

AFN Position Paper: Investing in a First Nations Skilled and Educated Workforce

Prepared for the First Nations-First Ministers Meeting (FN-FMM)
For the consideration by First Nation Chiefs

At a Glance

The First Nations-First Ministers Meeting (FN-FMM) presents an opportunity to secure rights-based commitments to First Nations education and workforce development. These commitments should support a clear ten-year objective: to eliminate preventable financial and systemic barriers that keep qualified First Nations learners from accessing education, skills development and career pathways.

First Ministers are being asked to advance the following three priorities:

1. Establish permanent First Nations participation in relevant existing Federal, Provincial, and Territorial (FPT) education, skills, and workforce tables;
2. Commit to a jointly developed ten-year, with five-year milestones, First Nations education and workforce strategy, supported by sustained investments; and
3. Secure a national commitment on First Nations wildfire firefighter accreditation, mobility, and deployment, to address urgent emergency management needs across jurisdictions.

1. Position Statement

First Nations are rights-holders with inherent, Treaty, and Constitutional rights to education and lifelong learning. These rights are uniquely situated within a framework protected under Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. The Government of Canada must uphold and honour the inherent authority of First Nations to exercise control over their education across the full learning continuum, including early childhood education, Head Start, elementary and secondary education (K-12), adult education, post-secondary education (PSE), and skills training.

The implementation, protection, and promotion of First Nations' Inherent and Treaty Rights must remain the highest priority. These rights include First Nations' lands, waters, resources, animal life, and plant life, and form the foundation upon which all other priorities rest. First Nations must be fully included in, and have decision-making authority over, all matters that affect their Nations and citizens, including healthcare, education, justice, child and family well-being, economic development, and environmental

stewardship. This includes full First Nations ownership, partnership, and participation in natural resource development occurring within their ancestral territories.

As Canada advances an ambitious federal agenda to expedite major projects and recruit skilled trades workers, First Nations must have the jurisdiction, institutions, resources, and intergovernmental involvement necessary to educate their learners and lead in the emerging economy. Meaningful participation in economic development and natural resource opportunities requires sustained investments in First Nations education, skills training, and workforce development. The FN-FMM presents a strategic opportunity to secure rights-based commitments to First Nations education and workforce development.

This strategy must be jointly developed with First Nations as rights-holders, consistent with Canada's commitments under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, including Article 14, which recognizes the right of Indigenous Peoples to establish and control their educational systems and to access all levels and forms of education without discrimination. Joint development must go beyond consultation and provide meaningful regional engagement so that the strategy reflects distinct education systems and First Nations priorities from coast to coast to coast.

These commitments should support a clear ten-year objective, with five-year milestones, to eliminate preventable financial and systemic barriers that keep qualified First Nations learners from accessing education, skills development and career pathways. This objective should also strengthen First Nations' capacity to exercise their rights, governance, and leadership in emerging economic opportunities and development occurring within their territories.

First Nations education should be a shared priority for FPT governments because of the direct impact on Canada's future workforce and regional economies. A wholistic, lifelong learning approach recognizes that properly funded and supported education is critical at every stage of life, beginning with culturally appropriate early learning and Head Start, continuing through K-12, adult education, post-secondary education, and skills training, and extending into career pathways and ongoing professional development. As provinces and territories face persistent labour shortages, an aging workforce, and challenges retaining young people, dedicated, new, and sustained investments in First Nations education will help increase participation in PSE, skilled trades, and employment. Improving educational outcomes for First Nations learners supports the exercise and implementation of First Nations' Inherent and Treaty Rights, advances reconciliation, strengthens economic growth and workforce sustainability, and contributes to the long-term prosperity of First Nations and all governments. Improving educational outcomes for First Nations learners supports reconciliation, economic growth, workforce sustainability, and the long-term prosperity of provinces and territories. For this reason, First Nations education should be viewed as a shared strategic investment rather than solely a federal

responsibility. First Nations education ensures Nations to fully participate in and benefit from decisions affecting their lands, resources, economies, and future generations.

2. Summary

Canada has Treaty, Constitutional, and international obligations to support First Nations-led education. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Calls to Action on education seek to close educational and employment gaps by addressing inequities in education funding, eliminating the backlog of First Nations students seeking PSE, supporting culturally appropriate early childhood education programs, and ensuring education systems reflect Indigenous knowledge, languages, and contemporary contributions.¹ However, persistent systemic barriers continue to harm First Nations learners – contributing to lower graduation rates, restricted program access, and broader socio-economic disadvantages that deepen intergenerational inequality. Government programs continue to fail to meet growing demands, ultimately restricting First Nations students who depend on financial support to complete their education. These challenges are compounded as First Nations have historically lacked a formal role in many intergovernmental education forums and decision-making processes, underscoring the need for their meaningful participation as rights-holders in education reform and governance. The challenges facing First Nations learners are not limited to educational outcomes. They also have direct implications for workforce development, community resilience, and the ability of First Nations to respond to emerging national priorities. This is particularly evident in the context of wildfire management, where First Nations possess significant knowledge, experience, and capacity, but continue to face systemic barriers that limit their full participation.

