

**LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD**  
**Report**

To: Mr. Cameron McBeth, Executive Director  
Kla-how-eya Aboriginal Centre

From: Rob Louie, Dipl.P.S.M., B.A., LL.B.  
Consultant

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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## Background

Little is known about the health and development of young Aboriginal children in Canada. In particular, comprehensive national data concerning Aboriginal children is not readily available, especially for young children. Empirically speaking, the Aboriginal population has a high proportion of young children and young Aboriginal children often live in single-parent families. The majority of young Aboriginal children live in low-income families in a variety of living arrangements. Further, Aboriginal children experience high rates of mortality, injury and disability.

Since 2001, the number of Aboriginal children served by special agencies has increased by 300 percent, and the budget for child and family services has climbed by 30 percent. B.C. Minister Christensen recently noted that there are no easy solutions to a complex situation, especially since responsibility for Aboriginal child welfare is shared by the provincial and federal governments and First Nations groups. "We've added resources, but we know that resources alone are not the solution," Christensen said. There is an effort to transfer greater responsibility to First Nations, which has been going on for more than 20 years; however, to date, only eight of 24 designated agencies have qualified to deliver services.<sup>1</sup>

The population of Aboriginal children is growing proportionally higher than that of the entire Canadian population. In light of this, the health and well-being of Aboriginal children will define the future health and well-being of Aboriginal communities in Canada – both on- and off-reserve. Therefore, it is important that the indicators of well-being examined reflect the unique situations of Aboriginal peoples. This report examines the situation in the Fraser Valley, especially in and around Surrey, B.C. through a project called "Leveling the Playing Field".

## Outcomes

The proposed outcomes for the Leveling the Playing Field Forum included the development of social capital for all service providers in the Fraser Valley catchment area to work more effectively with Aboriginal children, youth and families. The two consultation meetings, held on February 25 and May 27, 2008, also highlighted resources, identification of common areas of interest and next steps including the need to create a forward looking agenda for organizations to meet on common ground. All parties expressed an interest in generating a greater understanding of respective functions, goals and values. Finally, all participants were asked two questions, ***"How can we better serve children, youth, and families in Surrey?" "Is there an appetite – a will – to move forward to establish a collective/association of organizations for communication and to share common issues, ideas and actions to benefit all youth, children, and families in the Fraser Valley?"***

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<sup>1</sup> B.C. failing aboriginal children: auditor general: *Tuesday, May 6, 2008 | 8:00 PM ET CBC News.*

## **Process**

Welcome and introduction of Facilitated Dialogue process. (See Appendix A for a description of this process.)

### **Rob Louie, Coordinator:**

- Welcome visitors...
- We need to look at how we work together as service providers on behalf of all children, youth and families
- We agree that there is no way to go forward into the future unless we work together as partners – how this partnership is determined needs to be further discussed...
- To have you here is a testament to your desire to provide better services and a commitment to developing a better working relationship amongst us all
- Although a significant number of people representing various organizations were invited and are not at the table; many have expressed regrets and wish they could be here but because resources are limited and people wear many hats they can't be here.

The participants took turns introducing information and comments related to their respective priorities, challenges and opportunities in providing services to children, youth and their families.

The facilitator opened the discussion for the participants as a whole to ask questions, provide comments and/or seek clarification. These comments are summarized below.

## **Comments**

- There are three things I see:
  - Employment and Training
  - School Readiness
  - Language Acquisition
- In order for youth to have success employment and training programs should be made available; children need to be school ready, and have opportunities to enhance language acquisition
- Aboriginal youth are always dealing with systemic barriers including how they are taught, there is no recognition of the traditional ways that we learned as Aboriginal people... there is a real need to recognize the Old Ways of Teaching by mainstream education institutions
- It isn't just about teaching and learning models, the system is biased toward Eurocentric models that do not always fit with the way that Aboriginal children and youth learn
- There have to be independent living opportunities made available for youth who are in care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)
- There should be better use and adaptation of technologies to assist all students learn and that these should be made accessible at all schools and public libraries

- We recognize that we are working with some of the most marginalized individuals in our society and that there is no choice to make between having shelter and food or internet access and cable vision. The choice is self-evident.

Nadine Gagne, an Early Childhood Consultant for Kla-how-eya, commented,

*It actually starts before kindergarten. It starts prenatally with healthy pregnancies. It starts way before kindergarten - 0-6years when so much developmental takes place that lays the foundation for all other development and success. The amounts of neurological pathways that are built in the brain between 0-3 years are immeasurable. A child learns to walk, to talk, and to socialize and that baby grows into an independent person with their own personality. So much is related to attachment as an infant and building a secure and healthy attachment and bond with their parent/caregiver. Attachment or the lack of a secure attachment will affect that child in all areas of their life as they grow older. That is why I chose to go into early childhood development and infant development.*

