

Policy Proposal: Economic Responsiveness Funding Model

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December 21, 2025

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Executive Summary

Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, faces significant economic disruption as Algoma Steel prepares to lay off up to 1,050 workers, creating immediate workforce retraining needs. Current Ontario college funding policies, which rely heavily on outcome-based metrics, disadvantage institutions in economically fragile regions, limiting their ability to respond to crises. This policy proposes the Economic Responsiveness Funding Model (ERFM), comprising the Economic Shock Adjustment Factor (ESAF), the Community Economic Stabilization Fund (CESF), and the Regional Equity Weighting (REW), to stabilize funding, support rapid retraining, and ensure equitable access for displaced, marginalized, and adult learners. By leveraging existing college capacity, the policy preserves accountability while aligning metrics with regional economic realities. Implementation follows a phased approach with stakeholder engagement and ongoing evaluation using quantitative and qualitative measures. Adoption of ERFM enables Northern Ontario colleges to respond effectively to economic shocks, strengthen workforce recovery, and promote long-term regional resilience and educational equity.

Introduction and Overview of the Policy Issue

The community of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, is facing unprecedented times. Algoma Steel, Sault Ste. Marie's largest employer, faces severe economic challenges due to U.S. tariffs, which have led to the impending layoff of up to 1,050 of its 2,700 employees in March 2026 (Nordstrom & MacDonald, 2025). Other employers are bracing for the economic impact, with projections of a loss of 1,600 additional jobs beyond direct employees, including contractors and induced jobs (Duench, 2025), in a community of 76,000 (Government of Canada, 2025). This system-wide risk and economic disruption affect Sault College and other Northern Ontario post-secondary institutions, which are responsible for retraining displaced workers. The funding policy for Ontario colleges was significantly changed in 2019 when the newly elected Ontario government shifted funding from an enrollment-based system to one that emphasizes performance metrics, including students' skills, job outcomes, and economic and community impacts (Government of Ontario, 2025). This policy aimed to promote accountability and economic alignment by requiring colleges to improve efficiency and ensure that training aligns with labor market needs. Although well-intentioned, the current funding policy disadvantages Sault College during times of crisis and rapid economic change by exacerbating regional disparities and limiting its ability to respond to economic disruptions, such as the upcoming layoffs at Algoma Steel.

Without targeted reform, Ontario's college funding model undermines workforce recovery in regions most affected by economic crisis and industry downturns, limiting economic resilience and equitable access to post-secondary education and training. This paper presents an equity-focused policy proposal, the Economic Responsiveness Funding Model (ERFM), that addresses systemic inequities in Northern colleges, emphasizes regional impacts, and proposes

actionable policy changes grounded in education equity theory, human capital theory, and public value theory. The proposed funding model supports regional resilience, economic diversification, and social equity, enabling Sault College to provide education, training, and development opportunities for displaced workers. Evidence shows how the proposed funding policy will promote equity in regions facing upheaval, such as Sault Ste. Marie and Northern Ontario. Ontario's performance-based college funding model disproportionately challenges Northern colleges, limiting access for marginalized students and reducing responsiveness to local economic disruptions. This policy proposal implements weighted funding, hybrid models, and regionally sensitive metrics to enhance equity, sustainability, and colleges' capacity to support local communities and workforce needs. This policy applies to publicly funded Ontario colleges, with particular focus on Northern and regional institutions serving communities experiencing significant economic disruption. The policy focuses on domestic displaced workers and does not extend to universities, private colleges, or K-12 education levels.

Policy Proposal

Policy Goals

The proposed policy goals include:

1. Stabilizing funding for publicly funded Ontario colleges in regions experiencing economic volatility and shocks, ensuring institutional sustainability during crises.
2. Expanding access to rapid retraining and reskilling programs for displaced workers, with short implementation timelines to meet urgent labor market needs.
3. Reducing inequitable outcome-based penalties for colleges serving economically fragile or Northern regions, ensuring that performance measures account for external market conditions.