The current funding trajectory for First Nations education programs further demonstrates the need for a sustained federal commitment to First Nations learners and workers. The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) continues to face significant unmet demand, while its existing \$242.7 million budget enhancement is set to expire in 2026-27². At the same time, Canada reduced funding towards the First Nations and Inuit Youth Employment Strategy (FNIYES), which supports labour market participation and career advancement for First Nations youth, from \$52.8 million in their 2025 to 2026 plan³ to \$25.6 million in their 2026 to 2027 plan⁴. These funding decisions demonstrate a lack of

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Calls to Action*.

https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/trc/IR4-8-2015-eng.pdf

² Department of Finance Canada. (2024). *Budget 2024: Fairness for Every Generation*.

<https://budget.canada.ca/2024/report-rapport/budget-2024.pdf>

³ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2025). *Employment and Social Development Canada's 2025 to 2026 Departmental Plan*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/reports/departmental-plan/2025-2026/horizontal-initiatives.html>

⁴ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2026). *Employment and Social Development Canada's 2026 to 2027 Departmental Plan*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/reports/departmental-plan/2026-2027/horizontal-initiatives.html>

sustained federal investment in First Nations education, skills development, and employment pathways at a time when Canada is seeking to expand its skilled workforce. These programs must be supported through predictable, sustained and needs-based investments that allow First Nations learners and youth to access education and employment opportunities.

As Canada enters a new wave of major infrastructure investment – including housing, energy transition, transportation, digital connectivity, and water systems – First Nations will be both directly impacted by these projects and central to the opportunities they create. Budget 2025 will provide billions in capital investments for projects that will require a sustained supply of local workers in skilled trades and professions in various sectors. These commitments cannot be fully realized without dedicated, new, and sustained First Nations funding that supports learners in PSE and skilled trades for high-demand careers. An additional **\$2.81 billion per year** is required to further support First Nations in attaining the training required for jobs related to Canada’s infrastructure projects. Higher levels of education are strongly associated with higher employment rates for First Nations, rising from 25% among those without credentials to over 70% for those with a degree.⁵ This represents a large pool of potential learners who could enter Canada’s skilled workforce with the appropriate training and financial support. For provinces and territories, the case for investment is practical and immediate. Supporting First Nations learners through the full education continuum can help provinces and territories grow local workforces, reduce reliance on fly-in/fly-out labour, improve retention in rural and northern communities, and ensure that major projects create durable benefits for the First Nations whose territories they affect. First Nations education is a right and an essential foundation of self-determination. A skilled and educated First Nations workforce should therefore be treated as a national priority grounded in First Nations rights and jurisdiction. To work towards a shared ten-year objective, with five-year milestones, of eliminating financial and systemic barriers to First Nations education, skills development, and career pathways, First Ministers are being asked to take action on the following three priorities:

1. Establish permanent First Nations participation in relevant existing Federal, Provincial, and Territorial (FPT) education, skills, and workforce tables;
2. Commit to a jointly developed ten-year, with five-year milestones, First Nations education and workforce strategy, supported by sustained investments; and
3. Secure a national commitment on First Nations wildfire firefighter accreditation, mobility, and deployment, to address urgent emergency management needs across jurisdictions.

⁵ Statistics Canada. (2023). [Table 98-10-0425-01 Highest level of education by Indigenous identity and labour force status: Canada, provinces and territories, census divisions and census subdivisions with a population 5,000 or more.](#)

3. Background and Context

Education is a fundamental element of self-government and the right to self-determination as guaranteed by the *Constitution Act, 1982*, and in line with inherent and Treaty rights and international law. The TRC identified education as a cornerstone of reconciliation, emphasizing the need for education systems that respect and reflect First Nations histories, cultures, languages, and knowledge systems.⁶ It is also acknowledged that improving access to education, particularly at the post-secondary level, plays a significant role in boosting socio-economic mobility for First Nations.⁷ Recent government announcements have identified PSE as one of Canada's most important long-term investments, providing Canadians with the skills, training, and credentials needed to succeed in high-demand sectors. While Canada considers PSE a national priority, the same level of commitment has not been provided to First Nations learners. In July 2026, the Government of Canada announced an additional \$2 billion over five years for provinces and territories under the Team Canada Strong initiative. This investment builds on the previously announced \$6 billion in federal funding intended to help recruit, train, and hire between 80,000 and 100,000 new Red Seal trades workers to meet Canada's growing labour needs. As provinces and territories negotiate bilateral agreements with Canada, there is a risk that First Nations will not benefit equitably from these investments despite being well positioned to contribute to workforce needs.

First Nations must have a meaningful role in discussions and decisions related to these investments, including how workforce and education funding is allocated through provincial and territorial agreements. This should include discussions and planning regarding First Nations access to major federal investments and labour market initiatives, including the \$2 billion that is set to be distributed to provinces and territories through Team Canada Strong, to ensure First Nations learners and workers benefit equitably from nation-building opportunities.

