High-Cost Special Education Program: National Program Guidelines 2025 to 2026

Indigenous Services Canada
Services aux Autochtones Canada
Canada

For information regarding reproduction rights, please contact: communicationspublications@sac-isc.gc.ca

www.canada.ca/indigenous-services-canada
1-800-567-9604
TTY only 1-866-553-0554

Catalogue: R41-15EPDF
ISSN: 2291-4331

© His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of Indigenous Services Canada, 2025.

This publication is also available in French under the title: Programme d'éducation spécialisée à coûts élevés : Lignes directrices nationales de 2025 à 2026

Table of contents

- Introduction
- 1. Program introduction
- 2. Objective
- 3. Expected results
- 4. Eligible recipients
- 5. Eligible participants: students
- 6. Activities
- 7. Expenditures
  - 7.1 Eligible expenditures
  - 7.2 Ineligible expenditures
- 8. Funding request process
  - 8.1 Submission of funding requests
  - 8.2 Deadline for submission funding requests
  - 8.3 Assessment process and criteria
  - 8.4 Review and approval of funding requests
- 9. Managing conflicts of interest
- 10. Maximum program contribution
- 11. Funding
  - 11.1 Maximum amount payable per funding recipient
  - 11.2 Funding approaches
- 12. Reporting requirements and monitoring and oversight activities
  - 12.1 Reporting requirements
  - 12.2 Monitoring and oversight
- 13. Personal information
- 14. Accountability
- 15. Contact information

Introduction

The Government of Canada is committed to achieving reconciliation with Indigenous peoples through a renewed, nation-to-nation and government-to-government relationship based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation and partnership as the foundation for transformative change. The implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples requires transformative change in the government's relationship with Indigenous peoples.

These efforts must be guided by Canada's obligation to respect and uphold First Nations' inherent Indigenous and treaty rights, including those rights to education referenced in specific treaties and self-government agreements. The nation-to-nation relationship between the Government of Canada and First Nations is rooted in historic treaties, the numbered treaties, self-government agreements, section 35, guided by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and informed by the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

1. Program introduction

The High-Cost Special Education Program provides additional investments to recipients who provide services for students who ordinarily live on reserve and whose special education needs cannot be met within the current resources that are available for the general student population.

Broadly speaking, special education needs students fall within a continuum of mild to moderate, moderate to severe and severe to profound.

Special education needs categorized as mild to profound needs may be addressed within the funding and Terms and Conditions of Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) Elementary and Secondary Education Program.

Only high-cost special education needs ranging from moderate to profound are eligible for funding under the High-Cost Special Education Program.

There are 2 types of approaches:

- intervention-based
- assessment-based

The 2 approaches are typically used in school systems to help school administrators identify if a student has high-cost special education needs. These 2 approaches are sometimes combined.

Individual education plan

An individual education plan (IEP) can also be called an individual learning plan (ILP) or an individual program plan (IPP) according to the province of residence.

- IEP vary depending on the educational jurisdiction
- A student who has been identified by a team of experts as having high-cost special education needs must have an IEP in place, that maps his or her progress during the school year
- The IEP identifies the curricular areas that needs to be modified or it states whether the child requires an alternative curriculum which may be the case for students with severe to profound high-cost special education needs

The IEP also identifies the accommodations or any special educational services the child may need to reach their full potential.

The intervention-based approach is a formula-based method that does not require formal assessments before intervention strategies are introduced. Nevertheless, students must get a formal assessment no later than the end of the following school year.

Under this approach, teachers with the appropriate training can use and interpret assessment instruments to develop the necessary intervention measures that address the student's immediate needs while waiting for a more formal assessment. An IEP should be initiated at this stage.

The intervention-based approach is designed to provide immediate attention to the high-cost special education student by addressing the student's learning problems as soon as they are identified.

This approach serves to mitigate some of the subsequent learning problems that may be experienced in later grades.

The assessment-based approach involves classifying student needs into recognized high-cost categories and providing an individual funding allocation to support individualized programming.

Moderate to profound high-cost special education needs based on permanent physical or intellectual exceptions require at least 1 psycho-educational assessment.

