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PRESS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION

FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION: THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

Wendake (Québec), August 30, 2011 – The First Nations Education Council (FNEC), will not be taking part in the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education discussions. “It is no longer the time for speeches and analysis. It is time to adequately invest in the First Nations education system,” says the Director General of the FNEC, Lise Bastien.

The Director General of the FNEC mentions that the government possesses numerous reports that have been produced over the years, yet the majority remain ignored. The Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and the Final Report of the Minister’s National Working Group on Education (2002), put in place by the Minister for Indian Affairs, are two excellent examples. The Director General also points out that “in the last 25 years of our existence, the FNEC has had the opportunity to regularly consult its communities and has presented many well-documented reports on actions that are priorities in order to improve First Nation education. We know what the problems are and we know what the solutions are. Now it is time to apply them.”

Faced with the announcement of a National Panel, whose mandate will be to lead another consultation, the FNEC took some time before deciding not to take part in the Panel’s consultations. Wanting instead to take a more constructive approach, the FNEC united its efforts with the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), and the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) of Ontario in order to present the elements to include in the reference terms for this kind of panel. It is the lack of consideration for some of these elements that led to the final decision of the Chiefs of the FNEC to abstain from participating in the consultations spearheaded by the Panel and to instead, present a parallel report.

More precisely, even though a request was made on this subject, the Panel’s terms of reference do not contain any commitment to respect the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This Declaration represents, for all First Nations in the world, the result of more than 20 years of effort with the objective of specifying and enforcing their rights, including rights in education. “Not considering it is absurd,” affirms the Chief of the AFNQL, Ghislain Picard.

A commitment to respect the principles of the policy document, First Nations Control of First Nations Education (2010), was also refused inclusion in the Panel’s reference terms. This policy document, which is supported by all the Chiefs in Canada, was first published in 1972 (First Nations Control of Education), and even though it received official recognition by the federal government, it never obtained adequate support to be implemented.

Lastly, there has not been any further commitment to adjust the non-equitable financing (from the federal government) of First Nation schools as compared to provincial schools (funded by provincial government), which

constitutes a well-documented injustice towards First Nations youth and is denounced by the FNEC and all First Nations in Canada.

An independent report

To the three fundamental reasons mentioned above that led to the choice to not participate in the National Panel's consultations, other considerations are added, which include a concern for the lack of familiarity of the Panel members with the reality of primary and secondary education in the First Nations communities, along with a clear dissatisfaction that the mandate of the Panel is limited to primary and secondary education. "Moreover, since the process is non-binding, this leaves the government with all the necessary latitude to retain only the recommendations that suit its political agenda, including a new legislation that could be used as an opportunity to diminish the rights of the First Nations instead of enhancing them," warns Ms. Bastien.

One of the concerns that the Chiefs of the FNEC voiced in assembly, is the importance of bringing a positive contribution to each and every process that aims to determine action plans to improve First Nation education. Under the circumstances, it appears that the best way to contribute was to abstain from participating in the consultations of the National Panel and to jointly present with the FSIN and the NAN a parallel report. "We have enough information to define the measures needed to improve the education of our Nations' youth. The time when others decided what was good for us is over. Our education is our business," concludes Chief Picard.

About the AFNQL and the FNEC

The Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador is the regional organisation that groups together the 43 First Nations Chiefs of Quebec and Labrador. The First Nations Education Council is assembled by 22 First Nations communities in Quebec whose mandate is to support, promote and defend life-long education along with the unique cultural identity of the First Nations. For further information: www.avenir-future.com

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