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## A REASON TO CELEBRATE ON NATIONAL ABORIGINAL DAY

Ravina Bains

**A** small First Nations community called Whitecap Dakota, located just outside of Saskatoon, has a lot to celebrate on National Aboriginal Day. Whitecap Dakota describes itself as a modern and progressive First Nation with a

proud culture and a strong sense of community. It has 630 members, of whom 47 per cent live on reserve, and it is governed by one chief and only two councillors.

For the past 21 years the community has been led by Chief Darcy Bear,



who was first elected as chief at the age of 26. When he took office the unemployment rate on reserve was 70 per cent, the on-reserve education system was broken and the small community was running a deficit of \$350,000. With the support of his council and community, Chief Bear has brought the unemployment rate down to 5 per cent and has created business opportunities that have generated over \$6.7 million annually in own-source revenue. The community now has an education system on reserve that is so successful that non-First Nations parents in neighbouring Saskatoon want to send their children to his reserve school.

So what is the secret to Whitecap Dakota's success? Partnerships, openness to business and getting out from under the Indian Act.

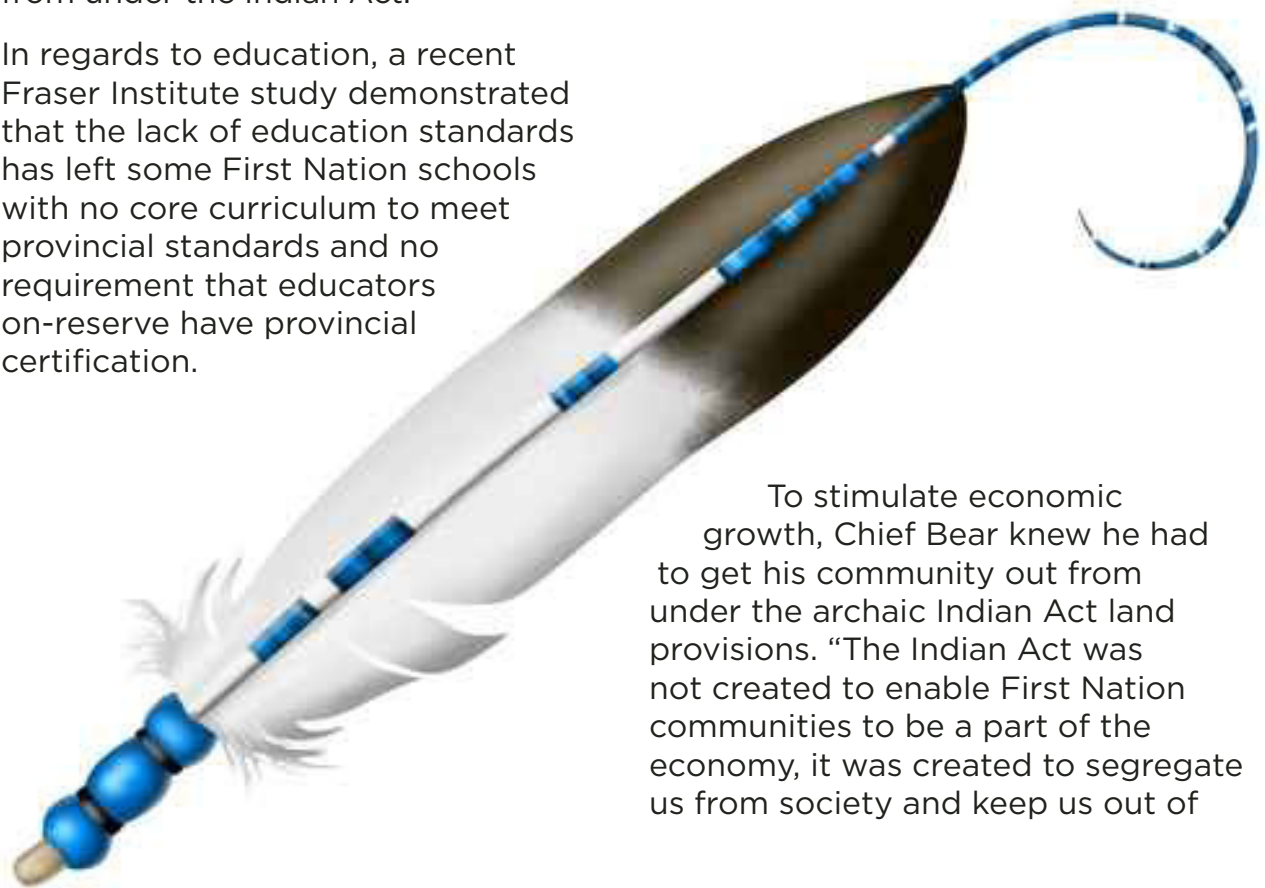
In regards to education, a recent Fraser Institute study demonstrated that the lack of education standards has left some First Nation schools with no core curriculum to meet provincial standards and no requirement that educators on-reserve have provincial certification.

To address these issues, Chief Bear developed a partnership with the local Saskatoon Public School Division. "We created a joint governance committee, joint operations committee, all second level services are provided by the local school division and all teachers in our school are members of the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation," he said. These standards have increased graduation rates and created an exceptional education system at Whitecap Dakota.

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**CHIEF DARCY BEAR,  
WHITECAP DAKOTA FIRST NATIONS**

To stimulate economic growth, Chief Bear knew he had to get his community out from under the archaic Indian Act land provisions. "The Indian Act was not created to enable First Nation communities to be a part of the economy, it was created to segregate us from society and keep us out of



sight and out of mind,” he said. In fact, our research has shown that archaic land provisions and lack of property rights on reserve has made First Nations members wards of the state and unable to enjoy the same economic opportunities as all other Canadians. In 2013, Whitecap Dakota joined the First Nations Land Management regime, which eliminated land provisions under the Indian Act and allowed the community to create their own land laws and move at the speed of business without intervention from the federal government.


**Whitecap Dakota has a 5 per cent unemployment rate.**

Chief Bear also attracted private investment to his community by opening up the band’s financial books, making Whitecap Dakota’s audited financial statements public long before the First Nations Transparency Act, which requires the public disclosure of a band’s audited financial statements. Furthermore, the council’s salary and expenses are funded through the community’s own-source revenue—no taxpayer dollars go towards paying the chief or councillors salaries.

And it’s all paid dividends for the community. Today, Whitecap Dakota has approximately \$100 million of capital investment in their community from the private sector and a 5 per cent unemployment rate. “All these revenues enable us to move forward and build a sustainable community,” he said.

This prosperity has also benefited the city of Saskatoon. Whitecap Dakota now employs more than 500 people from Saskatoon and recently contributed \$2.7 million towards the construction of a new Saskatoon school where only 10 per cent of the student body will be from Whitecap Dakota.

There are many other communities like Whitecap Dakota who have silently achieved tremendous success across Canada, such as the Haisla Nation in British Columbia and Fort McKay in Alberta.

So while it is important to highlight communities who are struggling with high unemployment rates and substandard living conditions, let’s not forget to celebrate successful communities like Whitecap Dakota, and inspirational leaders like Chief Darcy Bear, during this year’s National Aboriginal Day. Because as Chief Bear said “when First Nations are successful the region is successful.” 



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