

Believe BC

Education for sustainable communities

Education isn't just what we learn. It's how we learn, where we learn, and from whom we learn. Increasingly in B.C., First Nations children are learning in the context of their history and culture and, not surprisingly, they're doing better in school.

Between 1991 and 2000, the number of B.C. Aboriginal students completing high school more than doubled. Some of that is due to population growth, but it's also related to two key trends. First, as they work to build sustainable communities, First Nations are taking control of their children's education. Second, with their input, the broader public system is becoming more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal students – supported by partnerships such as the

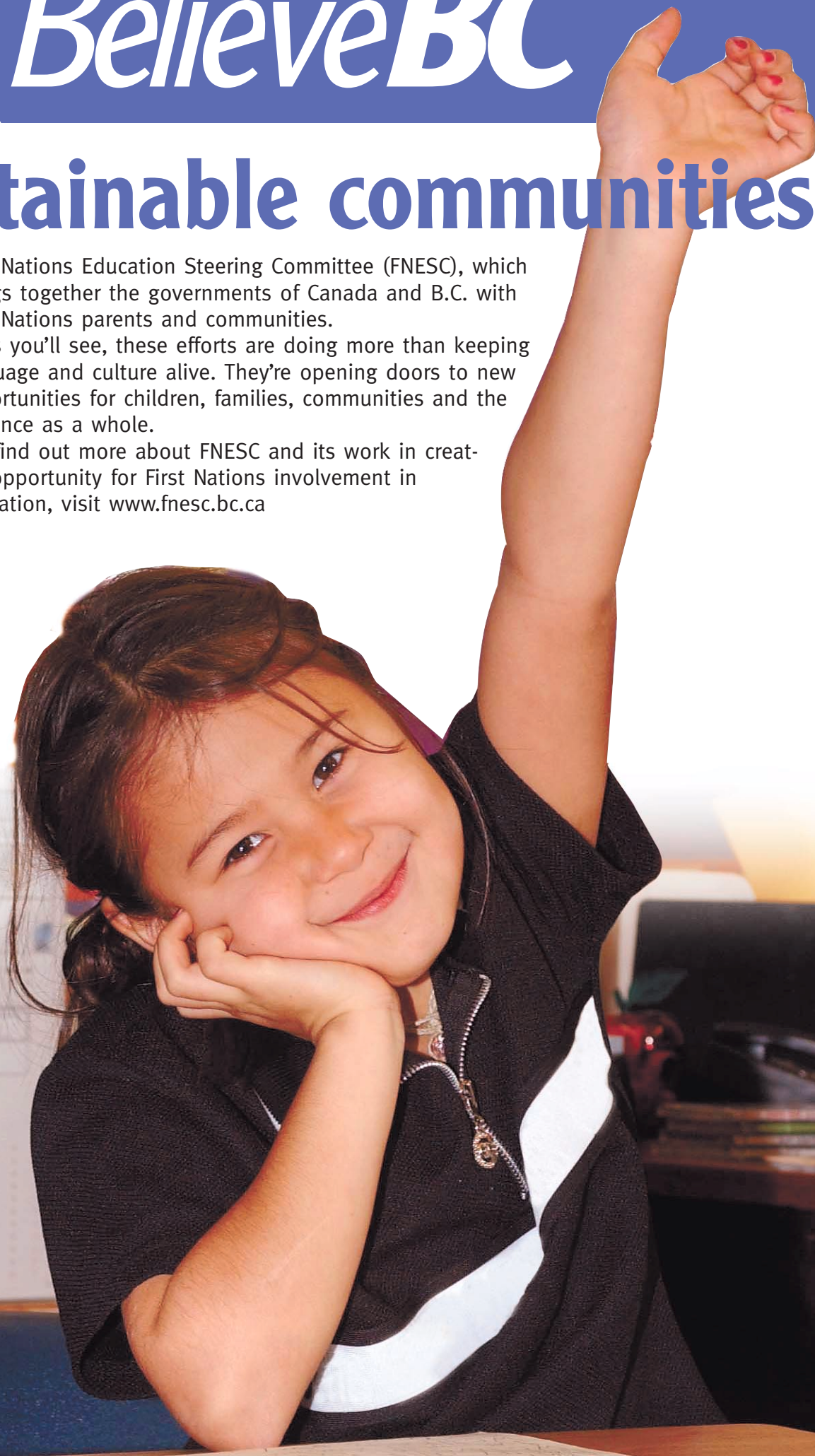
First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), which brings together the governments of Canada and B.C. with First Nations parents and communities.

As you'll see, these efforts are doing more than keeping language and culture alive. They're opening doors to new opportunities for children, families, communities and the province as a whole.

To find out more about FNESC and its work in creating opportunity for First Nations involvement in education, visit www.fnesc.bc.ca



Joan Jones and her students at Kuper Island Elementary School.



Darian Edwards of Penelakut Tribe attends school at Kuper Island Elementary near Chemainus.

