

**Aboriginal Student Achievement (ASA) Initiative  
Minister's and Community Education Forums  
Summary Report**

**Education, Culture and Employment,  
Yellowknife**

August 2011

## **Aboriginal Student Achievement in the NWT**

Aboriginal youth are the fastest growing segment of the north's population. They have a key role to play in the NWT's future. They have the responsibility to carry on Aboriginal languages and traditions, and to have the skills and knowledge to shape northern society in ways that are meaningful to northerners, Canadians, and others around the globe. Aboriginal youth must become 'strong like two people'.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of NWT students in kindergarten to grade 12 are Aboriginal. More Aboriginal students are staying in school longer and more are graduating from high school than in previous decades. In 1998, 20% of NWT high school graduates were Aboriginal students. In 2010, 44% of NWT high school graduates were Aboriginal students.

While education levels are improving, Alberta Achievement Tests (AATs) show significant educational achievement gaps between Aboriginal and other students. AATs show that 55% of Aboriginal students in Grade three in the NWT are achieving an acceptable standard in English Language Arts compared to 85% of other students. The gap widens as students progress through school. In Grade nine, 33% of Aboriginal students are achieving the acceptable level in English Language Arts compared to 81% of other students. These AATs results correlate to graduation rates. In 2010, only 44% of Aboriginal students in the NWT graduated from high school compared to 70% of other students.

There are several factors that contribute to education achievement differences between Aboriginal and other students. Missing school is a main factor. It is estimated that the average Aboriginal student in the NWT misses over 40 days of school each year. This means that by the end of Grade nine the average NWT Aboriginal student has missed two years of schooling. This is more than twice the amount of schooling that other students miss.

## **Eliminating the Gap in Student Achievement**

In keeping with the 16th Legislative Assembly's goal of "healthy, educated people and a strong, independent north built on partnerships discussed in the *Northerners Working Together* document, the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) directed the Department to focus on eliminating the educational achievement gap between Aboriginal and other students.

Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) is just one of the players responsible for ensuring that Aboriginal youth have the skills and knowledge needed for the future. In 2009/10, ECE held a series of partners' workshops to examine best practices and approaches to improving Aboriginal student achievement. The Aboriginal Student Achievement Working Group (ASAWG) evolved from these workshops. The ASAWG was established to develop a draft NWT-wide education plan to eliminate the education gap between Aboriginal and other students.

The ASAWG had membership from four Aboriginal organizations, a voluntary sector literacy organization, the NWT Teachers' Association, school boards, and Aurora College, as well as three GNWT departments. Industry representatives also participated in ASAWG meetings. The ASAWG had six meetings between April 2009 and April 2010. It examined key issues and promising practices for improving Aboriginal student achievement and launched pilot projects in each region and a territorial-wide communication strategy to encourage student achievement. ASAWG members also presented priorities to their constituents and members. The ASAWG's work resulted in a discussion paper detailing key issues and priorities for further consultation.

## **Aboriginal Student Achievement Priorities**

The discussion paper proposed four priorities for eliminating the achievement gap between Aboriginal and other students.

### **1. Early Childhood and Childcare:**

- Quality school-based early childhood and childcare that reflects the local community and culture and ensures competitive staff wages and benefits.
- Full day compulsory kindergarten for all five year olds and optional junior kindergarten for four year olds.
- Help for parents to learn essential parenting skills.
- Partnering with NWT Health and Social Services for early childhood assessments, interventions, and special needs supports.

### **2. Student and Family Support:**

- Positive student-home-school relationships built through counselling, teacher orientations, interagency training and involvement, and community support.
- In-school, alternative, and workplace programs and Aurora College-school and community partnerships to help youth complete their education.
- Resources and programs for successful transitions and to overcome barriers to success such as homework, tutoring, and library programs.

### **3. Aboriginal Language Curriculum and Resource Development:**

- An Aboriginal language curriculum and resources in place by 2013.
- Stronger Aurora College Aboriginal language instructors' program with relationships with the Teacher Education Program (TEP), Teaching and Learning Centres (TLCs), mentors, and community members.

