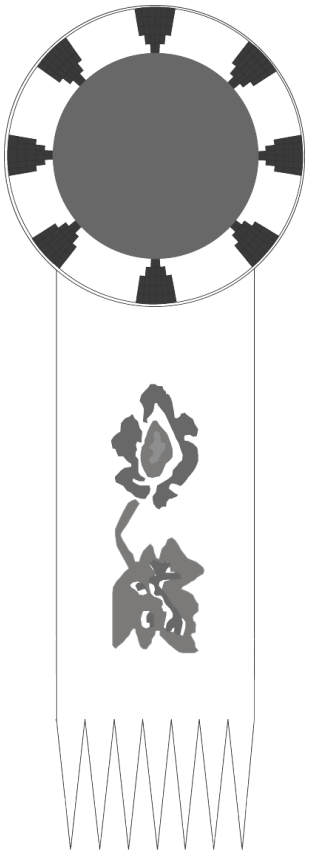
Native Women's Association of Canada



EARLY LEARNING & CHILD CARE

~ *April 29, 2005* ~

An Aboriginal Engagement Strategy

An NWAC Discussion Paper

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EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE

1. Background

a) The Aboriginal Engagement Strategy

In cooperation with Health Canada (HC), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), Social Development Canada (SDC) is leading an engagement strategy on Aboriginal ELCC – Early Learning and Child Care. This strategy is intended to ensure that the five National Aboriginal Organizations[1] have an opportunity to provide input into the elements, challenges and opportunities for improving the integration and coherence of Aboriginal early learning and child care. The national Aboriginal organizations have been asked to consider how the 'QUAD' principles – Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Development – are meaningful for Aboriginal communities.

These discussion papers are the main focus of the Aboriginal engagement strategy for the national ELCC initiative. The discussion paper process is intended to build on the Aboriginal Lifelong Learning Roundtable process, which has held in November 2004, and previous dialogue activities on developing a "single window" approach for Aboriginal early childhood development (ECD) programs conducted under the 2002 Federal ECD Strategy for First Nations and other Aboriginal Children.

b) The Focus of NWAC's Discussion Paper

The purpose of NWAC's discussion paper is to address how any new investments in early learning and child care, and in particular the 'QUAD' principles, could be made more meaningful in a culturally sensitive manner. This paper discusses the elements, challenges, and opportunities for improving the integration and coherence of early learning and child care programs for Aboriginal children. This paper reflects Aboriginal research into early learning and child care and highlights best practices within Aboriginal communities. The paper also outlines the barriers to overcome in developing a national ELCC system that includes Aboriginal children.

In addition, this paper responds to the report and recommendations prepared by representatives from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), who recently visited Canada to examine the ELCC systems in place in four Canadian provinces.

As part of this process, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has prepared this discussion paper on Early Learning and Child Care for children in Aboriginal communities based on discussions with NWAC constituents across the

[1] *In addition to the Native Women's Association of Canada, the other four National Aboriginal Organizations (NAOs) include: Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) Métis National Council (MNC), and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP).*

country. A "wrap-up" session was held April 18, in Ottawa, to consolidate views and concerns from NWAC constituents. It is understood that NWAC's contributions will be used to inform the development of a federal action plan and accountability strategy for an Aboriginal component of any new national ELCC initiative.

In this paper, as requested as part of the Aboriginal engagement strategy, NWAC provides its comments and concerns about using a "single window" lens, to ensure that any next steps on the "single window" initiative are informed by an understanding of Aboriginal women's perspectives, priorities and concerns about how to move forward.

2. NWAC's Fundamental Concerns about Aboriginal ELCC

At the outset, NWAC representatives believe it is necessary to address the context which Aboriginal children, families and communities experience when it comes to the need for Early Learning and Child Care.

While there are very different circumstances in which Aboriginal children grow up across this country – whether on- of off-reserve, in urban environments to rural and remote communities, there are some very fundamental differences in our experiences from that of mainstream Canada. We challenge the governments, child care providers and experts and the public to make the effort to understand our concerns about the special particular needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities. The bottom-line is that we have an acute need for more early learning and child care than any other group in Canada, and current federal initiatives do not go far enough to address the "gaps" in service which we face.

a) Multi-generational impacts of Residential Schools

No group of children other than our Aboriginal children suffer from the direct and indirect, continuing and insidious, multi-generational impacts arising out of the trauma of the Residential School system. While there are a number of healing initiatives which have been supported across the country for residential school victims[2], their families and communities, there is still an unrecognized and unaddressed fact that our youngest suffer from the problems of family formation and care stemming back to the total assault on our language, culture and families. And, the higher rates of suicide in our communities also has a terrible impact upon our youngest, most vulnerable community members.

In terms of research, we urge people to go back to the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3, which addressed the need for new directions in social policy because of the legacy of the residential schools and the child welfare system imposed upon our communities.[3]

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[2] *We wish to acknowledge here support from the Aboriginal Health Foundation.*

[3] *In addition, there has been a further 10 years' of independent documentation, research and analysis of the multi-generational impacts of Residential Schools – often through the voices of victims and their families.*

b) *Indian Act* discrimination against Aboriginal women and children

Many Canadians seem to believe that the problems with the old Indian Act provisions which disenfranchised women and their children if they married non-Indian spouses, was addressed by the Bill C-31 amendments in 1985. That isn't true. The effects of the discrimination against Aboriginal women and their children continue to plague us today, because of the divisions it has created within communities and families. Many people who have regained their "Indian Status" as a result of Bill C-31 have not been able to return to live in their communities due to a lack of housing, child care, employment etc. and as a result there has been continuing disruption of family life. Before Bill C-31 there was the same lack of basic services on reserve and so, the situation was exacerbated by an increase in membership. Aboriginal women were often blamed for this result and so continue to be treated as "second class" citizens with subtle and not-so-subtle impacts upon the self-confidence of Aboriginal mothers, aunties, and children.

