

**A Background Paper submitted to  
The National Aboriginal Roundtable  
on Lifelong Learning:  
Early Childhood Education and Kindergarten –  
Grade 12**

**by  
The Government of Nunavut  
and  
Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated**

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## **Introduction**

This paper is in response to an invitation received from the Prime Minister of Canada in May, 2004 to participate in the follow-up processes associated with the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable. Six sectoral planning committees have been established. One of these sectoral groups will focus on Lifelong Learning, from Early Childhood to Post-secondary/Adult Training.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly address some of the critical issues confronting Nunavut in – meeting the expectations of Nunavummiut originating in the signing of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, the rapidly increasing youth population, the acute housing shortage and the many other challenges the new territory has had to grapple with since April 1999. Central to this effort are the reforms being made to an education system based on the Alberta model and inherited from the NWT. In particular this paper addresses the following areas:

- Addressing Issues of Jurisdiction Control
- Curriculum & Research
- Improving Access/Increasing Integration
- Sustainability/Capacity Building

## **Some Nunavut facts**

Nunavut is Canada's newest territory, covering approximately 20% of Canada's land mass. There are 26 communities located as far north as Grise Fiord on Ellesmere Island, and as far south as Sanikiluaq in James Bay, as far west as Kugluktuk and Iqaluit in the East. The population of Nunavut is approximately 29,000, spread amongst the 26 communities, with 85% of this population being Inuit, who speak Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun as their first language. None of these communities are connected by road and, consequently, the mobility of people and resources are limited.

The population is increasing rapidly and by 2020, it will be nearly 44,000. Unlike the rest of Canada, Nunavut's under 15 cohort makes up 40% of the population – more than double the under 15 cohort for the rest of Canada. The youth of the population will place significant pressure on education, daycare and alternative working arrangements.

Nunavut's per capita income is 27% lower than the national average. More than 55% of Inuit receive income, fuel and utility support at a cost of approximately \$43 million per year. Given the current level of population growth, demand for these support programs will grow.

There is an acute shortage of housing in Nunavut. The average number of occupants per dwelling in Nunavut is 3.27, while the Canadian average is 2.39. The rapid population growth of recent decades has not been matched by a similar growth in the number of available housing units. There are 14,225 Inuit in public housing and another 1,000 families on the waiting list, which is increasing by 250 annually. The Government of Nunavut estimates that 3,000 homes will be needed over the next five years, merely to arrest the growth of the shortage. The health of people is tied inextricably to the conditions in which they live and this health status significantly impacts the ability of

students to succeed. Poor living conditions including, over-crowding, lack of clean water and safe waste disposal all contribute to higher levels of disease and negative impacts on spiritual and mental health. Life expectancy in Nunavut is more than ten years below the national average

The shortage of housing directly impedes the delivery of education. Access to housing is a key draw for people to work in education and problems in finding suitable housing make it difficult for Inuit to move to or stay in a community as students or for employment as instructors. The post secondary infrastructure in Nunavut is stretched to its limit. Any expansion of student enrolment in college programs is absolutely dependent on expanding the infrastructure, particularly housing, for both students and instructors.

## **Jurisdiction**

### *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*

The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA) was negotiated with the Government of Canada and signed in May of 1993. The NLCA is a constitutional document and has paramountcy over conflicting federal and territorial legislation. Article 4 required the creation of a Nunavut territory and government and this occurred in April 1999.

Two Articles of the NLCA bear directly on the mandate of the Nunavut Department of Education. Article 23 requires the creation of a “representative” public service at all grade levels and in all occupational groups. As Inuit are roughly 85 per cent of the Nunavut population, that is the “representative level.” Significantly for the Department of Education Article 23 requires that this level must be “maintained.”

Article 32 creates a legal obligation on the part of Government to provide “...Inuit with an opportunity to participate in the development of social and cultural policies, and in the design of social and cultural programs and services, including their method of delivery, in the Nunavut Settlement Area.” No other jurisdiction in Canada is under such a far-reaching legal requirement to involve its population in the development of social policy and there are significant costs to the government associated with this requirement to consult.

Article 2 of the NLCA guarantees that nothing in the NLCA affects the ability of Inuit to participate in and benefit from government programs for Inuit or aboriginal people generally. This Article is ignored by the federal government more than other Articles. There is a perception that the NLCA has dealt with all the federal government’s responsibilities for Inuit and consequently, many programs available to First Nations are not available to Inuit. Housing is an example. The federal government ceased providing public housing in Nunavut in the early nineties but continued to provide it to First nations through the on-reserve housing program. Further Nunavut does not receive DIAND funds ear-marked for Aboriginal education available to First Nations Band Councils.

