

Early Childhood Development: Access, Affordability and Inclusion

Mr. Speaker, the early years, from birth to age five, are among the most critical for a child's development. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment recognizes the need to support safe and high-quality early learning environments for children to grow into healthy adults and fulfill their potential as capable people.

We know that parents and caregivers have the greatest responsibility and influence on their children's development. An effective and integrated early childhood system that provides the necessary services, supports and resources to families with young children is essential, to ensure our children have the best support possible to help them succeed.

Accessible and affordable early childhood services in every community are a critical part of the Department's mandate and necessary to support working caregivers. We have been enhancing our programs, services, interactions and support for early childcare operators and working with communities to ensure there are options available for families.

As all families with four- and five-year-old children have an option to access early learning programming within their local schools, there is now a focus on child care for children from birth to three years old. We know the level of child care required across the territory varies from year to year, depending on birth rate, employment status and the needs and preferences of families. Understanding unique community needs for child care is an important factor for developing approaches across the territory – a one-size-fits-all approach will not serve our families or our communities.

Mr. Speaker, the *Supporting Access to Child Care Action Plan* provides a vision for accessible child care in the NWT and outlines a phased-in approach to making child care more accessible and affordable for families throughout the NWT. I will be tabling this document later today.

As Members of this House know, the Department received funding through a bilateral agreement under the 2017 federal Early Learning and Child Care initiative. Our new plan expands upon the *Right from the Start Early Childhood Framework and Action Plan*. It provides an overview of six key elements, with goals and actions that contribute to accessible early learning and child care in the NWT. The plan highlights current work and provides additional actions specifically related to infrastructure and affordability.

Mr. Speaker, in spite of efforts to increase the number of communities with licensed early child care programs, there remains 11 communities without them. We are currently working with the communities of Colville Lake, Detah, Enterprise, Jean Marie River, Kakisa, Łutselk'e, Nahanni Butte, Norman Wells, Sambaa K'e, Wrigley and Tsiigehtchic to determine their needs and what the community can support. For some, sustainable early childhood programming may take the form of parent and child drop-in opportunities or support groups; and for others, there may be a need for and interest in opening licensed early childhood centres or family day homes. We have invited representatives from each of these communities to the Early Childhood Symposium happening August 21st to 23rd to discuss their specific needs and how we may help.

Although we continue to face challenges in this area, I know that the work done during this Assembly will have a lasting positive impact. We have increased rates for all licensed spaces, from infant to preschool, increased the number of Early Childhood Scholarships up to 30 this year from 10 and remodelled our funding programs for licensed early childhood programs.

The *Supporting Access to Child Care Action Plan* outlines our way forward. It addresses challenges and suggests solutions to meet child care needs across the territory. We are focusing on community-driven programs, increasing available spaces, exploring infrastructure potential, stabilizing parent fees, increasing the number of early childhood staff with postsecondary credentials and providing specific funding to support children with complex needs, including those with developmental challenges.

The types of quality early childhood experiences available will vary greatly across the territory, but we are committed to working with all communities to improve access and ensure a tailored approach that will meet the needs of families and children.

Masi, Mr. Speaker.