### **4. Literacy:**

- More coordination and collaboration, literacy resource centres, and expanded literacy initiatives to improve literacy skills.

The discussion paper was the focus of discussion at the three-day Minister's Forums and Community Caucus meetings held in each of the six NWT regions between September 2010 and May 2011. Summary reports on regional forums are available under separate cover.

## **The Minister’s Forums and Community Caucus Meetings**

The Department of Education, Culture, and Employment (ECE) and education boards collaborated to organize education forums in each NWT region. The forums were intended to debate about the priorities advanced in the discussion paper and encourage partnerships to support Aboriginal student achievement.

Each regional education forum brought together 60-80 people with the will and power to mobilize action to improve student achievement. The forums were attended by youth, elders, community and regional education and political leaders, and educators and administrators.

The three-day forums had two main segments:

1. A two-day Minister’s forum which was designed to review and debate the discussion paper, and
2. A one-day Community forum designed to start developing community plans to address issues impacting Aboriginal student achievement.

The forums were designed to encourage interaction, meaningful discussion, and collaboration. In most regions, the forums were the first time that community and regional education and political leaders had sat together for an extended period of time to talk about education. The forums were also the first time that youth expressed their views on education to their leaders and elders. The forums resulted in extensive and thoughtful conversations, new relationships, and a strong commitment to education and securing a hopeful future for northern youth.

The Minister of Education, Culture and Employment was active throughout the forums, offering opening and closing remarks, observing small group discussions, and interacting with forum participants. Similarly, regional political and education leaders offered opening and closing comments and participated in forum discussions. Department staff recorded small group and community discussions. Aboriginal language interpretation was provided at all forums except in the Beaufort-Delta where interpretation services were not requested.

A highlight of the two-day Minister’s forums in each region was an evening feast followed by a drum dance or music and dance featuring local performers. Highlights of the one-day Community caucus meetings were keynote addresses by local role models and leaders, and the powerful sharing circles that closed the forums.

Each forum was filmed by a group of regional students working with ECE’s communication staff and technicians from the Western Arctic Moving Picture (WAMP) Society. The videos produced by the students were innovative and insightful. Students from throughout each region also contributed other creative videos, artwork, and musical demonstrations for display or presentation at the forums.

## **Messages from Keynote Speakers**

Each community forum was informed by keynote addresses from local role models and leaders. Their messages set the tone for developing community plans to support Aboriginal student achievement. Keynote messages are included in each regional forum report and summarized below.

### Sahtu Forums

- **Ethel Blondin-Andrew**, a well respected educator, legislator and Dene leader, explained that expectations are important for children’s success. “Many of us are afraid to expect anything of our children. (But) if we don’t expect anything, we don’t get anything.” She also said that the Dene “can do just as well as anyone else. We aren’t any less than others... We need to find happiness and thrive. If we could find happiness, we could give ourselves a break from the problems that surround us.”
- **Terry Fortin**, a Métis education consultant from Alberta, said that if a child knows that someone loves them unconditionally, he/she can do anything. To make a difference in education, political leaders need to be servant leaders who look into the future, take a stand on education, and have strong relationships with educators. He said that taking action on education is about taking responsibility and adopting a ‘no blame’ approach, avoiding being a victim to government money, and focusing on one or two doable actions. He said that culture and language are good ways to support student success. “Don’t be afraid to move the schools to the land.”

### Tłıchǫ Forums

- **Jim Martin**, a long time educator and CEO of the Tłıchǫ Community Services Agency (TCSA), described the past 30 years of work on education in the region as innovative, creative, and trail-blazing. The region’s work was guided by Chief Jimmy Bruneau’s vision of education in two cultures. This vision inspired community and regional control of education and the integration of education, health, and social services. The Tłıchǫ’s work in education has been honoured by the United Nations. This shows that integration is a good model to respond to human issues, especially language and culture, in the right way. He urged more emphasis on bringing peoples’ assets and strengths into the schools and making sure that children see themselves in the programs and services.

