

Executive Summary: Final Report of the Review of Inclusive and Special Education

Background

The Review of Inclusive and Special Education was commissioned by the Government of Yukon in response to recommendations made by the Auditor General of Canada in 2019 regarding inclusive and special education in Yukon. It was released on June 1, 2021, and took 18 months to complete. The Review was designed to evaluate and examine whether the Department of Education's approach to inclusive and special education is working; whether the services and supports are having the desired effect; whether sufficient resources are in place to support inclusive education; how to prioritize students for specialized assessments; how to assess and track specialist recommendations; and how to track teachers' use of recommended strategies.

Process

Dr. Nikki Yee was hired as a consultant to lead the review of inclusive and special education programs in Yukon on behalf of the Department of Education.

She reviewed the department's current practices, procedures and legislated responsibilities, scanned other jurisdictions, and identified barriers and opportunities by gathering experiences, stories and perspectives from across the K-12 education system in Yukon.

Throughout the review, Dr. Yee estimates that she connected with 300-500 people, reviewed notes from 31 focus groups and 26 individual interviews, and read 73 written submissions and more than 500 stories and comments shared through the online tool developed for the Review.

Dr. Yee's intention is that the findings and recommendations in the final report will be used as a 'springboard' to create solutions that are guided by Yukoners, and are for the good of all Yukon students.

Key Findings

The primary finding of the review is that, in many cases, students' learning needs are not being met, with devastating consequences. Specific findings are that:

- The majority of respondents struggle to identify the Department of Education's vision of inclusive education, and do not believe diverse students are being adequately supported in schools.
- Discriminatory, racist and colonial narratives and structures embedded in the Yukon education system, are made worse by the presence of destabilizing political forces.
- Services and supports are largely reinforcing inequity within the system.
- Systems and structures, such as School-Based Teams, are inconsistently implemented, and may be limiting students' access to adequate supports.
- Staff lack specialized training and expertise.
- Many concerns with the system are cited by respondents, such as:
 - toxic work environments, including central administration
 - examples of racism and deliberate discrimination
 - needs of students being ignored
 - limited access to culture and language

- miserably inadequate support for students
- wasted resources
- inadequate assessment of students' needs
- poor communication with parents
- deteriorating public confidence

Recommendations

Review Response to Intervention Model

The report recommends a review of the Department of Education's Response to Intervention model, which is the current model that guides the approach to inclusive and special education. The Review found that the Response to Intervention model focuses almost entirely on academic needs, rather than the inclusion of holistic supports. Further, it does not consider environmental factors that may pose challenges for students, and does not highlight student strengths as a way to build skills and positive relationships.

The final report recommends focusing on creating inclusive environments. All students - including those with special education needs - reach their maximum potential when they feel a sense of belonging and safety. In an inclusive education system, students are not expected to fit into the education program, rather educators are expected to shape education programs around students' learning needs.

Develop a definition and vision of inclusive and special education

The Review highlights the need to develop a Yukon definition and vision of inclusive and special education that emphasizes the perspectives of people with exceptionalities, Yukon First Nations, and rural and urban contexts. It noted the need to consider how Yukon First Nations' views about inclusion and special education in which disabilities and other differences are considered a part of normal diversity, and how inclusive and special education systems can be reimagined in partnership with them. Our inclusive and special education programs will be much more effective when they are co-constructed, emerge from local contexts, and are surrounded by the supports available in particular places.

Leverage educational expertise

The Review acknowledges that we need to leverage educational expertise both within and beyond the Yukon education system, including expertise in Yukon First Nations' ways of knowing, doing and being, so that all educators are better prepared to meet diverse student needs. This includes providing more professional development opportunities for educators to explore high-quality teaching approaches that can support students with exceptional learning needs and benefit all students.

Reframing inclusive and special education through stories

The final report suggests that one way to begin reframing inclusive and special education is to build on the power of stories using transformative listening. It is recommended that the Department of Education, Yukon First Nations, and partners in education consider how to open the opportunity for people to share their stories more publicly, in diverse settings, where storytellers and listeners can enter into relationship

with one another.

Building relationships

Closer collaborations and relationships between Yukon First Nations, education partners and all levels of the department including schools, educational consultants, Central Administration could be one way of creating respectful and equitable relationships that open opportunities for positive change.

Next Steps:

Moving forward, Dr. Yee indicates that there are some inherent strengths to build on, including pockets of highly effective programs and a strong desire to collaborate and coordinate services.

She notes that a Community of Inquiry may be needed to establish localized criteria to prioritize assessments. An “Inquiry” approach is where a problem is examined, one or more actions are taken in response, and the effects of those actions are measured.

A Community of Inquiry in the Yukon context represents the Government of Yukon Department of Education, First Nations Governments, and other education partners that engage in collaborative research about inclusive and special education in Yukon.

There are several goals that are outlined in the report that can lead to specific action items:

Short-term:

- Explore extending existing outdoor, experiential learning programs, cultural camps, and other hands-on activities as a way of teaching students with learning challenges.
- Strike partnerships with Yukon First Nations, and other government departments to create coordinated and holistic supports for students and families.
- Explore professional, collaborative development opportunities where educators can learn how to structure learning options that will benefit students with exceptional learning needs.
- Explore exemplary practices in Yukon schools or other educational settings.
- Establish norms for engaging across differences and use these to shape the workplace culture within the Department of Education.
- Engage with Yukon First Nation Governments and education partners to co-construct a vision of inclusive and special education.
- Specifically look at how funding allocations might support inclusivity in intersectional ways (e.g., Aboriginal language programs or cultural activities as providing key supports for students with exceptional needs).
- Use transformative listening to engage with diverse ideas, perspectives, and cultural worldviews.
- Explore ways of creating distance between Central Administration and political influences.

Medium-term:

- Find or develop software that allows for communication across student support team members.
- Implement consistent competency-based IEP templates that incorporate student voice, and create accountability structures.
- Create opportunities for student support teams to build up and coordinate supports.

- Create a specific focus and provide professional development over an extended period of time.
- Support creative teacher mentorship opportunities.
- Compile and collaboratively review policies that relate to inclusive and special education.
- Coordinate policies to facilitate Yukon's vision of inclusive and special education.
- Hold Educational Summits to cultivate connections across diversity.

Long-term:

- Provide culturally-appropriate mental health counselling services, directly to students and families, and in support of teachers' instructional efforts.
- Prioritize based not on student numbers, but on how communities are experiencing trauma.
- Hire Elders or knowledge keepers to work full-time in schools.
- Develop and maintain focused professional development for educators at all levels – from EAs to Student Support Consultants.
- Create or partner with a learning institution to provide professional development courses.
- Clearly and transparently communicate policies to families and communities.
- Create meaningful relationships among diverse peoples to co-construct curricula and teaching activities.