

FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION ACTION PLAN



MAY 31, 2005

VISION

The vision of a First Nations Education Action Plan is the development and implementation of sustainable education systems under the full control and jurisdiction of First Nations based on the recognition of inherent Aboriginal and treaty rights, and under international law.

FIRST NATIONS' PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION

First Nations education is a life long learning process that begins in the cradle and continues through to old age. First Nations women and elders play a central role as the transmitters of their culture to the younger generations. Enhanced education outcomes for all First Nation learners requires the recognition of First Nations jurisdiction over education at all levels, and the provision of adequate long-term and sustainable funding arrangements. First Nations education must be grounded in First Nations languages and cultural values, and must be properly funded so that education outcomes meet or exceed those of the general Canadian population.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has long advocated for First Nations control over First Nations education. In 1972, the AFN¹ released its first comprehensive policy statement on education with the publication of *Indian Control of Indian Education*. The themes that this document embodied remain relevant today, having been further developed and refined over more than three decades, culminating in the themes advocated by First Nation leaders at the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable sessions in 2004. The central thrust of these initiatives has consistently called for the recognition of First Nations jurisdiction over education.

There is a need to recognize First Nations jurisdiction as a central tenet of education reform. Since before the last century, formal education has been used by colonizing governments as a tool for the assimilation of First Nations peoples. In 2004, Canada's Auditor General identified an education gap of 28 years between First Nation peoples living on reserve and the Canadian population as a whole, and she indicated that this gap is increasing. Even more significant, there is growing evidence to support the premise that all reform - whether in education or elsewhere - must be based on Indigenous peoples' control over their own institutions in order for reforms to be effective (Cornell and Kalt 2001; Chandler and Lalonde 1998).

¹ The AFN was formerly known as the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB).

There are other compelling reasons to take action as pointed out in the AFN's *Pre-Budget Submission* (2004):

The First Nations population is burgeoning, young, diverse and mobile. The First Nations population is a potential resource to address labour shortages in Canada. But this potential can be realized only if First Nations increase their participation in the labour market, become successful in starting their own businesses, and strengthen their employability skills. This is an opportunity for Canada to reach out to the workforce of tomorrow, the entrepreneurs, the artists, the business leaders and bankers. Canada's population is aging but the First Nations population is coming of age. Our future is Canada's future.

The current state of First Nations education is unacceptable. Of the almost 120,000 on-reserve Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) students recorded by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) in 2001-02, only 32 percent are graduating from Grades 12-13. This results in 68 percent of the school-aged population having less than a high school education. The results are similar for First Nation students attending provincial schools. Human development indicators are generally lower for First Nations than for the general population in Canada. The higher rate of population growth in First Nation communities has created an associated demand for increased services such as education. For example, 40 percent of Canada's Registered Indian population is under the age of 19, while the same figure for the rest of Canada is only 25 percent (Auditor General 2004).

While First Nations in Canada are facing numerous challenges, it has long been recognized that significant change will not occur without meaningful progress towards the implementation of First Nations education systems. First Nations know the problems faced in their communities and in urban centres. Recent research shows that the best and most lasting solutions are developed when First Nations are the ones creating them. This action plan outlines some of the most pressing challenges facing First Nations, and identifies where strategic investments in First Nations capacities, skills, and education are needed to build efficient, effective and self-governing institutions.

THE DIRECTION FORWARD

First Nation peoples live and work in a knowledge-based society and economy that requires them to be adaptable and resilient lifelong learners. To prepare First Nations for the realities of the 21st century, fundamental changes to First Nations education must become a priority. This includes the recognition of First Nations jurisdiction over education at all levels: from Early Childhood Development (ECD) through to Post Secondary Education (PSE), including skills development and adult education. To do so means that the Government of Canada must commit to the funding of First Nations education to the degree that the educational gap is rapidly closed and educational outcomes meet and exceed those of the general Canadian population. This funding must take into account the unique factors affecting First Nation peoples including:

- Education that embodies and supports the strengthening of a First Nation’s identity through an emphasis on language, cultural and traditional knowledge, and the effective reincorporation of First Nation elders and women in educating younger generations;
- Adequate and sustainable investment in education as a key to the successful development of vibrant First Nations governments and economies; and
- A First Nations education infrastructure that meets the needs of First Nations peoples and communities on a lifelong learning continuum that includes ECD, K-12, PSE and all forms of skills development and adult learning.

