

Nishnawbe Aski Nation to ask Thunder Bay, Ont. and Fort William First Nation to declare state of emergency

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler says the declaration could mobilize more funds for student safety

By Jody Porter, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jul 07, 2017 6:22 AM ET Last Updated: Jul 07, 2017 6:42 AM ET



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Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler says he will ask the City of Thunder Bay and neighbouring Fort William First Nation to declare a state of emergency to mobilize more funds for student safety.

Fiddler says Nishnawbe Aski Nation can't make the declaration alone because they are visitors in this territory.

The decision comes after two days of talks with chiefs from First Nations across northern Ontario who gathered to consider the safety of Indigenous youth who attend school in Thunder Bay, Ont.

After hearing differing views from youth and elders, the chiefs resolved to form an emergency task force that will develop an action plan for keeping students safe this fall and report back at an annual summer meeting in August.

Seven First Nations students have died in the city since 2000. They were forced to leave home to pursue a high school education because their own remote communities don't have high schools.

In May, two First Nations teens, who were in the Thunder Bay seeking health support services not available in their communities, were found dead in separate incidents.

A jury at the coroner's inquest into the seven student deaths last year ruled three of the deaths accidental, while the cause of four others remains a mystery. The deaths in May are under investigation by York Regional Police, after chiefs complained about a lack of trust in Thunder Bay police.

The mystery of those deaths, combined with student reports of racism in the city, and the [death this week of Barbara Kentner](#), a First Nations mother who was hit by a trailer hitch thrown from a passing car have many fearing the lives of other students are at risk.

But there are opposing views about how to address the safety concerns.

"What is the cost of education?" elder Barney Batisse asked the chiefs. "When we look at the crisis within and the loss of life and dignity, then I say the price is too high."



First Nations have been struggling for decades for the necessary funding and control to provide a safe education for their children, Nishnawbe Aski Nation elder Barney Batisse says. (Jody Porter/CBC)

"If we are putting our children in harm's way during the school year, the price is too high," he continued. "If the process causes family disruption, then the price is too high."

"If it means the loss of our cultural pride and heritage then the price is really too high."

Batisse says First Nations have been fighting for better education for their students for decades and little has changed.

Some chiefs say they will not allow students to attend school in Thunder Bay this fall. But the capacity of schools in other northern towns and cities to take in First Nations students is limited.

- [Deaths in Thunder Bay, Ont., prompt First Nation to pursue new high school](#)

That means hundreds of Indigenous teens could be left with no other option than taking classes through a radio or internet-based high school.

That's not what Alaina Sakchekapo wants. She hopes to head back to Dennis Franklin Cromarty (DFC) First Nations high school in Thunder Bay this fall to finish grade 12.

"We're not forced to come out here. It's our choice to come out here to DFC. And if I could go back in time to my first year, I would still choose DFC to go to school because it's my home," she said.

"I think it's the students' decision on where they go to school and where they get their education from. If they want to stay home and take the internet courses, let them do that. Or, if they want to come out here to DFC or other provincial schools, that's their choice. No one else can make that choice for them.



Grade 12 student Alaina Sakchekapo says Dennis Franklin Cromarty First Nations high school in Thunder Bay is her "home." (Jody Porter/CBC)

"If you make a decision without us, you're taking away our freedom," she said, asking chiefs to check in on their youth when they visit the city and to ask the principal about their academic achievements.

"Thunder Bay can be dangerous, but we learn how to look after ourselves," Sakchekapo said.

The inquest into the student deaths made 145 recommendations to keep Indigenous youth safe.

First Nations say they need millions of dollars of federal funding to follow the recommendations to provide better supports for students when they come to the city.

- ['Pervasive racism' remains outstanding issue from First Nation student deaths inquest, lawyer says](#)
- [Funding shortages delay implementing recommendations from Thunder Bay student deaths inquest](#)

"I truly believe it's a crisis," the regional director of Indigenous Affairs, Anne Scotton, said at the meeting, but chiefs say little of the necessary funding has flowed.