

March 16th, 2017

Premier Peter Taptuna and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

Open Letter – If Nunavut Revokes Inuit Language and Education Rights, Canada Fails the Test of Nation-building

Dear Premier Taptuna and Prime Minister Trudeau,

We are educational researchers with experience living, working, and researching educational and language-related issues in Nunavut. Like you, we are committed to seeing the Inuit language, Inuktitut, flourish as a foundation of Inuit culture in Nunavut. We consider the maintenance of Inuktitut as a vibrant Indigenous language within the educational system in Nunavut to be critically important. In a globalized world where English is now spoken so widely, incorporating Inuktitut fully into schooling across Inuit Nunangat provides the only real chance for its long-term survival.

We understand the first vision statement in *First Canadians, Canadians First: National Strategy on Inuit Education 2011*, supported by representatives of all four Inuit regions in Canada, that stresses the value of “being bilingual (in the Inuit language and at least one of Canada’s official languages)” and of gaining an education “founded on Inuit history, culture and worldview” (p. 70).

On March 7th, 2017, Bill 37 was tabled in the Nunavut Legislature. It proposes amendments to the 2008 *Nunavut Education Act* and *Inuit Language Protection Act* that would delay the implementation of Inuktitut as a language of instruction in grades 4 to 9 until 2029 – and indefinitely in grades 10 to 12. The 2008 laws, which were based on extensive community consultation and rigorous research into best educational practices, required that Inuktitut become the language of instruction from K-12 by 2019. Bill 37 would remove the right to K-12 schooling in Inuktitut, replacing it with a much delayed and watered down right to a “majority of instruction” in Inuktitut, and only from K-9. Perhaps as troubling, the Government of Nunavut has offered no plan to meet even this goal.

The proposed amendments would create an international human rights case. Canada is a signatory to *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Article 14 of which guarantees Indigenous peoples the right to an education in their own language. Delaying the phased-in implementation date by 10 years would renege on the commitment made in the Nunavut Legislature in 2008 and in the Canadian Senate in 2009. Nunavummiut deserve to have their linguistic human rights upheld.

Reneging on the commitment to implement official language rights in a territorial public government within the established timeframe has many consequences beyond schooling that negatively impact Inuit identity and the survival of Inuit culture. A substantial body of evidence, some of it from Inuit Nunangat, shows that academic achievement suffers when Indigenous students are forced to learn in their second language from unilingual English-speaking teachers. The impact ripples out across society, preventing a representative number of Inuit in the workforce, including schools, and preventing Nunavummiut from receiving services in Inuktitut in all sectors from healthcare to policing. Justice Thomas Berger made this point in his 2006 *Conciliator’s Report to the Government of Canada* and wrote that the success of Nunavut is a test of nation-building for Canada. When 70% of Inuit children fail to graduate from schools run in English by majority non-Inuit staff, Canada is failing that test. When there are 453 non-Inuit teachers with just 430 non-Inuit children in the system, and 201 Inuit teachers for 9,300 Inuit students, Canada is failing that test.

While we understand that there are serious challenges in providing schooling in Inuktitut across Nunavut on a short timeline, we are distressed that planning has *not* led to an increase in the numbers of Inuit teachers in the school system since the passage of legislation in 2008 requiring K-12 schooling in Inuktitut by 2019. At that time, there were 246 Inuit teachers. That number has fallen by 45 while the number of non-Inuit teachers has increased by 113, leading to a further Anglicization of schooling at precisely the time when the stated GN goal was to increase the numbers of Inuit teachers and strengthen Inuktitut.

While the goal of creating a fully bilingual schooling looks daunting, it is not impossible. There are educational jurisdictions in Canada that are successfully teaching students in an Indigenous language. One of these is Nunavik, where valiant efforts effort to recruit and educate Inuit teachers has resulted in high levels of bilingualism that include Inuktitut and either French or English.

In Nova Scotia, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK), an award-winning school governance model, offers students an exceptional education in the Mi'kmaq language and English and many of the principals leading schools are skilled Mi'kmaq teachers committed to strengthening and maintaining their language and culture. In Eskasoni, a Mi'kmaw community, a Mi'kmaw immersion program has been operating for 20 years and the program is now housed in its own school with 26 certified Mi'kmaw educators working in the program. Research is clearly showing the strong and positive effects of the immersion program on Mi'kmaw students' fluency in Mi'kmaw, their sense identity as Mi'kmaw and their overall high academic achievement.

In Nunatsiavut, the Inuit Teacher Education Program has been designed to include intensive Inuktitut language training for future teachers, aggressively moving toward more Inuktitut in schools even where the language is most endangered.

Research in bilingual schools in the United States is also showing how unilingual English-speaking teachers can be equipped to more effectively contribute to the goals of bilingual education. Ongoing professional development of Inuit and non-Inuit teachers is also needed to achieve the Government of Nunavut's 2008 evidence-based educational legislation.

In Nunavut, our research has shown a high level of support for bilingual education and that there are many Inuit youth who would like to pursue a career in teaching. Bold steps by the federal and territorial governments could result in bilingual education becoming a reality in Nunavut. No amendments should be made to delay the implementation of Inuktitut as a language of instruction; rather, a robust and ambitious strategic plan should be presented to recruit more Inuit to teaching and to provide the supports required to retain them in the teaching profession. In addition, funding and staffing should be prioritized for ongoing curriculum and resource development, school-based teacher mentorships, and leadership and administrative professional education and development.

The Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP) needs to embark upon a vigorous recruitment campaign and funding for teacher education and teacher education students should be sharply increased. NTEP students need a wider range of effective immersion courses in Inuktitut and more Inuit instructors and Elders who speak Inuktitut fluently need to be recruited. NTEP must be broadened to prepare Inuit to teach at all grade levels and in all subject areas. Teacher education programs also need to be consistently available in the communities, as they were in the past. Implementation of such a strategic plan would not be easy, but it is possible.

Nunavut cannot do all this alone. While an immediate start should be made by accessing funds from the 2015 settlement agreement, the Government of Canada must make a major investment, as Nunavut is the only province or territory where public services are not delivered in the official language of the majority. Canada's formula financing of the territory must be increased to address this. This should be seen as an essential component of the reconciliation process, a step in supporting the Inuit right to self-determination.

There is a language crisis in Nunavut, and in many real ways the success of the language equals the success of the Territory. This is now a test of the seriousness of Canada's commitment to reconciliation – a test that must be passed.

We call on the Government of Canada to provide support to Nunavut commensurate with the challenge at hand. We call upon the Government of Nunavut to cancel the roll-back of the Inuktitut language of instruction in Nunavut schools and to create a roadmap, with commitments, that will see Nunavut move rapidly toward a fully bilingual education system.

Sincerely,

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