

The Challenges to Post-Secondary Education For the Residents of the Athabasca Basin, Saskatchewan



FINAL REPORT

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PREFACE

This study was commissioned by the Community Vitality Monitoring Partnership Process (Community Vitality). Community Vitality was initiated in 1998 as a means of identifying and tracking indicators of community vitality in Northern Saskatchewan communities that relate to northern uranium mines. The goal of Community Vitality is to provide information and insight to stakeholders so that they can actively engage in maintaining and improving the quality of life for residents of Northern Saskatchewan. The focus of this process is threefold:

1. Providing information about effects of uranium mining on community vitality.
2. Fostering partnerships to monitor community vitality.
3. Developing effective communication activities.

The Community Vitality Monitoring Partnership Process has five priority topic areas for gathering information. They include 1) Environment and Land; 2) Health; 3) Economic/Social/Infrastructure; 4) Community Dynamics and Relationships; and 5) Special Topics. Projects are undertaken in consultation with northern stakeholders and typically involve consultants with extensive experience working in the north. In consultation with stakeholders, this year the focus of Community Vitality was a project specific to the Athabasca Basin, the northern-most region of Saskatchewan. In particular, they sought to understand the factors influencing people's ability to access and succeed at post-secondary education programs.

InterGroup Consultants Ltd. would like to extend its thanks to the individuals who assisted throughout the course of the project. The Project Steering Committee included representatives from the Prince Albert Grand Council, Saskatchewan Advanced Education Employment and Labour, the Northern Lights School Division #113, Northlands College, key employers in the region, community leadership, and the Northern Mines Monitoring Secretariat. The Steering Committee played an essential role in framing the research, as well as in verifying the results of the interview program. Special thanks goes to Keith Frame of the Prince Albert Grand Council who took considerable time to share his knowledge of the challenges of delivering quality education across Northern Saskatchewan. In the Athabasca Basin, local community consultants were essential to the coordination of the interview program. Thanks to David Bigeye, Vivian Robillard, Joe Tsannie, Roxanne Adam, and Margaret Powder for all of their assistance in the process. Finally, thanks to the 90 individuals who took the time to participate in interviews and share their experiences. While we acknowledge the valuable input of all of these individuals, any errors or omissions in the report rest solely with InterGroup Consultants Ltd.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that a smaller proportion of residents from the Athabasca Basin are successfully enrolling in and completing post-secondary education than residents from elsewhere in Saskatchewan. As such, Community Vitality commissioned a research program to understand the barriers faced by Athabasca residents in attaining post-secondary education, and to develop strategies to assist residents in overcoming these challenges.

The links among better education, better jobs, and better income are well documented. "There is ample evidence that educational attainment leads to greater opportunities in the areas of employment and income" (Hull, 2005). The body of research that tries to understand the factors affecting participation in post-secondary is extensive. The links among background characteristics (age, gender, place of residence, Aboriginal status), intervening factors (academic performance, work/employment, family responsibility, personal barriers), affordability, and participation in post-secondary education are all subjects that have been studied by government agencies, education authorities, funding agencies, and academics across Canada (and the world), among others. Understanding these factors is essential in developing the labour force in today's economy.

The study considered the perspectives of various stakeholders in education in the Athabasca Basin, including residents with post-secondary education experience (complete and incomplete), high school students, educators and administrators, community leaders, key employers, and representatives of post-secondary institutions outside of the Athabasca Basin. The research sought to understand the key challenges for Athabasca residents in accessing and successfully completing post-secondary education opportunities. It focused on several types of barriers, including academic challenges, cultural challenges, social challenges, and financial challenges. Further, it sought to understand the factors contributing to successful post-secondary experiences, and to identify some of the potential solutions for overcoming the barriers that people face.

This report is organized into the following sections:

- Section 1 – Introduction
- Section 2 – Research Methods
- Section 3 – Education Experience and Value
- Section 4 – Challenges
- Section 5 – Discussion
- Section 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations
- Section 7 – References

1.1 PURPOSE

The purpose of this project was to carry out a comprehensive research program to identify strategies to overcome the impediments faced by Athabasca residents in attaining post-secondary education. It focused on two key questions:

- In your experience, what are the key challenges for Athabasca residents in accessing post-secondary education opportunities?
- In your experience what solutions have the potential to overcome the barriers?

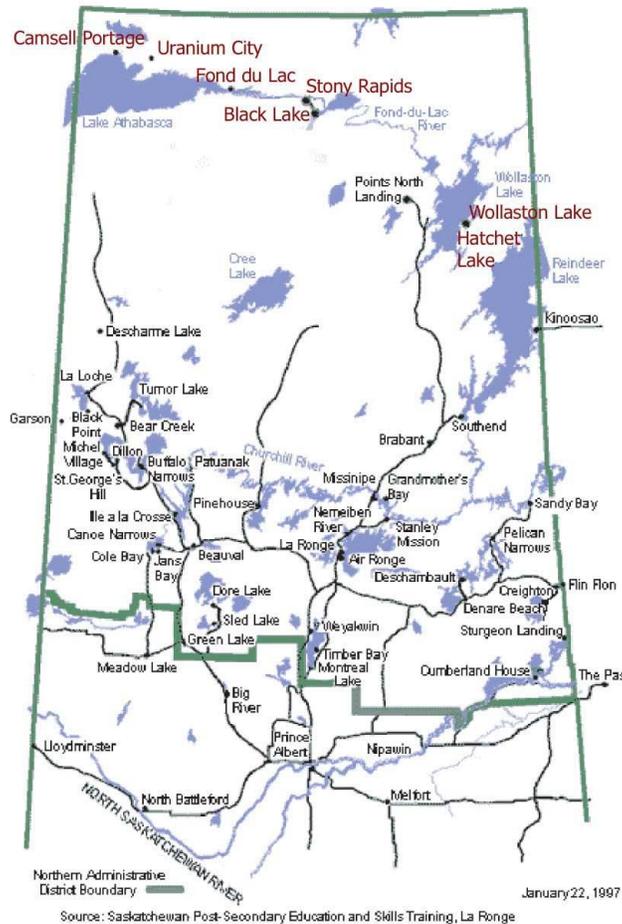
The study focused on understanding challenges as a means to developing recommendations. Specifically, questions were developed to understand what academic, cultural, social, and financial challenges residents of the Athabasca Basin faced in attending post-secondary program. In addition, the study sought to understand what factors helped residents overcome the challenges, what factors contributed to an individual's success, and what the respondents had as recommendations to stakeholders in education in the Athabasca Basin.

1.2 CONTEXT

The Athabasca Basin is the northern-most region of Saskatchewan consisting of seven communities, including First Nations, Northern Hamlets, and Northern Settlements (see Figure 1.1). The area is remote and accessible year-round only by air, although many of the communities can be accessed by winter roads (with plans underway for all-season roads to Wollaston Lake and Stony Rapids). The communities are as follows:

- **First Nation Communities:** Fond-du-Lac Denesuline First Nation, Black Lake Denesuline First Nation, Hatchet Lake Denesuline First Nation (located at Wollaston Lake);
- **Northern Hamlets:** Stony Rapids; and
- **Northern Settlements:** Camsell Portage, Uranium City, Wollaston Lake.

Figure 1.1
Northern Saskatchewan



1.3 POPULATION OVERVIEW

According to Saskatchewan Health (2007), the total population of the Athabasca Basin is 3,500, with communities ranging in size from less than ten residents (Camsell Portage) to more than 1,100 residents (Black Lake First Nation). According to Statistics Canada (2007a), approximately 85 per cent of residents identify themselves as Aboriginal, although this proportion is as high as 98 per cent in First Nation communities. The population is young, with a mean age of 25.5 years compared to 38.7 years provincially (Statistics Canada, 2007b). A complete breakdown of the communities' population, age and gender distribution is provided in Appendix A. Population data from both Saskatchewan Health (which accounts only for people residing in the communities) and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) (which retains data on and off-reserve populations for the First Nation communities)¹ are provided.

¹ The INAC total population is of relevance since post-secondary funding from INAC accounts for all members of the community regardless of their place of residence.

1.4 EDUCATION SERVICES

There are two distinct Kindergarten to Grade 12 school systems operating in the Athabasca Basin: the provincial system that serves Northern Hamlets and Northern Settlements, and the federal school system which serves First Nation operated schools. In the provincial system, decision-making authority resides with the school division boards of education, in this case the Northern Lights School Division #113. In the federal school system, guidance is provided by the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC), although decision-making authority ultimately rests with each of the First Nation education authorities. In both systems there are local school committees or local school boards that provide input into the operation of the local school (Saskatchewan Learning and the Education and Training Sub-Committee to the Northern Labour Market Committee, 2002).

The schools and grades provided in each of the communities are as follows:

- **Camsell Portage:** The school in Camsell Portage has been closed for two years due to no enrolment. In the past it consisted of a two-room Kindergarten to Grade 9 school. The school was part of the Northern Lights School Division #113.
- **Uranium City:** Ben McIntyre School: Kindergarten to Grade 9; sections of the school have been closed due to a drop in student population in recent years. The school is part of the Northern Lights School Division #113.
- **Fond-du-Lac:** Father Gamache Memorial School – a Kindergarten to Grade 12 school operated under the PAGC.
- **Black Lake:** Father Porte Memorial Dene School – classes from Kindergarten to Grade 12 operated under the PAGC.
- **Stony Rapids:** Stony Rapids School – a Kindergarten to Grade 9 school operated under the Northern Lights School Division #113. Some students from Stony Rapids go to the Father Porte Memorial Dene School in Black Lake.
- **Hatchet Lake:** Father Megret Elementary and High Schools – the elementary school provides Kindergarten to Grade 5 and the high school provides Grade 6 to Grade 12. Students residing in **Wollaston Lake** attend Father Megret Elementary and High Schools. The schools are operated under the PAGC.

There are no post-secondary institutions in the Athabasca Region, although programming such as University Entrance Programs are often provided in cooperation with Northlands College. Northlands College has the closest permanent post-secondary campuses, located in La Ronge, Creighton, and Buffalo Narrows. The College also offers training programs and adult education programs in a variety of other communities throughout Northern Saskatchewan, as determined by the annual training needs assessment undertaken by Northlands College and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment. The Northern Teacher Education Program/Northern Professional Access College (NORTEP/NORPAC)

maintains a campus in La Ronge to provide university programming in education and arts and science (Saskatchewan Learning and the Education and Training Sub-Committee to the Northern Labour Market Committee, 2002).

Other post-secondary agencies may provide training in Northern Saskatchewan, based on the annual training needs assessments undertaken by Northlands College and Saskatchewan Advanced Education Employment. Gabriel Dumont Institute and Dumont Technical Institute annually determine their training delivery to Métis people in Northern Saskatchewan, generally providing some adult education programs. The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology (SIIT), the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), and the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) also deliver a number of programs for First Nation students throughout Northern Saskatchewan, including to those resident in the Athabasca Basin (Saskatchewan Learning and the Education and Training Sub-Committee to the Northern Labour Market Committee, 2002).

The Province of Saskatchewan maintains a northern office of Saskatchewan Advanced Education Employment and Labour in La Ronge, with a mandate for leadership, communication, co-ordination, and support of education and training in Northern Saskatchewan. The Prince Albert Grand Council Education Office is located in Prince Albert.

1.5 EDUCATION LEVELS

Total school enrolments have been increasing on average by 3 per cent per year since 1989 in Northern Saskatchewan schools, with particular growth in the middle and high school years and in First Nation schools (Northlands College et al., 2006). Although enrolments in the provincial school system increased by only one per cent between 1988 and 2003, they increased 103 per cent for First Nation schools in the same time period (PAGC, 2008). The reasons for the substantial increase for First Nation schools is linked to population trends and the fact that in the last 10 years these communities have been able to provide education beyond the primary and middle school years, offering a full Kindergarten to Grade 12 program.

A total of 64 students in the Dené sector graduated with a high school diploma over the course of the 2004/2005 and 2005/2006 academic years. During this time frame, there was also a marked increase in graduation rates, with 72 per cent of enrolled students graduating in 2005/2006, up from only 55 per cent of enrolled students graduating in 2004/2005 (PAGC, 2008).

Despite these trends of increased enrolment, however, people in Northern Saskatchewan, have lower levels of education than the rest of the Province. Close to 75 per cent of the population over the age of 15 has less than a secondary education (Saskatchewan Trends Monitor, 2004). Lower levels of academic attainment are also noted at the post-secondary level, with only 12.3 per cent of the northern population having any type of post-secondary certification, compared to 16.6 per cent of the provincial population (Ibid., 2004).

2.0 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

A qualitative research approach was used to understand the factors that influence Athabasca residents' decision to pursue, and ability to succeed in, post-secondary education. Qualitative research can be defined as "an inquiry process of understanding social or human problems based on building a complex, holistic picture... reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1994, pp 10). Qualitative research has the benefit of being able to depict working systems, contextual factors and provides a thorough description of phenomena (Reid, 1994). It "draws attention to features of a situation that others may have missed but which once seen have major implications" (Shaw, 2003). This section focuses on the three main components of qualitative research: data, procedures, and reporting (Straus and Corbin, 1998).

2.1 DATA

Data was derived from three primary sources: 1) A review of the literature, 2) Key-person interviews with multiple stakeholders in education in the Athabasca Basin, and 3) Input from a Project Steering Committee. The use of multiple sources of data allows for triangulation, or the systematic use of a range of methods, types of information, and cross-checking of data to enhance reliability² and validity³ (Chambers, 1997).

2.1.1 Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted to describe the factors that affect people's enrollment and retention in post-secondary programs. Research about the background characteristics (age, gender, place of residence, etc.), intervening factors (academic performance, work/employment, family responsibility, etc.), and affordability (literally, the ability to financially afford to participate in post-secondary education) have been documented extensively by government agencies, education authorities, funding agencies, and academics across Canada (and the world), among others. The level of attention paid to the subject of education and its benefits supports the notion that understanding these factors is necessary to develop the labour force in today's economy.

The literature review included a general scan of the factors influencing people's participation in post-secondary education and focused on some of the characteristics most relevant to the Athabasca Basin, i.e., factors associated with remote and largely Aboriginal communities. Among the documents reviewed were the McCall Report (2007), a government-commissioned study to assess the issues of access and affordability of post-secondary education in Saskatchewan (McCall, 2007), including a complete literature review prepared by A. Rounce (2006). It considered numerous studies prepared by Statistics Canada (including Census information) and the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. It also reviewed research with direct relevance to the Athabasca Basin, including reports by the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC), and the Northern Saskatchewan Regional Training Needs Assessment Report, prepared

² Reliability refers to the constancy in findings.

³ Validity refers to the closeness of a finding to a reality.

by Northlands College, the Northern Labour Market Committee, and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment.

This research provided insight into the various background/personal characteristics, intervening factors, and financial considerations that students may face in accessing post-secondary education. The research, however, provided limited information about potential support measures to improve recruitment and retention in post-secondary programs. Although some studies have focused on Aboriginal engagement in post-secondary education (Mendelson, 2006; R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2002; R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2004; Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen, 2000), the overall success or outcomes of programs did not appear to be the focal point for most research.

The results of the literature are presented throughout this report, and are compared to the research findings from the Athabasca Basin where appropriate. Of particular relevance to the study were the *PAGC Education Indicators Reports* (2004, 2008) and *Post-Secondary Education Indicators Report* (2005), along with data from Saskatchewan Learning (2004). These sources of information were used to supplement research findings where relevant (i.e., where there is a direct relationship between what was heard from respondents and what these other reports have found).

2.1.2 Key Person Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 90 individuals, largely residents of the Athabasca Basin although former residents, administrators, post-secondary institutions and northern employers based outside the region were also interviewed. Semi-structured interviews are a vehicle to learn how things work in communities (Russell and Harshbarger, 2003). The approach was open-ended and allowed interviews to be conducted in an informal manner, following the structure provided by interview instruments, but allowing for queries to emerge according to responses received. Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the respondents in the location deemed most suitable by the respondent. A process of informed consent was used for all interviews – before each interview began, the interviewer explained to the potential respondent the voluntary nature of the interview, the overall purpose of the study, the commitment to ensuring that all answers and opinions are kept confidential. Interviewers noted that the interview could be stopped at any time, and that the respondent could choose not to answer any of the questions. The seven interview instruments used for the study, along with the script for informed consent, is provided in Appendix B.

