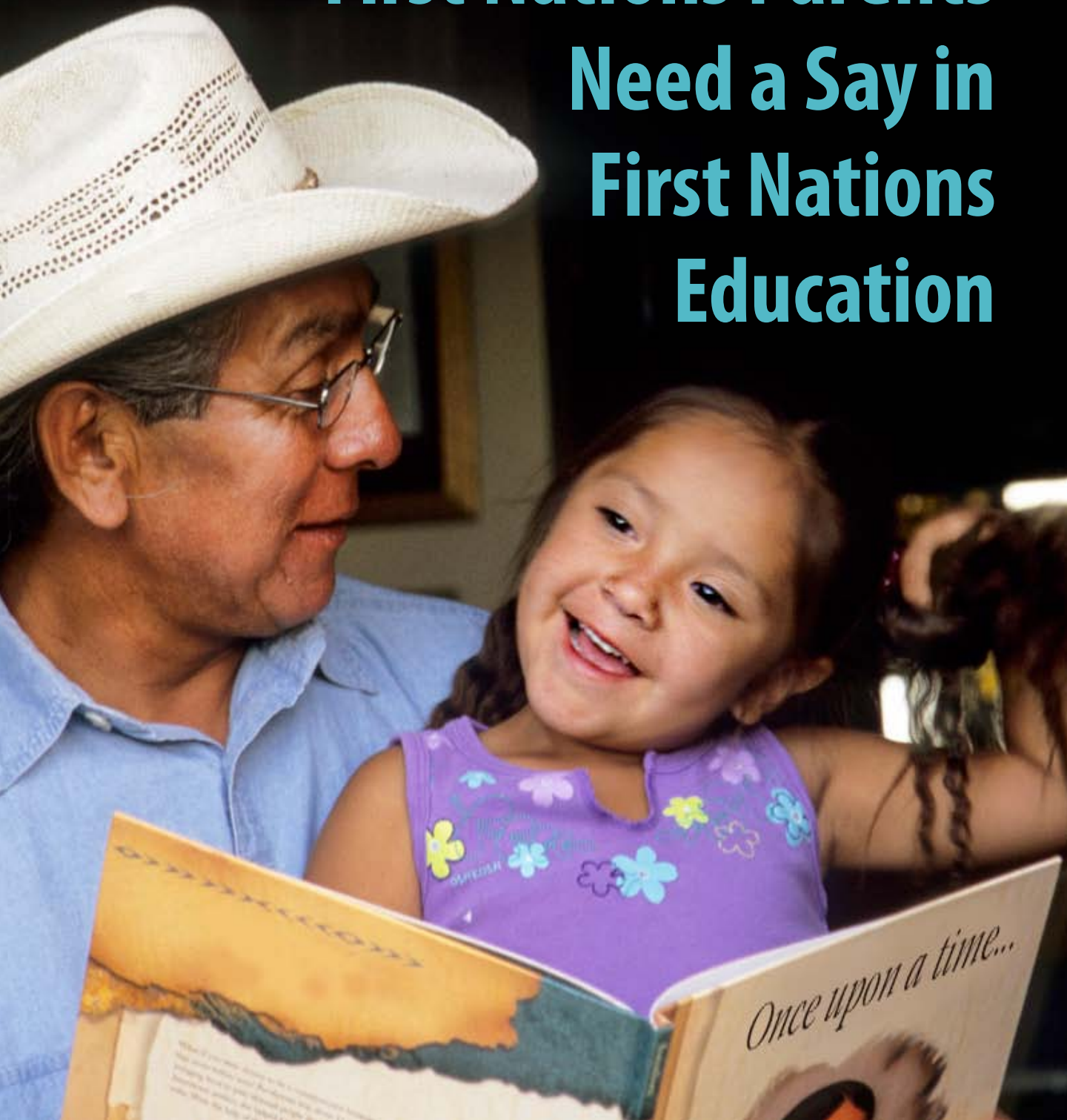


First Nations Parents Need a Say in First Nations Education



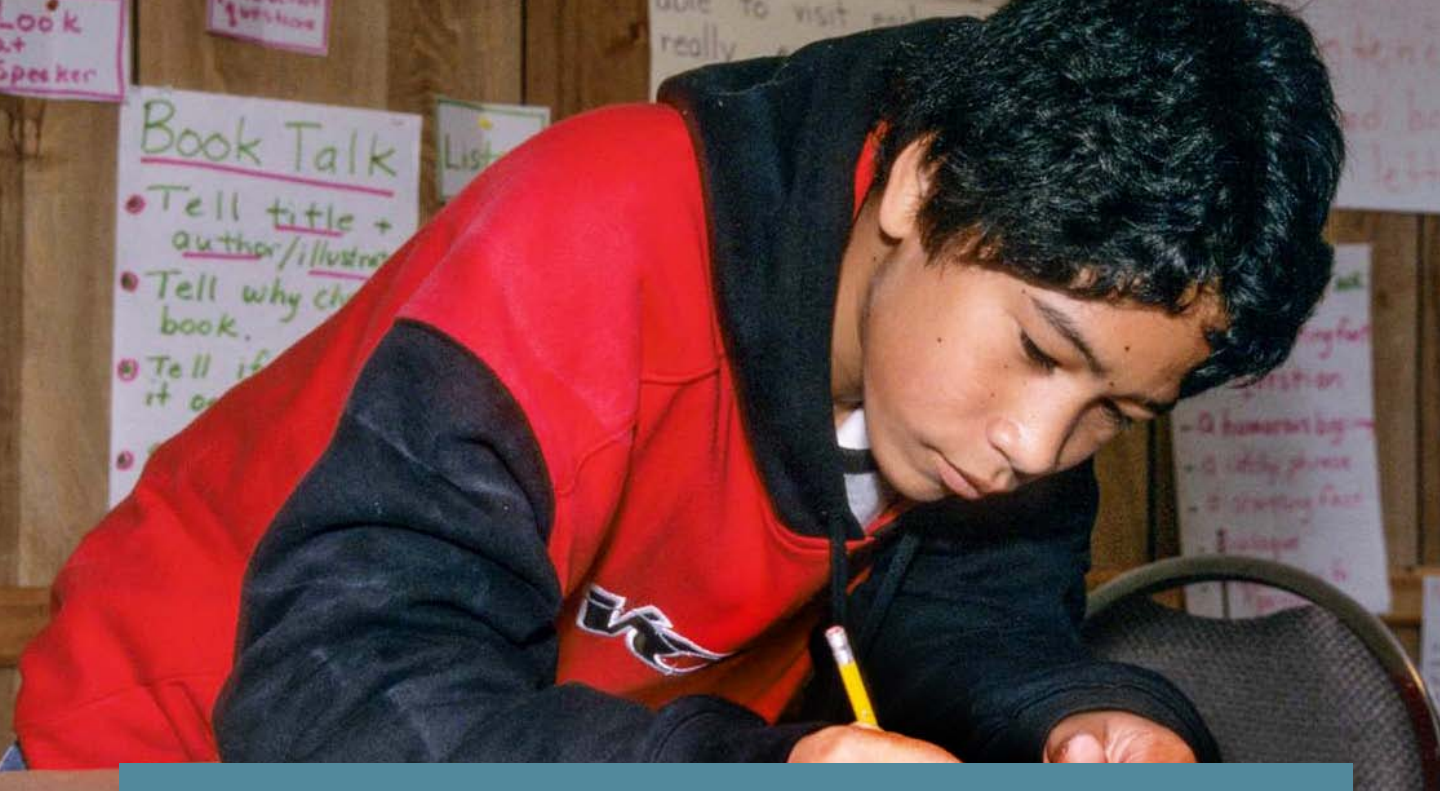
Ravina Bains

While the recent federal budget received much attention for its debt and deficit forecasts, a smattering of legislative reforms giving First Nations greater control of on-reserve education went largely unnoticed. Hand-in-hand with the proposed reforms, the feds also promised an additional \$1.25 billion in core funding for on-reserve education over three years, on top of the current \$1.5 billion spent annually. All of which was supported by the Assembly of First Nations.

There's no doubt that reform of the on-reserve education system for aboriginal students is well overdue. Less than half of on-reserve students graduate from high-school compared to the 80 per cent graduation rate for all other Canadian students. And 60 per cent of First Nations youth in their early 20s do not have a high school diploma compared to just 10 per cent of all other Canadians in the same age range. This lack of basic educational attainment is reflected in high unemployment rates on reserves—reaching an average rate of 23 per cent.

But the real question is not whether reform is needed but rather if the proposed plan enacts the right types of reforms. The answer to that question may depend on the meaning of “First Nations control of First Nations education” and whether this will be interpreted as protecting and strengthening parental choice or placing further control in the hands of First Nations political leadership.

The economist Milton Friedman once wrote “education spending will be most effective if it relies on parental choice and private initiative -- the building blocks of success throughout our society.”