These students are identified by a report by a professional specific in the relevant educational jurisdiction and are required to have an IEP that recognizes the broad range of their physical or intellectual abilities and addresses specific educational, health and personal care needs.

These guidelines set out the program delivery requirements for funding recipients that enter into a funding agreement with ISC for the delivery of the High-Cost Special Education Program.

These guidelines are effective as of April 1, 2025. They replace the High Cost Special Education Program: National Program Guidelines 2024 to 2025.

These guidelines are to be read in conjunction with the funding agreement signed by the funding recipient.

In the event of an inconsistency or conflict between provisions contained in these guidelines and an education agreement, the provisions of an education agreement will prevail to the extent of the inconsistency or conflict.

2. Objective

The objective of the High-Cost Special Education Program is to improve the educational achievement levels of First Nations students on reserve. The program provides access to quality and culturally-sensitive special education programs and services to:

- enable students with moderate to profound high-cost special education needs to achieve their fullest potential
- increase the number of special needs students acquiring a high school diploma or a certificate of completion

3. Expected results

The expected results of this program are to:

- increase the number of students with high-cost special education needs that will acquire a high school diploma or a certificate of completion
- provide support services to high-cost special needs students as identified in their IEP

Recognizing that students with high-cost special education needs may not achieve the same academic objectives as students without high-cost special education needs, the goals set out in an IEP measures a student's ability to meet or exceed their educational goals and demonstrate progression towards a high school diploma or a certificate of completion.

4. Eligible recipients

Eligible recipients of the High-Cost Special Education Program funding are service providers such as:

- First Nations and First Nations organizations including those in Yukon or Northwest Territories
- First Nations-mandated organizations designated by First Nations as service providers including:
    - not-for-profit organizations
    - for-profit organizations
    - private education institutions and organizations designated to deliver childhood education programming to eligible students ordinarily living on reserve
- provincial ministries of education
- provincial school boards or school board-like entities
- federal schools
- funding agreement managers and recipient appointed advisors in accordance with ISC Default Prevention and Management Policy

For-profit organizations, such as academic institutions, may be eligible for funding provided the nature and intent of the activity:

- is non-commercial
- is not intended to generate profit
- supports program priorities and objectives
- is publicly available at no cost

Eligible recipients who can only provide indirect special education services are only eligible to receive funding to deliver those indirect services. To learn more, consult Eligible expenditures.

5. Eligible participants: students

To qualify as an eligible participant, the following criteria must be met:

- student's age is from 4 and above by December 31 of the school year in which funding support is required
- enrolled and participating in an education program in a First Nations, federal, provincial or a private or independent school recognized by the province in which the school is located as an elementary or secondary institution. This includes program delivery through e-learning, alternative or outreach and early learning programs hosted in Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve or early learning centres
- an IEP must be in place or being created when a student has been identified by the school administration or a team of experts as having high-cost special education needs. The IEP must map the student's progress during the school year
- the student is ordinarily resident on reserve
- a student who is ordinarily resident on reserve lands that are leased is not eligible for funding unless that student is a registered under the *Indian Act*

Ordinarily resident on reserve means that the student usually:

- lives at a civic address on reserve
- is a child in joint custody who lives on reserve most of the time
- is staying on reserve and has no usual home elsewhere

Students continue to be considered ordinarily resident on reserve if they return to live on reserve during the year, even if they live elsewhere while attending school or working at a summer job.

In this context, reserves are deemed to include all land set aside by the federal government for the use and occupancy of a First Nations band, along with all other Crown lands that are recognized by ISC as settlement lands of the First Nations band of which the student is a resident.

In the case of a child in the care of a child and family services agency or in the care of the province, the residency of the child is determined by the residency of the guardian with whom the child is placed. A guardian is a person who assumes authority for the child through a legal guardianship agreement.

6. Activities

In keeping with the trend among provincial education systems, High-Cost Special Education Program funding supports both direct and indirect services. This approach maintains the requirement for formal assessments of students and the development of IEP. It allows First Nations schools the flexibility to employ intervention strategies more quickly.

