THE FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION JOURNEY IN YUKON

1960 – 2021

Yukon First Nations have long been passionate about the value of education for their children and for the future of society in Yukon. In the seminal 1973 document, *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*, their aspiration is succinctly stated:

> *"We believe that all education must have its two main goals, the stimulation of pride in one's culture and background and the development of those skills and that knowledge which is necessary to compete in today's world."*

1960
Yukon Committee on Education

OBSERVATIONS: Management issues, alongside an inability to "integrate" First Nations students effectively, led the federal government to download the responsibility for "Indian" education to the provinces/territories, expecting First Nations students to be better incorporated into the local education system.

IMPACTS: No change to curriculum, provision of additional resources, or inclusion of culture and language were considered.

1964
Master Tuition Agreement

OBSERVATIONS: The Yukon government was to further integrate First Nations students into local schools and "provide Indian children with the same educational opportunities and instruction as is provided non-Indian children attending Territorial schools."

IMPACTS: The federal government transferred funds and responsibility to Yukon for the education of "Indian students" without the participation of First Nations governments. Further research determined the Yukon government had failed to meet its obligations (*1987 KWIYA Report, 2012 Tripartite MOU, The 2019 Auditor General's Report*).

1972
Yukon Native Brotherhood Conference

OBSERVATIONS: High dropout rates, significant absenteeism, low numbers of First Nations teachers, and limited cultural inclusion spoke to the need for systemic improvements. Participants called for the government to improve the communication with stakeholders, revive and re-establish language and cultural teachings, and improve both quality and relevancy of instruction.

IMPACTS: The government's response was limited and there were few documented improvements for First Nations students.

1973
Together Today for our Children Tomorrow

OBSERVATIONS: Mainstream education modernized, adapted and improved upon its methodologies, but these improvements were not passed on to First Nations students. The *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* report highlighted the need to improve outcomes and bring both the modern and the traditional worlds closer together.

IMPACTS: Despite common findings shared by these reports, the federal and territorial governments failed to adapt or make the necessary improvements, leaving First Nations students further isolated.

1982
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

OBSERVATIONS: Canadians' rights and privileges are formally enshrined within the Canadian Constitution.

IMPACTS: Equal opportunity and guaranteed rights were broadly interpreted by the Yukon government as issues of "access," rather than as substantive guarantees. This meant that the interventions needed to fully support Yukon First Nations education were not put into place.

1987
The Kwiya Final Report

OBSERVATIONS: The Kwiya report determined that successive governments had failed to support First Nations learners, track outcomes, or provide necessary supports.

IMPACTS: Proposed solutions involved the need to significantly improve community relationships and shift more control of education to First Nations. It also recommended legislative and judicial changes, such as a renegotiation of the 1964 Master Tuition Agreement. Federal and territorial governments were largely unresponsive and few changes were made.

1988
Assembly of First Nations Declaration of First Nations Jurisdiction over Education

OBSERVATIONS: Raised concerns regarding the federal government's attempts to extinguish Aboriginal Rights. Explicitly stated that delegating authority for education to provinces or territories is not "acceptable as a substitute for aboriginal First Nations jurisdiction."

IMPACTS: The AFN report reiterated many of the Yukon First Nations' longstanding concerns, highlighting the underlying issues of paternalism and loss of sovereignty.

1990
Yukon Education Act

OBSERVATIONS: The Act outlined the responsibilities, powers and rights of Yukon stakeholders. Particular attention was paid to the role of First Nations' sovereignty and the increasing potential for local control (school councils).

IMPACTS: Despite plans for decentralization and increased community control, the Act failed to clearly identify how First Nations would influence policy or exercise any of these powers as the Minister of Education maintained ultimate control.

1991
MacPherson Report

OBSERVATIONS: As community concern over achievement levels and demand for much needed reform grew, the MacPherson Report recommended that serious and substantive talks needed to take place to discuss how First Nations' jurisdiction of education would be recognized.

IMPACTS: While the report focused on constitutional amendments, concerns were raised about the ability to find a solution within the Indian Act, given its paternalistic and control-based approaches.