The Assembly of First Nations calls upon the federal government to fulfill its commitment to First Nations by ensuring that First Nations communities are adequately funded and have the jurisdiction necessary to develop and implement the educational systems that meet First Nations’ goals and aspirations. This requires a commitment both to lifelong learning from ECD to PSE and beyond. The federal government must therefore support First Nations education, skills development and training as a tool for nation building, and must address immediate challenges facing First Nations in other areas that directly affect First Nations educational outcomes and quality of life, such as housing, clean drinking water, infrastructure, environment, and child welfare (See Appendix 1). The status quo is unacceptable to all concerned, and bold, meaningful steps need to be taken to implement a transformative solution to the current situation.

POLICY DIRECTION FOR A FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

The First Nations Education Action Plan provides a plan to address immediate shortfalls in the near term, and to achieve transformative change in the long term. To achieve the vision of First Nations controlled education, the First Nations Education Action Plan is premised on two key concepts:

- Jurisdiction
- Sustainability

These concepts are central to any changes that take place and must incorporate the critical interests of First Nations women, urban and youth populations.

Jurisdiction requires a recognition of First Nations inherent jurisdiction and the establishment of First Nations as empowered and definitive authorities that operate on a government to government basis vis-à-vis both the federal and provincial governments in relation to education. The intent is to recognize First Nations’ jurisdiction over education and their engagement in education related decision making. This will support First Nations in their development of viable governments and economies, and will increase the cultural relevance of education to First Nations learners.

Sustainability requires adequate, stable and predictable long term funding arrangements. This includes funding that is sufficient to meet the needs arising from the recognition of First Nations jurisdiction over education at all levels. This would support real improvements to the delivery of education that would, in turn, translate into improvements across a range of human development indicators for First Nations peoples and communities.

ELEMENTS OF A FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

The First Nations education sector requires immediate strengthening and stabilization, as well as positive transformative change. The First Nations Action Plan on Education is designed to equip the AFN to secure the political, policy and financial commitments necessary to advance a First Nations vision on education. In particular, the AFN will take full advantage of the important opportunities presented by the Cabinet Retreat and First Ministers Meeting scheduled for this year. To do so, the AFN is advancing the following key elements as the basis for long term meaningful change to First Nations education:

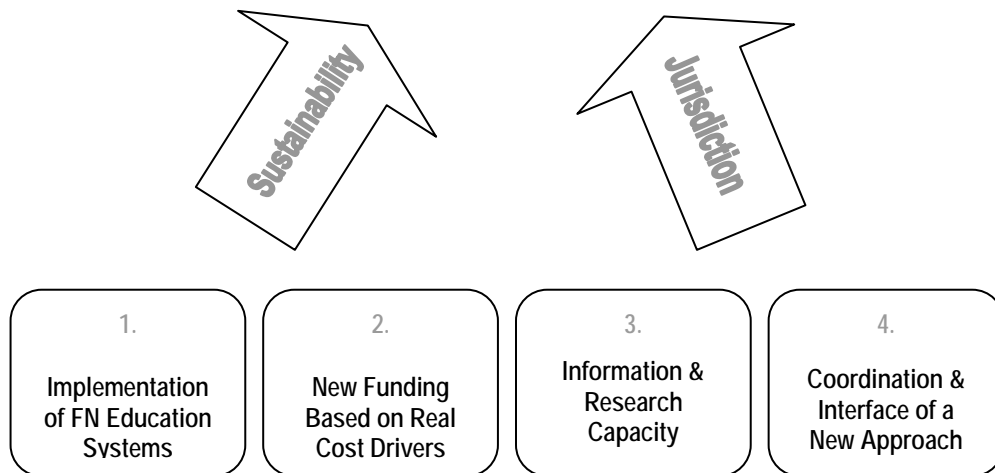
1. Implementation of First Nations Education Systems
2. New Funding Based on Real Cost Drivers
3. Information & Research Capacity
4. Coordination & Interface of a New Approach

These elements are premised on empowering First Nations communities to take control of their education. Where the AFN advocates for the recognition of First Nations jurisdiction over education at a national level, the negotiation of what this will mean must take place at the community and regional levels. Similarly, where the AFN lobbies nationally for the allocation of funds that are adequate and sustainable, how these funds are used by communities and regions must be determined at that level. First Nations education must be developed from the community up. In order to be meaningful and relevant, education solutions must be developed by communities. The AFN's role involves supporting First Nation communities and regions through the coordination of national policy development initiatives, and by advocating on behalf of First Nations in the national context.

