

## Education and Crown Paternalism: Reviewing the New On-reserve Education Funding Model

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**ON APRIL 1, 2019, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT** began implementing a ‘new’ approach to funding First Nations schooling on-reserve called the **Interim Funding Approach (IFA)**. This emerged from a ‘Policy Proposal’ co-created by a joint table made up of First Nation regional representatives and Indigenous Services Canada<sup>1</sup> after a 2016 federal budget announcement that included \$2.3 billion of new money into First Nation education over 5 years.

**According to the Policy Proposal, this new approach is “co-developed” to provide “sufficient, predictable, and sustainable funding and support strong student outcomes.”<sup>2</sup>**

This will be achieved in Ontario by “approximating how much funding First Nations would receive if the provincial formula was applied to on-reserve education, and enables a starting point to inform discussions with respect to what specific enhancements and adaptations are required to address the unique context and specific needs of First Nations schools and students.” This is according to the most recent attainable copy of the draft ‘Ontario K-12 Comparability Model’ (as of January 30, 2019).

This funding and even the IFA are a welcome reprieve for many First Nations who, since the mid-1970s, have been administering chronically underfunded schools. This, in the post ‘Indian’ residential and day school eras where there is increasing reliance on Canadian non-profits and charities working in First Nations education and picking up the government’s slack, but also government resources.

### **There are still issues in the new approach.**

What could have been a First Nations-specific funding formula that values the intra-national relations between Canada and First Nations, comparable to provincial education systems in terms of governance, legislation and policy development, has instead remained rooted in colonial ‘Indian’ federal education policy.

There is no funding to govern education; the resources that are there may boil down to a wage increase for some First Nations; few supports for sustainable long-term change to student outcomes; yet, full responsibility for the whole system. These problems are

magnified by the significant role built in for the provinces - the focus of this brief will be Ontario - and the glaring lack of meaningful First Nation control.

## THE COMPARABILITY MODEL AND PROVINCIAL INTERVENTION

On comparability, the provincial and First Nation systems cannot be more different. Indeed, there is no basis for comparability when ISC chooses to co-opt a formula meant for a mature system and transplant on a First Nation context. Yet, that's what the comparability approach does, by choosing northern school boards as proxies to a First Nation school community context and applying proximity adaptations between First Nation schools as if they are linked.

Provincial mainstream education systems and their development were never impeded by genocidal, assimilationist regimes meant to erase Canadian identity, remove children from their families over generations or deploy religious oversight in ways that went far beyond religious studies' instruction. The necessary healing from generations of abuse, lack of direct First Nation involvement or resources in the designing of highly-developed systems like libraries, technology, central reporting systems, curriculum, and data collection/ records management infrastructure cannot happen within the proposed model.

**We have to think deeply on research and funding methodologies which centre the family and community well-being alongside strong Indigenous curriculum standards and Indigenous pedagogy, as envisioned by First Nation leaders.**

This requires a robust system of governance supports to First Nation schools. Research, data systems, traditional knowledge keepers as teachers, First Nation education learning resource development, highly contextualized Indigenous teacher training/certification centres and policy hubs are just a few supports needed to make the long-lasting impact on student outcomes in First Nation communities. These core functions of any education system are not considered in the current "comparability model."

A more appropriate First Nations model would be intergovernmental agreements using provincially-comparable funding models that mimic provincial Ministries of Education budgets. Don't get me wrong, an updated transparent formula is needed and welcomed. That's just plain good governance. And in this approach, inequities across Canada will be addressed to some degree. But for those of us in Ontario, a province that continues to assume a deficit in First Nation education funding transfers at the elementary and secondary level, closing the funding gap with non-First Nation schools in the province using their methodologies will not translate to the substantial increases needed to make transformational change.

Most troublesome and most damaging to First Nation control is how intricately tied the comparability model is to provincial education lawmaker's decisions on any number of key funding drivers that dictate curriculum supports, class sizes, support staff levels, and special education (like the recent decision to cut supports to children with autism by the current Conservative provincial government, for example).

**The comparability model for First Nations, as it is currently written, is subject to provincial policy changes and funding fluctuations.**

A yearly review promises adjustments to First Nation funding levels based on changes to provincial funding formula, however, these changes go far beyond adjustments for inflation. Therefore, how schooling is defined, implemented and funded is now squarely dictated by the provincial government.

Left absent from the comparability model is accountability, power, authority and control. Even if this is interim, this current approach will become the benchmark for change later,

preempting any innovation a First Nation specific needs funding approach that doesn't look or feel like a conventional school board model will bring. This is a significant danger.

## **EDUCATION FOR THE SEVENTH GENERATION**

While we can easily have a larger debate regarding power relations, confederation and the place of First Nation governments, my interest here, as a practitioner responsible for problem-solving how to save First Nation youth lives, is to pivot the dialogue to finding workable solutions outside of a court of law that address norms, rules, and standards that honour Aboriginal title, Aboriginal rights and treaty rights, as these rights shouldn't be up for debate.

**First Nations need long-term self-determined strategic plans that span seven generations, far beyond a four-year political cycle or the whims of non-Indigenous governments.**

Indeed, given the timing of the comparability model implementation, even the hope of IFA future adaptation work may not see the light of day if the current federal government loses its mandate at the polls this November or defaults on its approach if elected back in.

The answers lie at home in the community by community members where experts in the field of intergenerational trauma, family well-being supports, traditional knowledges and culturally-relevant and land-based learning systems abound. Chuck this provincially-comparable school board-based model and let's get to work on a First Nations specific needs-based model that builds strong First Nation government to lead the change in student outcomes. Redirect much needed resources back to communities from non-profit mega projects with little First Nation direct resourcing, say or long-term sustainability measures.

Meaningful change, given the current capacity context and political climate in First Nation communities, will need initial funding allocations to build local governance capacity and hire human capital in education policy, governance and strategic planning.

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>*Policy Proposal Transforming First Nations Elementary and Secondary Education, V.1.15 Update December 5, 2017 Policy Co-Development Team Assembly of First Nations, National Indian Education Council & Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada.*

<sup>2</sup>*Ontario First Nations K-12 Comparability Funding Model Overview, Based on Indigenous Services 2017-2018 Nominal Roll & Ontario's Education Funding Technical Paper for 2018-19 dated January 30, 2019, Indigenous Services Canada.*