenous people, particularly towards educational establishments. The reports do underscore, however, that education is an essential vehicle for valuing and protecting Indigenous cultural heritage, which has led to calls for action in this regard (Figure 1).

1. The full name of the act is *An Act to encourage the gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes in this Province, and to amend the Laws respecting Indians*.

2. The full name of the act is *An Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians, the better management of Indian affairs, and to extend the provisions of the Act 31st Victoria, Chapter 42*.

FIGURE 1 Education-related calls for action from commissions of inquiry reports

1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples	2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission	2019 Public Inquiry Commission on relations between Indigenous Peoples and certain public services in Québec: listening, reconciliation and progress, known as the Viens Commission
<p>Call for action</p> <p>3.5.5 Federal, provincial and territorial governments collaborate with Aboriginal governments, organizations and educators to develop or continue developing innovative curricula that reflect Aboriginal cultures and community realities, for delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) at all grade levels of elementary and secondary schools; b) in schools operating under Aboriginal control; and c) in schools under provincial or territorial jurisdiction. 	<p>Call for action</p> <p>62. We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students. ... 	<p>Calls for action</p> <p>20. Carry out a public information campaign on Indigenous peoples, their history, their cultural diversity and the discrimination issues they face, working with Indigenous authorities.</p> <p>21. Further enrich the Québec curriculum by introducing a fair and representative portrait of Québec First Nations and Inuit history, working with Indigenous authorities.</p> <p>22. Introduce concepts related to Indigenous history and culture as early as possible in the school curriculum.</p> <p>23. Include a component on Québec First Nations and Inuit in professional programs at colleges and universities (medicine, social work, law, journalism and other programs), working with Indigenous authorities.</p>

11 Valuing and protecting Indigenous cultural heritage can contribute not only to the educational success of Indigenous students, and thus to the socioeconomic well-being of Indigenous peoples, but also to seeking solutions to environmental issues. The following paragraphs address these two themes.

Contribute to the socioeconomic well-being of Indigenous peoples

12 There have been significant and long-standing gaps between the socioeconomic conditions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The Québec government recognizes these inequalities in its 2022–2027 Government Action Plan for the Social and Cultural Wellness of the First Nations and Inuit, which identifies educational success as one of the issues linked to the field of action on socioeconomic conditions and social inclusion. These inequalities are reflected in lower high school and university graduation rates, as well as in lower employment rates and employment income.

13 The aim of supporting the educational success of Indigenous students is to give them the same opportunities as any other student to pursue post-secondary education, enter the labour market and benefit from better socioeconomic conditions, both for themselves and their communities.

14 It is recognized that educated individuals and societies benefit from better social conditions. For example, better-educated individuals live longer and healthier lives. As the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health notes in a 2018 publication, Indigenous peoples face inequities in health (e.g., more obesity, substance abuse, suicides) and housing (e.g., unsuitable and overcrowded housing, homelessness). Narrowing the academic success gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students would help reduce these inequalities. In a 2023 publication, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that high-quality education can help individuals move up the social ladder, translating into higher social cohesion and reduced inequality.

