

Standing Committee on  
Government Operations



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# Report on the Review of the Auditor General's 2020 Audit of Early Childhood to Grade 12 Education in the Northwest Territories

19<sup>th</sup> Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Chair: Mrs. Frieda Martselos

**MEMBERS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS**

**REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL'S 2020  
AUDIT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TO GRADE 12 EDUCATION IN THE  
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES**

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## **STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS**

### **REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL'S 2020 AUDIT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TO GRADE 12 EDUCATION IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Auditor General of Canada (AG) is also the Auditor for the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), as set out in the federal *Northwest Territories Act*. The AG is a statutory Officer of the Legislative Assembly. This means their responsibilities are set out in legislation.

The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) operates independently from the GNWT. The OAG conducts an annual performance audit of one of the government's departments, boards or agencies. A performance audit looks at how well a department has met its own policies and legislation while delivering a particular program or service. These audits are paid for by the federal government, and the subject of the audit is chosen by the OAG. This ensures the OAG's independence.

The Standing Committee on Government Operations (the Committee) reviews the reports of all statutory officers. When the Committee reviews a compliance audit report, it holds a public hearing with representatives of the OAG, who explain their audit findings. Representatives of the audited department also attend and explain their response to the audit. Committee's main focus is on how the department responded to the audit findings and how it intends to address problems identified in the audit report.

The Speaker tabled the *Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly – 2020: Audit of Early Childhood to Grade 12 Education in the Northwest Territories – Department of Education, Culture and Employment* on February 6, 2020.

Normally, the Committee tries to hold its review as soon as possible after the OAG's report is tabled. However, like many things, this review was delayed due to COVID-19.

The Committee held its review remotely on November 6, 2020. This is the Committee's report on that review.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For their appearance before the Committee, Members thank Auditor General Karen Hogan, Principal Glenn Wheeler, and Director Maria Pooley, from the OAG. Committee also thanks Deputy Minister Rita Mueller, Assistant Deputy Ministers John MacDonald and Sam Shannon, and Director Katy Pollock from the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) for their appearance before the Committee.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Education system in the Northwest Territories**

ECE is responsible for the Northwest Territories' education system from Junior Kindergarten through Grade 12. The system is made up of the department and 10 regional education bodies. These are similar to school boards.

The regional education bodies deliver services directly to students. The *Education Act* requires that NWT students have access to education programs that meet the highest possible standards and are based on the cultures of the Northwest Territories. Students may receive their education in any of the NWT's 11 official languages. The Act also says that students have a right to access their education programs in a regular instructional setting in their home communities, and to receive the support services they need to do so.

Daycares are also licensed and supported by ECE, but are separate from the education system. High-quality early education programs delivered through daycares can help prepare children for success when they enter the school system.

### **About the Audit**

The purpose of the audit was to find out whether, to improve student outcomes, ECE planned, supported, and kept track of the delivery of fair, inclusive education programs

and services, that reflect Indigenous languages and cultures. The audit covered the period from April 1, 2015, to May 31, 2019.

The OAG looked at whether ECE met key responsibilities related to inclusive schooling, Indigenous languages and culture-based education. They also looked at fair access to quality education, daycares, planning for and measuring the effectiveness of the education system, and putting in place key elements of the *Education Renewal and Innovation Framework*.

The audit looked at 10 years of departmental documents and data. The audit also tracked all students who enrolled in Grade 10, in a given year, to assess 3-year graduation rates.

During the regular audit process, the OAG works with management of the department under review. They get confirmation of management's responsibility for the subject being audited, an acknowledgement that they are using suitable criteria to do the assessment, confirmation that the department has provided all relevant information and that they agree the audit is factually accurate. For each of the recommendations made by the OAG, the audit report also includes the department's response.

## **AUDIT FINDINGS**

The OAG found that ECE “took steps to plan, support, and monitor the delivery of equitable, inclusive education programs and services that reflected Indigenous languages and cultures, to support improved student outcomes. However, we concluded that these actions were insufficient for it to fully meet its commitments and obligations. Providing sufficient support in key areas, such as Indigenous language and culture-based education, and monitoring the outcomes of its education programs, is necessary to help ensure that students in the territory are being given the best chance for success.”