### *Pinasuaqtavut (Bathurst Mandate)*

In 1999, the Government of Nunavut set out its vision for the new territory in a document called *Pinasuaqtavut* (also known as the Bathurst Mandate.) Four over-riding priorities

would guide its development. One of these was “Continuing Learning” which would be achieved through Nunavut becoming a society:

- that was fully functional in Inuktitut and English, respectful and committed to the needs and rights of French speakers, with a growing ability to participate in French,
- with a representative workforce in all sectors’
- in which educational programs are offered on a strategic basis, based on community by community needs, and
- in which a full range of interlocking educational programs allowing individuals continued access to all.

These are daunting objectives for any jurisdiction, let alone one located in Canada’s harshest climate with this country’s most rugged terrain.

### *Role of the Government of Canada*

The federal government has the constitutional responsibility for Inuit and First Nations affairs and it cannot stand aloof from this merely because education is a provincial/territorial jurisdiction. In Nunavut the Land Claims Agreement created explicit obligations to provide resources for capacity building and the Agreement has, as two of its over-riding objectives: *to provide Inuit with ... [the] means of participating in economic opportunities and to encourage self-reliance and the cultural and social well-being of Inuit.*

The Government of Nunavut was not in existence when the federal government made these wide ranging commitments to the Inuit of Nunavut. Nevertheless, when the Government of Nunavut came into existence these commitments had raised expectations among the vast majority of Nunavummiut that profound changes would take place. As the originator of formal education in the Eastern Arctic and as the current source of the vast bulk of the territorial government’s financial resources the federal government bears much of the responsibility for the current sorry state of educational outcomes in the territory.

The federal obligation to deliver on its commitments under the NLCA did not end with the creation of Nunavut. The NLCA imposed on the territorial government incremental costs which are over and above the normal costs of running a government in Canada. This was acknowledged in a Memorandum of Understanding between the federal government and the Government of the NWT signed in 1992 in anticipation of the signing of the NLCA.

Contrary to Article 32, Nunavut is the only jurisdiction that has not been given the opportunity by Heritage Canada to negotiate a co-operation agreement that reflects its linguistic situation. Further, Canada will only fund official language services in French and not Inuktitut, in spite of the need for essential services like education and health in Inuktitut.

## **Curriculum and Research**

### *Language*

The dominant language in Nunavut is Inuktitut, which the vast majority of Inuit learn as their first language, as shown in Figure 1. Consequently, Inuktitut is the language that most Inuit are most comfortable learning and working in. But English is rapidly gaining a position of dominance<sup>1</sup>.

The majority of Inuit speak Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun better than they speak English: 72 percent speak Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun very well, while only 50 percent speak English very well. Inuit are much more likely to speak only Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun at home (62%) than they are to speak only English at home (23%), while 15 percent speak English and either Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun at home. While these are average figures there are many small communities where as many as 96 per cent speak the Inuit language very well<sup>2</sup>.

Even though the majority of the population of Nunavut speak Inuktitut at home the majority of Government services and educational programs are provided in English. Nevertheless, there is a widespread belief that if the objectives of Article 23 of the NLCA (that is a representative public service) were achieved, Inuktitut would be the language used in the workplace<sup>3</sup>.

Language poses a serious barrier to education and work and the prominence of the Inuit culture. Unemployed Inuit are more likely to speak Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun, and less likely to speak English than employed Inuit (see Figure 1).

Many Inuit indicate that the transition from Inuktitut to English in grade school was insufficient to enable them to obtain continuous learning. Many Inuit feel that they are weak in both languages, and would prefer to have more schooling in Inuktitut. The main impediment to Inuktitut being the language of instruction is the lack of sufficient Inuit teachers and a consequence of that is that few if any Inuktitut resources exist for higher grades.