*Eighty to ninety percent of the infants in my program are foster babies that are in care because of alcohol and drug exposure. Most are from high-risk families that are direct causes of residential school, colonization, multi-generational trauma, abuse with the biggest being POVERTY. These babies will be affected for life and will grow up with numerous challenges and learning disabilities. They are already dealt a bad card before they are even born, before they even get to preschool or kindergarten. I take the preventative approach and we need to support our people way before this process. Birth control or ensuring healthy pregnancies and support post-natally and through early intervention Headstart programs, preschools, family support and early childhood education.*

## **Lessons Learned**

Some lessons learned from the forum series include:

1. Educators must recognize and respond to differences in the way Aboriginal students learn. In this respect technology can be used as a tool to help manage and respond to these differences.
2. Service providers need to communicate, collaborate and work together to ensure that the resources each receives can be maximized to benefit clients (oftentimes mutual).
3. Transitions to work can be facilitated through high-quality and supported work experiences while a student is still in school.
4. Employers need to understand how to assist youth workers be successful
5. Policymakers should support research and development efforts that increase the access that individuals have to educational and employment opportunities.

## **Final Remarks**

- Kla-how-eya is tremendous community asset we sometimes take for granted...
- Happy with the work that Kla-how-eya is doing...
- 100%, not just saying it, but using it and utilizing it (Kla-how-eya)...
- Thank you all very much...
- There is a tremendous amount leadership in the room...
- These sessions are heartwarming...
- Open dialogue will help us build a better future for our youth...
- Thanks to facilitators, staff and members...
- We all learned a lot from this...
- We will be moving forward and will do our best to communicate with everyone...

## **Conclusion**

All agreed that there is a need to establish a coalition/association for the Fraser Valley and that Kla-how-eya is seen as a leader in the community and is therefore in the best position to lead the process.

Although education, employment and training for youth is a high priority amongst all service providers they were concerned that many youth do not possess the requisite skills to finish high school much less enter the world of work. The participants were concerned about the literacy of youth; they viewed literacy as the basis of learning and survival in the larger world. It was agreed that family, schools and service providers needed to ensure that youth were prepared to finish high school and to enter the work world. However, there was also recognition of the fact that many youth, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, could not read and write and lacked basic mathematics skills to finish high school.

In this regard, the facilitator introduced the new Service Canada initiative Essential Skills. Essential Skills are the skills needed for work, learning and life. This new program supports the conclusion reached by the forum and that there is a program that they might utilize to assist youth achieve greater levels of success in their lives including school and the work world. These Essential Skills provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.

Through extensive research, the Government of Canada and other national and international agencies have identified and validated nine Essential Skills. These skills are used in nearly every occupation and throughout daily life in different ways and at different Levels of complexity.

There are nine Essential Skills:

- Reading Text
- Document Use
- Numeracy

- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Working with Others
- Continuous Learning
- Thinking Skills
- Computer use

The two forums of Leveling the Playing Field held by Kla-how-eya have offered some common sense solutions that can increase the standard of living for children, youth and their families in their daily lives, in school, and at work. Service providers can increase the benefits youth receive through public education, help develop high-level skills for the workforce, and smooth the transition through everyday life. Greater mainstream awareness can help create policies that promote their use within education, the workforce and society. By giving youth access to services and programs that aim to improve their numeracy and literacy skills they can become better learners and more highly skilled, future employees and productive citizens.

## **Appendix A - Overview of Facilitated Dialogue Process**

Infocus Management Consulting has developed and utilized with great success, a process known as Facilitated Dialogue with other clients in similar circumstances to achieve similar goals. Facilitated Dialogue may be rightly categorized within the emerging field of appreciative inquiry, which is comprised of thinking, seeing and acting for powerful, purposeful change in organizations. Appreciative inquiry works on the assumption of whatever you want more of, already exists in all organizations.

Facilitated Dialogue is a process of inquiry, mutual exchange, and respect in coming to terms with the issue(s) and challenges currently experienced by members of an organization. More specifically, Facilitated Dialogue is a group discussion, led by a facilitator, which enables participants with differing values, viewpoints, and ideas to talk deeply and personally about some of the major issues and realities that confront them. This strategy acknowledges that misunderstanding is often a source of conflict and that improved communication and understanding is one of the first steps to finding an appropriate resolution. Moreover, Facilitated Dialogue is a prerequisite to other processes such as problem solving, conflict resolution, and decision-making.

The purpose of Facilitated Dialogue is three-fold:

- It is intended to assist participants in reflective discussion about the issues and challenges that concern them;
- It is supposed to create a safe environment where people can talk and listen to each other in a respectful manner; and
- It is designed to help participants consider different viewpoints and assess various perspectives in order to reach agreements on actions that need to be taken or policy decisions that need to be.

### **Infocus Participant Approach**

- Listen with empathy – acknowledge that you’ve heard others...
- Look for common ground to identify areas where you agree...
- Search for and disclose hidden assumptions especially in yourself...
- Be open and suspend judgment. Don’t disparage other points of view...
- Keep “dialogue” and “decision-making” separate. Dialogue precedes decisions, negotiations or actions...
- Speak for yourself. Don’t be a representative for others and treat all participants as individuals...