



**Government of the Northwest Territories Response to
Motion 26-18(2): Junior Kindergarten**

Motion

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment produce a plan to implement Junior Kindergarten in 2017-2018, along with a fully-costed budget for presentation to the Standing Committee on Social Development;

AND FURTHER, that the Department implement all the recommendations of the Junior Kindergarten review tabled in February;

AND FURTHERMORE, that in developing an implementation plan, the Department acknowledge that a one-size fits all approach to Junior Kindergarten is contrary to the report's recommendations;

AND FURTHERMORE, that the Department tailor the introduction of Junior Kindergarten to each community, with a focus on providing the greatest need to improve school readiness;

AND FURTHERMORE, that the Department accommodate existing community programs for four-year olds without jeopardizing their viability;

AND FURTHERMORE, that the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a comprehensive response to this motion within 120 days.

GNWT Response

The Junior Kindergarten Program (JK) emerged as a result of comprehensive stakeholder engagement with community leaders, parents, families, elders, educators, and early childhood professionals, and is guided by international and national research. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) has been preparing for the implementation of the JK since 2013. Implementation began with introduction of the program to 17 small communities in the 2014-15 school year, and is now offered in 20 small communities across the Northwest Territories. The territory-wide implementation of JK, including all small communities, regional centres and Yellowknife, is planned for the 2017-18 school year.

The territory-wide implementation of JK follows the GNWT Mandate which calls for free play-based care for 4-year olds in order to ensure children have a strong foundation for their development. JK will offer parents and families in all communities the opportunity for free, accessible, high quality, early childhood programming for four year olds, regardless of income or geographic location. ECE is grateful to Standing Committee on Social Development (SCOSD) for the opportunity to discuss this important program.

A Draft Implementation Plan was presented to SCOSD on December 7, 2016. This presentation included the cost to implement Junior Kindergarten and how it will be funded. On February 21, 2017, following commitments made during the December 7 presentation, ECE also provided SCOSD with the Final Implementation Plan and a summary of public engagements that took place from May to December, 2016.

Over the past year, in both the Legislative Assembly and to the Standing Committee on Priorities and Planning, the Minister of ECE has stated that the Department welcomes and agrees with the recommendation of the Review of Junior Kindergarten Technical Report that was prepared by Proactive Information Services and released by ECE in January 2016. To date, ECE has either implemented, or is in the process of implementing, each of the eight recommendations of the review. For instance, the Department has:

- Carried out additional engagements with stakeholders and parents across the territory between May and December 2016 in order to better understand the unique needs of each community;
- Revised the JK funding model and increased financial support for JK;
- Created enhanced curriculum and comprehensive teacher guide;
- Increased training for JK teachers; and
- Created a detailed communications plan to ensure stakeholders and parents are aware and understand how JK will be offered in their community.

Following the recommendations of the review, ECE has also taken steps to ensure JK implementation accounts for different community contexts. A one-size-fits-all approach to early childhood development does not work in the Northwest Territories, and ECE has responded to the needs of stakeholders, such as Aboriginal Head Start, by adapting the way JK is delivered. For example, regional Education Authorities will have the flexibility to hire JK instructors with a Bachelor of Education or an Early Childhood Diploma and, where appropriate, may offer JK for full or half days.

The JK Curriculum and Teacher Guide have been enhanced to include materials and supports to ensure a smooth and successful implementation. Professional development and training is also being provided to JK teachers on an ongoing basis, including face-to-face sessions in the Spring and Fall of 2017.

The overarching benefit of JK is improving children's school readiness. School readiness includes the readiness of the individual child, the school's readiness for children, and the ability of the family and community to support optimal early child development. As stated in the Review of Junior Kindergarten Technical Report:

Research consistently shows that high quality education for four year olds positively impacts everything from educational success to health and well-being.

The need for early childhood development in the NWT was reinforced by the baseline results from Northwest Territories first three years of data from the Early Development Instrument (EDI). Developed by Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University in 2000, the EDI is widely used in Canada and abroad as a population-based measure of school readiness based on five domains of child development, including physical health and well-being; emotional maturity; communication skills and general knowledge; social competence; and language and cognitive development (p. 2).

The JK/K Curriculum for 4 and 5 year old children is play-based and supports children's cognitive, social, emotional, creative and physical development. Research has shown that JK will have a significant positive impact on these dimensions of a child's development and help build a foundation for continued success throughout their JK-12 schooling.

Families and communities will also benefit tremendously from JK. In addition to gaining equitable access to free, quality early learning programming for all NWT families, JK will:

- Reduce cost-of-living by saving families up to \$12,000 a year in child care costs per 4-year old child;
- Open opportunities for parents to consider entry into the workforce and/or to attend school or training; and
- Empower parents to make choices for their families that work best for them.

JK is an important part of the government's support for early childhood development in the NWT, but it is not the only action ECE is taking. The Department recognizes the need for maintaining options for parents of children between 1 and 4 years old. ECE has been working with child care providers to help them adapt to the territory-wide implementation of JK, and has made wide ranging improvements to the Early Childhood Program (ECP) funding model. Recent changes include:

- Revised ECP Operating Subsidy model with increased rates;
- Consolidation of licensing and funding applications into a single application form and the possibility of multi-year funding agreements;
- Increased funding for operators within government buildings;
- Increased ECP Operating Subsidy rates; and
- Streamlined licensing and funding application process.