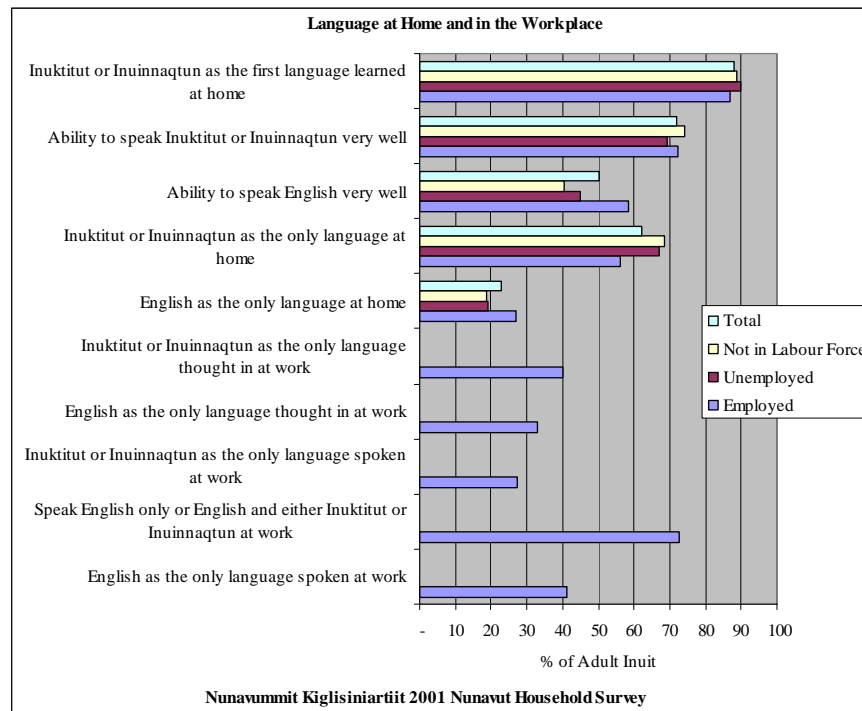
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<sup>1</sup> The Cost of Not Successfully Implementing Article 23: Representative Employment for Inuit within the Government – PricewaterhouseCoopers (February 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

**Figure 1**



Although, there are some schools with Inuktitut instruction up to Grade 4 and a few that can offer Inuktitut instruction up to Grade 6, in most Nunavut schools Inuktitut is the first language of instruction only up to and including Grade 3,. Accordingly, Inuktitut speaking children at a disadvantage due to a lack of early childhood development and K-12 education programs that build on their first language while developing their skills in English as a second language. From Grade 4 onward, English is the language of instruction and Inuktitut is available only in selected schools and in a few high schools as a second language. In the context of TV pop culture and movies this sends a clear message to young Inuit that the Inuit language and culture is of secondary importance to the society in which they live.

Recent Language of Instruction studies stress the importance of having Inuktitut used throughout the education system, not just in schools. Universally available early childhood programs such as pre-schools, day cares and Head Start programs founded on Inuit language and culture are particularly important to achieving bilingualism. Early language development is the secret to intellectual growth, including later language development and educational success.

As the Nunavut Department of Education does not want to preside over the destruction of one of the last remaining viable aboriginal languages and cultures in Canada, the challenge confronting it is to rapidly increase the number of Inuktitut speaking teachers and, in the interim, come up with creative ways to do its part in stemming the erosion of the language and culture. One such potential solution is to integrate the Inuit elders into the schools and with this objective in mind the Government of Nunavut has established a one year Elders' Teachers' Certification Program.

The federal government provides funding to provincial and territorial governments to support official language minorities across Canada. Thus, in Nunavut, English is a second language and only five per cent speak French. Even so the federal government funds the French language to the tune of \$3,400 per francophone while Inuktitut receives only \$48.50 per Inuk.

### **Improving Access and Increasing Integration**

#### *Inuit Traditional Skills*

Elders are the exponents of the purest forms of the Inuit language and its dialects. As a language resource they are Nunavut's most valuable asset. The elders are also the repository of knowledge and values that make up the Inuit culture and they possess the traditional skills that have enabled Inuit to survive on the Earth's harshest terrain. This ability to survive on the Arctic seas and tundra is one of the attributes which make Inuit unique. The loss of these traditional skills would essentially deny future generations of the ability to live in their own homeland.

Inuit culture in Nunavut is still a viable force. The 1999 Nunavut Community Labour Force Survey found that more than three quarters (78 per cent) of Inuit men aged 15 to 54 take part in harvesting activity, at least occasionally. Many Inuit youth aspire to continue Inuit traditional lifestyles, skills and culture. But over the past 20 years the changes that Inuit society has undergone has made passing these skills onto the next generation a significant challenge. Young people traditionally learned land survival and hunting skills from their elders while living on the land. Today, when young Inuit live in communities and attend school, this cultural learning process is far less automatic and certain. Accordingly, Inuit organizations and the Government of Nunavut have for a long time identified a pressing need for training youth in harvesting, handling, processing of wildlife, as well as other traditional values and skills relating to the land.

