

First Nations leaders demand more money for education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada's aboriginal leaders want the federal government to "step up to the plate" with funding and a comprehensive plan for First Nations education that addresses problems plaguing children's learning, both on and off reserve.

They're also asking the government for a "first ministers" meeting involving the prime minister, premiers and territorial leaders, as well as aboriginal affairs ministers and representatives, to determine the best way to teach the growing young Native population, which makes up more than half the one million First Nations people in Canada.

"The message is very clear, and it's a simple one: every First Nations child must have a guarantee to quality education. We're saying that it's time for Parliament and for this country, that we work together for a better future for First Nations and for Canada," said Shawn Atleo, national chief of the AFN.

Atleo said the gap in government funding of First Nations education compared with mainstream education has accumulated to about \$2 billion since 1996 - a figure the group says it determined based on a two per cent funding cap imposed by the federal government.

First Nations children - which does not include Metis or Inuit - have significantly lower graduation rates from high school and university, Atleo said. For example, only about 49 per cent of First Nations youth graduate high school, compared with 80 per cent in the rest of Canada. The number drops to four per cent for university graduation, compared with 23 per cent in the rest of Canada, he said.

First Nations children, living both on and off reserves, have fewer resources, such as computers and libraries, he said.

A spokeswoman for Indian Affairs Minister John Duncan said since 2008, the government has invested \$395 million in First Nations education, which resulted in the construction of 96 schools. She added that another 10 new schools and two major renovations were completed under the government's Economic Action Plan, and eight new school projects were undertaken under Infrastructure Canada.

Spokeswoman Michelle Yao said the government has also signed five "tripartite agreements" on education - an agreement between First Nations, the provinces and the federal government.

During question period, Duncan told the House that his party "understands the importance of education and that's why we are committed to improving it in partnership with First Nations and the provinces and territories."

"The money that we put in place through the Economic Action Plan is also achieving major, positive results for First Nations education," he said.

Vancouver Island MP Jean Crowder, the NDP's aboriginal affairs critic, blasted the Conservative government's "shameful" history on tackling the issue of First Nations education and said some agreements, such as one made in British Columbia, have not yet been funded.

Newfoundland MP Todd Russell, a Metis from Labrador, said a future Liberal government would increase funding for First Nations and eliminate the two per cent funding cap.

He said the Conservative government needs to work alongside communities to improve education.

"If you listen to some of the responses from government, they're nothing but a hodgepodge of different initiatives that they have put forward. There doesn't seem to be a co-ordinated approach to resolving this particular crisis," said Russell, who planned on meeting with Atleo on Tuesday afternoon alongside Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff.

Chief Gilbert Whiteduck of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation in Maniwaki, Que., said First Nations education is underfunded in his province and it receives up to 25 per cent less government money than other areas of Canada.

However, he said the problem isn't only about funding, but how the money is organized, distributed and used.

"We can't allow what's occurring in our communities to go on. The high dropout rate, the . . . issues of suicide and social problems. We know that education, quality education, will indeed make a difference, so I'm calling upon the federal government, let's do it together, let's make a difference," said Whiteduck.

He added that not all communities want "tripartite" agreements.

More than 50 First Nations chiefs met with parliamentarians, high commissioners and ambassadors in Ottawa on Tuesday and plan a demonstration on Parliament Hill on Thursday as part of the AFN "Week of Action" to address education and other issues.

- reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

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