Alternatives North

February 9, 2025

RE: The Standing Committee on Government Operations is studying the Government of the Northwest Territories' proposed Indigenous Employment Policy, slated to be implemented on April 1, 2025. To inform its work, the Committee invites members of the public to provide their input and comments on the proposed policy changes.

Dear Standing Committee on Government Operations,

The single most important factor in the success or failure of the past Affirmative Action Policy and the future Indigenous Employment Policy is absent from the *Indigenous Employment Policy* and the *Conclusion and Next Steps* sections of the *What We Heard* document.

That factor is education. Most Northerners—from Paulatuk to Fort Liard—recognize this issue. While past strategies to improve education outcomes, such as Junior Kindergarten (JK), have yielded minor gains, overall progress has been insufficient. Early childhood development deficits remain a significant barrier, with *Early Development Index* (EDI) data showing that only one-fifth of young children enter school with the necessary social, emotional, and communication skills to succeed. Pre-K, Kindergarten, and Grade 1 teachers consistently confirm this reality. Ignoring this foundational issue is not an option—it directly impacts the future of the territory.

The Minister responsible for the Indigenous Employment Policy, and its predecessor, publicly stated that the GNWT "cannot wait" for improvements in the NWT education system to increase Indigenous employment. Instead, the policy was expanded to include Southern Indigenous candidates. Public backlash from Dene leaders and others led to a reversal, restoring a Northern-first approach.

We believe the Minister was on the right track—but only if this effort is part of a broader strategy to improve education outcomes. GNWT jobs require at least a Grade 12 education. The success of the Indigenous Employment Policy depends on strong early childhood development support and a robust Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 community school system outside Yellowknife, where most Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit populations reside.

The committee should recognize that Northern education has historically been led by non-Indigenous education professionals using a non-Indigenous curriculum. While non-Indigenous students succeed, most Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit students—through no fault of their own—do not, as education data shows. It is the duty of the education department and Legislative Assembly to change this.

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Yet, accessing reliable school statistics remains difficult. Graduation rates, absenteeism, and dropout rates are unclear, with discrepancies between figures reported by the Department and those from regional school boards. The Auditor General identified misreported graduation numbers in 2018. The introduction of a new six-year graduation rate—primarily for Indigenous students—appears to be a transparent attempt to inflate success metrics rather than address student achievement. Dropout rates are not readily available but are linked to declining Aurora College enrollment. The reality is that outcomes in small communities fall far below those in Yellowknife's largely non-Indigenous schools.

These figures explain why the Affirmative Action Policy failed for over three decades and highlight how the education system has not prepared Indigenous students for meaningful employment opportunities. Again, EDI data showing that only one-fifth of young children in small communities enter school ready to learn strongly indicates the likelihood of poor long-term education outcomes.

We recommend that GNWT leadership establish a 30-year baseline of education outcomes to identify systemic failures and initiate a focused discussion on how to address them. Without improved education outcomes, the Indigenous Employment Policy will not succeed.

To establish a meaningful baseline and reveal historical trends, we suggest the committee research the following key indicators:

- Graduation rates (both certificate- and diploma-level performance)
- Attendance rates
- Indigenous students attending university
- Indigenous journeyperson certifications
- Indigenous participation in adult education
- Indigenous students pursuing academic upgrading (inside and outside the NWT)
- Literacy levels among Indigenous populations
- Dropout rates
- Number of Northern Indigenous teachers

While the Polytechnic concept is premature and likely to fail for the same reasons as the Affirmative Action Policy, it was created to address a clear need—providing Northerners with accessible higher education options.

Many Southern universities specialize in Indigenous education programs. These accredited institutions could form partnerships with the GNWT to help meet employment goals. The GNWT

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could prioritize hiring graduates (and interns) from these institutions, while they, in turn, could help prepare Northern students to meet university entry requirements—or eventually attend a future Northern Polytechnic—to qualify for GNWT employment.

A top priority must be producing cohorts of Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit teachers and classroom assistants. Their absence in the education system is a significant reason why it continues to fail Indigenous students.

We ask that once the baseline education metrics are established, the data be made publicly available, including to Alternatives North. This will allow all Northerners to engage with the GNWT in discussions on the way forward. Your committee is uniquely positioned to guide the Assembly, Cabinet, and GNWT in improving outcomes for students in community schools.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
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