

Community Wellness and Safety: ECE Progress Statement

Mr. Speaker, two of the key factors in community wellness and safety are education and partnership. Every person and organization across the Northwest Territories has something to contribute to help make our communities healthy and safe.

At the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, all of our programs and services follow a continuum of strategies, building on the foundations of the others. These strategies are designed to address community and resident needs from early childhood, through to ensuring Northerners have the skills, attitudes and opportunities for success.

Mr. Speaker, in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Services, the Right from the Start strategy is strengthening services, programs and resources for families and caregivers with young children across the North.

We have worked closely with Early Childhood Program operators, to provide them with supports, new funding and fewer administrative requirements, so they can focus on developing quality programs for the children in their care.

The Early Childhood Staff Grant Program, ongoing since 2015, continues to encourage early childhood workers in licensed day care facilities to upgrade their skills and education through incremental wage benefits. Over the 2015-2016 fiscal year, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment provided grants to approximately 240 full and part-time early childhood workers. The goal of this program is to help licensed child care facilities provide a greater level of service to their communities, and workers with a higher income and knowledge.

As well, since 2014-2015, we have awarded 38 scholarships to postsecondary students enrolled in full-time early childhood development diploma or degree programs. This includes 13 scholarships awarded in 2016-2017.

This is an investment in the critical early years, to ensure the children of the North have quality childhood workers committed to their safety and care.

Mr. Speaker, further to fulfilling our mandate commitments in community wellness and safety, we have had a strong focus on ensuring our schools are safe. Schools are central to many communities, but we know there are issues in every school; we have seen this across Canada and around the world.

We have been working very closely with our education partners over the past few years, and have engaged with experts in implementing safe and caring schools. We must ensure our schools are safe environments so students can focus on learning and feel supported, and that staff can feel secure.

On September 1, 2016, the Territorial School Code of Conduct and Safe Schools Regulations came into effect. The Regulations set a standard of behaviour for Northwest Territories students, school staff and the school community. The Department has provided education bodies with templates and exemplars to assist in the required development of Safe Schools Plans, and is currently providing supports to education bodies in the development of Emergency Response Plans, to be implemented in the 2017-2018 school year. These plans will be reviewed and updated annually.

As well, the Department is working with Non-Government Organization partners and education bodies to develop policies and resources to support students and staff from the LGBTQ2+ community.

In partnership with Health and Social Services, we are developing a renewed JK to Grade 9 Health and Wellness curriculum to address issues of mental health, healthy relationships and the importance of physical activity. The curriculum will encourage teachers to build strengthened relationships between the school, the community and regional health, dental and mental health service providers and other community organizations.

A key aspect of this new curriculum will be an increased emphasis on approaches to teaching and learning that rely on student research of community-identified wellness issues.

As a further investment in community wellness, the Small Community Employment Support Program enables residents to either receive training-on-the-job, or through the community initiatives which provides formal training or a combination of on-the-job and formal training. This program helps residents with employment, allowing them to contribute to their communities and the ability to provide for their families. In 2016-2017, 200 residents received training-on-the-job and 69 residents received training through community initiatives. The proposed three million dollar investment, announced by the Minister of Finance in the budget speech, will allow us to target our investments to ensure we are meeting the needs of both our residents and of the Northwest Territories labour market.

Mr. Speaker, senior citizens, the Elders of our territory, have helped to build and grow the North, and we must support them to remain amongst their families and with their communities. At the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, we deliver two programs specifically in place to assist seniors: the Senior Home Heating Subsidy and the Senior Citizen Supplementary Benefit. The Senior Home Heating Subsidy ensures that lower income seniors, who own their own homes, receive a fuel subsidy that assists with the cost of heating their home. The Supplementary Benefit Program is a monthly pension for low-income seniors, to assist them with the cost of living, and allows them to age in place.

Mr. Speaker, community wellness and safety are paramount to the well-being and success of our residents and of the North. We, and our partners across the territory have an obligation to ensure our residents have the opportunity to live healthy and productive lives in safe communities.

Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.