

## First Nations Urge Ottawa to Invest in their Schools

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Representatives of Quebec and Labrador First Nations are asking for more money for their education system, which is unable to meet the needs of growing numbers of children, teenagers and young adults.

Education is normally a provincial responsibility, but the band school situation is an unusual one. Their entire budget actually comes from the Federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

However, according to the Director of the First Nations Education Council (FNEC), Ms. Lise Bastien, the funding formula established more than twenty years ago no longer matches the reality of First Nations.

Band schools receive "between \$5,000 and \$6,000" per year and per student to cover the costs of teachers' salaries, maintenance of buildings and operating expenses.

There is no amount earmarked for vocational training, new technology or extracurricular sporting activities, even though obesity and diabetes are the scourges of reserve life. Cultural activities and libraries also suffer from a complete absence of funding.

"It is really very very difficult to build a quality education to enable our young people to attain their Secondary V with a system like this," Ms. Bastien stated at a press conference in Ottawa.

The FNEC Director has already started to build links with non-Aboriginal organizations that are involved in education. On Monday, Ms. Bastien was surrounded by a handful of Chiefs, including Ghislain Picard, of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, and Steven Bonspille, of Kanesatake.

The Chiefs denounced the current situation one by one, describing it as intolerable. Mr. Picard even declared that the attitude of the Minister of Indian Affairs, Mr. Jim Prentice, was irresponsible, as the Minister has already stated that enough money is spent on First Nations.

"All we want is to be treated equally. This system is unjust for our children," stated Chief Steeve Mathias from the Algonquin community of Winneway, in Témiscamingue.

First Nations have the support of the Bloc québécois. MP for Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Marc Lemay, affirms that the Conservative government omitted to include the sum of \$940 million in its last budget, which was intended for First Nations.

Mr. Lemay has promised to question Mr. Prentice on this matter when the latter appears before the

Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs on Tuesday. "We want to know why the money isn't there," he insisted.