

Alternatives North

Commentary

on the

Government of the Northwest Territories

Department of Education, Culture and Employment

**Strategic Planning
Consultation Guide Book Series**



February 15, 2005

Introduction:

Alternatives North has reviewed the Guide Books forming part to the ongoing public consultation process, a process that is intended to lead to a updating of the GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment ten-year strategic plan. We submit this commentary not as substantive input for the new plan but rather as commentary on the tools and process of the review.

There are five booklets out for the public to use to provide structured feedback: Income Security; Early Childhood and Schools; Adult and Post Secondary Education; Culture, Heritage and Languages; and Career Development, Employment and Labour. Except for those concerns considered below in detail, Alternatives North believes the booklets appear to fairly ask for feedback on the specified departmental programs.

We start with a review of the Income Support component, the segment of the process about which we have the most to say. Afterwards we discuss the remaining guides before offering some concluding remarks and recommendations.

Commentary on Income Support Guide Book:

Each of the consultation guides start with brief introductory comments and a group of “boiler plate” questions seeking the respondents’ age, sex, etc. Following this, the guides move into substantive questions.

The first substantive issue addressed by the Income Support Guide (Question #7) is a statement with which respondents are asked to agree or disagree. It reads: “There are some aspects of Income Security programs that discourage people from active participation in the workforce.” To start a survey on social assistance with such a loaded question causes Alternatives North substantial consternation about the real purpose of the review process. The question is fundamentally biased. Its wording and priority placement seem intended to influence the responses to the ensuing questions.

It's quite obvious that in a market economy having enough money to survive might discourage people from accepting work that is unacceptable (for many good reasons) to them. For this reason virtually everyone must necessarily agree with the statement. Having this question placed first poisons the results of the whole survey. Respondents to surveys normally try to be consistent in their replies. By having such a question first, one can expect that the answers to all subsequent questions will tend to be based on a presumption that people on social assistance are there out of laziness, not for bona fide reasons beyond their control.

What message would respondents have received if the first statement had been: "All people in the Northwest Territories deserve to have the means to enjoy a reasonable quality of life."? Alternatives North believes that most northerners would agree with this sentiment if they were given it as an option. What might their later answers have been if their first consideration was an encouragement to care about their fellow northerners instead of mistrusting them? Having a more positive first premise for respondents to accept would probably have given completely different answers to subsequent "values-testing" questions.

The identical criticism can be made about Question #8. Instead of, "What changes could we make to our Income Security programs that would better support people to be as independent as they can be?" What would northerners have said to "What changes could we make to our Income Security programs that would better support people to enjoy the best quality of life that they can?" Instead of blaming people for their unfortunate situation, suggesting that we should support them would be a good option, and a decent basis for a quality public support program.

Alternatives North can't guarantee replies would have been different but it can question a "survey" that so obviously pre-determines the answers it will get. Government doesn't appear to want to really know what northerners expect from public income support programs. This is apparent from both the structure and the content of the consultation work books.

The bias in the survey is once again apparent in the series of questions relating to "decentrallisation" and "local control" of Income Security programs. (See questions #11 - 14.)

Statement #11 asks for respondents to agree or disagree with, "Communities and

community organizations should take a greater role in determining the overall direction of Income Security programs and services.” Regardless of the respondent’s actual reply to Statement #11, open-ended Question #12, then asks, “What could we at ECE do to encourage communities and community organizations to take a greater role in determining the overall direction of Income Security programs and services?” What would a respondent say in response to this question if in the preceding question they had indicated they didn’t support decentralization? It seems their ideas, in that case, just aren’t welcome.

The next pair of questions (#13 and #14) has the same shortcoming. The first question asks whether there should be a greater link between territorial Income Support programs and local programs. The follow-up open-ended question then presumes you’ve agreed with the principle of local control, and doesn’t indicate an interest in your suggestions unless you did.

The transparent bias shown in the structure of these questions suggests that ECE has already determined that it intends to decentralize Income Support programs and marry them to local programs.

Statement #15 also limits the range of answers that can be given. “Benefits should be targeted to those most in need” is the statement one must agree to or disagree with. But what if the respondent was to believe that all northerners “in need” should be “targeted” for assistance, not just “most” of them? Those who believe our social programs must support all seniors in need, all disabled persons who can’t find employment due to unsuitability or prejudice, all children at risk because of they are in single-parent or other low income family situations, not just those “most” in need, have no easy way to make their position known. If the government was truly interested in the learning the full range of citizen opinion about income security issues, the survey would never have been distributed in its current form.