Local Community Consultants were hired in each of the Athabasca communities to assist in the research. Community Consultants coordinated the interview program and were responsible for the identification of local interview respondents. In addition, interviews were conducted outside of the Athabasca Basin in order to include post-secondary institutions, administrators for Northern Saskatchewan, and residents residing outside of the Basin. In a small number of cases, where an in-person interview was not possible, telephone interviews were conducted. A summary of the types of respondents is provided in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1
Respondent Characteristics

| Respondent Type | Uranium City and Camsell Portage | Fond du Lac | Stony Rapids | Black Lake | Hatchet Lake/Wollaston | Outside of the Athabasca | TOTAL |
|---|---|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Athabasca Resident with Post-Secondary Completed | 1 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 7 | | 21 |
| Athabasca Resident with Post-Secondary Not Completed | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 2 | | 14 |
| Athabasca High School Student | | 4 | | 2 | 5 | | 11 |
| Athabasca-related Educator/Administrator ¹ | 2 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 20 |
| Athabasca Community Leader | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | | 11 |
| Employer of Athabasca Resident | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 8 |
| Staff of Post-Secondary Institution | | | | | | 5 | 5 |
| TOTAL | 8 | 21 | 10 | 17 | 21 | 13 | 90 |
| Notes: | | | | | | | |
| 1. The interviews targeted educators and administrators who were either a) from the communities originally, or b) had worked with Athabasca communities for 10 or more years. | | | | | | | |

2.1.3 Project Steering Committee

The Project Steering Committee consisted of stakeholders related to the field of education in the Athabasca Basin. Members included representatives from the PAGC, Saskatchewan Advanced Education Employment and Labour, the Northern Lights School Division #113, Northlands College, key employers in the region, community leadership, and the Northern Mines Monitoring Secretariat. The Project Steering Committee provided three key functions related to the collection of data: 1) At the outset, assistance in identifying key challenges that were examined in the study, including through key person interviews, 2) Review of interview instruments and advice regarding the practical details of the key person interview program, and 3) A verification function through review of draft analysis of preliminary results.

First, the Project Steering Committee assisted in the identification of challenges associated with access to post-secondary education. This was done through round table discussion at a project initiation workshop that focused on the identification of issues and on overall research design. The input was used to develop interview instruments for the stakeholder groups. Once developed, these instruments were reviewed by the Project Steering Committee to ensure that questions were appropriate. The Project Steering Committee also played a role in the identification of key respondents.

At a second workshop, the Project Steering Committee reviewed and discussed the preliminary results of the research, prior to the drafting of this report. This review of results helped to verify that the data collected during the interview program were complete and accurate. In several instances, the group debated the best way to present the findings, especially in terms of results that may not be seen as favourable by some participants. In other cases, supplemental information was provided that added to a broader understanding of the challenges faced in the region.

2.1.4 Limitations of the Data

Several limitations are associated with the research, in particular in relation to the key-person interviews. The following items, in combination with the sample size, are reasons for which the results presented in the report and in Appendix C – Supporting Data Tables should be interpreted with caution.

Willingness of Respondents

Although the researchers worked in cooperation with local community consultants to identify the best-possible respondents, certain individuals were not as forth-coming with information as others. The best example of this was in the respondent group of high school students who were often reluctant to provide detailed responses, or were unable to provide insights on the subject matter. The data presented do not include when respondents chose not to respond to a question or answered with a form of “I don’t know”.

Complexity of Subject Matter

The interview instruments were designed in cooperation with the Project Steering Committee and were pre-tested with a group of local Community Consultants. In many instances, however, it was also necessary to reword and simplify questions and ask them as a series of questions.

Respondent Characteristics

Although the research targeted a broad range of stakeholders, there are still certain groups who are not represented in the results. This included individuals who did not complete high school and individuals who applied but were not successful in gaining entry to post-secondary programs. In addition, in the category of post-secondary participants (both complete and incomplete), the vast majority of respondents were women, which is not to say that fewer men have post-secondary experience, but rather men were more difficult to access for the purposes of this research. Repeated efforts were made to contact male respondents, but many declined the opportunity to participate in the study.

Gaps in the Data

Several respondents did not have a full hour to commit to the research project, however were still interviewed. As such, interviewers focused on asking the most important and relevant questions at the front-end of the interview, and left further probing or discussion aside. Respondents had the option of not responding to questions they did not want to answer. As such, there are gaps in the data provided.

2.2 PROCEDURES

Procedures refer to the methods that the research team uses to organize and interpret the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The collection and analysis of data was an iterative process that involved regular communication between researchers to ensure consistency of data collection and analysis. During the interview process, the researchers took notes which were later transcribed for analysis purposes. The transcription of interviews allowed for a review of the findings, and organization of the information as per the questions asked. Often, the semi-structured nature of the interviews resulted in certain questions being answered "out of order" instead of the order presented in the interview instruments. This allowed for a free flow of information in the interview, but required that responses be reordered for analytical purposes.

The research team used a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package called Atlas Ti to assist in the analysis process. Fundamentally, CAQDAS does two things: first, it supports the storing and manipulation of texts, and second, it supports the creation and manipulation of codes. While no software can replace the value of becoming very familiar with the data (through reading and re-reading of texts), CAQDAS makes the process of retrieving information much quicker, and as Gibbs (2002, pp. 105) suggests, it can make qualitative analysis "easier, more accurate, more reliable, and more transparent".

Interview notes were generally taken by hand, and typed up shortly after the interview for analysis purposes. This allowed for each researcher to review the interview notes, as well as provide any additional thoughts, clarification, or notes on respondents. The interview notes were then imported to Atlas Ti, where the first round of coding took place. Coding at this point consisted of placing the responses into general categories which were created on the basis of the questions in the interview instruments. Codes used during this phase of analysis included titles such as "academic challenges," "academic solutions," "social challenges," "social solutions", and so on.

Upon further review, new codes were developed to allow for analysis of emerging themes. For example, it became evident that questions regarding “academic challenges” could be further refined into “academic challenges in the K-12 system” and “academic challenges during post-secondary education.” Each of these codes could be further refined into sub-categories. For example, “academic challenges in the K-12 system” includes academic skills such as “basic reading, writing, and listening skills,” “math and science,” human resource challenges at the school level such as “teacher recruitment and retention,” “attitudes towards education staff,” “behavioural and classroom management issues”, and issues surrounding attendance, such as “school closures”. Each new code that was developed was defined so as to ensure each member of the research team understood its meaning and applied the codes in a consistent manner. In some instances, codes with very similar definitions were combined to create new categories of information, and in other instances codes were deleted when they proved less useful.

The creation and refinement of codes was an on-going task for the research team. In addition, team members reviewed each other’s interviews to ensure that codes were applied consistently throughout. Total counts (i.e., number of responses for each group of respondents) were also completed for many of the codes to support the analysis of the qualitative data. These counts are presented in Appendix C – Supporting Data Tables and are cross-references in various sections of this report.

3.0 EDUCATION EXPERIENCE AND VALUE

Studies have shown that young Canadians today explore more learning options before beginning their careers than ever before. Educational attainment is related to a range of characteristics and influences, which can ultimately support or hinder an individual's pathway to job opportunities (Hango and Broucker, 2007). Respondents were asked a series of questions to understand their educational experiences and to gauge perceptions of the value of a post-secondary education for residents in the region.

3.1 EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

Hango and Brouker, in their Education-to-Labour Market Pathways of Canadian Youth (2007) identified numerous background and intervening factors contributed to an individuals' pathway from education to the labour market. Several of the pathways involved different education choices, such as completing high school, dropping out of high school, and participation in post-secondary education options such as college and university. The study found that the most common pathway for Canadian youth was to complete a high school diploma and enter directly into the labour force. The least common was to take time off between high school and the start of a post-secondary program leading to a degree. A similar proportion of respondents in their survey took time off before or during their post-secondary program as those who entered directly from high school into a post-secondary program.

The trend that appeared with respondents in the Athabasca Basin was that pathways from education to the labour force were complex. Table 3.1 presents some overall characteristics of the 33 respondents who participated in post-secondary programs.

Table 3.1
Post-Secondary Respondent Characteristics

| Characteristic | Graduated from High School | Went to School Only in the Athabasca | Went to Residential School Outside the Athabasca | Began Post-Secondary Right after High School | Had Children During Post-Secondary Schooling | Parent Had Post-Secondary Experience |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|
| Completed Post-Secondary Education (Total of 19 respondents) | 14 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 15 | 3 |
| Started but Did Not Complete Post-Secondary Education (Total of 14 respondents) | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 4 |
| Total in each Category | 22 | 10 | 4 | 5 | 25 | 7 |
| Percentage of Total Respondents | 63% | 29% | 12% | 15% | 76% | 21% |

Of the 33 respondents with post-secondary experience, only five entered post-secondary programs immediately after high school, although several had moved south away from their families to complete high school. The vast majority (76 per cent) of post-secondary participants had young families while attending their program and many had in fact dropped out of high school to have children, returning later to complete their education. In some instances, there were even young mothers who jumped immediately into post-secondary certificate programs in order to access the labour market, and as such never completed high school. These respondents face particular challenges in continuing their education for, despite their post-secondary experience, they lack the necessary high school diploma (or equivalent) to gain entry into bachelor-level programs. The pathways followed by respondents in the Athabasca were clearly not as straightforward as those described by Hango and Broucker (2007), and were exacerbated by issues stemming from remoteness and family commitments.

Many of the factors affecting an individual's participation in post-secondary education, such as those described by Hango and Broucker (2007), were identified in other studies. Table 3.2 compares what the

literature says about various factors relevant to post-secondary education with what was found in the Athabasca Basin. These characteristics are broadly categorized as background factors and intervening factors. Background factors refer to demographic characteristics, as well as personal and family characteristics. Intervening factors refer to circumstances that characterize an individual's experience. The data are largely derived from respondents with post-secondary experience (both complete, and incomplete). When necessary, secondary sources are cited to describe the situation in the Athabasca.

Table 3.2
Factors Relevant to Post-Secondary Education:
Comparison of Other Research to the Athabasca Basin

| | What Other Research Found | What was Found in the Athabasca |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| BACKGROUND FACTORS | Gender | |
| | Females were less likely to ever drop out of school and were more likely to complete some form of post-secondary education (Barr-Telford et al, 2003; Hango and DeBroucker, 2007). | Of the respondents with post-secondary experience, 28 were females and seven were males. A similar proportion of females and males were among those who did not complete high school (total of 14). |
| | Females were more likely to complete a bachelor's degree, while males were more likely to complete a trade (especially if they have completed high school) (Boothby and Drewes, 2006). | The vast majority of respondents identified for the study were females. This may be indicative that, within the communities themselves, females are most likely to have post-secondary experience, although it is likely a high proportion of the males with trades, diplomas or certificates are working at the mines. |
| | Aboriginal Status | |
| | Aboriginal youth were far more likely to exit the education system at a lower level of attainment than non-Aboriginal students (Hango and Broucker, 2007). | The study did not target respondents with no post-secondary experience. The 2006 Census of Canada (Statistics Canada) suggests that the Hango and Broucker finding is reflective of the Athabasca. |
| | Overall, Aboriginal education achievement, including completion of high school, was highest in urban (city) environments, second highest in towns, third in rural areas, and lowest for reserve populations (Mendelson, 2006). | Of the respondents with post-secondary experience, only 11 completed their primary and secondary education entirely in the Athabasca. |
| | Aboriginal students tended to be older, more likely to be married, and more likely to have children (Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004). | Only five respondents began their post-secondary program immediately after high school, suggesting that entrants would be older. Twenty-nine had a young family while attending post-secondary education. |
| | Parental Education Levels | |
| | Youth whose parents had attained higher levels of education were more likely to go on to a post-secondary program (Hango and Broucker, 2007; Knighton and Mirza, 2002). | Only five respondents had parents with some post-secondary experience. |
| | Higher parental expectations were associated with a child's higher education attainment (Hango and Broucker, 2007). | Although parental expectations were not specifically gauged by the study, 95 per cent of all respondents indicated that family support played a role in a student's success. |

Table 3.2 ...continued

| | What Other Research Found | What was Found in the Athabasca |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| INTERVENING FACTORS | Academic Experience | |
| | Youth with low marks in high school were much more likely to drop out, while very high marks in high school predicted that an individual was more likely to enter directly into a post-secondary program rather than taking time off (Hango and Broucker, 2007). | Average marks in 30 level courses consistently remained in the 50 to 60 per cent range, with female students more likely to score higher than their male counterparts (PAGC, 2005). |
| | Young females were more likely than young males to engage in positive behaviours towards school, such as getting along with teachers, finishing homework on time, and having an interest in what is taught in class (Finnie et al, 2005; McMullen, 2004). | Of the total high school graduates in the 'Dené Sector' ⁴ in 2005/06, 70 per cent were female and 30 per cent were male (PAGC, 2008). |
| | Reserve and remote school students typically did not have the academic preparation required to succeed in post-secondary studies (Mendelson, 2006; R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd, 2004; Hull and Polyzoi, 1995). | The majority of respondents (70 per cent) indicated they required upgrading or participated in a University Entrance Program. The individuals who did not indicate a need to upgrade completed high school outside of the Athabasca. |
| | Family Responsibility | |
| | Individuals who had a child in their teenage years were disproportionately represented in those who dropped out of high school, as well as those who later returned to complete high school. Young parents were also less represented in pathways that included post-secondary education (Hango and Broucker, 2007). | Thirty per cent of high school students in the 'Dené Sector' had dependents (PAGC, 2008). The majority of respondents with post-secondary experience (75 per cent) had a family while attending their program. In fact, motivation to be an example for their children was frequently cited by young mothers as a reason to complete a post-secondary program. |
| | Having children, among other family issues, is a key factor in retention of Aboriginal students (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd, 2004). "The stress of post-secondary education (is) exacerbated by complex responsibilities and often moving to urban centres, away from the support of family and friends" (Rounce, 2007, p. 59). | For those who did not complete their post-secondary program "personal and family" issues was the most commonly cited reason. |

⁴ The Dené Sector, as noted by PAGC, includes the communities considered in this study.

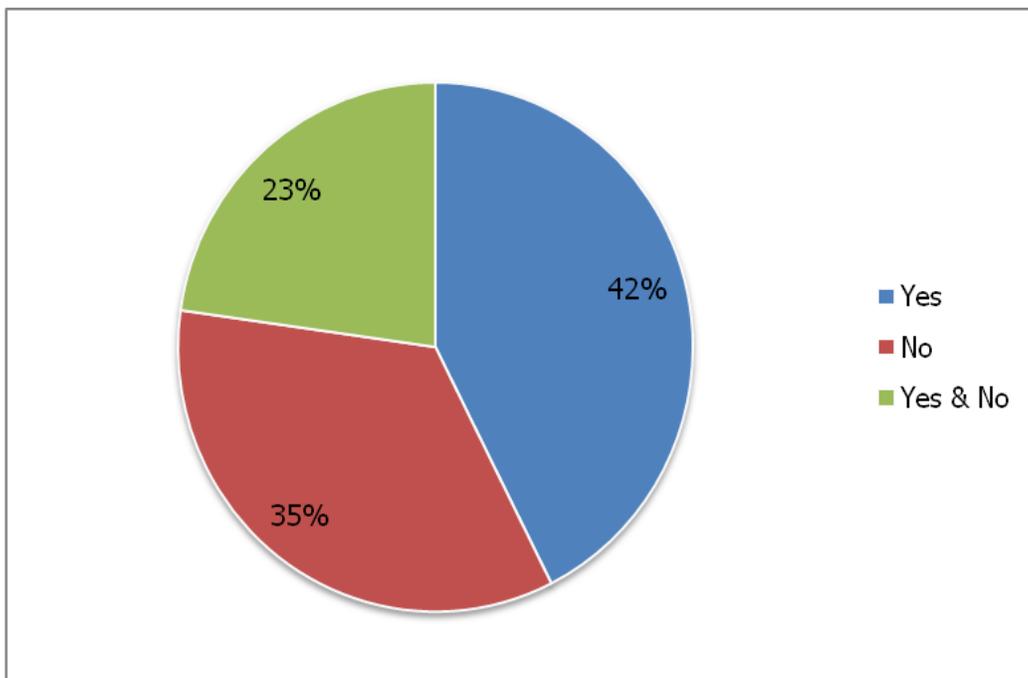
3.2 PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF SCHOOL-BASED EDUCATION

Respondents were asked whether they thought their community valued school-based education. The question was asked in reference to both the elementary, middle, and high school systems, and to post-secondary education. Respondents were further asked about the perceived benefits of a post-secondary education, and the opportunities that may exist in the region for residents who attain higher levels of education.

