

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL



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November 18, 2021

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside
Minister of Education
Via email only: Educ.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Re: Foundation Skills Assessment

Dear Minister Whiteside:

The education of First Nations children is a high priority among BC First Nations. With that in mind, we write to express our serious concerns regarding the ongoing targeted attack campaign, in particular by the BC Teachers' Federation, to have the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) cancelled in BC public schools. The First Nations Leadership Council strongly disagrees with and is alarmed by actions that erode public confidence in province-wide assessments necessary for addressing inequities within K-12 education. Cancelling the FSAs would be contrary to the clearly expressed views of First Nations leadership and to the legal commitments of the Province in BCTEA.

As you know, FSA outcomes were identified as a key measure of progress in the *Transformative Change Accord* (2005-2015) between the Government of British Columbia, the Government of Canada, and the First Nations Leadership Council.

The sharing of FSA data is also an existing commitment in the *BC Tripartite Education Agreement* (2018-2023) signed by the BC Ministry of Education, Indigenous Services Canada, and the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC). Specifically, the Province commits in Schedule I of BCTEA to provide aggregate data to FNESC including the "percentage of students who are meeting or exceeding expectations for reading, writing and numeracy in grades 4 and 7 in the Foundation Skills Assessment" as well as "participation rates for the Foundational Skills Assessment." BCTEA also includes a commitment for the Ministry to release the annual *How Are We Doing?* report, of which the FSAs are an integral component, and to consult with FNESC regarding "any proposed changes to the structure" of the report.

These commitments are based on the recognition that literacy and numeracy results are important indicators of the educational success of First Nation learners, and are informed by legal commitments and obligations to meet the objectives of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* required under the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*.

According to the Auditor General of British Columbia's *Audit of the Education of Aboriginal Students in the BC Public School System* (2015), the Ministry of Education "has identified Aboriginal student participation in the FSA as a strong predictor of graduation." The BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner's *Disaggregated Demographic Data Collection in British Columbia: The Grandmother Perspective* further clarifies that "The collection of disaggregated data is a human rights issue and can be used as a powerful tool in advancing human rights." Eliminating this process and access to this data would undermine our collective ability to meet the needs of First Nation students in the provincial school system and runs counter to the Province's commitment to introduce anti-racism data legislation in the spring as a key tool to understand the impacts of systemic racism across all sectors of society.

Importantly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which examined the "education policy" and legacy of the Indian residential school program, identified the gap in educational outcomes between First Nation and non-First Nation students as a "persisting legacy of colonialism." Recent provincial data demonstrates that these disparities, and the systemic racism underpinning them, continue in BC public schools.

In the 2019-20 school year only 27% of Grade 7 Indigenous students living on reserve were on track or extending numeracy expectations, compared to 67% of their non-Indigenous peers. The FSAs confirm the persisting legacy of colonialism and that our students are still not receiving education that meets their needs to result in improved outcomes. As noted by the Auditor General in their 2015 report, gaps in educational outcomes do not imply "any failure by Aboriginal students, but rather, a failure of the education system to meet their needs." We still have much collective work to do.

Given this important context, the First Nations Leadership Council is deeply disturbed by the continued anti-FSA campaign, including the "call" for parents to withdraw their children from the assessments, as this undermines the quality and reliability of information that is intended to inform system-wide interventions to support the needs of populations underserved and marginalized by public education systems. Further, this public "call" may produce divisions between families who rely on the FSA data to advocate educational equity for their children, and those who do not.

The First Nations Leadership Council calls on you to uphold the Province's legal commitments to First Nations and ensure the continued administration of FSAs. These assessments and data are needed at least until such a time that there is a parity of learning outcomes between First Nation and non-First Nation learners. Any willful misuse of FSA results for the purposes of unscientific school "rankings," or misrepresentations of impacts on First Nation students that are contrary to the messaging by First Nations and our advocacy organizations, cannot distract us from our collective focus and commitment to improving the education outcomes of our children and youth.

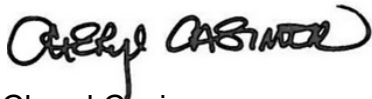
It is our full expectation that the Province will honour its obligation to First Nations and exercise its discretion to continue the administration of the FSAs. The First Nations Leadership Council seeks an opportunity to discuss this important matter with you as soon as possible.

We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

On behalf of the FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT



Cheryl Casimer



Robert Phillips



Lydia Hwitsum

On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



Grand Chief Stewart Phillip



Chief Don Tom



Kukpi7 Judy Wilson

On behalf of the BC ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS:



Regional Chief Terry Teegee

CC: Scott MacDonald, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education
BC Association of School Business Officials
BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils
BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner
BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association
BC School Superintendents Association
BC School Trustees Association
BC Teachers' Federation
First Nations Education Steering Committee