c) Aboriginal people are the poorest people in Canada

As all the research shows, poverty is the most significant factor affecting the development of the child – from pre-natal to pre-school stages, if a child grows up in poverty, she or he has greater disadvantages than the child growing up in a higher income household. We need not recite the statistics here – documented again and again by the United Nations and non-governmental agencies – that Aboriginal people have the lowest standards of living of any group in Canada. Too little has been done to address the income gap Aboriginal people face relative to other Canadians – and it is our children which bear the worst impacts of poverty.[4]

To be clear on this point: too many of our children grow up in overcrowded, poor quality housing, with problems arising from contaminated water, poor sewage, worse nutrition, lack of access to health and community services, living with families who do not have meaningful, stable employment. This is as much a concern in inner city environments as in remote Aboriginal communities.

d) Aboriginal children have greater health challenges

As a direct impact of higher rates of poverty, Aboriginal children experience greater health challenges. There is a range of handicaps which arise from lower birth weight, poor nutrition, overcrowding, higher rates of childhood disease, and Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), and lack of access to appropriate early interventions to promote health and well-being, assessment and treatment for underlying conditions. Substandard housing, particularly in the north and the lack of access to healthy foods due to prohibitive costs takes a further toll on the health of children.

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[4] *As Ontario Lt-Gov. James Bartelman has highlighted with his push to bring books to distant Aboriginal communities, too many of our pre-schoolers and students are handicapped in developing basic literacy and numeracy skills because they do not have access to the books in schools and at home which mainstream Canadians take for granted.*

e) There are more Aboriginal children with "special needs"

As a result, more Aboriginal children have "special needs" – and as a whole, our communities have less resources than anyone else to help these children get a "brighter future"![5] We are angry that governments find ways of excusing themselves from addressing the needs of our children, when Canadian parents living in the mainstream take it as a given that children with "special needs" have to have special supports. In a recent Toronto Star exposé on the shocking conditions Aboriginal children are growing up with in Northern Ontario remote reserves, it was noted:

> *A study of 1,800 children in Grades 1, 3, 5 and 7 in Sioux Lookout communities in 2003-04 found that more than 86 per cent were at least two grade levels behind in both literacy and numeracy, which would classify them as special needs students under Ontario's education system.[6] (emphasis added)*

David Kakegamic, the Education Director at the Sandy Lake First Nation is quoted, "I have 94 students on a waiting list for formal assessment, but no money to get that done. We need the resources to help our children be ready to learn at par with children in Thunder Bay or Toronto." (p. A24)

Meanwhile, the Indian Affairs official responsible for Education funding in Ontario, told the Toronto Star reporter the reason she turned down Sandy Lake's request for $104,000 to assess these 94 needy students is that she was not convinced they used a definition of "special need" consistent with definitions in other school jurisdictions. (p. A25) This kind of racist approach condemns Aboriginal children with special needs to permanent handicaps.

f) Demographically there are more Aboriginal children

Everyone knows that there are more young people in our Aboriginal communities, but policy makers do not seem to understand that this requires a more robust response. The funding formulas for early learning and child care which are used in the mainstream, do not address the fact that we have more children in our communities. This translates into greater need for both capital and operational support for child care facilities and programs.

g) There are more Aboriginal mother/grandmother/auntie-led families

Single families may be a reality in the mainstream – but it is different for Aboriginal children. As a result of family pressures, we have more mother, grandmother and

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[5] *One of the NWAC wrap-up participants noted that in her class of 28 kindergarten children in Happy Valley, Goose Bay, Labrador, **23** were recently diagnosed by provincial officials with FAE/FAS, but no treatment assistance has been forthcoming!*

[6] *"Making the Grade", Lousie Brown, reporter, Toronto Star, April 23, 2005, pages A24 – A26. See full story attached at Appendix A*

auntie-led families than the mainstream. Such single-led families often have fewer resources to help support our children.

h) There are more Aboriginal children in care

Many observers are talking about the latest "sweep" of Aboriginal children – by which we mean that a higher percentage of Aboriginal children are in "care" compared with the mainstream. This poses different problems to provide appropriate early learning and child care, because a foster family or institutional setting may not be able to access culturally appropriate programs and services.

i) There are higher rates of teen and early pregnancies

Again, the statistics are well-known, that there are more teen and early pregnancies in our communities. These early mothers may not have the necessary life skills to be good parents, and they need special supports that promote self sustainability so that reliance on social services does not increase. They require supportive services so that they can stay in school or enter the work force so that their children do not suffer from lack of opportunities.

j) There are higher rates of Aboriginal HIV/AIDS

Health Canada has been documenting the higher rates of HIV/AIDS in the Aboriginal population, but who stops to think what impact this has upon our youngest children when their mother or father is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Without the full range of treatment and support which exists in the mainstream for those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, our adults and youth have even tougher times being good parents.

k) There are higher rates of Aboriginal people in jail

A final reality which impacts upon parents and their children, is that there are much higher rates of incarceration of Aboriginal people – leading to more single-led families and children in care. In the case of Aboriginal men who have been in custody, it is important to consider what can be done to help reintegrate them into family life and parental responsibilities.

l) There are different issues for those living off reserve

Off reserve Aboriginal organizations and agencies must compete for "mainstream dollars" if they decide to provide culture based activities and services for urban Aboriginal children. This presents a huge challenge for these organizations and few are able to compete with other groups in accessing needed resources. In urban centers, generally, there may be more services available for Aboriginal people who live off reserve but few access these services due to the lack of a cultural component, discrimination, culture shock and a lack of trust in "mainstream institutions."

m) OECD ELCC Report

NWAC values the independent observations from the Report of the researchers from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. In particular, we want to underline that their findings that Aboriginal children are vulnerable because their parents are often on welfare or work irregular hours in low-paid jobs is accurate; along with the comments about Aboriginal communities suffering from exclusion, poverty and demoralization. We accept the central recommendation that there needs to be reinforcement of policies to support and include Aboriginal children in national ELCC initiatives – not as an "add-on" but as a core element of any new national initiative.

n) Conclusion

In conclusion, all of these factors contribute to a very different experience for Aboriginal children than in the mainstream – which need to be appreciated by policy and decision-makers along with professional staff working with our children and communities.

