**First Nations education a cash-strapped 'non-system,' bureaucrats tell minister**

**NDP says Liberals are spending $800M less on First Nations**

**education than originally promised**

By John Paul Tasker, [CBC News](http://www.cbc.ca/news/cbc-news-online-news-staff-list-1.1294364) Posted: Oct 05, 2016 6:30 AM ET Last Updated: Oct 05, 2016 11:37 AM ET

First Nations schools on reserves are in such a dire state that federal bureaucrats in charge of the file have taken to calling it a "non-system," a striking admission that many Indigenous students are being ill-served by the very schools these public servants oversee.

A "secret" briefing note prepared for Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett, and obtained through access to information, says First Nations schools are failing students not only because of a dearth of federal funding but because "many communities lack the educational systems and structures required to close the educational outcome gap."

Most of the individually run, band-operated schools don't have proper curriculum development, teacher training, testing and quality assurance and the larger support structures — like a school board, elected trustees or an education ministry — that make schools work, the briefing note from November says.

**Grading the Gap**

CBC News is investigating the quality of First Nations education on- and off-reserve in the wake of the federal Liberal government's pledge to spend $2.6 billion over five years on K-12 learning.

It has also commissioned many expert studies and yet has done little to implement their recommendations, she said.

"They have known about these problems for decades and they've not dealt with them. Why isn't the federal government doing better when it knows better?"

The Liberal First Nations education campaign promise has already been partly broken as $50 million Trudeau pledged for post-secondary education was [excluded from this year's budget](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/first-nations-cap-higher-education-1.3753021).

The money for kindergarten to Grade 12 education has also been spread out over five years — instead of the promised four — which amounts to an $800 million cut. The funding is also heavily back-loaded, with 25 per cent of it not set to roll out until 2020-21, a year after the next election.

"If you're serious ... you make those big budget investments in your first couple of years," Blackstock said. "They have used this 'It's a first step' narrative to protect themselves. But their incremental approach to equality never achieves equality. Children don't have incremental childhoods."

But in the briefing note obtained by CBC News, the department tells Bennett that committing more money, as First Nations advocates have been asking for, is only part of the solution.

"New investments alone will not improve outcomes, but increased funding is an important and necessary piece of the puzzle. Other factors relating to socio-economic conditions and the fact that many First Nations schools exist as a 'school house model' are also important factors that affect student outcomes," the report says, referring to the absence of an actual system to support individual schools.

**Literacy, numeracy results disappoint**

The goal of Indigenous Affairs is to have First Nations students reach provincial education standards, but standardized testing results reveal there is still much work to be done.

In 2013-14, only 21 per cent of on-reserve boys in Ontario reached or exceeded provincial literacy standards, while a paltry 18 per cent were competent in mathematics, according to statistics produced by the department. The figures were marginally higher for girls.

"I don't know if you could find literacy rates in the world that low, except for maybe sub-Saharan Africa," NDP Indigenous affairs critic Charlie Angus said in an interview with CBC News. "How many centuries is it going to take to get them up to a provincial standard?"

The numbers were not nearly as low for Indigenous students taught off-reserve. The results showed 38 per cent of all students in grades 3 and 6 achieved Ontario's standard for numeracy, while 50.5 per cent met literacy standards. The results were still below those of non-Indigenous students.

Graduation rates for Indigenous students taught in Ontario's public system in 2013-14 were also much higher: more than 70 per cent compared to 45 per cent for those on reserves.

Blackstock said this is proof that there isn't something "intrinsically" wrong with First Nations students, but rather poor outcomes are the result of "profound underfunding."

"I'm a common sense girl who grew up in the bush and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that these schools are in a total state of disrepair. It's absolutely clear that conditions are so poor. If we applied those same conditions to kids in Toronto, over time, we'd see the same results. It's the conditions that we're putting them in. That's what's so tragic to me."

These days, kids in Indigenous communities have access to the internet and travel and are more aware of the discrepancies in the quality of education services around the country.

"These kids know that other kids are succeeding. The children internalize it as their own failure. 'I'm not smart enough. I'm not good enough. It's our community, we're losers.'"

As a result, she said, federally funded First Nations schools have ceded large portions of their enrolment to provincially run schools because they are seen to be better run.

**'The department is just lying'**

"First Nations schools just can't compete with the provincial school system. It just doesn't happen," said Perry Bellegarde, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

For example, if a student attends the First Nations school in the northern Ontario community of Attawapiskat, the federal department will pay $8,000 to the school. If that same student transfers 500 kilometres south to a public school in Timmins, the department will pay the provincial system $16,000, according to figures provided by NDP MP Charlie Angus.

The tuition associated with attending public schools is covered by the department because the education of status Indians is the sole responsibility of the federal government.

Don Drummond, former Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty's budget czar, and an expert on Indigenous education at Queen's University, says there's a funding gap and it's likely closer to 30 per cent in most jurisdictions.

Angus figures the gap is actually "30 to 50 to 100 per cent, depending on where you go."

"It varies all over, from region to region," the NDP critic said. "That speaks to inequity in the system. You just can't figure it out."

**Questions for Critical Thinking:**

1. Define the term **dearth** - *paragraph 2*. (Comprehension)
2. List three problems with the First Nations School System as stated in this article. (Knowledge)
3. In what ways do you perceive your life would be different if you were attending a First Nations school instead of JMH? (Analysis)