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NUTAQQANUT INULRAMIRNULLU
UQAQTIKHAANIK

REPRÉSENTANT DE
L'ENFANCE ET DE LA JEUNESSE

REPRESENTATIVE FOR
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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Appearance of the Representative for Children and Youth's Office before the Standing Committee on Legislation

Opening Comments by the Representative for Children and Youth November 27, 2019

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and good morning. My name is Jane Bates and I have been the Representative for Children and Youth since July 22, 2019. Joining me today are Lynn Matte, director of child and youth advocacy services and Katie Didham, one of our office's senior systemic investigator/researchers. I am pleased to appear before you today to speak about the recommendations that our office has put forward about revising the *Education Act* in Bill 25.

Educating young people is about passing on skills and knowledge from one generation to the next. A young person's education happens in many places: in the home, in the community, and in the classroom. I think everyone here today can agree that education – in its many, many forms – is essential to the development of young people as functioning citizens that grow up to support themselves, their family, and their community.

The Representative for Children and Youth's Office is an independent office of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. While it is the responsibility of the Government of Nunavut to provide the best services possible to all Nunavummiut, it is the responsibility of the Representative for Children and Youth's Office to make sure Government of Nunavut services for young people are the best they can be for the children, youth, and families who rely on them. Our office provides feedback on legislation, policies, programs, and services for young people, which is why I am appearing before you here today.

About the Representative for Children and Youth's Office (RCYO): The RCYO is an independent child and youth advocacy office that ensures the Government of Nunavut supports and protects the rights and best interests of young Nunavummiut. Please visit our website at www.rcynu.ca

We would like to acknowledge that we support the Office of the Languages Commissioner's submission on the proposed amendments to the *Inuit Language Protection Act*. Regarding the *Education Act* our submission has nine recommendations. Each recommendation was made with the best interests of young Nunavummiut and the future of Nunavut, as a whole, in mind. Many of our recommendations stemmed from the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which details all of the rights of young people. Rights are things children and youth should have, like access to safe drinking water and nutritious food, or things they should be able to do, like go to school and receive instruction in their own language, so that children, youth, and their families have what they need to make good choices for their lives.

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* is a legally binding international agreement that Canada signed almost 20 years ago. When Canada signed the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Canada promised to make sure that every young person and their families across the country, including Nunavut, would have access to all of the things mentioned in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

One of the services mentioned in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, is a child's right to education. A young person's education is so important in fact, that it is actually two of their rights, under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

First – all young people have the right to good quality education and should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level they can.

And secondly – a young person's education should help them develop their talents and abilities. It should also help them learn to live peacefully, protect the environment, and respect other people.

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* is so important for all young people that our first recommendation was to have it included in the *Education Act*, and we were pleased to see that it was added to the preamble by Bill 25.

Four of the recommendations made in our submission, were made in support of a young person's right to give their opinion with the hope being, that through discussion, consensus, and collaboration we can make the best decision together.

It has been more than 20 years since I attended school. I can try to imagine, but I don't truly know exactly what it is like to be a student today, with computers, iphones, social media, and cyber bullying. Since I don't know, I think the best thing to do is ask someone who does, someone who has first-hand experience, which is why asking our young people for their opinion is so important. This does not mean that young people get to make the decisions; it just means that we, the adults, should ask for their opinion and listen to their ideas so we can make the best decisions on their behalf. Overall, I encourage the committee to give consideration to any input received from young Nunavummiut as this legislation, *the Education Act*, will have the greatest impact on them.

With this in mind, recommendation two speaks to asking for input from students past and present in order to develop legislation, policies, and procedures that will work best for the students who use the education system.

Further, recommendation three suggests that students who are to be suspended or expelled should be involved in the discussion about it, even students under 16 years of age. Not only is this an opportunity for the young person to take responsibility for their actions, it gives them a chance to participate in the process to understand the consequences of their actions and learn from it.

Recommendation four suggests that student representatives elected to District Education Authorities be given voting privileges and we are pleased to see that this recommendation has been filled with the proposed amendments.

Recommendation five encourages the development of early childhood education programs across the territory. In communities where the District Education Authority does not provide early childhood programs, the Department of Education would be responsible to do so. This recommendation further supports a child's right to education.

Recommendation six prioritizes the need to recruit young Inuit into the teaching profession to assist the department in reaching its obligations under Article 23 of the Nunavut Agreement, as well as support the department's ability to train, hire, and retain Inuit language speaking educators. Providing classroom instruction in Inuit languages would support a child's right to practice their own culture and language. Further delay of recruiting Inuit language speaking teachers risks the loss of Inuit languages.

Recommendation seven encourages the Department of Education to define some words used within the *Education Act* to avoid confusion because what something means to one person, might be different than what it means to another. For example, we recommended that the concept of “inclusive education” be defined. For the Representative for Children and Youth’s Office “inclusive education” means that schools should be welcoming of all young people and the way something is taught should be based on the learner’s abilities. We also recommended that “school supports” be defined and in doing so, young people and their families should be made aware of what school supports are available and how to access them.

In recommendation eight we encourage the Department of Education to recognize and support mature minors in the *Education Act*. A mature minor is a person under the age of 19 that has the maturity and understanding to make decisions on their own behalf. From time to time, young people need to be able to consent to decisions themselves. In Bill 36, the *Mental Health Act*, mature minors are able to consent for themselves, when decisions about their health care need to be made without the help of a parent or guardian. Further, all legislation for the territory should align; if the Department of Health recognizes mature minors so should the Department of Education.

Our final recommendation, recommendation nine, encourages the Department of Education to make sure that at least one component of the orientation and mentoring program for teachers be completed before they even start working, with a requirement to complete the program within the first year. This recommendation shortens the current timeline from two years to one, ensuring new teachers are as prepared and knowledgeable as they can be, as quickly as possible.

Over the past several years, staff at the Representative for Children and Youth’s Office have had the honour of working with hundreds of young people and their families from across the territory, including working on 80 concerns related to the Department of Education. It is important to our office to acknowledge them and recognize the courage they have demonstrated by reaching out to us, seeking support, and trusting us with their stories.

Mr. Chairman, I bring these recommendations forward in the spirit of working together for a common cause and decision making through discussion and consensus. I welcome the committee’s questions.