

THE HONOURABLE R.J. SIMPSON  
MINISTER OF EDUCATION, CULTURE AND EMPLOYMENT

**Delivering Equitable Education Services  
to Small Communities in the Northwest Territories**

Mr. Speaker, I have a Return to Written Question asked by the Member for Monfwi on June 1, 2022 regarding Delivering Equitable Education Services to Small Communities in the Northwest Territories.

**1) How does the Department of Education, Culture and Employment identify what is required to provide equitable access to quality education for all students in the Northwest Territories and provide the approach chosen and identify the applicable policy documents?**

Though the Department of Education, Culture and Employment does not deliver services directly to students, it is responsible for ensuring equitable access to education programs and services that meet the highest possible standards and that reflect NWT cultures. The *Education Act* establishes the foundation for choice of access and participation and inclusion of students and parents. The *Education Act* is supported by the Ministerial Directive on Inclusive Schooling and its associated funding the School Funding Framework. The Ministerial Directive on Inclusive Schooling ensures:

- That all students have access to quality education programs within a common learning environment in the community in which the student resides.
- That education bodies have direction on how to administer inclusive schooling supports and programming.
- Educators are provided with in-servicing to deliver inclusive schooling supports and programming.
- Financial accountability for inclusive schooling funding.
- Monitoring, evaluation and reporting of inclusive schooling supports and programming.

The Inclusive Schooling Handbook and Guidelines for Inclusive Schooling further detail the requirements for enacting and funding inclusive education programming.

The *Financial Administration Act* requires the Financial Management Board to develop a Planning and Accountability Framework, of which public agencies, which include education bodies, must comply. Education bodies submit annual Operating Plans and Annual Reports in compliance with this Framework. The implementation of a standardized reporting system improves planning and accountability and provides information in a consistent and comprehensive way, to support decision-making and ensure transparency for our students, parents, and the residents of the NWT.

**2) What actions has the Department of Education, Culture and Employment taken since the 2020 Auditor General report to support schools in small communities and ensure students in the territory have an equitable learning experience, indicating which actions are on hold and delayed, providing the reasons for the status, and indicating the partners involved and the amount spent or planned to be spent by activity?**

The Action Plan to Improve Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 Student Outcomes was established in 2020-2021. To date, ECE has completed six actions that responded to the Report of the Office of the Auditor General to:

- Deliver the two-year pilot of the Certificate of Indigenous Language Revitalization program.
- Provide distance learning opportunities in all NWT small schools through Northern Distance Learning.
- Implement a common job description for JK-12 Support Assistants.
- Update the JK-12 Support Assistants section of the Inclusive Schooling Handbook.
- Report on education outcomes established through the JK-12 Planning and Accountability Framework.
- Complete a five-year evaluation of the Education Renewal Initiative.

The following Actions are currently on-track for completion:

- Modernize the *Education Act*.
- Offer professional development opportunities for early childhood educators.
- Advance the Mentor Apprentice Program.
- Our Languages Curriculum and Indigenous Languages and Education Handbook.
- JK-12 Curriculum Renewal.
- Develop Northern Studies 20 curricula.

- Implement an online educator certification and credentialing system.
- Review the JK-12 education funding framework.
- Education System Training and Support Plan.
- Develop competency-based educator standards and accountability mechanisms.
- Pilot program to support training for JK-12 Support Assistants.
- Expand Career and Education Advisor program.
- Improve mental health counseling services to children and youth.
- Student Behaviour, Referrals, and Intervention Tracking.

Actions are funded internally from existing divisional budgets. In July 2021, for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, additional funding was identified to support the following actions:

- Implement JK-12 Our Languages Curriculum and Indigenous Languages and Education Handbook.
- Implement a pilot program to support training for certification of Support Assistants.
- Develop greater integration of services for children and youth in the education system.
- Early Development Instrument, Middle Years Development Instrument, and Healthy Behaviour in School-aged Children knowledge mobilization plan.
- Training and supports for small-school principals.
- Training and supports for teachers of multi-grade classrooms.

The following Actions are currently on-hold or delayed:

- The JK-4 Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is on-hold pending JK-12 curriculum renewal, which will have a significant impact on how students are supported in this area.
- Development of greater integration of services through expanding regional capacity is on-hold as the development has been enveloped into the advancement of the broader GNWT's focus on Integrated Service Delivery.
- Training and supports for small-school principals is on-hold, also pending JK-12 curriculum renewal. Research into best practices to support small school principals has been completed.
- Training and supports for teachers of multi-grade classrooms is on-hold, also pending curriculum renewal. Research on best practices for Multi-Age Groups has been completed.
- The Indigenous Language Diploma is delayed as ECE awaits a program proposal from Aurora College that will lead to the implementation of an NWT-based diploma program.

