

Early Learning and Child Care Update

Mr. Speaker, the Canada-NWT Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement was signed 11 short months ago. Since that time, every licensed childcare program in the NWT has signed on to the fee reduction subsidy, licensed childcare fees across the NWT have been cut in half, new licensed childcare spaces have been created, and now we are rolling out new wage enhancements that will allow licensed childcare centres to pay their employees more. We could not have done this without the involvement of childcare providers, early childhood educators, Indigenous governments, and, of course, the federal government. I would like to thank all our partners for their continued input and collaboration, as we work collectively to provide children with the best possible start in life.

The creation of a coordinated early learning and childcare system is a complex task with many moving parts, and requires a multi-faceted approach. First, we introduced the Child Care Fee Reduction Subsidy. As with any systemic change, there were bumps along the way. We rolled the subsidy out quickly so that families could benefit from a reduction in child care retroactively, and we have taken note of, and learned from, the issues and concerns that arose from that approach.

Mr. Speaker, you cannot have a childcare system without childcare spaces. I understand that a lack of childcare spaces has created incredible challenges for many parents throughout the territory so I am pleased to say that during the last fiscal year, 67 new childcare spaces were created, and more are on the way. I am confident that we will meet our target of 300 new spaces by 2025-2026 through the expansion of existing programs and establishment of new programs if necessary.

Mr. Speaker, we can create all the new childcare spaces we want, but they are of no use without early childhood educators. We need to retain the early childhood educators that are

currently in the system, and we need to attract more people to the field. In order to create a strong early learning and childcare system, our early childhood educators need to be supported and valued. That is why I am happy to announce that the Government of the Northwest Territories and the Government of Canada are creating a Retention Incentive by investing \$4.6 million over the next two years to enhance wages for early childhood educators in licensed centre-based programs.

This enhancement is retroactive to April 1, 2022, and will provide operators with flexibility to make decisions based on program and educator needs. Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned earlier, we have learned from the rollout of the fee reduction subsidy. That is why we made sure to engage childcare providers early and often in the development of the Retention Incentive. The GNWT will provide funding directly to operators, which will then flow the money to their employees. In the first year, licensed childcare centres will receive \$12,750 for every fulltime position that is required under legislation, keeping in mind that some centres have more than the minimum number of required employees. In the second year, the amount increases to \$16,250. Childcare centres will be able to decide how they distribute the funds to their employees, so actual pay increases will vary based on the particular centre. This two-year program will bridge a gap until we implement a wage grid in the 2024-2025 fiscal year.

To help develop a skilled workforce, we have also revised the eligibility criteria for the early learning and childcare scholarship. Previously, this scholarship was only available to full-time students, but now part-time students can apply, as well. By expanding the eligibility criteria, we are supporting flexible education paths and helping Northerners who are already working in licenced early learning and child care programs.

Mr. Speaker, the creation of an early learning and childcare system also requires legislative change. Earlier this year, the GNWT invited the public to have their say on proposed amendments to the Child Day Care Act. The results of that engagement are found in the recently published What We Heard Report. The amendments would allow the government to establish a certification process and wage grid, increase inclusion and reporting measures,

establish cost control measures, and protect the rights of families. These amendments would align the NWT with other Canadian jurisdictions as we move collectively toward a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system.

Mr. Speaker, we have come a long way in the past year. The GNWT and the federal government have invested millions of dollars in new childcare infrastructure, reducing childcare fees, and increasing the wages of childcare workers. These actions have tangible results that are directly benefiting residents across the NWT. Although there is still a significant amount of work to be done, I feel confident saying that we are well on our way to creating a universal child care system that will give every family across the NWT access to high quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive early learning and child care.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.