



# Information Sheet #2: First Nations Education

July 2013

## First Nations Education

The long and tragic history of residential schools in Canada and the colonial devaluing of First Nations knowledge and ways of living led the Assembly of First Nations and the Indian Brotherhood to submit the *Indian Control of Indian Education* report to the Canadian government in 1972. The report emphasized the importance of First Nations controlled education supported by equitable and flexible funding from the federal government. Federal authority over matters relating to "Indians, and land reserved for Indians" comes from section 91(24) of the *Constitution Act 1867-1982*. In addition, section 114 of the *Indian Act* gives the government authority to enter in to agreements with First Nations regarding the provision of education on reserve (Government of Canada, 2013). Canada has obligations to many First Nations in the area of education via treaties and self-government agreements. Further, article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) outlines Indigenous peoples' right to culturally based and equitable education without discrimination (UNPFII, 2013).

Before colonization, the education of children was held in high regard by all First Nations communities. Knowledge from ancestors was highly valued and sacred. The Elders, entrusted to teach the next generation, were amongst the most honored in all communities. It is important to note that ancestral knowledge continuously evolved. It was based on a foundation of essential knowledge, values, beliefs, and traditions but also invited new ideas and experiences.

Innovative ideas were measured against the knowledge and experience of those who came before. When the

first colonists arrived, many were impressed by these sophisticated knowledge systems. However, when relationships between colonists and First Nations moved from friendship and respect to oppression, First Nations children found themselves at the center of the assimilation regime (Caron, 2012; Milloy, 1999).

The residential school system undermined the traditional education of First Nation children and removed children from their families, contributing to mass loss of culture and language (Milloy, 1999). Chronic underfunding contributed significantly to the harms of the residential school system because of how funding affects the quality and integrity of the program as a whole, from staffing to infrastructure and maintenance to food (Milloy, 1999). The last federally-operated residential school closed in 1996 and yet educational programs on reserve, and their funding, remain inequitable and insufficient (Milloy, 1999).

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development of Canada (AANDC) manages the provision of elementary and secondary education on reserve and tuition reimbursement for students attending off reserve schools (AANDC, 2013).

AANDC also has a mandate to build and meet operating and capital expenditure requirements related to schools on reserve under section 114(2) of the *Indian Act 1867* (Government of Canada, 2013; Rajekar & Mathilakath, 2009). The *Summative Evaluation of Elementary/Secondary Education Program on Reserve* found a consistent gap between on and off reserve educational programming and opportunities between 2002 and 2012 (AANDC, 2012).

Education is a way to ensure First Nations children and youth have an equal opportunity to realize their full



potential in ways that honor their cultures and identities. Unfortunately, not all First Nations children have access to proper schools in their communities and thus some have to leave home at a young age to get an education.

It is important that there are schools on reserve so that all First Nations children and youth do not have to be unnecessarily separated from their families, cultures and traditions (Milloy, 1999; Government of Canada, 2013). In addition, for First Nation children and youth to have equal opportunity to realize their dreams, education programs must be culturally based and equitable so that they can grow up safe, get a good education, and be proud of their languages and cultures.

## Funding

Education in Canada falls under provincial/territorial jurisdiction, with the exception of education on reserve. The current federal policy objective is to provide First Nation children on reserve with "elementary and secondary education programs comparable to those required in provincial schools by the statutes, regulations or policies of the province in which the reserve is located" (AANDC, 2013).

This means that schools on reserve are held to the same standards and delivery expectations as schools off reserve. Yet schools on reserves are funded inequitably given unique community needs resulting from issues such as, but not limited to, isolation and intergenerational trauma from the residential school system.

First Nation children on reserve are underfunded \$2,000-\$3,000 per child (FNCFCSS, 2013; AFN, 2010). Unlike provincial schools, the federal government provides: \$0 for libraries; \$0 for computers, software and teacher training; \$0 for extracurricular activities; \$0 for First Nation data management systems; \$0 for 2nd and 3rd level services (including core funding for special education, school boards, governance and education research); \$0 for endangered languages; \$0 for principals, directors, pedagogical support, and the development of culturally-appropriate curricula (AFN, 2010; FNCFCSS, 2013).

In 2010/2011, AANDC provided \$1.5 billion in funding for First Nation education on reserve and \$304 million for

building construction and maintenance. The Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) released a report in 2009 with an analysis of actual costs for the delivery of education, finding that schools on reserve are systematically underfunded by less than half (58%) of the actual costs needed to provide equal and equitable access to safe schools and education (Rajekar & Mathilakath, 2009).

## Current Situation

Many First Nation schools in Canada are unsafe and uncomfortable (Rajekar & Mathilakath, 2009). Health concerns in First Nation schools include: overcrowding; extreme mold; high carbon dioxide levels; sewage fumes in school; frozen pipes; unheated portables; students suffering from cold and frost bite; and schools being abandoned despite a lack of alternative infrastructure (FNCFCSS, 2013; Milloy, 1999).

There are 803 schools located on reserve (Rajekar & Mathilakath, 2009). Of these, 726 schools are listed as permanent structures and 77 are listed as temporary structures (e.g. portables). According to the 2009 PBO report, only 49% of First Nations schools were considered in 'good condition' with 21% that were not inspected at all (Rajekar & Mathilakath, 2009).

