



Education Renewal and Innovation Formative Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Government of Northwest Territories Gouvernement des Territoires du Nord-Ouest

Executive Summary

The Minister of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) is responsible for the Northwest Territories (NWT) education system. This system includes the Department of ECE and ten education bodies who deliver Junior Kindergarten to Grade (JK-12) instruction in 49 schools throughout the NWT's 33 communities. As of September 30 2018, there are 8,587 students and approximately 800 educators in the NWT.¹

Guiding the NWT education system is the *Education Renewal and Innovation Framework: Directions for Change* (ERI) (2013-2023). This document was published in October 2013 following years of extensive engagement, research, and planning. Its publication in 2013 was the beginning of a 10-year process intended to radically change the NWT's education system for the purpose of improving student experiences and outcomes, and to better support the development of NWT students as healthy, capable people.

ERI was developed as a response to the global recognition that education systems needed to change to meet the needs of 21st century learners. Focusing on a competency based model, ERI has eight Foundational Statements which guide Education Renewal.

1. Relationships
2. Ecological Understanding
3. Identity
4. Development of Self
5. Learning Together
6. Diversity
7. Strengths and Growth
8. Competencies

The Foundational Statements are reflected through the nine Commitments in the Framework, which guide the subsequent Action Plans.

1. School and Community Relationships
2. Student Wellness
3. Educator Wellness
4. Quality Education
5. Small Community
6. K-12 Curriculum
7. Assessment
8. Accountability
9. Aboriginal Government Partnerships

¹ The number of students references the NWT school enrolment (Head Counts) taken from NWT Bureau of Statistics.

The Education Renewal framework encompasses numerous actions and innovative approaches to improving equitable education access and student outcomes across the Northwest Territories.

The end of the 2018-2019 fiscal and school years marked the end of the first five years of the ERI Framework. At this halfway mark in ERI's lifespan, ECE wanted to review the work undertaken as part of ERI to see whether the department was on track to achieve the radical changes proposed and anticipated by ERI. To do this, the department undertook a formative evaluation of the ERI Framework. A formative evaluation aims to assess the early implementation and results of an initiative to help inform changes moving forward. It recognizes that an initiative or program, or in this case, a strategic framework document encompassing a vast array of programs and initiatives held together by guiding principles, may need to be adjusted or tweaked to meet its goals.

The ERI formative evaluation asked and answered three questions:

1. What are the ERI goals and commitments, and how are they measured?
2. How were the ERI commitments implemented?
3. What are the results of ERI initiatives and how are these initiatives contributing to ERI commitments?

With respect to question 1, the work of this evaluation included developing and revising, as well as reporting on key performance measures for the education system. The results of this work suggest continued inequity in key student outcomes in the NWT, including early childhood development and developmental readiness for school, grade progression and transition through the education system and especially once students enter high school, systemic assessment of learning results (Alberta Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams) and graduation rates. In all of these key performance measures, dramatic and alarming differences were observed between students in Yellowknife and regional centres (this category includes the communities of Inuvik, Fort Smith, and Hay River), and students in small communities. These results point clearly to the need to continue working to improve the relevancy and quality of the education program to small community schools. This finding informed Recommendation 1, which is related to prioritizing small community schools. All recommendations are found below in the Summary of Recommendations.

ECE can implement Recommendation 1 by first validating the results of this evaluation with Indigenous leadership and governments. Further work with Indigenous governments and leaders will include determining the unique and innovative ways to support NWT small community schools and students achieve their full potential, and the ways to deliver such supports. Co-creation and delivery of education programming and education support programming will be critical as NWT Indigenous governments draw down jurisdiction for education of their people through the continued implementation of land claims and self-government.

