First Nations language education:
The rights of our youth to reclaim their culture and identity

Submission to:
Students First! National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education

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About First Peoples' Heritage, Language & Culture Council:
The First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council (the First Peoples' Council) is a provincial Crown Corporation dedicated to First Nations languages, arts and culture. Since its formation in 1990, the First Peoples' Council has distributed over $21.5 million to communities to fund arts, language and culture projects. The First Peoples’ Council monitors the status of B.C.’s First Nations languages, cultures and arts, and facilitates and develops strategies that help First Nations communities recover and sustain their heritage. Our cultural heritage, and the living expression of our identities, is integral to the health of all members of our First Nations communities, as well as to the well-being of all British Columbians.

Discussion themes to be addressed:
iv. Specific features of legislation that could best address the unique needs of First Nation students
v. Tools other than legislation that would help to ensure that First Nation students have access to quality education
vi. Areas that would make the most significant difference in the success of First Nation education

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Executive summary:
The areas that would make the most significant difference in the success of First Nation education are language, arts and culture education. In order to achieve this success, education must create competency and not just awareness in First Nations languages and cultures. This can be done through total immersion, or language-only education, with integrated cultural education including a significant incorporation of arts. With respect to the specific type of legislation, existing legislation providing for minority language rights for French and English would be an appropriate model to follow for First Nations languages and cultures. In addition to legislation, there are numerous other tools that would support First Nations language and culture education. These include teacher education and opportunities for teachers to increase their language fluency, curriculum and resource development, documentation and archiving, preschool language immersion nests, language recovery and development, involvement of First Nation community language and culture experts, and significant incorporation of culture and arts. Above all, we are going to require the investment of significant financial resources to make implementation of any legislation possible. First Nations students have the right to access quality education in First Nations languages and cultures, and this right must be upheld by inclusion of language, arts and culture as part of any legislation pertaining to elementary and secondary education.
Submission text:

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1. Introduction: First Nations languages must come first

Any legislation relating to First Nations elementary and secondary education must make First Nations languages and cultures the focal point, as aptly expressed by residential school survivor Shirley Williams:

“the greatest thing the government can do as penance is to restore the language they destroyed and restore the pride in the culture of First Nations through the education system” (Brown 2011).

The rebuilding of the First Nations languages and cultures of Canada will require roles for schools, families and communities, accompanied by long term funding for regaining fluency in First Nations languages. Our submission calls for legislation providing for education in First Nations languages (immersion or language-only education), discusses specific features of such legislation, and outlines tools other than legislation that will be needed to support successful language education in the elementary and secondary school systems. Last year, our organization published the Report on the Status of B.C.’s First Nations’ Languages 2010 (Amhrein et al 2010; hereafter, Report on Status of Languages). The report provides the most up-to-date statistics on the current state of B.C.’s First Nations languages; we reference this report throughout this submission.

2. Education in First Nations languages: Competency, not just awareness

We recommend that the right to education in a First Nations language be mandated through legislation. Once legislated, education systems providing effective language education need to be supported. The most effective type of language education at the elementary and secondary level is language immersion.

The best known example of language immersion education in Canada is French immersion, which has been in operation since the early 1970s. Over the last 40 years, many studies have provided evidence of immersion students achieving high levels of proficiency in both written and oral French (e.g. Cummins & Swain 1986, Genesee 1987, Lapkin et al 1991). Furthermore, immersion students have been shown to equal or outperform non-immersion students in subject areas other than French (e.g. Turnbull et al 2001). Bilingualism in general has been shown to have many positive cognitive benefits (e.g. Bialystok 2005).

French immersion is intended for children whose family heritage is other than French where the goal is for the child to learn French as a second language. Another model of language education (with similar advantages) that may be better suited to the First Nations experience is the francophone school model, such as the Conseil Scolaire Francophone in British Columbia. This model is intended for a child who has at least one parent of French heritage, whether or not that child has learned French as a first language before starting school. For students who have not learned French as a first language prior to beginning school, it is in effect an immersion environment for such students. According to B.C.’s Conseil
Scolaire Francophone de la colombie britannique (2011):
    “Francophone schools allow their students to live, to learn and to develop the French
culture, and to be active participants in the francophone community. In
other words, it exists not only to address students’ academic needs, but to help them
explore and develop their francophone heritage...French language and francophone
culture in the classroom are a natural extension of children’s family and community
life.”

