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ANALYSIS

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

A new model for aboriginal education

By: **Paul W. Bennett and Jonathan Anuk**
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Like Humpty Dumpty, the proposed First Nations education act had a great fall. The latest deal to modernize education on First Nations reserves, announced with great fanfare by then-Assembly of First Nations chief Shawn Atleo and Prime Minister Stephen Harper in February, did not hold together, despite a sweetened financial offer.

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

We believe 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 student learning at the school or community level.

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 making a difference and improving the achievement of all indigenous children and youth.

Education governance is contested democratic terrain. Provincial district school 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.

Publicly elected trustees and school-level administrators now voice serious concerns that "centralization" is slowly choking off local decision-making and rendering elected boards powerless. Simply enabling the establishment of school boards may well reinforce that centralization impulse.

A 2005 report for the Ontario Council of Chiefs, written by Lise Chalot, identified the critical need for, and potential of, engaging parents more in First Nations education. Based upon provincewide focus group discussions, she saw parent engagement as a way of not only tapping into indigenous understandings of learning, but providing the missing link in the current delivery of educational services to First Nations children, youth and families.

First Nations control over education now involves a transformation enabling First Nations to develop educational programs and practices rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and consistent with aboriginal ways of learning, exemplified recently in what First Nations people call Holistic Lifelong Learning Models.

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

The First Nations population is not only young but growing rapidly, creating a sense of urgency. Forty-two per cent of the country's registered Indian population is 19 years of age or younger, compared to 25 per cent of the Canadian population as a whole. By 2026, the on-reserve First Nations population of 407,300 in 2000 is expected to increase by 64 per cent to 667,900.

The February 2014 declaration spoke of "mutual accountability" yet insisted upon a core curriculum that "meets or exceeds provincial standards," requiring students to meet minimum attendance standards, teachers to be officially certified and schools to award "widely recognized" diplomas and certificates.

Following the declaration, grassroots First Nations resistance, initially sparked by Blood First Nations

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activist Twila Eagle-Bear Singer, set off a chain reaction. Then First Nations leaders across Canada not party to the national agreement coalesced, forcing Atleo's resignation and completely rejecting the pact.

With the federal bill broken into pieces, we propose an alternative model for First Nations schools that we term community-school-based management renewal. That approach embraces a mode of decision-making that has much in common with First Nations ways and practices, and most notably the "talking circle" tradition of the Mi'kmaq.

Pioneered in the 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 would seem to be more in accord with the aspirations of First Nations people for a greater measure of self-government in education.

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

Community-school-based renewal rather than bureaucratic reform may do so much more to build sustainable school communities, unlock the First Nations "learning spirit," and truly engage children and youth on and off First Nations reserves.

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

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