

**GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES RESPONSE
TO MOTION 22-17(5): FUNDING TO IMPLEMENT JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN**

Motion

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, that the Legislative Assembly strongly recommends that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment identify and seek new funding to support the implementation of junior kindergarten instead of reducing funding to any education districts;

AND FURTHER, that Department ensure that the junior kindergarten program be professionally designed and delivered by properly trained staff;

AND FURTHERMORE, that the junior kindergarten program be oriented to early childhood development, not a hybrid junior kindergarten/kindergarten program;

AND FURTHERMORE, that the Department's rollout of junior kindergarten be focused in communities without an Aboriginal Head Start programs;

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

GNWT Response

The GNWT through the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) has identified the funding to implement the Junior Kindergarten (JK) program in NWT communities over a three year period as follows:

- 1) 2014-15 – JK programming offered in 23 small community schools;
- 2) 2015-16 – JK programming offered in all small community schools, and the three regional centres of Inuvik, Hay River, and Fort Smith; and
- 3) 2016-17 – JK programming in all NWT schools, including Yellowknife schools.

The GNWT provides approximately \$150 million a year to the eight Education Authorities. This is \$17.5 million above the legislated funding level in 2013-14. Only five percent of this will have to be re-profiled to allow for the full implementation of Junior Kindergarten in all NWT communities. ECE has determined that Education Authorities have sufficient flexibility within their budgets to allow them to re-profile the funds necessary to implement Junior Kindergarten, without any appreciable negative impacts on the Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system. Given the fiscal realities of the NWT, this is the most effective and immediate way to offer this critically important high-quality, solidly researched early learning program for four year olds across the NWT.

The funding that ECE provides to Education Authorities has not been significantly reduced since 1997-98, despite overall government reductions in all other departments. In fact, not only have Education Authorities been sheltered from government-wide

reductions, but they have received funding well above the legislated levels in the areas of Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) contributions and Inclusive Schooling funding. For example, last year ECE provided Education Authorities with an extra \$11.2 million per year above the legislated PTR funding level, and an extra \$6.3 million per year on Inclusive Schooling programming above the legislated level. Both these amounts are over and above what legislation requires – in total an extra \$17.5 million beyond legislative levels.

To enhance Junior Kindergarten classrooms, the GNWT is providing one-time funding to all Education Authorities in the amount of \$15,000 per classroom. This start-up funding is being provided to help schools offset the cost of purchasing developmentally appropriate play based resources and classroom materials, such as sand and water tables, rest mats, building blocks, and art supplies. Thus, in fall 2014, the GNWT is investing \$345,000 in total for Junior Kindergarten start-up costs, and will invest an additional \$225,000 in 2015-16 and an additional \$225,000 in 2016-17. As well, the GNWT is providing \$360,000 for identified infrastructure costs including small scale renovations, such as for the addition of washrooms, installation of doors and removal of walls in schools. As JK rolls out into 2015-16 and 2016-17, it is anticipated that infrastructure costs will amount to \$400,000 each year. The GNWT appreciates the costs involved in delivering high quality early learning programs like JK, and will help ensure JK classrooms are equipped for constructive, fun, and inquiry related learning.

During the implementation of Junior Kindergarten, the territorial Pupil Teacher Ratio is not expected to exceed the legislated average of 16:1. However, it is projected that some Education Authorities may exceed the 16:1 Pupil Teacher Ratio. ECE commits to providing additional funding to any community District Education Authority (DEA) that goes over a 16:1 PTR. There is no legislated requirement to fund each Education Authority at a 16:1 PTR but the GNWT has committed to provide this additional funding.

Junior Kindergarten program is professionally designed and meets territorial curriculum standards as it follows the *NWT Integrated Kindergarten Curriculum: A Holistic Approach to Children's Early Learning*, completed in April 2014. ECE designed this curriculum using leading edge research on early childhood development, and incorporating input from NWT teachers and cultural advisors. This made-in-the-North curriculum is a developmentally and culturally appropriate, play-based, child-centered program that encourages children to learn skills at their own level and pace, according to their interests. Evidence shows that such a child centered approach positively impacts children's early developmental outcomes, and their later academic success.

ECE has ensured that fully qualified, trained and NWT certified educators are teaching Junior Kindergarten classes. ECE recommends that, in the hiring process for new teachers, Education Authorities ask for specialized early childhood education training as an asset for teaching in JK classrooms. Before they can teach in any NWT schools, all teachers must apply for and receive certification through the NWT Qualification Service to ensure they meet set teaching profession standards.

To ensure proper training, ECE provided two in-service training sessions to all NWT Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers in May and August 2014. These

sessions featured national and local early childhood experts who focused on sharing their knowledge and experiences about early learning as it relates to Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten. As well, all participants received free access to a dynamic online multimedia resource that highlights relevant research and best practices in early education and care. ECE will continue to offer training opportunities to Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers as well as providing on-going information and support through the JK information hotline, videoconferencing, and wiki sharing of best practices and questions and answers. Moreover, ECE's seven Regional Early Childhood Consultants located throughout the NWT provide additional support to Junior Kindergarten teachers through on-site visits in the communities where Junior Kindergarten programs exist.

The GNWT's Junior Kindergarten program for 4 year olds is strongly oriented to early childhood development. The research is clear that early childhood is a critical time for the education and development of children, and that young children learn best through play and inquiry. The *NWT Integrated Kindergarten Curriculum* and associated *Implementation Guide* focus on engaging four and five year old children in fun, inquiry-based, hands-on, experiential learning. It is a developmentally appropriate play-based, child-centered program. National and international studies show that both four and five year old children learn best through play and inquiry, which is the heart of *NWT Integrated Kindergarten Curriculum*.

Many NWT educators teach multi-age grouping (MAG) classrooms, which are already a reality in many community schools in the NWT. Community teachers quickly learn MAG classroom dynamics and develop learning strategies and activities that meet the needs of all children. Learning through play and inquiry is not something that goes away at certain ages or stages. While age contributes to differences among children, every child is on his or her own developmental learning continuum, with variations in social-emotional, physical, language and cognitive growth. The *NWT Integrated Kindergarten Curriculum* allows each child to learn skills at their level and pace so they can master the concepts to be ready for learning. The curriculum provides a framework for teachers to provide for the needs of all four and five year old children in ways that are developmentally appropriate, connected to the culture of the child and community and that build a happy and healthy first experience at school.

The GNWT recognizes the excellent early learning programs provided by the Western Arctic Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) Council over the past 17 years. AHS delivers quality, no-cost, half day programming for three and four year-old First Nation, Métis, and Inuvialuit children in eight NWT communities. However, the fact remains that 25 communities in the NWT do not have an AHS program. Another 10 communities have no licensed child care, no AHS program, and no early learning options at all. Ultimately, parents are their children's first teachers, and it is thus parents who will make the choice regarding their children's early learning options available through AHS or JK.

ECE will rollout Junior Kindergarten in all communities by 2016 and is committed to working with the AHS staff, AHS sponsoring organizations, and JK staff to ensure that the two programs work together. It is through cooperation and leadership that we can achieve the best learning environments for all NWT children.