



16th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

Standing Committee on Government Operations

Report on the Review of the Report
of the Auditor General on
Education in the Northwest Territories

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS**

**REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE
REPORT OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL
ON EDUCATION IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES**

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE REPORT OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL ON EDUCATION IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

INTRODUCTION

The Standing Committee on Government Operations (SCOGO) held its public review of the Auditor General of Canada's report, *Education in the Northwest Territories – 2010: Department of Education, Culture and Employment* on June 9, 2010. The Committee would like to thank the Auditor General, Ms. Sheila Fraser, and her staff for their work in preparing the report and in assisting the Committee with its review. The Committee would also like to thank Deputy Minister Dan Daniels and Paul Devitt, Director, Strategic and Business Services, from the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) for appearing before the Committee.

The Auditor General's performance audit was completed in November 2009 and her report was tabled on May 11, 2010, during the Fifth Session of the 16th Legislative Assembly.

SCOGO's mandate includes the examination of all reports prepared by the Auditor General.

GENERAL REMARKS

The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) restricted its examination to how the Department of Education, Culture and Employment planned, monitored and reported on: (1) early childhood education; (2) elementary and secondary schooling; and (3) post-secondary education and training. ECE was found to be deficient in matters of:

- planning at the elementary and secondary school level; and
- monitoring and reporting of early childhood education and post-secondary education.

The monitoring and reporting that occurred at the elementary and secondary school level revealed a lack of academic improvement among students. Although secondary school graduation rates had improved, the graduation rate of 55% was lower than in the Yukon and Alberta. At Aurora College, without adequate monitoring and reporting, there was little or no means to assess adult

achievement. It was also impossible to assess improvement of children's performance in elementary school based on attendance at day care.

SCOGO members agreed that the OAG's performance audit was very useful in its identification of trends and issues in ECE's programming, some of which call for immediate and/or continuing action. Findings of the audit validated and articulated concerns expressed by Members in this Assembly. The Auditor General's report contained nine specific recommendations. The Committee agrees with all of the recommendations and has included them in this report. ECE also agrees with the recommendations and has responded with an action plan.

Recommendation 1

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment accept all of the Auditor General's recommendations and proceed with its action plan to address them.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

ECE views the healthy development of young children as crucial to their success in elementary, secondary and post-secondary studies. In *Framework for Action, Early Childhood Development, 2001*, ECE identified early childhood learning as part of its responsibility. During the audit, the OAG found that between 2005 and 2008, 18 more licensed day care facilities were opened. However, the Auditor General found that ECE's monitoring and reporting on day care facilities was incomplete. Not all day cares were inspected annually as required by the *Child Day Care Act*. For example, only 50% of day care facilities in the North Slave region were inspected in 2008. In addition, there is no means to assess whether children who attend day care perform better when they enter school. ECE has not, as yet, developed performance indicators to collect data and complete assessments on the educational component of early childhood development.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 37 of the OAG Report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment should:

- ensure that all day care facilities are inspected annually, in accordance with the *Child Day Care Act* and *Child Day Care Standards Regulations*;

- collect critical data as is considered necessary and cost-effective to help assess the success of the program;
- formally evaluate the success of its early childhood development programming and report the results to the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly and the public; and
- use this information to make necessary adjustments to early childhood development programming.

ECE reported that it:

1. Subsequently conducted a review and confirmed that day care facility inspections are now up to date. SCOGO is satisfied that completion of day care inspections is current and that a program evaluation is scheduled;
2. increased on-going monitoring by the development of a tracking and reporting function within the Department's Case Management Administration System;
3. will initiate discussions with stakeholders to investigate the possibility of collecting and monitoring data to support the success of the program but notes that it will require more staff and resources; and
4. will initiate an evaluation of the Early Childhood Development program in 2010-2011. Results will be made public and used to determine the need for planned adjustments.

Recommendation 2

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the planned evaluation of the Early Childhood Development program include a review of both the strengths and weaknesses of outcomes of programming. This evaluation should also identify performance indicators and provide a means to collect information on them at entry to kindergarten. This information could be used for ongoing monitoring and reporting to support and provide direction for the Early Childhood Development program.

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL

The OAG expressed concern that there was no detailed territory-wide plan to improve student performance.

A key finding of the OAG's report is the lack of improvement in student performance between the school years ending in 2005 and 2008. One bright light is an increase in the number of secondary school graduates; however, the results on Alberta Achievement Tests and diploma examinations, and the number of students working at their functional grade levels, show little or no improvement. The OAG questioned ECE as to how this was possible and found that ECE had done no analysis. Without studying the results, the Department is not in a position to provide optimal guidance to education councils.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 52 of the OAG Report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment should:

- formally identify the root causes of the diverging trends in student performance and use this information to better target its efforts for continuous improvement; and
- develop, in collaboration with education councils, a comprehensive, territory-wide action plan and targets for improved student performance.

