

School solutions? Look to community

BY PAUL W. BENNETT AND JONATHAN ANUIK, THE LEADER-POST SEPTEMBER 23, 2014

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

Announced with great fanfare by Assembly of First Nations Chief Shawn Atleo and Prime Minister Stephen Harper on Feb. 7, it might have sweetened the financial offer, but it did not hold - particularly among First Nations leaders in western Canada.

When Atleo was toppled in early May, Ottawa's plan for bureaucratic reform was abandoned. Putting it together again, will require a different approach and a more responsive model of self-governance building from the First Nations up - not from the top down.

Our research paper, "Picking Up the Pieces," for the new Northern Policy Institute in Thunder Bay and Sudbury, demonstrates why the proposed structural education reform missed the mark.

More money for 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 student learning.

But a community school-based approach, respectful of what indigenous scholars term the "learning spirit" that supports a shift in decision-making, stands a far better chance of improving the achievement of indigenous children.

Education governance is contested democratic terrain. District school boards across Canada face a public crisis of confidence, and the proposed act ran the risk of perpetuating this problem by extending it into First Nations communities.

Trustees and school-level administrators voice 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.

Simply enabling the establishment of school boards might well reinforce that centralization impulse. That is precisely why we propose an alternative model for First Nations schools called "Community School-Based Management" renewal.

This embraces a kind of decisionmaking that has much in common with First Nations ways and practices, notably the "talking circle" tradition in Mi'kmaw culture and spirituality. It is also philosophically compatible with the tradition of school community councils championed by First Nations and Métis in cities like Winnipeg and Regina since the early 1980s.

Some First Nations reserve governments organized as tribal councils already embrace the integration of community-based educational services. The File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council in Saskatchewan,

for example, delivers its services, including a speech pathologist, by the pooling of band resources.

True First Nation control over education now involves letting First Nations develop educational programs and practices rooted in Indigenous culture and consistent with Aboriginal ways of learning.

But instead of accepting this, Ottawa focused more narrowly on improving employability skills, reflected in student achievement and graduation rates.

The First Nation population is not only young, but growing rapidly. Aboriginal children in Alberta represent only six per cent of the pediatric population, but account for 13.8 per cent of emergency room mental-health care visits. The situation facing is even worse in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where almost two out of three status First Nations children live in poverty.

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

It is time to embrace a totally different approach and model that we term "community school-based management". Pioneered in Edmonton's public schools in the 1980s and now adopted by the World Bank in its international education initiatives, it seems more in accord with the aspirations of First Nations for more 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 Canadian 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.

Paul W. Bennett, senior education fellow, Northern Policy Institute, and Jonathan Anuik, assistant professor of education policy studies, University of Alberta, are co-authors of *Picking Up the Pieces: A Community School-Based Approach to First Nations Education Renewal*.

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