We believe that whether funds flows from the federal government directly, or through provincial governments to provide support for ELCC to all residents in their provinces, there needs to be greater acknowledgement of the different conditions which our communities experience – and the need for a more concentrated, comprehensive, integrated response to the ELCC needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities.

As much as there may be compounding negative influences, we must guard against making Aboriginal parents and extended family members feel guilty. We need to focus on supports that help build positive sense of self, responsibility and realistic strategies for supporting children, parents and families.

A strong theme from our NWAC representatives has been the need to encourage and provide for more community-based, grassroots input into policy and decision-making and program delivery. Whether it is in the consultations about a Yukon Child Care Act or in the deliberations in First Nations' Councils, Métis organizations, etc., there needs to be greater responsibility taken for early learning and child care – not as a "women's" issue – but as a fundamental need for our communities.

And, we urge people to take greater note of what Aboriginal women are saying – "hear our voices" – because the priorities, concerns and suggestions we are making can contribute to more effective interventions to support healthy children, parents, families and communities.

3. Visualization Exercise

As part of the Aboriginal engagement strategy, NWAC was invited to present a visualization of an integrated, coherent, QUAD-based ELCC system for Aboriginal children within a "single window" for ECD programs.

NWAC would like to record its concerns about the "single window" approach – which can mean a variety of things.

On the positive side, having access to more sources of support for Early Learning and Child Care to promote community-based Aboriginal programs and services would be a good thing. It could be facilitated by a common application approach, to access from multiple sources, the resources needed to build an integrated approach at the community-level. (See our ideas on elements of an Action Plan which follows in section 4.)

However, we have a real concern that "single-window" approaches can translate bureaucratically into some groups being excluded – for instance, when Indian Affairs or Health Canada set parameters for programs, non-reserve and Métis groups are told often they cannot access that federal assistance – which creates further inequities for Aboriginal children and their families. And, on the other hand, sometimes provinces respond that First Nations do not qualify for provincial assistance because they are a "federal responsibility".

Consolidation of programming within a "single window" can also make it easier in times of "budget review" exercises to cut-back and even eliminate Aboriginal specific programming.

What we visualize is the need for a national Aboriginal ELCC Council – made up of Aboriginal community representatives knowledgeable about early learning and child care – to advise if not actually direct federal departments and Aboriginal organizations on how best to support and promote better Aboriginal community-based programs and services – irrespective of whether the children are on- or off-reserve.

We visualize a scenario in which First Nations, Métis and Inuit do not experience exclusion and "bottom-of-the-barrel" attention, but rather a priority being given by policy and decision-makers to the absolute need for comprehensive strategies to improve early learning and provide better child care for every Aboriginal child.

a) Quality

For NWAC the "quality" principle of QUAD is key: every Aboriginal child should have access to quality – not second or neglected class – Early Learning and Child Care programs and services. What has to be faced, though, right now, is that we do not have quality services for all Aboriginal children – and there needs to be significantly increased national investment to ensure that those who have less get more!

NWAC wishes to record a concern about who sets the standards for determining how "quality" programming is provided to Aboriginal children and their families.

Not all of our community-based workers have the same degrees and certificates as mainstream workers, and yet they are vital in providing direct services.

We believe that there is a need to evaluate – with Aboriginal community representatives being full partners – whether current standards and licensing/monitoring bodies need to factor in Aboriginal experience to ensure that "quality" is not used to screen out our workers.

We believe that the Aboriginal ELCC Action Plan should provide for support for the development and retention of qualified Aboriginal child care and early learning staff in our communities.

b) Universal

NWAC's overriding concern about the principle of "universality" is that each and every Aboriginal child, no matter whether she or he lives on- or off-reserve is entitled to appropriate early learning and child care support.

In terms of reaching Aboriginal "special needs" children, as noted above, it must be understood that we have very different needs from the mainstream. While in a mainstream pre-school program, there may be a few children with "special needs", as a result of the circumstances of our communities a very high percentage of our pre-school children may have "special needs". As a result, programs and services must be able to serve each and every one of those children with "special needs", especially when a majority of the kids are in need.

We have a concern though, about the extent to which sometimes we adopt the Western approach of segregating people by "special needs", and we want to see a more inclusive approach which ensures that children are not categorized and excluded from contact and growth with each other.

c) Accessible

Again, NWAC's overriding concern about the principle of "accessibility" is that each and every Aboriginal child, no matter whether she or he lives on- or off-reserve is entitled to appropriate early learning and child care support.

The Federal government needs to do more to ensure that non-reserve and Métis children, parents, families and communities are not disenfranchised from accessing support because of income barriers and lack of culturally appropriate facilities, staff and programs whether in the inner city to the most remote Aboriginal communities.

It is crucial that "communities" not be defined in ways which limit programs to those living on a land-base. "Communities" are not just confined to a land-base, but include groupings of people, sharing culture, language, tradition, across all ages, sharing a sense of ownership, values, worldview interest and hopes – so let us be inclusive in our recognition of Aboriginal communities.

We visualize more outreach support being available so we can work with Aboriginal parents and connect their children into early learning and child care programs and services. We need more opportunities for home visits and working with parents to overcome their fears and lack of resources to access appropriate services.

