

Imagining a new future for early childhood education in the NWT ^[1]

As the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the importance of childcare, daycare operators say now is the time to push for changes in the NWT's early childhood education.

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EXCERPTS

An online forum last week, organized by the Yellowknife Day Care Association and Inuvik's Children First Society, asked NWT residents to share their vision of those changes.

A distillation of the views expressed is to be presented to the territorial government.

Organizers of the forum hope that document will form a roadmap toward a new territorial childcare system.

The introduction of universal childcare, in which the territory ensures affordable childcare is available to all, is an eventual ambition.

Yellowknife Day Care Association president Ryan Fequet, who helped to organize the forum, said the early days of the pandemic proved the value of childcare services and staff.

"We recognized that staff were on the front lines," he said. "Just like they were in hospitals and healthcare clinics, folks running daycares and interacting with kids and parents were taking the same risks.

"It illustrated the importance of early childcare workers as the foundation of society."

Mike Harlow, from the Children First Society, said: "You need to have these services in order for the economy to function. If parents can't find safe and appropriate care for their children, they're not going to work.

"Secondly, research proves without a doubt that a high-quality and nurturing environment for children aged zero to five leads to substantially improved positive outcomes in their life as an adult."

Keeping up the momentum

On June 9, the two daycares published an open letter to NWT education minister RJ Simpson highlighting what they described as the wage gap between teachers and early childcare workers and a lack of funding for the sector.

They called on the GNWT to increase funding for early childhood education.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the territorial government spent \$5 million on wage top-ups for childcare workers and childcare subsidies for essential workers. The territory spent another half-million dollars in June to help repair or expansion work associated with creating more childcare spaces.

Fequet and Harlow hope last week's forum will help to sustain momentum on the issue as people share what a successful childcare system would mean for them.

Fequet said that could mean many things. For example, he suggested the incorporation of early childcare workers into municipal or territorial payrolls, so facilities are adequately staffed and workers properly compensated – as in Fort Smith.

Harlow said success could also mean the development of a "robust and caring curriculum."

The forum brought together some 50 participants per night over two nights, including residents from Fort Smith to Aklavik. Deputy education minister Rita Mueller offered closing remarks.

"It was very, very, very positive," said Fequet, calling the document to be produced "a great first step."

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/10/imagining-new-future-early-childhood-education-nwt> [2]

<https://cabinradio.ca/46638/news/education/imagining-a-new-future-for-early-childhood-education-in-the-nwt/> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7861> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce>