

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL ACHIEVEMENT FOUNDATION BRIEF TO THE STANDING HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

BRIEF FOR PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS, 2011

Executive Summary

Attention to educational issues is essential if the current and future generations of First Nations children and youth are to be able to participate fully in Canada's economy and simultaneously assist in reducing the severe labour shortages which challenge future prosperity.

Investment in two key areas will pay off handsomely in Canada's present well-being and future: improving the quality of K-12 education for First Nations, Inuit and Métis students, and ensuring that all students who qualify for post-secondary education or trades training will have the resources necessary to pursue that goal.

The National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation is a responsible, accountable attractive vehicle to ensure federal funding garners its intended results.

The pre-budget advice of the Standing Committee on Finance is the vehicle through which Parliament, the voice of the People of Canada, provides advice to the Minister of Finance and Government of Canada. Such advice is critical in these times of extraordinary international financial crises and the requirement that government expenditures be sharply reduced if Canada's fiscal well-being is to be properly administered.

Both Parliament and Government face difficult decisions in considering competing interests. The National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation acknowledges the Committee's crucial responsibility, and wishes its members clarity of mind, strength in maintaining vision and resolve, wisdom in finding the right balance. The allocations you recommend must simultaneously meet urgent needs and also respond to the economic needs of Canada.

True, the Foundation promotes its area of interest – realizing through education and training the boundless potential of Aboriginal youth. It does so, however, not because of any self-interest, but only in Canada's own interests.

The National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation is a financially accountable non-political nationally-registered charity that for 25 years has promoted, supported and celebrated the realization of the potential for achievement of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples, in particular youth.

We have a lengthy track record of accountable, cost-effective and transparent administration. This track record, along with our strict selection and monitoring processes guarantees that funds administered by the Foundation achieve their intended purpose.

The Foundation is regarded by both the public and private sector as a solid, credible organization. It is highly regarded by the First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities and regional and national organizations.

One of the Foundations' principal enterprises is the provision of bursaries. The Foundation has over the years provided over \$42.7 million to more than 11,500 Aboriginal student recipients; we remain second only to the Government of Canada in providing financial support to Aboriginal students. As CEO and President of the Foundation, I am proud to say that well over half of the total amount has been distributed in the last five years. Over this same period we have increased our support from the private sector.

Last year, the Foundation supported 204 students who want to be registered nurses, 133 doctors and dentists, 70 PhD candidates, 226 students at the Master's level, 115 business and commerce students, 25 engineers, 87 lawyers, 71 social workers, 107 teachers, and many more students in a variety of career studies. Although these numbers are impressive, we are still able to meet 20 % of the needs of the students who apply to us for support.

In addition to bursaries, through its virtual Institute, the Foundation stands ready to support the Government's initiatives by acting as a clearing house to locate, recognize and promote best practices found in K-12 schools across Canada.

There is a role for everyone to play in this enterprise and everyone will benefit from success. We are appealing to more and more individual Canadians to contribute much needed funds. We also work in partnership with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada in a concerted effort to involve representatives of Aboriginal groups with administrators and academics in the creation and implementation of a plan of action to improve the access and success of Aboriginal Canadians in higher education.

The National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation also has an admirable track record of working with government officials to develop proposals which are responsive to both the realities faced by government's need to achieve reduced spending and the realities faced by First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities today and in the tough years ahead of us. We believe that even in facing the need to cut spending across the board, the Government can be encouraged to see an investment in education is a wise, prudent and necessary investment. We invite government agencies to seek the Foundation's support by providing its expertise and experience in creative development of solutions and advances.

The Foundation recognizes its responsibility to ensure that funding provided to it not only is well-spent, but also that it becomes leverage to obtain additional funding from provincial governments, corporations, and individual donors.

Recently, the Foundation advanced a proposition to the Ministers of Aboriginal Affairs and Human Resources which responded to the critical need for additional funding for First Nations, Inuit and Métis students seeking access to post-secondary education and trades and apprentice training. The proposal is that the Government of Canada agree to match funds which the Foundation raises from the private, charitable, and Aboriginal sectors.

The Foundation has had remarkable success in attracting millions of dollars of generous support of the private sector for the funding of bursaries. Yet private sector leaders continue to make the point to me that they look to the Government of Canada to play a leadership role in changing the future for Aboriginal people in Canada and that includes financial assistance for education. I know that if they are challenged by matching federal funds, they stand ready to play a vital role in this enterprise. I am confident that Canada's corporate leaders will be motivated to contribute significant funds to be distributed to Aboriginal students through the Foundation, an entity they trust and rely upon to deliver results and to be accountable for their investments.