3.2.1 The Value of Education

Respondents were asked whether people in their home community valued school-based education. The responses to this question are displayed in Figure 3.1, and suggest that people have mixed opinions on the subject. Forty-two per cent of respondents felt that education was well-valued, 35 per cent indicated it was not valued by the majority of the community, and 23 per cent suggested it was valued by some, but not by all members of the community.

Figure 3.1
Value of Education in the Community



While at face value these results may suggest that education was simply not valued by a significant proportion of residents in the region, it may in fact be more reflective of residents' lack of personal experience with education. One respondent answered the question by saying, "I'm not sure. I could say most do (value school-based education). I'd say a strong group does. But there is a general lack of understanding on what a school should look like, what the expectations for school are – for both students

"There is a general lack of understanding about what a school should look like, what the expectations are for school – for both students and teachers. They are still learning about the culture of education in the region"
Administrator

and teachers. They are still learning about the culture of education in the region" (Administrator, June 2008).

The education system in Northern Saskatchewan and particularly in First Nation communities is relatively young. Up until the early 1990's, there was no secondary programming offered in the region. Students wishing to complete their secondary education, whether they were in the provincially administered or federally administered systems, were required to move south to centres such as Prince Albert. During the 1990's, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) devolved and withdrew from direct program management for education (PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting, 2005). It was around this time that the first secondary level courses were available locally to students

in the First Nation-operated schools, although a complete secondary education (up to Grade 12) has only become available in recent years.

Since a complete secondary education has only been offered in the region in the past decade, it is not surprising that a considerable proportion of the population have not completed a high school education. Of this generation of parents with lower levels of education attainment, many have been successful in acquiring long-term employment in the mining industry and in community administration. This success, despite a lack of education, may influence parents' willingness to emphasize the importance of an education to their child. In addition, many of these community members have had experience with the Indian Residential School system, further exacerbating the "distrust of indifference to education that is a strong characteristic of (Aboriginal communities)" (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2002).

The experiences that Aboriginal communities have had with education in the past decades have not necessarily been positive. The Indian Residential School system, while designed to provide a universal education to Aboriginal people, has resulted in a "deeply rooted distrust of educational institutions in general" (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2002). Although the majority of respondents in the study had no direct experience with the Indian Residential School system, it is likely that many of their parents and/or grandparents did. The legacy of removing Aboriginal children from their homes and communities has often been linked to current community circumstances such as violence, alcoholism, and loss of pride and spirituality (RCAP, 1996).

These historical factors may contribute to the overall attitudes that residents hold towards the education system. The respondents who felt that school-based education was not valued by residents often provided their insights as to how this materialized at the community level. "The rhetoric is there but the practice hasn't been established" (Administrator, April 2008). The "practice" is reflected in poor attendance rates, high drop-out rates, and the reality that upon graduation from high school in the Athabasca, the majority of students require upgrading before they are able to begin post-secondary programs. Several respondents identified a lack of structure and discipline at the household level which often translated into classroom management issues for teachers. One respondent described this in saying

"There is a lack of home structure and discipline. Kids here have a lot of freedom at home; they make their own rules" (Educator, April 2008).

On the other hand, numerous respondents, especially those with some post-secondary experience, were quick to emphasize the importance and value of education. Education, especially post-secondary education, was viewed as something that "opens doors" and provides better opportunities for employment. Several comments were made that suggested that over time communities are becoming more aware of the benefits of education, but that education is becoming more important to the younger generations.

The community of Camsell Portage, prior to the closure of the school, was often cited as the example of an educational success story for the Athabasca. Students from Camsell Portage had consistently higher success rates of completing high school and entering into post-secondary education. As one educator noted, education "was very important... Parents saw it as the key to their kids' success. They saw that the days of trapping and fishing were gone and seemed to understand that education was the alternative" (Educator, May 2008). Parental involvement in their children's education appeared to be one of the key factors in educational attainment at Camsell Portage. Respondents also suggested the high success rates of students contributed to the demise of the community since most have left for employment opportunities elsewhere.

3.2.2 Perceived Benefits of a Post-secondary Education

The benefits of completing a post-secondary education were identified by about 50 per cent of respondents. The benefits were largely linked with the ability to access employment opportunities. For numerous respondents, post-secondary education was viewed as something that "opens doors", and as something that could assist them in getting a job outside of the community. This was not always the case, however, as some respondents found that local knowledge and personal relationships sometimes played a more influential role in accessing opportunities than academic credentials.

Other benefits of completing a post-secondary education related to financial independence, which one respondent described by saying, "I learned from my own experience and made a big decision about my education. Through self-examination and research, I decided what I wanted for my life. Without the proper education, I would have ended up on social assistance; that's not what I wanted. I'm happy because of the choices I have made... I'm not dependent of welfare" (Educator, April 2008). This financial independence also came with the benefits of providing for one's family, as well as setting an example in the community. One post-secondary completer described this by saying "I wanted a better life for my kids. They saw me struggle and now I want them to be strong and never say never" (April 2008).

Other research has concluded that people's ability to assess the value of a post-secondary education (in terms of costs versus benefits) is "hampered by faulty information" (Acumen Research Group, 2008, p. 6). This was particularly the case for low-income Canadian, who thought tuition costs were much higher than they actually were, and grossly underestimated "how much more money university graduates make in comparison to high school graduates" (ibid, 2008, p. 6). This is relevant to the Athabasca Basin since there is substantial need for a skilled workforce, which employers suggest they would rather find

locally than import; currently they rely on bringing many workers with the requisite skills to the Athabasca from southern communities.

Awareness of the employment opportunities available in the region, especially those requiring post-secondary training, was somewhat limited. Respondents were able to cite the obvious options (for example being a nurse at the health centre, underground miner, worker at the Northern Store), but were typically unaware of the wide array of other opportunities that may exist at these same facilities. Understanding of the pre-requisites and training requirements for the full range of opportunities that exist locally, especially among the high school respondents, was virtually non-existent.

Research has suggested that the decision to attend a post-secondary program is often related to the individual's career goals. Career and education guidance needs to be provided, and to be truly successful, needs to involve parents and families, particularly if the student faces additional barriers to post-secondary education (Looker and Lowe, 2001; Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003). This appears to be the case for many residents of the Athabasca Basin.

Although some guidance counseling is provided at schools in the Athabasca Basin, and career fairs are held by local employers, respondents suggested that information about the opportunities available in the region was limited. This may be a reflection of the fact that many Aboriginal people have "relatively limited reliance on 'formal' methods of obtaining information" (R.A. Malatest & Associates and Stonechild, 2008). This is an issue common to Aboriginal youth living in remote communities, who may not have regular Internet access, or access to other sources of information more common in urban areas. In addition, guidance counseling at the high school level does not reach all residents since the majority of post-secondary participants in the Athabasca Basin do not access post-secondary programs immediately after completing high school.

4.0 CHALLENGES FACING RESIDENTS IN ACCESSING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding the challenges faced by residents of the Athabasca in accessing post-secondary opportunities. These questions focused on academic, cultural, social and financial challenges, each of which was defined for the purposes of this study. The following section begins in each case with the primary question and definition of each challenge, followed by a discussion about the emerging themes. The complete series of questions asked regarding challenges can be found in Appendix B. In addition, frequencies of responses are presented in the Supporting Data Tables located in Appendix C.

4.1 ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

For the purposes of this study, we are using the term "academic" to include things such as basic reading, writing, math, study skills, etc. This is related to both the K-12 and post-secondary environments. Did you experience any academic challenges?

Responses found in Supporting Data Tables C.1, C.2, C.3, Appendix C

Results showed that academic challenges faced by residents of the Athabasca Basin stemmed from the education received in the primary, middle, and secondary school levels. The links between academic achievement at the primary and secondary levels with success in post-secondary are well documented (Hango and Broucker, 2007; Mendelson, 2006; R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd, 2004; Hull et al., 1995). As such, it became clear early in the study that, in order to examine academic challenges to achieving post-secondary education, it was necessary to include some examination of the academic challenges faced in the K-12 system.

4.1.1 Academic Challenges in the Primary, Middle and Secondary School Levels

4.1.1.1 Factors Affecting Academic Preparedness

"Aboriginal peoples who do complete high school often have weak skills, but reserve and remote schools typically do not have the academic preparation required to succeed in post-secondary studies" (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd, 2004). This is consistent with what was heard from respondents; numerous comments were made about the lack of reading skills, the lack of writing skills, lack of study skills, and challenges associated with language. A variety of factors affected the ability of students to acquire the necessary education to succeed.

Literacy was a subject of particular concern, although many comments focused on the need for more adult literacy programs. The fact that there is a perceived lack of basic reading and writing skills in adults has potential implications for children and appeared to be evident in classrooms across the Athabasca region. Increased literacy levels among parents generally result in more reading and literacy-building

activities in the home, thus better preparing children for success in school (National Adult Literacy Database, 2008). "There needs to be reading in the home," noted one educator. "The joy and love of reading needs to be reinforced" (April, 2008).

Basic literacy skills go on to effect people throughout the course of their lives. As one employer noted "We're skeptical of the education levels stated on resumes. We don't take them at face value. Any technical knowledge or calculations require testing. Many people get screened out for basic reading, writing and math skills" (April 2008). A lack of math and sciences skills were noted by several respondents, which was often attributed to the fact that courses were not consistently provided at the higher levels, the lack of teachers with backgrounds in these subject areas, and the lack of resources to supply adequate science labs in the schools.

One of the major factors affecting students' ability to acquire the core academic skills is attendance. Typically, attendance is highest in the fall, and decreases over the course of the school year. Educators noted that this is linked to parental expectations about attendance, which in some cases means that there is no expectation for a student to get up and get to school on time. The practice of young people staying at their relatives for several days at a time could also result in their parents not being aware if their child was attending school or not.

Attendance also typically decreases as students get older. According to the PAGC (2008), the percentage change in student population in the Dené Sector over the course of the 2005/2006 school year was -11 per cent at the elementary level, -27 per cent in the middle years, and -41 per cent at the secondary level. These percentages only accounted for those who were enrolled at the beginning of the school year, and exit before the school year is complete. It did not account for those who did not continue from one school year to the next. "As stated by PAGC school principals, some of the reasons students do not complete the academic year are: lack of academic ability, socio-economic status issues, peer pressure, opportunity to enter the workforce, lack of motivation or support, or relocation" (PAGC, 2008, pp. 57).

Poor attendance contributes to the overall ability of a student to acquire the necessary academic skills to move forward. One educator talked about how she tried to instill the importance of education in her students: "I talk about tradition in my classroom. I use the example of what people used to do if someone's home burnt down in the community. The community would come together and rebuild. Today, if your house burns down, you just sit and wait until the Band does something about it. I go on to tell my students that school is like building a house – every day is a block in the foundation. Every day of school that you miss, your foundation becomes weak. Students here start but they don't finish things. They don't see the importance of finishing something" (April, 2008).

School closures also affect the ability of teachers to cover the curriculum, which is designed to be addressed in a certain number of hours. Schools in the Dené Sector in 2005/2006 were closed or partially closed an average of 16 per cent of the time, or 10 days above and beyond regular holidays and in-service days. Schools were often closed for reasons such as cold weather, problems with the facility (such as sewer and water) or for community funerals.

Poor attendance, in combination with school closures, creates gaps in many students' learning. These gaps are compounded each year that the curriculum is not fully covered. "You can't teach kids when they have continuous gaps in their learning," noted one educator. "You don't end up learning anything at all when that happens" (April 2008). Eventually, students make their way through the entire system despite a lack of basic academic skills. This is exacerbated by the fact that many students who are not academically ready end up getting moved ahead with what is referred to as a "social pass." This "social pass" can occur for several reasons, including the desire of parents, educators or administrators to keep the student with their peer group. Additionally, legislation prevents any student from being held back more than once in each level of schooling; i.e., a student can only be held back once between Kindergarten and Grade 3, once between Grades 4 and Grade 6, once in the middle years, and once in secondary school. As such, students are continuously moved ahead despite their academic abilities. "Not all of my students should have passed so I now have the challenge of working one on one with a few (students) just to get them to the right grade level" noted one educator "You combine that with other behavioural issues in the classroom - it's challenging" (April, 2008).

Educators and administrators were the respondents most likely to identify challenges associated with classroom management, which reflected some of the struggles they faced on a day-to-day basis in their schools. Lack of discipline and structure in the household environment often transferred to the classroom setting, and ultimately resulted in a great deal of time managing behaviour instead of delivering the curriculum. One educator noted how discipline at the household level affected the classroom setting in saying, "There is no discipline. Kids stay up late and arrive too tired for school. They become unwilling learners. If you're tired or you're hungry, you can't learn" (April, 2008).

Although concern about the general lack of discipline appeared in numerous interviews, it should be noted that this is not the case in every household in the region. Several respondents who were also parents talked about how they instilled the value of education in their households. Some respondents even disclosed some of the challenges they faced as parents. One respondent shared the following about her challenges as a single mother with teenagers: "They both have good reading skills...but their study skills are zero. They don't know how. They've got their stereo blaring and the music on. It's partly my own fault - I could have forced them to read more. I would take full responsibility for that. If I had it to do all over again I would do it differently. You have to work so hard as a parent" (April, 2008).

Classroom management issues are not limited to discipline. Teachers are also faced with behavioural issues resulting from ailments such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), to list a few. Although teachers indicated they are often able to identify these types of behavioural issues, there are limited resources for actual diagnostics in order to obtain the resources, in particular in terms of staffing, to support the student. They indicated that there is also a stigma against labeling a child on the part of some parents. These factors contribute to a lack of special-needs support in the classroom. Not surprisingly, the time a teacher spends on classroom management and behavioural issues detracts from the time available to address the curriculum.

4.1.1.2 Human Resources Challenges in the Primary, Middle and Secondary School Levels

One of the critical issues with the K to 12 education system is the ability to recruit and retain qualified individuals, especially at the high school level. Experienced and effective instructors contribute to “a sense of stability to a school and to the education program” (PAGC, 2008, p. 68). Numerous respondents indicated that competent long-term teaching staff was critical to producing successful students. One administrator noted “We need to have continuity in teachers, a longer-term commitment to the community and to the students to build more security and stability” (May, 2008).

*“We need to have
continuity in teachers, a
longer-term commitment
to the community and to
the students to build
more security and
stability”
Administrator*

A qualified teacher is someone who holds a Bachelor of Education degree and who is certified as a Professional teacher by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. According to the PAGC (2008) in 2006, teaching staff in schools in the Dené Sector had 40 per cent qualified teachers at the elementary level, 75 per cent in the middle years, and 72 per cent at the secondary level. Additional qualified teachers are also employed in administration, special education, computers, and physical education. In the 2005/2006 academic year, there were 25 new teachers in the Dené Sector. Seventeen of these individuals had some sort of specialization, including special education, administration, and secondary math and science. For 27 per cent of these individuals, it was their first year teaching (PAGC, 2008).