4. Enhancing institutional responsiveness to local labor market disruptions and aligning funding incentives with community and workforce needs.
5. Maintaining public accountability while adjusting funding metrics to reflect regional economic realities and the effectiveness of crisis interventions.

Proposed Actions and Initiatives

The proposed policy shifts from fixed-performance funding to an ERFM and the creation of a Community Economic Stabilization Fund (CESF), which would be accessible to colleges during major economic downturns. Additionally, implementing a Regional Equity Weighting (REW) mechanism is necessary to ensure stable financial adjustments for colleges serving vulnerable and economically volatile regions.

The current policy allocates 60% of funding based on enrollment and 40% on outcomes, measured by graduation, employment, and retention (Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario, 2019). Critics argue that the current model penalizes colleges in economically fragile regions where employers rapidly downsize, causing job losses that extend beyond the individual employer and spill over into partner organizations (Ontario Universities & Colleges Coalition, 2019). Additional arguments include that a heavier reliance on outcomes-based funding “will create an inequitable system of winners and losers, where institutions that require greater resources to meet their mandates [such as small, remote, and northern colleges] will see their funding reduced and students penalized” (Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario, 2019). Essentially, job outcomes decline in communities where external market forces are beyond the college’s control. The proposed policy introduces an Economic Shock Adjustment Factor (ESAF) to establish a formal funding adjustment mechanism triggered by major regional events. The ESAF temporarily suspends outcome-based financial penalties for colleges operating in

regions experiencing verified mass employment losses or industry collapse. This proposed policy recognizes institutional performance and prevents colleges from being punished for economic crises that ultimately lead to negative outcomes.

When the ESAF is activated, the policy temporarily rebalances the 60/40 formula during crises and shifts to an 80% enrollment, 20% outcomes format. This provides stability for the college while supporting displaced workers, rather than forcing the college to cut programs and staff. Therefore, during periods of declared economic disruption, funding weights shift to prioritize enrollment stability and increased intake capacity.

CESF, a targeted funding stream that colleges can access when major employers collapse, provides access to services such as micro-credential development, short-cycle workforce retraining, tuition-free bridging programs for displaced workers, and income support for adult learners, enabling rapid responses to disruptions without jeopardizing institutional funding.

A REW model for funding allocation ensures that colleges serving vulnerable or economically volatile regions receive stable funding adjustments. For example, colleges serving Northern and remote locations may receive an additional 10% in funding to address the region's specific needs. In regions with high unemployment, an additional 10% of funding is allocated to employment programs and services. Additional considerations may include economic volatility and institutions serving Indigenous communities.

Lastly, the proposed policy shifts the metric away from punishing poor job placement, replacing it with metrics that include the number of displaced workers retained, the number of community reskilling partnerships, the speed of credential development, and adult learner retention during crises. This yields outcome metrics that reflect institutional responsiveness to labor market disruption, rather than relying solely on post-graduation employment indicators.

These proposed changes ground this proposal in equity-based funding frameworks and regional development theory and are supported by the crisis governance literature. Human capital theory holds that firms increase productivity by investing in workers' education and training (Ross, 2025), and public value theory argues that government success lies in creating outcomes that citizens value, beyond efficiency, including trust and quality (Waheduzzaman et al., 2025). The proposed policy is a resilient, equity-oriented performance funding framework for regional postsecondary institutions. It adopts an economic response to funding, introducing adjustments for economic shocks, considers regional equity weighting, and recommends temporary rebalancing of performance-based funding during periods of labor market disruption. This approach recognizes that institutional performance cannot be accurately measured in isolation from regional economic conditions. By shifting emphasis toward enrollment stability, rapid workforce retraining, and regional resilience, the policy supports both institutional sustainability and community recovery without undermining accountability or public value.