One opportunity for co-creation and delivery may be for ECE and communities to work through the community wellness plans. Over the past several years, all NWT communities have developed and renewed community-specific wellness plans in collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Services. Community wellness plans enable communities to plan for the wellness priorities that are locally relevant. In most cases, community wellness plans identify early childhood and education related priorities. Community wellness plans enable communities to receive block funding from the federal and

territorial governments towards community-driven priorities and programming. Many ERI initiatives, particularly those related to student health and wellbeing, have goals that overlap with community wellness plan priorities and programs. The student achievement and performance measure gaps also informed Recommendation 2, which speaks to funding the education system. Implementing Recommendation 2 will require creative and innovative thinking to stretch the funding that currently exists in the system. The approach identified above, or others identified in collaboration with Indigenous government partners, could help stretch existing education system funding.

Refocusing ERI to prioritize students in small communities by responding to community-specific education needs and priorities will result in an education system with variation by community or region. ECE's role in this type of a system can shift to support the maintenance and quality of education system standards and practices, and away from the design and implementation of territory wide initiatives that support education programming, but are outside of the core education program, like curriculum and assessment. Focusing on these key aspects of the education system and ensuring that students and families have the information they need to be successful as students transition between grade levels, is a key role for ECE but something that has proven challenging as the Department has tried to address a broad range of issue and create system change in the last five years. This finding informed Recommendation 3, which is about monitoring ECE's students' educational programming and student grade transitions, and supporting students and families to understand student transitions throughout a student's education journey.

With respect to question 2, this evaluation found that the commitments were implemented through a huge number and variety of initiatives given the limited human resource compliment available for design, development, and implementation. In five years, approximately 45 education and education support initiatives were designed, developed, and / or implemented. Annually, ECE spent between \$1.5 and \$4.5 million on ERI initiatives for a total of approximately \$11.5 million over five years; this is over and above the funding contributed to the education system through formula funding to the education bodies.

Results showed that ECE spent the largest share of the ERI budget on initiatives in commitments 2 and 4, and implemented the highest number of ERI initiatives in commitment 2. Commitment 2 is about student wellness and the development of a positive sense of identity, while commitment 4 is about supporting learners experiences and ensuring personalized, quality education. By prioritizing students in small communities, as this evaluation has recommended, ECE could improve the results of work in these areas by partnering more deeply with Indigenous leaders and governments to identify community specific needs, and community specific ways to address those needs. Again, some of this work has already been done through the community wellness plans with respect to these commitments. Rather than working to design, develop, and implement territory wide initiatives related to these commitments, ECE could potentially achieve better results by supporting community-designed and delivered projects already underway. This finding further informed Recommendation 1, as well as Recommendation 4, which speaks to working with Indigenous governments to prioritize programming that is relevant to community and regional interests.

Results in this area also pointed to an education system overstretched, with too many initiatives in development for the human resources available. Refocusing and prioritizing students in small

communities, and working through partnerships and in collaboration will reduce the burden on the education system, including educators at the front line of education delivery in the NWT.

With respect to question 3, the evaluation found rich and valuable initiative-specific information in each of the nine case studies. These results and the initiative-specific recommendations they generated are available in Appendix E. Common ERI Framework recommendations were also drawn from these case study results and included: collaborating with key stakeholders in developing initiatives; and creating implementation plans to support initiatives.

The results of question three also provided the analysis needed to support the adjustment and modification of key ERI initiatives, or to encourage ECE to consider completely redesigning or abandoning the initiative. For example, while most of the initiatives reviewed as part of the nine case studies were well aligned with the ERI Framework overall, and were achieving at least some of their intended results, two case studies stood out as requiring larger adjustments. These were the case studies for commitments 7 and 8, which were the Systemic Assessment of Learning, and JK-12 Education System Reporting Requirements respectively.

Both of the above identified initiatives were found to lack alignment with the ERI Framework in some way and to be struggling to achieve their implementation and / or short term planned results. Such findings can support ECE to adjust its focus and energy away from initiatives that are not working, and into initiatives that will work. These findings led to Recommendation 5, which is about ensuring all ECE's education related work is aligned with the ERI Framework's Foundational Statements. As the education system's core values, the Foundational Statements help guide ECE in the development of relevant work and activities.

