

NWT child care 'at the bottom' [CA-NT] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A daycare co-ordinator on the Hay River Reserve is lamenting the state of funding and training for the Northwest Territories' licenced child care sector.

Elaine Rene-Tambour pointed to a recent report by UNICEF on early childhood education in 25 of the world's most affluent countries.

Canada ranked last among the 25 countries, and of 10 benchmarks looked at by UNICEF, Canada only achieved one - at least 50 per cent of staff in accredited early education services are educated with relevant qualifications.

However, the NWT doesn't even have that, said Rene-Tambour, who is the NWT liaison to the Canadian Child Care Federation.

"We're definitely at the bottom," she said.

Rene-Tambour said there is nothing in territorial legislation requiring training or setting educational standards for workers in daycares, day homes, preschools and other licenced facilities.

"You need an understanding of child development," she said of the legislative requirements. "It's very vague."

Gillian Moir, co-ordinator of early childhood and school services with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, acknowledged territorial regulations don't require child care workers to have formal post-secondary training in the early childhood field.

"However, those regulations are under review at this time," Moir said.

She said the process will be undertaken step by step, beginning with an assessment of the training workers currently have.

Moir said the assessment may find the majority of workers are trained.

Not requiring child care workers to have post-secondary training, she added, is not unique in Canada.

Moir also disagrees with Rene-Tambour's assessment that the NWT is at the bottom of child care in Canada.

"I don't think I would agree with that," she said, adding it is difficult to compare different jurisdictions.

Rene-Tambour lists a number of other concerns with child care in the NWT.

Most other jurisdictions in Canada offer specific funding for training and employment of child care workers, but the NWT doesn't, she said.

"It puts us at a real strain to try to find money for it, because it's not covered in our funding," she said, explaining it's a real juggling act to try to find money.

"You have to be really creative," she added, saying many daycares and other child care facilities have the same problem.

Currently, all the employees at the Hay River Reserve daycare are taking at least one distance education course in early childhood development from Aurora College.

While acknowledging the territorial government doesn't directly fund people to obtain training, Moir said "the GNWT invests in training through the college."

Moir also said while there is no dedicated funding for salaries, licenced early childhood programs receive operational funding that can be used for many expenses, including salaries.

Plus, she said there are other sources of funding from the GNWT, including money for facility start-up, minor health and safety renovations, rent/mortgage and language nest initiatives.

Rene-Tambour said there are many sources of funding for child care facilities, including government departments, aboriginal organizations and groups such as NWT Literacy, and she tries to access whatever is available. Plus, her daycare charges parent fees and does fundraising.

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Some funding for child care in provinces and territories originates from the federal government.

However, Rene-Tambour said Ottawa calculates funding based on population, not on the percentage of children each jurisdiction might have.

That shortchanges the NWT, since it has one of the highest percentages of children in Canada, she said.

According to 2007 data from Statistics Canada, the NWT has 10,100 children under the age of 14 out of a total population of 42,600, which works out to 23.7 per cent. The national percentage of children under 14 years of age is 17 per cent.

Moir agreed per-capita federal funding for many programs is an issue for all three Northern territories.

"The per-capita funding doesn't reflect the NWT situation," she said.

Rene-Tambour said another issue is the NWT has never had an association representing the child care sector.

Such an association could offer help in training and assistance with programming for daycares, Aboriginal Head Start programs, day homes and other child care services, she said.

Finally, Rene-Tambour said improved funding would help daycares and other programs offer higher pay to keep their trained workers.

She said her workers often leave to become higher-paid classroom assistants in schools once they complete their courses from Aurora College.

"This happens continuously," she said. "The minute you've got them trained, they're gone."

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