



Child welfare advocate Cindy Blackstock testifies at inquest into seven deaths

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The federal government has failed to provide equitable funding for education on reserves, much as it failed to put in appropriate funding for child welfare services, says First Nations advocate Cindy Blackstock.

Blackstock, president of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, testified about the First Nations education crisis at a Thunder Bay, Ont. inquest on Wednesday.

A jury is examining the deaths of seven young people who died after they had to leave their isolated communities to attend school.

"What I've seen in the evidence, in education, is the same pattern we saw in child welfare, which is for many years and in fact decades, the federal government has known that it underfunds First Nations education," Blackstock said in an interview prior to her testimony.

"That underfunding of First Nations education is directly linked to poor outcomes for First Nations students that get in the way of the lives they wish to have."

The inquest, which is being conducted in phases, is exploring what happened to 15-year-old Jethro Anderson, 18-year-old Curran Strang, 21-year-old Paul Panacheese, 19-year-old Robyn Harper, 17-year-old Kyle Morrisseau, 15-year-old Jordan Wabasse and 15-year-old Reggie Bushie.

Their deaths occurred over a decade — from 2000 and 2011 — but they endured a shared struggle that impacts First Nations kids across the country, Blackstock said.

"I've often said when I think about education, I think about Shannen Koostachin (from Attawapiskat)," she said.

"There was a girl who was going to school and there was a high school in her community, but it was so underfunded, there's no way that she would have had the education she needed."

Canada has been placing First Nations kids in situations where their deaths are far more likely, Blackstock added, noting Koostachin died in a car accident while trying to get to school.

"When you send 13 year olds off to go to school hundreds of miles away because they are denied an equitable education ... there's something really wrong with that," she said. "That's setting them up for a lot of risk."

Many communities lack high schools, which forces young people to live in boarding houses closer to available facilities, said Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler.

Fiddler's organization, which represents northern Ontario reserves, is one of the parties with standing at the inquest.

"For the most part, you don't have a choice but to go to high school — whether it is in Sioux Lookout or Timmins or Thunder Bay," he said in an interview earlier this year.

It's an experience that Fiddler knows first-hand.

"I was one of those kids," he said.

The Liberal government has said improving education outcomes for First Nations children living on reserve is critical to improve their quality of life and to build stronger communities.

In Finance Minister Bill Morneau's first budget released last week, the federal government earmarked \$2.6 billion over the next five years for primary and secondary schooling in communities — though the government extended its window from the four years outlined in its campaign platform.

The funding also significantly ramps up in later years, with \$801 million set to flow in the last year of the five-year period, which falls outside the Liberal mandate.

Blackstock said the government's current fiscal plan means children will continue to experience discrimination while growing up.

"When you think about it, if you have a child in Grade 8 right now, they're not going to see that money until they graduate from high school," she said.

In January, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled in favour of Blackstock's society and the Assembly of First Nations after a lengthy legal battle on child welfare spanning nine years.

It found First Nations are adversely affected by the services provided by the government and, in some cases, denied services as a result of the government's involvement.

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