

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

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Context and recommendations



Table of contents

Context	3
COVID-19: Immediate and long-term challenges in education	4
Educational success of Kindergarten to Grade 12 / Secondary 5 stu	dents4
Post-Secondary education	8
On-the-land education	9
Recommendations	9
1. Telecommunication infrastructures	10
2. Access to technology	10
3. On-the-land education and Inuktitut language protection	10
4. School infrastructures and study facilities	10
5. Testing	11
6. Water and sewer services	11



Context

There are 12,090 residents in Nunavik, 10,755 of whom are Inuit and identify Inuktitut as their mother tongue (Source: <u>Nunavik in figures, 2015</u> and <u>Statistic Canada, 2016</u>).

The education programs developed by the school board are offered in Inuktitut as first language and in French and English as second languages. We operate 17 primary and secondary schools as well as 6 adult education centres. In the youth sector (Kindergarten to Grade 12 / Secondary 5), we serve a student population of 3,460 children and youth. This represents a quarter of the overall Nunavik population. In the adult sector, an average of 370 students enroll in our vocational training and general education programs annually.

We also manage a sponsorship program for Inuit beneficiaries studying at the post-secondary level. On a yearly basis, the school board supports over 120 students through this program. At the moment, students wishing to continue their education at the college and university levels or at the vocational training level for programs that are not offered in Nunavik, have to move outside of territory to do so.

Our workforce consists of teachers, professionals, support staff and managers. Out of a total of nearly 1,000 permanent employees, 89% hold Nunavik-based positions and approximately 50% of these permanent employees come from outside Nunavik.

Before discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the delivery of educational services in Nunavik, it is important to recall two points that were mentioned by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) President Nathan Obed when he spoke before this committee on May 8.

Firstly, up to now and in sharp contrast to the situation in Canada—and even more so with the situation in the province of Quebec, there have been only 17 confirmed cases of COVID-19 detected within *Inuit Nunangat* (across four jurisdictions and 51 communities). Of those 17 cases, all individuals have now recovered.

It is important to point out that Nunavik accounts for 16 of these 17 cases. At the moment, no new case has been reported for more than 14 days. Despite this positive development, we should not underestimate the level of fear and anxiety around the possibility of COVID-19 infection as communities start to



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



Nunavik. At the time, the Quebec Ministry of Education had already issued general guidelines for the end of school year, should school closures continue beyond May 1. Our schools and adult education centres will remain closed until the start of the next school year.

Following the school closures, the school board moved quickly to mobilize resources and expertise to provide parents with access to online educational resources in Inuktitut, English and French. In particular, two initiatives were launched by our Education Services department: a web portal of educational resources, and a mentoring program for Secondary 5 students.

Those initiatives were essential given the specificity of the population we serve as an organization. Kativik Ilisarniliriniq's curriculum in the youth sector differs from that of Quebec. It offers youth an education aligned to their day to day reality and language, rooted in the Nunavik environment, Inuit kinship values and communities. During school closures, other school boards in Quebec were able to rely on diverse online platform, which were not adequate for us and also did not offer access to educational resources in Inuktitut.

The school board's web portal of educational resources and mentoring program for Secondary 5 students were met with very positive feedback from both parents and students. However, these initiatives also highlighted Nunavik's dire need for **broadband telecommunication infrastructures** and **household access to new technologies**.

Here are some concrete examples that illustrate how the lack of broadband telecommunication infrastructures impacts the daily work of our staff and our students' learning environment. For students and their parents that had access to computers or electronic devices, using online educational resources and connecting with teachers or mentors proves extremely challenging without a broadband internet connection. Similarly, our school administrators and regional pedagogical counselors were regularly unable to join Zoom video conference or open PDF documents heavier than 700 KB. They struggled to access our online forms, procurement platforms and virtual workspaces or shared files, etc.

As Quebec moved to reopen the schools outside of the Montreal region in May, the issue of equal access to education has drawn growing public attention. Namely, in relation to children's access to internet connection, computers and electronic tablets. Some of the solutions that have been brought forward by the Quebec Ministry of Education remain irrelevant for us.