We visualize assistance so we can purchase places for Aboriginal children to get into quality child care.

We visualize income support for grandmothers, aunties and other extended family members providing child care.

d) Developmental

In terms of the principle of "developmental support" we believe there need to have safe, secure, nurturing, and stimulating ELCC environments for all Aboriginal children, with culturally and developmentally appropriate learning models.

It is key to foster the child's spiritual, emotional, social, intellectual and physical development, and we need to find ways to build on existing Aboriginal language and cultural elements in programs – through the involvement of Elders, families and Aboriginal women in the design, development and delivery of programs.

We need more opportunities to share our stories – and learn from our traditional teachers and experiences of promoting healthy children and families. We need to support our value system of social inclusion and community.

It is important for mothers to raise good sons as well as daughters and to find ways to engage our Aboriginal fathers, men and boys in playing and being with our children.

We need to have more support for our family workers to be able to go and visit with mothers and families, especially the teenage mothers and fathers, to help them understand how they can help their children.

4. Action Plan

NWAC wishes to provide the following input into a new federal action plan on how to expand and improve Aboriginal Early Learning and Care Care through prioritizing investments, and clarifying roles and responsibilities, targets, and timelines. Our inputs build on the work of the Aboriginal Lifelong Learning Roundtable process, in which NWAC participated in November 2004, and NWAC's Background Paper: From the Womb to the Tomb, from October 2004.

a) Quality and Developmental Support

There needs to be support to for capacity development for existing programs and services and more Aboriginal people in Early Childhood Development.

There needs to be an increase in the number of Aboriginal child care workers.

There needs to be income support – recognition and compensation – for extended family members caring for Aboriginal children.

We need to have more training done in the community rather than forcing people to leave the community, which is especially difficult in rural and remote settings, where workers have to uproot or leave their own families, find accommodation and support in a strange environment, etc.[7]

Aboriginal community representatives need to be involved in defining our own standards or deciding whether we are prepared to adopt provincial ELCC standards.

We need to support outreach to parents, particularly the young ones.

We need to support culturally relevant programs and involvement of our Elders and women at all levels.

b) Universality

Every Aboriginal community needs Aboriginal daycare.

We need more support for capital and operational funding to build and maintain ELCC facilities, staff and programs.

There needs to be particular attention to closing the gap for Aboriginal children with "special needs" compared with the services available in the mainstream. People have to understand and design programs and services that at times are needed for the majority of Aboriginal children because of the effects of FAE/FAS, poor nutrition, health status, etc.

We need creative responses which work outside of the confines of federal/provincial program constraints – for instance, trying to get funding for wheelchair accessibility on-reserve, and being told we cannot qualify because of program criteria.

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[7] *As stated in NWAC's paper From the Womb to the Tomb:*
***Access and Increased integration**: The concept that lifelong learning is "from the womb to the tomb" must be embedded into all approaches to lifelong learning. For Aboriginal women access and increased integration into learning initiatives is essential however, basic supports are just as vital as access itself. This is particularly the case for single parent women, low-income families and those living in rural and isolated communities. Some basic requirements for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women and their children attending education and/or skills training programming include affordable housing, adequate funding for school supplies, safe, reliable and accessible daycare facilities, culturally appropriate, gender specific sexual health education (and adequate, accessible, confidential provision of reproductive health supplies and services), transportation, access to telephone lines, internet connection/hardware and resources such as mentoring and coaching for learning at home and in the community. (Page 3)*

c) Accessibility

We need transportation assistance – to ensure parents can get their children to the early learning and child care programs and services. This is a particular problem whether on-reserve or in rural and remote areas where there is no public transportation system.

We need more outreach workers and advocates to work on behalf of parents and families who need services for their children.

We need respite care for parents and extended family members to give them relief when dealing with children with special needs.

We need more trained resource teachers and assistants in our communities.

We need more support to encourage parents to not be ashamed and feel judged if they have a child with "special needs".

We need support for life skill development, especially for the very young parents, single mothers, those with HIV/AIDS, those returning from custody, etc.

There needs to be more support for community planning and integration of services to ensure that there is seamless transition from pre-natal to infant, pre-school and early school programs and services.

d) Moving Towards a Single Window

NWAC supports a single, simplified application process to access the necessary resources to support community-based Aboriginal Early Learning and Child Care programs and services.

NWAC supports modified reporting requirements to end the overlap, duplication and waste of resources which our communities experience in having to meet different reporting requirements from Health Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and the new Public Health Agency, etc.

NWAC is concerned that there inequities built into a number of federal programs – and example we heard was that in Ontario there are four program consultants through the Public Health Agency to support the 75 CAPC and 34 CPNP projects[8], while Health Canada also has four program consultants for the 19 Aboriginal Head Start projects. We recommend that more resources be directed to the community level so that we can design, develop, deliver, monitor and support our own programs.

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[8] *CAPC = Community Action Program for Children, as known as Brighter Futures program; CPNP = Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program*

We propose Aboriginal ELCC Council – made up of community-based Aboriginal representatives knowledgeable about ELCC to advise if not actually direct federal departments and Aboriginal organizations on how best to support and promote better Aboriginal community-based programs and services – irrespective of whether the children are on- or off-reserve.

The government needs to understand that "accountability" is not about our communities always having to report "up" about our activities, but also, the government needs to be accountable for providing the appropriate resources and tools so that we can provide the support needed in our communities. We need to be able to see where there are gaps in the support the government is providing by getting full reports on what it is doing – not just how our communities are managing!

There needs to be recognition of the fact that there is a patchwork of different Aboriginal ELCC programming across the country. For instance, the Ontario Government supports a "Healthy Babies, Healthy Children" initiative which is available to Aboriginal communities, but a number of other provinces have no comparable initiatives.

