

## First Nations Education

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As presented by Grand Chief Edward John,  
First Nations Summit Political Executive

### "STUDENT SUCCESS: DIGNITY, DIVERSITY AND WELL BEING"

*"every generation has its dreams  
every generation needs its dreams  
and every generation has its dreamers  
set your sight clearly on a dream  
believe in it  
follow it  
don't give it up  
and don't give up on it  
for a generation without dreams surely will perish"*

## INTRODUCTION

1. The late Takla elder William George told me once, that in his life he had two great teachers, cold and hunger: cold-that he had gone to check on his trapline in the middle of a cold winter and he did not prepare well for it which nearly cost him his life when he became stranded; and hunger-that, in his arrogance, he thought he could live off the land but when game became scarce he nearly perished. He did not attend any school but he believed these lessons he had learned to cherish were the great teachers in his life. He was firm believer in teaching the ways of our people to the young...so that at the very least they knew and understood the land and how to live with it and to survive.
2. In the winter ceremonies of the Coast Salish peoples the teachers in the big house provide lessons which you will never find or hear in the modern day classroom. The cultural treasures of a people are told and taught by elders on the dusty floors of the big houses in virtually every Coast Salish community. These teachings provide the necessary guidance to a life connected to the ancestors and their ancient beliefs for a life well lived and are as significant as any knowledge you learn in the ivory towers of our Nation.

3. The residential schools of the past sought to fundamentally change this-that the answers to "civilization" lay in assimilation- in Christianity and the consequent "killing of the Indian in the child". Governments in concert with Christian faith groups believed it was the right and proper thing to do. So three to at least 5 generations of Indigenous peoples were virtually uprooted and sent to these institutions of learning all across Canada. In the end though these students were neither well suited to survive in their Indigenous world or in the world into which they were being indoctrinated.
4. Fast forward to today. Regarding First Nations education: 1. What languages, or cultural environment, are they learning? 2. How well are we doing in the education of our youth? 3. Where are they going to school?
5. The answers to these basic questions will also be answers for the continued "survival, dignity and wellbeing" of Indigenous peoples as Indigenous peoples.

#### **INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES/CULTURE**

6. Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General in his opening remarks to the 10th session (May 2011) of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) solemnly noted that an Indigenous language dies every two weeks somewhere in the world. In BC, or in Canada, what are the chances for the survival of Indigenous languages? How are the learning and use of these languages funded? Notwithstanding the Prime Minister of Canada's apology in 2008 to survivors of Indian residential schools and his clear acknowledgement of the profound and serious negative consequences of Crown assimilation policies, particularly respecting Indigenous languages and culture, there is still a stunning lack of commitment and resources from the federal government to address this. The consequences of this indifference by the federal government in the long run will no doubt lead to the continued erosion and loss of more Indigenous languages in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, Cree (78,885), Inuktitut (22,015),

and Ojibwe (24,190) are the three largest aboriginal languages reported as “mother tongue”.

7. Notwithstanding the current dismal level of financial resources to teach Indigenous languages and cultures in what ways are our students in our schools being taught these? And how well are they learning their languages and cultures? What are the prospects for the future survival of their language? It is important that our youth have access to an education which ensures they are conversant and confident in who they are, their cultures and languages.

#### **HOW WELL ARE OUR STUDENTS DOING?**

8. In the mid to late 1980s First nations students were graduating at about 25-30% compared to the provincial average of 75-80%. Following the extensive submissions by First Nations to the BC Royal Commission into education by the late Barry Sullivan four (4) major recommendations emerged. Chiefs and leaders responded by agreeing to address the large disparity in graduation rates as a measure of success for our students. It was then a committee, FNEESC, was formed to coordinate this singularly focused effort and the challenge to our leaders and educators in our communities to provide a concerted and coordinated effort. This effort would subsequently call on those in provincial education (principals and vice principals association, school boards, superintendents, teachers and the BC college of teachers) to contribute their resources and skills to the table. In the ensuing 20 years the graduation gap has been reduced by at least 20% so that students are graduating at approximately 50%. This improvement is of course is a long ways from parity but it is an important gain. However there is also another disturbing note-which is that only half of the students who do complete grade 12 earn a dogwood certificate. And the rates for Aboriginal children in care is even more dramatic with graduation rates at about 27%. Given this stark scenario access to universities and colleges become but distant dreams.