Education and workforce reforms affecting First Nations should be developed in partnership with First Nations and in a manner consistent with their inherent, Treaty, Constitutional, and international rights. While Indigenous education is often referenced as a strategic priority for ministers, First Nations have not historically had a formal seat at key intergovernmental education tables. Providing First Nations leaders with standing participation in FPT governance committees would help close this gap and support more responsive, effective, and equitable education policies and programs.

⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Calls to Action*.

https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD. (2018). *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en>.

This participation should extend to key education decision-making forums, including the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), where First Nations should participate in a permanent and meaningful capacity rather than solely through ad hoc invitations. Such participation is necessary to ensure that federal, provincial, and territorial education and workforce policies are informed by regional First Nations priorities and realities. Given the diversity of First Nations across Canada, regional approaches must be recognized and reflected in all education and workforce initiatives, funding models, and policy discussions.

The First Nations population is younger, faster growing, and increasingly concentrated in regions where infrastructure development is occurring. However, federal funding limitations continue to restrict access to PSE and skilled trades training, particularly for learners in remote First Nations communities. This represents both a violation of inherent and Treaty rights and a limitation to Canada's economic growth. Current available data shows that 45% of First Nations people aged 25 to 64 have completed post-secondary programs, compared to 68% of non-Indigenous Canadians.⁸ Although rates are improving, a substantial education gap remains, limiting both employment and economic output for First Nations individuals. As of 2023, 144,130 First Nations individuals aged 25 to 64 have the academic credentials required to attend PSE institutions but have not obtained any post-secondary qualifications.⁹ Without dedicated, new, and sustained investments for First Nations across the learning continuum, labour force participation gaps will widen, economic inequality will persist, and Canada will face growing workforce shortages. This has direct implications for provinces and territories, as labour shortages are felt locally and regionally, not only at the national level.¹⁰ When First Nations learners cannot access PSE and skilled trades training, jurisdictions lose a critical source of local talent who could help fill urgent workforce gaps close to home.

Investing in First Nations PSE can directly support workforce needs in sectors that are critical to projects overseen by the Major Projects Office (MPO), including construction, skilled trades, engineering, project management, environmental monitoring, resource development, and digital infrastructure. First Nations are well-placed to contribute to regional economies, as many large-scale infrastructure projects are being planned near First Nations territories. Projects such as the Port of Churchill Plus, with a joint federal-provincial investment of \$262.5 million, and the Mackenzie Valley Highway, with an initial federal investment of over \$100 million, present opportunities for procurement benefits and local hiring of First Nations workers. Local recruitment can strengthen communities

⁸ Statistics Canada. (2022). *Census profile, 2021 Census of population*.

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm>

⁹ Statistics Canada. (2021). [Table 98-10-0423-01 Highest level of education by Indigenous identity, Indigenous geography and labour force status: Canada, provinces and territories](#).

¹⁰ Statistics Canada. (2025). *Labour Force Survey and Job Vacancy and Wage Survey*.
<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/labour/labour-shortage-trends-canada>

and overall economic growth by reducing staff turnover and commuting costs, leading to improved health and well-being for workers and accelerating onboarding through existing networks. Providing sufficient funding for First Nations PSE can more than double employment rates and increase labour force participation by nearly 45%, further supporting this investment as one of the highest-impact economic interventions available.¹¹

As the foundation of learner pathways, K-12 education outcomes directly shape PSE access and future employment. The most recent First Nations high school attainment rates indicate that 58% of First Nations young adults aged 20 to 24 living on-reserve had a high-school certificate or equivalent, compared to 93% of non-Indigenous Canadians.¹² First Nations students have the inherent and Treaty rights to receive education that reflects their cultures, values, traditions, and languages, yet they continue to experience lower high school completion rates than non-Indigenous learners and face barriers linked to geography, poverty, inadequate facilities, special education needs, and limited culturally relevant programming.

There is a widening gap between the funding required to meet First Nations' elementary and secondary education needs and available federal resources. As of June 2026, 20 Regional Education Agreements, a core mechanism for funding First Nations education based on self-determined needs, were prepared for implementation, with no funding mechanism established to implement them. Stable, predictable, and multi-year funding commitments that allow First Nations to fully exercise jurisdiction over education and implement regionally driven education systems are a critical component of ongoing reconciliation.

Addressing these educational attainment gaps requires more than academic supports alone; it also requires investments in the physical infrastructure that enable First Nations learners to access safe, high-quality, and culturally appropriate learning environments. To meet Canada's current infrastructure standards set through Indigenous Services Canada's (ISC) *School Space Accommodations Standards*, 227 First Nations require additions, and 77 schools require immediate replacement, based on their condition and age.¹³ Infrastructure conditions and shortages force approximately 54% of First Nations students to leave their communities to obtain a high school diploma due to limited access to secondary schools.¹⁴ Closing the First Nations education infrastructure gap is therefore

¹¹ Statistics Canada. (2021). [Table 98-10-0423-01 Highest level of education by Indigenous identity, Indigenous geography and labour force status: Canada, provinces and territories](#).

