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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

First Nations Education

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, June 18, 2014

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

Hon. Claudette Tardif: My question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. As I advised you in writing last Monday, I would like to ask you a question that was sent to me by Doreen Rabbit of Alberta, who is the chair of the Saint Kateri Catholic School Board and a member of Alberta's Blood Indian Reserve. Her question is as follows:

[English]

In September 2012, Blood Indian parents opened the Saint Kateri Catholic School on the Blood Indian Reserve. We are the only private Catholic school on an Indian reserve in Canada. Our school has met all the requirements from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development and our teachers, facilities and school curricula have been granted accreditation by Alberta Education.

Despite this accreditation, the Band Council's Education Authority has refused to provide the Federal funding it administers for educational services. No reason has been provided for this refusal. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development states that it is not responsible for funding the school because the responsibility for the administration of education has been transferred to the Blood Band Council under a five year agreement. However, this delegated administrative authority does not empower the Federal Government to violate denominational school rights guaranteed by sections 120 and 121 of the Indian Act.

The Government has a legal duty to respect the denominational school choice of First Nations. Will the Government take action to restore this right and ensure that Government services are provided within a policy framework that respects the existing statutory provisions?

[Translation]

Hon. Claude Carignan (Leader of the Government): Thank you, Senator Tardif, for sharing that question from Ms. Rabbit and, I

believe, Mr. Wallace, who is part of the Saint Kateri Catholic School Board.

Our government believes that First Nations students deserve a quality education, like all Canadians. I was informed that, since 2006, we have invested \$100 million so that the Blood Indian Reserve and the Kateri school board can offer education services to the Blood tribe. They are in the best position to determine how best to provide those services. We will continue investing in students.

Since 2006, we have invested over \$10 billion to support primary and secondary education for approximately 117,500 First Nations students on reserve and we will continue to support them.

Senator Tardif: I have a supplementary question. I am asking this question, not Ms. Rabbit. It would seem that those in charge of the school board are concerned about the application of section 121 of the Indian Act, which states that a band's Catholic minority in a band can establish a separate school on reserve.

You are saying that it is the government's responsibility and that you have provided funding to the council on the Blood reserve. The government still has the responsibility to ensure that rights are respected. Will the government make a decision on this file and provide a satisfactory reply to this group of parents?

• (1440)

Senator Carignan: As I said, senator, the Blood Band and the school board are in the best position to make decisions about the best way to provide these services. We will continue to invest in students, particularly by investing considerable amounts of money in supporting the primary and secondary studies of First Nations students.

Senator Tardif: Mr. Leader, you have delegated these responsibilities to a third party that does not respect these rights. That does not relieve the government of its obligation to make a decision to ensure that the rights of these groups are respected. Will you accept that responsibility?

Senator Carignan: As I said, senator, those two organizations, the Blood Band and the school board, are in the best position to make decisions about the best way to provide these services. We will continue to invest in the students by making sure we support the primary and secondary studies of First Nations students on reserve.