



**The Honourable Edna Ekhivalak Elias
Commissioner of Nunavut**

**“Celebrating *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* in Nunavut Schools”
Banquet**

Iqaluit, Nunavut

February 2nd, 2011

I am honoured and proud to be here this evening with a group of educators and District Education Authority members who are working so hard to create a system of education for Nunavut students that is founded on *Inuit Quajimajatuqangit*, reflective of individual communities and promotes learning of Inuit languages, culture and traditions.

You may not be aware that I am a former teacher and principal, a graduate of the NWT Teacher Education Program, and have taught in Ikpiarjuk and Kugluktuk. I also had the pleasure of recently instructing the Aboriginal Language Certificate program in Kugluktuk, where five of the students were Elders and more recently instructed the Inuinnaqtun Course for the NTEP students in Kugluktuk. As an Inuinnaqtun interpreter/translator, I am very familiar with many recent education publications, such as the foundation documents!

It is my intention to acknowledge the strides that you have made in program development and delivery as well as the administration of your powers and duties but also to raise questions, I'll say, food for thought. I will raise issues as an outsider looking in and from my latter experiences.

The theme of tonight's banquet is "Celebrating *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* in Nunavut Schools" is familiar to me in many ways. As a classroom assistant in Kugluktuk in the 1970s - of course, I was very young then and later as a qualified teacher – I loved using a hands-on approach to teaching and believed that learning occurred best in the appropriate environment. Stories were told using fish head bones, seal bones and anatomy was learned by dissecting animals like hikhiit. Berries were not only picked to eat but also to create dyes to color fabric. We didn't call those lessons

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit back then, but that is what they were.

In my classroom years, it was called cultural inclusion.

I am very pleased to be here to help celebrate the successes you have accomplished in schools over the last few years. I want to affirm how important the work you are doing is to our youth. Later tonight, I understand that you are going to share some examples of what your students and schools have done with respect to *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* over the past year.

Right now I would like to celebrate you – our school principals, our district education authority representatives, and our Department of Education staff, as well as our partners from other organizations – who have worked tirelessly to ensure that the education system is consistent with our values and culture.

Thank you! Please give yourselves a round of applause and

give the person to your right a congratulatory pat on the back.

Pat your own if you wish!

The *Education Act* calls for the public education system to be based on Inuit societal values and the principles and concepts of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit. This is fundamental to ensuring a public education system that will provide the youth with the skills, knowledge and attitudes they will need to be sure of who they are as Inuit, as well as what they need to be successful in school, post-secondary education and work.

Students will be more engaged and empowered in a system that reflects their values and culture. We all have a role and an obligation to do everything we can to help build and develop this system.

Nunavut's *Education Act* provides guidance to educators, community members, District Education Authorities and

partners on how to go about this important work. Many of you have already been doing much of the important foundational work in your communities for some time, by involving Elders in programming and instruction of culture, language and traditions.

Elders are essential in helping our youth expand their knowledge of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* and to pass on important knowledge and skills that have been with Inuit for generations. Earlier today, five Iqaluit Elders: Mary Akumalik, Sinea Kownirk, Serapio Ittusardjuat, Letia Tikivik and Sheepa Ishulutaq, were honoured and recognized as *Innait Inuksiutilirijit* under the *Education Act*. This was a very proud moment for our Elders, the schools and students they work with, the community and our education system. When you return to your communities, I hope you will all, begin the process of recommending Elders for certification, to work in

your schools and pass on their knowledge and skills to our youth in methods most appropriate for your students and the Inuit language situation of your community.

For example, Inuinnaqtun in Kugluktuk has been in a revitalization mode for the past five years. Inuit educators from the Kitikmeot School Operations, studied a method of revitalization that has been proven successful in other aboriginal countries; the Master Apprentice Approach.

Through lobbying for funding and successfully obtaining funding from various sources numerous workshops were held facilitated by experts of the approach in Kugluktuk. It was a success; we were the first to graduate Elders as language instructors in a method that was most appropriate to our situation; revitalizing Inuinnaqtun. Today these five Elders are ‘stretched to the max’ and are in high demand by schools and agencies to delivery programs.

Funding to successful programs like this need to be a government commitment so they may continue to operate. There is a desire by many residents to participate in such a program. Although Nunavut Arctic College offers language courses; too much emphasis is placed on reading and writing. We, in the Inuinnaqtun language area need to focus on conversational Inuinnaqtun courses and that is what people want. We, as educators have known for years that listening and speaking must be mastered before reading and writing. It holds true for adult learners as well.

Involving Elders in school programs also reinforces the importance of continuous or life-long learning. Not only are our young people learning from our Elders, but our Elders are having the opportunity to learn from our young people! It was so clearly demonstrated in the course that I taught in

Kugluktuk. I know there were and are many things that are new to them. I saw firsthand how excited and hesitant learners, including Elders, can be when they faced with learning new things. Observing the learning taking place between Elders and young adults, and particularly how they were teaching each other new things was priceless. When young people see adults and Elders learning throughout their lives, it helps them to understand that education does not only take place in the school, but all around them, and for their entire lives. It shows all Nunavummiut the importance of helping others to learn and that learning need not always occur in formal settings

Currently, the Department of Education is working to ensure that even our youngest learners have the chance to access programs and learning opportunities that focus on Inuit language and culture. By providing early exposure and support to children aged 0 to 6 to develop language skills and take part

in cultural activities, we will build a solid foundation for their future. Having said this, it is crucial and important to provide opportunities and access for early childhood workers from daycares and pre-school programs to participate in professional development, particularly language teaching workshops.