The Foundation is seeking a federal commitment to provide new funding to the level of \$50- million dollars to match private-sector funds raised by the Foundation for Aboriginal post-secondary bursaries and scholarships. This would make a total of \$100-million available for student support. This fund could also be expanded in future to appeal for contributions from the provinces and territories.

The National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation has consistently demonstrated its ability to show value in returns for every dollar it receives and earns. We put "students first" and can show that funds reach those in need. Compared with the need and opportunity, however, we know we are under-utilized in helping Canada ensure its investment in First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth. We have the capacity to improve performance rendering return on investment both at the level of the individual and as contributors to the national economy.

The Foundation is a vehicle which facilitates collaboration – educators, communities, employers, school boards, teachers' associations and companies interested in highly-meaningful exercise of corporate social responsibility.

The result is a sustainable meaningful relationship which will carry all parties far into the future to meet new challenges, new opportunities, to work together even when the going gets tough.

We also familiarize First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth with the employment opportunities offered by the various industrial sectors. One way we do that is with an “Industry in the Classroom” series of short documentaries and supporting curricula materials to promote career options and to motivate students to stay in school. We have a module on mining, for example, launched with the support of Vale, together with other modules in health, railways, TV-broadcasting, justice, transportation, and so on.

The Foundation partners with five companies to support indigenous people for training and apprenticeships in Oil and Gas trades.

Increasing success in education for First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth is not just a noble undertaking. Increasingly it has major implications for Canada’s future. We are just beginning to feel the effects of major demographic change as older Canadians retire without having a sufficient number of younger Canadians to take over their positions. Recruitment is struggling to find the new health care workers and professionals who are needed to care for an aging population. Aboriginal youth play two paradoxical roles in the equation: on the one hand, they are Canada’s fastest growing demographic group with literally hundreds of thousands of bright, creative youth looking for a better future, and on the other hand, are the sector of the population with the most dismal educational outcomes. Yes, there are notable individual success stories and we celebrate them. But no one can feel satisfied with the overall picture.

In our work, we see their hopeful faces of a better future. We read their applications for assistance. We rejoice hearing about the successes of those we support – and we are saddened when our funds cannot be stretched any further, knowing of the rich potential which will not be realized.

Approximately 28% of Canadian students go on to receive post-secondary education – only about 8% of indigenous students do the same.

The vast majority of Canadian elementary school students go on to graduate from high school. Only about 53% of Aboriginal students, often less, are able to obtain this most basic requirement.

Canada pays a dear price for this situation in terms of our future economic and social well-being. Unless we do something about education of indigenous youth, hundreds of thousands of youth will not be available to help Canada deal with that shrinking labour force. Otherwise, they simply won’t be there when they are needed. We must get started now – graduates do not appear overnight.

Why is this an investment? The Centre for the Study of Living Standards report last year demonstrated a savings of \$115-billion on just the expense side of the ledger over the next 15 years if indigenous youth receive the preparation necessary so they can contribute their potential by being a part of Canada’s work force.

It reported the impulse to the Canadian economy would also be startlingly huge: in the same 15-year period there would be an estimated \$401-billion cumulative positive effect on Canada's GDP if the educational and employment gap can be closed.

The Foundation has been encouraged by the growing focus across Canada on the urgent need to support the success of Aboriginal students through education. Frankly all sectors are reaching the same conclusion – it simply makes sound economic sense to invest in education of Aboriginal students – the tremendous return on investment as these students make their contribution to the economy of their own communities and to Canada is stunning. The champion of this development are the students themselves who against all odds have completed high school and are now entering post secondary institutions. If we support them they will be the positive role models to lead the transformative change required in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities in rural and urban settings.

We ask that you recommend this increased investment on behalf of all Canadians to ensure our Aboriginal youth are prepared to make their full contribution to their own and Canada's future. We must be sure we can be proud of the history which our generation intends to leave for our future generations.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That the federal government increase its financial support to funding to assure access to post-secondary education, training, and trades for First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth.
2. The federal government support the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation with a special matching fund to increase private sector participation in supporting access to post-secondary education, training and trades for Aboriginal students.
3. That the federal government increases its financial support to funding of K-12 education for First Nations, Inuit and Métis schools and student programs.