Written Brief to the Government of Canada for Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2026 Budget

Submitted by: The Canadian Teachers' Federation

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About the Canadian Teachers' Federation

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE) is a national alliance of provincial and territorial teachers' organizations that collectively represent over 370,000 public school teachers and education workers across Canada. The CTF/FCE promotes inclusive and high-quality public education. We uphold teaching as a profession and advocate for adequate resourcing, labour rights, and social justice across Canada and around the world.

Public education is the cornerstone of both a strong economy and a thriving democracy. A well-funded and equitable public education system ensures that all young people, regardless of background, are equipped with the skills and critical thinking required to participate fully in civic life and the modern economy. The actions of the federal government have wide-ranging impact and influence on both the public good and public education. Investing in public education yields long-term economic benefits, including higher employment rates, increased productivity, and scientific and social innovation. Additionally, education fosters engaged and informed citizens who can meaningfully participate in the democratic process and contribute to social cohesion.

The public good, including healthy communities, safe societies, and shared prosperity, relies on equitable access to quality public education. Strengthening Canada's public education system must be a top priority for any government seeking to build a more resilient, inclusive, and forward-thinking nation.

- **Recommendation:** Invest in transformative mental health support for Canadians with a particular focus on school-based resources.
- **Recommendation:** Ensure access to K-12 public education regardless of immigration status.
- **Recommendation:** Invest in critical AI literacy for K-12 and made-in-Canada education technologies.
- **Recommendation:** Invest in climate-resilient school infrastructure and heat relief.
- **Recommendation:** Increase funding to support both on- and off-reserve Indigenous students.

Recommendation: Invest in Transformative Mental Health Support for Canadians with A Particular Focus on School-based Resources

Schools are a microcosm of society, and mental health continues to be a defining challenge in Canada's education systems. Artificial Intelligence adds a new layer to Mental Health considerations for children and youth in this country. Students, teachers, and education workers are experiencing elevated levels of burnout, stress, and trauma, fuelled by pandemic aftershocks, rising workloads, inadequate supports, and broader social crises such as homelessness, addictions, and poverty.

In a study of over 5,000 education professionals across Canada, 72% of educators describe their workload demands as unmanageable and 80% reported they are somewhat-to-barely coping with the stresses of daily teaching. At the same time, youth are facing deteriorating mental health at unprecedented rates. Statistics Canada and the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth reported that "among the 88% of youth who rated their mental health as 'good', 'very good', or 'excellent' in 2019, about one in five (21%) reported a decline to 'fair' or 'poor' by 2023". These challenges faced in school communities are reflective of challenges faced by Canadians writ large.

The CTF/FCE supports the Government of Canada's creation of the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. However, urgent investment is needed to move from intent to impact.

We call on the federal government to:

- Introduce dedicated funding of $4.5 billion over five years through the Canada Mental Health Transfer to provinces and territories, with accountability mechanisms to ensure funding reaches schools and communities, where educators and children can access resources directly;
- specify funding allocation within the Canada Mental Health Transfer as funding for school-based mental health services, including access to psychologists, social workers, and mental health programming; and
- recognize the mental health needs of teachers and education workers, with supports tailored to the realities within these professions.

Addressing mental health is foundational to improving the well-being of Canadians, bolstering the health of our education system, and ensuring students and teachers can thrive in their learning and working environments. Depriving students and educators access to mental health supports will lead to poorer educational outcomes which will ultimately be a detriment to the academic, social, and economic viability of the nation.

Recommendation: Ensure Access to K-12 Education for Children Regardless of Immigration Status

Recent changes to Canada's immigration system have left families across the country navigating the challenges created by expiring permits and other immigration documents. No child should face an interruption to their K–12 education because of their or their parents' immigration status. The federal government has a responsibility to ensure that study permit extensions are processed in a timely manner, and that provincial and territorial governments, school boards, education workers and families clearly understand a child's eligibility to attend school under federal immigration law.

Statistics Canada has found that among study permit holders whose permits expired before an extension became effective, half had to wait over 43 days for their extension—with one in five waiting more than 100 days. With more than 167,000 primary and secondary students holding study permits in Canada in September 2025, inconsistent understanding of federal immigration rules can unnecessarily interrupt children's access to education.