¹² Ibid

¹³ Assembly of First Nations. (2026). *First Nations Education Infrastructure Capital, Operations and Maintenance Needs Assessment*. <https://afn.bynder.com/web/13682ab7c2836581/2026-education-infrastructure-research-collection/?viewType=grid&mediaId=2B75AE38-7356-4A30-A555792FF044BA6B>

¹⁴ Assembly of First Nations. (2023). *First Nations Education Infrastructure Fact Sheet*. <https://afn.bynder.com/asset/92ef574f-d78a-4f35-808b-47efb9ef95bd/Education-Infrastructure-Fact-Sheet-Final.pdf>

essential not only to improving student outcomes, but also to ensuring First Nations learners can access the post-secondary pathways and skills training required to participate in emerging economic opportunities.

Strengthening educational and training opportunities is also critical in addressing the increasingly complex challenges facing First Nations communities, including climate-related emergencies. As wildfire seasons become longer and more severe, investments in education, training, and workforce development can help support both community resilience and the growth of First Nations-led emergency management capacity. Wildfire risk has become a growing national concern, with First Nations experiencing some of its most severe impacts. Across the country, communities are facing increasing threats from wildfires, including displacement, damage to homes and infrastructure, and the significant challenges associated with recovery and reconstruction. At the same time, many First Nations possess valuable emergency management expertise and are prepared to contribute more broadly to wildfire preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts. Jurisdictional complexities, liability concerns, inconsistent accreditation requirements, and financial constraints continue to limit the development, certification, and deployment of First Nations firefighting personnel. First Nations wildfire firefighters should be recognized as a vital component of Canada's national wildfire response capacity and support measures to remove these barriers through greater intergovernmental collaboration and accountability, mutual recognition of training and credentials, targeted investments in workforce development that build on existing community expertise, and accessible federally backed insurance solutions to address liability risks.

Removing barriers to the training and deployment of First Nations wildfire firefighters would not only strengthen Canada's emergency response capacity but also demonstrate the broader value of investing in First Nations workforce development. The need for First Nations-led training, skills development, and labour market planning extends beyond emergency management and is increasingly important in sectors driving Canada's economic growth. In August 2025, the Government of Canada established the MPO to bring together agencies and support transformative strategies that align with national priorities in infrastructure sectors such as mining, transportation, and energy. The MPO explicitly identifies partnership with Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous economic participation as central to major project development, including opportunities for ownership, equity participation, environmental stewardship, employment, and generational benefits.¹⁵ These objectives require more than project-by-project consultation. They require a First Nations workforce with access to post-secondary pathways in trades and other high-demand careers so that First Nations can shape

¹⁵ Government of Canada. (2026). *Major Projects Office: Our priorities*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/major-projects-office/our-priorities.html>

projects, exercise rights, and capture long-term economic benefits. Programs such as the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) program provide foundational support for skills training delivery across First Nations communities. However, ISET's effectiveness depends on alignment between training provision and actual labour market demand. This reality represents a gap that remains difficult to close. The Labour Market Information (LMI) pilot has demonstrated the value of First Nations-led, localized labour market data in closing information gaps by connecting labour data to priorities such as housing and infrastructure development. However, the current LMI pilot is sunsetting with no new investments identified. This creates immediate risk where First Nations will lose access to the tools and data capacity required to sustain workforce participation in major projects.

Investing in a First Nations skilled and educated workforce can address needs in sectors that are critical to projects overseen by the MPO, including construction, skilled trades, engineering, project management, environmental monitoring, resource development, and digital infrastructure. First Nations are well-placed to contribute to regional economies, as many large-scale infrastructure projects are being planned near Indigenous territories. Projects such as the Port of Churchill Plus, with a joint federal-provincial investment of \$262.5 million, and the Mackenzie Valley Highway, with an initial federal investment of over \$100 million, present opportunities for procurement benefits and local hiring of First Nations workers. Local recruitment can strengthen communities and overall economic growth by reducing staff turnover and commuting costs, leading to improved health and well-being for workers and accelerating onboarding through existing networks. Providing sufficient funding for First Nations PSE can more than double employment rates and increase labour force participation by nearly 45%, further supporting this investment as one of the highest-impact economic interventions available.¹⁶

4. Existing Authorities and Jurisdictional Concerns

Education for First Nations is a fundamental element of self-government and the right to self-determination, in line with inherent and Treaty rights and international law. Addressing funding gaps is not only a Constitutional, Treaty, and international obligation of Canada, but also a critical strategy to support First Nations leadership in cultural and language revitalization, learner and community wellness, and regional economic development.

