



First Nations Control of First Nations Education

A framework to achieve success in First Nation education



Beginning in 1972, First Nations engaged a formal conversation with Canada to advance a vision of First Nations control of First Nations Education (FNCNE). Canada responded by affirming the policy and assuring that Canada was committed to realizing the learning goals in FNCNE.

In 1998, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Jane Stewart in the Statement of Reconciliation committed to renewal, an opportunity to correct wrong doings and to move forward to cooperative relationships – an essential step in building trust.

The Government of Canada acknowledged past failures in First Nation education through the Statement of Apology - June 2008 and committed to advancing a new beginning to move forward together, with First Nations, in partnership.

The renewal of the Crown-First Nations relationship, including the recognition and implementation of inherent and Treaty rights is essential to re-building trust. Dedicated action to recognize and implement First Nation Treaty and rights is needed across all sectors as well as meaningful dialogue to support First Nation economic, social, and education outcomes.

The education of our children is a fundamental and sacred responsibility and duty of our Nations. First Nations are resolved 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 school era, we are resolved to achieve this better day for our children now.

Canada and First Nations have expressed and advanced the priority of nurturing, enabling and supporting the success of all First Nation children through quality, culturally relevant education. Canada must agree that this can only be achieved through fundamental change starting with the recognition and implementation of First Nations Control of First Nations Education.

Values:

As reflected in 1972 – the core values of First Nations regarding education remain the foundation of change and advancement now:

"We want education to give our children the knowledge to understand and be proud of themselves and the knowledge to understand the world around them. We believe in education: as a preparation for total living as a means of free choice of where to live and work; and as a means of enabling us to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and education advancement."

First Nations advance the centrality of our jurisdiction and responsibility to shape our children as First Nation citizens through education based in on our history, culture, values, spirituality, language and traditional knowledge.

Key Elements:

Jurisdiction

1. Respects and recognizes inherent rights and title, Treaty rights, and First Nation Control of First Nation Education jurisdiction. First Nations must retain all options to advance their education and all such agreements must be fully respected, enabled and supported;

First Nations control and jurisdiction over First Nations education is required. Supporting this goal, First Nations must have sufficient capacity and support at the local level as well as for second and third level support.

First Nation treaty and inherent rights will be respected. First Nations will retain all options to advance education as they determine most appropriate. Agreements advancing First Nation education through treaty implementation, nation-re-building or self-government will be respected, enabled and supported.

On the question of why national legislative changes, Paulette Tremblay's paper issues that "a new mechanism has to be developed with the input of and co-operation of First Nations. That mechanism must enable the government to fulfill its treaty obligations and responsibilities to First Nations and enhance the ability of First Nations to govern their own affairs in co-existence with Canada" (First Nations Educational Jurisdiction, A Background Paper, April 2001).

Achievement of First Nations education requires communities looking within themselves to frame education, Verna J. Kirkness points out (Aboriginal Education in Canada: A Retrospective and a Prospective: 1995) that this local action will identify the values that education will be based on and recognize community autonomy. The Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey Agreement specifies, "participating communities shall have the power to make and administer laws with respect to primary, elementary, and secondary education on reserves", local involvement and local control are having a direct impact on the achievement of a graduation rate of 87.7% for 2012-13 (Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey Annual Report 2012-13).

Funding

2. Provides a statutory guarantee for funding of First Nations education as a precondition that is sustainable and reflects needs based costs consistent with Canada's obligation;

First Nations education requires funding that is stable, predictable and responsive to First Nations education. The elimination of gaps in funding is required - this includes the removal of restraints as well as the establishment of a fair rate to respond to growth in demographics and education needs. Requisite support for transition and the development of systems, explicit support for language and culture programming and support that guarantees safe, secure healthy learning environments and facilities.

Tremblay reports that process and funding are two barriers to First Nations exercising jurisdiction in education. The process under which First Nations were engaged in assuming control of education was as a service provider and as an administrative manager of a system controlled by Aboriginal Affairs, secondly and of primary importance was the lack of funding provided to First Nations - adequate funding was not provided for education or the transfer of jurisdiction (First Nations Educational Jurisdiction, A Background Paper, April 2001).

Language and Culture

3. Enables and support systems to provide full immersion and grounding of all education in Indigenous languages and cultures;

"Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their languages, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being" (Indian Control of Indian Education, 1972).

First Nations education recognizes community and requires the inclusion of First Nations wisdom, knowledges and languages; it requires teaching and learning in those languages and cultures. Language and culture must be funded as core curriculum. In addition, cultural experts, elders and parents must be fully engaged in the First Nations education system.

As a high school student reflected on his success in a First Nation high school, "Our way of learning is recognized on our school, we can be who we are and still fulfill the expectations of school" (Report on Moving Forward First Nations Education – Working Session, 2014). An educator also contributed on the matter of language and culture and offered, "We need to be clearer about what our First Nation education looks like – what is this? We must also be careful about the language we use when we describe what it is that we really want in First Nation education – it is not based on the provincial systems, it must be based on our own".

Support and funding for language and culture programming is a critical aspect of advancing First Nation control of First Nation education. As Tyrone Mc Neil, First Nation Education Steering Committee Society points out, previous efforts in 2007 on the Languages Revitalization Strategy, Implementation and Costing models work provides an important reference point. Through Assembly of First Nations pre-budget submissions, the notion of a Reconciliation Fund has emerged linked to the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which underscores the importance of education grounded in First Nation languages, cultures and world-view as we begin to look to the future. Current costing by the Assembly of First Nations, including in a letter to Minister Flaherty from November 2013 includes the press for languages and culture through a reconciliation fund and advances an 'ask' based on what currently exists for French language programming in the Canadian public system. More detailed work will be important to determine how and what specifically is required moving forward.

Reciprocal Accountability and Transparency

4. Develops mechanisms to oversee, evaluate, and for reciprocal accountability and ensure there must not be unilateral federal oversight and authority.

First Nation education must be controlled and supported by First Nations. The opportunity to design systems, codes and laws must also be present as First Nations move forward at their own pace determining their options for exercising First Nation control of First Nation education. Parental involvement and parental responsibility assured by transparent local control is the basis for First Nations education.

Implementation of First Nations education will include First Nations design, development and determination of curriculum and learning approaches. This will require support for transition and capacity development. Additionally, First Nations will want to ensure their students can transfer between systems and that outcomes for success meet or exceed existing standards. Every First Nation student must have choice and opportunity to pursue the education and advancement they desire. Transparency, community engagement and building trust and confidence within each First Nation as well as respect and recognition from other systems is key to achieving the vision of First Nation control of First Nation education.

Meaningful Dialogue

5. Ensures a meaningful support process to address these conditions through a commitment to working together through co-development, fully reflective of First Nations rights and jurisdiction.

Canada must commit to direct dialogue and discussion throughout development including regulation and establishing agreements with First Nations communities specific to their approach to advance education including through Treaty implementation or other agreement.

In 2001, an AFN report on jurisdiction in education proposed that in negotiations on the transition to self-government, a negotiations secretariat be established to handle negotiations and ensure good faith was kept (First Nations Control of First Nations Education, It's our Vision, It's our Time, 2010). The press for dialogue and for "good faith" relations with Canada has been consistently advocated for on all issues; however education in particular requires it given our shared history learned from the residential school experience.

References

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