We call on the federal government to:

- **Invest $15 million over three years, beginning in 2027-2028, for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to work with provinces and territories, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, school boards and settlement-sector partners to establish a National K–12 School Access Initiative.** The initiative would provide standardized guidance, training, multilingual resources and documentation to ensure that education authorities, school personnel and families understand when children are authorized to attend elementary and secondary school under federal immigration law and applicable provincial and territorial legislation, including where immigration documents have expired or a child or family lacks immigration status. The initiative should include mechanisms to prevent unnecessary interruptions in a child's education while immigration applications or restoration processes are underway.

Recommendation: Invest in Critical AI Literacy for K-12 and Made-in-Canada Education Technologies

In 2023, representatives across the CTF/FCE 18 Member and Associate Organizations (representing over 370,000 educators) called for action to address concerns about the deployment of artificial intelligence in public schools. Since then, the CTF/FCE has undertaken a multi-year research and advocacy strategy focused on ensuring the safe, responsible use of AI in K-12 education.

Since our last submission, the federal government has taken steps to protect students from AI-related harms. AI for All is a National AI Literacy Initiative and commits $30 million through CanCode to deliver free digital skills training to K-12 students and teachers. Bill C-36 would require that children's data be handled to a higher standard, and mandates improved transparency on how data is used for automated decision-making. Bill C-34 would establish the Digital Safety Commission of Canada, and apply a duty to protect children and duty to act responsibly on both social media and AI chatbot providers. The CTF/FCE welcomes this progress.

As Canada's national AI strategy accelerates, critical gaps remain to support K-12 educators and students navigating this monumental shift. The National AI Literacy Initiative aims to reach one million entry-level post-secondary students, but promises the development of AI learning kits for only 3,000 of Canada's 420,000 public K-12 educators. Canada currently ranks 44th of 47 countries on AI literacy and training. The CanCode commitment to training 76,000 more teachers through non-profit-led training is positive, but still leaves a significant gap in access to professional learning for many educators across the country.

More than 90% of young people in Canada attend public schools. Educators cannot be left to teach these students how to think critically about AI without appropriate guidance. Access to critical AI literacy must be equitable throughout the country, and critically, **programs must be defined and designed in partnership with educators and students.** The government must lead on funding this, rather than waiting for Big Tech to step in and fund initiatives that serve their profit motives over children's rights.

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting critical AI literacy is urgently needed. Dependence on generative AI without guardrails diminishes critical thinking, essay writing, and math aquisition. The OECD found that the use of AI may give a false impression that students are learning. Brookings found that the risks of AI use in K-12 education currently outweigh potential benefits and warns about "a 'great unwiring' of students cognitive capacities" (p. 56). In a 2026 CTF/FCE survey of over 6,200 Canadian educators, respondents repeatedly raised concerns about how AI was impacting students' ability to think. If we let AI erode the quality of public education, we will likely see grave consequences for democracy, prosperity, and innovation down the road.

There is also a gap in Canada's industrial strategy for AI. Education is not identified as one of the strategy's priority sectors, despite having a significant influence on the opportunities and outcomes for young Canadians. The AI Missions Program commits $200 million to advance high-impact AI projects in the health care sector. A comparable investment should be made in education if the government is serious about protecting children's rights and long-term well-being. A dedicated mission would support the development of made-in-Canada education technology, co-designed with teachers and students and driven by actual school needs, not private sector profit. This would also reduce school system reliance on US-owned tech platforms who have a history of data breaches, an important step towards realizing Canada's ambitions towards digital sovereignty. The National Education Lab AI (NOLAI) in the Netherlands offers a proven model of teacher-tech co-design that Canada's National AI institutes are well-placed to adapt. We call on the federal government to:

- Invest $250 million over five years, beginning in 2027-2028, to establish a National Critical AI Literacy Initiative for K-12. Building on CanCode, this would be a targeted, pan-Canadian initiative ensuring no educator or student is left behind in learning the critical skills they need to thrive in the new digital ecosystem. The initiative should be delivered in close coordination with provinces and territories, and co-developed with teachers' organizations, researchers, civil society, and public sector experts. Funding must reach rural, remote, northern, and Indigenous school communities, and resources must be delivered in both official languages, as well as Indigenous languages.