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



<u>Public Inquiry Commission on relations between Indigenous Peoples and</u> certain public services in Québec.

The need for access to broadband telecommunication infrastructures for residents of Arctic Canada is a well-documented Canadian issue (see for example the 2017 report <u>A New Shared Arctic Leadership Model</u> presented by Mary Simon, Minister's Special Representative on Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy under the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and the 2017 Arctic Economic Council <u>Recommendations for an Interconnected Arctic</u>). It is also something Inuit organizations have, for many years, continuously advocated for. The COVID-19 may be an opportunity to do things right.

When looking at student success in the youth sector (Kindergarten to Grade 12 / Secondary 5), the school board is anticipating an increase in the school dropout rate over the 2020-2021 school year. This is a concern given that 85% of our students currently leave school without a Secondary School Diploma or any other type of qualification certification (Quebec Ministry of Education, 2019). In addition, it should be noted that with school closures, many at-risk students have been cut-off from a local support service hub. Ensuring continuity in terms of psycho-social and pedagogical support, as well as minimal food security through breakfast and lunch programs, has not been thoroughly possible since March 16.

As we proceed to plan for the reopening of schools along with the implementation of recommended health and safety regulations, we must tread carefully to ensure that we will foster welcoming environments for students.

Here, it is important to touch upon an on-going challenge that Nunavik communities are facing: access to water and sewer services. Water and sewage removal shortage is something that happens frequently in Nunavik. In addition to negative repercussions on Nunavimmiut's quality of life, it disrupts the continuity of educational services. We often have to close our schools due to water and sewer issues. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we will need to enforce the message and health measure that everyone should wash their hands frequently. We are looking at alternative ways to disinfect hands. However, the challenges our communities still face in terms of access to water and sewer services are unacceptable. This must be addressed through immediate and long-term infrastructure investment.



The health and safety measures that the school board needs to introduce to prevent COVID-19 infection also require schools and classrooms to be cleaned and disinfected in a much more sustained manner. We foresee difficulties related to the local recruitment of janitors whose workload will increase. Recruitment from outside the region for these positions would have important infrastructure repercussions. For example, we require housing for staff recruited outside of the communities where the positions are based. At the moment, the school board lacks housing for its employees. This year in some Nunavik communities, we have had to lodge teachers in hotel rooms.

Finally, the Inuit population is growing rapidly, at a rate of 29% compared to 11% for the rest of Canada. In Nunavik, 58% of the Inuit population is less than 25 years old. This **growing population puts a tremendous pressure on our infrastructures**. Many of our schools cannot accommodate the current student population in the space they have at their disposal. For example, in the community of Inukjuak, a school built for a maximal capacity of 350 students currently serves a student population of 550 students (Kindergarten to Secondary 5). In this community, we also have been unable to recruit 15 of the 65 teachers we have the budget to hire since there is no classroom space available at the school and no available housing to lodge them.

In this context, health measures for COVID-19 infection prevention such as social distancing will prove challenging to implement. School repair, extension and repair projects are currently on hold, as the region has yet to reopen (the above-mentioned travel ban is currently in force and as of June 6, applies to construction workers from outside Nunavik).

Post-Secondary education

The vast majority of post-secondary students sponsored by the school board have made the choice to complete their current term from Nunavik, since colleges and universities were offering online education. Here again, the lack of access to broadband internet has resulted in important challenges for students sponsored by the school board. During school closures, the school board was able to give post-secondary students access to computer labs at local youth sector schools. However, due to the above mention shortage of space in our schools, this type of arrangement would not have been possible during a regular school year.

It would be desirable for post-secondary students to have the option to study at a distance from Nunavik. Should more of them choose to do so, this would result in new infrastructure needs for the school board. Indeed, and with many Nunavimmiut living in overcrowded houses, it would be ideal if these



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. Onthe-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 outmost 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 postsecondary 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 postsecondary 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 CODIV-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.