Nevertheless, the Department of Education recognizes that this fundamental need for culture and identity must be fostered by the education system and, given that the culture and life force of the Inuit language comes from pursuing the traditional life on the land, it is not likely that the schools can carry out this function entirely in from the formal classroom. While the intellectual courage and flexibility to acknowledge the value of Inuit traditional skills exists within the department, the organizational flexibility to develop a process within the formal educational system is impeded by the lack of capacity and this must be developed.

### *Grades 10 to 12*

Generally, in large schools in southern Canada the requirement for specialist teachers to deliver high school programs requires a more generous PTR than the K – 9 grades. However, the problem in Nunavut is a small/rural/remote school issue around the narrowness of the enrolment base. The number of students in the 10 – 12 grades is often too small to make it feasible to have enough subject experts for teaching all core subjects.

This is not a problem unique to Nunavut but one that is experienced throughout the sub Arctic region and in other countries where a relatively small population is spread across a large landmass. In these circumstances the funding of high school programs, which depend heavily on specialist teachers becomes disproportionately expensive. One obvious solution is to dispense with single teacher classes and apply the specialist to subjects in the lower grades through team teaching. The loss of the close relationship established between students and teacher in the single teacher classroom is to some extent offset by the strong community spirit that exists in small schools. The second problem is the need for specialist materials and equipment for small numbers of students. This challenge is well within the range of the creative abilities of most teachers and can include distance education models and computer technology built around a core of on site teachers.

### *Student Outcomes*

Nunavut faces many obstacles to its development and in the field of K to 12 and the following are major issues facing the Department over the next few years:

- Nunavut has a young and rapidly growing population,
- Education and skill levels of the population are below those needed to meet the cultural and practical needs of the people of Nunavut,
- Increased departmental competition for scarce financial resources.

Approximately four-fifths of the working age population does not have a high school diploma and three quarters of adults with at least a high school diploma are likely to be employed. The likelihood of obtaining employment decreases significantly for individuals who have attained a grade 9 to 11 education level (46%) or lower (39%)

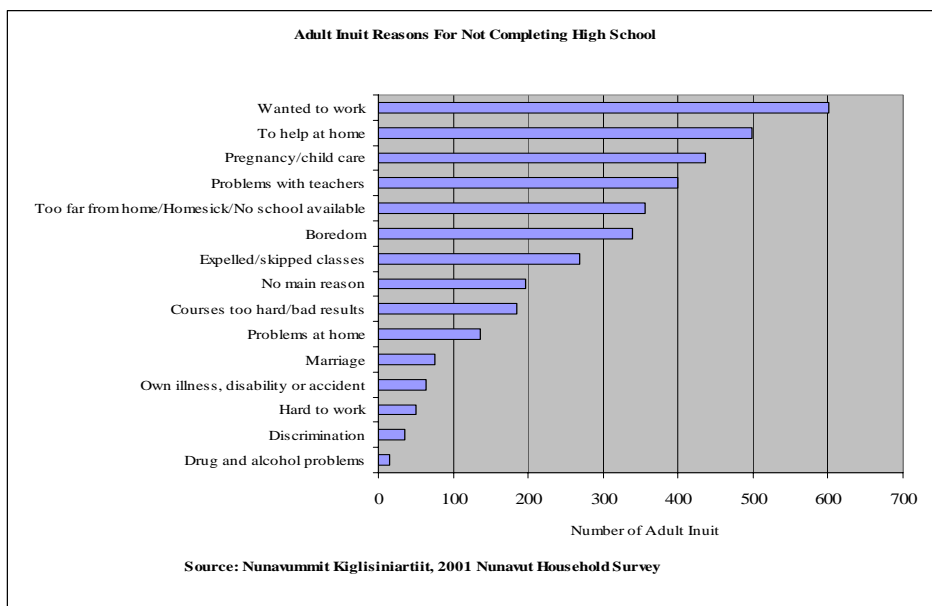
The number of high school graduates has, however, improved over the past five years. Growth has increased as a result of two factors. Where high school was once available only in Frobisher Bay/Iqaluit (and outside Nunavut in Churchill, Yellowknife and Inuvik), all communities in Nunavut now have high school programs. Second, students are increasingly recognizing that more opportunities exist within Nunavut for those that have a grade 12 diploma.<sup>4</sup>

As Figure 2 illustrates, the most significant reasons cited for not continuing education were that Inuit wanted to work (16%), to help out at home (14%), or were pregnant or caring for children (12%).