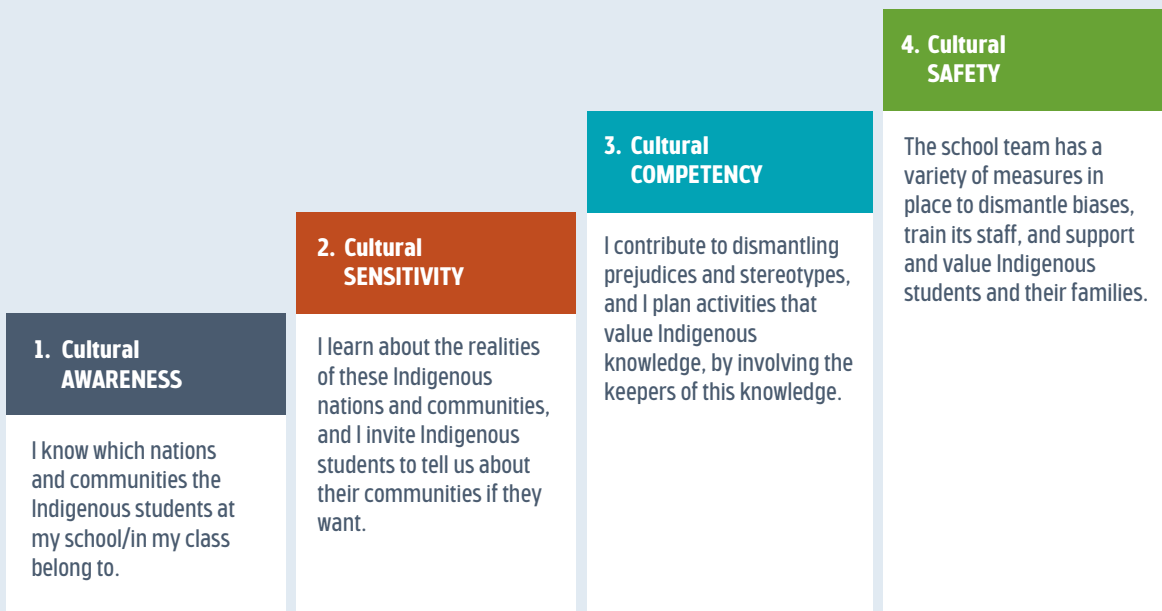
15 It is also recognized that educated individuals and societies benefit from a better economic situation. Better-educated individuals have better job prospects and higher earnings. Societies, for their part, benefit from increased labour market participation, productivity and innovation. A study by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards, published in 2023 by the Assembly of First Nations, shows that there are massive economic gains, in the billions of dollars, associated with the closure of key educational and labour market gaps facing First Nations people in Canada. According to this study, it is therefore necessary to support First Nations education.

16 To build a more equitable and prosperous society, it is important to think about strategies that promote greater educational success for Indigenous students. With a view to cultural safety, educational success must be supported by pedagogical and organizational strategies.

Cultural safety

Cultural safety is a process that aims to create safe environments for the Indigenous population in various settings, including education. The Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec maintains that cultural safety must involve not only schools and government, but also Indigenous people, for systemic changes to be made.

This process, which stems from the mismatch between the needs of the Indigenous population and the services available to meet those needs, is divided into four phases.



Source : Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec.

Through pedagogical strategies

17 Many publications, including the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), assert that recognizing and valuing cultural heritage in pedagogical practices have a significant impact on the educational success of Indigenous students.

18 Firstly, Indigenous students themselves have expressed the importance of implementing pedagogical strategies that fully incorporate Indigenous realities. This approach can help foster a sense of pride in identity among Indigenous students. This sense of identity is central to the sense of belonging. When young people feel a sense of belonging to their family and community, they are better equipped to deal with life's problems.

19 In addition, valuing the history of Indigenous peoples is important for the cultural safety of Indigenous students. Widespread misconception of Indigenous realities comes with its own set of prejudices and stereotypes, as well as significant repercussions on relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Conversely, when the teaching of history is faithful to reality and makes room for Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come to adopt a more open and respectful view of each other. Despite recommendations to this effect made by the National Assembly's Committee on Education in 2007, the Auditor General notes in its audit report that the inclusion of elements related to Indigenous realities into curriculums has not been completed.

Indigenous-focused high-school graduation requirement in British Columbia

One initiative of the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care is the introduction, as of the 2023–2024 school year, of an Indigenous-focused requirement to graduate from high school. This requirement involves students taking one or more courses to develop a deeper understanding and broader knowledge base of First Nations' perspectives, histories, and cultures. To meet this requirement, students must obtain at least four credits from among the following courses:¹

- one or more of the existing, Indigenous-focused provincial courses in British Columbia;
- a First Nations language course;
- a locally developed, Board/Authority Authorized course that meets specific criteria;
- a First Nation Language and Culture External Credential may also be accepted.

1. Each eligible course may be worth one, two, three or four credits; the student must pass as many as necessary to earn at least four credits.

Through organizational strategies

20 In addition to the pedagogical practices employed in the classroom, the school system as a whole plays a role in supporting the educational success of Indigenous students. A culturally safe school system for Indigenous students involves a range of measures, including training for staff who work with Indigenous students (e.g., teachers, remedial teachers) and building trust with parents and elders.

