

Early Learning and Child Care

Mr. Speaker, this Legislative Assembly has made it a priority to advance universal child care for residents of the Northwest Territories. In December 2021, we signed the Canada-NWT Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, and since then we have worked closely with licensed early learning and child care programs and early childhood educators to advance this mandate.

As of April 1st, the average cost of licensed child care for children five years of age and younger was reduced, on average, by 60 per cent. This means that families in the NWT are now saving up to \$545 a month per child in child care fees. Families can expect to see further cost reductions until we reach our goal of an average of \$10 per day child care.

Mr. Speaker, amendments to the *Child Day Care Act* and two related regulations came into force on May 1, 2023. These changes establish limits on child care fees charged to families by licensed programs receiving government subsidies and increase reporting provided by licensed programs in response to our commitments within the Canada-wide Agreement. We are taking a phased approach to updating the regulations to take the time to consider our next action as we change the early learning and child care system. Later this year we will continue engaging with the sector on more changes to regulations as we work to introduce a wage grid for educators, a certification process, and establish a new funding process for licensed programs in response to a Programs Review that was completed in Spring 2021.

Mr. Speaker, earlier this summer we gathered feedback on these initiatives by engaging with Indigenous governments, the Northwest Territories Early Childhood Association, licensed early learning and child care program operators, and early childhood educators working in licensed centre-based programs. We know that the NWT needs a flexible certification process that recognizes and considers post-secondary education equivalencies, as well as a wage grid that is comparable to other positions within the early learning and child care sector and will attract and retain educators. Participants appreciated our proposed shift

away from basing operating subsidies on attendance and highlighted the need for additional funding to support long-term sustainability. The full What We Heard Report summarizing the GNWT's findings is posted on the Education, Culture and Employment website.

We continue to collaborate with the Government of Canada to help achieve our shared vision of a Canada-wide system that meets the needs of our communities, families, and young children.

I am pleased to share that at the end of June, the Government of Canada announced the new Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund to help deliver affordable child care for families by funding the cost of physical infrastructure needed to create more spaces like real estate and building materials. Through this fund, provinces and territories will receive \$625 million over the next four years, which will take into consideration the unique infrastructure challenges in the three territories. I look forward to sharing more details on what this means for the NWT as we work collaboratively with the federal government to implement the funding.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to support our licensed programs to create welcoming and inclusive early learning environments that incorporate local cultures and languages and support the developmental needs of all children in their care.

To ensure early learning environments in the NWT are a place where all children are welcomed and supported, we are reviewing how children from vulnerable or equity-seeking families, including those with specific developmental needs, are included in early learning opportunities across the territory. The aim is to identify strengths and barriers that exist within the early childhood sector, enhance the overall quality of licensed programs throughout the NWT, and support the creation of new licensed spaces, so more families have access to quality early learning and child care in their community.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize the need for flexibility as we continue to build the foundation for the NWT's early learning and child care system and are working to address affordability for

families, develop the early childhood workforce, and improve wages and incentives for those employed as early childhood educators.

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