



Honourable R.J. Simpson
Minister of Education, Culture and Employment
Government of the Northwest Territories

June 9, 2020

Dear Minister Simpson,

On behalf of organizations working in the early childcare sector, including the Open Door Society in Fort Simpson and Le Garderie Plein Soleil in Yellowknife, thank you for the vital work your government has undertaken to support families who need childcare in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We appreciate that the Government of the Northwest Territories' (GNWT) remains focused on the immediate public health response to, and economic fallout of, this pandemic. As the Northwest Territories begins to re-open and adjust to a new normal, early childcare providers are thinking about the role our services will play in healing the social and economic harm caused by the virus.

The early childhood care and education sector has been challenged by COVID-19. Many businesses and organizations have been financially affected, with some having to close their doors for good. There are new expectations around workplace safety and risk management, and there is a heightened national awareness and appreciation for the critical and essential role early childhood educators provide.

The early childhood care sector strives to provide quality care and maintain affordability to families. Quality care requires ongoing training and staff development, but it also requires attractive compensation and benefits. For too long, this sector has been poorly paid in comparison to the regular education system; according to Statistics Canada the average annual starting salary of a primary school teacher (grades 1-6) in the NWT was \$78,600, and according to the 2016-2020 NWT Teacher's Association Collective Agreement, the starting salary for a teacher with no experience or formal education is \$64,605. Meanwhile, the average annual salary of an early childhood educator at the Yellowknife Daycare Association, even after a 2019/2020 update to our salary structure, is approximately \$44,720 (~\$21.50/hr).

This wage gap is a critical barrier for the NWT early childhood sector and its ability to become sustainable by attracting and retaining a qualified workforce. Until this barrier is addressed, the early childhood education sector will suffer from continual staff turnover as high quality, trained staff move from the early childhood education sector into the Junior Kindergarten to grade 12 education system.

We see this turnover and devaluation of the early childhood sector routinely, yet we know that quality care and education in the early years is just as valuable as quality instruction during the school years. In fact, high quality early childhood experiences set children up for excellence in their future education. Without high quality childcare and education, the NWT education system will continue to struggle to support student excellence and wellbeing, as shown in the Department of Education, Culture and Employment's own Education Performance Measures Report.¹ Investment in early childhood creates benefits beyond the early years, and will support improvements in the NWT education system.²

¹ Executive Summary, JK-12 Education Performance Measures Report. GNWT. February 2020.

<https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/en/services/education-renewal/education-renewal-and-innovation-5-year-evaluation>

² Investing in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/48980282.pdf>

We applaud the temporary funding the GNWT provided to the early childhood sector that included up to \$1000/ month in wage top-ups for child care staff.³ **We ask that all funding and actions taken to support the early childcare providers during this time continue until more effective permanent mechanisms are in place to advance the early childcare sector.**

We are seeking a partnership with the GNWT to help us explore opportunities for transformational change with respect to the integration and support of the early childcare sector. Perhaps there is no better time to address this challenge given the Premier's statements supporting universal childcare and considering that the 2015 Feasibility Study on Universal Affordable Day Care concluded that "Kindergarten assessments indicated that 2 out of 5 children are entering school with delays that will likely compromise their academic and life chances - no society can prosper when such a huge portion of its youngsters are left behind."⁴ Only through the support of a strong early childhood care and education system, will NWT children be ready to learn and grow in the NWT's Junior Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and grade 1 programs. As the regulator and leader of this sector, we ask that you:

- 1. increase the GNWT's investment in the sector so that all children and families have access to high quality early childhood care and education (e.g., universal childcare, have early childcare workers employed by the GNWT or the municipality similar to Fort Smith's recent success); and**
- 2. streamline existing funding programs that are provided by the GNWT to early childcare and education providers to reduce the administrative burden on early childcare providers and staff (e.g., change from attendance-based funding to provide consistent funding that supports operations).**

We envision a sector that provides high quality, accessible care for all NWT children who could benefit from it. As you can appreciate, each community has different needs and different mechanisms available for the effective delivery of early childcare support – so we need to move beyond consultation to collaboration in order to achieve meaningful change. We plan to send out a meeting invitation to early childcare providers within the coming weeks to identify the preferred approach to having this important conversation. We recognize that the GNWT is an essential partner and we invite you to join us in leading this initiative and look forward to receiving your response.

Best wishes and good health to you, your colleagues, and staff as you guide us through the pandemic.

Sincerely,



Ryan Fequet, President
Yellowknife Daycare Association

- Original Signed By -

Mike Harlow, Co-Chair
Children First Society

- Original Signed By -

Lenora McLeod, Co-Chair
Children First Society

Copied to: All other Members of the 19th Legislative Assembly

³ Financial supports for licensed early learning and child-care programs. Department of Education, Culture and Employment. GNWT. <https://www.gov.nt.ca/covid-19/en/services/financial-support/licensed-childcare-support>

⁴ Feasibility Study of Universal Affordable Day Care in the Northwest Territories, tabled on June 4, 2015. P. 87. https://www.assembly.gov.nt.ca/sites/default/files/td_276-175.pdf