

Cap leads to steep drop in First Nations students receiving post-secondary support

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The federal program that helps First Nations and Inuit people attend college or university has registered an 18.3 per cent decline in the number of students it funds since 1997, according to documents obtained by the NDP through Access to Information and shared with CBC News.

The slump is striking given the population growth in those communities over the same time period. (The First Nations population alone has grown 29 per cent since 1997.)

But a Liberal campaign promise to add \$50 million a year to the post-secondary student support program for Indigenous students was not included in the spring budget, adding to the funding crunch.

"I'm shocked and saddened to see those numbers. I didn't realize it was that high," Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde said in an interview with CBC News. "We've had 10,000 students on the wait list for years, trying to access post-secondary institutions.

"More and more graduates are coming out of Grade 12 and you're telling First Nations students: 'No. No you can't go to university. Your right to education is being capped.' This is not acceptable. It's just another missed opportunity to help close the socioeconomic gap that exists."

The student support program has stagnated since former finance minister Paul Martin imposed a two per cent annual cap on spending increases at the Department of Indigenous Affairs in the 1990s as part of an effort to rein in mounting budget deficits.

The average price of tuition, however, has more than doubled since that cap was imposed. In Ontario, inflation-adjusted fees were roughly \$4,000 in 1996-97 and have surged to \$8,691 in 2016-17 — [according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#) — meaning the pool of funds available to First Nations students has failed to keep pace with inflation and the rapidly rising cost of tuition.

When presented with her department's own data, Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett said she would like to see the number of First Nations students that are heading to university or college for the first time this week when classes return.

"I'm looking forward not back. There was a time kids had lost hope and couldn't see themselves in post-secondary, and I think we're turning that around," the minister said in an interview. "We're really seeing an exciting take-up."

Liberals break 1st election promise

Charlie Angus, the NDP's critic for Indigenous affairs, said there will be no meaningful growth in the number of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education until the cap is lifted.

"Indigenous communities have been crippled by the two per cent cap. What disturbs me is that it is so difficult for many Indigenous students to graduate from schools in isolated communities. The young people who want to go — they're being denied the support they need. We're abandoning the potential of this next generation and it's really unconscionable," he said.



Former prime minister Paul Martin shares a laugh with AFN National Chief Perry Bellegarde. A two per cent cap imposed by Martin on Indigenous education spending, during an era of cuts in the 1990s, is still in place. (Ryan Remiorz/Canadian Press)

The support program is designed to help offset tuition, books, travel and living costs, and to fulfil the federal government's treaty obligation to provide status Indians with education.

The maximum non-repayable grant is \$35,000 a year — although few actually receive that full amount — and approximately 22,000 students receive some funds from the program each year. Funding for certain programs is limited and not all prospective students get help, even if they have the grades.

'Heartbreaking' choices

The first spending promise Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau made during the last campaign was [a \\$2.6-billion boost to First Nations education spending](#) for kindergarten to Grade 12 and \$50 million more annually for the post-secondary support program. "We will make up for 10 long-lost years," Trudeau said in August 2015. But the 2016 budget was silent on the funding for post-secondary education.



Justin Trudeau announces funding for First Nations education.1:11

"Why was that promise considered breakable? It sends a very, very bad message to all Indigenous youth," Angus said. "They made a promise for tax cuts for people earning \$200,000 a year and they delivered. They made a promise to Indigenous children and they didn't deliver. It's a question of priorities."

The decision is further proof the federal government is "all talk" on the issue of First Nations education, the national chair for the Canadian Federation of Students said in an interview.

"It's very shameful," Bilan Arte said. "Let's see the money. Let's actually commit not just through words but through funding."

'Let's rectify this wrong. A good education is the best way out of poverty.' - AFN Grand Chief Perry Bellegarde

Band or tribal councils, which distribute money from the support program, are forced to make "heartbreaking" choices about which students will be eligible, she said.

Now, many prospective students will have to wait until next fall to pursue a university or college degree with the hope the government will come through on its promises.

Bellegarde said advocates have to refine their pitch to the Liberal government.

"Let's make sure that this is on everybody's radar," he said of pre-budget planning, which will begin this fall. "Let's rectify this wrong. A good education is the best way out of poverty and this is about investing in human capital."

Bennett left the door open to fulfilling the Liberal campaign promise down the line, but did not say definitively why the funding was left out this year.

"These budgets get written in a certain way and we're just working towards the next budget. It's still a commitment. It was in our platform," she said.



Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett says funding for post-secondary education could be in the next budget, and the party is still committed to the \$50-million figure it promised during the election campaign. (CBC)

She also pointed to the \$8.6 billion in new funding the government directed toward Indigenous people overall.

"I think that was pretty historic investment, and I think that coast to coast to coast it was extremely well-received. [First Nations] know that everything isn't done in the first year."