1993–2006
Umbrella Final Agreement

OBSERVATIONS: After protracted negotiations, the UFA was signed and Yukon First Nations assumed a wide array of administrative powers. Sections 17 and 24 enabled Yukon First Nations to direct and manage their local education system.

IMPACTS: A lack of progress and persistently poor educational outcomes led a number of First Nations to revisit Section 17 in a search for new solutions. As no First Nation had fully "pulled down" their responsibility for education, the Minister is still responsible for First Nations education.

1996
Royal Commission on Aboriginal People

OBSERVATIONS: Indigenous Canadians stated the obvious: they wanted their children to be schooled so they could thrive in a modern society. At the same time, they needed to develop an understanding of their cultural traditions.

IMPACTS: As numerous reports and studies have shown, the present system accomplished none of these goals. In an effort to avoid the biases and paternalism built into the system, Indigenous control was put forward as viable solution.

2000
Auditor General's Report on the State of Yukon First Nations Education

OBSERVATIONS: While the performance gap continued to widen and more needed to be done, considerable confusion surrounded the roles/responsibilities of the federal government, impeding the entire process.

IMPACTS: Recommended changes to jurisdictional oversights were poorly implemented and a 2004 follow up found that the federal government had made little progress in the intervening years.

2001
Assembly of First Nations: Jurisdiction National Background Paper (A literature review from 1972–2000)

OBSERVATIONS: Repeated calls for education reform and changes to Aboriginal educational jurisdiction were noted Canada-wide.

IMPACTS: The report noted that it is unlikely that such demands will decrease or go away. A growing sense of frustration at the misdirection and mistreatment of First Nations student will likely only inspire further effort.

2003
Na–Cho Nyak Dun Report: Two Trails One Vision

OBSERVATIONS: An assessment of a local community school determined that a range of issues contributed to poor student performance, including racism, alienation, bias, etc. contributed to poor student performance.

IMPACTS: Despite requests to improve community relationships, update and support new teaching approaches, and incorporate more cultural knowledge, the report was rejected and there were few changes or improvements.

2005
Federal Action Plan

OBSERVATIONS: The federal government implemented an Action Plan that focused on accountability and data management. A First Nations education policy was developed to determine a vision and direction for a federal Indigenous education policy.

IMPACTS: The program was felt to be ineffective and little progress was made.

2006
Setting our Course: Yukon First Nations (video)

OBSERVATIONS: Yukon First Nations produced a backgrounder video about their motivation to improve their self-governing agreements.

IMPACTS: Participants made it clear that sovereignty, self-control, and effective cultural integration were the keys to improving student outcomes.

2007
One Vision Multiple Pathways (Secondary School Reform)

OBSERVATIONS: Failings in the secondary school system led to a number of recommendations, such as the development of a student-focused approach that is flexible and adaptable and supports First Nations learners.

IMPACTS: While changes to the system were made, many of the recommendations have yet to be fully implemented.

2008
Education Reform Final Report

OBSERVATIONS: A community-based evaluation took over three years to review the Education Act. Of concern was the performance gap in First Nations communities. Participants made recommendations for adaptations to both the school system and the Education Act.

IMPACTS: The inability to narrow the achievement gap between First Nations and non-First Nations students indicated the approach was not effective.

2008
Helping Students Succeed: Vision, Goals and Priorities for Yukon First Nations Education (Yukon First Nation Education Advisory Committee)

OBSERVATIONS: To improve community relationships and educational outcomes, YFNEAC identified five specific goals.

IMPACTS: Most First Nations governments were underwhelmed by the Department of Education's ability to implement the goals.

2008–2009
Government of Yukon's New Horizons

OBSERVATIONS: Government of Yukon began a consultative process, intending to find strategies to support First Nations learners and develop appropriate curriculum.

IMPACTS: Yukon First Nations found the process laden with bureaucracy and committee meetings – ineffective and off-target.

2009
Auditor General's Report on Education in Yukon

OBSERVATIONS: The Department of Education was deemed to be significantly under-performing and not meeting the needs of its First Nations students.