High turnover rates among teaching staff were noted as a common challenge by administrators, and were noted by high school students as well. One of the factors affecting retention was the culture shock teachers from the south experience when they move to the communities to take up their teaching positions. This was described by one respondent as “They don’t have a clue what they’ve signed up for, what they’re up against, or even where they’re going... the shell shock of arriving for a new teacher – many end up bailing in the first week” (Employer, April 2008). This is exacerbated by the geographical remoteness of the area, and isolation of teachers from family and friends (PAGC, 2008).

While this is not the case for all teachers (in particular for local teachers and teachers who have worked in remote communities during their careers), there is evidence that the retention of teachers is an ongoing challenge. While the various “TEP” programs (Teacher Education Programs including NORTEP, SUNTEP and ITEP) have been successful in training local teachers, the majority of these individuals teach in the elementary and middle school grades, and very few end up at the secondary level.

The recruitment and retention of teachers is also affected by the differences between the First Nation governed and provincially governed schools. The most recent Provincial Collective Bargaining Agreement includes a series of pay raises for teachers equivalent to a 12 per cent increase over the 2007-2010 time frame. No similar commitment has been made by INAC to meet the provincial increase, creating a salary disparity that may make it difficult for the First Nations schools to compete for teachers.

4.1.1.3 Administrative Challenges

In discussing some of the human resource issues faced in the communities' schools, many people commented about challenges presented by local leadership, in particular for the Band operated schools. There was a sense that decision making at the school level could be trumped by decision making at the community level. In some cases, decisions were made in favour of the current political agenda at the expense of the best interest of the students. Intervention by the community leadership in education-related matters was sometimes felt to hamper performance and stability of local schools. This was less of an issue for schools that were part of the school division system and less susceptible to local political interference. These schools had what one respondent described as "less anxiety and more direction" (Administrator, May 2008) for teachers in comparison to the Band operated schools.

First Nation Community leadership's actions were often scrutinized by respondents. Several people noted that the actions of their leadership were not sufficiently supportive or encouraging of post-secondary education. This was reflected in a sense that post-secondary graduates were not acknowledged for their success and educational credentials played a secondary role in hiring Band administration staff.

4.1.1.4 Other Resources

Generally speaking, educators and administrators indicated that they had adequate resources to provide the necessary education for their students, although at times lacked the human resources to best deliver programs. Exceptions noted by respondents included:

- The ability to provide a high school education to young adults over the age of 21. Generally speaking, First Nation-administered schools were willing to accept mature students, but received no funding from INAC to do so;
- The ability to provide adequate programming for industrial arts and some science programs (e.g., a suitable and adequately stocked chemistry lab);
- The high cost of transporting resources to the region; and
- The high cost of providing professional development opportunities for educators and other staff.

*"The resources we have
don't line up with the kids
reality. Social studies,
science and health
resources aren't focused
on the region or even the
province"
Educator*

Access to culturally relevant curriculum materials was noted by educators and administrators. Discontinuity between home cultures and the school environment have been examined in other studies, and are considered as one of the factors for failure of Aboriginal students in the primary, middle and secondary school levels (Cajete, 2000; Kanu, 2002; Shade and New, 1993). "The resources (we have) don't line up with (the kids) reality" noted one educator. "Social studies, science, and health resources aren't focused on the region, or even the province" (April, 2008).

The other area where resources seemed to be lacking was funding to provide additional programming for students such as intramural sports, arts, and music programming. In many schools in less remote communities such things are a regular part of school activities, and in many cases even part of the curriculum. However, the human and financial resources to support sports, arts, and musical programs are lacking in the Athabasca. Numerous respondents identified the lack of recreational and social options for teenagers in the community. Along with this is the lack of opportunity to go on field trips since the cost of leaving the community is considerably higher than in less remote settings.

Research has shown that participation in extracurricular activities can support interpersonal competence, self-concept, grade point average, school engagement, education aspirations, and higher education attainment (Eccles et al, 2003; Elder and Conger, 2000; Marsh and Kleitman, 2002;). Several respondents who completed high school in Prince Albert indicated that playing on sports teams helped them to vent their frustration and use their energy in a constructive manner.

4.1.2 Academic Challenges During Post-Secondary Education

Do you think your high school education has prepared you for college/university? Did you have the necessary prerequisites to gain entry into the post-secondary program? Did you find the post-secondary program itself challenging?

Results found in Supporting Data Table C.4, Appendix C

The academic challenges faced by students once in the post-secondary system were largely a reflection of their level of academic preparedness. "I worked hard" noted one respondent. "The assignments I got were at a university level -- sometimes it took me hours to get them done and I got only four or five hours of sleep. Stepping into university is a big challenge, especially when you are a northerner" (Educator, April 2008). The academic skills that were mentioned most frequently as a challenge for the post-secondary students were writing (especially essays), reading, and the ability to take tests successfully. For most respondents, it appeared that these skills were not well developed during their primary, middle and secondary school experiences. Therefore, the transition to completing such tasks at a post-secondary level was challenging for most respondents.

The majority of students (70 per cent) indicated a need for upgrading prior to beginning their post-secondary program.⁵ While the necessity for upgrading may be changing over time (most students started their post-secondary programs over five years ago), interviews with current high school students suggested that upgrading is still a reality for many. The following trends were noted in the responses regarding the need for upgrading:

- Students who completed high school in the Athabasca Basin were most likely to identify the need for upgrading.

⁵ Note that this statistic may be changing since most post-secondary respondents began their program five or more years ago.

- The courses most frequently identified as requiring upgrading were English, math and sciences.
- Students who completed high school outside of the Athabasca Basin did not appear to struggle to the same extent academically as those who completed their schooling in their home communities. Often, their struggle occurred at a much younger age upon entering the high school system in the south.

Many of the post-secondary programs taken by northern residents recognize the need for upgrading as a part of their curriculum. It is common for the first several weeks (or months) of the program to include upgrading components to ensure that all students begin at a similar level. Providing more upgrading options at the community level was identified by several respondents as something that would be of great benefit.

In addition to academic skills, many post-secondary participants noted that the overall workload associated with post-secondary studies was a challenge for them. Many respondents indicated they were “overwhelmed” by the amount of work, and struggled to keep up with assignments. “There were a lot of challenges” noted one post-secondary completer. “Even the subject matter - it’s hard. I was taking a full course load and taking care of my kids, and studying. It’s hard but my kids were still my number one priority. Either way, someone suffers - your subjects/classes or your attention to your kids. Balancing and prioritizing was a challenge” (Post-Secondary Completer, April 2008).

4.2 CULTURAL CHALLENGES

For the purposes of this study, we are using the term “culture” to include things like language, way-of-life, beliefs, traditions, sense of time, etc. Were there any cultural challenges?

Results found in Supporting Data Table C.5, Appendix C

Many respondents indicated that the Athabasca Basin has managed to ensure that its culture has survived. The maintenance of Dené as the primary language was a source of pride for many. The annual caribou hunt remains an important community activity. “The community has a strong sense of identity” said one respondent. “We have cultural camps as part of school, and a cabin close to the community where students can learn to do things like light fires. Elders come to the school as well” (Administrator, April 2008).

While respondents spoke proudly about their Dené culture and heritage, they also noted that the communities are in transition. One respondent described this by saying “I think part of the cultural challenge is that things in the north are changing very rapidly” (Administrator, May 2008). The communities were only settled in the 1950’s and over the last 50 to 60 years there has been a shift from a hunting and gathering culture to a more sedentary, community-based lifestyle. “Nobody is going out on the land the way they used to, with the whole family,” noted one educator. “That was the culture of the

past" (April, 2008). Another educator noted the loss of tradition in saying "We need to reinforce the idea of respect and appreciation that used to be inherent in everything" (April, 2008).

Several challenges arose in relation to culture and post-secondary education; these were language, discrimination, and other cultural differences.

4.2.1 Language

Closely linked to the academic challenges is the subject of language, which for the purposes of this study is discussed under the umbrella of cultural challenges. Respondents were very proud to say that Dené remains the first language for the vast majority of the population. Most children come to primary school with some English, although Dené remains the main language spoken in the home and in the communities. One respondent talked about the significance of Dené versus English. "When people talk in English it doesn't have the same meaning as if they say in the same thing in Dené" (Administrator, May 2008). Another respondent talked about these differences in terms of story-telling. "It is more meaningful in the first language" she said. "The stories change in meaning in the translation" (Post-secondary completer, April 2008).

Language becomes a challenge for the Athabasca students since English is the primary language of instruction in both the First Nation and provincial K to 12 school systems. As such, a great deal of classroom time is spent focused on English language acquisition, sometimes at the expense of other subject areas. While the First Nation schools offer some Dené language and cultural programming to their students, English remains the only language of instruction in the provincial schools. One long-term educator and administrator for the region provided the following perspectives about language:

"The literature would suggest that an immersion program in Dené would provide a better start for kids -- they'd have a better shot at translating things into English. But the Dené language is largely an oral tradition. The syntax, the grammar, (it's a different) structure. There are few educators capable of teaching it in a structured manner. No one really reads or writes the language. If kids don't understand the composition of their own language -- how are they supposed to learn a second language? The two languages cause some confusion... but the reality is that kids just need to learn the basics of each language. If taught properly, Dené can be a benefit but it has to be done properly." (Administrator/Educator, April 2008).

To varying degrees the schools approach language through the use of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. The educators interviewed indicated that there were typically some ESL resources available at the schools, and that the internet was also becoming a useful tool in accessing additional resources. School administrators indicated that they preferred to hire teachers with ESL experience, although there was no indication that all teachers were accredited as such.

Part of the challenge associated with language is the fact that certain terms, especially where math and science are concerned, do not translate easily from English to Dené (or vice versa). As such, even if the language barrier can be overcome by instructors with fluency in both languages, there are certain terms

and concepts that just do not translate well. This was also true at the post-secondary level, especially in terms of trades or technician-related certifications.

Respondents indicated that language continued to be a challenge during their post-secondary experiences. Again this was sometimes related to subject area, since certain concepts just didn't translate easily. As one post-secondary completer noted "It's hard to think in a second language. My mind works in Dené and it's complicated to translate. I got poor marks because of my English" (April 2008). Numerous respondents also indicated it was difficult to transition from communities in which Dené was spoken daily to environments where English was the primary language. A student currently enrolled in a post-secondary program said "You speak more English here, much less Dené. I'm finding it harder to talk in Dené now, especially with my grandparents. It's like they use a different dialect that I don't understand very well" (May 2008).

*"It's hard to think in a
second language. My
mind works in Dené and
it's complicated to
translate"
Post-Secondary
Completer*

4.2.2 Discrimination

Over half of the respondents with post-secondary experience indicated that they had experienced some form of discrimination when they moved to more southern communities to complete their education. Students had a wide range of experiences and that discrimination resulted not only from being of Aboriginal descent, but also being a Northerner. It is interesting to note that of the respondents, high school students were the only group who did not indicate that discrimination could be a potential challenge. This may be indicative of naïveté, or of their limited exposure to issues of racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination.

When discussing discrimination with respondents it became evident that the personal experiences people had varied greatly. In some instances, their experiences were so negative that it marred their entire education experience. For others, personal experiences with discrimination became a driver that motivated them to excel and "prove them wrong." Other individuals took the perspective that discrimination was just "part of life" and you had to learn to deal with it.

A theme that emerged in discussing discrimination was the difference between the Cree and Dené populations. The Cree are the dominant Aboriginal culture in Saskatchewan, and in some instances, people felt as though they were discriminated against because they were a minority within the minority. In post-secondary programs with a First Nation focus (for example with the "TEP" programs), Cree culture, traditions and language are more likely to be part of the curriculum than Dené culture. Several respondents indicated that they were required to participate in Cree cultural activities that were not relevant to them, and in some instances, even to learn the Cree language as a program requirement. While this was a point of contention for some, for others it was embraced as an opportunity to learn more about other cultures.

4.2.3 Other Cultural Differences

Aside from language and discrimination, respondents offered comments about other cultural differences that made attending and completing post-secondary programs a challenge. A small number of respondents commented on a difference in the sense of time between the north and urban communities. In addition, some respondents commented on differences in available food, particularly caribou. Comments such as, "The southern food was a challenge. I really missed the caribou meat" (Post-secondary completer, April 2008), or "My mom and my sister would come and fill my freezer with caribou meat" (Post-secondary completer, April, 2008) were common.

4.3 SOCIAL CHALLENGES

For the purposes of this study, we are using the term "social" to include things like support systems (e.g., family, friends, services, etc.), social interaction skills (e.g., ability to communicate, relate to people), and lifestyle (e.g., life on the reserve vs. life down south). Did you experience any social challenges?

Results found in Supporting Data Table C.6, Appendix C

4.3.1 Community Circumstances

When asked about the social challenges that people face in accessing and completing post-secondary programs, respondents often provided descriptions of their home community circumstances that made completing an education a challenge. Although only a small number of respondents divulged a great deal of detail, likely due to the sensitive nature of some of the subjects, respondents did identify alcohol, drugs, physical and sexual abuse, and poverty as issues that their home communities face. While outside of the scope of this study, it is important to note that education is linked to the environment in which it occurs, and as such, these broader societal issues noted by respondents are acknowledged as contributing factors to a lack of educational achievement.

Among these sensitive subjects, a handful of respondents were willing to disclose some of their experiences with the Indian residential school systems. INAC (1993) documented these types of issues at residential schools, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, deprivation of adequate nourishment, and circumstances involving the loss of life. Survivors of the residential school system often experience "shame and humiliation" and sometime "find themselves enduring a sense of inferiority and (struggle) as parents" (Morissette, 1994, p. 383). The 1996 *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* acknowledged that many of the issues in Aboriginal communities today "can be traced back to the sense of disconnection that Aboriginal children experience as a result of being sent to a residential school" (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2002). It is also a contributor to the overall lack of trust and indifference that many Aboriginal people feel towards school, and likewise a barrier to post-secondary education (ibid, 2002).

One respondent described her understanding of community circumstances as follows: "Every First Nation community has its social problems, but not every child is affected by things like alcohol or real problems at home. There are programs in place in the community to support families in those situations as well.

It's hard to get by up here. The cost of living is very high so poverty is a reality. But the school has a breakfast program to ensure that all kids have access to breakfast to start their day" (Administrator, April 2008). Although respondents in each community noted that there are initiatives and activities in place to try to support people facing these types of issues, it appeared that there were never enough resources to meet all of the challenges that existed.

One community circumstance that is closely linked to education is the issue of employment. According to Statistics Canada (2006), the communities in the Athabasca for which data are available⁶ experience an unemployment rate almost three times that of the Province (15.8 per cent versus 5.6 per cent respectively), and ranging from a low of 7.7 per cent in Stony Rapids to a high of 31.2 per cent in Hatchet Lake. Similarly, the proportion of earnings from government transfers is nearly double that of the Province (24.5 per cent versus 12.8 per cent respectively), and ranging from 10.5 per cent in Stony Rapids and 37.1 per cent in Hatchet Lake.

Numerous respondents, in particular administrators and employers, recognized the benefits of employment to the communities and were able to identify links to education. The example of Camsell Portage was provided, where at least one parent (if not both) had stable employment (in most cases with the mines). The result was that a child's "home life was in many ways equitable to life in middle class Canada. They had all the necessary amenities." Similar descriptions were offered for Stony Rapids, where the majority of people were participants in the workforce. Many respondents also suggested that parents who were employed were more engaged in their children's education.

4.3.2 Family Support

The importance of family support was one of the most common themes to emerge as a factor critical to the success of students in their education, be it in the primary, middle or secondary school levels or in the post-secondary system. Feedback about the importance of parental support in the primary, middle or secondary school levels was reiterated across respondent groups, while at the post-secondary level this was emphasized by post-secondary participants. In addition, the role that people believed parents or guardians should play differed during different phases of education.

