

**Education, Culture and Employment Response to COVID-19**

Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 global pandemic has had profound effects on people around the world, including residents across the Northwest Territories (NWT). The Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) has been working tirelessly to adapt its programs and services to help lighten the economic, social and emotional weights of the pandemic, and I would like to provide an update to the public about those efforts.

We recognize the essential role that licensed early learning and child care programs have for our youngest residents and their families, and as a result ECE has continued to flow existing funding for licensed programs to daycares and day homes, regardless of whether they have chosen to close or remain open, since the start of the pandemic. In addition ECE helped coordinate with the NWT health authorities to match parents working within the healthcare system with childcare, as well as coordinating an online list of open licenced early learning and child care programs throughout the NWT.

To provide further support during this challenging time we responded with an additional \$5.1 million in temporary subsidies, including a 33 per cent subsidy for parents who are essential workers, an additional wage top-up of up to \$1,000 a month for child care staff or family day home operators providing care during the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, ECE continues to work closely with licensed early learning and child care programs and pass on regular information updates from the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer, including best practices for early learning and child care, to ensure programs that are open remain operational and ones that have closed are able to reopen quickly.

In our Junior Kindergarten-Grade 12 education system, significant efforts have been made by educational staff, students, parents and guardians to accommodate the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation. On March 24, 2020 based on my recommendation and initial recommendations from the CPHO, all elected NWT education leaders made the decision to keep schools closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year and to proceed with plans focused on a distance education approach for the continuity of learning for all Junior Kindergarten-Grade 12 students.

On March 30, 2020 we released the NWT Education Bulletin, which set the framework for continued learning. Since releasing the NWT Education Bulletin, ECE has provided additional support to teachers on all aspects of at-home learning, including providing distance supports for students with complex needs, course completion processes for high school students, and at-home Indigenous language learning, among others.

ECE is providing guidance and support to Indigenous language instructors during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of our ongoing support for continued learning. Some language instructors have been collaborating with other subject teachers to incorporate language into their units, and many schools are using social media and school websites to promote and teach language and culture during school closures.

Mr. Speaker, on May 12, 2020 the Emerging Wisely plan was released, which contained a recommendation for the reopening of schools. On May 13, 2020 NWT education leaders with my support decided that the challenges faced by schools due to the pandemic would make it impossible to reopen schools now and that the focus needed to be on planning for the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. The Department of ECE continues to work closely with education bodies and the NWT Teachers' Association on continued learning for all NWT students for the 2019-2020 school year and on planning for the fall.

Mr. Speaker, for Grade 12 students who have worked so hard towards graduating and planning their next steps, Career and Education Advisors are reaching out to students by telephone, email and video conferencing to ensure they are aware of the support available to them. These advisors will continue to offer their support to all interested Grade 12 students from now until September to support those dreams of where their adult lives would take them. I send my congratulations to all NWT high school graduates. You have worked hard and you made it.

For post-secondary students accessing Student Financial Assistance, their funding continued for the remainder of their winter semester, and for those repaying loans, we deferred all payments to the end of September 2020, with no interest accrued during this time period. Student Case Officers also reached out to every single student receiving Student Financial Assistance to ensure they had information on how to return home safely, including contacts for travel agencies, information about self-isolation requirements, the self-isolation plan, and the orders of the Chief Public Health Officer. For students who will not have the opportunity to work to repay loans or save, the Student Financial Assistance program provided information on accessing income support and available federal benefits.

Mr. Speaker, to ensure the most vulnerable residents have enhanced supports for themselves and their families, the Income Assistance program made a number of temporary changes beginning in March.

- We provided a one-time emergency allowance for Income Assistance clients registered in March. Individuals received \$500 and families received \$1,000 in order to ensure they could purchase the necessary supplies to self-isolate for two weeks, if necessary, and to encourage physical distancing.
- Monetary donations such as gifts from friends, family, benevolent organizations or Indigenous governments intended to provide support during the pandemic have been exempted from the calculation of Income Assistance benefits, through the end of June. We also made the decision to exempt the one-time Special GST credit for low and modest income residents, the one-time Special Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement payments for seniors, and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Emergency Student Benefit for students.
- Administrative processes were streamlined to focus on quick responses and turnarounds for clients, including payrolling all clients through the end of June so that they do not have to report each month.
- The Productive Choice reporting requirement was also removed, and all clients were directed to engage in only one Productive Choice; taking care of themselves and their families.
- Finally, all clients were automatically assessed for both basic needs and enhanced benefits.

Seniors receiving the Senior Home Heating Subsidy received a modest increase to their benefit beginning in April 2020, and automatically had their applications renewed for the 2020-2021 year to allow them to maintain physical distancing.

Mr. Speaker, Labour Development and Standards programs and services at the Department include Labour Market Programs; Apprenticeship, Trades and Occupation Certification; Employment Standards; and the NWT Nominee Program. These programs provide a range of financial supports to students, apprentices, employees, employers, communities and organizations. Clients have been advised that funding will continue as planned until the end of their programs, tuition refunds would be provided as required, training costs reimbursed, and funding for community and organization training and employment projects would continue.

In the areas of Culture and Heritage, Mr. Speaker, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre and NWT Archives closed to the public on March 16, 2020 due to the serious health concerns posed by COVID-19. Focus was placed on ensuring the public was aware of the museum's extensive virtual exhibits and online resources. Staff worked hard to ensure delays in funding to NWT artists have been minimal and that accommodations are in place for arts projects impacted by the pandemic, and archaeological permitting and land reviews have continued with minor delays. Phase One of the Emerging Wisely plan recommends museums and art galleries reopen. While reduced hours and reduced public programming are expected the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre is gearing up to open its doors to the public before the end of the month.

The Francophone Affairs Secretariat worked quickly to streamline services available to our francophone population. Services TNO positioned itself as a hub for all non-health related information for our French speaking residents, and provided them with a single point of contact for all requests. The Secretariat also provided 24/7 translation services to ensure that our francophone residents had timely access to the vital information being shared by the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer, the Department of Health and Social Services, and every other GNWT department involved in the COVID-19 response.

I want to thank the staff of ECE and the NWT Education Authorities for their incredible work in adapting to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. The situation created by the pandemic has been unprecedented and so has the response from our staff. I want to personally thank them for all their efforts and hard work.

Mr. Speaker, everything we have responded with over the last few months has come about through an imperative to support Northerners, to make sure all Northerners had answers to their questions quickly, and critical programs were modified to meet their needs. As we move to adapt our programs further, the residents and communities of the territory are our primary concern and we commit to continuing to provide the supports and services residents need during this difficult time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.