- Development of an Early Learning Framework and handbook was delayed by COVID-19 and engagement with the system to support development of the *2030 ELCC Strategy* and finalized federal agreements. A new version is set to be piloted in 2022-2023.
- An increase in Indigenous language scholarships is delayed due to the pending nature of the Indigenous Language Diploma pilot program. ECE awards as many qualifying scholarships as applied for, however, the Department is experiencing a lack of demand without an NWT-based program.
- Plans to analyze and share Middle Development Instrument and the Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children surveys are delayed due to conflicting priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic and internal staff capacity. Action is expected to be completed by 2023.
- The Indigenous Language Instructor Employment Plan is delayed. A draft employment plan has been completed and one education body is interested in implementing action in the 2022-2023 school year.

**3) How does the Department of Education, Culture and Employment know that it meets students' needs in small communities, including needs for specialist services; how are the needs identified, measured, monitored and reported; and what are barriers and problems in data collection?**

ECE has an Education Body Committee System through which education body input and feedback is provided; within this system, ECE officials work with Superintendents while the Minister of ECE works with elected Education Leaders. Is it through this committee structure that education bodies inform ECE of both successes and issues within their communities so that the Department can collaborate with regions directly to address issues and provide support.

The early screening and identification of the learning needs of students are completed at the regional level through schools and education bodies using a variety of screening tools and interventions. Education specialist services include ECE staff such as Territorial-based Support Team Coordinators and Regional Inclusive Schooling Coordinators, specialist staffing within schools such as Program Support Teachers and Support Assistants), and staff contracted by ECE and/or education bodies as needed. Program Support Teachers at each school may refer students to the NTHSSA, Child and Youth Counsellors, and Educational Psychology services. ECE's Territorial-Based Support Team is working closely with education bodies and contracted expertise to further improve school-based support services across the territory.

ECE monitors various performance measures which help identify progress or areas for improvement

annually. The EDI, MDI and HBSC provide snapshots of the developmental health of five-year-old children, Grade 4 and Grade 7 students, and Grades 6-10 students, respectively. These are not screening or assessment tools for individual children.

Health and Social Services specialist services are provided by the Department of Health and Social Services and the health authorities.

General barriers impacting the collection of data include inconsistent data collection standards, lack of quality assurance processes, and economic and technical limitations, such as human resource capacity and the cost and usability of technology in the North. With respect to data on student needs, barriers include a lack of territorial tools to collect needed data and legislative barriers that limit information sharing between departments.

**4) How is the Department of Education, Culture and Employment considering the socio-economic diversity and residential school legacy in small communities in its approaches to providing education services and collaborating with communities, explaining which actions, services, and funds are explicitly targeting small communities and the distinct socio-economic situations and legacies - for example, are actions like providing food allowances or liaising with Housing NWT considered?**

ECE's *NWT JK-12 Indigenous Languages and Education Policy* guides culture and language-based education. It ensures that schools actively implement the foundational curricula of *Dene Kede* and *Inuuqatigiit*, as well as the Indigenous Languages and Education Handbook. The ILE Policy mandates that education bodies ensure Elders and cultural resource experts play an integral role in developing learning environments that centre and promote the Indigenous worldviews, culture, and language of the community. Indigenous language instruction is guided by the NWT's mandated JK-12 Indigenous language curriculum: *Our Languages* curriculum.

In 2022-2023, the GNWT is providing \$11.6 million for Indigenous languages and education initiatives in schools. Of this amount, \$7.05 million is for Indigenous languages staff and \$857,000 is for resource development to support Indigenous language instruction. The School Funding Framework, NWT JK-12 Indigenous Languages and Education Procedures Manual, and ILE Handbook outline how education bodies and schools are expected to implement the ILE Policy, including additional details on ILE funding limits and expectations.

ECE is adapting anti-racism training used for health care professionals and will be offering “Creating Cultural Awareness, Anti-Racism & Allyship in Action” workshops to teachers and school staff in 2022-2023. ECE also offers the delivery of the KAIROS Blanket Exercise, adapted to a northern perspective version, to education bodies upon request.

The New to the NWT Educators’ Conference is a professional learning opportunity extended to all educators that are new to the NWT. It has been created to help orient educators to the foundational elements of education in the NWT, provide background knowledge of the unique history and context of education in the NWT, and to begin the process of establishing personal and professional connections.

Two training components of this conference include **Indigenous Languages and Education**, familiarizing teachers to the philosophy for programming and practices that bring the Indigenous Languages and Education Policy to Life in NWT schools; and **Rooted in Conversation**, familiarizing teachers with the complex history of residential schools in the NWT, the impacts of trauma as a result of residential school experiences, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to action and the process of reconciliation.