### Dehcho Forums

- **Margaret Thom**, a respected Dene educator, elder and community leader, explained that the life journey of the Dene was planned by those who came before. She said that although this journey was interrupted by residential schools, “we must move forward and get back on this trail” and the leaders must walk beside us. She said that we all have a responsibility to help our youth to make the connections they want so much, and to walk with dignity and respect, as the Dene have always done. She described the many successes and the challenges that the Deh G’ah School in Fort Providence has in supporting students to make strong connections with themselves, their community, culture, language and environment. “We need to listen to and to love our children

unconditionally. We need to say and speak what is in our hearts and teach our children the culture and language and about Dene spirituality. Our culture and language are the roots of who we are and where we are going. Our spirituality helps us develop as people and to live with respect and dignity. Our commitment to our children needs to be clear and strong.”

### Yellowknife, Ndilo, and Dettah Forums

- Long time Dene leader **Bill Erasmus**, National Chief of the Dene Nation, spoke of the colonial legacy of powerlessness and the self-governance efforts that have sought to restore power among the Dene. He said that it is important for everyone to understand the history of education in the north and to move forward with a common understanding. It is necessary to demonstrate commitment to education in the home, the school, community, and government policy. It is also important for communities and families to take control of education so “that Aboriginal people can see themselves in the education system.” National Chief Erasmus also spoke about the importance of the parents in providing a healthy living environment for their children.

### South Slave Forums

- **Mattie McNeill**, a long time Dene educator, reflecting on her long history of learning and teaching, said that student success is not just about overcoming barriers but about power. Power takes many forms and works in many different ways. We always have to challenge ourselves to be aware of power and how it circulates. We need to understand who has power, the kind of power they have, and how they got and use their power. “As Aboriginal people, we believe that education institutions have all the power and we don’t have any.” But there are many opportunities to take, shift, and share power. The real challenge is to take ownership. “Instead of saying ‘the school has to...’, we should be saying ‘we have to...’ or ‘I have to...’ Every time we say ‘the school has to ...’, we are giving power to the school.” “Dene are the only people who can teach Dene to be Dene.” We always need to be aware of our power, and recognize the power of the people.

### Beaufort-Delta Forums

- **Alex Illasiak**, a long time education leader, told the story of his education journey that took him from residential school in Aklavik to high school in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario to college in Calgary to DEA Chair in Aklavik. Though he excelled throughout his education and life journey, he lost his identity as an Inuk. He said that residential schools were a negative attempt to wipe out Aboriginal culture, beliefs, and language. “We are in the process of reversing these trends. We can be optimistic that we can make a difference given that the top people in ECE are Aboriginal people. We need to be conscious that we are working for the health and well-being of our children now and six generations from now. We can be hopeful that future generations will make it right.”
- **Sarah Jerome**, NWT Language Commissioner, educator and long-time language activist, described the impacts of attending residential school. She said that abandonment, being left without feelings, voice, or self-esteem, and feeling of shame about culture and identity are significant impacts that are still felt today. She learned through her work in education that Aboriginal people who walk in both worlds are very smart people even though “many of us always put ourselves down.” She wants the community to be more involved in education, a

culture-based curriculum to be the norm in all schools, and for all educators to learn where children are coming from. “We all need to be in this together.”

## Regional Views on Aboriginal Student Achievement Priorities

Detailed summaries of regional discussions of the four Aboriginal Student Achievement Initiative priorities are available under separate cover. These discussions are summarized below.

### Priority 1: Early Childhood and Childcare

<b>Quality early childhood and childcare reflecting local community and culture</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality school early childhood and childcare programs that meet the child’s development needs and reflect the local community and culture.</li> <li>• Schools with quality early childhood and childcare facilities that meet health and nutrition, sanitation, safety, and physical space standards and reflect the local community and culture.</li> <li>• Competitive wages and benefits for trained early childhood and childcare staff, working in school and community-based facilities.</li> </ul>
<b>Kindergarten</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-day compulsory kindergarten for all five year old children in the NWT.</li> <li>• Optional junior kindergarten for four year old children in the NWT.</li> </ul>
<b>Helping parents</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents learning essential parenting skills through programs that teach and support good nutrition, literacy, self-esteem, and child development.</li> </ul>
<b>Partnering with Health and Social Services</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of all babies and children six years of age and younger.</li> <li>• All babies and children six years of age and younger meeting health and developmental benchmarks.</li> <li>• All young children receiving interventions when required.</li> <li>• All children with special needs receiving the support they need.</li> </ul>

