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Kativik Ilisarniliriniq

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of educational services in Nunavik

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Context and recommendations

Brief presented to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs
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slowly reopen. As such, having the ability to test travelers and transient workers before they depart for Nunavik is essential.

Fear and anxiety among the Nunavik population must be understood in the following context, which was also described to this committee by ITK President Nathan Obed in May.

Inuit communities across Canada suffer tuberculosis at a rate of 300 times the non-indigenous Canadian rate. Respiratory illnesses that affect Inuit living the Arctic have the potential to significantly increase the risks of complications for those infected with COVID-19. The recommended social distancing measures are also difficult to apply in our communities. As documented in a [2018 Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples Senate Committee report on housing in Arctic Canada](#), in Nunavik alone 1,030 housing units were needed to address the shortage of adequate housing. Access to health care does not compare to the rest of Canada in Inuit communities; our clinics and health centres are mainly staffed by nurses and act as referral structures to southern health facilities for major illnesses.

Secondly, the 14 fly-in Nunavik communities are small and isolated. They are currently closed and a ban on travel to and from areas outside Nunavik is still in force. As noted by Mr. Obed, although necessary to stop the progression of COVID-19 infection, the travel restrictions currently in place are unsustainable from a supply lines, economic and public service delivery perspectives. In education, this particularly hinders our ability to deliver services. As previously mentioned, an important segment of our workforce comes from outside Nunavik.

COVID-19: Immediate and long-term challenges in education

This section looks at how the COVID-19 has affected the delivery of educational services. It looks at: Educational success of Kindergarten to Grade 12 / Secondary 5 students, Post-secondary education and On-the-land education.

Educational success of Kindergarten to Grade 12 / Secondary 5 students

On March 13, the Quebec government announced the closure of all daycares, schools, adult education centres, colleges and universities, from March 16 to 27. After the first week of school closures, Kativik Ilisarniliriniq's Council of Commissioners made the decision to end the school year on March 23 in

For example, in the absence of an adequate cellular network in Nunavik, providing iPads with an LTE internet connection to families that do not have a device nor internet at home is not the right answer to ensure equal access to education in our environment.

Any solutions tabled to address the issue of equal access to education for students in Quebec must include Nunavik students. The COVID-19 pandemic may offer an opportunity to ensure that Nunavik students, the Nunavik education system and essential telecommunication infrastructures are funded at a level that will allow them to be at par with other jurisdictions in Canada.

As we envisage the reopening of Nunavik schools and adult education centres for the 2020-2021 school year, the school board is actively exploring **distance education** models. We are of the view that distance education offers very interesting options beyond the immediate context of the current pandemic. In fact, it could open new avenues with regards to culturally relevant school calendars, indigenized learning models and parental engagement in education. To be clear, the tools and platforms we are currently developing could form the basis of a new service offering in the youth and adult education sectors. Incorporating distance education into our services would change the role of educators and lead to new needs for technical expertise at the school board.

When looking at distance education models, the importance of adult education and vocational training in Nunavik cannot be underestimated. Given that 85% of our students leave school without a Secondary School Diploma or any other type of qualification certification ([Quebec Ministry of Education, 2019](#)), the educational success of an important segment of the Nunavik population is dependent on our service offering in the adult sector. Distance education could allow us to meet the needs of this clientele.

To be viable, distance education options require a commitment from the Federal and Provincial governments to urgently invest in broadband telecommunication infrastructures that need to be vastly improved in Nunavik.

Adequate broadband telecommunication infrastructures form the corner stone of access to education for Inuit communities, even more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also is the mandatory first step of any serious efforts made to implement the [2015 Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action on education](#) and the recommendations on education tabled by the 2019

students could access designated study facilities, areas or classrooms in their community.

Despite these challenges, the experience of the recent months confirmed that Nunavimmiut are genuinely interested and eager to engage in distance education at the post-secondary level.