9. What can be done to reduce the gap even more? What steps should each and every community take to ensure that every student who enters into grade 12 graduates with a Dogwood certificate? Is this an unrealistic expectation? Is it possible that every community can get fully behind these students to ensure success? Or should we wait another 20 years and hope we achieve graduation parity for our students? It is, of course, easier to say than to do. But without some clear and direct commitments by ourselves to our students we will never know what we can achieve. No one else will do for us. We have some 61,000 students in the public school system and we need to ensure greater support for them to ensure greater levels of success.
  
10. I fully understand that adequacy of resources is a significant obstacle. In reading the "political tea leaves" I see absolutely no commitment from either the provincial or federal governments in providing the required significant resources. The federal Minister of AAND advised us recently that the answers did not include "throwing more money at the problem" and that we should examine ways to make better use of the existing resources which I understand is at least 25% less than what the province provides to its education institutions. The Senate Committee on Aboriginal Issues will soon complete a report on Aboriginal education and as I understand the need for more resources is not on the table but that ideas such as First Nations pooling their resources, in the form of local school boards, may form a partial solution. The current federal government is on a full frontal assault to reduce expenditures in every federal government department, agency and institution, including AAND. This notwithstanding that there are considerable social economic gaps facing aboriginal peoples. The Governor General of Canada when asked (at a luncheon held in his honor and where he spoke about "philanthropy and volunteerism" in Canada) where in his opinion the greatest need lay he responded unequivocally by saying it was in the aboriginal communities across Canada.
  
11. In the meantime the federal government is insisting that First Nations provide their own financial resources (own source revenues) to their children's education. Where First

Nations do have financial capabilities they do provide significant contributions to their children's education. But I do not see the province, or federal government, insisting that municipalities must contribute to the education of the children in their communities.

## **WHERE OUR CHILDREN LEARN**

12. Following the collapse of the residential schools system the federal government responded by committing to bringing education into First Nations communities. This was a response to the 1970s rallying cry "Indian control of Indian education". The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes articles which confirm the right of Indigenous Peoples "to establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" (A14) and that they have the "right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information" (A15).
13. Although we have some 130 schools in First Nations communities not all have the capability to offer high school programs. So a significant number of FN children attend public schools. Both systems however have varying degrees of success. The Fraser Institute yearly loves to criticize the lack of success in First Nations education and recommends solutions from their ivory tower as to how to improve education successes.
14. The federal panel on education is already hamstrung by statements by federal government officials that new and more resources are not on the table.
15. There is no question that Indian control of Indian education has taken significant in root in First Nations communities and that this will not likely change in the future. Resources, infrastructure and capacity will always remain as considerable challenges in our communities. Governments need to understand that after the significant and

devastating negative impacts and consequences of the failed Indian residential schools system they need provide the needed and necessary support and resources to First Nations for them to meet the significant social economic challenges they face.

16. Aboriginal peoples represent the fastest growing demographic profile in Canada, with approximately 29.8% of Aboriginal population of 1, 072,790 been under the age of 14. However the disturbing reality remains that aboriginal students are least likely to graduate. We must do all we can to provide the best opportunities for our children and grandchildren to succeed. If they succeed, our families and communities succeed and BC and Canada stand to become net beneficiaries.
  
17. So what are we doing? There is a common saying that you cannot fix the flat tire by yelling at it. First Nations across the province are collaborating and coordinating efforts. Over the last several years First Nations, Chiefs and leaders have developed extensive action plans relating to health, education, children and families, justice, energy & mines, forests, fisheries and so on – to develop a common strategy in a critical mass of thinking, direction and effort to support transformative changes needed in each and every one of our communities. The off-reserve First Nation members, thru the combined efforts of the 25 Aboriginal Friendship Centres are also collaborating with our Chiefs and leaders to develop a similar approach. These, in my opinion, will help move us in the direction we so desperately need. We will succeed!