ISC currently provides funding to First Nations PSE through the Post-Secondary Partnership Program (PSP) and Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). Both programs have received consistent funding for over a decade, and there was no

¹⁶ Statistics Canada. (2021). *Table 98-10-0423-01 Highest level of education by Indigenous identity, Indigenous geography and labour force status: Canada, provinces and territories.*
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810042301>

additional funding allocated to First Nations PSE in Budget 2025. Expenses for both institutions and individuals have risen significantly since the initiation of these programs and funding has failed to keep pace with the growing demand for PSE among First Nations students, therefore restricting the number of students who can access and successfully complete their education.¹⁷

Compared with mainstream post-secondary institutions, First Nations Institutions (FNIs) operate in a fragmented funding landscape absent of reliable core funding mechanisms, and many face additional barriers including higher operating costs for remote areas with limited infrastructure. While governments invest approximately \$29.4 billion annually in mainstream post-secondary institutions, only about \$50 million is made available to the roughly 80 FNIs serving 10,000+ students across Canada.¹⁸ These disparities are pervasive because of the lack of FPT funding mechanisms required to support the needs and mandates of FNIs. FNIs are distinctive in that they deliver community-based education, serve remote and northern communities, integrate culturally relevant curricula, and offer trades and applied programs aligned with local economies. In addition, FNIs are uniquely positioned to support the 40% of First Nations people living on reserve who have no certificate, diploma, or degree, to attain a high school credential and access PSE.¹⁹ This role extends beyond traditional post-secondary programming, as FNIs are also key providers of adult education and upgrading programs that help learners re-enter the education system, strengthen foundational skills, and pursue further training and employment opportunities.

Given the number of First Nations adults who have not completed high school, adult education remains a critical pathway to workforce development and is directly tied to economic growth, leading to reduced poverty, increased earnings, and improved employment opportunities. In 2021, Canada invested \$350 million over five years towards adult education. This time-limited funding is set to conclude in 2026-2027, without any indication of new investments. In 2022, there were over 3000 new adult learners, and by 2025, there were upwards of 6000 adult learners enrolled in adult education. As the program sunsets, First Nations will be unable to continue offering these programs without secured and predictable funding and are likely to lose any momentum in terms of staffing, space acquisition, and program development and delivery. Without renewed investments, up to 300 adult education programs could be lost, disrupting the educational journeys of thousands of learners and undermining pathways to post-secondary education, skills training, and employment.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Assembly of First Nations. (2025). *Assessing Structural Funding Availability for First Nations Institutes*. Draft Report.

¹⁹ Ibid

Rather than the renewed investments that are needed, FNIYES planned spending reduced from \$52.8 million in 2025 to 2026²⁰ to \$25.6 million in their 2026 to 2027²¹. These funding decisions demonstrate a lack of sustained federal investment in First Nations education, skills development, and employment pathways at a time when Canada is seeking to expand its skilled workforce. Adult Education, PSE and FNIYES programs must be supported through predictable, sustained and needs-based investments that allow First Nations learners and youth to access education and employment opportunities.

Although the federal government has distinct obligations to First Nations, provincial and territorial decisions still shape the systems that many First Nations learners must navigate, including off-reserve K-12, PSE, adult education, apprenticeship pathways, training, and labour market programming. Ministers should therefore consider how federal investments and First Nations-led approaches can be complemented by provincial and territorial systems to reduce barriers and support learner success. Improving student outcomes requires provincial and territorial education systems to work in partnership with First Nations. For First Nations students attending schools off reserve, this includes ensuring access to adequately funded educational supports instead of relying on Jordan's Principle to address service gaps. Since 2016, more than 10 million products, services, and supports have been approved through Jordan's Principle, underscoring both the significant demand for equitable services and the persistent systemic gaps that continue to affect First Nations children.²² Governments must recognize that Jordan's Principle is intended to address unmet needs where existing systems fail to provide equitable services, and not as a substitute for sustained, equitable investments across the First Nations education continuum.

Similar jurisdictional concerns arise in emergency management and wildfire response sectors. First Nations firefighters may be trained and experienced, yet still face barriers to deployment when accreditation, liability, insurance, hiring authorities, and recognition of training differ across provinces and territories. These interprovincial barriers limit First Nations participation in resource sharing and can prevent qualified First Nations crews from being mobilized during wildfire emergencies. Addressing accreditation as the first technical priority would help clarify hiring and deployment requirements, support liability and insurance solutions, and enable First Nations firefighters to be recognized and

²⁰ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2025). *Employment and Social Development Canada's 2025 to 2026 Departmental Plan*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/reports/departmental-plan/2025-2026/horizontal-initiatives.html>

²¹ Employment and Social Development Canada. (2026). *Employment and Social Development Canada's 2026 to 2027 Departmental Plan*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/reports/departmental-plan/2026-2027/horizontal-initiatives.html>

²² Government of Canada. (2025). *Jordan's Principle: Approved services and products*. Indigenous Services Canada. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1568396296543/1582657596387>

deployed across jurisdictions as part of Canada's emergency management and climate adaptation workforce.