We need to support a smooth transition from pre-natal to infant to pre-school to early school programming in our communities.

e) Evidence-based programming

NWAC representatives wish to state categorically to government that all the evidence-based research shows that programs work better in Aboriginal communities IF you trust our people to design, develop and deliver them!

We insist that governments involve community representatives from the "get-go" and not after the bureaucrats in Ottawa or provincial capitals have developed policies or programs.

There needs to be demonstration of increased trust and confidence in our ability to decide what's best for our communities.

Experience of NWAC participants has been that when communities are able to design programs, we can do so more effectively and efficiently than outside policy makers.

We believe it would be helpful in this regard to have a website supported which can be used to feature best practices, examples of community action, evidence-based research, etc.

Our Elders, traditional teachers, women and community members need to be fully involved and not just "experts" from outside our communities. We are committed to work in collaboration, in partnership, but with our full – not token – participation.

f) Funding

NWAC's position is that Aboriginal parents should not be charged fees when Aboriginal children access daycare. We have even heard of situations when Aboriginal parents have daycare subsidies, and the daycare then turns around and charges that parent a higher rate "because you are being subsidized". Subsidies should be income-tested.

There needs to be more capital funding provided – not just initially for construction of new facilities, but on a continuing basis over time to provide for expansion as needed and up-keep and replacement of facilities.

There also needs to be recognition of the fact that in many Aboriginal communities – on-reserve and in rural and remote areas – that there is a lack of community infrastructure, which makes the construction and upkeep of daycare facilities more expensive than in the mainstream. A particular problem is the lack of adequate public transportation facilities, so transportation support assistance is vital.

We need support, too, for what are called "ancillary" services – for example, many of us have started out with snack programs, only to realize that we need to be providing full breakfasts and lunches so that children get good nutrition, and often we are told that food is not an allowable expense under one program or another. We often have to rely on food donations and volunteer efforts to make sure our children get well fed.

We need funding for supportive services for parents and not just their children. This is what we mean in the Aboriginal community about a holistic approach to services – not just focusing on need without addressing the full range of other needs.

We need funding for physical access improvements to create barrier-free environments, whether for a wheelchair, a child who is seeing or hearing-challenged.

We need funding for recreational equipment. We ask policy makers and funders to contrast the experience of a city daycare where child care workers can take children out to a local schoolyard or park to access recreational equipment, whereas in our communities there is often a deficit of community recreation facilities and equipment.

g) Human Resource Development

NWAC believes that there needs to be support for our own regulation system so that our cultural competencies can be recognized and respected.

We urge governments to understand that if you under-resource Aboriginal Early Learning and Child Care, then you will produce increased burn-out and loss of quality services for Aboriginal children and families.

The annualized funding and reporting project-based system is a problem; we need to see long-term continuing resourcing for our programs.

Aboriginal communities are not supported to provide comparable benefits so we end up losing many qualified people to the mainstream systems.

We need to bring the trainers to the people at the community level. Our women staff with children, in particular, cannot leave the community to access training because they do not have a support system to look after their children and families.

There needs to be more support for long distance education and satellite learning too.

There is a need for on-going professional development and upgrading of skills by our staff.

h) Priorities

NWAC urges government to understand that communities need the capacity and respect for identifying their needs.

We believe the proposed Aboriginal ELCC Council should be given scope to set ELCC priorities.

Flexibility needs to be built into the Aboriginal ELCC system.

There needs to be more coordination with the funding support through Aboriginal Resource Development Agreement holders (the ARDAs) to support more training of early learning and child care workers.

Federal funding for ELCC which flows to provinces should be used to close the gap in Aboriginal ELCC too.

i) Evaluation

There needs to be focus on results – we need to measure success better, but we should always be mindful of the full needs of the child, the physical, mental and spiritual.

We need to focus on what the individual child's capacity is.

Children who are cared for and participate in the community will become leaders in our communities.

There needs to be measurement in the fullest sense of "quality of life" and not just educational achievement levels. Being happy, fulfilled and maintaining your life is a good thing in its own right.

Keep in mind the holistic sense of child development – focus on how children interact developmentally and culturally.

We need to track Aboriginal language retention and cultural awareness.

We need to track measures of increased family involvement with children.

We need to track the increase in volunteers and how we are getting people in our community more involved.

j) Data systems

As is apparent from the Auditor-General's reports, federal departments do not have good data systems on how our children are doing – in large part because federal departments continue to try to collect data without involving our communities as full partners and owners of data.

There is almost no reliable data available to track effectively early childhood development and Aboriginal participation in ELCC. This needs to be addressed in any new policy initiative by working with our communities to build data collection in from the start, through our direct participation.

We should look to the experiences of some of the Alternative schools to learn from their best practices around data collection.

k) Accountability Strategy

NWAC accepts that Aboriginal ELCC accountability plans should include strategies to report on:

- descriptive and expenditure information on all early learning and care programs and services;
- proposed indicators of availability/accessibility; and
- proposed indicators of quality and developmental programming.

However, there needs to be more support for sharing stories of our success and our experiences.

We need to look at other indicators too, such as community acceptance and involvement in ELCC; increase in volunteers, increased participation of Elders, etc.

We need to see if we have built a system in which there is seamless transition rather than gaps as children, youth and adults move through the stages of life.

5. Conclusion

NWAC is prepared to work with federal departments and other Aboriginal organizations to ensure that a concentrated, comprehensive strategy to support quality, universal, accessible and developmentally-focussed Aboriginal Early Learning and Child Care.

Our families and communities do not want to condemn another generation of children to lack of opportunities for growth by depriving them of the most appropriate start on life. We believe Canadians support equity for Aboriginal children too, and we challenge the federal and provincial governments to ensure that programs and services are developed with us to meet the real needs of our communities – from the womb to the tomb!

