

On Wednesday March 17 Free to Learn co-author Calvin Helin joined host Anna Maria Tremonti on CBC radio's The Current to talk about [Free to Learn](#). Shawn Atleo, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations and Thomas Benjoe, a student at the First Nations University in Regina, were also invited on the show to comment on Free to Learn. You can listen to the [clip here](#). Below is the transcript from that interview:

ANNA MARIA TREMONTI (Host): Well, across the country the numbers paint a disturbing picture. While 18 percent of Canadians have a university degree, only three percent of registered Status Indians do. And since post-secondary education is associated with higher earnings, more savings and lower unemployment, that's of concern. The federal government spends 314 million dollars a year trying to address that issue. But according to a new report, the approach Ottawa is taking is not working. Calvin Helin is the co-author of that report. It is called Free to Learn: Giving Aboriginal Youth Control Over Their Post-Secondary Education. Calvin Helin is also the president of the Native Investment and Trade Association. He's in High Level, Alberta. Good morning.

CALVIN HELIN (President, Native Investment and Trade Association): Good morning.

TREMONTI: What concerns do you have about the way post-secondary education for aboriginal students is currently funded in Canada?

HELIN: Well, if you talk to aboriginal students themselves, they highlight the number one concern as, as lack of access to education dollars. And unlike mainstream society folks, most aboriginal parents do not have the resources. They're, they're impoverished and are unable to send their, their kids to, to post-secondary education. And so, what happens is the federal government provides the finances. And currently what happens is the monies are provided in block funding to communities and they're controlled by the, the chief and council. And the monies are provided for purposes of post-secondary education. But there are two problems with the existing program. Firstly, the monies are not sufficient at present to provide educational financing for all of the students that want to attend school.

TREMONTI: Okay. So there's not enough, right? Okay. It goes to the band council? Is that what you're saying?

HELIN: Yes.

TREMONTI: Of, of every reserve?

HELIN: That's right.

TREMONTI: Okay.

HELIN: Secondly, there have been various studies pointing out, including government audits, that a lot of the time the band councils don't use the money for what it was intended. They get,

the monies get used for other purposes. And in the context of a band council the education monies become a source of patronage. So, if you happen to know the right people and so on and so forth you get funded, whereas if you don't, you don't get funded.

TREMONTI: You don't get the money, right.

HELIN: And the, the issue is really, there's two aspects to why this is important. First of all, it's absolutely incredibly important to the aboriginal communities themselves because we need to try to lift the standard of living of aboriginal people. The statistics and the social pathologies that exist in aboriginal communities are, are horrendous and really of third world status.

TREMONTI: So, what are you saying about changing that structure? What do you want to see instead?

HELIN: Okay. Well, let me just provide you with the second reason why this is important for Canada. This is important for Canada because with our aging population and the third of the population getting set to retire, the most efficient thing and optimal thing Canada can do is to try to get the young aboriginal and rapidly growing aboriginal population into the workforce. So, what we've proposed then is the ultimate, I think it's the ultimate form of, of empowerment and putting responsibility for education where it belongs, in the hands of the students themselves.

TREMONTI: And what would you do?

HELIN: Well, what we would do is we would essentially set up a, what's equivalent to an RESP. And that is, when an aboriginal, when a registered Indian is born that there will be an amount of money transferred in from the Department of Indian Affairs into a financial institution, into a trust account, and that trust account collects interest as the, as the years go by.

TREMONTI: In the child's name.

HELIN: In the child's name.

TREMONTI: Okay.

HELIN: And he controls it or she controls it. And as they go from grade six to twelve there's an additional amount of money put into the account. And the, the value of that is that it creates an incentive as the, as the child is going through school to see that they're actually building their own equity as it were in their education and creates an incentive for them to finish school so that at the end of the, when they graduate out of high school they have 25,000 dollars plus interest to be able to, to be able to apply to their post-secondary education at any certified educational institution.

TREMONTI: Now, would this be for anyone living on or off-reserve?

HELIN: Right now, yes, exactly.

TREMONTI: Right now it's only available, the funding you were talking about is only for people on-reserve, right?

HELIN: It's, it's available for people on and off-reserve. But the tendency is that a lot of people off-reserve, since they don't know people, know the leaders on the reserve don't get funded.

TREMONTI: Okay. And this would be for full Status Indians. Would both parents have to be fully First Nations?

HELIN: They would have to be a registered Indian under the rules of the Indian Act, and that's a complicated question because of a lot of different things.

TREMONTI: We won't get into that because of time. But now, would it only be university or would it be any post-secondary? What about skilled trades? What about things like that?

HELIN: It could be for any certified educational institution. And they would have the choice. The choice would be in their hands. So, this, this proposal would solve two problems. It would eliminate all the existing problems with the current way of paying for post-secondary education. Secondly, it would ensure that every aboriginal registered Indian in Canada would, would have their education funded.