In this context, we appreciate the recent agreement between the Makivik Corporation and Kativik Ilisarniliriniq, for which funding is provided by Indigenous Services Canada and distributed by ITK.

On-the-land education

As is the case across Arctic Canada, the pandemic has created new opportunities for on-the-land education in Nunavik, where families and youth are engaged alongside educators. The Inuit culture and identity cannot be dissociated from the territory. On-the-land activities offer unique educational opportunities that connect youth to their language, identity and communities.

Federal funding that can support these activities continues to be needed. On-the-land education can be a game changer as we continue to work on the indigenization of our curriculum, bridging western and Inuit knowledge and ways of learning inside and outside the classroom.

At the school board, on-the-land education and educational excursions have benefited from the support of New Paths for Education, a program formerly administered under Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. Discussions on the transfer of funding available through this program to the province of Quebec are recurrently occurring. This means that federal funding the school board currently relies on for on-the-land education could be distributed through the Quebec Ministry of Education. We would like to stress the utmost importance of ensuring a seamless transition of this program, as a gap in access to funding could jeopardize some of the culturally relevant activities offered by our schools.

Recommendations

In light of the elements discussed in the previous section, here are the recommendations that that Kativik Ilisarniliriniq respectfully submits to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

1. Telecommunication infrastructures

Without access to broadband internet, there is no real prospect for distance education to develop as a serious service offering in the youth, adult and post-secondary sectors in Nunavik. The federal government must urgently support the development and maintenance of telecommunication infrastructures that will connect Arctic Canada to the global world. Nunavimmiut are eager to participate in.

2. Access to technology

Poverty is something too many households are struggling with in Nunavik and across the *Inuit Nunangat*. In Nunavik, a region where the cost of living is particularly high, the 2018 median income of Inuit families was of \$25,627 compared to \$61,400 for the rest of Canada (Source: [ITK Inuit Statistical Profile 2018](#) and [Statistics Canada Canadian Income Survey 2018](#)). Families and students must be provided the financial means to acquire new technologies; this is essential to ensure the educational success of Inuit students as learning is likely to increasingly shift towards online platforms and tools.

3. On-the-land education and Inuktitut language protection

The educational resources, digital content, online platforms and curriculum developed by the school board are available in Inuktitut, English and French. We need to recognize that guaranteeing consistent access to content in Inuktitut that has been developed from an Inuit perspective, requires additional time, specific expertise and can only happen with access to adequate funding. The Inuit culture and identity cannot be dissociated from the territory. On-the-land education programs and activities offer unique educational opportunities that connect youth to their language, identity and communities. They play a crucial role in strengthening the Inuktitut language and require adequate funding.

4. School infrastructures and study facilities

With a rapidly growing student population and a renewed interest for post-secondary studies at a distance, we need to see infrastructure investments that will support the Nunavik education system beyond the immediate measures announced in the context of this pandemic. This includes school and adult education centres renovation and expansion, housing for employees, student residences in the adult sector and study space for post-secondary students.

5. Testing

As we proceed with the reopening of our schools and adult education centres, we will also contribute to the movement of an important number of transient workers from regions of Canada where there are still active COVID-19 cases to isolated and vulnerable Inuit communities. In order to foster trust in our transportation networks and institutions, it will be important for the Nunavik organizations and air carriers serving our communities to have access to COVID-19 testing with reduced delays for obtaining results. On the backdrop of a high tuberculosis rate and a recent history of devastating epidemics, this is key to addressing the fear and anxiety many Nunavimmiut feel about the prospect of reopening our communities.

6. Water and sewer services

Access to water and sewer services remains an on-going issue in Nunavik. Lack of water or sewage service is a recurring cause of school closure in most of our communities. In the context of COVID-19, where the main health measure is to wash our hands frequently, we need to see infrastructure investments that will support and ensure sustainable maintenance of our water and sewer services beyond this pandemic.