Success in the early years establishes a strong foundation for lifelong achievement. In all regional forums, there was consensus that quality early childhood and childcare programs are crucial to success in the early years but the most important factor is the quality of care and nurturing in the home. “Parents are the first teachers of their children” and the family, particularly elders, is the main teacher of language and

culture. The family has primary responsibility for ensuring that children have good nutrition, proper sleep, and feel loved, safe, and protected. Families are responsible for ensuring that children have positive interactions with others, are exposed to good role models, are supported in learning new things, and are engaged in dialogue with others. All family members have a role to play in supporting early successes. Community leaders and organizations can support families to achieve safe, stable, and nurturing environments. They can also advocate for quality early childhood and childcare programs that work closely with, and support young children within the family environment. Awareness and education campaigns targeting parents of young children, are needed to promote understanding of the importance of early childhood development. “Families need to know about brain development and the critical period between zero and three.” The Grade 7-12 school health curriculum should also include information on early childhood and parenting.

Early childhood and childcare programs should replicate safe, healthy, nurturing home environments. There should be consistently high quality early childhood and childcare services, including prenatal services, available to all NWT families. These programs and services should meet territorial standards, be responsive to local needs, and have the capacity to meet local demands. Families should feel comfortable using these programs. Currently, there is uneven access to quality early childhood programs in too many NWT communities. “There should never be a waiting list for any child needing early childhood programming.”

Participants in every region said all early childhood and childcare programs need to have:

- Well-trained, well-paid early childhood staff.
- Appropriate facilities and resources.
- Culturally appropriate programming.
- Aboriginal language immersion opportunities.
- Strong relationships with the home, school, and community.

Early childhood and childcare programs must be well-connected to health and social services agencies on matters of assessment and interventions. Programs should have regular access to trained personnel who are competent at assessment and recommending and monitoring interventions. Assessment/intervention personnel need to work closely with parents, the early childhood program, and the school. Early assessment, interventions, and ongoing monitoring are ways to prevent high rates of development delay and disability among children in the NWT.

In both the South Slave and Dehcho forums, participants agreed that “many parents in the NWT are likely unaware that kindergarten for five year olds is optional and/or that DEA/DECs have the option of offering full or half day kindergarten.” Overall, forum participants were supportive of the idea of mandatory kindergarten for all five year olds and an optional structured no-cost early childhood program (junior kindergarten) for all four year olds. Participants in all regions identified the many contributions that these programs can make to early childhood and lifelong successes if they are properly staffed and resourced and follow a culturally-relevant curriculum. Staffing, funding, and curriculum were identified as significant concerns that must be addressed prior to making a commitment to programming for four and five year olds.

In all forums, there were concerns raised about the impact of mandatory kindergarten programming on young children who are not ready for full-day programming and those who live in stimulating home environments with strong bonds to family members. Forum participants also discussed the impact of programming for four and five year olds on parent’s ability to fulfill their responsibilities. They also questioned the consequences of not sending young children to mandatory programs. Forum participants also raised questions about the impact of programming for four and five year olds on existing early childhood programs and the K-12 program, especially if the programs are the responsibility of the school. Nevertheless, forum participants agreed that locating a kindergarten in the community school is appropriate if space is available. They were less sure that the school was an appropriate location for a program for four year olds.

Forum participants recommended more discussion of the purpose of the kindergarten proposals and whether kindergarten “is meeting the needs of Aboriginal children and founded on Aboriginal perspectives, values, and culture.” They suggested that discussions consider the benefits of full versus half-day programming, graduated rather than mandatory attendance, ways to ensure that all NWT children have access to high quality, stimulating early childhood programs, and ways to honour the primary role of parents in supporting early successes.