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Interestingly, the Assembly of First Nations has expressed similar views about the importance of parental choice in education. In 1972, the AFN said “Indian parents must have control of education with the responsibility of setting goals. What we want for our children [is] to reinforce their Indian identity, to provide the training necessary for making a good living in modern society.”

But the existing structures for on-reserve elementary and secondary education vests control not in parents but typically in First Nations political leadership or education authorities. These authorities offer either on-reserve education or they can negotiate tuition rates for parents who wish to send their children to a non-reserve school. In either case, the federal

education transfers are used to pay for the education of on-reserve students. But should these authorities refuse to support an off-reserve option, parents have no recourse but to pay for their children's education privately or, against their wishes, send their children to the on-reserve school.

This is the key point. A parent's choice to transfer their child from a band operated school to an off-reserve provincial school should be respected and funding should follow the student.

Enabling and protecting parental choice in any First Nations education reform can ensure that on-reserve families are able to enjoy the same freedom of school choice that other citizens—both off reserve First Nations and non-First Nations citizens, now enjoy. At the end of the day, First Nations parents, not political leadership, should have control over their children's education.

The federal government and the Assembly of First Nations may well be putting First Nations students first by trying to find a common path forward on education reform. However, what is still unknown is whether the new plan will contain meaningful education reforms that will protect and strengthen parental choice. If, after all, parents have no real opportunity to choose the school that they believe is best for their children, real improvement will likely be a long time coming. ■



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