

Planning for the Junior Kindergarten – Grade 12 2020-2021 School Year

Mr. Speaker, as the end of the 2019-2020 school year approaches, planning for how to safely reopen schools in the fall is well underway. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) is working diligently with its education partners to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students in the 2020-2021 school year, and beyond.

As we emerge wisely into more relaxed public health restrictions, I want to be clear: the upcoming school year will not be a return to normal. I understand that all of us want desperately to get back into our routines and have this crisis end. That cannot happen this fall and the number one priority of my office and the Department of ECE has to remain the health and safety of our students and education staff. Schools will be taking strong action to meet the recommendations of the Chief Public Health Officer while providing Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 education programs and services starting this fall and we continue to need the support of all our residents to make this happen.

Mr. Speaker, ECE and education bodies responsible for delivering education are working on a coordinated, system-wide approach for the coming school year that is based on the detailed criteria provided by the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer on how to safely reopen schools. This approach is focused on achieving the following priorities:

- Maintaining the health and safety of students, staff and communities;
- Starting the school year on time;
- Maximizing in-person learning, as much as possible;
- Seeking equity across regions;
- Maintaining financial supports to schools, and the programs they offer; and,
- Supporting continuity of learning.

While details on specific health and safety measures will vary from school to school, Mr. Speaker, there are some general measures that will be enacted in schools across the NWT to help maintain physical distance. These include:

- Limits on class sizes;
- Enhanced cleaning and disinfecting practices;
- Strict hand-washing routines;
- Designated entrances and exits;
- Staggered breaks, drop-offs and dismissals;
- Use of personal protective equipment by staff and students when physical distance cannot be maintained;
- Spacing of desks and other furniture;
- Restricting and managing flow in hallways and common areas, through floor markings and/or physical barriers;
- Encouraging activities to take place outdoors, when possible;
- Restrictions on assemblies, choir and music classes, drama, team sports and other gatherings, where physical distancing is not possible; and,
- Limited access to schools for parents, guardians and visitors.

Education will be delivered, based on factors such as school size and layout, grade level, the number of students and staff, access to technology, and the unique needs of each student. Individual schools will be making adjustments to student transportation, food programs and scheduling in order to accommodate public health recommendations.

In our smaller schools, it is likely that students will be safely accommodated within the existing space, and will not need to rely as much on distance learning. However, larger schools with more staff and students will have a harder time delivering the full extent of education programming within the school space. In these situations, schools may access space outside of the school, provide a blended learning approach that will prioritize in-person learning, or continue to support at-home distance learning if necessary.

Mr. Speaker, this is a dynamic situation and plans for the coming school year may need to change as new information or public health and workplace safety requirements are identified. Education bodies are taking a flexible approach to their planning to account for a potential second wave of COVID-19 in the fall of 2020 to ensure schools are able to open and remain open. The Government of the Northwest Territories is committed to providing regular updates to the public as plans move forward for the upcoming school year.

Each school will need to have its reopening plan assessed and approved by the Office of the Chief Public Health Officer and the Workers' Safety and Compensation Commission. All schools are working to have their detailed plans submitted before the end of the current school year, and details of these will be made available to students, parents, guardians and staff once those plans are reviewed and approved. In addition, ECE will be publishing a territorial plan on reopening schools for the 2020-21 school year later this month.

Mr. Speaker, the health and safety of residents and communities of the NWT is our primary concern. As we near the end of this school year, ECE remains committed to providing support to education leaders, students, parents, guardians and teachers as we truly work together to meet public health and safety requirements, while supporting the critical learning and well-being of all NWT students.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.