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CHIEFS OF ONTARIO

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THE TIME FOR REALIZING OUR VISION OF FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION IS NOW

Toronto, ON – Earlier this week, the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve released their report titled “Nurturing the Learning Spirit of First Nation Students”. This panel, jointly created by the federal department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) and the Assembly of First Nations, was mandated to identify ways of improving education outcomes for First Nation students.

“This panel has identified what we already know – that there is no existing First Nation education system, just a patchwork of agreements and policies that are failing First Nations children and youth. We have known for decades that the current approach is not working for our people and requires action,” stated Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse.

The Regional Chief indicated that the First Nations in Ontario completed a parallel report which was submitted to AANDC Minister John Duncan, and National Chief Shawn Atleo, to coincide with the completion of the National Panel report. The Chiefs of Ontario report titled “Our Children, Our Future, Our Vision” is grounded in the fact that First Nations have a Treaty right to education and the inherent right to assert jurisdiction over First Nations education and that these rights must be recognized and implemented without delay. “We have skilled and knowledgeable educators in our communities and we know what needs to be done and what will be effective. Most importantly, we have the inherent right and responsibility to do all we can to ensure our children and youth succeed and fulfill their potential,” stated Regional Chief Toulouse.

Regional Chief Toulouse pointed out that the report of the First Nations in Ontario is consistent with the National Panel report in a few important respects, including the need for immediate action on First Nations education reform, the requirement for a needs based funding formula and the critical importance of ensuring that language and culturally relevant curriculum are included and supported by any funding formula and supporting education policy. He emphasized that the First Nations in Ontario will be taking a close look at the National Panel report and expect to be fully engaged and informed with regards to the next steps in the process.

Regional Chief Toulouse welcomed the panel’s emphasis on the need for First Nations to be equal partners in the design and development of a modern education system. “The panel recognized that genuine change and progress must be made. We must be full partners in driving change and we must remain cautious about which recommendations we support and in what manner. We have seen that legislation does not always result in accompanying resources that are based on the Treaty principle of sharing resources and we see clearly from both reports that the resource requirements are very real.” said Regional Chief Toulouse.

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The National Panel made five broad recommendations and outlined steps that should be taken over the next 18 months to implement them. Regional Chief Toulouse indicated that the First Nations in Ontario would be reviewing and analysing the reports carefully in the coming days. Of particular note, the report outlined three immediate steps that should be taken in fiscal year 2012-13 in order to alleviate urgent funding pressures, including the need to provide funding increases to First Nations schools equal to the funding increases being provided by provinces to provincial schools.

The report of the National Panel also recognized the need to act with urgency in order to not fail another generation of First Nations students. The Report of the First Nations in Ontario pointed to the fact that the topic of reform in First Nations education has been discussed, studied and recommended for years, and that “the time for studies and national panels is over – its’ time for real action”.

The need to act with a sense of urgency and purpose is also clear in light of the current challenge facing Canada with respect to anticipated severe labour shortages in the years to come. A report by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, also published on February 8, indicates that the labour shortage is becoming “desperate” and threatens Canada’s global economic competitiveness. The National Panel report recognized the fact that the First Nations population is young and growing and that this “underscores the necessity of improving First Nation education”. Clearly there are significant mutual benefits to First Nations and to Canada to action First Nations education and ensuring that increasing numbers of educated and trained First Nations people enter the workforce over the coming years.

“If real progress is to be achieved, the approach to revitalizing First Nations education and empowering First Nations students is critically important. This work cannot be dictated by government, it must be respectful of First Nations inherent and Treaty rights and it must be an effort led by First Nations. We have to move beyond talking and finger pointing. First Nation children and youth across this country are looking to us as leaders, both First Nations and government, to address this situation quickly and effectively. We have to meet this challenge and grasp the opportunity that is before us,” said Regional Chief Toulouse.

The Chiefs of Ontario (COO) is a coordinating body for the 133 First Nations located within the boundaries of the Province of Ontario.

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