Policy Direction for a First Nations Education Action Plan

VISION:

The development and implementation of sustainable education systems under the full control and jurisdiction of First Nations based on the recognition of inherent Aboriginal and treaty rights, and under international law.



1. IMPLEMENTATION OF FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION SYSTEMS

First and foremost, change means that all levels of government must formally recognize the right to self-determination of First Nations peoples under domestic and international law. First Nations' inherent jurisdiction must be recognized and supported through the creation of First Nations education systems that are governed by First Nations.

Such initiatives must account for the varying circumstances of First Nations including: existing legislation; treaties and agreements; the adoption of new legislation acknowledging First Nations' rights to self-government; and the transfer of decision making authority in recognition of inherent Aboriginal and treaty rights. First Nations peoples must be fully involved and must be recognized as the ultimate authorities in decisions affecting First Nations education.

Therefore, First Nations communities must be involved in key political processes, the development of funding and other administrative mechanisms, allocation methodologies, and the implementation of all policies relating to education.

First Nations communities must have the means to participate fully in the learning of their children by integrating the cultural, traditional, spiritual, physical, emotional and social well being of the learner in an holistic approach to education. This will ensure that First Nations education remains effective and relevant.

Funding is needed to support the implementation of autonomous First Nations education systems over the next 3 years. First Nations must have the opportunity to design and develop appropriate institutions to deliver essential professional and administrative support to their schools and communities in areas such as curriculum development, specialized services, assessment, and other second and third level education services.

Among the 485 First Nations schools in Canada, there are certainly many real successes. By providing First Nations with the jurisdiction and funding to manage their own affairs, First Nation communities will be able to coordinate their efforts, learn from their challenges, and build upon successes.

2. NEW FUNDING BASED ON REAL COST DRIVERS

A sustainable financial base for First Nations education is essential to end the cycle of poverty and shameful conditions in First Nations communities. The funds that are currently invested into First Nations education are insufficient to achieve the objectives for which they are intended.

The key elements of adequate and sustainable funding include:

- Funding matched to population growth, community needs and real cost drivers;
- Multi-year funding arrangements to support long-term planning;
- A flexible and consolidated funding base;
- Adequate funding to support core community programming and administration; and
- Funding models that account for the regional differences and unique needs of First Nations across Canada, including representative size, geographic location, and socio-economic status.

Rapid population growth in First Nation communities contrasted with a two percent cap on INAC funding has created disproportionate shortfalls in education. An assessment of how monies flow from INAC to First Nation communities must be carried out to address inconsistencies in how funds are distributed, and to identify those areas where funds are most needed. New funding must be based on actual costs, and must account for real cost drivers.

As indicated in the AFN's *Pre-Budget Submission* (2004), an immediate investment of at least \$3.9 billion over five years is required in such areas as:

- The Band Operated Funding Formula (BOFF) to address areas of high need that are greatly under-funded in the present context;
- Cultural and languages programming for First Nations;
- Special Education to meet current shortfalls in the Federal Budget (2005);
- Capital, operations and maintenance for First Nations schools;
- Teacher salaries to account for the gap between teachers' salaries in First Nations schools and those in provincial schools;
- PSE to address the enormous funding gap that has been created by the 2% INAC funding cap and a 400% increase in tuition since 1988;
- Support for the development of First Nation Institutions of Higher Learning that are controlled by First Nations peoples; and
- The elimination of taxation on PSE assistance.

3. INFORMATION & RESEARCH CAPACITY

Information and research capacity is required to provide First Nations with the tools they need to develop effective education systems that are accountable to First Nations communities. While it is likely that some INAC funded First Nations schools produce positive results, there are currently no mechanisms in place to make such an assessment. This issue is illustrative of the current lack of First Nations information gathering and research capacity, and the lack of accountability on the part of INAC.

The establishment of regional First Nations education assessment systems, rolled out nationally, will also assist First Nations in developing the capacity to collect and manage information for themselves. An immediate infusion of resources is required for the development of local, regional and national First Nations student assessment systems that are both culturally relevant and appropriate.

