

Open Letter about the Future of the Teacher Education Program

February 18, 2017

I have been asked to write to you on behalf of my fellow students. We are a group of Teacher Education Program (TEP) students, who are concerned about the recent Government of the Northwest Territories' decision to phase out the Bachelor of Education program at the Aurora College Thebacha Campus as of 2020. Our apprehension is not only for the safety of our own educational journeys, but mainly for all of those who wish to follow our path in the future. Our fear is that by ending this forty-seven-year-old program, opportunities will close for both aspiring northern educators and northern school students. The importance of northerners teaching in NWT classrooms is immense. Students deserve educators who are both culturally aware and trained in the North. Students in the Northwest Territories need teachers who are well trained and also aware of the lingering effects of the damage to our people from residential schools and colonization. We believe that it would be wrong to impede opportunities for Indigenous educators and students.

According to the Strategy for Teacher Education in the NWT document (https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/resources/strategy_for_teacher_education_in_the_nwt_-_2007-15.pdf), NWT TEP was the first program of its kind in the country, and many others have been modelled after it. The Program was built on a desire to return the control of Aboriginal children's education to Aboriginal peoples, by removing systemic and social barriers that prevented access in the educational field. While postsecondary institutions are struggling with finances throughout the country, many southern provinces are increasing funding and support to Indigenous students. It is ironic that the South is still looking to the NWT as a leader in Indigenous education.

As of 1968-2008, there were 269 TEP Graduates, 78% were Indigenous. In 2004-2005, there were only 11% indigenous teachers in the NWT. This is partly because some of our graduates move on to other careers within and outside the field of education. Nevertheless, as of 2005, 79% of graduates from 1991-2005 were still working in some capacity in the field of education in the NWT. This begs the question: Why do we not promote the success of the TEP? Indeed, we should be celebrating its success rather than planning its demise.

The idea that the GNWT will save money by shutting down TEP is erroneous. From 2000-2004, the cost of importing southern teachers to the NWT was 1.2 million dollars. The teacher turnover rate was about 18% between 1999 and 2004 ([ece.gov.nt.ca](http://www.ece.gov.nt.ca)). By contrast, teachers from the North tend to stay in the North.

There will be other negative effects if the decision to close TEP is not reversed. When students are educated in the South, they spend their SFA grant in regions other than in the NWT. We ask whether this economic impact has been evaluated. Was there a real cost/benefit analysis of the economic effects of eliminating this valuable program? Indeed, there are many other unanswered questions. Do the decision-makers know that the graduation rates at the Thebacha Campus have been constant over the last 20 years? Has a study been done about how many

Indigenous students who go south to complete their degree and return to the NWT to teach? Have prospective Indigenous TEP students been consulted about where they want to earn their degrees?

We have other questions to which we would appreciate clear answers. Please help us to understand this decision by answering these queries:

1. Whose decision was it to cut both the TEP Program and the Social Workers Program?
2. How was this decision made?
3. What economic analysis was done?
4. Were all programs evaluated, and if so, where is the documentation?
5. When was the decision made to phase out both the TEP and Social Work programs?
6. Were programs themselves discussed, in terms of their effectiveness?
7. What other options were presented?
8. Was there a consideration of reducing the top heavy administration of the College in order to save money?
9. What is the College's and the government's definition of program success?
10. Were students consulted prior to making this decision?
11. Was the effect on the future students having to uproot their families from the North been considered? (A high majority of TEP students tend to be females, many of who are mothers).
12. Why should money of the NWT taxpayers be assigned to a private post-secondary education entity by the government, while the government is cutting financial support to public post-secondary programs?
13. The Aurora College Board of Governors signed an Indigenous Knowledge Declaration in the fall of 2015, at the Thebacha Campus. How sincere was the College when they signed this document when they are cutting programs consisting mainly of Indigenous people and where Indigenous Knowledges can most be recognized, respected, and shared?

Aboriginal leaders across the territory have continually highlighted the need for improvement of our schools. For decades, they have heard the members of their communities asking for an education system that is purposeful and relevant to the real lives and future goals of students. As current and future partners in education, Aboriginal governments are increasingly involved in discussions about education. The NWT is moving into a period where Aboriginal governments, through negotiated agreements, have regained the rights of formal education for their people, and are beginning to negotiate and will ultimately exercise these responsibilities. How is eliminating TEP advancing the aspirations of Aboriginal governments?

There is a great need to make education more relevant to Aboriginal people. Presently, a big gap exists between the achievements of Aboriginal students and other students, especially in small community schools where the student population is close to 100% Aboriginal. In the NWT, on average, only four of every 10 Aboriginal students will graduate, compared to eight of every 10 non-Aboriginal students (ece.gov.nt).

The proposed cuts disregard the needs of our Aboriginal children. In our view, this decision represents short-sighted thinking. According to Skills4success Strategic Framework Report, the highest requirement for jobs requiring a degree in the next 15 years will be elementary school teachers! (777 positions). Whereas, the trades are projected to need about half as many jobs, compared to the present requirements. Why is the government putting additional money into training for trades, when its own employment forecast indicates that teachers will be in higher demand? Additionally, TEP trained individuals with university degrees also prepare its students for the workforce beyond education, as demonstrated by producing a Member of Parliament, MLAs and a Premier.

Teachers from the north tend to stay in the north! This program cutting decision is not a long term thinking solution regarding our children. Economic trends come and go but the education our children receive is life-long and has generational impacts.

We ask that you please help us to fight for Northern education by assisting us in finding an alternative and sustainable solution, rather than ending this valuable and excellent program. Its graduates are currently teaching in classrooms in many different communities. I hope that you can help us future NWT educators to have our voices heard, and in doing so, secure the future of education across the North.

Mahsi,

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