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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

First Nations Schools

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, June 7, 2012

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FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I was saddened and concerned to learn this week that First Nations schools in my province of Alberta are being shortchanged \$15 million a year in funding compared to their provincial school counterparts. The numbers come from a new joint study by provincial, federal and First Nations staff that also found that an average of 39 per cent of children and young adults on reserves across the province are taking a pass on school altogether.

Honourable senators, there are huge gaps in funding between First Nations schools and provincially run schools. What is the government prepared to do in light of these alarming figures?

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, the honourable senator has asked about the specific situation in Alberta. As she knows, Aboriginal education issues are very predominant in the activities that the government has undertaken.

• (1410)

Canada's Economic Action Plan 2012 includes a significant investment of \$275 million in First Nations education. It builds on major investments our government has already made over the last six years to improve outcomes for First Nation students, including the building of 37 new schools on reserves and negotiating partnerships with the provinces and First Nations across the country. We have some very good examples of working with the provinces to achieve very good results.

We are also committed to working with First Nations and other stakeholders toward legislation that will establish the structure and standards needed for a strong, accountable education system on reserves; and we are exploring ways to provide stable, predictable and sustainable funding for First Nations education.

As an aside, honourable senators, I attended the meeting of the ministers of the Crown and leaders of the First Nations in January. The issue of access to proper education and funding were at the top of the list. We have made a very good start and have been investing in programs since we formed government.

With regard to the specific school to which the honourable senator refers, I would have to ask for more detail.

Senator Tardif: I thank the minister for looking into this particular situation in Alberta. However, I had asked a similar question last February that dealt generally with what the government planned to do to close the gap in funding. The leader assured honourable senators that the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development would take measures as quickly as possible to address these serious concerns. It is now the month of June. Will the leader make the commitment to take the \$100 million proposed in the 2012 budget to deal with this particular situation?

Senator LeBreton: In fairness, honourable senators, what the honourable senator asks of the government is being done by the government. The report prepared by the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples dovetailed very nicely into an independent report commissioned by the government. Certainly, it has been the focus of the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs every week this year and before. Great steps have been taken.

Through our jobs and skills training programs, the Prime Minister and I have said on many occasions that, as we develop the resources in the North, in particular those areas where there are large Aboriginal communities, it will be in everyone's interest that these jobs be available for the people who live in those communities, who in many cases are Aboriginal. Great effort is being put into skills training for Aboriginal people. Their economic status in the country will be greatly enhanced if these jobs are available to them and they have the skills to perform those tasks.
