

Developments in Early Childhood Programs and Services

Mr. Speaker, many factors impact a child's life both negatively and positively. As a parent, I understand some of the struggles parents face and as a Social Worker I adhere to the principle that all of us; (parents, family, friends, community members, and governments) have a role to play in ensuring children have the supports to succeed in life.

Upon assuming the position as Minister for Education, Culture and Employment, one of my first priorities was to ensure we were doing our part to meet the developmental needs of children, and having measurable outcomes to assess if our programs and services are effective. The 2015-17 Early Development Instrument results and a national 2017 Early Childhood Education Report confirmed that my concerns had merit, and although we are working in the right direction; we still have much to do.

The Early Development Instrument, or EDI, is a nationally utilized tool, administered prior to Grade One, that provides a snapshot of five-year-old children's developmental vulnerability rates. The most recent data available shows that vulnerability rates of Canadian children are increasing. This is reflected in the results for the Northwest Territories, where vulnerability rates have increased from 38 per cent to 42 per cent, as compared to the 2012-14 results. Unfortunately, the EDI results alone, do not identify specific causes for vulnerability that we can easily address. They reflect the accumulation of early childhood experiences within the family, community and wider society.

Education, Culture, and Employment and Health and Social Services will continue to work together on initiatives in the Right From the Start Framework and Action Plan to address areas of vulnerability in the NWT. This Action Plan will be renewed during the 2019-20 fiscal year, and the EDI data will be used to inform the new action plan and any initiatives included in that plan as we move forward. As part of this work, we will renew our joint

Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability plan to ensure that we are looking at the impacts of initiatives over the longer term and adjusting as necessary.

As well, we work in partnership with the federal government through the Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, and we work closely with education bodies and licensed child care operators to support healthy early childhood development. Only by all of us working together, can we provide a comprehensive set of programs and services to better support families and young children.

Mr. Speaker, the effects of Junior Kindergarten across the Northwest Territories continues to be monitored, and has been one of our early successes. Although Junior Kindergarten is optional, 552 children are now enrolled in this early childhood programming. Not only is this helping to address the cost of living for families with small children, it is also ensuring more children have access to play-based early childhood programming. Preliminary analysis of the Early Development Instrument shows that children who attended Junior Kindergarten during the implementation in small communities were showing less vulnerabilities than children who did not.

During this 18th Legislative Assembly, we have developed curriculum for our Junior Kindergarten programming and resources to support schools. In the coming year, we will also be introducing an Early Learning Framework and, through federal funding, providing resources, including music, books and other play-based materials that reflect Indigenous beliefs and culture for licensed centre-based programs. A strong relationship with a child's own culture boosts a child's self esteem, mental health, and general wellness.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize that access to licensed-based child care supports healthy child development, as does Junior Kindergarten and reaches even younger children, however, we still have eleven communities without any licensed child care programs. This continues to be a priority. During the coming year, we will be completing the mandate to develop a comprehensive plan to make childcare more accessible, affordable, and inclusive. As well, where communities identify a need and interest in operating licensed early childhood programs, ECE will work with the community to support their establishment. We will also be placing a stronger emphasis on reaching out to communities lacking licensed child care

programs to increase awareness of the startup and ongoing funding available, as well as other supports we offer.

Mr. Speaker, to assist in the cost of living and encourage more licensed operators, we have also made increases to the licensed childcare operating subsidy rates beginning in October 2016 which were further enhanced in 2017-18 through federal funding. These increases, as well as the grants for health and safety, start-up funding, provider enhancement funding, and the Early Childhood Staff Grant program, will hopefully assist in making this opportunity more attractive to potential operators and early childhood educators.

Accessing qualified early childhood educators and ongoing training was a concern that we are also able to address through the Canada-NWT Early Learning and Child Care Bilateral Agreement and its three-year action plan. With this federal funding, Aurora College has expanded its certificate program and is now offering a full-time, two-year diploma in Early Learning and Child Care. As well, we have increased the scholarships available for students in early childhood programs from 10 to 30 scholarships. Over the coming year, we will also be developing an on-going training plan for flexible and sustainable training for staff of licensed child care centres and family day home programs.

The Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, released its 2017 Early Childhood Education Report. This report assesses early childhood education programming in Canada by province and territory. From 2014 to 2017, the Northwest Territories' rating increased from 6.5 to 8.0 out of 15, which places the NWT exactly in the middle of all of the provinces and territories. This ranking shows that as a government we have made early childhood development a priority and are investing in our youngest residents; a commitment that must continue.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize it takes a community to raise a child, and we are doing our part to assist in this. We have made some great progress to date and although we have a lot of work ahead during the rest of this 18th Legislative Assembly, we know how critical our work is and we welcome the challenge knowing that our efforts will assist our most valuable resource; our children.

Masi, Mr. Speaker.