

*MEDIA RELEASE*

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**MATAWA FIRST NATIONS SOUND THE ALARM ON THE LACK OF 2020/2021  
SUPPLEMENTARY FUNDING TO MAKE SCHOOLS SAFE IN THE COVID-19 GLOBAL  
PANDEMIC**

**Thunder Bay, ON**— Recognizing that the COVID-19 global pandemic has caused significant disruption to First Nations in the 2019/2020 academic year, and will continue to do so in 2020/2021 if proper planning and precautions are not put in place—the Chiefs of the Matawa Chiefs Council—based on an urgent recommendation from a number of Education Authorities in their communities—passed a resolution last week that put into place the development of a comprehensive Matawa Emergency COVID-19 Education Response Plan to prevent the spread of COVID-19 so parents can support the return of students to school in the fall. The plan will be developed with Education Authorities in the Matawa region, and initial planning has already begun.

Having attended the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (NAN) Special Meeting on Education which was held virtually on June 17 and 18, 2020—Matawa education leaders agree with the assessments made at that Special Meeting that core funding for 2020/2021 fall school year *will not be sufficient* to allow First Nations to provide quality education programs and ensure the safe delivery of education programs and services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and *urgent supplementary funding is needed* as only 2 months are available before students return to school.

Today, the Matawa Chiefs Council is sounding the alarm on the lack of supplementary funding available to make their schools safe. They say that nowhere in the proposal-based community-support funding made available by the federal government thus far are funds directed for education only—nor have questions been answered by federal officials on addressing COVID-19 mitigation in First Nation schools, despite having been asked on numerous occasions. The Matawa Chiefs say the envelopes are just not there for what is needed to make their schools safe.

As the Ontario Ministry of Education is making significant investments to support students return to school (like the recently announced \$15 million to purchase thousands of classroom computers, and \$10 million to hire additional mental health workers), the Matawa Chiefs are calling parity for their First Nations children and families so that they do not fall further behind in the education gap. They are also calling for provincial government supports that are safe-schools-specific and not general proposal-based. The Matawa Chiefs are urging the federal and provincial governments to review and consider recommendations made at the NAN Special Meeting on Education regarding a per-student/per-school funding formula that best addresses needs for children in remote fly-in and road-accessible First Nations schools.

One of the major and ongoing areas of concern for First Nations in Matawa in particular—more for the 5 fly-in remote communities, but also road-accessible communities as well—is the lack of broadband connectivity in their communities. Some First Nations are still operating on aging satellite systems, and students are not able to achieve the provincial standard of 1 megabit per second per student and cannot access resources like the province's [Learn at Home](#) online portal. While a longer-term process to build a fibre-optic backbone to 5 remote fly-in communities is in operation within Matawa, it too has been affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Matawa's Emergency COVID-19 Education Response Plan will be ready by July 20, 2020, it will include (but will not be limited to) a 2020/2021 plan and costing for:

- upgraded bandwidth where needed so that teachers and students can access online resources

- additional costs for safe facilities (PPE supplies, cleaning, heating – including the logistics of delivering and operating in fly-in remote communities)
- additional capital costs that will be incurred to upgrade school facilities (such as retro-fitting washrooms with touchless-handwashing and automatic-flushing, etc.), teacher accommodations (especially where accommodations are shared) and office facilities in the schools and Education Authority offices in order to accommodate physical distancing measures
- additional transportation where schools implement staggered attendance to reduce the number of students in the classrooms
- additional student supervision and monitoring
- curriculum modification (including land-based learning, home-based instruction, safe classroom teaching methodology, remote program delivery)
- on-site medical

Matawa First Nations and their Education Authorities require funding envelopes being made available so that—just like every other parent in Ontario—parents from First Nations can also be assured that their children will be safe to send to school.

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**For more information, please contact** Carol Audet, Communications Manager – Matawa First Nations at (807) 632-9663 or by email at [caudet@matawa.on.ca](mailto:caudet@matawa.on.ca) (on July 1 only) or Vivian Ann Martin, Executive Assistant – Matawa First Nations at (807) 627-2861 or by email at [vmartin@matawa.on.ca](mailto:vmartin@matawa.on.ca) (on July 2 and 3).

## QUOTES

“At this time, Marten Falls First Nation is in the process of recruiting elementary teachers and a principal for 2020/2021 school year. Our community needs an education plan so that we can access the same level of support in the form of teaching staff.”

—Chief Bruce Achneepineskum, Marten Falls First Nation

“This coming July 19 will be 115 years since the signing of the Treaty here in Fort Hope. Today, education is one of key building blocks for a healthy, self-sustaining community. It is the hope and future for our youth. It would be a tragedy that our children would lose more instruction if the proper tools and resources are not in place before this September.”

—Chief Harvey Yesno, Eabametoong First Nation