This initiative would represent one of the first steps in empowering First Nations in the area of education, and would contribute to the overall direction that First Nations education takes. Without this capacity, First Nations remain at a disadvantage when it comes to distinguishing their successes from their failures, benefiting from lessons learned, and improving their educational practices.

4. COORDINATION & INTERFACE OF A NEW APPROACH

Due to inadequate and unsustainable resources, the majority of First Nations schools have only been able to focus on the primary grades. As a consequence, provincial / territorial jurisdictions will continue to play a key role in the provision of secondary and post-

secondary education for some time to come. Enhanced relationships are needed between First Nations and provincial / territorial ministries, school boards, and schools to support First Nations participation in governance and to develop culturally appropriate programming, teacher recruitment and retention strategies, and methods of tracking First Nations student progress and rates of success in the provincial / territorial systems. Related to this, there must also be an increase in provincial / territorial accountability at all levels to First Nations on these matters.

As First Nations education systems emerge, First Nations must have the capacity to coordinate an effective interface with provincial systems. First Nation learners must be able to take advantage of the best education opportunities wherever they exist, and be confident that their learning will be recognized and accepted by other education systems. First Nations communities and leaders must have an appropriate and real interface with regional school boards in order to influence the quality and appropriateness of First Nations educational programming.

CONCLUSIONS

Unless the government immediately fulfils its responsibility to provide adequate and sustainable funding for education, health care and housing to First Nations, we risk perpetuating the unjust social and economic conditions of First Nations peoples for another generation. Under this scenario, rather than contributing to the social and economic fabric that makes up Canada or furthering the work of contemporary First Nations leaders working to resolve the long-standing challenges facing First Nations, the next generation may actually become more alienated and less able to participate in Canadian society.

First Nations have long called for the recognition of their right to control their own lives and nations. Education is one such area that holds tremendous promise for a new and better future. Adequate and sustainable investment in education is the key to the successful development of vibrant First Nation governments and economies. First Nations have cultural, socio-economic, and demographic characteristics that are distinct from the rest of the country. Moreover, First Nations are building upon different societal institutions and work within a unique and restrictive regulatory structure. As a result, First Nations are often not well served by generic programs and policies. Only First Nations can properly incorporate these differences into program and policy changes that would meet their needs. First Nations are looking to pursue new initiatives as part of a bold, new and transformative agenda that responds to the current situation.

It is time for action. First Nations must begin to advance the elements described in this Action Plan - we cannot wait any longer. The world is watching and documenting the situation of First Nations peoples in Canada. There can be no further delays or piecemeal solutions.

APPENDIX 1

LINK BETWEEN CHILD WELFARE AND EDUCATION

The removal of First Nations children from their families, in the interest of child welfare, occurs far too frequently and has occurred at a rate that is disproportionately high when compared with the general Canadian population.

This is due, in part, to the existing funding structure for First Nation child and family services. There is a lack of funding for 'prevention' and 'in-family support services' that could assist families prior to the emergence of crisis situations. A new funding methodology is urgently needed to provide sufficient resources to assist vulnerable children and families thereby allowing the children to remain safely in the care of their parents and families.

First Nation child welfare services exist to provide support and enhance safety for the most vulnerable children and families. First Nations children are disproportionately affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and other disabilities. In some cases, these special needs go undiagnosed and, therefore, many First Nations children do not receive treatment in their formative or pre-school years. This has a direct and significant impact on a child's readiness for school and the development of their basic physical and emotional health.

Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life. Numerous studies have demonstrated the fundamental importance of a child's early years. One such study stresses that "[T]here is powerful new evidence from neuroscience that the early years of development from conception to age six, set the base for competence and coping skills that will affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life" (McCain and Mustard 1999).

This situation highlights the need for:

- Quality and adequately funded early intervention and support services for First Nation children and families within the family home;
- Early diagnosis and treatment for children with disabilities and special needs - at infancy and in the pre-school years (direct impact on school readiness);
- Parent support programs; and
- Quality child care programs in the community which can benefit both children and parents.

While the 2005 Federal Budget allocated \$125 million over five years for First Nation child and family services, this investment will only alleviate some of the funding shortages faced by First Nation agencies and is by no means sufficient to address all of the issues affecting First Nation children and families. The longer term objective must include the development of a new funding methodology that emphasizes prevention and family support.