Chalo School is the heart and life of a community

The kids in Mrs. Pennell's Kindergarten class at Chalo elementary school smile for the camera. They look like any other group of healthy, happy five-year olds. But these children – members of the Fort Nelson First Nation – represent a growing source of strength in their community.

Until 1983, there was no local school. Children had to leave home to get an education.

"Now," says education director Kathi Dickie, "Chalo school is the heart and life of our community." Governed by the First Nation's own board of education, the school has 140 students in Kindergarten through Grade 7. It also supports an alternate program for older students in partnership with the Fort Nelson school district, offering smaller classes, individual support and stronger links between home and school. This fall, additional programs will bring employers and students – including adult learners – together for such things as apprenticeship and work-experience training.

Chalo has twice been nominated as Canada's most outstanding First Nations school. And while she appreciates the national accolades, Dickie says the local results are far more exciting.

"Our families are stronger. Our community is stronger. And our young people today have more opportunities to build the kinds of futures they want." That bodes well for Mrs. Pennell's students. Their growing school is a key part of their First Nation's vision for a strong, healthy, proud and self-reliant community.

House of Wisdom draws the world

There is no campus. Classes are held in a renovated church and a former group home. The budget is tiny, especially compared to most universities and colleges. But the Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a (WWN), or Nisga'a House of Wisdom, in New Aiyansh is changing lives and attracting international attention.

Students come from as far away as Europe and Japan – even though the WWN has never advertised. And government delegations from China, New Zealand, Peru and the Arctic have all asked for insight into this unique school's success with distance learning.

Chief Executive Officer Deanna Nyce says the WWN was established 10 years ago to respond to "a burgeoning need for post-secondary education that would not only develop the specialized skills prerequisite for employment but would also preserve and reinforce Nisga'a language and culture."

Today it offers a broad range of college-level courses

in partnership with Northwest Community College and a Bachelor of Arts in First Nations studies in partnership with the University of Northern BC.

Five thousand courses have been completed over the years with graduates in high demand among northern employers. Nyce says the Nisga'a treaty, signed in 2000, "strengthened WWN immensely. It offered hope and a way for all this to happen."

Like the treaty – the first of its kind in B.C. history – the Nisga'a House of Wisdom has a permanent place in our record books. When four BAs were conferred in 1999, it was the first time in Canada that First Nations students earned degrees in their own, Aboriginal communities.

Nyce – who had to leave New Aiyansh to get her own degrees – says it's been "incredibly rewarding to see the original vision pay off. Educational success perpetuates educational success."



Jacob McKay, Chair of the WWN, presenting Charity Peal with the Degree of Bachelor of Arts. Charity now teaches at Nisga'a Elementary Secondary School in New Aiyansh.

Cowichan Tribes create model daycare with cultural influence

In the late 1980s, Sabrina Williams of the Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island started a drive that would change her community – forever, and for the better.

As a single parent studying at Malaspina College, she rallied the community to start a new child-care centre close to the college campus, which is on Cowichan land.

In 1989, the Ley'lum'uy'l centre opened its doors. Today, it offers far more than safe care for children.

"The centre offers early childhood education that reflects the traditions and values of the Cowichan people," says founder and manager Al Lawrence. "Cowichan language, music, art and storytelling are integral parts of the curriculum," which is shaped in part by Cowichan elders and cultural teachers.

Most of the children attending are Cowichan, but the centre also serves non-Aboriginal families. And it's proven to be a catalyst for higher education. A program to train Early Childhood Education (ECE) instructors began at Malaspina's Cowichan campus a decade ago, largely to support the Ley'lum'uy'l centre. And the award-winning centre (both Lawrence and staff member Crystal Tom have been honoured for their efforts) is now a model for ECE programs in other B.C. First Nations communities.

"The program is helping to build sustainability," Lawrence says. "The children are here because their parents are enrolled in adult education. And, because the children are here, more of our people are learning to teach – and have the opportunity to work in our community."

In other words, the Ley'lum'uy'l centre is making a real difference – not just culturally, but socially and economically.

The centre offers early childhood education that reflects the traditions and values of the Cowichan people.

Al Lawrence, Manager

More in this series

Wednesday, Oct. 22 - Neighbourly Relations

Wednesday, Oct. 29 - First Nations Farming

Saturday, Nov. 1 - Economic Partners

For more information on Aboriginal issues

Call: 1-800-665-9320

To provide feedback, visit the website at:

www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/sc-cd



Historic signing on Aboriginal education in B.C.

Secretary of State Stephen Owen, (Indian Affairs and Northern Development), Deborah Jeffrey, President, FNESC, Minister Nault, Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Chief Nathan Matthew, FNESC, at the signing of an historic understanding among FNESC, Canada and B.C. in July 2003. The understanding lays the groundwork for greater First Nations control and authority over K-12 education on-reserve as well as increased influence in the public school system.