Furthermore, intergovernmental investment in First Nations school infrastructure has the potential to generate benefits that extend well beyond communities. The planning, design, construction, and maintenance of new or modernized schools require architects, engineers, tradespeople, project managers, equipment operators, and suppliers, many of whom are drawn from regional labour markets.²³ Canada's construction sector employs more than 1.6 million people and contributes approximately 7% to 7.5% of national GDP, demonstrating its significant role as an economic driver.²⁴ Based on 2022 input and output data, the \$7.1 billion required to meet safety and crowding standards in First Nations schools and teacherages over the next five years would create 44,234 jobs and increase demand for local manufacturing, transportation, professional services, and building materials.^{25,26,27} Beyond the immediate employment effects, improved education infrastructure contributes to stronger educational outcomes, workforce development, and long-term economic participation, creating a more skilled labour force that benefits both First Nations and the broader Canadian economy. From a public policy perspective, investments in First Nations schools should be viewed not only as a reconciliation and equity imperative, but also as a strategic economic development measure that supports regional employment, stimulates economic activity, and strengthens the future workforce across Canada.

Several jurisdictions have demonstrated how provincial and territorial investments can complement federal funding and strengthen First Nations participation in education and workforce development. In Ontario, a recent \$7.2 million investment through Skills Advance Ontario is supporting workforce training initiatives, including funding to train Indigenous workers in housing construction, forestry, and telecommunications infrastructure, helping to address labour shortages while creating pathways to long-term employment. In Saskatchewan, provincial support for FNIs is helping to create education-to-employment pathways that align with labour market needs. The First Nations University of Canada, through programs in Indigenous knowledge and science and Indigenous business and public administration, supports First Nations learners in developing the skills and leadership needed to participate in and benefit from economic development opportunities. In addition, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies provides

²³ BuildForce Canada. (2026). *Construction and maintenance looking forward 2026-2035*. <https://www.buildforce.ca/en/lmi-2026/>

²⁴ Canadian Construction Association. (n.d.). *Value of the industry*. <https://www.cca-acc.com/about-us/value-of-industry/>

²⁵ Statistics Canada. (2025) [Table 36-10-0594-01 Input-output multipliers, detail level](#)

²⁶ Assembly of First Nations. (2026). *First Nations Education Infrastructure Capital, Operations and Maintenance Needs Assessment*. <https://afn.bynder.com/web/13682ab7c2836581/2026-education-infrastructure-research-collection/?viewType=grid&mediaId=2B75AE38-7356-4A30-A555792FF044BA6B>

²⁷ Statistics Canada. (2025). *Construction statistics*. <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/construction>

hands-on trades and industrial training through programs in construction, heavy equipment operating, welding, and other apprenticeship-related training, helping First Nations learners transition directly into high-demand skilled trades careers. In British Columbia, the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology offers post-secondary options to First Nations that include forestry, environmental science, health trades, business, and language. Together, these investments demonstrate how provinces and territories can build on federal investments through targeted partnerships that advance workforce development while respecting First Nations control of education.

While these examples show the positive impact of provincial and territorial partnerships and investments, they also highlight the importance of ensuring that First Nations are actively involved in the governance structures where education priorities, funding approaches, and workforce development strategies are established. As governments increasingly align education and training systems with labour market and economic objectives, First Nations must be included as full partners in discussions and decision-making processes that affect their learners, institutions, and communities. Meaningful participation in forums such as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) is essential to ensuring that policies and investments reflect First Nations priorities and support First Nations control of First Nations education.

5. Funding Requirements

Building a First Nations skilled and educated workforce requires dedicated, new, and sustained annual investments for First Nations, in addition to current core funding and existing FPT funding mechanisms:

Post-Secondary Education:	PSPP:	\$67.5 million*
	PSSSP:	\$155 million*
Team Canada Strong:		\$32 million
Adult Education		\$194 million
Labour Market Information		\$65.6 million
Firefighter Education and Workforce Readiness		\$146.8 million
Education Infrastructure		\$1.4 billion
Regional Education Agreements		\$750 million
TOTAL:		\$2.81 billion per year

*This amount is in addition to current core funding for both PSPP and PSSSP.

Detailed program descriptions and calculations to support these funding requirements can be found in Annex B.

6. Strategic Policy Recommendations

To advance the shared goal of eliminating financial and systemic barriers to First Nations education, skills development, and career pathways within the next five years, First Ministers are being asked to advance the following three priorities:

