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June 29, 2020

The Honourable John Horgan, M.L.A.
Premier of British Columbia
West Annex Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4
Premier@gov.bc.ca

The Honourable Rob Fleming, M.L.A.
Minister of Education
Room 124 Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4
EDUC.Minister@gov.bc.ca

The Honourable Scott Fraser, M.L.A.
Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
Room 323 Parliament Buildings
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Re: Mandatory First Peoples' Course in the BC K-12 Graduation Program

Dear Premier Horgan, Minister Fleming, and Minister Fraser:

For a number of years, with the support of our partners in the public education system, we have advocated for the inclusion of a mandatory course on First Peoples, or equivalent bundle of credits, as part of the BC graduation requirements. Recent events demonstrate the imperative for concrete measures to address racism in our society and the responsibility of the Province to act. Ensuring that every student graduates from the BC school system with an understanding of First Peoples' perspectives, cultures and histories is a widely supported measure that will contribute to significant change in the province. On behalf of the First Nations Education Steering Committee Board, I am once again reaching out to make this call for a change to the graduation program.

We renew this call in the context of events that have exposed to a greater audience how entrenched racism is in Canada and internationally, particularly towards Indigenous peoples. This includes:

- The handcuffing of a 12-year old Indigenous child and her grandfather at a Bank of Montreal in Vancouver in January 2020

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- Student protests and community backlash against a First Nations name for a Prince George high school in early 2020
- Racism in the health care system, including reports of BC health officials betting on Indigenous patients' blood alcohol levels in June 2020
- Government inaction and delay on the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls despite the final report's release one year ago
- Ongoing racism, cruelty, abuse and violence in policing of Indigenous peoples, including at least six Indigenous people killed by police in Canada between April and June 2020. An Indigenous person in Canada is more than ten times more likely to have been shot and killed by a police officer in Canada than a white person
- RCMP deliberately hitting an Inuk man with a truck in Nunavut in June 2020
- The RCMP's denial of systemic racism and Prime Minister Trudeau's subsequent acknowledgment in June 2020 that systemic racism exists all "across the country, in all our institutions, including in all our police forces, including in the RCMP"

While these events are devastating and have led to heightened awareness, there are countless other harmful incidences of racism that impact Indigenous children, families, and communities on a daily and cumulative basis, including within our schools. This situation points to the need for a deliberate and organized anti-racism strategy, which would include, among other components, a mandatory First Peoples course, or bundle of credits. Building awareness and understanding of First Peoples' perspectives, cultures and histories among all BC students would serve as an effective strategy to combat racism within the province, to the benefit of all British Columbians.

In the 2015 Office of the Auditor General's Report, *An Audit of the Education of Aboriginal Students in the BC Public School System*, the Auditor General described "racism of low expectations" in BC public schools towards Indigenous students, based on "preconceptions or biases stemming from social attitudes". We are deeply concerned that the Province has not done enough to address the racism of low expectations in our schools. Further, data from BC's annual province-wide Student Learning Survey (SLS) consistently shows that Indigenous students are more likely than non-Indigenous students to report being bullied, teased or picked on at school. For example, in 2018/19, 14% of Indigenous grade 4 SLS respondents reported being bullied, teased, or picked on all of the time or many times compared to 10% of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

This recommendation would not require the creation of a new course as a number of courses already exist which could satisfy the requirement, including English First Peoples 10-12, BC First Peoples 12, and Contemporary Indigenous Studies 12, which were developed collaboratively by First Nations educators and the Ministry of Education, as well as many locally developed courses.

FNESC has written a number of letters to the Ministry of Education recommending a mandatory First Peoples course. In response, the Ministry has asserted that First Peoples content (knowledge and perspectives) is integrated into every grade and subject area of the BC K-12 curriculum. Our analysis demonstrates that this is not the case. While we acknowledge and appreciate that the revised K-12 curriculum has increased First Peoples content in both the mandated learning standards and non-mandated supporting materials compared to the previous curriculum, First Peoples-specific learning standards make up only 5.44% of total mandated learning standards, and many grade 10-12 courses have no explicit mandated First Peoples content. As such, educators

may choose not to teach non-mandated supporting materials. Further, recent Ministry data demonstrates very low enrollment in a number of existing elective First Peoples content courses. For example, in 2018/19, only 439 students across the province enrolled in and received a final mark in English 12: First Peoples compared to 37,495 students in English 12.

A mandatory First Peoples course would be consistent with the Province's commitment to fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN Declaration) and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to bring the principles of the declaration into action in British Columbia through the implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. Article 15 of the UN Declaration states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.
2. States shall take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.

Call to Action #63(i) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission states:

We call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including:

- i. Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.

A mandatory First Peoples course would also support the Province's commitments in the BC Tripartite Education Agreement (BCTEA), in which the Province, FNESC and Canada agree to work together to make systemic changes to improve First Nations student achievement. Further, this recommendation aligns with the BC Teachers Council's new 9th Professional Standard of BC Educators that requires all K-12 teachers in BC to commit to truth, reconciliation and healing and to integrate Indigenous worldviews and perspectives into learning environments.

The First Nations Leadership Council, representing political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, have formally advocated for the mandatory course as well. The BC School Trustees Association, representing 60 school boards; the BC Teachers' Federation, which represents 43,000 teachers; and the BC Association of Institutes and Universities, representing a group of public post-secondary institutions, have also formally called on the Province to include this requirement. The support of these organizations speaks to the importance and achievability of this recommendation.

Concrete actions are needed to make BC and Canada safer for Indigenous peoples, and education is an important part of that work. As recognized by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "accommodation of Aboriginal culture and identity should be regarded as a core responsibility of public institutions rather than as a special project to be undertaken after other obligations are met. Educational institutions have a pivotal role in transforming the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society" (RCAP Vol.3, Gathering Strength, p. 478). Consistent with this, we

strongly recommend that the Province implement a mandatory course on First Peoples immediately.

Respectfully,



Tyrone McNeil
President

Cc: First Nations Leadership Council
All Members of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia
All School Board Chairs in British Columbia
K-12 Indigenous Education Partners Table
Indigenous Post-Secondary Education and Training Partners
Don Bain, Special Advisor, Office of the Premier
Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth, Representative for Children and Youth (RCY), Office of the RCY
Kasari Govender, Human Rights Commissioner, Office of the Human Rights Commissioner