

First Nations Education Steering Committee

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From Apology to Action: Restoring Dignity and Decision-Making Powers in Aboriginal Education

As we listen to Stephen Harper apologize to residential school survivors on behalf of the federal government, there is an important opportunity for healing and for allowing us to move on as individuals and as communities.

The residential school era is very recent history. Its effects are still felt by our grandparents, and parents and youth, and the impact of that era cannot be overstated. We also remember that the residential schools were just one injustice that First Nations people experienced in the education system, and as late as the early 1950s, Aboriginal students in British Columbia were prohibited from attending public schools.

Today, First Nations parents are more determined than ever that their children will be successful in school. They are extremely frustrated that although their children make up 10% of the population of our provincial schools, less than 50% of them graduate from high school. They are also frustrated that teachers often hold low expectations for their children and that there is not more action to address the poor performance of Aboriginal students on the annual BC-wide tests of writing, reading and math skills.

In the past two years, we saw a hopeful development as First Nations, Canada and British Columbia signed a set of agreements designed to fulfill the vision of Indian Control of Indian Education articulated by the National Indian Brotherhood 35 years ago. It has taken First Nations representatives about ten years of work, including four years of hard negotiations to achieve that recognition, which restores to First Nations people a piece of the education authority that the Indian Act stole away.

With the necessary resources, education jurisdiction will include several tools that First Nations need to be decision-makers in education including powers to design curriculum, to set standards for teachers in their schools, and to grant their own graduation certificates. Sixty First Nations want to proceed with education jurisdiction.

Under-resourcing of First Nations education was a factor during the residential school era and it has remained a huge hurdle to this day. Despite this major challenge, First Nations have high hopes for their children. First Nations are leading the way in several new First Nations-driven innovations like the two courses: First Nations Studies and the new English 12 First Peoples. We are also seeing more and more integration of Aboriginal content across the curriculum and world-class First Nations language teaching programs. Relations with the BC Ministry of Education have been strengthened and effective working relationships have also been established with other partners in the education system.

Educators, policy makers, and all Canadian citizens would do First Nations children a great service if they would support the innovative work that First Nations are doing in education, and provide resourcing they require to be successful.

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Learning from the Residential Schools

The apology issued by the Government of Canada to former residential school students and the testimonies that will be heard by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the coming months are important steps in the healing process. As we reflect on the lasting impact of the residential schools, let's ensure that the wrongs of the past are never repeated.

First Nations communities have come a long way toward regaining the education powers that were stripped from us during the residential school era. Over the past 35 years, we have seen First Nations establish approximately 130 on-reserve schools across British Columbia. Those schools serve about 5000 students and they play a central role in the transmission of our languages and cultures and in preparing our children for their futures.

We are also optimistic because First Nations schools in BC are national leaders in so many respects. Our schools have developed their own teacher certification procedures, school assessment measures, data collection tools and clubs to support First Nations parents. Recently, First Nations in BC have also succeeded in getting formal, legal recognition from the federal and provincial governments of our jurisdiction for K-12 education on First Nations land.

Our schools' accomplishments have been achieved in the face of many challenges, including years of under-funding of on-reserve education by the federal government. Even today, First Nations schools receive about 30% less than similarly situated provincial schools.

We are deeply aware that education is just one of the areas of urgent need. The First Nations Schools Association is coordinating with its partners, including the First Nations Leadership Council, to raise awareness of how urgent it is to address the basic needs like adequate housing, security, economic opportunities, and clean drinking water, which are so often lacking in First Nations communities. All of those factors have role in the ability of our children to be successful in the classroom.

The best demonstration that we have learned from the grave errors of the past is to do better for the First Nations students of today. We call upon the federal government and our partners in education to support the innovative work First Nations schools are doing, and to give them the resources they need to deliver to our First Nations students high-quality, culturally relevant educations.

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