Implementation Timeline

Implementation is broken down into three phases: Baseline Implementation, Crisis Activation, and Recovery and Evaluation. Table 1 summarizes the actions, durations, triggers or conditions for phase opening and closing, and the responsible stakeholders.

Table 1

Implementation Timeline for ERFM Policy

Phase	Actions	Duration	Trigger or Condition	Responsible Stakeholder
Phase 1 – Baseline Implementation	Implement ERFM and REW	Standard funding cycle	N/A	Ontario Ministry of Colleges & Universities; College Administrators

Table 1 (continued)

Phase	Actions	Duration	Trigger or Condition	Responsible Stakeholder
Phase 2 – Crisis Activation	ESAF triggered, funding rebalanced to 80/20	During a verified economic shock	ESAF criteria met	Ontario Ministry of Colleges & Universities; College Administrators; Algoma Workforce Investment Corporation (AWIC)
Phase 3 – Recovery and Evaluation	Gradual return to standard 60/40 funding; CESF evaluation	Post-crisis review	Once the job market stabilizes	Ontario Ministry of Colleges & Universities; College Administrators; Policy Evaluation Team

Evidence Assembly

Evidence

This policy focuses on economic shocks, equity, and college funding, so multiple evidence streams have been considered. Algoma Steel, labor unions, federal, provincial, and municipal governments, and the Algoma Workforce Investment Corporation (AWIC) have published economic data on job-loss projections. In a recent statement, Michael Garcia, CEO of Algoma Steel, promoted a pivot to a business strategy focused on transitioning to Electric Arc Furnace (EAF) steelmaking, “moving to a modern process that dramatically lowers costs, increases flexibility, reduces carbon intensity, and strengthens our ability to serve domestic customers” (2025). This evidence demonstrates the company’s commitment to economic transition and long-term regional competitiveness. Further evidence is provided through the signed letter of agreement between the United Steelworkers Union Local 2251 and Algoma Steel that outlines EAF integration (United Steelworkers Union Local 2251, 2025), emphasizing the need for enhanced and extended training opportunities and considerations, extended training periods, education leave, and an investigation into funding to support these plans. Although the

letter pertained to layoffs prior to July 31, 2025, a recent SooToday article (McGrath-Goudie, 2025) interviews the union president, who clarifies that the letter remains in effect until the EAF transition is completed, and claims that none of the mitigation strategies were implemented.

Earlier this year, the federal government provided a \$400 million loan, and the provincial government provided \$100 million to help the company pivot operations away from markets dependent upon the United States (D'Mello & Callan, 2025). Both governments have praised Algoma Steel's ability to save 2/3 of the company's jobs, and continued support is expected (Rabinovitch, 2025). A projected 1050 jobs are expected to be offset by approximately 500 new positions within the EAF (Walker, 2025). However, an accelerated timeline of the EAF transition intensifies the demand for rapid, large-scale workforce training.

Although training and workforce transition commitments were clearly identified by Algoma Steel, labor unions, and government partners, corresponding funding mechanisms were not fully implemented or sustained. Formal agreements recognized the need for extended training periods, education leave, and reskilling support during the Electric Arc Furnace transition; however, evidence indicates that these mitigation strategies were not implemented in practice (McGrath-Goudie, 2025; United Steelworkers Union Local 2251, 2025). As a result, publicly funded colleges are left to respond to large-scale workforce displacement without stable, dedicated funding streams, even as they are expected to deliver rapid retraining and workforce development programs. This gap highlights a structural disconnect between recognized training needs and the funding frameworks required to support institutional responsiveness during periods of economic disruption.