IMPACTS: Despite a similar finding in the KWIYA report 22 years earlier, the Department of Education offered to adapt and improve its approach to Indigenous education – but the achievement gap remained and many recommendations were not addressed.

2011
Assembly of First Nations First Nation – Elementary and Secondary Education: A Discussion Guide

OBSERVATIONS: The AFN, from a national perspective, identified several key components that effective Indigenous education practices should include.

IMPACTS: Yukon First Nations were increasingly frustrated as they were unable to implement or mirror the educational successes of other Canadian First Nations.

2012
MOU on Education with Yukon First Nations, and Federal and Territorial Governments

OBSERVATIONS: The MOU sought to refocus government attention on basic obligations that had been agreed to under the Yukon First Nations self-government agreements.

IMPACTS: An implementation plan was required – but not completed until 2014. In the interim, no action was taken by either the federal or territorial governments.

2013
Assembly of First Nations: Jurisdiction Principles in First Nations Education

OBSERVATIONS: AFN noted that trust and collaboration would be key factors in any effective partnership.

IMPACTS: Yukon First Nations felt that the central value of "trust" upon which the progress would be based, was not upheld.

2013
David Joe Options Paper

OBSERVATIONS: Yukon First Nations wanted to adopt a negotiating position to improve educational outcomes for First Nations learners by focusing on jurisdiction, improving academic outcomes, and strengthening the use of First Nations language and culture.

IMPACTS: The adoption of a "new" approach reflected the growing frustration with both the speed and the overall lack of progress for students. A self-directed system was felt to be one of the few effective alternatives.

2014
Joint Education Action Plan (JEAP) **Tripartite Education Partnership agreement between Government of Yukon, Government of Canada, Council of Yukon First Nations and all 14 Yukon First Nations.**

OBSERVATIONS: With a common thread of community, family, and parent and student engagement, the priorities in the plan were to support First Nations as they took on more authority, control and responsibility for education. This included a focus on improving culture and language, sustainability, and support and success, as well as closing the achievement gap.

IMPACTS: A 2019 review noted several significant concerns, most specifically:

- Limited funding
- Questionable data collection
- Top down implementation by Yukon government with limited collaboration
- Few real changes in the responsibility and accountability sought by Yukon First Nations
- Two-year meeting hiatus (2016 -2018)

2014
Yukon First Nations: A 360 Perspective

OBSERVATIONS: Participants highlighted the need for a holistic approach to the social, health, economic, and political challenges facing Yukon schools. Particular attention was paid to the concept of the "whole child" and their readiness to participate in society.

IMPACTS: The ongoing issues of attendance, poor academic performance, and post-secondary participation highlighted the limited success of the government supports.

2015
Truth and Reconciliation Final Report

OBSERVATIONS: It noted that wide-ranging partnerships, a reallocation of funding, and a fundamental shift in mindsets are needed to begin repairing the damage of colonization and the residential school system.

IMPACTS: The report highlighted historical and longstanding concerns. It is unclear what actions Yukon government had taken or will take, or overall effectiveness to address the report findings.

2018
AFN: Yukon Indigenous Language Discussion Paper

OBSERVATIONS: Both Yukon First Nations and Yukon government recognized that language preservation and instruction are vital, but were unable to agree on what steps were necessary.

IMPACTS: Despite the Department of Education's offering of language revitalization programs since 1981, objective measures indicate there had been little improvement in language fluency. Changes in the status quo needed to be made.

2019
Auditor General's Report on Education in Yukon

OBSERVATIONS: In a follow up to the 2009 Auditor General's report, the Yukon Department of Education is found to have made few improvements or structural changes to the outcomes of First Nations students.

IMPACTS: Despite concerns with systemic inequality being first identified 32 years ago, a failure to act continued to devastate generations of First Nations youth.

2020
Yukon Government Definition of Consultation with First Nations

OBSERVATIONS: Yukon government attempted to define its working relationship with Yukon First Nations.

IMPACTS: Consultation, while much contemplated and widely discussed, has been found to be haphazard and superficial. The concept of consultation, as defined by the government, did not support progress and did not represent a government-to-government relationship.

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Photo: Council of Yukon First Nations from 2018

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