ECE also provides trauma-informed approach/responsive classrooms training and support to education body staff on a request basis to assist educators with understanding and responding to the impacts of trauma.

Through partnerships with education bodies, ECE has increased both the number of small schools accessing the Northern Distance Learning program, as well as the number of available courses offered through the program. This has allowed students to have equitable access to higher level academic courses not often available in their local communities which will enable them to pursue post-secondary opportunities.

The School Funding Framework allows education bodies to provide quality educational programming that reflects the needs of the population they serve. The Framework permits flexibility to accommodate local decision making. The School Funding Framework is based on the premise that, over and above the base costs of operations, education bodies should receive funding for factors that are beyond their control. A location factor, northern cost index, is based on Statistics Canada’s living cost differentials and serves to increase the amount of a funding an education body receives, where Yellowknife is the base city in the price comparison. The northern cost index is applied to funding for Healing and Counselling under Inclusive Schooling funding. Healing and counselling refer to strategies and supports designed to address behavioural, social, emotional, and healing issues, including those related to the legacy of residential schooling.

As part of the Anti-Poverty Strategy, ECE distributes Healthy Food for Learning annual funding to NWT schools for breakfast, snack and lunch programming. The program responds to needs related to northern food insecurity and socio-economic challenges.

The Northern Cost Index is taken into account to ensure equitable funding is given to each school and Superintendents have the authority to allocate funding to best meet needs in the schools in their regions.

Under the Income Assistance Program, applicants who have school aged children are provided an education allowance in September based on what the specific school identifies as necessary, notebooks, indoor shoes, binders, pens, pencils school bus fees, etc. This allowance is specific to the school/community needs.

Through the Small Community Employment Support Program, ECE provides funding directly to Designated Community Authorities (DCAs) to allocate among local employers in accordance with their specific employment and training needs. This supports a strategic and inclusive approach to community-wide labour market, employment and training development. ECE also provides funding support to DCAs to assist them in developing multi-year Community Labour Market Development Plans. Under the SCES Program, communities who develop CLMDPs, with or without ECE financial support, are eligible to receive SCES Program funds through multi-year funding agreements, as opposed to annual allocations. SCES Program supports are available in all communities except Yellowknife.

**5) Has the Department considered designing a targeted approach to improve student outcomes in small communities within a set timeline that may include partnerships and allocate funds to support students based on needs; and if yes, will that approach be actioned upon, and if not, why not?**

Within the Action Plan to Improve JK-12 Student Outcomes, actions to support achievement in small community schools are prioritized and intended to support Education Renewal and Innovation (ERI) Commitment #5: *The GNWT will do its part to ensure that the strengths and realities of small communities are recognized and built upon in order to ensure equitable, quality education in all NWT communities.*

The ERI Framework is a ten-year strategy that places a great deal of emphasis on supporting NWT educators so that they may be in the best possible position to meet the needs of all students in all communities. Recognizing this need, ECE intends to design and introduce training that is specifically targeted towards those

employees who work in the smallest schools in order to address equity issues in education delivery. To date, ECE has completed research on best practices to support small-school principals and for multi-age groups to inform training and supports for teachers of multi-grade classrooms. The ongoing renewal of the JK-12 school curriculum will have a significant impact on how small-school principals and teachers of multi-grade classrooms will be supported. The proposed training programs are scheduled to be developed in parallel with the phased-in implementation of curriculum renewal, as the GNWT works with partners to adopt and adapt BC's curriculum and assessment tools.

Small schools, even those with a high school program, are often unable to offer the same educational programming options as larger schools in Yellowknife and regional centres, which is why ECE has developed initiatives to support the increased provision of equitable access to education for all students, including those in small communities. Examples include the introduction of the Northern Distance Learning program, as well as the Career and Education Advisors.

ECE works closely with the Regional Indigenous Language & Education Coordinators and the Indigenous Language & Education school teams, consisting of school leadership, classroom teachers, Indigenous language instructors, and support staff, to ensure that school initiatives are respecting and promoting the Indigenous languages of the community and delivering culture-based learning.

Allocation of funding based on student need is a southern-based model that requires one or more specific diagnoses to implement specific monetary values of support. A reliance on a diagnosis-based system is more aligned with the medical model, rather than an inclusive schooling model of tiered supports (supports for all, next level supports for some, intensive support for those with complex needs). Given a lack of access to diagnoses across the territory, needs-based funding is not seen as a favourable system.

In the NWT, support is provided regardless of diagnoses. Inclusive Schooling conditional funding is allocated to education authorities to meet needs and additional supports are provided from ECE, including training, supports for capacity building around complex needs, and more.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.