APPENDIX "A"

Making the grade: Gap between native, non-native schools growing. Students don't get the support they need to learn.

Louise Brown, Toronto Star -- April 23, 2005

Up here north of 50, in a town unmarked on maps and unlinked by road to anywhere at all but primeval woodland, there lives a genius girl who may be doomed.

She looks like any 9-year-old, perched at her bedroom computer in T-shirt and jeans, downloading Eminem and giggling at "South Park versus The Simpsons."

But Kayla Rae has a gift. She can do math better than 99 per cent of kids her age anywhere, not just here in North Spirit Lake, a tiny fly-in reserve northwest of Thunder Bay.

The psychologist who tested Kayla says she could grow up to be anything she wants; she could be the one to cure cancer, she's that smart.

"I can do Grade 6 subtraction and I'm only in Grade 4," she boasts. "My teacher Joseph lets me stay for lunch to do extra work."

Kayla loves to learn. She has only missed two days this year at her seven-room grade school; both times she was sent home with a fever.

But there's more to Kayla's story. She keeps falling asleep at her desk. She has been crying lately after school and she won't tell teacher Joseph Farsang why. Last week, she bombed a quiz that Farsang was sure she would ace.

And there's something else. Her shoulders slump, she falls back in her chair and drops her eyes.

"I can't read," Kayla mumbles, hanging her head. "I don't know how." Anywhere else in Ontario, a 9-year-old non-reader who is fatigued and depressed would unleash an army of experts, from reading specialists to social workers. There might be an annoying wait, but help would come.

But not here, in fly-in communities like the 24 that make up Sioux Lookout District First Nations, which stretches from Lake Superior to Hudson Bay.

Here, that safety net so taken for granted in the south disappears, and some of neediest children in Canada are left without the help they need to learn.

There is no literacy consultant Farsang can ask why a child with an almost photographic memory for numbers cannot master her alphabet. There is no social worker here, 660 kilometres from Thunder Bay, to listen when Kayla speaks of an aunt who hanged herself.

This is ground zero of the growing education gap between Canada's native and non-native children.

In native schools on reserves, which are paid for by the federal government instead of the province, educators say there is too little help for children with heartbreaking need.

Local communities say they are left to run schools with empty bookshelves, loose teaching requirements, rampant turnover, no mandatory curriculum, no system for checking how well students are doing and no money to fly in experts to determine why even bright students like Kayla sometimes can't learn.

Here, in tiny grade schools sprinkled across the north, Canada's booming ranks of First Nations children start to fall to last place. By Grade 12, nearly 60 per cent will drop out in frustration and either head home or hit big-city streets, roughly twice the dropout rate anywhere else in Canada. A study of 1,800 children in Grades 1, 3, 5 and 7 in Sioux Lookout communities in 2003-04 found that more than 86 per cent were at least two grade levels behind in both literacy and numeracy, which would classify them as special needs students under Ontario's education system.

At first glance, the tangle of obstacles facing these children seems insurmountable; the hunger pangs of poverty, the brain damage and hearing loss of fetal alcohol syndrome, the mistrust of education among families still living with the memory of residential school abuse, the inherited despair of a welfare community where as few as 1 in 4 have jobs; the truancy of children whose parents are often addicted to crack cocaine and alcohol.

Just last Monday in North Spirit Lake, the school cancelled classes because only 20 of the 70 students were sent to school.

But dysfunctional families bear only part of the blame.

Canada's auditor-general has sounded the alarm twice in five years over woefully inadequate federal funding for native schools, and Ottawa is slated to meet with aboriginal leaders next month in a policy retreat to seek ways to shrink the learning gap.

Locally, a small number of band councils have been guilty of steering education dollars away from the classroom.

And some communities are just too small and remote to have the police and social services to ensure the kind of calm and safe environment that children learn in best.

Yet no matter how small the fly-in reserve, it will have a grade school, which is why native leaders have zeroed in on schools as the place where change must start.

In Northern Ontario, a group of native educators say they have the makings of a plan for schooling that could be a first step out of the despair that has haunted these communities.

They admit it takes heavy lifting to remove the obstacles facing these children, but that's exactly what specialists like speech pathologists, psychologists and occupational therapists are trained to do. These consultants used to be flown into remote reserves back when Ottawa ran the schools 20 years ago.

So now Sioux Lookout District wants to bring them back, so struggling children here get the same help as they would anywhere else in Ontario. Moreover, they also want to make schools a hub that can reach out and address some of the larger social issues, from parenting to literacy.

They believe that the cycle of despair can be broken slowly, child by child.

Without it, the future seems grim.

What hope is there for bright prankster Samuel Meekis, a North Spirit kindergarten student whose birth defect means he cannot speak, cannot fully hear and breathes through a tube in his throat?

A Winnipeg doctor has said Samuel needs speech therapy every day, but the closest therapist is in Thunder Bay.

Samuel's classroom aide, Chrystal, has no special training. She spends much of her time answering school phones, because the secretary was laid off earlier this month when funding ran out. When Chrystal does find time for Samuel, she teaches him sign

language from a book, even though no one else in town knows sign language, including his mother.

What hope is there for Gerald Ignace, an affable 12-year-old who has brain damage caused by fetal alcohol syndrome?

Gerald is North Spirit's unofficial Welcome Wagon; wandering the streets pulling his empty red wagon, he greets visitors with cheery questions.

"Do you have a dog? What's your mom's name?"

The next day he will ask them again.

In school, Gerald also has an aide called a "tutor-escort" who admits he has no notion how to help the boy learn. Angus Rae sets a timer for Gerald to sit still for 15 minutes and copy down words. Gerald can't understand what he reads; he just copies the symbols. Psychologists say he would be better off learning life skills like how not to poke people or wander into homes without knocking.