## Priority 2: Student and Family Support

<b>Positive student-home-school relationships.</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trained counsellors in all NWT schools with more than 50 students.</li> <li>• Trained district-based counsellors to work with small schools with less than 50 students.</li> <li>• School staff training and cultural orientation to promote understanding of local community and culture.</li> <li>• Student counselling and interventions that reflect the local community and culture.</li> <li>• More interagency training to involve and support students in and outside the school.</li> <li>• More community support for students attending school regularly and achieving academic success.</li> </ul>
<b>Helping NWT youth complete their education</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternative education programs accessible to more NWT youth.</li> <li>• Stronger community-based partnerships among community schools and Aurora College.</li> <li>• More programs to support youth to attend school regularly, stay in school, and graduate from Grade 12.</li> <li>• More programs that promote positive self-esteem among youth.</li> <li>• School and workplace programs to promote the school-work connection.</li> </ul>

<b>Positive student-home-school relationships.</b>
<b>Providing tools to help kids progress through schooling</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources for children and youth to make successful transition from:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ home to pre-school,</li> <li>○ pre-school to school,</li> <li>○ elementary school to junior high,</li> <li>○ junior high to high school, and</li> <li>○ high school to postsecondary school.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• More community belonging and support to help students make transitions.</li> <li>• A plan to overcome barriers like childcare and financial assistance that prevent youth from staying in, and succeeding in school.</li> <li>• More alternative education programs accessible to youth.</li> <li>• Homework programs, tutoring programs, and library support to help students progress in school.</li> </ul>

In each regional forum, a host of student and family supports were identified to address the numerous interrelated barriers and challenges that undermine recognition, value, respect, and support for children and youth in the home, school, and community. Most often the main barriers that diminish the valued place of young people:

- in the home relate to basic needs – lack of proper care, sleep, nutrition, structure and safety – and lack of understanding and support for education.
- in the school relate to absenteeism, poor student-teacher and home-school relationships, and demands on, and the skills of, school staff.
- in the community relate to negative peer pressures, lack of after school tutoring and recreational programs, and inadequate social services.

While bullying in and outside the school was identified as a significant barrier to success, participants identified it as a particularly serious issue in the Beaufort Delta. Similarly, racism was identified as a challenge but it was a significant concern in larger centres such as Fort Simpson, Hay River, and Yellowknife.

Related to these two barriers were issues associated with the lack of Aboriginal identity and skills, and self-esteem. Lack of Aboriginal identity was a barrier to school success identified in all regions but was a particular concern in the Sahtu. “Many Aboriginal children/ students do not know who they are as an Aboriginal person. They are not strong in their Aboriginal language and cultural ways, history, or identity. They do not have relationships with the land.” In all regions, multi-level classrooms and the inclusive schooling policy were often identified as factors that prevent school success.

Several initiatives would go a long way to support students and their families to deal with the barriers and challenges that prevent school success. Inherent in these initiatives must be an attitude that responsibility for school success is shared by all parties and that no single party is to blame for the lack of student success. Initiatives should also recognize and celebrate student, home, and family strengths and successes. “We need to recognize, support, and appreciate families who are succeeding.” Most frequently suggested initiatives were:

- Family-specific interventions to address basic social and economic needs.
- Serious and sustained efforts to build school-home relationships that are founded on trust, respect, and clear, honest information.
- Plain language communications about student, parent, and school expectations, roles, responsibilities, and pathways to a high school diploma.
- Innovative and culturally relevant school programming based on Aboriginal perspectives, values, and strengths.
- Solution focused community responses to deal with the health, social, and economic issues that impact on student successes such as poverty, substance (ab)use, cultural disconnection, and unemployment.

“Children need to see the family, school, and community working together and having expectations for their success.”

Efforts are required to better support student transitions to postsecondary education. In addition to addressing issues associated with inclusive schooling which may impact the foundational skills of students, forum participants identified the need to improve working relationships with Aurora College. These concerns were a particular focus in the Beaufort Delta. In that region, it was suggested that Aurora College Developmental Studies/ ALBE program be added to K-12 programming as a preparation/transition program to get students ready for postsecondary education.