TREMONTI: Now, if they don't go to post-secondary education, what happens to that money?

HELIN: Well, what we're proposing, and this is a proposal. So, a lot of this is subject to, to discussion.

TREMONTI: Right.

HELIN: But, we're proposing that they be given a ten-year window to attend a post-secondary educational institution. If they choose not to do so, then the monies that were earmarked for them, which would be collecting interest, would go back into the fund and finance other students.

TREMONTI: Okay. Calvin Helin, we have to leave it there. But thank you for talking to me.

HELIN: Okay.

TREMONTI: I'm sorry and I just mispronounced your name. It's Calvin Helin. He is the president of the Native Investment and Trade Association and the author of Dances With Dependency. He was in High Level, Alberta. Shawn Atleo is the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations. It has said that it does not like this idea. Shawn Atleo is in Ottawa. Good morning.

SHAWN ATLEO (National Chief, Assembly of First Nations): Good morning.

TREMONTI: Why don't you like this idea?

ATLEO: Well, actually what I really like is the, is the attention that it continues to bring to the need for post-secondary education success. And as Calvin points out, the fact that we have a greying mainstream population and over 50 percent of the First Nations population are under the age of 25, and those are really important factors.

TREMONTI: So, why don't you like it?

ATLEO: Well, I didn't say that I didn't like it. I think that there are challenges with the, the whole concept or the whole idea of how post-secondary has been managed. And I think that that's where there's a shared, that's where there's a shared notion. Since 2004 the auditor general said in a report that there is no higher priority than aboriginal post-secondary education. But in fact, the points that were made in that report was that the administration that needs to be improved is with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. And so, if there are problems with how this program is administered in Ottawa, certainly there's going to be challenges with how it's administered overall. It has been very, very successful as a program overall.

TREMONTI: But he just pointed out that there are audits that show that there's patronage involved in who gets the money. What's wrong with actually, he's suggesting something that would empower individual students. They can look at money in a fund that they would be able to use for their education and he says it would be an incentive because they know that they would be able to use it. What about this idea of bypassing the band councils?

ATLEO: Well, what we've said to the federal government and what they've said in the throne speech and the budget speech is that they're prepared to work hand-in-hand with First Nations to reform a program that certainly has overall, people would suggest and agree, many, many flaws. In the early sixties or mid-sixties we only had two or three graduates and we've now got over, I think, 100,000 graduates in post-secondary education. But right now we've got at least 10,000 students, post-secondary possible students whose dreams have been delayed or denied. And of course...

TREMONTI: Well, so can you speak to that specific question. You keep talking about the federal government. He's suggesting that it goes right to the students as part of the structural change. Do you have a problem with that?

ATLEO: Well, you know, I'm challenged with the notion that, you know, as the Prime Minister said in 2008, the former education system under the residential schools sought to pull children from families. It was unilaterally delivered, designed and executed and caused tremendous damage. And so, the notion that's being forwarded now is that we design an approach that works for us collectively together. And it could include some sort of proposals, the likes of which are being considered in this particular report. But what's important to go back to is the original notion of, of the treaty-making in this country, which still goes on, which says that we should work towards bringing our peoples much more closely together. And so, this report doesn't speak to how we're going to achieve the goals that we've set out of 65,000 new graduates within the next five years, which would close the achievement gap with the rest of Canada and the need for 60 new schools in communities altogether.

TREMONTI: Okay. Okay, but you're still not answering my question. The idea of giving individual funding to individual students, are you opposed to that? You seem to keep skirting around that point.

ATLEO: Well, actually I just answered your question because I said...

TREMONTI: Well, he's suggesting that it goes to a completely different structure, where you create a system for an individual aboriginal student.

ATLEO: What he called it was a proposal. And what I've said is that, you know, it's one proposal of a good number that should be considered when First Nations governments and when the federal government are jointly designing an approach that will work for everybody, then absolutely, you know, everything should be looked at. But the point here being is that it shouldn't be about what he said and she said. That's been our past and it's been full of conflict and finger-pointing about who's responsible, who's to blame for what's not working for students. And we've got to bring our focus back, rightfully so, to the students and design together an approach that's going to ensure their success.

TREMONTI: Well, his point is that right now there's no transparency, nobody knows where the money goes.

ATLEO: Well, I saw that in the report in a cursory manner. And I think, I think it's important to note that there wasn't anything to substantiate that, that point. I work directly with First Nations governments right across this country and transparency and accountability and the quality of administration continues to improve and in fact I would suggest that, that by and large the vast majority are very accountable in the management of their programs. The problem does not stem from there alone. The issue is how the programs are managed. Indian Affairs will, will agree that, you know, they shouldn't necessarily be the ones who are involved in managing of education programs. And that's why we need to take them up on their offer to strengthen and reform education, which are their words in their throne speech, and to do it hand-in-hand. And we should absolutely be looking at all and every way that we can reform and strengthen the system to improve education success and to achieve those objectives that would close the achievement gap with the rest of Canada, and while we're doing that, strengthen communities so they can create sustainable economies in the 633 communities across this country. By building strong communities it'll mean a strong Canada.