Rationale

Evidence assembled on economic disruption and college funding using an ERFM supports the proposed policy goals and demonstrates the feasibility of an economic-responsiveness funding model for Ontario colleges. This evidence highlights structural limitations in the current performance-based funding model and underscores the need for reform. The layoffs at Algoma Steel are one example of an economic shock; however, such disruptions are predictable and recurring, and colleges are expected to respond quickly. For these reasons, the current performance-based funding policy fails under these conditions. As discussed, external economic forces distort outcome metrics, penalizing colleges during crises and undermining workforce recovery. Evidence indicates a clear disconnect between current policy expectations and available funding tools, justifying a temporary rebalancing of the funding formula to an 80% enrollment and 20% outcomes model.

The evidence presented above confirms the need to focus on training demand and timing. Dedicated, flexible funding is needed to support identified training needs, accelerate industrial transitions, and address implementation gaps through an agile lens. Current colleges have expertise and infrastructure but lack timely, stable funding. ERFM is feasible because it leverages existing capacity, demonstrating practicality. While maintaining the importance of performance-based outcomes, the ERFM preserves accountability by adopting metrics that reflect the regional economic context. Additionally, the model promotes regional equity through a weighting system that mitigates structural disadvantages in Northern and economically volatile regions. The model addresses the needs of marginalized and adult learners in these regions.

Stakeholder Engagement

Key Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders and those directly impacted by policy changes and implementation include Ontario colleges, and students and adult learners. College administrators, faculty, and support staff are responsible for implementing the ERFM and CESF programs and for reporting their outcomes. Students and adult learners include displaced workers and those from marginalized populations. These stakeholders directly benefit from retraining, reskilling programs, micro-credentials, and bridging courses.

Secondary stakeholders are influencers and include government bodies such as the Ontario Ministry of Colleges & Universities for funding oversight and policy enforcement, and federal and provincial labour and employment agencies for support programs and economic monitoring. Labour unions, representing displaced workers, provide essential information on workforce requirements and training needs. Additionally, community organizations and local employers collaborate on retraining programs, co-op placements, and regional workforce planning.

Tertiary stakeholders are those who may be indirectly affected, including the families of displaced workers, local communities, and municipalities, because economic recovery and social stability depend on successful retraining and employment outcomes. Media and public opinion shape perceptions and policy support, making them essential stakeholders for securing buy-in.

Engagement Strategy

The ERFM stakeholder engagement strategy is actionable in multiple phases, including consultation during policy development, communication during implementation, and

management of opposition. Table 2 outlines phase details, including actions and responsible stakeholders.

Table 2

Engagement Strategy Phase Details

Phase	Actions	Responsible
Phase 1 – Consultation during policy development	Workshops/focus groups to review proposed ERFM and CESF mechanisms.	College administrators, faculty, labour unions, students, government agencies
Phase 2 – Communication during implementation	Regular reporting and feedback loops; advisory committee participation; public information campaign; consultation with municipalities.	College administrators, labour unions, local employers, government agencies
Phase 3 – Managing Opposition	Provide policymakers with evidence; demonstrate ERFM leverages capacity; involve unions in program design; emphasize accountability and equity; and mediation with unions.	College administrators, labour unions, government agencies

Implementation Strategy

Action Plan

The following action plan outlines the steps to operationalize ERFM, including resources, roles, and timelines. As previously noted, colleges have the capacity, infrastructure, and experience in workforce training; however, current funding mechanisms impede their ability to address workforce needs during an economic crisis.

1. Policy Approval and Budget Allocation

Obtain government approval for ERFM, EASF, CESF, and REW mechanisms and secure initial funding allocations. This ensures colleges have the legal and financial authority to implement rapid workforce programs and resolve funding priorities and accountability frameworks under Strategic Mandate Agreements, which require government approval

and allocation before performance-based funding can be implemented (Government of Ontario, 2025; Government of Ontario, 2019)

2. Development of Administrative Guidelines

Establish procedures for activating ESAF during economic shocks, defining CESF access criteria, and applying for REW allocations. These guidelines provide consistency across all institutions and align with the structured funding framework outlined in Ontario's performance- and outcomes-based funding documentation, ensuring the transparent and uniform application of funding mechanisms (Ontario Ministry of Colleges & Universities, 2019).