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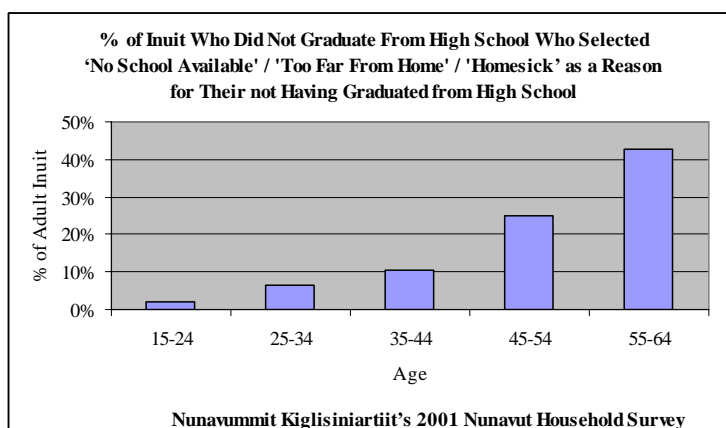
<sup>4</sup> Government of Nunavut, Article 23 – Inuit Employment within Government Discussion Paper, 2002

**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

It is worthwhile noting that the percentage of Inuit citing the reason for not completing high school of “too far from home/homesick/no school available/accessible” has gradually disappeared with the younger generations, as schools have been increasingly decentralized by Government of Nunavut to the communities, as shown in Figure 3. As noted above, the establishment of high schools in all of the communities has contributed to increased graduation rates.



*Special Needs*

The Department of Education has an inclusive schooling philosophy that directs schools to educate all students in the mainstream. The aim is that students attend regular classes

whenever possible and that mainstream programming is supplemented with appropriate educational programs geared to the capabilities and needs of students with special needs.

Approximately 20% of students may have special needs. About 1% have high needs such as severe visual, hearing or developmental disabilities. About 7% have minor to moderate physical and social/emotional needs, and approximately 12% require extra help to be able to keep up with mainstream programming. However, the data available on special needs is incomplete at this time.

### *Counselling and support services*

Currently, in the three regions there are:

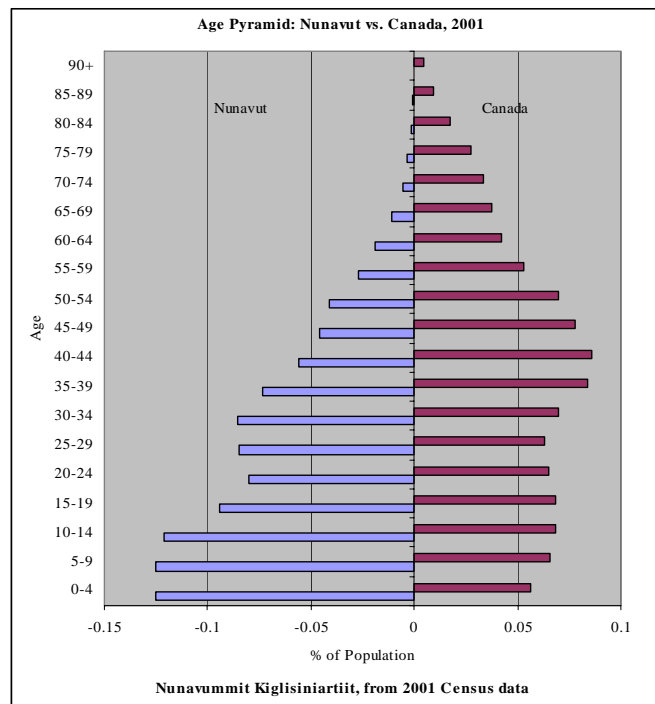
- 4 student support consultants
- 38 student support teachers
- 53 student support assistants

There are no special programs for gifted students.

### **Sustainability and Capacity Building**

The youth of the Inuit population as shown in Figure 4 presents several challenges and opportunities for Nunavut. It means that childcare and alternative working arrangements are likely to be the key to enabling employment and to pursuing higher education. At the same time, given the increasing importance of the “knowledge economy”, strong emphasis on education has the ability to significantly spur the growth of the economy.