"The pressure and expectations (of parents') have such influence on what their kids do in school and their attitudes towards school"
Educator

In the primary, middle and secondary school years, respondents suggested that the role of the parent or guardian was to be engaged in their children's education and ensure that the child participated by establishing routine and discipline. When people talked about the need for discipline, they talked about a parent's responsibility to make sure that their child was awake and going to school on a daily basis, that their child was completing homework, and "pushing" their kids to succeed. "In my feeling, success seems to come from parents and their expectations," noted one educator. "The pressure and expectations have such influence on what their kids do in school and their attitude towards school" (May, 2008).

⁶ Statistics Canada provides data for Fond du Lac, Black Lake, Hatchet Lake, and Stony Rapids. The communities of Uranium City, Camsell Portage, and Wollaston are excluded from the averages presented.

Although this varied from household to household and community to community, many respondents commented that parental engagement in education was lacking. Educators and administrators were most likely to note the importance of supportive parents, and also commented about how much pressure was put on teachers and schools. "To me," noted one educator, "Parents don't always try to support the teachers. There is no communication between school and home. Homework doesn't get completed. Education is just not important to some parents. If parents really become involved in the school, and communicate with the school, together teachers and parents can help students reach their potential" (April, 2008). "There is too much burden placed on the school" remarked an administrator. "There needs to be more parental involvement" (April, 2008).

Several theories were offered as to why engaging parents in education was such a challenge. There was an indication from some, that numerous adults did not have positive education experiences themselves. "A lot (of parents) had such poor experiences and there is a distrust for what their kids are getting today. They view schooling today within the (same) context of their own experiences" (Administrator, May 2008). Others noted that many parents with lower levels of education have gone on to have gainful employment. "Some parents push their kids and know education is important, others don't. A lot of it has to do with the fact that people can get jobs whether they have an education or not" (Post-secondary graduate, April, 2008).

Parental expectations continued to play a role once students entered post-secondary programs, particularly if they began their studies in the south when they were younger. "I had very strict parents" remarked one post-secondary completer. "There was no way I could get away with dropping out. I would rather face the challenge of school than face my parents if I dropped out" (April, 2008). At the post-secondary level, continuing support from family was cited as a very important factor for success since the student no longer had access to their typical support systems in the community. "You can feel lonely, lost, and missing home" said one post-secondary completer. "Some (people) end up dropping out. You need encouragement" (April, 2008). Encouragement, financial assistance if necessary, and help with childcare were listed as ways that families supported students during their post-secondary experience. Some post-secondary students had the benefit of family members living in the southern community, or had families willing to send someone south to help with childcare if necessary. Not everyone, however, was as lucky to have a parent, sibling, or spouse come south with them, and for those individuals, regular communication by phone and visits became key.

4.3.3 Transition from Remote to Urban

Respondents talked about "culture shock" which appeared to have more to do with the transition from remote to urban settings than with cultural challenges as defined by the study. People talked about the differences between remote communities and the urban environment using terms such as "fast paced," "overwhelming", "more people," "more traffic," "so many distractions," and "a big shock." There was a sense that students were not entirely prepared for the transition to urban living. The experience of using public transport, paying bills, getting groceries, and other activities of daily living in an urban setting were foreign to most students prior to beginning their post-secondary programs.

There was a definite sense that leaving family, friends, and the support network provided by the community was difficult. "There was such change in culture in the city" noted one student who completed a post-secondary program. "It's very private. No one cares what you do. Up here, everyone knows everything" (April, 2008). Other research has shown that disconnection from the community, relocation fears, and lack of exposure to other communities are all factors that deter individuals from leaving to go on to post-secondary studies (Andres and Looker, 2002).

Some respondents noted that the move to an urban environment also came with a series of distractions. Respondents spoke of "the party life" and other lifestyle choices including alcohol, drugs, and even gang involvement. It seems that the risk for such behaviours increased for those students leaving home to complete high school, especially if they were placed in a household with limited rules. Respondents noted that, while a "bit of partying" was acknowledged as part of most people's college or university experience, it was also recognized that it could act as a distraction and add to the struggle for students in completing their coursework.

4.4 FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

For the purposes of this study, financial challenges include direct education costs (tuition, books, travel to the institution from your home community) and cost-of-living costs (food, housing, transportation, entertainment, etc.) Were there any financial challenges in accessing post-secondary education?

Results found in Supporting Data Table C.7, Appendix C

The financial considerations for students enrolling in post-secondary education included education costs (tuition, books, etc.), and living costs (transportation, accommodation, etc.). Results indicated that the challenges associated with funding a college or university education were different for First Nation members (eligible Treaty and Status Indians, both on and off reserve) than for Métis and non-Aboriginal students. First Nation members are eligible for support through the INAC administered Post Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), while Métis and non-Aboriginal students must fund their entire post-secondary education independently (which includes accessing scholarships and bursaries). The majority of respondents in the study were eligible for funding under the PSSSP. Those who were not eligible (i.e., Métis and non-Aboriginal students) faced additional challenges in securing funds to cover their post-secondary education.

Other research has suggested that aside from accessing First Nation funding for post-secondary studies, Aboriginal youth "do not have a comprehensive understanding of the range of post-secondary education funding options...there appears to be...a low level of awareness or understanding of other forms of assistance" (R.A. Malatest & Associates and Stonechild, 2008). This research also suggested there was limited reliance on formal means (teachers, education counsellors, etc.) to learn about the financing options available. This was consistent with what was found in the Athabasca Basin, where respondents indicated that school programming had little or no time dedicated for career and education planning.

Lack of awareness among Aboriginal youth regarding financing options also results from a lack of face-to-face opportunities to gain information (R.A. Malatest & Associates and Stonechild, 2008). This was reflected in respondent comments about lack of job fairs in the Athabasca Basin, and that perhaps having one job fair every year was not adequate in providing information to residents. This is particularly relevant to residents who have taken time off (to work, to care for family, etc.) prior to entering post-secondary education and "may be somewhat disconnected from the informational supports available to those currently in the high school system" (ibid, 2008, p. vi).

4.4.1 Education Costs

Tuition fees across Canada have increased substantially over the past fifteen years and public concern about the affordability of post-secondary education is widespread. Research about the impact of rising tuition fees, however, has produced contradictory conclusions. One study suggested that for every 10 per cent tuition increase, the probability of a high school graduate enrolling in post-secondary education decreased by 0.9 per cent (Dubois, 2002). Coelli (2004) found that students from lower-income families were more negatively affected by tuition increases. Other research argued that rising tuition fees, when offset by tax credits, resulted in little effect on students' ability to participate (Usher, 2006). Another study suggested that there appeared to be no relationship between post-secondary participation in the 1990's despite significant increases in tuition fees (Finnie et al, 2004).

Respondents raised limited concern in the Athabasca Basin about the subject of education costs. Respondents rarely identified the rising cost of tuition as an issue, although on occasion university students spoke of the high cost of textbooks. The reason behind the lack of concern about education costs is likely due to the fact that the vast majority of students were eligible for INAC's PSSSP. As such, the rising cost of tuition was borne by the First Nation administration, and was not a concern for the individual.

The PSSSP includes tuition support for part-time and full-time students, travel support for students who have to leave a permanent place of residence, and living expenses to help cover the cost of food, shelter, transportation and daycare (INAC and PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). It came into place in 1987, replacing the then Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Post-Secondary Education Assistance Program (PSEAP). Under the PSEAP, funds were available for all Aboriginal students wanting to pursue a post-secondary education. "Under the PSSSP, funding for Registered/Status and Treaty First Nations was capped: restrictions were placed on students' eligibility, and daycare and rent subsidies were removed" (R.A. Malatest and Associates, 2002). Administration of the PSSSP devolved from INAC in the 1990's, and as such it is currently the responsibility of each First Nation administration to allocate funding to its eligible members.

An INAC and PricewaterhouseCoopers audit conducted in 2005 found that expenditures for the post-secondary education program have increased from 1989/1990 to 2001/2002 from \$142 million to \$285.5 million. Up until 1992, the annual PSSSP was determined by applying a formula to the number of eligible First Nation and Inuit students in each region, and aggregating the total. Since 1997, block funding envelopes have been capped with annual increases allotted according to Treasury Board directives (Hanson/Macleod Institute and INAC, 2005). Increases from Treasury Board are in the range of two

per cent each year and may be passed on to a First Nation depending upon the type of funding arrangement with the department. Whether an increased funding directive from Treasury Board will be passed on directly to a First Nation may also depend upon the region since funding allocations vary from region to region across Canada.

For the Athabasca Basin, the formula caps the funding envelope for the age category 18-34 years for each First Nation population (pers. comm., INAC Saskatchewan Region, May 2008). Financial support will be provided within the limits of funds approved by Parliament. If support for the number of eligible applicants exceeds the budget, applications will be deferred (Hanson/Macleod Institute and INAC, 2005), i.e., the applicant will be placed on a waiting list. Nationwide, there is an average 20 per cent deferral of applicants.

Of the eligible First Nation members interviewed, only one individual indicated they were placed on a waiting list. This could suggest that the rate of deferral of applicants is lower in the Athabasca, or this may simply be a reflection of the fact the study did not target individuals without post-secondary experience. According to the PAGC (2005), the number of enrolments for the Dené Sector has generally increased from 1989 to 2003. It is likely that demand will exceed the funds available in the coming years.

4.4.2 Cost-of-Living Expenses

While accessing funds for tuition and books was not seen as a challenge by the majority of respondents, paying for living costs while away from home was an issue for most. Other research has found, in general, that living costs require more expenditures than direct education costs, especially for those living away from home (Frenette, 2003; Junor and Usher, 2004; Barr-Telford et al, 2003). Typically, most students prior to beginning their program have little knowledge of the associated costs of attending post-secondary programs. "This is often compounded by the inexperience of some youth from more rural, remote and northern areas in living in the urban centers where most colleges and universities are located" (R.A. Malatest & Associates and Stonechild, 2008).

Post-secondary students from the Athabasca Basin cited things such as housing, transportation, and daycare among their biggest financial challenges. "Going home", especially for emergency reasons, was also a significant cost for students (although three round-trip flights a year were covered by the PSSSP).

This is consistent with observations made in the INAC and Hansen/Macleod (2005) report about post-secondary education, which stated:

"The evaluation showed that PSSSP student support levels fall below those set for other Canadians under the Canada Student Loan Program. They have not kept pace with dramatic tuition fee increases in the past decade, nor the cost of living which has escalated by 30 percent since 1989. PSSSP's per student budget in 2001-2002 was \$1,000 lower than the 1997 national post-secondary education average for all other Canadians, and would be lower still if the number of First Nation and Inuit students had not fallen by five percent over the preceding five years. Furthermore, First Nation and Inuit student-aged populations (20 to 44 age cohort) rose by almost seven percent in the

same period. In addition, PSSSP living allowances remain unchanged since they were first introduced 14 years ago. Canada Student Loan living allowances, by way of comparison, are higher in every region than those established for PSSSP" (Hanson/Macleod, 2005, pp. 51).

A study of First Nation university students found that access to childcare, transporting children to and from care, and the ability to access affordable and suitable housing were areas of concern (Thomas Prokop and MacDonald, 2004). Access to suitable housing is important to many groups of students, especially those with families, and "has implications for retention and completion of post-secondary programs" (Rounce, 2007, p. 63). These challenges were reiterated by respondents from the Athabasca Basin.

There were anomalies in responses; a handful of students felt that the money allocated by their respective First Nation was adequate in meeting their cost-of-living needs. When probed further to understand why certain students were able to "get by" on the monies provided, several themes emerged. First, these students were typically single – they did not have young families to care for while completing their studies. Second, they were able to rely on family for additional financial support if necessary. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these students all spoke about how they learned to budget their resources in order to meet their daily needs.

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 RANKING THE CHALLENGES

Given the sheer volume of challenges that emerged from the key person interview program, two approaches were taken to determine priority challenges to be addressed through recommendations. The first approach considered the volume of emerging themes, i.e., how many distinct patterns emerged in response to the questions. The second approach considered the ranking of challenges by the respondents themselves during the interviews. The two approaches produced different results, although provide a good indication of where efforts are required to improve the abilities of residents of the region to enroll in and succeed in post-secondary education. The following section provides an overview of how the priority challenges were identified, as well as the potential solutions and recommendations as suggested by the respondents.

Figure 5.1 provides the breakdown of the total number of challenges that emerged in the course of interviews. Table 5.1 provides a summary of all themes that emerged in the interview process, as well as identifying challenges that appear to be linked (academic, cultural, social, and financial).

Figure 5.1
Total Proportions of Emerging Themes

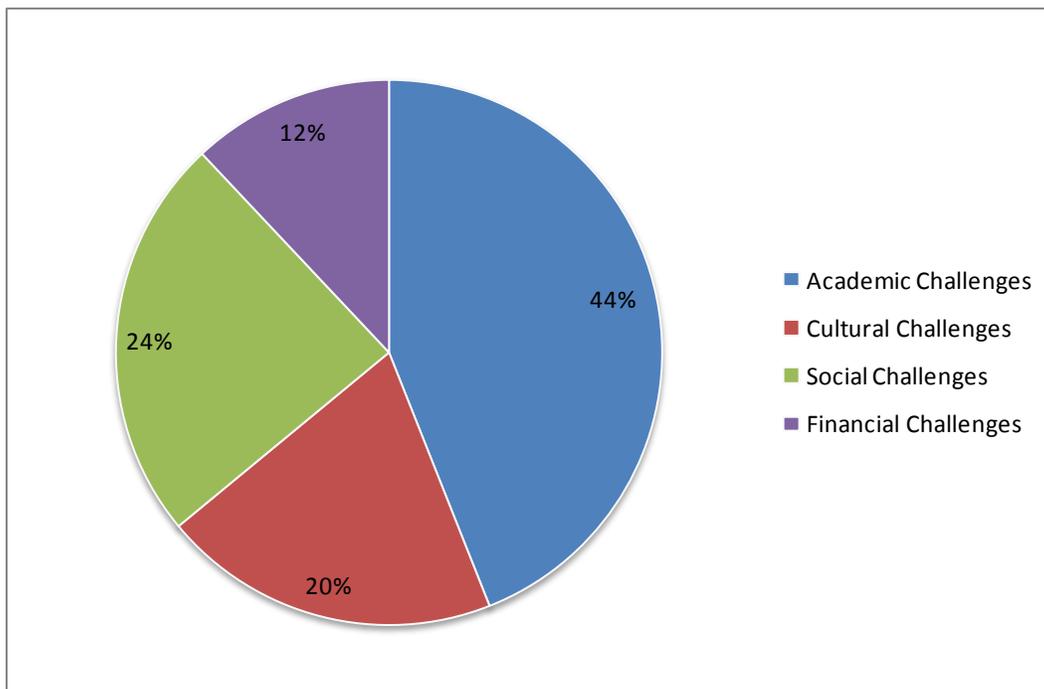


Table 5.1
All Themes and Linkages among the Themes
from Key Person Interview Results

| | Academic Challenge | Cultural Challenge | Social Challenge | Financial Challenge |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Academic Challenge | Basic reading, writing and listening skills Math and Science Attendance School Closures Classroom management and behavioural issues Discipline Teachers Attitudes towards education staff Administrative challenges Post-secondary workload and scheduling | Language Curriculum and language. | Discipline | |
| Cultural Challenge | Language Curriculum and language | Language Curriculum and language Discrimination Other traditions | Social skills | |
| Social Challenge | Discipline | Social skills | Discipline Family Support Community Circumstances Lifestyle Choices Transition from remote to urban Social Skills | Family Support |
| Financial Challenge | | | Family Support | Living Expenses Transportation Education Costs |

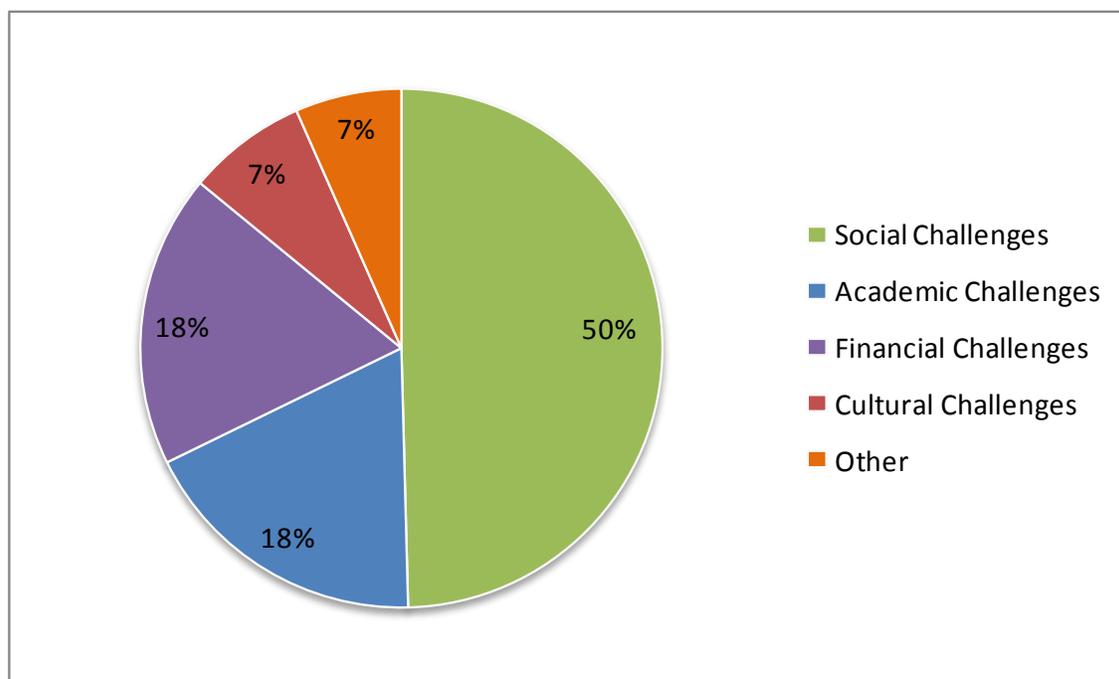
Figure 5.1 and Table 5.1 suggest that from the perspective of emerging themes, it would appear that academic challenges are the most critical barrier for residents of the Athabasca Basin. Representing 44 per cent of the total of emerging themes, academic challenges are also linked to cultural challenges (through language) and social challenges (through issues related to discipline). The second largest group of challenges were social (24 per cent) followed by cultural challenges (20 per cent) and finally financial challenges (12 per cent).

