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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

First Nations Education Funding

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, February 15, 2012

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[*Translation*]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION FUNDING

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. The national panel mandated to evaluate First Nations elementary and secondary education, created by the federal government and the Assembly of First Nations, released a report last week recommending positive measures for First Nations education.

The panel's recommendations come in addition to several reports released over the past few years that reiterate what everyone already knows: First Nations communities lack a truly organized education system, and resources and investments earmarked for students on reserves are significantly less than those earmarked for students in provincial school systems. An earlier report calculated that First Nations schools receive between \$2,000 and \$3,000 less per student than provincially run schools.

The government has all the facts it needs to rectify the situation and develop a funding formula tailored to the needs of First Nations students and communities.

Madam leader, what is your government waiting for to eliminate the gap in funding for First Nations education?

[*English*]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): I thank the honourable senator for the question. I hasten to add that there was also an excellent report prepared by the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, which I am sure Senator Tardif would have wanted to acknowledge and support.

We have obviously received the recommendations of the panel. The government, most particularly the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, is working now to quickly study these recommendations.

As I have said before, with regard to Aboriginal education, this is something that the government will work on in partnership with our Aboriginal leaders and communities.

As honourable senators know, we have signed five education partnership agreements with the provinces and First Nations. In January, Minister Duncan was proud to sign the British Columbia First Nations Tripartite Education Framework Agreement. This was a very good program in which to participate. There is every indication that very good results will come of it. Since coming to office, the government has built 22 new schools; and last month, it tendered for a new school in Attawapiskat.

• (1400)

[*Translation*]

Senator Tardif: The panel finds that most First Nations schools clearly do not have enough resources to help their students succeed. They have fewer books and computers, classrooms are overcrowded, and there is a huge disparity in the salaries of the teachers and principals.

Given the extent of the current underfunding and the urgency of the situation, the panel is recommending immediate financial measures.

My question is simple: will the government follow through on these urgent recommendations in the next budget in order to reduce the growing gap in education funding for Aboriginal children?

[*English*]

Senator LeBreton: The government acknowledges, as did the report, that serious issues need to be addressed. The Crown-First Nations meeting held in late January focused almost exclusively on economic opportunities and education for Aboriginal youth. The government takes this matter seriously. Significant progress has been made. I assure honourable senators that the government realizes the severity of the issue. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development and his parliamentary secretary will take measures as quickly as possible to address these many concerns.