First Nations school infrastructure is funded under the Capital Facilities and Maintenance (CFM) program, which is also responsible for funding other community infrastructure needs (Shaw, 2013). Pressures on the CFM program means that needed infrastructure projects are delayed as a result of projects that present more immediate health and safety concerns (Shaw, 2013). The AANDC 2013-2014 spending plan consists of \$7.9 billion, with \$2.1 billion dedicated to First Nations education (Shaw, 2013). Of the \$2.1 billion, \$300 million is for school infrastructure (Shaw, 2013).

Historical annual funding for school infrastructure in British Columbia is \$26 million, which accounts for approximately 11.5 percent of the \$300 million for all of Canada; however, the report found that it was still not enough (Shaw, 2013). The actual funding needed just to sustain the current footprint of First Nations schools for 2013-2014 would be \$39 million (Shaw, 2013). Approximately 10

percent of the First Nations schools surveyed in the PBO report had a rating of being in poor condition or worse, with an estimated remaining service life of 3 years (Shaw, 2013). That means that the schools in poor condition can only remain open for a maximum of 3 years before they pose too much risk to health and safety.

For more information on the PBO reports, check out the 'Other Resources' tab at: <http://www.fncaringociety.com/shannens-dream-media-gallery>.

## Shannen's Dream

([www.shannensdream.ca](http://www.shannensdream.ca))

A campaign was started by elementary school student Shannen Koostachin and her classmates for safe and comfy schools and culturally based education for First Nations children (FNCFCFS, 2013). Shannen was from the Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario and the school in her community was closed because of a diesel fuel spill that contaminated the school grounds (FNCFCFS, 2013). The school was left closed for over 10 years and students were forced to learn in portables with no heat in the winter, not enough school supplies like books and computers. Shannen recognized that it was not right that other Canadian children had safe and comfy schools when she and the children in her community did not. She took action and inspired thousands of children to join her in a letter writing campaign to the government to ensure safe and comfy schools, and a proper education for all First Nations children and youth in Canada.

In 2010, Shannen was tragically lost in a car accident on her way home from school off reserve, but her dream lives on in the voices of children and youth speaking out for safe and comfy schools, and culturally based education in First Nations education (FNCFCFS, 2013). In 2012, after repeated denials, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs announced that a new school will finally be opened for the 2013/2014 school year in Attawapiskat (AANDC, 2012).

While this is a welcome announcement, the children involved in Shannen's Dream will continue writing letters until all children in the country have access to a proper school and education.

## Culturally Based Education

Culturally based equity in education is about more than equal funding for on and off reserve education. It is also about culturally relevant education and the local autonomy needed to adequately incorporate culturally relevant learning into the curriculum.

There are over 600 First Nations communities in Canada with diverse cultures, languages, histories and circumstances. It is the communities who are the experts on their own cultures so it is important that they play a role in the development of culturally relevant curricula.

British Columbia has unique legislation regarding First Nation education called the *First Nations Jurisdiction over Education in British Columbia Act* (2006). This Act allows First Nation communities to enter into an individual agreement with the federal and provincial governments regarding on reserve educational programs, including the right to enact laws regarding education (Department of Justice Canada, 2006). Under this Act, school credits must be transferable to provincial public schools without penalty (Department of Justice, 2006). This provides the authority necessary to implement culturally appropriate, self-determined education on reserve while maintaining the social function of preparing youth to enter into society and the workforce.

In Canada, mass education is meant to instill national pride, lawfulness, and democratic and capitalistic values (Caron, 2012). First Nation communities have diverse histories, cultures, and languages that are not adequately recognized under current provincial curriculum. As a result, mainstream education on reserve is largely culturally inappropriate, with the exception of some innovative school programs with culturally relevant education. Individual agreements with the government that create space for First Nation communities to self-determine culturally relevant education will better prepare First Nations youth for life on reserve while still providing a transferable education and skills relevant to Canada at large.

If you would like to learn more about Shannen's Dream and what you can do, please visit:  
[www.shannensdream.ca](http://www.shannensdream.ca) or [www.fnwitness.ca](http://www.fnwitness.ca).

## The Way Forward

Every child in Canada has a right to a good education that honors their cultures and languages, and to proper schools and school equipment. Student achievement in education goes beyond the curriculum to the environment in which it is taught. The conditions of schools are the conditions where learning takes place, which is just as important as the quality of instructional services (Milloy, 1999). It is hard to learn the times tables if you are too cold to concentrate on the numbers.

Research and government documents have evidenced that First Nations children are systemically underfunded for elementary and secondary education, and that the federal funding formula is not comprehensive, neglecting the need for libraries, computers, and needs resulting from isolation. Through partnership and collaboration with First Nation communities, who are the experts on their own cultures and needs, equity for First Nations children and youth in education can be realized.

First Nations education can be further supported by educating non-Aboriginal children and youth on Aboriginal peoples' histories, languages, cultures, and ways of knowing and being. The education of non-Aboriginal children and youth in the spirit of reconciliation and relationship building supports consciousness raising among the future leaders of tomorrow! Knowledge and understanding are the foundation of change.

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