BRITISH COLUMBIA
ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS

PRESENTATION TO THE INDIGENOUS ADULT & HIGHER LEARNING ASSOCIATION’S 8TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE: Building Our Capacity

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY
Gilakas’la, Greetings, Elders, Chiefs, ladies and gentlemen; I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today at the Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association’s 8th Annual Conference entitled ‘Building Our Capacity’.

My traditional name is ‘Puglaas’ and I come from the Musgamagw-Tsawateineuk/Laich-Kwil-Tach people of Northern Vancouver Island where I live, with my husband, in my village of Cape Mudge and where I also serve as a member of Council.

I want to begin by acknowledging the important work that educators do – you are helping to make a difference in the lives of every student you teach. Likewise I want to acknowledge all the students for your commitment to life-long education. Truthfully we all teach and hopefully we all continue to learn.

We are in an incredibly exciting time for Aboriginal peoples in BC and we have many opportunities that lie ahead of us. After years of being marginalized through restrictive legislation such as the Indian Act and federal policies designed to assimilate us, we are now re-building our Nations and rebuilding our societies and taking our rightful place in this country. Getting to this point has not been easy and there have been many struggles; and there will be more to come. However, the leaders who have come before us have set the foundation for the transformation. It is now our responsibility to ensure this transformation takes place. And all of us have a critical role to play; in ensuring that our people have the skills and the tools they and, in turn, our Nations need to rebuild.
Education is a priority of our National Chief and the Assembly of First Nations. The AFN represents the 633 First Nations in Canada. There are 10 Regional Chiefs of which I am one. Through our General Assemblies and Special Chiefs’ Assemblies, we receive direction. The Chiefs of Canada resolved during the Special Chiefs’ Assembly in 2010 to make education the major priority of the AFN.

In our region, we have developed an Action Plan to support the *Building on OUR Success* platform on which I ran for Regional Chief. We are implementing this plan. This plan has four key and inter-related pillars. Firstly, establishing strong and appropriate governance, which is a pre-requisite to social and economic success and which includes moving away from governance under the *Indian Act*; a wholly inappropriate framework for governance that needs to be replaced. To support our Nations we are developing a Governance Toolkit to help our communities navigate the various options and opportunities for moving forward beyond the *Indian Act*. This includes jurisdictions over education. The Toolkit will be officially launched at the BCAFN Special Chiefs’ Assembly and AGM in Vancouver on June 22-24, 2011.

The second pillar of our plan is “fair access to lands and resources”. Our Nations have never ceded or surrendered our lands and require access to our fair share of the resources beyond the small reserves that were initially set aside for us. We need access to land and resources to fuel our local economies, both traditional and new, and to settle long outstanding claims.
Thirdly and fourthly as part of our BCAFN plan we are focusing on the individual; on our citizens’ health and their education. There is no point going to court and defending our rights and title and creating opportunities if our citizens are not in a position to benefit from or enjoy those rights.

While the recent endorsement by all Nation States of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is very significant, and its importance should not be diminished, it is only really symbolic and actually quite meaningless if, on the ground, in our communities those rights are not translated into actual tangible benefits making the lives of our people better. To achieve this we need to strengthen our capacity and you, as educators and learners, are playing an important role. It matters very little if you have rights to self-determination if you have no capacity to use those powers in a constructive way. It means nothing to have access to lands and resources if our people cannot make use of the land or resources. It makes no difference if you have a right to languages and to practice your culture if those languages are gone or the culture has been destroyed. So the hard work is in our own communities and with our people - - who have been living under the shadow of the Indian Act for so long that in many cases it is hard to see the opportunities or if they do, cannot take advantage of them and get even more frustrated.

The good news is we are making progress and conditions are improving but not for all. While some of our communities are doing much better; others are not. And we can’t leave communities behind. This is why we also need to focus on the individual; we need strong, well educated
and healthy individuals in all our communities – to be leaders and champions of change. People like you.

We need to invest in our future. We need to invest in our people. We need to invest in education.

Adult education and post-secondary education is of course, an essential part of the lifelong learning journey. For me, like most of us, my education began at my earliest memories. I learned important lessons from a loving, determined and supportive family.

I was raised traditionally and was greatly influenced by my grandmother, Pugledee. She was an activist and was a very traditional woman, she was the matriarch of our clan, the eagle clan. I believe in the laws of our big house and understand the conduct that is expected of our leaders.

My mother was a teacher...still is a teacher. She taught in some of our remote communities and she had the fortune or misfortune of being my third grade teacher. I had many teachers that I remember, all of whom were enormous influences in my life.

