OPEN LETTER to MINISTER OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT CANADA
November 25, 2013

“There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. In moving toward healing, reconciliation and resolution of the sad legacy of Indian residential schools... (this) agreement gives us a new beginning and an opportunity to move forward together in partnership.” Statement of Apology, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, June 11, 2008

The education of our children is a fundamental and sacred responsibility, and both a right and a duty of our Nations. The residential schools era is a deep scar on the national soul of this country. Every day, our families bear the trauma of this past. Honouring this reality, respecting our rights as Nations and as peoples demands clear actions to achieve reconciliation. First Nations are resolute and determined to resume our responsibility fully to First Nation education. While our ways, our rights and our responsibilities were pushed aside by the federal government in the residential schools era, we have been fighting back ever since to take back this responsibility. Today, we are acting to achieve this better day for our children now. We have welcomed the support, encouragement and agreement of hundreds of thousands of Canadians and Parliamentarians, including the Government’s, to take action on First Nations education, in full partnership with First Nations.

On October 22nd, 2013 – you sent a proposal to all First Nations: “Working Together for First Nation Students: a Proposal for a Bill on First Nation Education”. On October 23rd, the Assembly of First Nations issued a statement reiterating the clear priorities of First Nations based on decades of resolutions, hard work and the initiative of First Nation educators, leaders and families. These include the central principle of First Nation control and the absolute need for a funding guarantee for First Nation children to learn in a safe, secure environment nurtured within their languages and cultures. On November 4th, I issued a Special Bulletin to all First Nations affirming our principles and our path forward grounded in our rights and our responsibilities and affirming that as Nations we will stand firm but we will not stand still. We encouraged dialogue and analysis to advance our position because we believe our children cannot, should not and must not wait for a better future.

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Since this time, from coast to coast to coast, our Nations have engaged resolutely in this dialogue and this effort, including at recent Assemblies in British Columbia, Alberta, parts of Ontario, Quebec and the east, and this week at our National Youth Summit where hundreds of young people brought their voices forward determined to achieve a better future. While this discussion continues, the outcome and the message is very clear.

**The current Federal Proposal for a Bill for First Nation Education is not acceptable to First Nations.** We must work together on a mutual plan that fully respects and reflects partnership, that is consistent with Treaty relationships, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and re-affirmed in countless studies and recommendations.

While our Nations are diverse, thanks to the efforts of our Elders and leaders that have gone before and the countless educators within our Nations that continue to drive this effort forward as first articulated in our policy statement in 1972 – *Indian control of Indian education* – there is a remarkable degree of consensus, shared values and common ground that must be fully addressed to move forward together. These elements now form clear conditions for success on this critical matter for First Nations and for Canada.

1. **First Nation control and respecting inherent and Treaty rights:** First Nation control of the education of our children must be the overriding, paramount principle of all our work. It is at the core of reconciliation and, furthermore, is key to achieving improved outcomes and success for our students. First Nations must retain all options to advance their education through Treaty implementation, self-government, partnerships or other agreements, and all such agreements must be fully respected, enabled and supported by the federal government within a framework that honours and respects our rights, affirms federal fiduciary obligations, supports and enables First Nation control and ensures accountability to our families first and foremost. In doing so, First Nations will uphold our duty to ensure access to quality education that achieves strengthened outcomes and results.

2. **Funding:** As set out and mandated by all First Nations in resolution in 2010 – there must be a full statutory guarantee for funding for education for our children. This is a fundamental matter and requirement of reconciliation. For over a decade, First Nations have engaged in the pre-budget consultation process and every year we have taken forward this need for fundamental transformation – for stable, sustainable and needs-based funding. The Auditor General of Canada clearly stated that current funding practices are completely inappropriate and are failing our children and Canada. We are today tabling a clear and detailed statement of funding requirements to Minister Flaherty. A clear statutory commitment must be advanced and must be reflected in the upcoming Federal Budget 2014.
3. **Languages and Culture:** The interim report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission notes that as survivors move forward in their healing, they bring clarity and focus to what must happen now. First Nations children must now be nurtured in an environment that affirms their dignity, rights and their identity, including their languages and cultures. First Nations education systems must be enabled, supported and funded in a way that ensures they can design programming that achieves this imperative. Moreover, as a country, and as part of reconciliation, Canada must recognize the importance of First Nations languages and cultures as foundational to this land.

4. **Oversight:** Achieving the elements described here means that there must not be and cannot be unilateral federal oversight and authority vested in the Canadian bureaucracy. First Nations children deserve fully accountable and successful systems that achieve clear outcomes. The oversight required and remedies to achieve this must be jointly determined and fully respect First Nation rights and responsibilities.

5. **Ongoing process of meaningful engagement:** To address these conditions, we must ensure meaningful engagement including through commitment to co-development and shared oversight including evaluation.

These are the conditions required now – a mutual plan to advance First Nation education respecting our rights and advancing our responsibilities as well as those of the federal government to this generation of First Nation children. First Nation leadership will be gathering in Ottawa December 10-12th, 2013. We seek clear commitment to these conditions and we will be relentless in our advocacy and actions expressing our full support for our children to achieve this change now. We must remove every reason and every excuse to not act – but rather create the proper and rightful environment to act now together for our children today and tomorrow.

We were partners in the past and we can be partners again but First Nations will never compromise on fundamental principles, our rights, our responsibilities and the well-being of our children. In the spirit of the statement of Apology, I, together with First Nations leaders invite you to stand with us – in affirming for all Canadians a solemn commitment to reconciliation and to a path forward that never again will our children be victimized in the name of education, never again will our dignity, languages and cultures be denied and desecrated. Instead, we will rise anew in this new day that was the promise of the Apology, in partnership and pledge our dedication, together, to ensure these conditions are addressed, that we chart a path forward of partnership and respect and that we immediately seize this moment and this opportunity to achieve the change needed for our children - change that is essential for reconciliation and change that is essential for Canada.

Respectfully,

Shawn A-in-chut Atleo
National Chief