3. Training and Capacity Building

Train college administrators and staff on ERFM procedures, reporting requirements, and program delivery for displaced workers. This leverages existing institutional capacity to ensure the timely and effective rollout of the program. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development highlights that successful governance depends not only on accountability and policy design but also on capacity building at the individual and institutional levels (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016).

4. Pilot Implementation – Sault College

Launch a pilot at Sault College to test ERFM and CESF processes, monitor enrollment stability, and evaluate rapid retraining effectiveness. Pilot programs provide real-world evidence to refine full-scale implementation. Amaya Jackson et al. (2018) describe a pilot-to-policy process in which a statewide pilot of an evidence-based treatment for traumatized youth was used to build infrastructure, assess feasibility, and inform broader

implementation decisions. This illustrates how pilot programs can generate real-world evidence to refine and scale policy innovations before full rollout.

5. Full-Scale Rollout

Expand ERFM and CESF to all publicly funded Ontario colleges, integrating REW into the funding formula. This ensures equity-focused funding reaches all regions and institutions. Sault College's SMA3 document highlights the institution's unique role in Northern Ontario and its accountability framework tied to performance outcomes, demonstrating why a regionally adjusted funding model like REW would help ensure equitable distribution of funding that accounts for local economic conditions (Government of Ontario, 2020).

6. Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation

Establish reporting systems to track enrollment, retraining outcomes, and workforce integration. Periodically review and refine metrics, ESAF triggers, and CESF disbursements to maintain accountability and responsiveness (evaluation frameworks from the crisis governance literature and public value governance principles) (McConnell, 2011).

Roles and Responsibilities

Key stakeholders for this policy will have roles and responsibilities aligned with actionable outcomes. Action plan steps, responsible stakeholders, and supporting or oversight stakeholders are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Action Plan Steps, Responsibilities of Stakeholders, and Support/Oversight

Step	Responsible Stakeholders	Support/Oversight
Policy Approval & Budget Allocation	MTCU	Federal agencies
Administrative Guidelines	College administrators, MTCU	Labour unions, AWIC, government oversight
Training & Capacity Building	College administrators, staff trainers	Adult learning experts, unions
Pilot Implementation	Sault College, college administration	MTCU, ERMF advisory committee
Full Rollout	All Ontario colleges	MTCU, provincial agencies
Monitoring and Evaluation	College administrators, ERFM advisory committee	MTCU, labour unions, local employers

Timeline

Table 4 outlines each phase of the action plan, duration, expected milestones, and the responsible stakeholders.

Table 4

Implementation Timeline and Milestones for ERFM Policy

Phase	Duration	Milestones	Responsible Stakeholders
Phase 1 – Policy Approval & Budget Allocation	3 months	Government approval of ERFM, CESF, REW; initial funding secured.	MTCU, AWIC
Phase 2 – Administrative Guideline Development	2 months	Procedures for EASF activation, CESF access, and REW allocation established	College administrators, MTCU
Phase 3 – Training & Capacity Building	2 months	Staff trained on ERFM procedures, program delivery, and reporting; guidance materials distributed	College administrators, faculty, staff trainers
Phase 4 – Pilot Implementation	6 months	Pilot launched at Sault College; monitor enrollment stability, retraining outcomes	Sault College, ERFM advisory Committee

Table 4 (continued)

Phase	Duration	Milestones	Responsible Stakeholders
Phase 5 – Full-Scale Rollout	3 months (post-pilot)	ERFM and CESF are fully implemented across all Ontario colleges; REW is integrated into the funding formula	All Ontario colleges, MTCU
Phase 6 – Monitoring & Evaluation	Ongoing	Reporting systems operational; periodic review of metrics, ESAF triggers, CESF disbursements; program refinements	College administrators, ERFM advisory committee, government oversight committee