Thus, the philosophy of the francophone school model, along with its student eligibility criteria,
is different from that of French immersion schools. Moreover, English is gradually phased in
to the French immersion program in British Columbia so that up to 75% of the program may
be in English by grades 11 and 12 (B.C. Ministry of Education 2011) whereas francophone
schooling takes place entirely in French from kindergarten to the end of high school (Conseil
Scolaire Francophone de la colombie britannique 2011).

In British Columbia, there are at least twelve First Nations language immersion
preschools. At the elementary and secondary school levels however, we are only aware of two
schools that offer any immersion programming. First, there is the successful Xit’olacw
Community School in Mount Currie, B.C., which offers immersion in the Ucwalmicwts language
from preschool to Grade 2 (http://www.lilwat.ca/community/education/xitolacw-community-
school.cfm). Second, there is Tsecel’tqen Clleq’mel’n, Chief Atahm School, a Secwepemcetsin
language school located on Adam’s Lake Reserve near Chase, B.C. (http://new.chiefatahm.com/).
The school offers preschool immersion, K-3 immersion and
grades 4-7 bilingual education. Students in the school achieve high levels of proficiency in the
Secwepemcetsin language along with a solid academic foundation.

    “ ‘We think that if we offer a quality education here, [our graduates] will be prepared to go
anywhere,’ says Robert Matthew, the principal at Chief Atahm for the past 16 years. ‘And
history has proven it’s true. Our students here are well prepared for the public school
Grade 11 and 12, and many have gone to university or colleges’ ” (Hyslop 2011).

We were disappointed that the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary
Education did not visit Chief Atahm School during its regional visit, and highly recommend
that the panel consult with the school in the preparation of the final report.

Many schools in British Columbia, including both band-operated and provincial
schools, have been offering classes in First Nations languages for decades, with little success
in increasing language fluency. Typically, these classes are offered for a minimal amount of
time per week. The Report on Status of Languages found that of the 75 First-Nations-
operated schools in B.C. reporting, the average number of hours per week spent on language
was 1-4 hours/week. While offering language and culture at this frequency increases
awareness, it does not provide the opportunity for students to develop even basic levels of
competency in practicing their language and culture. Awareness is not enough; students must
be able attain competency in a First Nations language in order to achieve the benefits that
such competency can afford. Beyond the documented examples of increased language
fluency and academic achievement in students in immersion or language-only programs,
there are other potential benefits. We suggest that there is also a correlation between First
Nations students being connected to their language and culture, and their completion rates
and success in school. Though there is no known research to support this connection, there is
plenty of anecdotal evidence. For all the above-stated reasons, we advocate for a full
immersion/language-only elementary and secondary school system which we believe will
contribute to the overall academic success of First Nations students.

First Peoples’ Heritage, Language and Culture Council
3. Recommendations for legislation

With respect to Discussion Theme IV (specific features of legislation that could best address the unique needs of First Nation students), there already exists legislation pertaining to language education that could be used as a model for First Nations language education.

Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms makes provisions for minority language rights. This section “requires provincial governments to provide education to Canadians in the official language of their choice, even in areas where a minority of residents speak that language” (Canadian Heritage 2008). For example, in provinces such as British Columbia, where French is considered to be in the minority, Canadian citizens have the right to have their children educated in French if “their first language is French, they received their own primary education in Canada in French, or they have a child who has received or is receiving his or her education in French in Canada” (Canadian Heritage 2008). At the provincial level, these rights to education are enacted through the part of the School Act dealing with Francophone Education Authorities. Under the School Act (B.C. Ministry of Education Governance and Legislation Branch 2011), “An eligible child of school age who is resident in a francophone school district, on application to the francophone education authority for that district, is entitled to enroll in a francophone educational program provided by the authority.”

