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National First Nations Leadership Call for Canada to Honour Education Commitments

(West Vancouver) At the Assembly of First Nations Special Chiefs' Assembly in Ottawa on December 9th and 10th, 2008, First Nations leaders from across Canada came together and challenged the federal government to meet its educational funding responsibilities to First Nations learners.

Specifically, the Chiefs-in-Assembly called upon the federal government to deliver the funding it committed to support the First Nations Education Jurisdiction British Columbia Act passed in 2006, and the Chiefs demanded immediate action to address the chronic under-funding of post-secondary education and First Nations languages education.

"I cannot understate the importance of the Chiefs-in-Assembly coming together on this issue. We are in a post-apology era, and Canada has stated in the throne speech that they are committed to improving education for First Nations students," stated Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, BC Regional Chief of the BC Assembly of First Nations. "Education is key to turning the page on a dark chapter in our history and to ensure that our children and communities have an enhanced quality of life and well-being. The government of Canada has the means to ensure educational success by honouring their funding commitments."

The Chiefs also rejected the federal government's new proposal guidelines for a 5-year, \$268 million dollar program to address First Nations school accountability and relationship building, saying the new guidelines were excessively heavy-handed. The First Nations Schools Association in BC, working on behalf of the province's 130 First Nations schools, also rejected the new guidelines, observing that they reflect neither consultations with BC's First Nations schools nor the effective school accountability processes those schools have developed over the last decade.

"First Nations in BC have always embraced the need for accountability, but clearly that accountability must be first and foremost to First Nations students, families and communities, and secondly accountability to government funding agencies," said Tyrone McNeil, President of the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC). "These highly prescriptive funding guidelines are part of a disturbing trend in government policy that just isn't compatible with the spirit of First Nations education jurisdiction that we are pursuing here in BC."

Representatives of FNESC and BC First Nations leadership brought several pressing issues to the table at the national meeting and came together in unity for the needs of their children, their people, and their communities. BC First Nations demand adequate funding that is comparable to that provided by the public education system if they are to provide a comparable education and opportunities for success.

The state of First Nations education is a concern and priority for First Nations leadership across Canada and, through the Assembly of First Nations, Chiefs from across the country are pursuing a coordinated national education strategy. It includes reasserting the vision of First Nations

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Control of First Nations Education, first articulated formally in 1972 by the National Indian Brotherhood.

Considering the economic down-turn that is being experienced worldwide, it is vital that Canada adequately invest in First Nations education now. First Nations are an integral part of Canada's future.

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