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First Nation Education: Financial Accountability and Educational Attainment

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Abstract :

The author of this article provides a clear picture of the context of First Nations education based on information drawn from Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) records, reports of the Auditor General of Canada (2000, 2004) and various statistical sources.

A Few Historical Milestones

In 1876, the Indian Act assigned the responsibility of First Nations education to the Canadian Federal Government, leaving First Nations with very little to say in decisions regarding their education system.

The Indian Control of Indian Education Policy established in 1972 by the National Indian Brotherhood described the urgent need for equitable education in order for First Nations students to develop the fundamental attitudes and values of the Amerindian culture and be better prepared to face modern society. While this policy fostered some progress, the current situation remains alarming.

In 1988, a formula for funding band-operated schools was established by the DIAND. This policy was never revised or updated to suit First Nations' current needs.

Persistent Inequalities

On a number of occasions, the poor academic achievement of First Nations students lacking in educational opportunities has been acknowledged and compared to that of other Canadian students. It has become harder to fill this widening gap. For instance, in 2000, a proportion of 40% First Nations youths aged 18 to 20 were reported to have dropped out of school compared to 16% of other Canadian youths of the same age. Similarly and for the same age group, 30% of Amerindians obtained a high school diploma compared to 63% of other Canadians. Moreover, the graduation rate has decreased since 1995-1996, dropping from 33.9% to 29.6% in 2001-2002.

A Problematic Funding Method

Certain practices underlying DIAND fund transfers to First Nations resulted in negative outcomes within the education system. For instance, the Financial Transfer Agreement allowed some flexibility, helping to ensure that funds be allocated according to the most blatant needs in a context of limited resources. Therefore, certain funds allocated to education could be redistributed to meet other needs, but with an effect on the effectiveness and quality of the education system.

The quality of educational services may also be tested in cases where, for various reasons (e.g.: budget deficit), the administration of a band council budget is placed into receivership and handled by a third-party manager. This situation has been criticized on several occasions, particularly by auditor generals. Costs incurred by this practice are taken directly from the band council budget. Cuts are made to several budget items, including education, in order to re-adjust budgets, regardless of the consequences that may ensue.

As a result of this process, resources allotted to schools are once again reduced, leading to a lack in material resources (e.g., school books) infrastructures and educational activities (e.g., extracurricular activities). This situation leads to long-term consequences on student academic achievement and the mobilization of teaching staff.

Conclusion

The educational aspirations of First Nations students are still not fulfilled, and Canada cannot continue to ignore this

situation. Although productive cooperation is seen between the Federal Government, provinces and First Nations in some areas in the country (Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan), no joint effort should be spared to develop innovative ways that will meet the needs of First Nations.

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