



CANADIAN ALLIANCE OF STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS ALLIANCE CANADIENNE DES ASSOCIATIONS ÉTUDIANTES

Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada

An Open Letter on Improving the Lives of Canada's Aboriginal Populations

In recent weeks the immense challenges facing Canada's Aboriginal population has caught needed attention by the state of emergency declared by Attawapiskat First Nation. Attawapiskat, like many Aboriginal communities in Canada, has been subject to chronic underfunding. As an organization representing over 320,000 students, we cannot wait and watch as a growing problem in the country is left unresolved. Investments of time and resources across party lines are required. There is no time to waste on laying blame.

Aboriginal peoples are the fastest growing population within our borders. Canada must prepare and implement a long-term plan to address the many inequalities facing our Aboriginal population.

One major area requiring investment that will work as part of a holistic solution is the provision of quality education. The government has a responsibility to ensure that equal access to quality education from elementary to post-secondary is available to all Canadians. Only 3% of Status Indians have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 6% of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit population, and 18% of the total Canadian population. It is clear that status quo approaches have failed to break this devastating and cyclical reality.

There are numerous origins for this state of affairs. At the core lies a legacy of barriers once designed to encourage cultural assimilation. In addition to the abhorrent treatment that many First Nations, Métis and Inuit faced in residential schools, the Indian Act forbade Registered Indians from attending post-secondary education unless they gave up their legal status, rights, and identity as described by the Indian Act. This was the harmful reality until 1951.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations face numerous social barriers. The limited options that result from low high school graduation rates and varying levels of post-secondary preparation among those that do graduate are particularly damaging. These outcomes are the product of inadequate government investment and support for on-reserve primary and secondary education. This is due in part to jurisdictional conflicts between the federal and provincial governments.

The December 7th, 2011 report of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples entitled “Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope” offers a similar analysis:

The departmental evaluation acknowledges that First Nations responsibility for education has been restrained and that without appropriate capacity and resources, many communities are unable to maximize the impact that First Nations control of education could have over something as fundamental as education of children.¹

Post-secondary institutions have not been seen as welcoming of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Historically, institutions have not placed accommodation of Aboriginal values, experience and ways of learning in the mainstream of course and program design. This, combined with relatively fewer role models who have taken part in positive and successful post-secondary experiences, results in institutions that have failed to consistently demonstrate accommodating instruction on campus. Fortunately though, preconceptions about post-secondary education are slowly changing as more universities provide culturally sensitive academic programming and support services.²

Historical cultural and social barriers combined with inconsistent funding of education leads many potential students to believe that post-secondary education is not appropriate for them.

The moral imperative for providing greater support for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students is clear, but the fiscal proposition is convincing as well. According to the Centre for the Study of Living Standards, the effect of improving educational and labour market outcomes of Aboriginal peoples to the level similar to that experienced by non-Aboriginal Canadians in 2001 would support the following fiscal improvements for Canada by 2026:³

- An increase in Aboriginal income by \$36.5 billion per year (\$401 billion cumulatively),
- An increase in tax revenues by \$3.5 billion per year (\$39 billion cumulatively), and
- Lower government expenditures by \$14.2 billion (\$77 billion cumulatively).

The situation in Attawapiskat brings attention to the broader, more fundamental issue: the lack of a long-term plan for Aboriginal peoples.

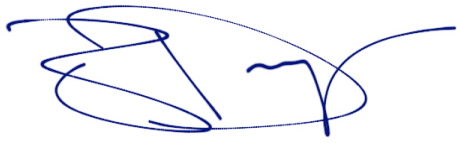
The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations believes that the government must show the necessary leadership now and engage with all political parties and Aboriginal leaders to develop and commit to a long-term plan to address the many inequalities facing Aboriginal Canadians. Canada can no longer afford piecemeal and reactionary approaches. In the words of the National Chief of the Assembly of First

¹ Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples. *Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope*. December 2011. www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee?411/appa/rep/rep03dec11-e.pdf

² http://www.aucc.ca/_pdf/english/reports/2010/Aboriginal_report_e.pdf

³ *The Effect of Increasing Aboriginal Educational Attainment on the Labour Force, Output and the Fiscal Balance*, Centre for the Study of Living Standards, May 2009, pg. v.

Nations, Shawn Atleo “The time to act is now. We must seize on the growing momentum and consensus on the need for reform.”⁴ The ability to make this happen rests in the hands of those addressed.



Zachary Dayler, National Director
Canadian Alliance of Student Associations

cc: Hon. John Duncan, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development
Nycole Turmel, Interim Leader of the Official Opposition;
Hon. Bob Rae, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada;
Vivian Barbot, Interim Leader of the Bloc Québécois;
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party of Canada

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit national student organization composed of 27 student associations, representing over 320,000 students from coast to coast.

Acadia Students' Union / Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia Vancouver / University of British Columbia Graduate Student Society / Brock University Students' Union / Dalhousie Student Union / University of the Fraser Valley Students Union Society / University of Prince Edward Island Student Union / Red River College Student Association / Saint Mary's University Student Association / Southern Alberta Institute of Technology Student Association / St. Francis Xavier University Students' Union / St. Thomas University Students' Union / McMaster Student Union / Student Association of Mount Royal University / UNB Fredericton Students' Union / UNB Saint John Students' Representative Council / University of Alberta Students' Union / University of Calgary Students' Union / University of Lethbridge Students' Union / La Fédération des étudiants et étudiantes du Centre universitaire de Moncton / University of Waterloo Federation of Students / University of Western Ontario Student Council / Wilfred Laurier University Students Union / Graduate Student Association - University of Waterloo / Mount Allison Students' Administrative Council / Athabasca University Graduate Student Association / Kwantlen Student Association

⁴ Shawn A-in-chut Atleo. *Assembly of First Nations Welcomes the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples Report on First Nations Education as Transformative and Progressive*. December 8, 2011. <http://www.newswire.ca/en/story/892323/assembly-of-first-nations-welcomes-the-standing-senate-committee-on-aboriginal-peoples-report-on-first-nations-education-as-transformative-and-progres>"