Similar legislation could be enacted to provide for First Nations language rights, with adaptations relevant to the context. Firstly, under Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a child’s eligibility for education in French where it is a minority language is determined based on whether the parent’s first language is French and whether they received their own primary education in Canada in French. These eligibility requirements would need to be amended in the case of potentially eligible First Nations students. Due to the multi-generational assimilationist policies of the Government of Canada through the residential school system, parents generally do not have a First Nations language as their first language, nor were they educated in a First Nations language. Secondly, these rights apply “wherever in the province the number of children of citizens who have such a right is sufficient to warrant the provision to them out of public funds of minority language instruction” (Canadian Heritage 2008). Given the diversity of First Nations languages, especially within British Columbia (home of 60% of First Nations languages in Canada; Amhrein et al 2010), careful consideration must be given to the numbers of students that would be considered sufficient under any legislation. Nunavut’s Inuit Language Protection Act and Official Languages Act can provide direction in this area.

In sum, legislation is needed in order to ensure that First Nations students have the right to, and access to, quality education in First Nations languages and cultures, based on the model providing for minority language rights for French and English.

4. Tools other than Legislation: Supporting First Nations language education

To achieve the goal of successful language education in the elementary and secondary school systems, much more support will be needed outside of this system. Any legislation pertaining to the right to education in First Nations languages will be useless if not backed by significant commitment to providing long term financial resources to support such an education system. Along with support for the school systems themselves, there are several
other types of essential supports and tools, including:

- teacher education
- teacher fluency and literacy
- curriculum and resource development
- documentation and archiving
- language recovery and development
- preschool language nests (immersion)
- involvement of First Nation community language and culture experts
- significant incorporation of culture and arts

**a. Teacher education**

First Nations language schools will need qualified teachers, ideally from the communities in which the schools are located. This will require an increase in the number of teachers certified by the province. There are programs in place that support the training of teachers for First Nations language education. For example, the University of Victoria offers programs in Indigenous language revitalization that can lead into a Bachelor of Education in Indigenous Language Revitalization. There are currently two large cohorts of students from two language communities in British Columbia progressing through the program. While this cohort-model is new and has yet to be evaluated, initial results indicate that this is an effective way for multiple students from the same language community to complete their teaching certification. Much more financial support will be needed for all language communities to benefit from such programs.

**b. Teacher fluency**

Teachers in a First Nations language education system need not only be qualified to teach, they must be fluent enough to teach in the relevant First Nations language. The *Report on Status of Languages* (Amhrein et al 2010) found that only 4.6% of B.C.’s First Nations population are fluent speakers of a First Nations language. Among fluent speakers, only 8.1% are under the age of 45. In other words, most of the population who are of the age to be working as teachers are *not* fluent in their language. Thus, teachers will need to have support to increase their language fluency.

As with children, the best method for learning a second language is through immersion. This can be challenging in the case of endangered First Nations languages where the environment to provide immersion on a day-to-day level simply does not exist. However, a successful model has been developed to provide an immersion environment for learners of endangered languages: the Master-Apprentice model (Hinton 2002). The Master-Apprentice model is a one-on-one language immersion program. A “master” (a fluent speaker of a language) is paired with an “apprentice” (learner). The master and apprentice spend concentrated time together doing everyday activities using the language at all times. Since its inception in the early 1990s, this method has been very successful at helping adult learners become more fluent in their language. Since 2008, the First Peoples’ Council has funded and provided support, resources and training to Master-Apprentice teams in 21 different languages with very good results. However, long term financial support is required to provide the opportunity for potential language teachers to become fluent enough to teach their language.
c. Documentation and archiving

Curriculum materials and other language resources for First Nations language education will need to be created through language documentation. The Report on Status of Languages (Amhrein et al 2010) found the following with respect to language resources in British Columbia:

- Only about 31% (53) of communities have recordings of their language available as a community resource. The quality of many of these recordings is poor.
- Only about 52% (88) communities have any sort of curriculum materials for teaching the languages. Many of these curricula are very limited and have not been developed for many levels of language learners.
- Only about 39% (66) communities reported to have access to a FirstVoices.com archive of their language, which provides language recording, documentation and archiving technology.
- Communities need to be consulted and involved in the development of language resources.

