



Press release
For immediate release

**French Language Reform Bill:
Hope of strengthening the French language and considering the reality of First Nations in
Quebec**

Wendake, May 13, 2021 – The First Nations Education Council (FNEC) and the Chief Responsible for Education, John Martin, have some reservations about Bill 96: An Act Respecting French, the Official and Common Language of Quebec tabled today by the Minister Responsible for the French Language, Simon Jolin-Barrette which would amend the *Charter of the French Language*.

First Nations strive to protect, value, and promote their Indigenous languages, and acknowledge the Quebec government's aim to do the same with the French language. However, the FNEC and Chief Martin cannot remain silent about the negative impact the latest version of the Charter will continue to have on First Nations who have also been fending off linguistic and cultural assimilation measures for decades.

The Minister Responsible for the French Language could have made a bold move by including provisions that would safeguard Indigenous language and culture without deteriorating the French language in Quebec.

- The FNEC is appealing to the government to modernize the preamble of the Charter by updating the legislative wording used when referring to First Nations and Inuit in Quebec, and to respect their right to Indigenous language and culture instruction and preservation.
- The FNEC is calling for the latest version of the Charter to extend an exemption from the application of chapter VIII for students enrolled in off-reserve schools.
- The FNEC is asking the government to consult with First Nations on attenuations and exemptions protecting the right to Indigenous language and culture instruction and preservation for First Nations.

The current version of the Charter is a systemic linguistic barrier that hinders First Nations student success. The Charter makes it extremely difficult for First Nations students whose mother tongue is their Indigenous language (their second language being French or English) to access professional services, particularly speech therapists and special education teachers.

Moreover, the AFNQL's Action Plan on Racism and Discrimination recommends "eliminating systemic obstacles to academic success, including the required French test under the French Language Charter" to reduce the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Canadian courts have repeatedly ruled that language is more than a mere means of communication, it is part and parcel of identity and culture. As such, language of instruction cannot be separated from the culture associated with the language. This reform was an opportunity for the Quebec government to take the necessary action to respect the reality of First Nations and support First Nations student success.

The FNEC hopes that the Premier, the Minister Responsible for the French Language, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Higher Education, and the Minister Responsible for Indigenous Affairs will listen to us, and become key partners in the academic success of First Nations students. The FNEC would like to point out the Quebec government's willingness to "protect the rights of Indigenous nations," as stated by the minister during his press conference.

The FNEC will be taking part in special National Assembly consultations on Bill 96, and will be lobbying the Quebec government to ensure that the new Charter takes into consideration the reality of First Nations.

Statements

"First Nations express themselves in their Indigenous language and live according to their own unique culture. Our languages are our age-old unyielded heritage, and are a valuable part of Quebec's cultural mosaic. Almost half of our communities use English as their working language; their Indigenous language being their mother tongue. Access to professional resources in this working language is already problematic and has a direct impact on our children, their learning, and their success. We need to continue the dialogue, and do what is necessary to enable all children to reach their full potential, and to ensure their identity, language, culture and heritage are respected."

John Martin, Chief Responsible for Education, Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador

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“The proposed amendments succeed in strengthening the French language, but do not in any way meet our demands to eliminate the barriers to First Nations student success. Reopening the legislation is an opportunity to end the prejudice we face in the Charter. We are asking the minister once again to discuss the recommendations we have submitted and move forward with solutions to achieve our respective goals. It is our duty and our responsibility for our children and future generations.”

Denis Gros-Louis, Director General, First Nations Education Council

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