The second approach to prioritizing challenges considered the responses to the following question:

Of all of the challenges we've discussed, what would you say was the most challenging thing for you? Why? Which challenges would you rate as second and third?

Since the respondents did not always provide a first, second and third challenge, all top three challenges were combined to produce the result presented in Figure 5.2. The results from respondents painted a different picture than the results based on emerging themes. According to the respondents, social challenges presented the biggest barrier (50 per cent), followed by a tie between academic challenges and financial challenges (18 per cent each), and finally a tie between cultural challenges and other challenges that did not fit clearly into any of the defined categories (7 per cent each).

**Figure 5.2
Ranking of Top Three Challenges by Respondents**



Asking respondents about the most significant challenges for post-secondary participants revealed further insights about the emerging themes. In terms of social challenges, the act of simply leaving home

appeared to pose the greatest challenge to students, with comments such as, “it was my first time away from home” (Post-secondary completer, April 2008), “just leaving the north” (Post-secondary institution, April, 2008), and “the biggest challenge is not having family support – the comfort of getting a pat on the back when you have done well, or the support through the tough times” (Administrator, April 2008). This was coupled with the “culture shock” of moving to larger urban centers; respondents noted that learning how to live in the city, to pay bills, to take the bus, to budget, etc. added to the difficulty of moving south. The most significant financial challenges focused on managing living expenses and transportation costs. In terms of academic challenges, it became evident that the biggest challenges were associated with acquiring the basic academic skills necessary to complete the post-secondary program. Once enrolled in a post-secondary program, this was coupled with managing the workload and schedule.

These two approaches to identifying the most significant challenges for post-secondary respondents suggested that recommendations should be geared toward addressing the social, academic, and financial challenges faced by post-secondary participants.

To provide further background for shaping recommendations, the following section addresses factors identified by respondents as factors which contribute to an individual’s success.

5.2 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS IN POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS

In order to understand what factors contributed to the success of individuals in completing post-secondary programs, respondents were asked the following question:

What factors do you think contribute to some students being more successful in attending and completing post-secondary programs?

Results presented in Supporting Data Table C.8, Appendix C

The responses to this question are summarized in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2
Factors Contributing to Success in Post-Secondary Programs

| Factor | Proportion of Total Reponses |
|---|------------------------------|
| Attitude | 37% |
| Family Support | 31% |
| Role Models and/or Mentors | 10% |
| Adequate Academic Preparation | 9% |
| Social Skills | 7% |
| Participation in Extracurricular Activities | 3% |
| Lifestyle Choices | 3% |
| Total | 100% |

In discussing factors contributing to success of post-secondary students, a positive attitude was mentioned by more than one-third of respondents. Other research has identified attitude as a contributor to success in education and has identified positive attitudes and behaviours such as getting along with teachers, finishing homework on time, and being interested in the subject matter (McMullen, 2004). In this study, statements by respondents suggested that determination and focus reinforced the notion that attitude can contribute to success. "I'm not a quitter" noted one respondent. "I put my mind to it and finished it. What would I have done if I quit?" (Post-secondary Completer, April 2008). Attitude was also noted by a respondent representing a post-secondary institution with the comment "The ones who come down [to study here] are so focused and so determined" (April, 2008).

*"I put my mind to it and finished it. What would I have done if I quit?"
Post-Secondary Graduate*

Family support received recognition again, with 31 per cent of respondents indicating that it was a critical factor for success. Adequate academic preparation also was identified as a contributing factor, mentioned mainly by post-secondary institutions and employers. Role models and mentors were also mentioned as factors contributing to success. Ten per cent of respondents, largely post-secondary participants, indicated that they had a role model or mentor who supported and encouraged them through the post-secondary process. Social skills were mentioned by 7 per cent of respondents, and were often in reference to the ability to make friends and find supports during the post-secondary experience. Finally, making positive lifestyle choices, i.e., participating in extracurricular activities such as sports, and

avoiding those activities associated with the “party lifestyle” (drugs, alcohol, etc.) were cited as factors contributing to individuals’ success.

5.3 SOLUTIONS IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS

Over the course of the key person interviews, respondents offered a wide array of perspectives in regards to what might help more Athabasca Basin residents to enroll and succeed in post-secondary education. These solutions emerged throughout the course of the semi-structured interviews. The solutions described below were not targeted toward specific stakeholder groups, but rather reflected the respondents general observations about what they saw as necessary to succeed.

5.3.1 Academic Solutions

The majority of academic solutions that emerged in discussion with respondents focused on the primary, middle, and secondary school levels. There was a general sense that once students were academically prepared that the transition to a post-secondary environment would be much smoother. Respondents also suggested that changing academic standards in local schools would be a very challenging task.

Basic Academic Skills

Ensuring that students receive a Grade 12 education that is equivalent to the rest of the Province was seen as paramount to address the challenges of accessing post-secondary education. To do this, respondents raised a number of ideas, including enforcing stricter academic standards, assigning more homework, requiring more written assignments, and testing students more rigorously. It was also suggested that students be required to meet the academic standards of one grade before moving on to the next grade. This would be required from the primary school level to Grade 12, so that students could build skills from year to year.

Curriculum

Respondents suggested a twofold solution with respect to curriculum development. First, they indicated that there was a need in First Nation-administered schools for the development of curriculum guides for teachers for all subject matter. Second, there was a need for the development of culturally relevant curriculum to which the students could relate. Revised school closure policies were seen as necessary to provide teachers with enough teaching hours to fulfill curriculum requirements. This was especially the case for First Nation-administered schools, since the provincial schools were required to meet the standards of the Northern Lights School Division #113, which are less discretionary in terms of school closure.

Teachers

Respondents felt that the northern education staff, in particular non-local teachers, should be improved with a focus on recruitment and retention strategies. This was especially the case at the high school level and for subjects such as math and science. One respondent suggested that perhaps all of the high schools needed to “think outside of the box and perhaps look at finding one qualified science teacher and using them throughout [the region]” (Employer, April, 2008). A commonly cited strategy for retaining

teachers was providing all staff with cultural orientation, and preparing teachers from outside of the communities for the culture shock of living in these remote locations.

Alternative Programs

Finally, several respondents suggested that one of the ways to overcome the academic challenges faced by residents in the region was to develop and support alternative programs to allow for different ways to attain a high school diploma. In talking about alternatives, Credenda, a virtual high school established by the PAGC, was often cited. Credenda is an online school where students can log in and join a virtual classroom at a regularly scheduled time. "Students and E-teachers have headsets with microphones so they can talk to each other. The [virtual class] has many valuable features such as a versatile whiteboard, text messaging, a web tour, and break-out rooms for group work. Each session is recorded so if students have to miss a class, they can use the archives" (PAGC, 2008). Credenda offers an alternative to the traditional textbook-style correspondence course, and in its pilot year (2005-2006) faced some challenges. The low rates of successful completion of courses in the pilot year were attributed to "lack of academic ability, socio-economic issues, peer pressure, opportunity to join the workforce, lack of motivation or support, or student relocation" (PAGC, 2008). Despite the initial experience, respondents still felt that Credenda provided an alternative that worked for some students and allowed them to attain their secondary school diploma. The PAGC plans to work through some of the challenges faced in offering Credenda and to expand the program over the next several years.

Educational and Career Information Prior to Entrance to Post-Secondary Programs

Respondents, in particular post-secondary participants, felt that there needed to be a better understanding of the opportunities that exist for post-secondary education that results in employment in their home communities. There was a desire for a better understanding of the academic prerequisites, course content and requirements, and generally more detail about what they could anticipate academically upon starting a post-secondary program. Providing a better sense of what could be expected was seen as a solution to prepare residents for the academic challenges they might face as post-secondary students.

During Post-Secondary Programs

Respondents did not have many suggestions to overcome academic challenges during post-secondary programs. The only solution provided here was to increase the number of First Nation tutors, in particular Dené tutors, available to students during their programs.

5.3.2 Social Solutions

In talking about social solutions, respondents typically focused on the challenges associated with family support, the transition from a remote to an urban environment, and community circumstances that affect education.

Family Support

Devising methods to promote parental engagement in education at the community level was the solution most frequently identified by respondents to address the need for family support. A long-term teacher and administrator provided the following insights about the importance of parental engagement and family support to a child's education: "It takes parents involved in a child's education, showing interest and concern. It takes parents forcing [their child] to go to school when necessary. That's about it." (Administrator, April 2008). When probed further to see if there were suggestions as to how to involve parents who were currently disengaged in their child's education, the response was less clear: "There are things that could be done – look for ways to get [parents] into the schools as much as possible. You could show them how to help their kids with their school work and help them to understand their child's experience. [Some parents] haven't had a lot of success at school themselves. Overcoming that dread of school, that feeling, will take time" (Administrator, April 2008).

*"It takes parents involved
in a child's education,
showing interest and
concern. It takes parents
forcing [their child] to go
to school when
necessary.
That's about it"
Educator*

Several respondents identified the need for resources to support families, such as parenting classes, in particular for young single mothers. Literacy and reading programs were also identified as an appropriate way to have parents and children interact. Activities such as spelling bees and other community activities at the school were also suggested.

At the post-secondary level, support from family for education did not appear to require the same degree of engagement. Here, it was the ability of family to visit and provide support that was viewed as most beneficial. Several post-secondary respondents said that having family members present to assist with babysitting was particularly helpful, especially in the case of single mothers. A few talked about the importance of the care packages brought by family members, with many emphasizing the importance of caribou meat.

Transition from Remote to Urban

To assist residents in their transition from a remote to an urban environment respondents focused on preparing students for the anticipated changes. Suggested approaches included exposing students to southern communities before they attended post-secondary institutions and providing life skills training that would be relevant in their new setting. "The cultural change and shock is a big issue" noted one administrator. "The students need to know what living outside [the community] is all about. Having experience is important" (April, 2008). Exposure to urban communities was seen as an important way to show students about life outside of the Athabasca. "Exposure is necessary" noted one educator. "Maybe not living out there – but steady exposure. We did school trips to [large urban centers] to help the kids become aware of what is out there" (April, 2008).

Preparing students for independence through the development of life skills was seen as another mechanism to ease the transition. "Basic life skills would have been good" noted one student who started but did not complete a post-secondary program. "How to be on your own, manage things like your rent

or SaskPower, etc.” (April, 2008). The list of potential things to cover in life skills training ranged from taking the bus, how to get a driver’s license, how to budget, how to identify local services and recreation opportunities, how to pay bills, and so on. Suggestions as to how to provide this life skills training ranged from making it a mandatory high school course to offering workshops for any residents who plan on attending post-secondary programs.

Community Circumstances

Although not necessarily linked directly to education, respondents presented solutions to addressing some of the circumstances that affect the social well-being of the Athabasca communities. Some respondents talked about the need for healing, particularly in reference to experiences of the residential schools system. Others spoke about the need for better education about issues like addiction and teenage pregnancy. One of the more concrete solutions offered was the development of partnerships between the education authorities and other organizations in the region such as the Athabasca Health Authority.

Another potential mechanism to engage young people in positive behaviours was through recreation. “We need facilities for young people, like after school programs,” noted one educator. “The kids have nothing to do here. They get into mischief. They need something like a drop-in centre or teams to play on” (April, 2008). The lack of extracurricular activities was seen as something especially important for teenagers, who were identified as the group with the fewest options.

5.3.3 Cultural Solutions

In talking about cultural challenges respondents often spoke of the importance of maintaining culture in their home communities. These statements were often generalized, and not directly linked to education, either at the primary, middle and secondary level or at the post-secondary level. In the primary, middle, and secondary school levels, the specific solution offered most frequently was the implementation of a language program that allows young children to gain a complete understanding of the structure of language. Such a program could be developed in either Dené or English – what was seen as most relevant is that young students learn structure, which will ultimately assist them in understanding a second language.

At the post-secondary level, the cultural solutions presented by respondents focused on increased content for Dené culture and language. A number of people suggested the idea of having a Dené person on staff at the post-secondary institution or having access to a Dené elder for advice and direction.

5.3.4 Financial Solutions

Respondents were less likely to offer constructive solutions to overcome the financial challenges faced by post-secondary students. First Nation leadership indicated a need to address the post-secondary funding cap. Others noted simply that governments should “provide more money.” Specific potential solutions offered included:

- Provide more training about financial planning and budgeting for all potential post-secondary students;
- Improve promotion of alternative funding sources such as scholarships and bursaries; and
- Arrange for care packages from home (or from the community) to help offset some of the living expenses (with an emphasis on caribou meat).

Only two respondents suggested that getting a part-time job was an important thing for students to pursue. “Get a part-time job. Fill your time. Put some money in your pocket now. It will help to build your self esteem” (Administrator, April 2008).

5.3.5 Post-Secondary Institution in the Athabasca

Approximately one-third of respondents suggested that the creation of a post-secondary facility in the Athabasca Basin would help to alleviate many of the challenges associated with having to move south to complete post-secondary programs. When people talked about a facility, they were referring to an actual institution – a building containing the necessary classrooms, computers, housing for students, etc. Respondents, however, also recognized the limitations of this solution. The challenges identified by respondents included the following:

- Determining where the facility would be located;
- Provide adequate housing for students;
- Recognizing that, despite being located in the Athabasca, most students would still have to “leave home” to attend; and
- Developing appropriate programs to suit the opportunities in the region.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY RESPONDENTS

In addition to suggesting solutions, respondents were also asked a series of questions regarding recommendations to key stakeholders in education in the region. Although many of the recommendations reiterated the solutions discussed, in this context they were directed specifically at stakeholders groups

and included recommendations to communities (both at a household and leadership level), to educators and administrators in the region, to post-secondary institutions, and to key employers in the region.

5.4.1 Recommendations to Communities

Do you have any recommendation to your community, in terms of leadership and at the household level, to help more students from the Athabasca Basin attend and complete post-secondary education. Is there anything your home community could be doing?

