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Improved Education

Over the years ahead, as more and more of our communities move away from Indian Act governance or settle land claims, our people, perhaps more than any other people in Canada, are going to be asked to make very important decisions about their future. They are going to have to vote on governance initiatives, land claims and law development among other important decisions regarding their future, their family's future and the future of their community.

Education must be a lifelong endeavor from pre-school through to continuing education in adult life. We never stop learning. BCAFN is working with our leaders to ensure we have the necessary financial resources and the jurisdictional tools to assist the citizens of our Nations with meaningful opportunities for lifelong learning.

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In BC, access to quality lifelong learning is not just a question of vision and financial resources, it is also a question of 'jurisdiction'. Many of our Nations want to take more control over jurisdiction for education and we must support this goal and build on our success. On July 5, 2006, BC and the First Nations Education Steering Committee signed an historic agreement to recognize First Nations' jurisdiction over First Nations education on-reserve in BC. There are over fifty communities that have expressed an interest in assuming jurisdiction for education on reserve, not including those nations that already have jurisdiction by virtue of self-government arrangements. With jurisdiction, our Nations have the opportunity to design the k-12 education programs that meet their Nations' education needs. This is important work.

Ultimately as we move away from control by Victoria and Ottawa the majority of our Nations will be making laws in relation to education and managing their own education. With jurisdiction comes responsibility but also the ability to direct resources where they are most needed and to ensure the content of what is taught to our children is appropriate and relevant.

With respect to post-secondary jurisdiction, we can build on the partnerships that have been developed with post-secondary institutions to advance this agenda. We can help focus courses on our needs as aboriginal people and what is needed in our communities, whether it concerns public administration in our governments, doing business on our lands, or providing appropriate healthcare or education in our communities.

The Child

Starting with our children, we can build upon the successes in many of our communities that have established quality daycare and early learning centers in their villages.

We need to ensure all communities have appropriate access to quality elementary and secondary schooling. This means where a First Nation runs its own 'band' school or independent school, there is adequate financial support to run the school properly; from building the infrastructure to classroom instruction. Where our communities purchase education services from adjacent non-aboriginal school districts we can build upon the successes of those communities that have negotiated creative and strong Local Education Agreements; in many cases now requiring the public schools to provide aboriginal language and cultural programming.

The Young Adult

Society has become more complicated. There are fewer and fewer jobs that do not require a university degree or college diploma of some sort. There are almost no jobs that do not require a high school diploma. We need to continue to work to improve the high school graduation rates of our young adults and support them through high school; particularly during their most formative years when the distractions of teenage life can be the most stressful. I will work with our leaders as they implement their plans to improve graduation rates and support their students.

However, in the modern economy simply graduating from high school is not always enough and, therefore, cannot be the only goal for our young adults that want to and can go further. It is not always enough to graduate with a simple Dogwood Diploma. While high school graduation rates have been increasing for many of our communities, and we need to build on this success, there is an unfortunate trend in some School Districts to push our students through high school without them actually taking the classes they need to move forward into higher education. Students need to be directed to the proper mix of classes that will allow them to go to university.

For our high school students who qualify and want to attend university or go to college we need to ensure that they take the right courses and then have the opportunity to actually go. Financial support for our students to attend college and university has meant there are now many more of our people graduating from University and college; again success that needs to be celebrated. This is a positive trend that must not reverse. I will encourage increased investment by both the federal government and our own governments to support post secondary education and will work with our leaders to ensure that the education systems are responsive to our needs. I will work with the National Chief and the Executive of the AFN to demand greater investment in Post Secondary Education as support funding rates have not increased to meet current demand nor kept pace with inflation. Investment in Post Secondary Education is an investment which is paying huge dividends in our communities. We need to ensure this continues. I will also work with our leadership to encourage BC to offer trades support funding to First Nations' students.

The Adult

For our citizens that have not graduated from high school but who want to, we must continue to build upon our success in developing Adult Basic Education programs. These programs have been very effective in getting our citizens back to school and then into the workforce. Also, not all our citizens are ready to go to college or university as a young adult and may want to go back to school as a 'mature student'. For instance, some of our citizens that are working in our governments may not have a degree or a diploma but have years and years of practical experience and then want to go back to school to get their formal qualifications. Opportunities need to be created to help these people get the higher education they may need to take their careers further and, in the process, share valuable skills with younger students and bring new skills into our communities. If this is part of a community's vision I will work with your community to advocate for increased professional development programs.

The BC Assembly of First Nations

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