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Comment: An alternative for First Nations education

Paul W. Bennett and Jonathan Anuik / Times Colonist

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The proposed First Nations Education Act has “had a great fall,” much like Humpty Dumpty.

The latest deal, announced with great fanfare by Assembly of First Nations Chief Shawn Atleo and Prime Minister Stephen Harper on Feb. 7 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, embodied in Bill C-33, was abandoned, leaving the pact shattered. Putting it all together again will require a different approach and a more responsive model of self-governance, building from the First Nations up, not the top down.

Our research paper, *Picking Up the Pieces*, for the new Northern Policy Institute based in Thunder Bay and Sudbury, demonstrates why the proposed structural 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.

A community school-based approach, respectful of what indigenous scholars such as Marie Battiste term the “learning spirit” that supports a real shift in the locus of decision-making, stands a far better chance of improving the achievement of indigenous children and youth.

Education governance is a contested democratic terrain. School district boards across Canada are facing a public crisis of confidence, and the proposed act ran the risk of perpetuating that problem by extending it into First Nations communities.

Elected trustees and school-level administrators now voice serious concerns, most recently in a 2013 Canadian School Boards Association study, that “centralization” is choking off local decision-making and rendering elected boards powerless.

Simply enabling the establishment of school boards might well reinforce the centralization impulse. That is why we propose an alternate model for First Nations schools, which we term “community school-based management” renewal.

Such an 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 cities such as Winnipeg and Regina since the early 1980s.

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

True First Nation control over education now involves a transformation enabling First Nations to develop

educational programs and practices rooted in indigenous culture and consistent with aboriginal ways of learning, recently exemplified in what First Nations scholars like Battiste term the holistic lifelong learning framework.

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

The First Nation population is not only young, but growing rapidly, creating a 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 were more likely to experience such mental-health crises than other kids their age. The situation facing First Nations children 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.

Community school-based management was pioneered in Edmonton public schools in the 1980s and has been adopted by the World Bank in its international education initiatives. The essential concept of “school-based management” would seem to be 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 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 is a senior education fellow at the Northern Policy Institute and Jonathan Anuik is an assistant professor of education policy studies at the University of Alberta.

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