Results presented in Supporting Data Table C.9, Appendix C

At the Leadership Level

Respondents identified numerous ways in which their community leadership could help more students to succeed in post-secondary education. In the community, the recommendation heard most often was for elected leadership to support the schools and their policies. This recommendation was directed at the First Nation-operated schools where the administration of education was seen by some respondents to be influenced by the decisions of Chief and Council, sometimes in contrast to the community education policies.

Once students were enrolled in post-secondary programs, respondents saw additional ways in which community leadership could support students. One of the simplest recommendations was that leadership could acknowledge students in their endeavours. This could be accomplished at community events or in other informal ways, like simply encouraging their membership to pursue further studies. More formal recognition could be provided through incentives for successful post-secondary students such as scholarships, bursaries, or even summer employment. Another means in which a post-secondary education could be recognized by leadership was to ensure that priority was given to residents with suitable post-secondary education for positions with the First Nation administration.

Monitoring and moral support of students was an additional way that respondents felt that the community leadership and administration could assist post-secondary students. Although each of the First Nation communities had a post-secondary education counselor responsible for monitoring students, most felt that more could be done in terms of "checking-in." The occasional phone call, or visit when people go south, is all that most post-secondary students thought would be necessary to feel more encouraged. Other ways in which more monitoring and support could be built in would be to arrange for mentors for students when they first move away from the community. This could be from other students from the community already pursuing post-secondary programs or living outside of the community.

Finally, the last recommendation that respondents made to their community leadership and administration was to provide their students with more money, particularly for their post-secondary living allowance. Respondents did not link this recommendation specifically to lobbying the federal government for additional funding in the PSSSP, but rather just saw it as an option for their local administration to pursue.

At the Household/Community Level

Recommendations geared towards individual community members focused on two key items. First, it was thought that parents and/or guardians needed to be engaged in their children's education. Second, there was a sense that encouragement and support for post-secondary students was also a role that other community members could undertake.

Engagement of parents or guardians in their child's education was viewed by respondents as an individual responsibility; however it was acknowledged that finding ways to involve parents/guardians in education and education-related activities would likely be necessary and could be helpful. Respondents recommended that the community find ways to engage parents with the education system through activities such as spelling bees or reading programs. They also suggested that programming to support parents was necessary, such as literacy programs, parenting classes, and other programming to develop parenting skills.

Additionally, individual community members could support and encourage students in post-secondary programs. This would be similar to the level of support suggested for community leadership, in that an occasional phone call or visit when people go south would be appreciated by post-secondary students.

5.4.2 Recommendations to Educators/Administration

What recommendations would you make to the schools and educators in the Athabasca Basin to prepare students for post-secondary studies?

Results presented in Supporting Data Table C.10, Appendix C

Recommendations by respondents to educators and administrators focused primarily on ensuring that students were academically prepared for the transition to post-secondary programs. A respondent from one post-secondary institution made the following remark: "We've moved away from the basics in the school system. There is a lack of accountability – proving you can pass the test and know the materials before you move forward. Everybody passes. It's the easy way out. But it's a disservice – it sets the kids up for failure" (April, 2008). The need to move beyond the current system, including "social passing", was seen as paramount to ensuring that students were prepared to enter into post-secondary programs successfully.

Recommendations to meet this challenge included allowing for flexibility in programming so students could have more time to complete the core curriculum if necessary. Respondents also recommended that the schools need to ensure that teachers are given the necessary time to cover the curriculum. This would require that schools decrease the total number of days a school is closed throughout the course of the year. Some respondents also felt that cultural activities should be integrated with academics in the school, rather than taking time away from academics.

Recommendations to educators and administrators also focused on recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Although the "TEP" programs were identified as the best approach to training local teachers,

with NORTEP, SUNTEP and ITEP considered among the best practices for Aboriginal participation in post-secondary education (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2002), other suggestions for building the education workforce were also provided. One of the recommendations was that local teachers should be exposed to schools in other communities so as to broaden their experience from just their home communities. For non-local teachers, it was felt that cultural training for the transition into the communities would be beneficial.

Preparation for the transition from remote communities to urban environments was another way in which the education system could support potential post-secondary students. Recommendations included offering a life skills course to high school students which would focus on skills required in a southern, urban setting, and making it a mandatory course for anyone planning to attend post-secondary programs. In addition, it was felt that regular field trips to urban centers should be planned for students to ensure they get exposure to urban environments before their post-secondary experience.

Finally, it was recommended that the education system do more to make students aware of the employment opportunities that exist in the region, along with the necessary education and training requirements to access those opportunities. This was thought to be an essential role for school guidance counselors to play, and that materials should be developed to support students in making decisions about their education and career paths.

5.4.3 Recommendations to Post-Secondary Institutions

What recommendations would you make to the post-secondary institutions to improve the experience of Athabasca students in completing their diploma/degree?

Results presented in Supporting Data Table C.11, Appendix C

Generally speaking, respondents who were post-secondary participants spoke positively about the post-secondary programs in which they enrolled. They appeared to be generally satisfied with the support they received from the institutions. The recommendations that were made focused first on activities prior to a student's entrance to a program and later on providing stronger supports to enrolled students.

Prior to Entry into Post-Secondary Programs

Respondents recommended that post-secondary institutions do more in the way of informing residents about the potential post-secondary education opportunities. This could include more frequent trips by the institutions to the north to explain what programs they offered, the overall course requirements, and the necessary prerequisites to gain entrance, and if possible to deliver this information via past or current students from the north. Respondents also recommended more opportunities for students to attend the institutions themselves for a thorough tour and to be oriented to the southern community in which they are located.

Another recommendation to post-secondary institutions was to reserve seats for northerners. This was particularly relevant for programs which had high potential for employment in the Athabasca, such as

relevant trades and technical programs related to mining, and health care-related programs such as nursing. Some respondents felt that most northerners were not willing to wait for post-secondary openings and were likely to pursue other options if not immediately accepted into a program.

During Post-Secondary Programs

Recommendations to support post-secondary students during their programs focused on two general areas: 1) Improved support systems for students, and 2) Increased Dené content in programming. The first of these recommendations focused on improving the initial orientation students receive upon starting a program, with the potential to extend that orientation to address things beyond the walls of the institution, such as getting around the community and other local opportunities (e.g., recreation). Respondents also suggested that having more First Nations tutors available for students would be beneficial.

Recommendations to increase Dené content included hiring Dené faculty members, having Dené elders available on site for students, and increasing awareness and appreciation for the Dené culture in post-secondary programming.

5.4.4 Recommendations to Employers

Is there anything else that the major employers (mining companies, health authority, others) could be doing to help Athabasca students to attend and complete post-secondary programs?

Results presented in Supporting Data Table C.12 and C.13, Appendix C

When asked this question, almost 30 per cent of respondents identified actions that employers are already doing to support residents in furthering their education. This included scholarships, bursaries and awards, on-the-job training, and general encouragement for employees wishing to increase their education. Continuation and expansion of such initiatives was an overall recommendation aimed at this stakeholder group.

Respondents recommended that employers improve communication about the nature of opportunities in the region. They felt that employers should go beyond what they were currently doing in terms of job fairs and career information. This included a clear definition of the nature of jobs, the prerequisites necessary to be accepted into training, and the expectations of the relevant education and training programs. Respondents also recommended that employers promote local success stories in their workplaces. For example, local role models could explain to prospective students in the communities how they achieved their success, and how they overcame some of the challenges.

In addition to education and employment-related activities, some respondents felt that key employers in the region, in particular the mining companies, should be undertaking activities that benefit the whole community, not necessarily just those employed in or training to work in the mining sector. Recommendations included providing education and training opportunities at the community level as well

as providing financial support to students pursuing post-secondary studies. In addition, many respondents felt that employers could financially support extracurricular activities in the communities.

5.5 ADVICE TO POTENTIAL POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

Finally, in looking for ways to support more residents to attend and complete post-secondary programs, respondents were asked the following question:

What advice would you give to young people today who are thinking about attending post-secondary programs?

The respondents had several messages to share with potential post-secondary students. The first of these dealt with planning for a post-secondary experience. Respondents advised that students keep up with their studies and be prepared to work hard. Focusing on academic success during high school was one way to make the transition to post-secondary studies smoother. Potential post-secondary students were advised to choose their programs carefully. They were advised to pick something in which they have interest or which will result in employment in the region. "If they are thinking about attending post-secondary education make sure that you know what you are going to do and what training will be required" said one resident who completed a post-secondary program. "You need to be serious about the studies and committed to [it]" (May, 2008).

In terms of planning, several young mothers were also quick to suggest that students should undertake post-secondary studies before starting a family. "Do it while you can" advised one young mother who did not complete her post-secondary program. "Once you have kids it's impossible. It gets more complicated" (April, 2008).

The second message to potential post-secondary students was about attitude. "Just focus and do it! You have to be dedicated" suggested one employer (April, 2008). An administrator advised that people need to be prepared "for a hard journey. It takes hard work and perseverance to succeed" (April, 2008). A post-secondary student who did not complete his program had three things to offer: "Number one: work hard. You can decide to work 100 per cent or at 50 per cent. If you go for 100 per cent more will come out of it. Number two: you can always improve. Number three: don't dwell on mistakes. Move on and learn from what you've done. Those three things will get you through the tough times" (April, 2008). Messages of encouragement and reminders to persevere were the most common pieces of advice.

Respondents also advised potential post-secondary participants to make responsible choices about their lifestyle when they move south. This advice often came from people with post-secondary experience, perhaps a reflection of what they learned on their own. "My advice" said one post-secondary completer, "Don't go out and party" (April, 2008). Another student who did not complete their post-secondary program said "Watch your lifestyle. The bar scene is so new, but it keeps you from doing your work" (April, 2008).

Finally, a number of respondents reminded potential students that there is some fun to be had in the experience. "Let them know that it is fun" said one resident currently undertaking a post-secondary program. "You get to meet a lot of people, make new friends and try new things. I'm taking yoga and tae kwon do" (May, 2008). "Well, I know I told one kid to work hard" said one educator. "But don't forget to enjoy life while you are there. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience" (April, 2008).

6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 CONCLUSIONS

In order to understand the factors that influence residents' decisions to pursue and ability to succeed in post-secondary education, the study considered the perspectives of multiple stakeholders related to education in the Athabasca Basin. The results of key person interviews with post-secondary students, high school students, educators, administrators, community leadership, representatives of post-secondary institutions and employers, along with input from the Project Steering Committee painted a complex picture of the factors that affected residents in attending and succeeding in post-secondary programs. Many of these challenges were paralleled by other research on access and affordability of post-secondary education in Canada.

In attempting to pursue post-secondary opportunities, the residents of Athabasca Basin face a complex series of challenges. Many of the respondents in the study had characteristics that other studies have shown to be an impediment to post-secondary education:

- They dropped out of high school;
- They had young families;
- Their parents had no experience with post-secondary education; and
- They live in remote communities without post-secondary facilities.

In addition, residents faced a series of challenges, many of which are common to many remote, northern and Aboriginal communities across Canada. Overall, the study found that social challenges were the most significant barrier to overcome. This was followed closely by academic challenges, many of which resulted from the education received in the communities. A general lack of awareness of the benefits of a post-secondary education, and a lack of awareness of employment opportunities in the region contributed to the low overall perceived value of education by many respondents. Reinforcing the value of an education was seen as necessary not only at the post-secondary level, but also in the primary, middle and secondary school levels.

Respondents also faced financial challenges associated with attending post-secondary institutions far from home. Most of the respondents were eligible for funding under INAC's PSSSP and as such comments focused more so on cost-of-living aspects of post-secondary education versus concerns about direct education costs like tuition and book. The study found some cultural challenges associated with attending and completing post-secondary programs, such as language and discrimination, although in comparison to other challenge areas, culture was less of a concern for respondents.

Social Challenges

Distance plays a role in the social challenge faced by residents of the Athabasca Basin for two reasons. First, it contributes to the social context and community circumstances of the region; and second, it exacerbates the emotional cost of leaving social networks and support systems (Frenette, 2003). This was certainly the case for residents of the Athabasca Basin, who indicated that “just leaving home” was one of the top challenges they faced. The transition from a remote to urban environment resulted in “culture shock” for many individuals. Factors such as disconnection with the home community and lack of exposure to other communities have been examined in other studies (Andres and Looker, 2002) and were consistent with respondents’ ideas as to what social factors need to be addressed to enable residents to succeed in a post-secondary environment.

The social context of the Athabasca Basin also presented a challenge to potential post-secondary participants. “When trying to assess the factors influencing participation (in post-secondary education) the impact of an individual’s environment and community context cannot be underestimated” (Rounce, 2006). In the Athabasca, respondents suggested that poverty, alcohol and drug use, and abuse were realities that many people lived with. They also suggested that family or parental support was paramount to a successful education and that, in many instances, parental engagement in education was insufficient. Although there were some parents engaged in education in each of the communities, the example of Camsell Portage was often cited as a location where the entire community was engaged in education. This engagement was seen as one of the major contributors to the large number of students from the community who had success with post-secondary programs.

Community circumstances such as average education attainment of residents and employment rates influence people’s participation in post-secondary studies (Cartwright and Allen, 2002). This stems, in part, from the fact that high average levels of education, high employment rates, and jobs with reasonable earning potential mean that there are more role models in the community. Role models play a role in enhancing the perceived value of a post-secondary education (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2004). Most Athabasca Basin communities, in contrast, had low education levels and high unemployment rates. The lack of university- or college-educated role models is often a result of distance (Frenette, 2003; R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2004).

These challenges, however, are not entirely unique to the region since similar challenges are faced by rural and remote communities across Canada. Frenette (2002) determined that distance to post-secondary institutions, in particular universities, has an effect on people’s participation in post-secondary education. This effect is discernable as soon as an individual lives further than 80 kilometres from a post-secondary institution. “More than 50 per cent of Saskatchewan residents live further than 80 km from the nearest university” (Rounce, 2006), although Frenette (2003) noted that this is less of an issue for colleges, since almost 97 per cent of the population have a college nearby. The Athabasca Basin, however, falls into the 3.5 per cent of the Province that has neither a college nor a university within commuting distance.

Academic Challenges

Academic challenges appear to begin well before the post-secondary level, at the primary, middle and secondary school levels. This was demonstrated by the volume of challenges reported by respondents regarding academic barriers prior to entry in post-secondary programs. This is partly a reflection of the fact that a full Kindergarten through Grade 12 education has only been offered in the region over the last decade. Other research has suggested that graduates from reserve and remote schools “typically do not have the academic preparation required to succeed in post-secondary studies” (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd, 2004). This is consistent with what respondents said about the lack of literacy skills, writing skills, study skills, and math skills, along with academic challenges stemming from language. This is also demonstrated in the need for upgrading, which was required by 70 per cent of student respondents.

Ensuring that students receive a Grade 12 education that is equivalent to the rest of the Province was seen as necessary to begin addressing the challenges of accessing post-secondary education. Mendleson (2006) asked the question “of Aboriginal students who do finish high school, what proportion go on to post-secondary education and is this figure different than that of the total population?” (p.30). The results suggested that about the same proportion of Aboriginal high school graduates go on to complete post-secondary education as other Canadian high school graduates, although they are much more likely to choose post-secondary options other than university. This observation has significant implications in that “it is unrealistic to expect Aboriginal post-secondary education graduates, as a percentage of the total Aboriginal population, to increase substantially while the proportion of high school graduates remains the same” (Mendleson, 2006, p. 30).

In the Athabasca, several factors that affect a student’s ability to acquire the necessary academic skills to move on to post-secondary programs were identified. This included low attendance, unscheduled school closures, classroom management issues disrupting instruction time, and an overall sense that discipline and structure were lacking. All of these factors detracted from the time a teacher had to meet curriculum requirements. Each year that curriculum is not fully covered in regular class time resulted in gaps in students’ learning. This is exacerbated by the fact that many students who are not academically ready are moved ahead on a “social pass.”

