

Community-led model is best

BY PAUL W. BENNETT, JONATHAN ANUIK SEPTEMBER 12, 2014

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The proposed First National Education Act has "had a great fall," much like Humpty Dumpty in the popular children's poem.

The deal that was announced with great fanfare by Assembly of First Nations Chief Shawn Atleo and Prime Minister Stephen Harper on Feb. 7 may have sweetened the government's financial offer, but it did not hold, particularly among First Nations leaders in Western Canada.

When Atleo was toppled in early May, the federal plan for bureaucratic reform embodied in Bill C-33 was abandoned, leaving the pact shattered. Putting it together again will require a completely different approach and a more responsive model of self-governance that builds from the First Nations up, not top down from the government.

Our research paper demonstrates why the proposed education reform missed the mark. More money in the form of increased capital funding might have brought modest gains to on-reserve schooling, but replacing one bureaucracy with another rarely changes the state of education or improves the quality of learning at the school or community level.

A community schoolbased approach, which respects what indigenous scholars such as Marie Battiste term the "learning spirit" and supports a real shift in the locus of decisionmaking, stands a far better chance of making a difference and improving the achievement of all aboriginal children and youth.

Education governance is a contested democratic terrain. Provincial school boards across Canada are currently facing a public crisis of confidence, and the proposed aboriginal education act ran the risk of perpetuating that problem by extending it to First Nations communities.

Elected trustees and school administrators are voicing serious concerns, most recently in a 2013 Canadian School Boards Association study, that centralization is slowly choking off local decision making and rendering elected boards powerless.

Enabling the establishment of aboriginal school boards may reinforce the centralization. That is precisely why we propose an alternative model for First Nations schools - community school-based management.

This approach embraces a mode of decision making that has much in common with First Nations ways and practices, most notably the "Talking Circle" tradition in Mi'kmaq culture and spirituality. It is also

philosophically compatible with the tradition of school community councils championed by First Nations and Métis in Winnipeg, Regina and elsewhere since the early 1980s.

Some First Nations governments organized as tribal councils are embracing the integration of community-based educational services. The File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council, for example, delivers services, including a speech pathologist, by pooling band resources.

True First Nation control over education now involves a transformation that enables First Nations to develop educational programs and practices rooted in indigenous culture and consistent with aboriginal ways of learning.

Instead of accepting the centrality of First Nations knowledge systems as an essential precondition to discussion, Ottawa focused on advancing a plan that is more narrowly focused on improving employability skills, reflected in student achievement and graduation rates.

The First Nation population is young and increasing rapidly, creating the sense of urgency. Aboriginal children in Alberta represent only six per cent of the pediatric population but account for 13.8 per cent of the emergency room mental health care visits. Children and teens from First Nations communities and families on welfare are more likely to experience such mental health crises than others their age.

The situation facing First Nations children is even worse in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where almost two out of three live in poverty.

The Atleo-Harper pact did not win over First Nations people outside the leadership circle. A small group of Alberta First Nations people who were evicted from the ceremony immediately began protesting the deal by wearing "blue dots" that symbolized their historic exclusion. Eventually, First Nations leaders across Canada coalesced in outright rejection of the pact.

It is time to embrace community school-based management. Pioneered by Edmonton Public Schools in the 1980s and now adopted by the World Bank in its international education initiatives, the essential concept of school-based management seems more in accord with the aspirations of First Nations for a greater measure of self-government in education.

Educating our First Nations children and youth is too important to be left solely to the AFN chiefs and federal officials. We urge the federal government to invest in supporting and expanding community-led initiatives involving teachers, parents and families outside the existing span of administrative control to achieve longer-term goals of improved literacy, academic achievement, and life chances.

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