



ASSOCIATION OF YUKON SCHOOL COUNCILS, BOARDS & COMMITTEES

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January 4, 2022

Currie Dixon
Chair
Standing Committee on Public Accounts
Yukon Legislative Assembly
P.O. Box 2703
Whitehorse, Yukon
Y1A 2C6

Dear Mr. Dixon:

Re: Auditor General of Canada's Report, Kindergarten – Grade 12 Education in Yukon

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the recommendations on the Auditor General of Canada's report, Kindergarten Through Grade 12 Education in Yukon. We very much appreciate the opportunity to provide the association's perspectives regarding the department's ongoing work to address the recommendations from the audit with the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Marking 23 years now in existence, the Association of Yukon School Councils, Boards & Committees (AYSCBC) has and continues to provide services and supports to Yukon school councils, with a focus on working collaboratively with its partners to promote quality education, positive student outcomes and the invaluable work of the locally elected School Councils in Yukon. We very much value our partnership with the department of Education and other organizations in the territory to advance our collective work in support of school councils, students, families and communities at large.

Below is an overview of issues that the association has been working on over the past three years which are directly and indirectly related to the Auditor General of Canada's report on education in Yukon.

Yukon First Nations Education

As identified in the 2009 and 2019 Auditor General Reports on Education, gaps in student outcomes continue to exist between First Nations and non-First Nations students. The AYSCBC supports the work of the Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE) and the Yukon First Nations Education Directorate (YFNED) towards the creation of a Yukon First Nations School Board. As announced, this agreement marks the first step towards First Nations control of First Nations education in the Yukon and is history in the making. While not a partner to this agreement, the association has played an integral role this past year working with the directorate, department of Education and Elections Yukon to make information available to school councils throughout the territory regarding the framework agreement and the process/procedures for forming a school board. As the duly elected arm of school communities, it is the decision of individual school councils, however, on whether to support joining the First Nation School Board. The AYSCBC will continue to support the work of school councils, and looks forward to continuing our collaborative work with the directorate and other education partners in support of all students, families and school communities.

As outlined in the Education Audit, there is currently no policy for Yukon First Nations language instruction. The audit goes on to recommend that the department of Education develop policies and guidelines to support First Nation language training. Attracting and retaining First Nation language teachers is a significant issue for many Yukon schools. We are supportive of the work being undertaken with the Council for Yukon First Nations, Yukon Native Language Centre and First Nation governments to develop initiatives focused on fluency as well as mentorship opportunities. It remains unclear however what specific work is underway to develop a policy framework in collaboration with First Nation governments, school councils and other partners to address this important need.

Improving Student outcomes

As outlined in the Department of Education's recent response to the audit (September 2021), the Department acknowledges that it has not yet implemented a comprehensive strategy for measuring and analyzing differences in student outcomes and for targeting initiatives to address those differences as they pertain to First Nation and rural students. While we are supportive of the department's decision to create a Data and Analytics Unit to manage and analyze student performance data, it is not clear as to how information that is collected has led to any decisive and/or immediate action to improve student outcomes. What remains clear however, is there continues to be a disparity in learning outcomes for rural students with special needs due to the lack of resources, both services and supports, which greatly impacts the delivery of inclusive education.

Last month, correspondence was shared with the association in regards to an urgent request to make more education assistants available to meet the one-on-one needs of students requiring additional supports. As explained, the community does not have a child/youth support worker nor a pediatrician or physician. While additional COVID-19 funding was received for a Learning Assistance Teacher last year, funding was not renewed this school year despite the increase in students requiring supports. As relayed, the lack of resources in all of these areas is but another contributing factor to significantly lower learning outcomes among rural students.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

The recruitment and retention of teaching professionals has and continues to be a significant issue in the territory. The pandemic has further contributed to these challenges. Examples of not being able to recruit staff in a timely manner include delaying the start of the school year to reassigning specialists (ie. Learning Assistant Teachers) to the classroom to an overreliance on temporary / substitute teachers. One recommendation put forward by the association is that of an anticipatory hiring campaign for teachers and teachers on call held early in the year as opposed to later in the year. In doing so, the territory would be on an even playing field with the other provinces and territories who commence recruitment / advertising early in the year.

The issue of a shortage of housing in several Yukon communities has also been identified as a contributing factor to challenges surrounding the recruitment and retention of teaching professionals. The increased reliance on substitute and temporary teachers in the communities has been further referenced as another consequence of not having access to affordable housing for teaching professionals. As relayed, contracts offered in the communities do not include an offer of secure housing. This can be attributed to an overall lack of housing in some communities. At the same time, we have heard concerns raised regarding the number of staff housing units which sit vacant in some communities.

The association has suggested consideration be given to making available accommodation in those communities identified with a demonstrated housing need as a means of creating stability and continuity of teaching professionals throughout the territory. The association has further suggested engaging with First Nation governments regarding shared housing needs and opportunities for partnerships. The suggestion to establish a rental agreement with the department of Education to secure housing units in new construction builds is but another solution.

Supporting Student Learning Needs

As a member of the Advisory Committee on Yukon Education (ACYE), the Association of Yukon School Councils, Boards and Committees (AYSCBC) has been engaged in discussions regarding the topic of inclusive and special education and the findings of the report that was commissioned. While we are supportive of this important work, the association remains concerned regarding the lack of clear and tangible deliverables, cost estimates and measurable indicators for implementing each of the recommendations. As conveyed in a letter to the department in March 2020, the association recommended that the review be conducted in a clear, transparent manner with concrete objectives, action items, timelines and deliverables for improving learning opportunities for Yukon students. With two years having passed since the review was first initiated and no substantive improvements having taken effect in Yukon schools, these recommendations continue to stand.

We wish to acknowledge the work to create a working group comprising representatives of various education partners including AYSCBC as well as those who participated in the recent Education Summit to advance work on the report recommendations. It should be acknowledged, however, that key stakeholders such as Autism Yukon, Learning Disabilities of Yukon and the Office of the Yukon Child & Youth Advocate were not invited to participate in the working group. Having the voices of those front-line organizations who work directly with students and families would have been beneficial to these important discussions. Again, we remain concerned regarding the amount of time that has passed since the report was first commissioned with no tangible outcomes realized thus far, particularly as it pertains to the Auditor General's recommendations to:

- prioritize students for specialized assessment;
- formalize Individualized Education Plan (IEP) policies and guidelines
- assess and track specialist recommendations; and,
- assess and track teachers use of recommended strategies.

Mental Health Supports in Schools

Though mental health is not specifically referenced in the audit, it is directly related to the delivery of programs in support of Yukon students' well-being. According to the results of the third pandemic learning survey (summer 2021) commissioned by the Department of Education, 49% of students reported that the pandemic has negatively and very negatively impacted their mental health and wellness. Not unlike what is occurring across the country, it is clear the COVID-19 pandemic has placed a disproportionate burden on children and youth in the Yukon. Children and youth are affected by the closure of schools, recreational programs and other public places. They are also impacted by the increasing economic pressures and stress that their parents and other caregivers are facing due to work disruptions and job losses.

Given the cumulative effects of stress, anxiety and/or depression on students' ability to learn as well as attend school, and in light of the significant role schools play in the lives of children and youth, AYSCBC has and continues to advocate for making increased mental health services and resources readily available in Yukon schools throughout the territory. As governments put in place policies and programs to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on Canadians, we urge all levels of government to consider the unique ways that children are made vulnerable by the pandemic and to put in place urgent measures to reduce their vulnerability.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share these important perspectives as well as offering solutions.

Sincerely,

Original to be mailed

Sandra Henderson
Chair