### Priority 3: Aboriginal Language Curriculum and Resource Development

<b>Develop Aboriginal language curriculum and resources</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An Aboriginal language curriculum by 2013 to revitalize, promote, and sustain NWT Aboriginal languages.</li> <li>• Learning from Aboriginal people elsewhere about Aboriginal language curriculum development.</li> <li>• Participation from Aboriginal language curriculum resource people.</li> </ul>
<b>NWT Aboriginal language instructors, resources, and mentors</b>
<p><b>Expected Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger Aurora College NWT Aboriginal language instructors’ program.</li> <li>• Well-trained Aboriginal teachers able to teach the NWT Aboriginal language curriculum.</li> <li>• Relationships between the Teacher Education Program and the Teaching and Learning Centres for the development of Aboriginal language teacher resource materials.</li> <li>• A mentorship program to help support Aboriginal language teachers in their work.</li> <li>• Aboriginal parents and community members engaged in the school as speakers and carriers of their language and culture.</li> </ul>

The health of Aboriginal languages throughout the NWT was a central concern in all regional forums. Leaders were particularly passionate about language issues. “If we lose the language, we lose our culture and identity.” Forum participants made strong connections between Aboriginal language fluency, strong cultural knowledge, self-

esteem, identity, and successes in school and in life. They also made comments about the difference between the impacts of artificial or unauthentic teachings that devalue and marginalize languages and culture, and respectful, relevant, and meaningful teachings that help students make the connections they seek.

Forum discussions on language and culture elicited strong responses from all participants. Some participants stated that bold or even drastic actions need to be taken to ensure that students are fluent in their Aboriginal language and strong in their culture. They advocated for:

- Language laws that make Aboriginal languages the official language in the community/region.
- Fluency in an Aboriginal language as a requirement of high school graduation.
- Year-round school schedules, modular approaches, and sequential credits to provide more flexibility so language and cultural programs do not compete with the regular school program.
- Abandoning the current school curriculum to evolve a curriculum that is truly based on Aboriginal perspectives, “integrates everything,” and meets the needs of the child, family, and community.
- Homes and communities taking ownership of language and cultural programs and creating immersion environments.
- “Closing the school for a couple of years” and “going back to the land to relearn language and culture.”

“In order for the language to survive, we need to give it the same relative importance as English.”

Tłıchǫ is the NWT’s strongest language in terms of usage yet people felt, “The Tłıchǫ is in a crisis with respect to the future of the language. It is urgent that something be done right away with the assets we have now.”

In all forums, participants advocated for a fundamental shift in attitude and practice in the home, school, and community environments to support language acquisition among children and youth. “The language must be used absolutely everywhere, everyday throughout the home, school, and community, from womb to tomb.” The active engagement of, and support for elders and other language-cultural holders, and immersion approaches were strongly recommended in all three environments. There was agreement that:

- Fluency begins in the home and it needs to be supported by the community, elders, and the school. This requires ‘buy-in’ that is achieved when everyone understands the value and benefits of Aboriginal language fluency and strong cultural knowledge. “It needs to be ‘cool’ so everyone wants to speak it!”
- Discussions based on solid evidence would help parents to understand that it is beneficial for children/youth to learn other languages as well as English.
- All early childhood and childcare programs serving Aboriginal populations should be immersion environments.
- Priority must be given to implementing immersion programming in K-5 where the majority of students have Aboriginal ancestry.

- Efforts need be made to develop a full K-12 Aboriginal language immersion program.
- An Aboriginal languages curriculum must be developed with a focus on reading, writing, and speaking. It should recognize each community’s use of the language (e.g. accommodate local dialects and practices). Language advocates tended to agree that a K-12 Aboriginal languages curriculum could be developed by 2013 if there is the will and resources to do so.
- The *Dene Kede* and *Inuqatigiit* curricula should be updated and have clear learning outcomes.
- Educators should be oriented to the culture and language and trained to consistently implement language and cultural curricula.

“Instructor and curriculum development should be an ongoing, cooperative enterprise between the community and school and recognize the particular circumstances in each community.”

“Children need to learn a sense of pride in being an Aboriginal person and pride in knowing and speaking the language.”

“We must convey to all Aboriginal children and youth, the power that they have as an Aboriginal individual and the power, the gift of knowing and speaking their first language.”

