

# The 176 Million Dollar Question: Are the Promised Federal Education Funds for First Nations Actually Flowing?

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**FOR MANY YEARS, FIRST NATIONS HAVE HIGHLIGHTED** the chronic underfunding of First Nation education in Canada. The lack of resources meant First Nations often could not pay competitive salaries to teachers, provide culturally and linguistically relevant curriculum, or provide the types of support services to students which might be found in a typical provincial school. But during the 2015 federal election campaign each of the major political parties promised to provide significant amounts of new funding to support First Nations elementary and secondary education.

For their part, the Liberal Party of Canada announced that they would commit \$2.6 billion in new funding upon being elected. After the election there were initially positive signs of implementing this promise, but running the numbers reveals that Canada is in danger of breaking their promises on First Nation education.

In the 2016 federal budget, the federal government set out a schedule for releasing additional education funding. Here is an abridged version:

## "Making Sure Every First Nation Child Receives a Quality Education"<sup>1</sup>

Year 1 2016-17	Year 2 2017-18	Year 3 2018-19	Year 4 2019-20	Year 5 2020-21	Total
\$ 287.5 million	\$ 382.9 million	\$ 482.4 million	\$ 647.0 million	\$ 801.0 million	\$2.6 billion

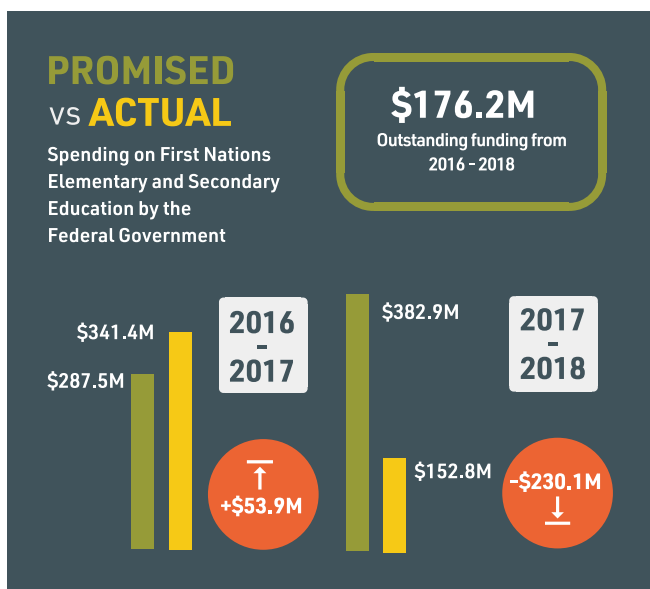
It is important to note that more than half of the committed funding (\$1.4 billion) is slated to be released after the next federal election (next October) with no indication a new government will honour the pledge.

Still, according to Public Accounts of Canada, in 2016-17 the federal government increased spending on education by \$341.4 million<sup>2</sup>, which is an 18.9% increase from the previous year.<sup>3</sup> In 2017-18, education spending increased again by another \$152.8 million or 7.1% more than the previous year.<sup>4</sup>

## The increase in funding is a welcome relief from decades of austerity.

In the previous decade alone, from 2006 to 2016, total federal government spending on First Nations elementary and secondary education increased by an average of 1.14% per year. This is less than the devastating 2% cap on annual expenditure increases imposed in 1996-97 and kept in place for the next two decades.

However, the amount of funding provided in 2016-17 and 2017-18 falls significantly short of the commitment set out in the 2016 federal budget. Here are where more concerns arise.



In 2016-2017, the federal government actually spent \$53.9 million more on First Nations education than they promised. Regrettably this trend did not last. In the second year, 2017-2018, they underspent by a whopping \$230.1 million.

**Over these two fiscal years, the federal government has withheld their promised allocation for First Nations elementary and secondary education by approximately \$176.2 million.**

Considering this, just 26.3% of the promised funding for 2016-17 and 2017-18 has been spent. With the federal election on the horizon, it is possible that less than half the committed government funding will actually be allocated.

Examining the budget for 2017-18 in a little more detail gives a sense of the specific programs and services are being neglected. The federal government budgeted \$276.0 million for “Addressing Immediate Funding Needs and Program Cost Growth” (\$85.5m), “Language and Culture” (\$55m), “Literacy and Numeracy” (\$20m), and “Special Needs Education” (\$115.5m). These are areas relating directly to the operation of First Nations schools and the programs and services they provide to First Nations students. The underspending issues then are especially acute. How can this be explained?

The budget also includes \$104.9 million for “Supporting System Transformation to Improve Education Outcomes”. This is a collaborative process through the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to change federal policy and funding models with respect to First Nations education. According to AFN resolution #65-2017, the approach “Supports First Nations, through funded regional tables,<sup>5</sup> to negotiate and conclude regional First Nation Education Agreements that will include their own education funding model that provides funding for

the unique needs of First Nation students, communities and schools starting in 2018-19”<sup>6</sup>

The development of regional entities and negotiating tables, and regionalized and localized funding models, are not matters which are likely to materialize overnight, and certainly subject to much discussion and debate.

### **Is the federal government waiting for an ideal political process before spending these resources?**

A fulsome explanation on the refusal to finally and adequately fund First Nation education would be welcome from Canada. As the clock runs out on yet another government with good intentions, trust remains elusive.

We can only hope that the underspending in Year 2 of this multi-year commitment does not signal a return of a backwards trend for the future.

### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Government of Canada, Table 3.1: Making Sure Every First Nations Child Receives a Quality Education, from Budget 2016, [https://www.budget.gc.ca/2016/docs/plan/ch3-en.html#\\_Toc446106726](https://www.budget.gc.ca/2016/docs/plan/ch3-en.html#_Toc446106726), retrieved November 24, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>Receiver General of Canada: Public Accounts of Canada 2017 – Volume 2 Details of Revenues and Expenses, pp. 11.11. retrieved November 24, 2018 from [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/301/public\\_accounts\\_can/pdf/2017/2017-vol2-eng.pdf](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/301/public_accounts_can/pdf/2017/2017-vol2-eng.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>Receiver General of Canada: Public Accounts of Canada 2016 – Volume 2 Details of Revenues and Expenses, pp. 11.11. retrieved November 24, 2018 from [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/301/public\\_accounts\\_can/pdf/2016/2016-vol2-eng.pdf](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/301/public_accounts_can/pdf/2016/2016-vol2-eng.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Receiver General of Canada: Public Accounts of Canada 2018 – Volume 2 Details of Revenues and Expenses, pp. 308 and pp. 322, retrieved November 24, 2018 from <https://www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/recgen/cpc-pac/2018/pdf/2018-vol2-eng.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>According to Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations will determine what constitutes a ‘region’ for the purposes of their First Nation Education Agreement.

<sup>6</sup>Assembly of First Nations: Resolution #65-2017 “New Interim Funding Approach for First Nation Education”, retrieved November 24, 2018 from <https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2017-sca-res-v2.pdf>