1. **Establish permanent First Nations participation in relevant existing Federal, Provincial, and Territorial (FPT) education, skills, and workforce tables:** Despite Indigenous education being identified as a CMEC strategic priority, First Nations have historically not had a formal seat at the table during annual discussions and decision-making processes. First Nations should participate as rights-holders in the existing FPT education, skills, apprenticeship, labour-market, and infrastructure forums, including CMEC.
2. **Commit to a jointly developed ten-year First Nations education and workforce strategy, with five-year milestones, supported by sustained investments:** First Ministers and First Nations leaders should jointly develop a ten-year action plan with designated targets and accountabilities as a starting point. This plan should be extended to cover a longer planning horizon to give stability after establishing an initial strategy. This should include dedicated, new, and sustained investments for First Nations across the full lifelong learning continuum, skilled trades pathways, adult education, labour market information programs, and school infrastructure. The strategy should not rely on existing funding mechanisms as a substitute for new commitments and should aim to eliminate preventable financial and systemic barriers that keep qualified First Nations learners from accessing education, skills development, and career pathways. Annual reporting should track implementation of the ten-year strategy, dedicated investments, learner access, institutional capacity, infrastructure progress, workforce outcomes, and agreed targets and accountabilities.
3. **Secure a national commitment on First Nations wildfire firefighter accreditation, mobility, and deployment, to address urgent emergency management needs across jurisdictions:** First Nations wildfire firefighters are a critical yet underutilized component of Canada's emergency response capacity, with many communities possessing extensive frontline experience and local expertise. However, inconsistent accreditation standards, liability concerns, and interprovincial barriers limit their ability to deploy where they are most needed. First Ministers and First Nations leaders should support a national accreditation framework with performance metrics that recognizes existing First Nations firefighter capacity and enables greater mobility, coordination, and employment opportunities across Canada. These metrics should clearly articulate the outcomes of this initiative, including the number of First Nations firefighters trained, number of days deployed, and cost savings by avoiding expensive, taxpayer-funded international firefighter deployments to Canada.

7. Conclusion

First Nations education is a right and an essential foundation of self-determination. First Nations across Canada continue to call for stable, predictable, needs-based, and equitable education funding that upholds inherent, Treaty, Constitutional, and international obligations. Investment in First Nations education must therefore be understood not as discretionary program spending, but as a rights-based obligation and a practical requirement for Canada's major projects agenda and economic growth.

First Ministers Meetings have long served as a forum for Canada's most senior political leaders to address issues of national importance. The 2004 meeting of the Ministers demonstrated that governments could make meaningful progress in improving education, employment, and overall living conditions for Indigenous peoples through coordinated funding and program development. While past commitments were not fully realized, they underscore the impact that can be achieved when political leadership is matched with sustained investment and accountability.

Today, Canada faces urgent workforce, infrastructure, environmental, and economic development challenges that cannot be addressed without the full participation, leadership, and jurisdiction of First Nations peoples and communities. First Nations education is indispensable to Canada's ability to deliver major projects, address labour shortages, and build sustainable economies.

Canada must build on existing commitments, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, Treaty and Constitutional obligations, and commitments supporting First Nations participation in economic development. Advancing First Nations control of First Nations education through sustainable Regional Education Agreements, long-term funding commitments, and meaningful participation in intergovernmental decision-making will be essential to achieving these objectives.

A ten-year strategy, supported by five-year milestones, sustained investments, regional approaches, and transparent accountability, would provide the stability required for First Nations to improve education systems, build institutional capacity, support learners, and develop the skilled workforce needed to participate in Canada's economic agenda.

By working collaboratively with First Nations as rights-holders, FPT governments can help close persistent educational and employment gaps, strengthen First Nations control of education, and advance productivity and economic growth. Most importantly, these efforts can lay the foundation for a future in which every First Nations learner has equitable access to the education, training, and career opportunities needed to advance self-determination and benefit from Canada's nation-building agenda.

Annex A: Key Messages, Proposed Announcements, and Decisions Requested

A. Key Messages

1. First Nations must be full partners in education governance and reform.

First Nations are rights-holders with inherent, Treaty, and Constitutional rights to education and life-long learning. Decisions that impact First Nations learners, institutions, and communities must be made with First Nations as full partners in FPT tables, not as stakeholders consulted after priorities are set.

2. Every First Nations learner must have access to the education, skills development opportunities, and career pathways needed to participate in and benefit from Canada's major projects agenda.

Persistent funding gaps across the education continuum continue to restrict access to education and employment opportunities for First Nations. As governments invest billions in major projects and skilled trades recruitment, First Nations learners must have access to the education, training, and financial supports needed to participate in, lead, and benefit from these opportunities.

3. Investing in First Nations education will support economic growth and workforce sustainability across Canada.

Provinces and territories facing labour shortages and workforce retention challenges stand to benefit from increased First Nations participation in post-secondary education, skilled trades, emergency management, and the broader labour market. Dedicated, new, and sustained investments in student supports, adult education, school infrastructure, firefighter education and wildfire workforce readiness, and career pathways can strengthen educational attainment, expand workforce participation, and help meet Canada's future labour market and community safety needs.

The TRC's education-related Calls to Action reinforce these key messages, including Calls to Action 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 62, which identify the need to eliminate education and employment gaps, eliminate discrepancies in education funding, ensure sufficient funding and culturally appropriate curricula, end the backlog of First Nations students seeking post-secondary education, develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs, and support K-12 and teacher education related to residential schools, Treaties, Indigenous knowledge, languages, and contemporary contributions.