Support is needed to help the home, school, and community strengthen Aboriginal languages and ensure more culturally relevant learning environments. This requires:

- Meaningful and regular engagement of elders in classrooms and efforts to address barriers that keep elders out of the schools (e.g. lack of support, unclear or token roles/ responsibilities, confusion around Aboriginal language writing systems, and ‘claw back’ of pension earnings).
- Use of modern technologies to support language learning (e.g. phraselators, webcasts, on-line language lessons, and social media sites).
- In-depth on-the land and summer school-type immersion programs.
- Community-based language classes and language oriented activities that engage all members.
- More local and family history, traditions, and practices reflected in the home, school, and community.

Participants also suggested more focus on language within Aurora College’s Teacher Education Program (TEP) and more linkages between TEP and the Aboriginal Language Certificate Instructors Program (ALCIP).

#### **Priority 4: Literacy**

**Increase and improve literacy skills**

## Increase and improve literacy skills

### Expected Outcomes:

- A family literacy coordinator to support development of literacy skills with families of school aged children.
- Collaboration with literacy partners to evaluate and support family literacy activities.
- Literacy resource centres in all NWT communities.
- More school-aged children with access to the resources needed for their school courses.
- Expansion of current successful NWT literacy initiatives.
- More NWT students reading at or above their grade level according to Canadian literacy standards.

*Towards Literacy: A Strategy Framework – 2008-2010* (also the NWT Literacy Strategy) defines literacy as “the lifelong development of a broad range of skills in one or more of the NWT official languages for the purpose of expanding an individual’s potential for optimal health, personal success and positive participation in community wellness and development.” This definition recognizes that literacy is more than the core skills of reading and writing. Literacy is listening and learning from others, numeracy, oral communication, working with others, computer use, critical thinking, analytical skills, problem solving, decision making, planning, organizing, and finding information. Literacy skills are not just English or French language skills. They are also Aboriginal language skills. While the broad definition of literacy was discussed at the regional forums, the main focus was on reading.

In all forums, there was agreement that literacy skills are nurtured in positive, healthy, safe, and supportive environments that encourage and role model language learning and literacy. Nurturing home, school, and community environments need to understand the importance of strong literacy skills in all NWT official languages, and have resources to support literacy development. These resources are:

- Assessment and intervention services provided by speech/language, education psychologists, and counsellors.
- Early childhood programs that focus on early literacy.
- Community and education leaders who actively work to change attitudes and share responsibility for literacy within schools. “Teaching literacy is everyone’s responsibility, not just English or Aboriginal Language Arts teachers’ responsibility.”
- Educators including TEP graduates who are trained to teach reading and who receive ongoing professional development to be ‘reading teachers’ and role model literacy. “We need more consistent training opportunities rather than a half or full day training here and there.”
- Literacy experts/coaches and other school, community and home supports who implement reading recovery, implicit reading, guided reading, and other reading strategies across all learning activities “using materials that reflect local traditions, realities, and history.”
- Programs and services that provide opportunities to learn, practice, and demonstrate literacy skills for example, ‘reading buddies’, family literacy activities, storytelling, music and dance, and reading clubs.
- Literacy resource centres, community-school libraries, or family resource centres that are staffed and have appropriate resources to promote and

provide non-intimidating and culturally relevant literacy programming for all family members. Programs should address ‘screen time’ in the home and focus on positive and meaningful family interactions.

In addition to the above resources, forum participants said that early childhood and school-based programs need to be “totally honest with parents so that they are aware of their child’s strengths and challenges and what reading/writing level their child is at. Parents must be kept in the loop and aware of how their child is progressing.” Parents also need to understand the impact of absenteeism on literacy development and school successes. “Absenteeism has the greatest impact on students becoming capable readers by Grade 3.”

Even if parents have weak English/French or Aboriginal language literacy skills themselves, every parent can support and encourage their children’s literacy skills. Every parent “can have expectations of their children.”

Questions were raised in the forums about whether the NWT education system, communities, and families share mutual expectations of student success. Many participants felt that expectations in these three environments were often conflicted. Similarly, definitions of success differed. For many, student success is about being a capable, balanced and healthy individual who fits into and contributes to the needs of the community. For others, student success is academic achievement as measured by school tests.

