

FIRST NATIONS SUN



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We both are honoured to contribute a monthly column as part of the "First Nations Page" that is being initiated by the Winnipeg Sun. This is for us both a responsibility and a privilege to pay our small part. Given the tenor of the daily repertoire there is a need for a balance - to highlight aspirations, pride and achievements of First Nations people. Contrary to prevailing perceptions, as with citizens elsewhere across Canada, First Nations people want to be contributing and productive citizens. This perspective will guide our focus of the monthly columns.

Education, meaningful employment and economic development are the key building blocks by which to ensure a healthy and contributing individual, family, and community. Our future generation has to be equipped with the appropriate tools to ensure for themselves a better quality of life and opportunity. In an economy and society that is knowledge-based, education is no longer an option but a necessary condition. Education is viewed by our youth as the "new burlap".

Education has to be meaningful in that it meets the needs and expectations of a society and economy that is education and knowledge-based. We need to prepare our membership so that they too can attain opportunity as with others elsewhere across Canada. It is clear that First Nations need to have control and input to education. If there is to be an increase in duties and obligations, this must be accompanied by corresponding levels of resources.

Last, but not least, the focus must always be upon the student. A student-centric approach is what needs to be at the forefront. Accordingly, the envisioned and proposed community-based information session must focus on - equipping the students for the economy and society of 21st century and beyond. As such, it must consider the issue of ensuring students stay in school and, sustaining higher graduation rates.

In September 2013 and January 2014, the Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council convened on behalf the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Affairs Canada two major community based information sessions on education. These were held "without prejudice" and for informational purposes only.

Invited to each of the above information sessions were representatives from each of the 36 First Nations across southern Manitoba. The September session focused on the "blue-print" of the First Nations

Education Act. The participants sought to "deconstruct" the draft Act with the goal of providing informed analysis and critique.

For the January 2014 session, the focus shifted "towards a student-centric approach" to ensure that the interest, needs and expectations of the students do not get lost. Participants to this session consisted of Leaders, Band Managers, Principals, Directors of Education and Guidance Staff. Guiding-questions, specific to each group, were given to the five break-away groups. The day-long community based information sessions were marked by a high degree of commitment, dedication and passion from each of the participants.

Overwhelmingly, consensus was that through there was attempt to address the pressing issues, the draft Act did not address the root causes and obstacles that long stilled progress and, purpose that education is meant to serve - betterment of the individual and society. Furthermore, instead of autonomy and input from the local - that is the norm elsewhere in Canada - "control" of both process and decision very much remained with the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. Last, but not least, not only did the levels of funding lag far behind those prevailing elsewhere across Canada but also that the formulae to determine total of funding had not changed over at least two decades. Yet, so much had changed in the intervening period within the First Nations.

The sessions laid themselves for a communication and political strategy to disseminate information and perspectives. It is about lending voice to the idea that First Nation problems do not exist in an airtight compartment; they do not recognize or abide by the demarcations drawn by policy or benign neglect from the decision-makers and/or influencers. First and foremost, these are Canadian problems that ultimately will affect one and all - sparing none!

- Sharma and Daniels are Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council members