

**Impact of COVID-19 on First Nations Education**  
**First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)**  
**Update to BC First Nations Leadership**  
April 15, 2020

## **Purpose**

To inform First Nations leadership of developments in First Nations education related to the COVID-19 pandemic and to support communities in responding to the needs of their learners during this challenging time.

## **First Nation School and Program Funding**

Recognizing that decisions regarding the operation of First Nations schools are made by individual First Nations through their established governance structures, FNESC and the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) have recommended that First Nations schools suspend in-class instruction, consistent with the direction of the Ministry of Education to school districts and independent schools. Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) has communicated that, while in-class instruction is suspended, funding for First Nations schools will remain in place to ensure teachers can stay on salary, planning for continued learning may take place, and facilities can be maintained.

Funding grants to schools and communities administered by FNESC and FNSA will continue as usual for the 2019/2020 school year, including the Special Education Program, the First Nations Language and Culture Program, the School Bus Capital Funding Program, Local Education Agreement (LEA) funding grants, School Assessment Program and School Growth Plan Follow-up Grants, the Innovations in Education Program, and the First Nations and Inuit Youth Employment Strategy Programs. Reporting deadlines for those programs are extended until June 2020. Further information about the extended reporting timelines and new deadline dates for each program will be communicated by May 2020.

## **Continuity of Learning**

First Nations Leadership may want to connect with their respective school administrative leadership to discuss plans for continuity of learning during the suspension of classes. To assist in that process, FNESC and the FNSA have prepared a [Suggestions for Continuous Learning document](#) and an accompanying webpage (<http://www.fnesc.ca/continuous-learning/>) that provide engaging and easy to implement remote learning activities requiring resources that many families will have in their homes. We have also tried to identify learning opportunities for students and families who have varying access to computers and internet connectivity.

In appreciation of the role that families play in their children's education, FNESC and the FNSA have also prepared a [Suggestions for Families: Supporting Learning at Home document](#), to share ideas intended to help families provide learning opportunities for their children. Families are encouraged to use and adapt these suggestions as they see fit. We also hope that families and schools will work together to identify how at-home contributions can complement the continued learning already taking place.

## **Technology for Teaching and Learning**

Several First Nation schools and communities have expressed concern about First Nations students having access to the technology and connectivity required to continue their education.

FNESC is not aware of any specific funding to support the technology needs of students in public or First Nation schools in response to the pandemic. However, ISC is providing First Nations with financial support through the Indigenous Community Support Fund, which is intended to “provide Indigenous leadership with the flexibility needed as they prepare for and react to the spread of COVID-19.” According to the ISC website, this funding is flexible and can be used by communities for a variety of purposes, including educational support. Program details are available at <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1585189335380/1585189357198>

The BC Tripartite Education Agreement funding formula, by which First Nations are funded for education, also enables First Nations to determine how best to invest education funds received from ISC. During this time, First Nations may want to adjust their education budgets to ensure current priorities and needs are addressed for their learners.

With respect to post-secondary students, First Nations have decision-making authority on funding provided under the Post-Secondary Student Supports Program (PSSSP). This includes the ability of First Nations to support the purchase of technology for funded students. These expenses could be reported under materials and supplies or included in the amount reported for living allowance.

## **Local Education Agreements (LEAs)**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts and independent school authorities should continue to support equitable outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous learners and collaborate with local First Nations in doing so. Engagement with First Nations is particularly necessary where an LEA is in place, as LEAs set out terms and conditions for the exchange of tuition for education programs and services for First Nation students.

First Nations are encouraged to reach out to their respective school districts to determine the learning opportunities that will be available while classes remain suspended. In the interim, FNESC has requested the Ministry of Education advise school districts to refrain from requesting LEA tuition payment until there is clarity on continued learning plans.

## **Mental Health and Well-Being**

First Nations school and communities are encouraged to support the mental health and well-being of families and students, and to ensure educators are supported in addressing new mental health challenges that may arise. It is important to keep in mind that students who were not considered vulnerable prior to the COVID-19 outbreak may now be experiencing mental health challenges.

The First Nations Health Authority is one resource for culturally-relevant supports for Indigenous students and families.

## **First Nation Independent Schools and Children of Essential Service Providers**

Given that First Nations have jurisdiction over their schools, and that many First Nations have declared states of emergency, FNESC and the FNSA requested an explicit exemption from the Ministry’s directive that independent schools provide service for children of people who are performing essential services. On April 8 2020 the Ministry formally confirmed there would be no

impact on independent school certification in cases where First Nations have chosen not to meet the Ministry's directive, acknowledging the authority of First Nations to make the decisions that best meet the needs of their communities.

### **Additional Supports**

FNESC COVID-19 Updates [www.fnesc.ca/covid19](http://www.fnesc.ca/covid19)

Continuous Learning Resources [www.fnesc.ca/continuous-learning](http://www.fnesc.ca/continuous-learning)

Suggestions for Families Resource [www.fnesc.ca/supporting-learning-apr14-2020/](http://www.fnesc.ca/supporting-learning-apr14-2020/)