Activities funded under the program include:

- activities that support the identification of students with high-cost special education needs
- preparing enhanced IEP or learning plans for identified students
- implementing the services required by the students

Direct services

Direct services are program activities such as classroom student intervention and counselling, focused directly on meeting the student needs.

Indirect services

Indirect services refer to an array of supportive programs and activities focused on enhancing special education programming at schools such as providing information services and professional development opportunities.

These activities are often, but not necessarily, delivered by band-operated schools, regional First Nations organizations or First Nations regional management organizations and can benefit from aggregation by optimizing the use of resources for shared services.

7. Expenditures

7.1 Eligible expenditures

High-Cost Special Education Program programs and services are divided into 2 categories:

- direct: first level services
- indirect: second level services

Direct services

Direct services must represent a minimum of 75% of the annual High-Cost Special Education Program funding. The direct services allocation is to be spent on high-cost student support services. The following is a list of eligible expenditures for direct services:

- costs associated with tuition and tuition top ups for special education students attending specialized and non-specialized school institutions such as:
    - band operated
    - federal
    - provincial
    - private
    - independent schools
- costs associated with in-school expertise as well as the development and monitoring of IEP or other professional assessments using provincially recognized methods and techniques
- salaries or benefits for special education teachers
- salaries or benefits for individual teacher aide or paraprofessional workers
- costs associated with educational psychological services
- costs associated with counselling or social work services

- costs associated with services provided by Elders
- costs associated with speech or language services
- costs associated with occupational therapy services
- costs associated with physical therapy services
- costs associated with instructional or resource materials
- costs associated with assistive technologies or equipment purchases

The following list of adaptive hardware and software is an example of the types of assistive technologies and equipment that can be used in the classroom to assist the high cost special education needs students.

Hardware:

- Audiocalc, a talking scientific calculator
- AudiSee, an audio-visual FM system used by oral-deaf or hard of hearing students that enhances understanding of speech and filters environmental noise
- Dream Writer Smart Keyboard, a portable keyboard with a built in word processor
- Franklin Language Master, a Merriam-Webster dictionary 300,000 word spell checker with visual and auditory feedback
- Hewlett Packard Scanner and Laser Jet Printer
- Juliet Braille Embosser, a Braille printer
- Kurzweil Personal Reader, a scan and text reading technology
- Magna Cam, a portable scanner and print magnifier, such as mini-screen, TV or eye-wear
- Tracker 2000, a head mouse and bat keyboard
- V-Cam, a head mounted zoom-lens, for example, for example Jordy zoom or lens video eyewear

Software:

- DeskTalk PC speech output
- Dragon Naturally Speaking continuous speech recognition
- Duxbury Braille Translator
- JAWS for Windows or DOS speech output synthesizer, screen reader
- Open Book Unbound OCR software, scan text and convert to e-text
- Text Help, Wordsmith & Inspiration, a multi-sensory computer software that assists reading fluency and enhances writing development for students with reading and written language difficulties
- Zoom Text, print magnification screen reader

Indirect services

Up to 25% of the High-Cost Special Education Program allocation can be spent on school activities and services that will improve special education programs for high-cost special education needs students. The following is a list of eligible expenditures for indirect services:

- costs associated with providing information services

- costs associated with contracting professional high-cost special education support and professional assessment services
- costs associated with professional development for professional accreditations
- costs associated with other professional development, for example, workshops, conferences
- costs associated with accommodations, for example, room and board
- costs associated with accommodation needs and may also include changes in how a student accesses information and demonstrates learning. These may include changes in the method of instruction, the curriculum and the environment
- costs associated with transportation, for example, the transportation of severely disabled, special day-class pupils and orthopedically impaired pupils who require a vehicle with a wheelchair lift as specified in their IEP
- costs associated with emergency transportation

Direct and indirect services funding may be used for administration support. Eligible administration costs include only the actual costs associated directly with administering High-Cost Special Education Program and must not exceed 15% of the sub-total amount requested before administration costs.

The program's data collection instrument will automatically calculate the amount.