While we have always taught our ways to our peoples, participation in the non-native education system has not always been easy or has come with a cost.

For a long period of our modern history, as I am sure most of you are aware, if our people went to university or college they lost their
registration as an Indian. This did not change until the 1951 amendments to the *Indian Act*. The first significant wave of graduates from college or university emerged in the 1960’s, which is not too long ago.

Today many of our people in colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes of higher learning are still often the first in their families to gain post-secondary credentials. This is, however, changing for my generation and the next ones. For me, both my father and mother went to university. My father was the second Aboriginal person to graduate with a law degree from the University of British Columbia. Both of my parents were very encouraging that my sister and I should go to university. We basically had no choice. We all need support, usually in the home but this is not necessarily always the case – the need for encouragement was identified in a recent study by the AFN that looked at post secondary education; trends and issues.

Our study found that encouragingly 7 in 10 First Nations’ youth do aspire to complete a post secondary education. However, the reality is that there are still barriers that are preventing our people from reaching their education goals. Lack of funding remains the primary barrier for our people living on-reserve.

Others identified problems with alcohol/drugs and pregnancy. Some said that post secondary education was not encouraged. Other factors included not being used to living out of the community and lack of academic qualifications. We have to address the barriers and
overcome them and you are helping to do this through work that you are undertaking.

The proportion of First Nation adults, who have completed a trade’s certificate, is now on par with non-Aboriginal adults. This is good news. Where we still lag is with respect to university degrees.

While we are graduating more First Nations’ students than ever before, what is troubling though is that the post-secondary attainment gap for degrees is actually growing. In Canada, 23% of Canadians have a degree. But for our people it is only 7%. Based on our numbers we require 65,000 more people in post-secondary than the 25,000 we currently have in order to achieve equity with the Canadian population. This gap must be closed.

The statistics show that with increased education the gap in employment rates between First Nations and non-Aboriginal people is essentially closed... meaning our people are active and equal contributors to the economy. This means billions of dollars a year could be injected into the economy if the gap was closed. This is significant and the government of Canada knows it and is acting not just from benevolence or legal obligation, but also self-interest. Canada as a whole also needs our people to be a more productive sector of the working population. This is because our peoples’ population is growing disproportionately to other Canadians and it will be our people that are needed to fill the jobs when the ‘baby boomers’ retire and there are less people generally in the workforce as a percentage of the overall population. So the success of First Nations’ people in post secondary
education and skills training is of vital interest to all Canadians as the country’s social and economic prosperity depends on it.

One way Canada supports our people in post-secondary education through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program. This has been a very successful program. In fact, I would go out on a limb and say that of all the investments made in our communities it has by far the highest return. However the program is falling behind and needs to be strengthened.

This post-secondary support program has been significantly impacted by the 2% funding cap on federal program spending for Indians. The number of First Nations’ students funded through INAC’s PSE program has steadily declined from 22,938 in 1997 to 18,729 in 2009.

The program needs more money and changes are needed in its administration. This was identified by the Auditor General. I also think we need to look at how we implement the program in our own communities.

While we continue to pressure the federal government to increase its support for adult education and post-secondary programs, we must also encourage our own governments to continue to invest in education. Many of our Nations, that have own source revenues, do supplement the monies they receive from Canada as there is no bigger investment in our future that can be made. While not all our Nations have own source revenue, when they do we need to encourage its use in education.
Making our own investments in education demonstrates that we are partners and Canada needs to step up and make the larger contribution to close the gap. Also, we do need to ensure that it is those students in our communities that truly need the money to go to school get it and that those that can afford it are looked at second. We also need to ensure that where we are providing support through our governments that we have clear policies on who is and who is not eligible and for what types of courses and programs, and the conditions under which funding is provided.

One of the problems is the way the current federal funding formulas work for Post-Secondary education. Funding is provided to our bands based on a per capita formula - not based upon need but upon the total amount of resources available to be distributed evenly across the country. The result; many of our Nations do not have the resources necessary to meet all of the actual needs of our members who wish to go to university or college while some Nations have money left over.

Under some funding agreements if First Nations do not use their post-secondary funding dollars they can reallocate this money for another purpose. A First Nation that uses all of its post-secondary education money but has greater need will not receive any more funding. This problem has more to do with funding arrangements than priority setting and these issues need to be looked at in the future.

We need a thorough policy debate in our communities on post-secondary programs and priorities and the federal program must be
strengthened. First Nations are willing to assist the federal government in this work.