Early Childhood and Schools:

Concerns exist about apparent bias inherent in some of the questions in this Guide Book too. Underlying many of the statements posed in the *Early Childhood Programming* section is a premise that there is insufficient funding to deliver the programme that is needed. Respondents

are wrongly forced to choose between two critical principles. Statement #9 reads, "Lowering the cost to parents for child care and pre-school programming is more important than improving the quality of the programs," and #12 reads, "Increasing the number of child care spaces is more important than improving the quality of child care in the NWT". In these statements, lowering costs to parents and increasing the number of available spaces are sawed off against improving the quality of care. This is not a fair choice; this is not the only choice.

Recent debates at the national level have shown early childhood development to be both an essential public service and a priority of Canadians. To Alternatives North, this leads to the conclusion that accessible, affordable, quality childcare for all who need it, not only for those who can afford it, or only for those living in the larger communities, should be an option.

If the government really wanted to understand the perspective of Northerners about the accessibility and quality of childcare services in the North, a more meaningful choice could have been offered. Why not, "Accessible and quality childcare services are so important to the well being of our children and to the future of the North that I would support a tax increase to see it made available"?

Questions appearing in this Guide Book in the *School Curriculum and Instruction* section, also cause consternation to Alternatives North because they assume a level of knowledge about educational issues that we suspect the vast majority of respondents are not likely to have. Without this background, respondents do not have sufficient information on which to base an intelligent choice. Statement #20, for example, asks respondents to agree or disagree with "In Grades 1 through 3, learning should focus on language arts and mathematics, with less emphasis on other subjects." How can an average individual provide a responsible answer to such an issue without having a good grasp of the science of how children develop intellectually and socially? Without more, the responses collected to such a question must be little more than prejudice. Identical criticism can be made about the next Statement, #21, which reads, "In all grades, the curriculum should focus on basic skills (reading, writing, social studies, science and mathematics)." But what is the accepted knowledge on this issue? What do the experts say?

Without this essential information behind the responses, there seems to be little real value to the responses received and the results should be discarded.

Adult and Post Secondary Education:

The section of the Guide that concerns Alternatives North is in the *Post-Secondary Education* segment. Statement #6 therein is not a fair question. The statement respondents must agree or disagree with has a completely inappropriate preamble that biases the possible results in the extreme. It reads, “To meet Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) NWT fiscal priorities, students should pay a greater portion of their post-secondary education costs.” What are the government “priorities” against which student financial assistance is to be measured? Are loans to allow our children to get the education they are going to need in this “era of rapid change” (*Culture, Heritage and Languages Consultation Guide*, p. 5) to be judged more or less important than public health care, than paving roads, than providing tax breaks to mining corporations or subsidies to diamond processing facilities? Without this context, the answer to this question is quite simply meaningless.

Statement #6 also happens to be the first substantive question in this section of the Guide, and, as with the initial question in the *Income Support* Guide, its placement, content and ambiguity appear designed to poison the results of the survey. No respondent is likely to go so far as to state that financial support for post secondary students should be a government’s first priority. But then, having “downgraded” the programme in their own minds, their responses to all the rest of the values-based questions about the topic may be biased.

Distribution Methodology:

Government should find direct ways to put the specific questions about service levels into the hands of past and current clients of income support (and other) programs. For example, instead of having to go to the internet to access the questionnaire concerning their experience with income support, why were all recipients not provided with a questionnaire along with their monthly benefit cheque? The same for sections concerning Student Financial Assistance, Child Care Subsidy, NWT Child Benefit, Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit, and Senior Home

Heating Subsidy. The government should have actively put these surveys into the hands of those now receiving benefits, even into the hands of those who have received benefits within the last two years. It should have been made much easier for the people most directly affected by each of these programs to provide their feedback. Of course, confidentiality would still need to be guaranteed.

Concluding Comments and Recommendations:

Alternatives North commends the Department of Education, Culture and Employment for its consultative initiative. Much of the information it will garner from the process will be valuable. We do recommend, however, that the results of the survey relating to the Income Support programs be treated very cautiously. Those results cannot be considered reliable; they do not necessarily reflect the true wishes of northerners; nor are they necessarily an accurate assessment of the quality of, or problems with, current program delivery. We go so far as to suggest these results should be discarded in their entirety, and that the Department go out again to seek the opinions of northerners in a more objective way.

The current long term strategy upon which government support programs are based is an individualist commitment to independence and self-reliance. Although a laudable goal to many in theory, government social policy must acknowledge that some people simply cannot or will not ever be self-reliant. This can be for a wide variety of reasons, many of which are beyond the control of the individual. Programs must accommodate these people and provide them with a minimal acceptable quality of life - without blame, without mean spiritedness.