Required Resources

Implementing the ERFM, CESF, ESAF, and REW mechanisms requires coordinated financial, human, and infrastructure resources. Financial resources include initial and ongoing funding for CESF disbursements, rapid retraining programs, micro-credentials, bridging courses, and administrative operations, as well as contingency funding to activate ESAF during regional economic shocks. Human resources include college administrators, faculty, and support staff for program delivery and reporting; trainers for workforce retraining; and advisory committee members to oversee implementation and evaluation. Infrastructure and technology resources include digital platforms for program registration and reporting, classrooms and laboratories for training, and data systems to track enrollment and workforce outcomes. Leveraging existing college capacity, supplemented with targeted funding and technological support, ensures that resources are sufficient for timely, effective, and equitable policy implementation (Ross, 2025; Waheduzzaman et al., 2025).

Evaluation Framework

Metrics for Success

Metrics for success are measured using qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Quantitative metrics include enrollment stability, completion of retraining and reskilling, employment outcomes, program outreach, and equity indicators. Enrollment stability tracks changes in college enrollment during economic shocks and uses ESAF and CESF to mitigate sudden enrollment declines. Retraining and reskilling metrics include the number of displaced workers who complete micro-credentials, bridging courses, and rapid retraining programs. Employment outcomes are an important component, requiring that a certain percentage of program participants be re-employed or upskilled within 6 to 12 months. Program outreach includes the number of colleges and regions that successfully access CESF and ERFM funding adjustments. Lastly, equity indicators track participation rates among marginalized populations, adult learners, and Indigenous students.

Qualitative metrics include stakeholder satisfaction, institutional responsiveness, and community impact. Surveys and focus groups with students, displaced workers, and administrators will provide insights into program relevance, accessibility, and impact. Colleges will provide feedback on CESF use and access, ESAF activation, and REW metric implementation. Lastly, community impact will be measured through interviews with local employers and community organizations on workforce readiness and regional recovery.

Evaluation Methods

The college will collect enrollment, completion, and employment data, including data from government databases. Additional surveys, interviews, and focus groups with students, displaced workers, college staff, labor unions, and employers will also be used. CESF and ESAF utilization will be tracked using college administrative records. Data analysis will include descriptive statistics, trend analysis, and comparisons across regions and time periods to identify recurring themes, satisfaction trends, and implementation challenges. A thorough equity analysis will be conducted to identify discrepancies in access and outcomes among marginalized students.

Periodic reporting and semi-annual evaluations, including regular reports to the Ontario Ministry of Colleges & Universities and advisory committee summaries of outcomes, metrics, and lessons learned, will be completed and used to inform policy updates. Adjustments will be made iteratively, within an agile mindset, to influence program design, funding allocation, and regional support strategies.

Conclusion

This policy proposal presents an equity-focused, regionally responsive funding model for Ontario colleges that addresses the limitations of the current performance-based system. Key elements include the Economic Responsiveness Funding Model (ERFM), the Economic Shock Adjustment Factor (ESAF), the Community Economic Stabilization Fund (CESF), and the Regional Equity Weighting (REW) mechanisms. These components stabilize funding during economic shocks, support rapid retraining and reskilling for displaced workers, and ensure that outcome metrics reflect external economic conditions while maintaining public accountability. The policy prioritizes Northern and economically vulnerable regions, promotes institutional sustainability, and strengthens colleges' capacity to respond to workforce disruptions.

Call to Action

Stakeholders, including college administrators, faculty, labor unions, government agencies, and local employers, are encouraged to support and implement this urgent call to action on this policy to enhance regional resilience, workforce recovery, and educational equity. By adopting the ERFM framework and its associated mechanisms, colleges will be better equipped to serve communities facing economic upheaval, providing timely education and training while maintaining accountability and alignment with labor market needs. Immediate engagement, collaboration, and resource allocation are essential to ensure the success of this policy and the long-term well-being of Northern Ontario communities.

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