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## **Growing concern among southern First Nation families with province's back-to-school plan**

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**ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB** — More than 17,000 First Nation students will head back to school this month amid growing concerns around returning to school in-person. The government of Manitoba has not properly informed or supported schools and families to adequately deal with COVID-19 as they begin the fall term.

“As First Nation students head back to provincial schools this week, they have been met with confusion, last minute updates, changing plans, and very little support from the province of Manitoba,” said Grand Chief Jerry Daniels of the Southern Chiefs’ Organization. “The province has yet to take responsibility for the safety of our students, and they are putting undue stress on already overburdened families.”

The province has offered parents and caregivers insufficient options for going back to school in a healthy and safe way. Remote learning should be an option for all students, but currently it is only offered for immunocompromised children. Most families with children in provincial schools are being forced to choose between attending school in-person and homeschooling, which is not an option for most working parents and caregivers.

First Nation families already deal with systemic racism and economic apartheid that has resulted in an 11-year gap in health outcomes. They are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, as are extended family members including Elders, and many communities have imposed strict lockdown and quarantine measures to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks.

Grand Chief Daniels stated, “Sending their children into communities with higher cases of coronavirus and into schools developing plans in less than a week is causing great concern among many First Nation parents and caregivers. Our communities and our families have taken strong measures to prevent outbreaks and now the province is forcing us to choose between our children’s education and risking their potential exposure to the coronavirus.”

The province has also been unclear about who is responsible if COVID-19 cases begin to rise, and if the coronavirus starts spreading in schools and communities. Education Minister Kelvin

Goertzen has not stepped forward to take responsibility, and has instead placed it on school divisions.

With less than a week before the school term started, the province shared an information package aimed at families and staff going back to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The timing of the materials was inadequate, especially given that the province has had since March to plan and prepare for the fall term.

The materials cover important guidelines, including for physical distancing. The province's documents state that these guidelines will be followed "to the fullest extent possible", but there is little advice or support on what to do when distancing is not possible.

"Adequately preparing for students to go back-to-school during a pandemic takes significant time, planning, coordination, and funding. The provincial government should be taking any and all measures that they can to ensure the health and safety of all students across the province. Many questions remain for First Nation parents and caregivers who want to keep their children safe while still allowing them to receive their necessary education," said Grand Chief Daniels.

First Nation families and communities looking for support and resources can refer to the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc. (MFNERC) resource hub at <https://mfnerc.org/remote-learning-resources/>.

The Southern Chiefs' Organization represents 34 Anishinaabe and Dakota First Nations that came together in 1999 to protect, preserve, promote, and enhance First Nations peoples' inherent rights, languages, customs, and traditions through the application and implementation of the spirit and intent of the Treaty-making process.

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