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Catholic schools to track progress of aboriginal kids

Information will help target school services to aid students

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Saskatoon's Catholic school division is going to keep closer tabs on its aboriginal students.

The division will soon be combing its database to compile statistics on aboriginal students' graduation rates, movement between schools and progression from one grade to the next, says Gordon Martell, superintendent of learning services with Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools.

"We know that in our schools, aboriginal students aren't faring as well (at graduating)," Martell says.

It's a move Saskatoon Tribal Council Chief Felix Thomas applauds.

"I think it's needed -- it's long overdue," Thomas said. "I think we need to identify who's not succeeding."

According to Statistics Canada's 2006 census, 49 per cent of Saskatchewan aboriginals, aged 15 and older, had not completed high school. Similarly, a recent

C. D. Howe Institute report found in 2006 that 48 per cent of Saskatchewan First Nations men aged 25-34, and 37 per cent of women in that age group, did not finish high school. Of Saskatchewan Metis in the same age range, 28 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women had not graduated high school. For non-aboriginals, the dropout rate was nine per cent for women and 14 per cent for men.

For years, the division has had programs and employees meant to support aboriginal students. Seven First Nations elders spend time at seven Saskatoon schools to lead cultural activities and provide students with guidance.

The division also has approximately 10 home-school liaison workers who work mostly in inner-city schools helping students whose families are struggling with poverty, addictions, homelessness and other social issues.

However, Martell says the division has been guessing about where such supports are needed.

Meanwhile, the number of students who identify themselves as aboriginal --

including First Nations, Metis and Inuit -- has been growing. Fifteen per cent of division students this school year were aboriginal, compared to 12 per cent in 1998, and Martell expects that number to reach 20 per cent within five years. The division needs statistical evidence to make the best choices about where to put school supports and programs, he says.

So, once a month, the division will search its student database to compile more detailed statistics on students who have identified themselves as aboriginal. They'll likely look at how many students are changing schools, and how many of those are aboriginal.

"There are things that we can do to interrupt that," Martell said, such as making classrooms inviting and sensitive to aboriginal learners, or putting more supports in schools to combat poverty.

Once a year, the division may also look at graduation rates for the general student population, and compare that to aboriginal students specifically.

At schools with a higher proportion of aboriginal students, the division could also consider allotting more day-care spaces, or running more career training programs to help steer more aboriginal students into the workforce.

The division may also look at which high school classes aboriginal students drop, in order to pinpoint troublesome spots.

Documenting the proportion of aboriginal students from Grade 9 to Grade 12 will also be "extremely valuable," Martell said. If there are fewer aboriginal Grade 12s than Grade 11s, and so on, then "there's an attrition rate we need to deal with."

Martell did not know of any division plans to track any other specific group or minority in the same way the division intends to track aboriginal students.

Thomas said as long as children and their families know how their "self-identification" data on race will be used, he doesn't see a problem with the information being used to better direct student supports.

Quantifying the problems will be more useful than subjective guesses, he says, and, sometimes, school divisions need numbers to justify to government and the public why money should be spent on extra supports.

Thomas said he hopes the school division will share the data they gather. Martell said he plans to share the numbers with partners such as the tribal council and the Central Urban Metis Federation Inc.

When asked why the division will track aboriginal students rather than low-income students, who may face some of the same struggles, Martell said there are issues and supportive programs specific to aboriginal students.

"Largely, this is about program development and ensuring that we have our finger on the pulse of aboriginal learning outcome so we can align resources with the need," Martell said.

The intent to track aboriginal students first surfaced at a Greater Saskatoon

Catholic Schools' September board meeting. Earlier this month, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations called for a publicly funded, separate school system in Saskatchewan for aboriginal students, saying existing education systems were failing them.

Martell agrees aboriginal students in his division do not have outcomes in school equal to the general population.

"As long as our aboriginal students are not doing as well as all other students in school, I think that criticism is fair," Martell says.

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