In the 2010, Speech from the Throne, the federal government did promise to “work hand-in-hand with Aboriginal communities and provinces and territories to reform and strengthen education.” The federal government announced they will take “a new approach” to post-secondary education which will be “coordinated with other federal student support programs.” In the midst of an election campaign we have no indication of what this means. Whatever the change, change must support the critical role of education in our communities and our Nations must be fully engaged in any reforms. There must also be adequate financial resources. This change must also be tied to and support our aspirations for Nation building and governance reform and a discussion on jurisdiction over education must be part of it.

Our Nations are increasingly looking at how they can strengthen the education of our peoples by exercising broader jurisdiction over education as part of governance reforms.

All of the Nations in British Columbia that have comprehensive governance arrangements with the Crown have jurisdiction over education and most have jurisdiction over post-secondary education; this means they have law-making authority and not just in respect of administering federal transfers but rather with the establishment of educational institutions. I am not aware of any First Nation that has exercised jurisdiction over post-secondary education yet and there are only a handful of Self-Government agreements, but it is most likely
some Nations will go down this road to support the establishment or expansion of institutions of higher learning within their territories.

Of course there are already a number of institutes of higher learning for our people established under provincial jurisdiction represented by many of you here today and the work you and others are doing for all of our people is significant and greatly appreciated. Across the country there are 45 Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning located on-reserve with approximately 10,000 students.

As we move forward and deal with our changing environment, we must continue to look to develop new professional programs that recognize our changing needs and which value Indigenous knowledge. Our governments need to do this in partnership with Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning as we strengthen the capacity of our people and our communities. We can make use of expanded jurisdiction to help achieve this. As First Nations we do not want to simply be the consumers of education – we must be involved at all levels, from institutional governance, to research, to program development, to program and service delivery to ultimately enacting laws that oversee the delivery of educational programming to our people.

We need to ensure that there are and remain institutions of higher learning throughout the province and that are available to our students. In this regard the whole concept of webinars and distance learning is very positive. But still nothing beats the familiarity and support of local instructors and the ability to interact and share with other students. There is a need for more Indigenous faculty, cross-
cultural education, and more reflection of Indigenous identity. This means a focus on language, culture, history, and traditional knowledge.

UNICEF in 2009 noted that a key determinant of education success for Indigenous peoples is access to education which reflects Indigenous languages and cultures.

When asked about post secondary education in another AFN survey earlier this year our students identified that their Indigenous language and culture was important to them. Over 80% of the respondents agreed that our own institutions require greater recognition and support with many feeling that offering post secondary education programs in closer proximity to their community would increase accessibility. While access to funding for tuition was identified as critical; so too is funding for safe housing, childcare, and transportation.

To focus the work in education, the AFN has issued what we are calling a “Call to Action” on education and the AFN will hold whichever party or parties form the next government to previous commitments and move forward on our education agenda. We must succeed.

Before I close I want to come back to the theme of the conference ‘capacity building’ in the context of social change and the opportunities we have to rebuild. In this position I am fortunate to travel to many communities and listen to our political leaders and other leaders on the front line dealing with our Indian Act reality. Despite the opportunities and momentum for change, many of our people are afraid and do not know where to start and how to get past the Indian Act world. This has
a lot to do with our capacity to handle the change that lies before us. Change can only happen when the majority of our citizens are ready and can participate. One of the great ironies of our colonial experience is that in order to make significant social change our citizens have to vote the colonizer out in local community referendums. So we truly need well-educated citizens to participate in this change, to come out and lead this change. We need informed citizens to support change.

So in closing, I put a challenge out to all of you...to us. Ask yourselves, what more can I do to assist in this time of change and transformation? And not necessarily just in the field of education or at work but to become a part of a social movement for change and whether you are a member of one of our communities or not?

For all the Aboriginal people in this room, all of us have a Nation even if you live in a city or away from home. All of us have roots to territory which is different from any other Canadian. You also have rights to that land and to protect your culture, rights that are recognized not only in documents such as the UNDRIP but in our own Canadian Constitution under section 35 which is actually stronger.

Whether in your own community or in the community in which you work - or through the institution you represent - what are you doing?... or What can you do? The truth is we all can make a difference. To attend community meetings – to talk to family – to talk to neighbours – to inform ourselves and to do what we need to do to empower our people, realize our opportunities and finally remove the shackles of colonialism and the restrictive Indian Act system.
We have come a long way from a time when if our people went into post-secondary education they had to enfranchise and lose legal rights to today where we are running and controlling our own institutions of higher learning. The next phase in our history is the one that excites me most – where we use these tools of learning and all the other tools we have fought so hard for to rebuild our Nations and our societies - To take back that which was taken - To build stronger and healthier communities with thriving and practicing cultures.

Gilakas’la