The case study findings from question 3 of the evaluation also led to Recommendations 6 and 7, which were about planning ERI initiatives, and revising or discontinuing ERI initiatives respectively. Making difficult decisions about whether programs need to be discontinued will be part of the work of ERI in the next five years if the key priority of student achievement in small community schools is to be advanced. The results of evaluation questions 2 and 3 confirm the common wisdom that if everything is a priority, nothing is prioritized.

However ECE chooses to move forward with ERI in the next five years will shape student experiences and outcomes far beyond the lifespan of ERI as a strategic document. Major shifts in the key education performance measures that have been called for by NWT politicians, parents, and students, can take years and even decades of consistent, effective work. Working in collaboration with Indigenous and community governments will ensure this work is supported at all levels of the education system, that it is locally relevant and reflects the diverse needs and interests of NWT communities. It will also support consistency in application as the governance landscape in the NWT shifts over time with the implementation of land claims and self-government.

An education system is always a work in progress. As shown in this evaluation's case studies and elsewhere, success is dependent on the quality of the partnerships and relationships in the system. The creators of ERI recognized this importance and made relationships a cornerstone of the document through the first Foundational Statement and commitment 1. Advancing the ERI Framework in the next

five years means that ECE must improve student experiences and outcomes in small communities, and this requires intentional work to strengthen key relationships between ECE and Indigenous governments for the betterment of the education system as a whole.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: It is recommended that ECE revise the ERI goals, with a focus on prioritizing small community schools.

Some ERI initiatives already focus specifically on one or more of these suggested priorities. For example, the Residential School Awareness Training opportunity for new educators and GNWT employees and the revised Our Languages curriculum (see Case Studies 1 and 9 respectively) are two initiatives that were the subjects of case studies in this evaluation. Both clearly focus on Indigenizing the education system and experience for the purpose of making the NWT school experience more relevant to Indigenous students and families, majority of whom live in small communities.

Another example of an ERI initiative that was the subject of a Case Study for this evaluation is Northern Distance Learning (see Case Study 5). This initiative is specifically designed to support students in small communities by offering them access to a fuller range of academic high school courses.

These three example initiatives should be continued given that they are designed to focus on small community schools. All other ERI initiatives should be examined to determine whether they specifically aim to benefit and improve educational outcomes of students in small community schools.

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that ECE review and potentially revise its approach to funding, with a focus on increasing supports to small community schools and students to achieve outcomes equal to students in Yellowknife and regional centres.

Recommendation 3: It is recommended that ECE monitor and report on students' educational programming overall, and specifically of the progress of students as they transition through the education system, providing more communication and awareness to parents and guardians about the distinctions between promotion, placement, and retention at the end of the school year.

Recommendation 4: Increase financial accountability and reporting for the ERI initiatives.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that ECE work with Indigenous governments and education leaders to prioritize ERI initiatives to focus on small community schools and for the purpose of reducing the number of new initiatives and initiatives, especially in the design and piloting stage. Initiatives in these stages are particularly resource intensive from both a human and financial resource perspective.

Recommendation 6: It is recommended that ECE continue to apply the Foundational Statements at the initiative planning and design stage to embed these core ERI values in all ERI initiatives, and pay special attention to those Foundational Statements that may be under-represented, including Foundational Statement 6 (Diversity) and 8 (Competencies).

Recommendation 7: It is recommended that ECE use established program planning tools, such as project charters, implementation plans and logic models or otherwise, to support the development of new initiatives, or to revise existing initiatives, while ensuring they are well aligned to the ERI Framework as a whole.

Recommendation 8: It is recommended that ECE use ERI Framework and initiative alignment results, initiative implementation, short-term planned results, and unplanned result findings from the case studies to revise or abandon ERI initiatives that do not fit the commitment, goals, or Foundational Statements of ERI, have issues with their short-term or unplanned results, or do not fit the suggested new priority of small community schools.