B. Proposed Announcements

1. Governments will work with First Nations to jointly develop and implement a ten-year First Nations education and training strategy, supported by dedicated, new, predictable and sustained investments across the lifelong learning continuum. This

includes First Nations-specific funding for early learning and Head Start, K-12, post-secondary education, adult education, skilled trades, labour market information, school infrastructure, and First Nations firefighter and wildfire workforce readiness, without relying on existing funding mechanisms as a substitute for new commitments.

2. Governments will measure, monitor, and report on First Nations-specific participation and outcomes in education, skills training, and major project employment opportunities, using disaggregated data to demonstrate progress.
3. First Nations will be established standing participants in FPT education governance tables to support coordinated, rights-based policy development, including at the Council of Ministers of Education.

C. Decisions Requested

First Ministers and First Nations leaders are being asked to:

1. Establish permanent First Nations participation in relevant existing Federal, Provincial, and Territorial (FPT) education, skills, and workforce tables;
2. Commit to a jointly developed ten-year First Nations education and workforce strategy, with five-year milestones, supported by sustained investments; and
3. Secure a national commitment on First Nations wildfire firefighter accreditation, mobility, and deployment, to address urgent emergency management needs across jurisdictions.

Annex B: Program Details

This section consolidates detailed program descriptions and calculations that support the main paper's political proposition and funding requirements. The amounts below should be framed as dedicated, new, and sustained investments for First Nations, in addition to current core funding and existing federal, provincial, and territorial mechanisms.

A.1 Post-Secondary Partnership Program (PSPP)

The PSPP supports First Nations Institutes (FNIs) and First Nations-directed community-based programming. In addition to current core funding mechanisms, a dedicated, new, and sustained investment of \$67.5 million per year is required for FNIs and community-based programming through PSPP. This is calculated at \$29,959 dollars per student for 2250 students, based on long-run estimates for maintaining and advancing institutions.²⁸

A.2 Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP)

The PSSSP provides non-repayable financial support for eligible First Nations students registered under the *Indian Act*. The program supports access to post-secondary education by helping students cover costs such as tuition, travel, and living expenses. In addition to current core funding mechanisms, a dedicated, new, and sustained investment of \$155 million per year is required to support eligible students who are currently unfunded. This amount would provide funding for 4500 additional students, calculated at \$34,234 dollars per student.²⁹

A.3 Team Canada Strong and Skilled Trades Pathways

Based on 2021 census data indicating that 2% of individuals with a trades or apprenticeship certificate or diploma are First Nations, a proportional First Nations allocation of the \$8 billion Team Canada Strong investment would be \$32 million in funding per year, or \$160 million over five years.³⁰

A.4 Adult Education and Vocational Programming

In 2021, Canada invested \$350 million over five years in adult education. A dedicated, new, and sustained investment of \$194 million per year is required to renew and expand adult education and vocational programming to accommodate the increased student population.

²⁸ Assembly of First Nations. (2022). *First Nations Post-Secondary Education: A Costing Analysis on the Establishment and Advancement of First Nations Institutions*.

<https://afn.bynder.com/m/20bce611a31304a4/original/First-Nations-Post-Secondary-Education-A-Costing-Analysis-on-the-Establishment-and-Advancement-of-First-Nations-Institutions-Summary-Report.pdf>

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Statistics Canada (2021). Table 98-10-0423-01 Highest level of education by Indigenous identity, Indigenous geography and labour force status: Canada, provinces and territories.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810042301>

A.5 First Nations Labour Market Information (LMI) Pilot

The LMI pilot, launched in 2017 under the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training program, has demonstrated the value of First Nations-led, localized labour market data in closing information gaps, identifying workforce needs, designing relevant training programs, and supporting targeted employment strategies. To-date, LMI has engaged more than 30,000 participants and supported communities in aligning training pathways with documented employment opportunities in high demand sectors such as construction, infrastructure, and skilled trades. \$65.69 million per year with a 2% escalator beginning in 2026 is required to transition LMI into a permanent program.

A.6 Firefighter Education and Workforce Readiness

Significant gaps in emergency management service delivery are outlined in the 2022 and 2025 Auditor General of Canada reports. To adequately fund a First Nations wildfire firefighter education and workforce readiness program, \$146.8 million is required annually over 5 years. These investments would support the accredited training and safety equipment needs of First Nations Type 2 and 3 firefighter crews across Canada.

A.7 School Infrastructure and Teacherages

Based on current infrastructure standards, 227 First Nations require additions, and 77 schools require immediate replacement. The estimated requirement to meet safety and crowding standards in First Nations schools and teacherages is \$7.14 billion over five years. These investments would support improved educational outcomes, create jobs in planning, design, construction, maintenance, and related supply chains, and strengthen long-term workforce development.

A.8 Regional Education Agreements

Assuming an average cost of \$25 million in additional funding per Regional Education Agreement, \$750 million is required per year to fund the 10 active REAs and 20 REAs that are prepared but not funded. This number is derived using needs-based estimates from 5 First Nations models, adjusting down to accommodate an over-representation of large First Nations in this sample.