This is why you need people who know how to evaluate special need, say the educators of the Sioux Lookout District first Nations.

"The social factors facing our children make our special education caseload so much higher than other places, but we have no resources to help them," says David Kakegamic, education director at Sandy Lake First Nations, a fly-in reserve north of North Spirit.

"I have 94 students on a waiting list for formal assessment, but no money to get that done. We need the resources to help our children be ready to learn at par with children in Thunder Bay or Toronto," he says.

Through a proposed $5-million pilot project called Saving Our Children, the Sioux Lookout District Education Planning Committee has called for social workers, reading consultants, speech therapists and psychologists to fly in on a regular basis to help figure out how best to help children like Kayla, Gerald and Samuel.

The plan also urges the creation of pre-school centres, adult literacy programs, parenting help, books for the community and annual eye and ear exams in the schools.

It is a first step, but an indispensable one. The alternative is another generation of children ill-equipped with the skills to graduate from high school, go on to higher learning and become informed citizens ready to take decision-making roles at home and in the wider world.

So far, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has rejected the proposal.

Meanwhile, a growing chorus of native and non-native advocates say the current system has gone on long enough:

Canada's Auditor-General Sheila Fraser slammed Ottawa last November for failing native children who live on reserves. She said school funding is so inadequate compared to provincial public schools that it will take 28 years for them to catch up to the high school graduation rates of their non-native peers.

Former Premier Bob Rae was so alarmed by the learning gap between native and non-native children as he reviewed post-secondary education for the Ontario government that he called for a plan to encourage more native students to pursue higher learning.

Ontario Lieutenant-Governor James Bartleman, whose mother is Ojibwa, is so concerned about the reserves he calls "Ontario's Third World" that he has sent more than a million books to fill the empty class shelves and will start summer literacy camps

this July. He has twinned 100 northern native schools with schools in the south, which have pledged to send books to fill the empty library shelves.

"It's just criminal that the same opportunities are not in these isolated communities," said Bartleman in a recent interview. "If they don't get educated, they have disdain for themselves and others, they become a menace to themselves and others and in the end, the taxpayer picks up the cost."

MP Andy Scott, Canada's Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, praises Bartleman's book drive as a "value-added" gesture, but agrees it doesn't let Ottawa off the hook for improving native schools.

He says education is now recognized as the key to closing the sizeable gap in quality of life between native and non-native communities.

"The past is full of examples of failed efforts to solve the problem ... but it's fair to say education is the driver on closing that gap. It's one of the most critical issues," said Scott in an interview yesterday. He said a policy retreat May 31 will see government and aboriginal leaders seek ways to shrink the learning gap, and admits "much more money will be needed."

But artist Saul Williams says native children are not getting a fair shake.

"I'm sorry to say it, but these are racist standards at play across the north, and a whole generation of children are being cheated right here in Ontario," says Williams, education director at Weagamow First Nations, a fly-in reserve an hour north of North Spirit by bush plane.

"Where else would there be such a double standard? Our children don't have the same opportunity as other children in the same province."

While the per-student operating grant on a reserve school is not always vastly different from the per-student grant anywhere else in Ontario - about $7,500 a year - its buying power can be only half as strong, say educators, because of the high cost of doing business in the north.

These are isolated communities where everything has to be flown in and out, so even bananas for a morning snack program cost $4.45 a kilogram. Communities cannot afford their own psychologist or speech pathologist, and it can cost up to $4,000 to send a student and accompanying adult to a big city such as Winnipeg to see a specialist.

Unlike the 2 million children in public schools run by the province, whose reading and math skills are the focus of a new Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and squads of roving specialists who visit schools preaching the latest reading techniques, children on reserves are on their own.

Schools are "encouraged" to follow the provincial curriculum, but no one checks to make sure that's the case, and there's no money to conduct the kind of regular testing that happens elsewhere in the province.

Teacher turnover is rampant because the isolation can be brutal. It often costs $400 by bush plane, each way, to reach the nearest library, gym or coffee shop. Joseph Farsang is the third teacher in Kayla's class this year. It doesn't help that the conditions can be rough. North Spirit's teachers' quarters had no heat or running water for weeks this winter.

In the rest of Ontario, teachers are required to have a university degree. Many remote reserves have native teachers who did not finish university, and sometimes not Grade 12, but who earn an abridged form of a bachelor of education degree recognized only

on reserves. The abridged degree was itself an attempt at a solution, because it can be easier to train a local resident to become a teacher than to attract and keep more educated professionals from down south.But even fully certified teachers like Joseph Farsang can feel over their head.

"I step into my class where half the students have some sort of special need, and I feel like I have stepped into murky, fast-running water that follows the rules of the wild," he says.

"We are in survival mode here, and many teachers give up and leave, heartbroken for life."

His Grade 5 students read at a Grade 1 level. Teacher Laura Marchand's Grade 8 students read at a Grade 4 level. Marchand, a retired Vancouver Island principal, doubles here as principal in her spare time, on weekends.

In truth, Marchand feels more like a social worker, keeping close watch on the girls who are thin, not because they are on diets, but because there is no food at home. She quietly slips some of them food.

But while she weeps openly for children who live in homes of such poverty and neglect, she dare not ask too much lest she be compelled to call Children's Aid and lose another student to foster care far away.

"It's very discouraging to work with these dear children who have so many problems and no resources to help them. It was easier running a school of 580 students in the south than this small school of 70 children."

Two years ago, leaders of the Sioux Lookout District First Nations became so alarmed about their students' poor achievement that they pooled $500,000 from their special education budgets, added $90,000 from Health Canada and hired a psychologist to come in and test them.