The OAG made 9 recommendations as a result of this audit. ECE has agreed with all of them.

## **ECE Action Plan to Improve Student Outcomes**

Independently of the audit, ECE evaluated the *Education Renewal and Innovation Framework*. They also identified recommendations for improvement.

ECE drafted an *Action Plan to Improve JK-12 Student Outcomes in the NWT, 2021/22 – 2023/24*. This Action Plan responds to both the audit and the evaluation recommendations. There are 30 specific actions grouped under seven themes: Quality Early Learning and Child Care; Workforce Development and Capacity Building; Curriculum and Student Assessment; Student Supports; Training, Developing and Support for School Employees; Governance; and Monitoring and Evaluation.

The Action Plan identifies which recommendations from the OAG and evaluation framework are addressed by each theme.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Performance Measures**

A key finding of the audit is that while ECE took steps to support student outcomes, the department did not know whether these efforts were improving student outcomes. ECE did not determine what was needed in small communities to improve access to education, and it did not make enough of an effort to collect and use data to learn what changes might be needed to address the ongoing gaps in student outcomes.

Therefore, the Committee recommends:

#### **Recommendation 1**

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the department of Education, Culture and Employment develop performance measures for each area highlighted in the compliance audit and the corresponding ECE action plan to achieve specific outcomes, and to report annually on these measures.

### **Indigenous Languages**

The use of Indigenous languages and the ability of residents to speak in the official languages of the NWT has declined over the last 30 years. The Committee hopes to

see progress through the *Our Languages* curriculum, the pilot projects for Indigenous language revitalization, and the assessment tools to measure students' use of Indigenous languages. While the Committee supports these initiatives, regular reporting is needed to be able to ensure progress is being made. Therefore, the Committee recommends:

### **Recommendation 2**

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the department of Education, Culture and Employment report annually on each action related to revitalizing official languages, including on the oral proficiency assessment tools, the Indigenous Language revitalization certification program and the mentor-apprentice program.

Members have also heard concerns that the division leading the work on Indigenous language revitalization does not list the ability to speak an Indigenous language as a priority. Therefore, the Committee recommends:

### **Recommendation 3**

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the department of Education, Culture and Employment include Indigenous language proficiency when hiring positions in the Indigenous Languages and Education Secretariat.

## **Inclusive Schooling and Student Success**

In 2016, ECE issued a Ministerial Directive on Inclusive Schooling. Its vision is: To ensure access to quality education for all students by effectively meeting their diverse needs in a way that is responsive, accepting, respectful and supportive.

A key principle is that learning is individualized, meaning “education programs and decisions focus on the individual student’s strengths and needs, and are based on the student’s best interests.” It also means that students have access to education programs, and supports, in their home community.

The audit found ECE’s 2015 action plan ambitious, and that the department did not have a way to track progress on implementing the plan. There were not enough efforts to track whether schools were creating, monitoring and updating individualized learning plans. The monitoring that did take place did not allow ECE to know whether students

with individualized learning plans were receiving the supports they needed, nor whether there were improved outcomes.

#### **Recommendation 4**

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the department of Education, Culture and Employment conduct greater oversight on inclusive schooling practices, including through spot checks on individualized learning plans, and report annually on the outcome-oriented performance measures.

#### **Schools in Small Communities**

The audit confirmed that students in small communities are less likely to graduate from high school. Department information shows that graduation rates in small communities is less than 40% for Indigenous students. The Committee supports the Northern Distance Learning Program, but is concerned with the finding that even students with a normally good rate of attendance could miss up to 30% of classes due to differences in school calendars.

Schools in small communities face numerous challenges, with multi-grade classrooms, limited opportunities for professional development, higher costs and the need for greater supports for teachers and principals. Therefore, the Committee recommends:

#### **Recommendation 5**

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the department of Education, Culture and Employment bring forward a plan to better support schools in small communities, to ensure students across the territory have an equitable learning experience. The Committee further recommends that the department work with District Education Authorities to minimize the impacts of differing school calendars on Northern Distance Learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

This concludes the Standing Committee on Government Operations' *Report on the Review of the 2020 Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly (Early Childhood to Grade 12 Education)*.

**Recommendation 6**

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the GNWT provide a response to the recommendations contained in this report within 120 days.