21 During their initial training and in continuing education throughout their careers, all staff members working in public services should be made aware of the realities of the Indigenous people with whom they are likely to come into contact, in order to promote their cultural safety. In its audit report, the Auditor General notes, however, that the training provided to school staff on Indigenous realities is not sufficient.

22 Involving parents and elders can also support the educational success of Indigenous students. When the parents of Indigenous students develop greater trust in the school system and become more involved in their children's educational activities, they have a positive influence on their children's success, who feel stimulated and encouraged. In this sense, it is recognized that elders, as knowledge keepers, play a particularly important role within the Indigenous population. They can therefore be a valuable resource for school staff by contributing to the teaching of their culture, for example.

Contribute to seeking solutions to environmental issues

23 Indigenous knowledge is an integral part of Indigenous cultural heritage. This knowledge is transmitted, often orally, from one generation to another, and is based on the world view of Indigenous peoples, whose existence is closely linked to the land. This includes knowledge on subjects as varied as animals, plants, water and climate, as well as know-how (e.g., agricultural, technical and medical knowledge) based on millennia of interaction with the environment.

24 This is why it is recognized that the participation of Indigenous peoples is of great value to inform decision making in the implementation of sustainable development. A 2008 World Bank report on the role of Indigenous peoples in biodiversity conservation states that they have been important stewards of the environment for millennia. The participation and commitment of Indigenous peoples is therefore essential to seeking solutions to environmental issues such as the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems, and climate change.

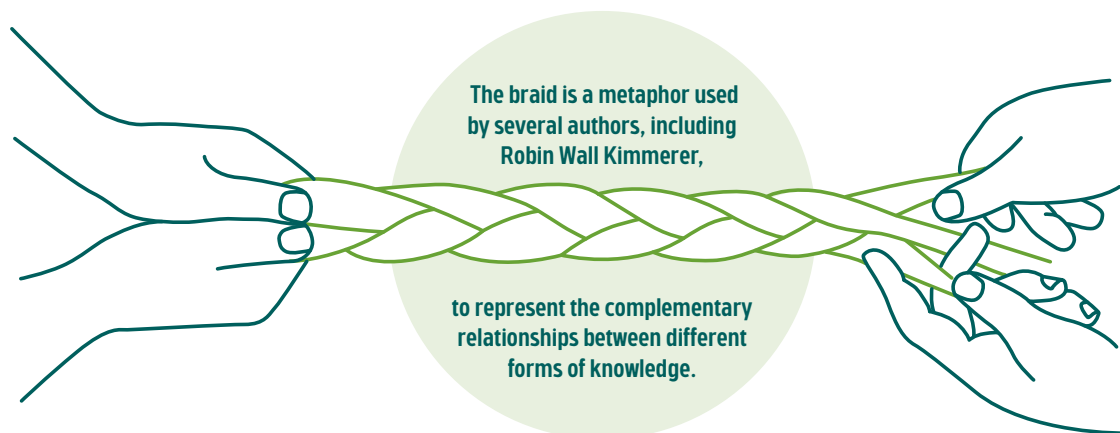
Recognition of Indigenous peoples' contributions at COP 15

In December 2022, the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity ended in Montréal with an agreement to guide global action on nature through to 2030. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework was thus adopted, to be implemented with the full and effective contribution of Indigenous peoples and local communities among others.

The Framework acknowledges the important roles and contributions of Indigenous peoples and local communities as custodians of biodiversity and as partners in its conservation, restoration and sustainable use. It states that implementation of the Framework requires transformative and innovative education, at all levels, recognizing diverse world views, values and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples and local communities, and that education is essential to promote sustainable lifestyles.

25 In education, pedagogical and organizational strategies could put forward the complementary nature of Indigenous and scientific knowledge, bringing them together while maintaining their integrity (Figure 2). These strategies could strengthen the recognition of Indigenous knowledge, so that Indigenous students do not feel forced to abandon their own knowledge in favour of what is typically valued in school.

FIGURE 2 Complementarity of knowledge



26 In short, educational approaches that value Indigenous cultural heritage can support the educational success of Indigenous students. More broadly, an education that highlights the realities, knowledge and contributions of Indigenous peoples can strengthen the ability of future generations to build a more equitable, prosperous and sustainable society.