**Figure 4**



### *Teacher Education Strategy*

Teachers are the foundation and core of any school system and in Nunavut and, where the goal is to build a system that is responsive to Inuit culture, Inuit teachers are vital. The Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP), in partnership with McGill University, has for the past 30 years offered a campus and community based program, which prepares Inuit to become classroom teachers in Nunavut schools. The emphasis is on training primary and elementary teachers, but students may choose to practice at the junior high and high school levels. The program has a strong focus on practice, and theory learned in courses is applied in classroom situations through observation and teaching.

Although this program has enjoyed consistent success it is small and in the 30 years of its existence fewer than 300 teachers have graduated and entered the school system. Currently 218 or 38% of the 573 teachers in Nunavut are Inuit and NTEP only graduates enough teachers to support Inuktitut language instruction up to Grade 3. To offer Inuktitut language instruction from K to 12 Nunavut will need an additional 269 Inuit teachers, a 123% increase. This number does not, however, cover new teachers required because of population growth, or the anticipated decrease of Inuit teachers as they reach retirement.

The solution is complex. Not only must large numbers of Inuit be encouraged to enter the teaching profession but the NTEP program must expand its infrastructure to accommodate the increase and this requires student housing, classroom space, materials and instructors – who also need housing. When the requisite numbers of teachers are trained they will need curricula to support Inuktitut language instruction in all subjects up to Grade 12 that will give Nunavummiut graduates the assurance that their education is comparable to that offered to Canadians elsewhere in Canada and that it is generally recognized as such. Naturally, this will be an incremental process but it is well beyond the resources currently available to Nunavut.

## **Conclusion**

This year the CMEC acknowledged that by the standards Canadians use to judge the success of their education systems, all levels of government are failing Aboriginal students. The failure comes at a time when the number of Aboriginal young people is rapidly increasing with an expectation that in the next 15 to 20 years, First Nations students will represent over 25 per cent of the elementary population in some jurisdictions. In Nunavut, the average elementary classroom will be 85 per cent Inuit. Despite some recent gains in recent years, drop out rates continue to be high, with high school graduation and post secondary transition rates low.

The Government of Nunavut has made education its highest priority and it is aggressively pursuing a policy of inclusiveness. Some of the key initiatives currently being implemented are:

- Development of an Early Childhood program strategy to implement Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun in day cares, pre-schools and Head Start programs by assisting these programs to involve Elders, parents and staff who speak Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun.

- Completion of Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun Early Childhood/Kindergarten curriculum and teaching materials.
- Complete development of the K-12 curriculum and related teaching resources to make them more relevant to Nunavut
- Develop a Language of Instruction Policy for Nunavut schools and provide the resources required for effective implementation
- Improve the teaching and learning of Inuktitut in schools and in the public service
- Work for a public education system that focuses on graduating bilingual youth (aboriginal language) who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to succeed in post-secondary studies
- Strengthen Inuit culture for future generations by finalizing plans for a Nunavut Cultural School
- Increase the number of Inuit adult educators and college instructors
- Build partnerships to meet the expected 30% increase in demand for education and training at all levels and the resulting infrastructure needs: including new schools and college facilities
- Develop a strategy and partnerships to support the healthy development and well-being of children and youth
- Provision of support to more fully develop and implement programs to support technology and trades training programs
- Provision of support for increased community based teacher training programs to ensure students are able to learn in their first language as Anglophone and Francophone students enjoy in Nunavut.

Nunavut remains predominantly an Inuit Society. The Government of Nunavut recognizes the specific circumstances of our children and accepts the obligation to work with our communities to develop and implement a culturally relevant education system.

The Government of Nunavut also recognizes and accepts its responsibility to deliver an appropriate and high quality education to Nunavummiut but the government must also deal with many other significant challenges some of which have already been alluded to and, all of which were inherited from the predecessor government. The potential of its human and natural capital to generate wealth is still largely underdeveloped and the territory is almost wholly dependent on federal transfers. The ability of the Government of Nunavut to deliver on the high expectations created by the federal government in the NLCA is absolutely a function of the resources provided by the federal government. These resources are not

sufficient and, if the Government of Nunavut fails to create a system of education that can meet the expectations of Inuit arising out of the NLCA that they negotiated in good faith with the Government of Canada that will be Canada's failure. Nunavut, accordingly, invites the Government of Canada to step away from the sidelines and join with the Government of Nunavut in sharing in the success of Nunavut by delivering on the commitments it made with Inuit in 1993.