The lack of continuity in teaching staff from year to year also became an issue; for example, new teachers may not be aware of materials covered and not covered in the previous year. There was often considerable time spent “catching up” on what was missed. Teacher retention was one of the human resources challenges faced by schools in the Athabasca Basin, in particular when it came to recruiting and retaining teachers from outside of the region.

These academic issues go on to challenge students when they start post-secondary programs. In addition, respondents indicated that managing workload and schedule became equally important at the post-secondary level. Many respondents indicated they were overwhelmed by the amount of work, and struggled to keep up with assignments. Time management and other life skills relevant to an urban setting were mentioned by respondents as necessary to ease the transition to the southern communities.

Research has shown that participation in extracurricular activities can contribute to interpersonal competence, self-concept, grade-point average, school engagement, education aspirations, and higher education attainment (Eccles et al, 2003; Elder and Conger, 2000; Marsh and Kleitman, 2002). Numerous comments were made about the lack of recreation and social opportunities in the Athabasca communities, in particular for teenagers. In many schools in less remote communities such things are a regular part of school activities, and in many cases even part of the curriculum, but the human and financial resources to support sports, arts, and musical programs are lacking in the Athabasca.

Lack of Awareness

It appears that the overall awareness of the benefits of higher education, as well as the employment opportunities to be found in the Athabasca Basin, were lacking. Part of this may be “rooted in individuals’ perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with post-secondary participation” (Acumen Research Group, 2008), but part of it also appeared to stem from an overall lack of awareness of the opportunities that exist within the region.

Awareness of the employment opportunities in the region, especially those requiring post-secondary training, appeared to be limited. Respondents were able to cite the obvious options (for example being a nurse at the health centre, an underground miner, staff person at the Northern Store), but were typically unaware of the many other opportunities that may exist at these same facilities. Understanding of the prerequisites and training requirements for this broader range of opportunities, especially among high school respondents, was virtually non-existent.

Research has suggested that the decision to attend post-secondary programs is often related to the individuals’ career goals. Career and education guidance needs to be provided, and to be truly successful needs to involve parents and families, particularly if the student faces additional barriers to post-secondary education (Looker and Lowe, 2001; Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003). Steps need to be taken to ensure that people are aware of the opportunities that exist, and the necessary steps to attain those opportunities. More face-to-face interaction was felt to be a more appropriate means of communicating the opportunities than the development of written materials.

Financial Challenges

The challenges associated with funding a college or university education are different for First Nation members (eligible Treaty and Status Indians, both on and off reserve) than for Métis and non-Aboriginal students. The majority of respondents in the study were eligible for funding under INAC’s PSSSP. Those who were not eligible (i.e., non-Aboriginal and Métis students) faced additional challenges in securing funds to pay for their post-secondary education. Cost-of-living expenses were the primary financial challenge for students, which is consistent with other research that has found, in general, that living costs require more expenditures than direct education costs, especially for those living away from home (Frenette, 2003; Junor and Usher, 2004; Barr-Telford et al, 2003). The PSSSP living allowances that the majority of respondents in the study received remain lower than Canadian Student Loan living allowances across the country (Hanson/Macleod, 2005). There is concern among First Nation leadership that the post-secondary funding cap is likely to prevent more students from attending post-secondary programs in the future as the population grows.

A lack of budgeting skills contributed to the overall financial stress of attending post-secondary programs. For those students who felt that the funding they received was adequate, several patterns emerged. First, these students were typically single – they did not have young families to care for while completing their studies. Second, they were able to rely on family for additional financial support if necessary. Finally, these students all spoke about how they learned to budget their resources in order to meet their daily needs.

Cultural Challenges

Issues related to culture seemed to present less of a barrier to respondents than other challenges. This may reflect that the communities have a strong sense of identity, including the maintenance of the Dené language. It may also reflect that the communities are in transition and adapting to the changes that the north has been experiencing over the past decades.

Language was viewed as the most significant cultural challenge, largely because English is the primary language of instruction in both the provincial and federal school systems. Most children come to primary school with some English, although Dené remains the main language spoken in the home and in the communities. Substantial classroom time is spent focused on English language acquisition, sometimes at the expense of other subject areas. In addition, certain terms, especially in math and science, do not translate easily from English to Dené (or vice versa).

Efforts to Address the Challenges

Although the challenges faced by residents of the Athabasca Basin are complex, the results of the study indicated that stakeholders in the region were largely aware of the issues at hand. In many instances respondents provided examples of activities that are helping to address some of the challenges, such as the following:

- Breakfast programs at school to ensure all children have a healthy start to their day;
- Pilot programs to teach parenting skills;
- Cultural and language programming in the schools;
- Corporate support for field trips and community activities;
- Scholarship and bursary programs sponsored by the mining companies; and
- Post-secondary training programs in the region for addictions counselors through the Athabasca Health Authority.

While these initiatives are targeted to support education, they also address other challenges and speak to the complex nature of educational challenges.

Respondents identified an array of additional initiatives that may assist more residents to access post-secondary opportunities. A full discussion of these initiatives is found in Sections 5.3 and 5.4.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has resulted in two types of recommendations: long-term recommendations and recommendations for near-term action. Both require the input of multiple stakeholders; however, the former are likely to take numerous years of effort to adequately address some of the challenges while the latter are intended to be feasible over the next several years.

6.2.1 Long-Term Recommendations

Ultimately, in order to increase the number of post-secondary graduates from the region it will be necessary for students to graduate from high school with an education equivalent to that received in schools in the rest of the Province. To achieve that goal, many of the behaviours, assumptions, concepts, programs, and resources that form the basis for the current educational system would have to be revisited, redefined and realigned. Wide-ranging, concerted and sustained efforts will be required from multiple stakeholders over a long period of time.

Long-term change can only be achieved through the initiative and support of local stakeholders; in particular the formal and informal leadership of Athabasca Basin communities along with the local educators and administrators. This stems from the fact that many of the challenges post-secondary students face stem from issues that exist in their home communities. While it is important that local stakeholders be engaged in initiating and sustaining efforts to raise the standard of local education and increase number of high school graduates, there is ample opportunity for partnership arrangements and shared funding, which can contribute to relationship building among key stakeholders inside and outside of the region.

The long terms will require a multifaceted, multilayered approach to increase the number of post-secondary graduates from the region. The following are two of the most important thrusts that would need to be encompassed in dealing with the long term perspective.

Long-Term Recommendation 1: Stricter Academic Standards

Rationale: Given that increasing the total number of post-secondary participants seems to hinge on increasing the total number of successful high school graduates, it is imperative that actions be taken to improve academic standards. At present, there appear to be limited efforts directed **specifically** at increasing the academic rigour necessary for schools to reach academic parity with the rest of Saskatchewan.

Actions: Local education authorities, in particular at the First Nation-operated schools, should begin by enforcing stricter attendance policies and school closure policies to ensure that the minimum curriculum hour requirements can be met. In addition, they need to develop more supports for teachers so that classroom management and behavioural issues can be addressed without detracting from the total

amount of teaching time. Local education authorities need to accept the fact that a transition to stricter academic standards is likely to be met with opposition and potential failures at the outset.

At a classroom level, more attention should be put toward basic literacy and numeracy skills. If the current amount of time available to teach basic academic skills is inadequate, schools should look to alternative programming options to ensure that students have the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills to move forward. The concept of a "social pass" needs to be reconsidered.

Stakeholder Participation: Ultimately, a shift to a higher academic standard would involve not only the education system, but also the support of community leadership, parents/guardians and community membership.

Long-Term Recommendation 2: Improve Parental Engagement in Education

Rationale: Parental engagement in education is integral to the success of students, and as such communities need to look at ways to actively engage parents and guardians in the education system. Given the historical and contextual factors (such as residential school experience) that have resulted in negative perceptions of education and the school system by some residents, this will be no small task. Improving parental or guardian engagement in education will ultimately require a shift for some in the perceived value of the benefits of an education.

Actions: Steps to initiate this process should include bringing parents into the school as much as possible, so as to improve their comfort level with the school. Schools could look to ways to have parents understand their child's experience and assist wherever possible – from helping with homework to simply ensuring that their child is at school, on time, every day. An alternative strategy to increase parental engagement in education would be to work toward improving parents' levels of education. This would require further resources for adult education.

Stakeholder Participation: These actions would require the cooperation of parents and guardians, educators and administrators.

6.2.2 Recommendations for Near-Term Action

The following recommendations for near-term action attempt to remain practical in nature and achievable in a relatively short time frame (i.e., with commitment, they could be implemented in the next one to three years). They are designed to address the most significant challenges identified by respondents and, where possible, to address overlaps among the various types of challenges. Although potential stakeholders for implementation are identified for each recommendation, participation is not limited to those who have been identified.

Near-Term Recommendation 1: Develop a Transitions Program to Enable Potential Post-Secondary Students to make a Smoother Transition to an Urban and Post-Secondary Setting

Rationale: The emotional cost of leaving home social networks is exacerbated by the “culture shock” of moving to an urban environment. Students need to be better prepared for the day-to-day realities of urban living. These actions are designed to help residents overcome some of the social challenges associated with the transition from a remote to urban environment.

Actions: There are two opportunities for program development to assist students in the transition from remote to urban and post-secondary living. This first is at the school and/or community level, while the second is upon the beginning of post-secondary programs.

At the community level, a Transitions Program may be implemented in combination with (or in the place of) the life skills course offered at the secondary level. Education authorities should consider making the course mandatory for graduation. Content for the program should include life skills relevant to the urban setting (communication skills, time management, budgeting, etc.), as well as focus on education and career exploration. It should also include the opportunity for a class field trip to an urban environment in order that students are exposed to life in other communities. (Alternatively, such a program could be set up by the local government and be mandatory for all students who receive First Nation funding for their post-secondary studies).

At the post-secondary level, programs should look to enhance the orientation and support to students in the urban environment. This should include providing orientation not only to the post-secondary institution and its services, but should also address a general orientation to the community in which the institution is located. A general orientation to public transportation, available community services, community recreation facilities, etc. should be included. It is recommended that orientation for students also seeks to involve peer mentors, i.e., other students further along in their programs who have already made the transition to urban living.

Stakeholder Participation: This recommendation targets local schools (with support from their education authorities) and post-secondary institutions. There is also potential for financial support for field trips from key employers.

Near-Term Recommendation 2: Acknowledge and Recognize Successful Post-Secondary Participants at a Community Level

Rationale: Support through the form of acknowledgement and recognition was identified by respondents to be a valuable form of encouragement for post-secondary students. Public recognition of post-secondary success is also a means to provide role models to youth in the community. And recognition is one of the easiest recommendations to implement. This recommendation is designed to address both social and academic challenges by building role models into the social fabric of the community.

Actions: Devise means to publicly acknowledge successful post-secondary students (past and present). This could be accomplished during regular community events, by inviting successful students back to local schools to share their experiences, and simply by encouraging community members to be supportive of students while they attend post-secondary studies.

Stakeholder Participation: This recommendation requires efforts from community leadership who can also foster encouragement by community members. It should also involve educators/administrators in bringing role models to the classroom. Finally, it involves community members who have been successful in completing post-secondary programs to share their experiences with others.

Near-Term Recommendation 3: Implement Extracurricular Programming at Community Schools

Rationale: Given the beneficial links between recreation and educational attainment, it is clear that participation in sports, music, and creative arts would be of benefit to students in community schools. In addition, programming should be geared to engage the community at large, and in particular parents/guardians, so as to bring them into the school setting in a welcoming way. This recommendation would support academic success, as well as provide a positive outlet for the social context of the communities.

Actions: The challenge with this recommendation is that successful implementation would require local participation, which may be voluntary or a paid recreation coordinator position if funds are available. Local enthusiasm and commitment to any recreation activity (be it sports, or arts, or otherwise) is necessary in order for an activity to succeed. Local capacity building for recreation planning is recommended for the long-term benefit of the community.

In the interim, it is important that recreation opportunities be developed for youth, in particular for teenagers. This could take the form of drop-in opportunities to use the gym or computers at the school. Such activities would require minimal supervision until more formal recreation initiatives are established. In addition, activities that promote education and engage the broader community are suggested. This could include reading programs and spelling bees, both of which could be undertaken with the use of youth volunteers.

Stakeholder Participation: Local schools and community administration would be the key players to implement this recommendation. There would also be potential funding opportunities for the key employers in the region.

Near-Term Recommendation 4: Strengthen the Local Teaching Force

Rationale: Since experienced instructors contribute to the stability of schools and to education programs, it is important to place efforts on recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Although it is recognized that the local education authorities undertake activities to provide quality teachers, some additional actions recommended by respondents could be readily implemented and may improve the

ability to retain staff. This recommendation is one of the simple actions that could be taken to try to improve upon the academic systems in communities.

Actions: While most schools offer some cross-cultural training to new teachers, additional activities are recommended. Schools should consider pairing new teachers with a local teacher to act as a mentor and guide to the community – a “buddy system” of sorts. This would help to orient new teaching staff to the realities of the communities, as well as to provide an opportunity for the non-local teachers to interact with community members outside of the school.

For local teachers, it is recommended that opportunities be sought to expose them to other teaching environments. One approach to this could be to require or encourage local teachers to gain one year of experience in another community before returning to their home community to teach. While this action may benefit the experience of local teachers, it may actually be a detriment to recruiting local teachers. A second suggestion would be to create a teacher-exchange program with schools in other communities. Although such a program could be piloted within the Athabasca, it is suggested that the schools look to develop partnerships with communities elsewhere in Saskatchewan or other parts of Northern Canada.

Stakeholder participation: This recommendation would be the responsibility of administrators and educators in the region.

Near-Term Recommendation 5: Establish an Athabasca Education and Career Counseling Program

Rationale: Lack of information appears to be one of the root causes of residents deciding not to pursue post-secondary programs. This includes a lack of awareness of the employment opportunities in the region, and the necessary education choices to attain those opportunities. Steps need to be taken to better communicate those opportunities to residents. This recommendation addresses some of the issues surrounding awareness, and helps to bridge both academic and financial challenges.

Actions: Given that current human resources for education and administration are already stretched, a new position of Education and Career Counsellor should be established. At the outset, this could be a single position that serves the entire Athabasca Basin; eventually, if feasible, it would be ideal to have several Education and Career Counsellors serving the communities. Working with the employers in the region, the PAGC, the Northern Lights School Division #113, and other appropriate stakeholders, this(these) individual(s) would work to develop an Education and Career Counselling Program that emphasizes the opportunities within the region. The program should initially be targeted at secondary students, although in the future should be extended to middle schools and eventually should include broader community outreach. The program should focus on communication of opportunities – namely employment opportunities in the region and how to attain the necessary education and training to achieve those opportunities. The program should have a strong interpersonal character with an emphasis on face-to-face interaction. The participation of role models from the community in the Program is strongly encouraged.

Stakeholder Participation: This is an opportunity for key employers in the region to assist in program development with education authorities (PAGC and NLSA #113) and community representatives from the Athabasca.

Near-Term Recommendation 6: Take Steps to Ease the Financial Challenges Faced by Post-Secondary Students

Rationale: Students face financial challenges when attending post-secondary programs since they are required to move far from home to undertake studies. Since cost-of-living expenses present the most significant financial challenge, steps should be taken to help students access additional funding. This recommendation is targeted specifically at the financial challenges residents face.

Actions: The actions associated with this recommendation are twofold. One action relates specifically to First Nation leadership, who can continue to lobby the federal government for further funding for the PSSSP. A main argument for this is that PSSSP living allowances are considerably lower than those allocated by Canada Student Loan and steps need to be taken to rectify this disparity. In the future, as student populations expand, the funding cap is also likely to present a limitation on the number of students able to participate based on this funding source.

The second set of actions can be applied more broadly to all potential post-secondary students and is encompassed by other recommendations. This includes ensuring that students obtain training about budgeting and financial planning as a part of a Transitions Program. Second, communicating information about available scholarships and bursaries will be a responsibility of the Education and Career Counselor.

Stakeholder Participation: Community leadership (see other recommendations).

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