Because the majority of fluent speakers of First Nations languages in B.C. are elderly and aging (52.4% over the age of 65, and 39% aged 45-64; Amhrein et al 2010) there is an urgent need to document and archive languages so that effective teaching materials can be developed.

d. Building a foundation: Preschool language nests

The elementary and secondary education system should be part of a continuum of language learning from early childhood to adulthood. We must mobilize every generation including the healing of parents and grandparents who were punished and ridiculed for speaking their language. At the preschool level, language education can begin through preschool language nests. The language nest model was developed for Indigenous languages in New Zealand and then Hawaii, and has decades of evaluation validating the success of the model.

In preschool language nests children under five years old and their parents are immersed in their language, culture and an environment that encourages healthy families and building strong intergenerational ties. Community resource people participate as language and culture experts, and preschool language nests teachers are either fluent speakers or are in the process of becoming fluent speakers in their languages. Preschool language nests address the need to create more speakers from younger generations. In addition, preschool language nests create opportunities for young parents to learn the language and bring it back into their homes and daily lives, which is necessary for revitalizing a language.

The First Peoples’ Council has funded and provided support, resources and training to eleven B.C. preschool language nests in different communities, but much more financial support is needed to reach all First Nations language groups.

e. Community involvement

Achieving successful First Nations language education system will require the support of the whole community. We need to look to our own community experts and support them to be involved at all levels. One way that the First Peoples’ Council has been developing community-wide language initiatives is through the Language Authority and Language Plan.
Development Program. In this program, all communities with the same language are asked to come together to collaborate in spite of geographical challenges, dialect, political and community differences. Communities are asked to work as a team to share resources, knowledge, funding, resource people, infrastructure, and expertise to develop a Language Authority and Plan for language revitalization.

The purpose of Language Authority and Language Plan Development is to:

- Govern language related initiatives
- Develop long term language revitalization strategic plans
- Approve work done on the language
- Develop language-based policies
- Take responsibility for the revitalization and future of the language
- Develop a viable and sustainable plan for community language revitalization
- Plan and implement language revitalization projects
- Certify language teachers

The existing Language Authorities could provide the basis for establishing a province-wide First Nations language education school board. The First Peoples’ Council has funded and provided support, resources and training to Language Authority and Planning projects from twelve different languages (including all dialects of each language) in British Columbia, but as with the other types of tools outlined above, much more support is needed.

f. Significant incorporation of culture and arts

The legislated disruption of First Nations languages was mirrored in the disruption of the entire cultural context, including artistic practices and expressions, and their transmission across generations. Any education systems or legislation intended to contribute to First Nations student success, language competency, and cultural pride must include tradition-based arts and culture. The artistic practices bring forth language that is otherwise unspoken, and therefore facilitate language and cultural understandings that are not otherwise possible. For instance, the various and specific weaving traditions of First Nations offer teachings related to a broad range of Indigenous knowledge linked to traditional lands, histories and cultural and social structures. The gathering and preparation of materials require scientific knowledge related to botany, the environment, weather, and the seasons, as well as cultural protocols that address relationships to the land, plants and animals. The processes of creation involve complex techniques, mathematics and planning. When our children are immersed in this knowledge, and gain competency in these deep cultural understandings there is the possibility of walking with cultural pride because it is experienced, rather than simply understood as a concept or theory.

When our children can think and dream in their languages there is also the possibility of imagining in the language from a place of cultural competency. It is the imagination that creates the future.
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the areas that would make the most significant difference in the success of First Nations education are language and culture education. In order to achieve this success, education must create competency and not just awareness in First Nations languages and cultures. This can be done through total immersion, or language-only education, accompanied by cultural education. With respect to the specific type of legislation, existing legislation providing for minority language rights for French and English would be an appropriate model to follow for First Nations languages and cultures. In addition to legislation, there are numerous other tools that would support First Nations language and culture education. These include teacher education and fluency, curriculum and resource development, documentation and archiving, preschool language immersion nests, language recovery and development, involvement of First Nation community language and culture experts, and significant incorporation of culture and arts. Along with these tools, we must provide support to communities and opportunities to network and share. We must demand more accountability and acceptance from schools. For example, there are many non-First-Nations principals who don’t support language education. Above all, we are going to require the investment of significant financial resources to make implementation of any legislation possible. First Nations students have the right to access quality education in First Nations languages and cultures, and we recommend that this right must upheld by inclusion of language and culture as part of any legislation pertaining to elementary and secondary education.

References


