

Expect early child care deal by end of year: Simpson ^[1]

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Source: Northern News Services Limited

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Nov 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Education Minister RJ Simpson says he expects to have an early child care deal inked with Ottawa by the end of the year.

Speaking to Inuvik Drum Nov. 15, Simpson said the GNWT was still at the negotiation table because Ottawa took a “staggered” approach to negotiations with provinces and didn’t come to the table as soon as it did with others.

“We started the engagement a little later,” he said. “When you’re dealing with the federal government, especially with new people, you have to take the time to ensure they understand the context in the north and how it’s different from the south, because they generally come in with some preconceived notions about how things work.

“But things don’t work here the way they necessarily work in southern Canada. So that too a bit of time in the beginning, and then we had an election period.”

Meetings were paused during the federal election, but Simpson said they resumed shortly after the new cabinet was sworn in.

Part of what is slowing the process down, he explained, was the infrastructure deficit between the north and the south. While there are plenty of suitable buildings available in the populous centres in Alberta, British Columbia and so forth, such buildings are few and far between in the north and will need to be constructed.

A second problem the NWT is grappling with is the small workforce. While colleges from the Atlantic to the Pacific churn out Early Child Care graduates year-after-year, only the Aurora College Fort Smith campus offers a diploma in Early Learning and Child Care Development. This means the GNWT would either have to train staff or hire from outside the territory, which could get very expensive very quickly.

“If we wanted to start a child care centre, in most places there’s not a building that can be renovated or moved into – we actually have to build something. So there’s a big infrastructure component that we don’t have which they do have in the south,” he said. “We don’t have as many trained early learning childcare educators as they have in the south, so we need a lot more time to develop our workforce.”

A third factor in negotiations, said Simpson, are the existing child care programs funded largely or entirely by Indigenous governments in the territory.

There are some places where low-to-no cost childcare is available, and Simpson said the differences presented by how Indigenous governments in the NWT interact with territorial and federal governments needed to be worked out in the agreement.

“It’s not like in the south where there is Indigenous governments on-reserve and off-reserve there’s other organizations who provide – we have a number of Indigenous communities here where they are the child care providers and there are several programs that they can access as well,” he said. “So there’s an interplay between the funding that they don’t have in the south as well.”

Complications aside, the minister said negotiations were ongoing and he expected them to wrap up soon.

“We’re only six weeks away from the end of the year, so it’s relatively tight considering there’s multiple parties involved,” he said. “I know a lot of people are anxious for us to get a deal done, but I want to make sure we take the time and get the deal that’s going to work for us. We need flexibility in the agreement to ensure we can respond to some of those differences that are here in the territory compared to southern Canada. That takes time to get it right.

“I know there’s some jurisdictions who are hoping for sort-of a blank cheque, that they could spend however they want. But Canada will also be asking for things in this agreement – they’ll be asking for reduced costs by this much and eventually by this much, and create this many new spaces. So there’s a lot of moving parts in play.”

Children First Society executive director Patricia Davison said she was excited by the prospect of a deal being in place for 2022.

She said studies have shown that every dollar spent on early child care translated to between seven and 13 dollars in savings later in life for other social security nets.

“I’m so looking forward to that coming down the pipe so we can have more resources to figure out how we’re going to enhance early learning and care,” she said. “If we want to build a strong society, we start at the base and early childhood is the base.

“If we ensure that children have all they need to become what they can be, we’ve built a strong and resilient society.”

Davison said she hoped to see greatest accessibility for families, but agreed the need for proper infrastructure and staff with recognized training was paramount to making an early childcare system work in the north and said she hoped the GNWT can address those in the agreement.

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

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