In the largest study of its kind in Canada, Thunder Bay psychologist Mary-Beth Minthorn-Biggs assessed 1,800 children in Grades 1, 3, 5 and 7 across 22 native communities over 2003-04. She used the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, which measures reading, vocabulary and simple math ability and tested each child twice within one school year.

Her results were devastating. More than 86 per cent were at least two grades behind. In Ontario schools, any child lagging that far behind would be classified as special needs, and extra funding would kick in for each student. Funding doesn't work that way for schools on Indian land, which get an extra 11 per cent added to their overall education funding for all special education needs.

To learn why students scored so poorly, the Sioux Lookout chiefs then hired Minthorn-Biggs to take in a team of doctors, community workers, a psychologist and academic assistant to conduct full medical, educational and home assessments on 130 children at Sandy Lake.

Again, these results were shocking;

53 per cent of children had a hearing or vision problem that interferes with their learning;

71 children need glasses for distance, yet only five have been prescribed glasses;

23 per cent had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder, which affects short-term memory, hearing, impulse control and intelligence;

54 per cent of children said they do not have enough food to eat. "Where is the parity for these Canadian children?" asks Minthorn-Biggs. "When someone immigrates to

Canada, we welcome them with the gift of education. We guarantee them all the opportunities provided to children who were born here; supports that range from special education to ESL.

"But with First Peoples, it's different. I know we can't change what happened in the past. We can certainly work to ensure these beautiful children have the same opportunity as my kids have in the city."

Sioux Lookout District education directors like David Kakegamic and Saul Williams were so outraged at the results, that they proposed an urgent $5-million, three-year pilot project called Saving Our Children, which would fly in a team of assessment experts twice a year to these communities to evaluate the children, and assign one special education resource teacher for every four communities to work closely with the schools on helping needy students. It includes early literacy and pre-school centres, adult literacy programs to encourage parents and grandparents to read with their children, parenting help for families, books for the community and annual eye and ear exams in the schools.

But the government has said no. The proposal was turned down more than a year ago by Katherine Knott, director of education in Ontario for the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

This month, Knott also turned down Sandy Lake's request for $104,000 to assess 94 needy students.

When the Star asked Knott about the needs revealed by the Sioux Lookout study, she said she is not convinced it used a definition of "special need" consistent with definitions in other school jurisdictions.

"We're working with First Nations groups to develop some consistency and understanding over what 'high needs' really means and how you address it," said Knott in a telephone interview.

"Is there adequate funding to assess every student? No. Is there a need to establish priorities for education spending? Yes.

"Can the public purse support the needs of all these children? That's a difficult question."

Veteran teacher Anne Williams remembers when the public purse did better at supporting native students, back when Ottawa ran the schools and supported a system of regular assessment and support.

When Ottawa turned over control of native schools to First Nations bands themselves in 1991, it withdrew those supports.

Like school boards anywhere that complain they get too little money to do their job properly, native leaders say inadequate funding has left them helpless to serve the children.

"When I came here in 1984, we had reading specialists and speech pathologists and occupational therapists who would fly in to our communities to help the children; we didn't have to fly the kids and their families out," said Williams, a non-native Grade 3-4 teacher married to education director Saul Williams.

"We're so concerned about our kids' falling behind that a group of experienced teachers did our own unofficial assessment and found that in a school of 120 children, 92 appear to have special needs.

"But we have one special education teacher - and one is not enough."

For now, the Sioux Lookout District chiefs have enough money left to hire Minthorn-Biggs for one last visit to a few schools to run fleeting assessments on the most needy of their children. Wherever she alights, she gets a hero's welcome and is whisked off to see as many children as possible.

Sandy Lake's special education teacher Karen Petz was desperate for Minthorn-Biggs' help with several children who will not speak.

Draven is a favourite of this teacher with 17 years of experience in special education in Ottawa-area schools. The affectionate boy cannot seem to form words, but he understands what is being said and does a victory dance when he gets something right. He looks like a football player who has just scored a touchdown.

But Petz is winging it with Draven; trying two different tactics; teaching him simple sign language so he can communicate and trying to help him to begin to make sounds.

"Am I doing the right thing?" she frets. "I'm no speech pathologist. I desperately need help. An expert would know from the placement of Draven's tongue whether his problem is structural, or whether it's something else. An audiologist would know whether these children can't speak because they have partial hearing loss.

"And it's now always possible to detect the effects of FAS. These are things I need to know the cause of before I can really help these children.

"Without it, it's like knowing someone is dizzy, but not knowing why. You can make sure they don't fall down, but that doesn't stop the problem."

Draven smiles and sits at the table in the airy special education room at Sandy Lake's elementary school. Petz puts her fingers on either side of her mouth and pulls. "Eee," she sounds.

Draven mimics her and makes the sound. "Oh yay!" he calls out, when he hears himself.

"Oh yay indeed," Petz laughs, and gives him a hug.

From the sidelines, Minthorn-Biggs steps in. She asks him to touch his finger to his nose, to put up three fingers, to move pegs on a board.

Her hunch is that Draven's problem is "structural," that is, a problem involving the formation of his mouth, not a problem of intelligence or hearing problem. So she tells Petz to carry on with her program with Draven as quickly as he can go.

Another boy comes in who won't talk. He looks nervous. Minthorn-Biggs runs a number of quick exercises, then sets down her pencil.

"When did you go to bed last night, dear?" she asks him.

Late. "Were your parents there?" Yes. On a hunch, she asks if they were drinking.

Yes.

And in the gentle questions that follow, it becomes clear that the child lives in a home of drinking and fighting so frequent, he often goes to stay with a friend. Petz had not thought to ask this sort of question, but from now on she will.

"You can't learn if you're scared," Minthorn-Biggs tells Petz.

"It's always helpful to have a bigger picture."