

Charting a new path

Riding the 'warm wind' in First Nations education begins in Thunder Bay

BY PAUL W. BENNETT
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A WARM WIND is blowing across Canada," Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Perry Bellegarde is fond of saying, and the roles have reversed. After a so-called "decade of darkness" in First Nations-Ottawa relations, it's time for First Nations to come up with a plan of their own.

That's why the recent Chiefs of Ontario Education Symposium in Thunder Bay Nov. 17-19 had a remarkably different tone. Instead of railing at Prime Minister Stephen Harper or reliving the horrors of Indian residential schools, the focus was on Neegahnee daa (let's walk together) in "charting a new path forward."

Under the watchful eye of Grand Chief Gord Peters and Regional Chief Isadore Day, some 180 First Nations educators, councillors and elders gathered at the Victoria Inn to discuss in-depth a set of proposals for a new framework for genuine first Nations control of education on and off the reserves. I attended as a Northern Policy Institute observer, determined to listen instead of talk, and to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges ahead.

The two federal emissaries, former Prime Minister Paul Martin and newly-installed Indigenous and Northern affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett, both struck a positive chord. Martin described the present juncture as "a magical period," referring to the Liberal ascendancy in Ottawa and at Queen's Park. Dr.



COMMENTARY

Bennett was more restrained and more nuanced in her declarations.

The Martin Initiative, now encompassing three programs, the Aboriginal Youth Apprenticeship Program (AYAP), the online Indigenous Principal's course, and the Early Literacy project, all come with hefty price tags. That explains why Martin, at every stop on his national tour, emphasizes the 'big bucks' needed to close the funding gap.

Minister Bennett clearly 'gets it' when it comes to building bridges. "Paternalism," she told the delegates, "has been a disaster" and the way forward involves "the new Three R's — recognition, rights and respect." She also shows a willingness to be patient. "Educators talk," she quipped. "That's because you do your homework."

The current realities in Ontario First Nations education may be enough to test that patience. The province's 201,100 First Nations people are served by a system of 133 First Nations, most with education directors or managers. Seventy-six First Nations have band

council-operated schools (24 K-12 and 52 elementary level). Fifty-seven of them do not have a school and send their children to provincial public schools.

The existing aggregation which evolved to secure sustaining funds or to demonstrate self-government is complex and multi-layered. Of the 17 tribal councils, 13 provide educational services, but an additional 21 First Nations remain unaffiliated with any tribal council. Four provincial territorial organizations exist, two of which have educational advisory committees. Two education governance tables (PTO) have been formed; in addition, 16 First Nations are either independent or unaffiliated, lying outside the current organizational framework.

The daunting responsibility for reinventing the governance framework has fallen to Julia Candlish, education director for the Toronto-based Chiefs of Ontario (COO). Working with the key chiefs and her staff, she has produced what is known as a "support circles framework" centred on the "First Nations learner" and designed to surround her/him with a series of "support circles."

While the proposed COO models recognize that 75 per cent of First Nations students attend provincial schools, the framework recognizes the broader education of children in "paces of learning," in school and in the community.

Tying all this together is fraught with complexity and wades into historic competition for scarce government funds between and among various autonomous groups. Respecting the wisdom of the elders involves looking backward while charting the way forward.

Trust has been re-established, but that's only the first step toward educational reconciliation and nation-to-nation partnership. A so-called "blended framework" is possible, and one that resembles a consortium rather than a "department of education."

Improving the funding levels is imperative and so is ensuring that those funds actually reach students in the schools.

The aborted 2013-14 First Nations Act was killed by First Nations chiefs and educators resistant to being herded into a deal and then confined in a 'made-in-Ottawa' funding-accountability

system. "Come up with a plan" is the current federal approach, but it's much easier said than done.

The pace will be set by First Nations leaders and it will take time to fashion a new framework that truly respects First Nations 'sovereignties' in education.

Paul W. Bennett is senior education research fellow, Northern Policy Institute, Thunder Bay, and founding director of Schoolhouse Consulting, Halifax.

Ottawa now 'gets it' when it comes to building bridges