In its response to the OAG, ECE has agreed to target known root causes with the Aboriginal Student Achievement Initiative, which was developed in part to address the low attendance levels at NWT schools. An accountability framework has been drafted that will support continuous improvement efforts and provide information that can be reported to the public. A number of activities are planned to address performance issues.

SCOGO believes ECE should be mindful of the importance of identifying the causes that affect performance of students. A delineation of these causes can inform planning.

The OAG noted that the Department introduced the Aboriginal Student Achievement Initiative in order to address concerns over poor student performance.

The OAG found that the Department has improved its reporting on student performance over the last four years. Indicators in ECE's *Towards Excellence: a Report on Education in the NWT* were on par with those of other education and statistical organizations.

The OAG advises it is important for ECE to keep the public and the Legislative Assembly informed about the results of its programs delivered by Education Councils and their impact on Aboriginal peoples.

The Aboriginal Student Achievement Initiative is intended to identify the root causes of low student achievement levels and provide ways to raise Aboriginal secondary graduation rates to the same level as non-Aboriginal rates.

The OAG noted that ECE monitors compliance with education directives but has not formally assessed their effectiveness or relevance.

The Minister has provided 20 directives to education councils. Subjects range from calendar planning to standardized testing. The OAG's performance audit focussed on two directives: inclusive schooling, and Aboriginal Language and Culture-Based Education (ALCBE). Inclusive schooling requires education councils to respond to the needs of individual students to develop individual learning plans when necessary. In 2006–2007, over 20% of students enrolled in grades one to nine were following such plans. The ALCBE directive requires education councils to provide students with school programs and learning environments that reflect, validate, and promote the community's language and culture. Education councils complied with the reporting requirements, but reports on activities were often too general to provide enough information for ECE to assess compliance.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 63 of the OAG Report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment should:

- follow up on corrective actions taken by education councils to address issues the Department has raised as a result of its monitoring of education directives;
- develop a strategy and timetable for formally assessing the success and continued relevance of education directives; and
- formally strengthen the reporting requirement for the Aboriginal Language and Culture-Based Education directive.

In its action plan, ECE acknowledges this finding and intends to strengthen its reporting requirements. The Directive on Student Assessment will be amended in time for the 2010-2011 school year. A policy review framework has been developed, a working group of departmental and education authority officials will be established to begin this work, and a schedule of reviews will be developed.

The ALCBE directive will be the first directive to be reviewed. ECE will undertake consultations with the education authorities during this fiscal year to determine how additional jurisdictional information could be provided in future editions of *Towards Excellence*.

The OAG found that the Department has improved its reporting on student performance over the last four years but the OAG warns that it is important for ECE to inform the Legislative Assembly and the public about its results, including the program impact on Aboriginal peoples.

Currently, ECE reports mainly by community size. It does not break down results into categories by education council, ethnicity or gender. Residents of a particular region cannot compare the performance of their students with those of other regions in the Northwest Territories. The OAG notes that such comparisons could lead to sharing of good school practices.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 66 of the OAG Report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment should:

- ensure that key performance indicators are publicly reported to the Legislative Assembly according to major categories such as education council, ethnicity, and gender; and
- report these key performance indicators in its *Towards Excellence* reports.

In its action plan, ECE reports that it will undertake consultations with the education authorities during this fiscal year to determine how additional jurisdictional information could be provided in future editions of *Towards Excellence*.

SCOGO observes that the cost of the two initiatives the OAG reviewed, inclusive schooling and ALCBE, was \$33 million in 2008 and yet there was no evidence that these programs had improved student performance. In fact, there is evidence of a downward trend in performance in (1) non-Aboriginal secondary school graduation; (2) grades three, six and nine language arts, and (3) grade three math. The Committee is pleased that ECE is reviewing the ALCBE directive and, in addition, sees the need for a review of inclusive schooling.

Although SCOGO agrees with the recommendation to publicly report key indicator information by education council, ethnicity and gender, the Committee accepts that there may be a need to address individual privacy by aggregating data when necessary.

Recommendation 3

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment review both the Aboriginal Language and Culture-Based Education directive and the inclusive schooling directive in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of both initiatives.

Recommendation 4

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment report performance according to major categories such as education council, ethnicity, and gender, with a recognition that it may sometimes be necessary to aggregate data to protect the privacy of individual students.

ADULT AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Forty per cent of Aurora College students are enrolled in the Adult Literacy and Basic Education Program (ALBE). ALBE has had consistent enrolment numbers for four years but during the same time period the total of all Aurora College graduates decreased by about 33%. This is attributed mainly to the discontinuation of welding and other apprenticeship programs.

The OAG identified gaps in the measurement of the performance of adult and post-secondary students.

The Auditor General found that ECE and Aurora College have reasonable performance indicators including rates of completion of certificate, diploma, and degree programs; graduate satisfaction with the quality of the College programs; and graduate employment six months after graduation. However, the OAG observed that ECE has not developed a strategy to achieve established targets. Further, the method of determining program completion rates is inaccurate. Rates are expressed as a percentage of students in their final year and thus there is no accounting for students who leave programs earlier.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 67 of the OAG Report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment should:

- work with Aurora College to establish consistent performance indicators and targets for adult and post-secondary education; and
- clarify how it intends to achieve its performance targets.

