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## Picking up the pieces; A community-school alternative to First Nations education renewal

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in [Columns](#)

By Paul W. Bennett and Jonathan Anuik

The proposed First National Education Act has "had a great fall," much like Humpty Dumpty in the popular children's fable. The latest deal, announced with great fanfare by Assembly of First Nations Chief Shawn Atleo and Prime Minister Stephen Harper on Feb. 7, may have sweetened the financial offer, but it did not hold.

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.

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 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 focus 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 a contested democratic terrain. Provincial district school boards across Canada are currently 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, 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 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 province-wide 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

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develop educational programs and practices rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and consistent with aboriginal ways of learning, exemplified recently in what First Nations 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 as compared to 25 per cent of the Canadian population as a whole. By 2026, the on-reserve First Nation population of 407,300 in 2000 is expected to increase by 64 per cent to 667,900. The February 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 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, 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 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 Anuik, assistant professor of education postudies, 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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