Consistency in teaching methods and strategies is important to allow smooth transition of learners from one program to the next. Pre-school programs feed our kindergarten programs.

You have worked hard to create schools that are inclusive environments where all students, parents and community members feel welcome, safe and respected. From developing and implementing innovative programs that encourage attendance, to programs that help students develop and learn the skills and knowledge they need to become able, your schools are shining examples of the principles of

Qanurilirutikhaqhiurniq and *Pimmarikharniq*.

You are taking the steps needed, through the implementation of new curriculum, student assessments and best teaching practices to provide programming that meets student's individual needs, strengths and interests. In providing programming and support for each student, you are taking the steps to assist students to develop at their own learning pace and style. Question to ponder here is whether we are letting children go at their own pace too often without pushing or challenging them too much. By saying "to assist students to develop at their own style", are we taking into account the different learning styles of students?

Please allow me to elaborate. I am, as are some others, starting to believe we need to go back a decade or two and bring back some of the 'vocational' courses. Face it, we all know that every learner is not of mainstream academic ability. It is those

students that are not, that we lose by their lack of success and subsequently poor attendance which eventually leads to dropping out. If we are truly to be inclusive, we must take a serious look and plan to develop programs that will make us inclusive of all learning styles and abilities.

The *Education Act* offers parents and community members a greater role and responsibility in developing policies, administration and support for school activities through District Education Authorities. The District Education Authorities provide important links between the home, community and school, to create an environment where students can reach their full potential. Through the principles of *Piqatiriingniq* and *Kivgaqtuiniq*, the District Education Authorities are encouraging increased community involvement in education and making sure that the education system serves the needs and strengths of the community.

All of you here tonight have embraced the principles of *Tunngahuktittiniq, Kivgaqtuiniq, Aajiiqatigiinni* and *Piqatigiingniq* through the community consultations to develop *Inuuqatigiittiarniq* policies, to determine your language of instruction models and to develop school programs. By involving parents, families and communities members in the education system, you are taking an important step to create schools and a system that are truly reflective of each individual community. You are respecting and building on the strengths and knowledge of those individuals.

Lastly, a topic that is very close to my heart and the hearts of most Inuit- bilingual education. The *Education Act* and the *Inuit Language Protection Act* mandate that graduates must be able to communicate bilingually in the Inuit language and one other language when they graduate. This is one of the most

important aspects of the *Education Act* and one that requires commitment, dedication and leadership with all your partners, in many areas. There are many challenges in reaching this goal, but many opportunities as well. Chances for our young people to learn their language and go on to teach others; chances for our Elders to share and communicate in their first language; and chances for us to strengthen our communities and revive Inuit languages and culture.

I agree that there are many challenges and some jurisdictions face far greater challenges than others. Again I will use the Kitikmeot, the Inuinnaqtun situation as an example. We are facing the loss of Inuinnaqtun. We acknowledge the efforts of the NTEP to train Inuit teachers but it is sad to say but I will say it. The Inuinnaqtun speaking area is running out of bilingual speakers - potential bilingual teachers. This fact adds another challenge to the implementation of bilingual education.

Not only does it add to this challenge but also to the Language of Work goals of the legislation.

However, all this work and your efforts are producing great results. There are more students graduating from Nunavut's high schools every year. There are more students going on to post-secondary education and other learning opportunities.

Students are becoming self-reliant, able and proud to be Inuit.

Despite all the emphasis on the implementation of the Act through the implementation of Inuit Qauyimayatuqangit, Inuit societal values and principles, I think the biggest and concrete measure of educational success will be the increased retention of students, lower drop-out rates and increasing number of high school graduates. Graduates with honors and marks that will allow their entrance into post secondary without requiring upgrading. We know that our education system gets criticized

for not being equal to southern standards. I believe that our education standards can be equal to that of our Southern counterparts with all the added value of Inuit

Qauyimayatuqangit. Our curricula is far richer by milestones because of the dedication and commitment of Nunavut's partners in education.

I am looking ahead with great excitement to see what else will be done in the near future to ensure schools that reflect the culture, language, needs and interests of our students. It is not that many years since I was in the classroom myself, so I understand the many challenges you face each and every day. I thank you for your commitment. In my role as Commissioner, I am extremely proud to tell the people that I meet in Nunavut, across Canada and others from around the world of our ownership of made-in-Nunavut legislation, of our

achievements and challenges in education and language, and the bright future we are building for our students.

Thank you again for all your hard work and dedication! Enjoy this evening and I hope you will all return to your communities invigorated and excited about the direction of education in Nunavut. It is all in your hands to carve as you see fit and appropriate for your respective communities. Community members have come a long way from being advisory only to your position of power today. Never have we had such power!

Quana.