Eligible administration costs include but are not limited to:

- clerical support
- office supplies
- collection, maintenance and reporting of data and information in accordance with program and financial reporting
- costs associated with ensuring that personal information is appropriately managed and safeguarded during its:
    - collection
    - retention
    - use
    - disclosure
    - disposal

Further distribution of funds by ISC's funding recipients

When a funding recipient further transfers funds that were received under this program to a third party, the 15% allowed for administration costs must be divided between the parties, as agreed to between the parties.

The total administration costs retained by all parties must not exceed 15% of the sub-total amount requested before administration costs.

7.2 Ineligible expenditures

Ineligible expenditures include but are not limited to:

- services for special education students whose needs are mild to moderate. These needs are expected to be addressed by ISC's Elementary and Secondary Education Program
- enhanced programs and services for gifted students or enriched, subject-specific programming for students streamed into, for example, drama and the arts
- expenditures for constructing, operating and maintaining facilities or purchasing vehicles. They are provided through ISC's Capital Facilities and Maintenance Program and cannot be charged to the High-Cost Special Education Program budget allocation
- duplication of federal funding for a given activity, such as receipt of funding from more than 1 federal source for the same activity

8. Funding request process

8.1 Submission of funding requests

- High-Cost Special Education Program is a national program that is managed and funded by ISC regional offices. Each year, ISC regional offices solicit, review and evaluate incoming High-Cost Special Education Program funding requests, for example, a proposal, work plan or application from eligible recipients
- Eligible recipients must submit detailed requests for all the high-cost special education activities to be undertaken during the school year. Requests must clearly state how the proposed activities will further the objectives of the program and respond to the student's high-cost special education needs and the expected results of the program

8.2 Deadline for submission funding requests

The deadline for submitting funding request submissions is May 15, 2025.

8.3 Assessment process and criteria

- Capacity to manage the implementation of the activities proposed in the funding request
- Engagement and commitment involving support from schools and communities
- Implementation activities that identify timelines, cost-effectiveness and anticipated impact on outcomes
- Management activities that support governance, deliverables, monitoring and reporting
- Costs assessed on the basis of estimation of reasonableness of expenditures

Meeting these criteria does not guarantee funding from the High-Cost Special Education Program. Funding is limited by the total available national and regional funding.

8.4 Review and approval of funding requests

Funding requests are reviewed and approved by the ISC regional office or jointly by the ISC regional office and a First Nations management organization. A written response is sent to applicants to confirm whether or not their funding request has been approved.

9. Managing conflicts of interest

It is necessary to avoid potential, perceived and actual conflicts of interest and any situation that might cause doubt in objectivity. As such, a procedure to manage conflicts of interest must be developed and put in place.

Recipients that manage the adjudication and administration of funding of the program must demonstrate transparency and accountability in their policies and processes.

This includes having:

- a conflict of interest policy
- written standards, policies and procedures on the project selection process for funding
- an available list of successful proponents

Individuals cannot participate in the evaluation of a proposal in the following situations:

- individual has assisted in the preparation of the proposal, is an employee of the applicant, has provided consulting services, in any capacity, to the organization submitting the proposal or may in the future
- individual will be a team member on the proposed project
- individual is a relative or close friend of any of the employees of the management team of the eligible recipient which submitted a proposal

Conflicts of interest may arise during the review of proposals. These situations must be managed in an open and transparent manner.

Should a situation arise that presents a real or potential conflict of interest during the review process, the impacted individual must withdraw themselves from the deliberations concerning the specific proposal.

10. Maximum program contribution

The maximum amount payable per student per year will not exceed $155,000 and will depend on availability of funding and on high-cost special education needs defined in each student IEP.

An exception to this limit may be made depending on the severity of the student's exceptionality, according to methods prescribed by the province of residence and provincial standards for funding eligibility to meet the student needs.

11. Funding

11.1 Maximum amount payable per funding recipient

The maximum amount of funding to be provided to a funding recipient in a fiscal year is set out in the funding agreement signed by the funding recipient.

11.2 Funding approaches

Transfer payments to funding recipients of the High-Cost Special Education Program may be made using fixed contribution or flexible contribution depending on the recipient's eligibility and the service to be delivered.