- Dedicate **$200 million over five years** to an AI mission for public-good education technology, at parity with the health care mission. AI tools designed through meaningful collaboration with educators, students, and communities are more pedagogically grounded, more trusted by teachers, and better aligned with actual classroom needs. NOLAI in the Netherlands offers a promising model for teacher-tech co-design hubs that promote responsible innovation for public benefit. NOLAI's model could be replicated by Canada's AI Safety Institutes—Mila, Vector, and Amii. Tools developed under the mission would be independently evaluated for safety and efficacy before deployment, and any student and educator data gathered by the system would be stored and protected in Canada.

- Invest $50 million over five years, beginning in 2027-2028, through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, for independent, longitudinal research on the effects of AI on cognitive development, mental health, and equity and inclusion in K-12 schools. This would provide essential evidence for governments at every level to make informed decisions about how to use AI responsibly in K-12 in such a way that protects children's rights.

Recommendation: Invest in Climate Resilient School Infrastructure and Heat Relief

Climate change and its effects continue to impact all Canadians in various ways. As the Earth continues to warm and regular weather patterns that regions and communities have been accustomed to for decades rapidly change, infrastructure must adapt to protect the health, safety, and comfort of Canadians. The CTF/FCE is hearing from Member and Associate Organizations from coast to coast to coast that school infrastructure has not kept pace with the rapidly changing climate. Classrooms are sweltering in the spring and summer, windows need to be propped open in the middle of January, and the risk of flooding and fire remain omnipresent in some regions of the country.

The Government of Canada has placed capital investment at the core of many of its long-term economic stimulus plans – education infrastructure should be part of this plan with a clear focus on climate-resilient K-12 school infrastructure and heat stress-management strategies. All children have a right to safe, conducive, and comfortable learning environments.

Although the federal government currently supports climate-resilient community infrastructure through the Green and Inclusive Community Buildings Program, public K–12 schools are explicitly excluded from eligibility. Previously, there was a program that directly supported Municipalities, Universities, Schools, and Hospitals (MUSH) that invested in green retrofits, we believe this initiative should be resurrected with the creation of a similar program.

We call on the federal government to:

- Replicate the Municipalities, Universities, Schools, and Hospitals (MUSH) stream of the Climate Action Incentive Fund and expand the list of expenses eligible for reimbursement to support both energy efficiency as well as climate change resilience.

Recommendation: Increase Funding to Support Both On-Reserve and Off-Reserve Indigenous Students

The CTF/FCE believes strongly that Indigenous students in Canada need stronger support both On-Reserve and Off-Reserve in whichever community they call home. As one of the youngest populations in Canada, Indigenous peoples will continue to play an essential role in the future of the country. National Indigenous Organizations and local Indigenous communities should be supported in closing the gap between educational outcomes experienced by Indigenous and Non-Indigenous children living within Canada.

With recent reports that programs such as Jordan's Principle are no longer substantially supporting First Nations students in ways that were previously experienced, the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education (ACIE) and our Board of Directors believes that calling for increased supports for all Indigenous students – regardless of province, territory, or community – is a vital step towards educational and economic reconciliation.

While the CTF/FCE is not an Indigenous organization, we do regularly consult with the ACIE to guide our work related to Indigenous education. The ACIE group is comprised of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis educators from across Canada. The ACIE feels passionately that language education is the keystone upon which meaningful education funding reconciliation can build upon and the importance of language preservation and revitalization cannot be understated.

As always, we encourage the Government of Canada to listen directly to Indigenous peoples and their organizations regarding the supports they need to close the gap. We fully support the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, notably Calls to Action 7, 8, 9, and 10 and their direct relevance on K-12 education.

We call on the federal government to:

- Work with national Indigenous Organizations, local Indigenous communities, and non-Indigenous education stakeholders to close the gap between educational outcomes experienced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous children living in Canada.
- Convene a First Ministers Meeting on Education with Indigenous language revitalization being a major focus.
- Invest **$1 billion over five years, beginning in 2027-2028, with $200 million per year ongoing**, to establish an **Indigenous Languages in Education Fund**, supporting distinctions-based, tripartite agreements among the Government of Canada, Indigenous governments and organizations, and provincial and territorial governments to expand access to Indigenous-language education in publicly funded K–12 schools.

Conclusion

Investing in public education is a nation-building act. It is central to economic growth, community development, public health, and the health of our democracy. The Canadian Teachers' Federation urges the federal government to make Budget 2026 a budget for education, equity, and the public good. These recommendations are not simply expenditures – they are long-term investments in Canada's future.

We welcome the opportunity to collaborate further on these proposals and thank the government for its continued dialogue and partnership with educators across the country.

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