TREMONTI: You have a master's degree in education. Am I right?

ATLEO: That's right.

TREMONTI: What made the difference for you?

ATLEO: Well, focus on education in our, in our family and in our community and the support of the post-secondary education program, direct support for me. And so, I can personally attest to its success and saw it being managed as a very fair program for the people where I come from on the west coast of British Columbia. And that's the point that I'm trying to make here. I don't

think it's, I don't think it's, we can just accept carte blanche that there is patronage or that there's going to be widespread problems. I mean, we say that about every level of government. What's important is to build in, in a reformed (inaudible) system to reduce or eliminate the potential for those kinds of abuses, which I agree shouldn't be there.

TREMONTI: Okay.

ATLEO: And if they're happening, then you know, let's address them through strengthening and reforming the system.

TREMONTI: Shawn Atleo, thanks for your thoughts.

ATLEO: Thank you very much.

TREMONTI: That is Shawn Atleo, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. He was in Ottawa. Thomas Benjoe has been listening in. He's a fourth year student in business and indigenous studies at the First Nations University of Canada. He's also the vice-president finance, of the student association at the university. He is in Regina. Hello.

THOMAS BENJOE (Student, First Nations University): Hello.

TREMONTI: Well, what do you think of the idea of bypassing band councils and putting money directly into accounts for each First Nations child?

BENJOE: Well, I guess the, the first problem that I have with this, this proposal is that the only incentive upon graduation is 25,000 dollars, which in fact for our time right now is not going to cover a lot of our tuition and the living costs that we have to deal with from year to year.

TREMONTI: What do you get right now? Do you get that much?

BENJOE: Typically we get our tuition and our books paid for.

TREMONTI: So, it's not 25,000, is it?

BENJOE: For a year?

TREMONTI: Over the course, is it 25,000 over the course of, of an undergraduate degree at university or is it less?

BENJOE: I think that's what they, this 25,000 dollars is what they were proposing is to, is over the course of four years for a degree.

TREMONTI: Right. And what I'm asking is what do First Nations students get now?

BENJOE: Typically we get our tuition covered, which is, for a full course load is about 6,000 dollars a year.

TREMONTI: Over how many years? Four?

BENJOE: Over four years.

TREMONTI: Okay. So that's 24,000.

BENJOE: That's 24,000 right there.

TREMONTI: Yeah.

BENJOE: That's not even including the, the living incentives or the living allowance or anything like that.

TREMONTI: So you are, are you opposed to the principle or the actual amount?

BENJOE: I'm, I'm opposed to both actually.

TREMONTI: Why?

BENJOE: For me my, my post-secondary career has been, has been really successful dealing with my band and their post-secondary program that they have set up. I have a post-secondary counsellor that has helped me throughout my entire career here. And she went above and beyond what was expected of her to, to help with our, not only paying our tuition and getting those kinds of costs covered for us, but she's helped us with scholarships and being a part of the community in many other ways because...

TREMONTI: What about those communities where they don't go above and beyond though? Who helps them?

BENJOE: I can't really speak too much about them. I don't know their situation.

TREMONTI: No, I'm just asking, because you make the point that you've been helped. But is that common or are there people who fall through the cracks with the present system?

BENJOE: Well, any system has got to have, have their faults. But, you know, I do know, like, a lot of other students from, from many of the other bands that I, I take classes with and they, they tell me that their post-secondary program is, is, runs really well. And they haven't had too much of these problems that I, that I've heard in this, in this report that was put out by...

TREMONTI: Well, so, is the problem really at the post-secondary level or is it at high school or the lower education level?

BENJOE: I think what the problem is is that as First Nations people we're only maybe a first and second generation of families that are actually in post-secondary education. And for us to be behind the national average of how much people go to post-secondary, I mean there's a big difference here. I mean, we, we only just started being able to come off the reserves in the

sixties. I mean, we're playing catch-up here and we are making progress. And that being said, the first and second generation families being able to access post-secondary or be able to go to university or anything like that, I mean, it's a little, it's something new to some families and it's something that hasn't been around for too long in some families as well. So, that support....

TREMONTI: So we shouldn't, we shouldn't necessarily consider this a failure at this point then is what you're saying.

BENJOE: No. I think we just need to, there is some faults in the program and I think we do need to work those out.

TREMONTI: We are out of time Thomas Benjoe. But we'll leave it there and we'll give you the last word on that. Thank you for talking to me.

BENJOE: All right.

TREMONTI: That is Thomas Benjoe, vice-president of finance at the student association at the First Nations University of Canada. He spoke to us from Regina.