ISC regional officers can provide information on the eligibility requirements of these funding approaches and on the requirements related to the management of the funds.

The funding approach used to transfer funds to a recipient is identified in the recipient's signed funding agreement.

The following specific program directions for the management of transfer payments complement the directions provided in the recipient's signed funding agreement and are to be read in conjunction with the funding agreement.

Fixed contribution funding

Reallocation of funding:

During the fiscal year, recipients may reallocate funds among the eligible activities and expenditures of their ISC-approved funding request, to ensure identified students do not have interruption in services due to a situational change.

While funds may be reallocated, direct services expenditures must represent a minimum of 75% of the recipient's annual targeted High-Cost Special Education Program resources and indirect services expenditures must represent a maximum of 25% of these resources.

Unexpended funding:

Recipients may retain unexpended funding from a fiscal year to expend in the 1 year period immediately following the fiscal year for which it was provided on eligible activities and expenditures outlined in these guidelines.

Flexible contribution funding

Reallocation of funding:

During the fiscal year, recipients may reallocate funds among the eligible activities and expenditures of their ISC-approved funding request to ensure identified students do not have interruption in services due to a situational change.

While funds may be reallocated, direct services expenditures must represent a minimum of 75% of the recipient's annual targeted High-Cost Special Education Program resources and indirect services expenditures must represent a maximum of 25% of these resources.

Unexpended funding:

Recipients may retain unexpended funding remaining at the end of each fiscal year, to expend in a subsequent fiscal year, to further achieve results towards their ISC-approved funding request for this program.

12. Reporting requirements and monitoring and oversight activities

12.1 Reporting requirements

The reporting requirements, program and financial reports, and their respective due dates are listed in the recipient's funding agreement and details on these requirements are available in the Reporting Guide.

Recipients must report on all funds received and expended, including the use of unexpended funding they were allowed to retain to use in another fiscal year. Consult the funding approaches section of these guidelines for details on the use of unexpended funds.

Recipients who have access to the ISC Services portal can access the reporting forms by opening a session on the portal. Recipients who do not have access to the portal, should contact their regional office.

All recipient reporting requirements are subject to monitoring and oversight activities to determine the accuracy of the information provided to ISC.

12.2 Monitoring and oversight

Desk or on-site reviews may be conducted in collaboration with the recipient. These include:

- audits
- evaluations
- targeted program strategy reviews

We do these reviews to make sure:

- program or strategy outcomes and objectives are being met

- opportunities are always being identified to improve results for Indigenous peoples

13. Personal information

ISC's collection and use of personal information and other records for the purposes of targeted program reviews, for example, desk and on-site reviews, will be limited to what is necessary to ensure that the program delivery requirements are met.

ISC is responsible for all information and records in its possession. The confidentiality of the information will be managed by ISC in accordance with the *Privacy Act, R.S.C., 1985, c. p.21* and other related policies on privacy.

Recipients are responsible for the protection of personal information as per provincial privacy statutes and regulations and the recipient's policies up to the point that the personal information is transferred to ISC.

14. Accountability

ISC is committed to providing assistance to recipients in order to help them effectively carry out their obligations under these guidelines and their funding agreement.

Regional offices and other ISC contacts are available to answer questions and provide guidance related to ISC programs and funding.

Recipients must:

- deliver the programs and strategies in accordance with the provisions of their signed funding agreement and the delivery requirements outlined in these guidelines
- ensure that the necessary management controls are in place to manage funding and monitor activities
- exercise due diligence when approving expenditures
- ensure that such expenditures are in accordance with the eligible expenditures set out in these guidelines

15. Contact information

To find out more about the program, visit:

- High-Cost Special Education Program.

Visit the Regional offices page to find your regional contact.

You can also write to:

Education Branch
Indigenous Services Canada
10 rue Wellington - Suite 1455 Mailstop 25E-19
Gatineau QC K1A 0H4
Email: education-education@sac-isc.gc.ca

To learn more about education programs, consult the National program guidelines or click on the View instructions button on the first page of this program's data collection instrument.