In several regions, there was strong representation from participants to diminish curriculum expectations in K-Grade 3 to focus on developing strong literacy and numeracy skills in the early grades. “The amount of content in K-3 needs to be reviewed and perhaps diminished to increase the focus on developing strong literacy skills, reading, and problem solving in the early grades.” Several regions recommended that the inclusive schooling policy be reviewed to minimize negative impacts to school success. Most regions also advocated for changes to the school funding formula to support a stronger focus on literacy, including more:

- Individualized instruction,
- Student and teacher support personnel,
- Diverse and appealing programming, and
- Equitable large and small school learning opportunities.

## **Is the Discussion Paper on the Right Track?**

After debate on the four priorities contained in the discussion paper, participants in each regional forum considered whether the Plan is on the ‘right track’ to eliminating the gap between Aboriginal and other students. In every region, youth, elders, community and regional education and political leaders, and educators and administrators agreed with the overall direction set out in the Plan. They said that the four priorities are the ‘right ones’. By pursuing these priorities, forum participants were hopeful:

- That everyone can take ownership, share responsibility, and work together on education, and
- That positive changes can be made in the lives of Aboriginal students, their families, and communities.

A main issue raised about the discussion paper was a fear that the Plan would ‘sit on the shelf’ and not be implemented. Minister Lafferty and senior management with Education, Culture and Employment explained that the Plan will be brought to Aboriginal groups and tabled in the NWT Legislative Assembly. However, implementation of the Plan relies on everyone giving priority to the education of our children.

Forum participants agreed that it is important for everyone to take action and move the Plan forward. The plans developed by each community involved in the regional forums are an encouraging step toward eliminating the gap between Aboriginal and other students.

### **Community Actions to Support Student Success**

Each community developed a plan to support student success. The plans were developed in two separate community caucus sessions – one at the beginning of the Minister’s forum and one near the end of the Community forum. These sessions were structured in this manner to ensure that plans benefited from discussions about the four Aboriginal Student Achievement Initiative priorities and the thinking of keynote speakers.

Community plans are included in the regional reports, available under separate cover. Some themes in these plans are:

#### **Sahtu Region:**

- Improving attendance and performance.
- Expanding and strengthening home-school information, relationships, and involvement.
- Addressing school scheduling issues.
- Seeking additional funding and partnerships.
- Focusing on culturally-relevant programming.

#### **Tłıchǫ Region:**

- Providing counselling supports.
- Strengthening school-family-community relationships.
- Improving/expanding the high school program.
- Addressing urgent Tłıchǫ language issues.
- Improving understanding of the education system including inclusive schooling.

#### **Dehcho Region:**

- Building on strengths to support achievement.
- Empowering the DEA and involving others.
- Improving understanding of the education system including funding and the curriculum.
- Improving cultural, language, and literacy programs and supports.
- Facilitating transitions especially to larger communities and postsecondary education.
- Providing counselling supports.
- Improving attendance and reducing late arrivals.

**Yellowknife, Ndilo, and Dettah:**

- Sharing information.
- Taking an interagency approach and expanding local representation on decision making groups.
- Improving parent/family relationships and involvement.
- Improving attendance and student engagement.
- Improving Aboriginal language and cultural resources.
- Facilitating transitions.
- Addressing literacy among K-3 students.

**South Slave Region:**

- Improving community and home involvement, responsibility, and relationships.
- Diversifying learning opportunities.
- Strengthening student self-esteem and identity.
- Educating others about education.
- Addressing teachers' housing issues.
- Addressing early childhood, alternate education and counselling needs.
- Addressing funding issues.

**Beaufort-Delta Region:**

- Providing counselling and literacy supports.
- Improving relationships at all levels.
- Building student support networks and addressing bullying.
- Reducing absenteeism, improving performance, and increasing recognition of efforts.
- Improving cultural and community relevance of school programming.
- Dealing with teachers' housing.
- Expanding involvement in the DEA and interagency cooperation.
- Increasing awareness of small community needs.