In its action plan to address the OAG's recommendations, ECE has committed to working with Aurora College in 2010 to develop an accountability framework that will support the establishment of consistent performance indicators and targets. Annual and multi-year program plans will be adapted to reflect these indicators and targets.

The OAG observed progress in identifying labour market needs and coordinating training.

The OAG expected ECE and Aurora College to assess territory-wide labour market needs to inform its training delivery decisions but no such process happened. To its credit, ECE used many methods: partnering with industries such as mining to produce sector-specific needs assessments; working with the Bureau of Statistics to develop comprehensive territorial labour market reviews on employment and unemployment trends; hosting forums and promoting the establishment of regional training coordination committees. Still, the OAG observed that the market needs of some key sectors and regions were neglected.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 84 of the OAG Report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment should:

- complete an assessment of labour market needs for all major sectors and regions; and
- use the assessment information to determine how best to design and deliver its programs to help fill gaps in the labour market.

In its response to the OAG, ECE reports it is working on a Labour Force Development Framework that will address training needs and coordination through the development and implementation of specific strategies to support the NWT labour market based on the assessment of needs.

The OAG advises that the Department's monitoring and assessment of its post-secondary education and training programs is incomplete.

ECE and Aurora College regularly collect data on the delivery and results of education and training but there are significant gaps. There is no tracking of adults who complete part of their training at the College and then transfer to

programs at southern institutions, or take training provided through partnerships with organizations such as the Mine Training Society. ECE:

- does not analyze data collected to improve program delivery;
- does not regularly evaluate the results of existing training programs; and
- cannot demonstrate what progress has been made or if existing training programs should be maintained, modified, or new ones considered.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 87 of the OAG report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment, in consultation with Aurora College, should:

- identify and collect relevant data on the results of training delivered through partnerships;
- undertake a more rigorous analysis of the data in order to assess the success of adult and post-secondary education and training programs; and
- undertake improvements to these programs.

ECE reports that once the accountability framework is developed in 2010, it will work with Aurora College to improve the monitoring, reporting and review processes for training programs, including those undertaken through partnerships.

The OAG advises that monitoring of compliance with the Adult Literacy and Basic Education directive is inadequate.

Adult Literacy and Basic Education (ALBE) is an education directive meant to increase low literacy rates among adults in the territory. Aurora College delivers ALBE programming ranging from basic literacy to Grade 12-level courses at all campuses and community learning centres. Reporting requirements for the College include basic information on ALBE programs, including numbers of individuals enrolled and results achieved. However, Aurora College provides limited detail and incomplete information, making it difficult for ECE to assess compliance with the directive.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 92 of the OAG report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment, in collaboration with Aurora College, should:

- establish key performance indicators and targets for expected results for Adult Literacy and Basic Education programs;
- review the reporting requirements of the Adult Literacy and Basic Education directive to ensure that key information is being collected;
- ensure these reporting requirements are coordinated with those of the literacy strategy;
- monitor adherence to these reporting requirements, and take formal action in cases where requirements are not met; and
- periodically assess gaps in performance, identify root causes, and establish detailed action plans to help close the gaps.

ECE's action plan indicates it will be conducting a formal evaluation of the Adult Literacy and Basic Education program in 2010. Results will be used to determine further actions related to this recommendation.

The Department is developing a tool to track planning, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of advanced education activities, and a Youth Literacy Gap analysis is being completed.

The OAG states that reporting on the post-secondary system is not timely.

Four years has passed since the post-secondary version of *Towards Excellence* was issued with details on performance indicators like enrolments and number of graduates by program.

Reporting makes ECE and Aurora College accountable to the public for student performance.

OAG Recommendation (paragraph 96 of the OAG report)

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment, in collaboration with Aurora College, should:

- review the performance indicators it reports publicly; and
- publish these indicators regularly.

ECE has stated it will work with Aurora College to review performance indicators and to coordinate the publishing of reports.

SCOGO looks forward to the tabling of the 2009 *Towards Excellence* report.

Recommendation 5

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that when the Department of Education, Culture and Employment plans and designs a new program or initiative, it identifies the means to be used to assess, measure, and report on the program or initiative.

CONCLUSION

Having completed its review of the report of the Auditor General on education in the Northwest Territories, the Committee acknowledges the commitment and dedication of education councils and Aurora College. It recognizes the many challenges facing ECE and suggests that it is not a matter of offering more programs, but a matter of focusing on improving delivery of basic programming as well as improving delivery of programs that prove effective in achieving higher student success rates. Members are hopeful that the organization is willing to rally its staff to address these challenges. If these challenges are not addressed, children, youth and adults in our education system will suffer the consequences.

Recommendation 6

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment provide periodic updates on the progress of the implementation of the Auditor General's recommendations through status reports to the Standing Committee on Social Programs.

Recommendation 7

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a comprehensive response to this report within 120 days.