

NWT publishes 'vision to transform childcare' by 2030^[1]

The NWT government has published a strategy intended to guide a raft of improvements to childcare and early learning over the remainder of the decade.

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Source: Cabin Radio

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Mar 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

Education minister RJ Simpson called the document a “10-year vision to transform the early learning and childcare system in the NWT” that will focus first on creating more spaces and improving conditions for staff.

The territory will “develop a system that addresses the needs of Indigenous families and communities, which is a vital part of reconciliation,” Simpson, introducing the strategy, promised.

The strategy focuses on families with infants and preschoolers too young for the free-to-access junior kindergarten program. Those families’ costs “are often the highest” and they struggle to find adequate care, the territory stated.

Broad-brushstrokes ambitions in the strategy include the provision of more (or renovated) buildings to house childcare programs, creation of incentives to retain staff, and, ultimately, the enrolment of more children in programming.

The primary measure of success will be the number of spaces created, the strategy states, which will be reported annually. Childcare costs, participation rates, and the number of licensed workers will also be tracked.

Residents have asked for qualified staff delivering affordable, inclusive and community-driven programming grounded in Indigenous culture and language, the territory said.

Affordability will be tackled through the federal government’s broader commitment to delivering \$10-a-day childcare across Canada.

The strategy’s publication – promised by the NWT government since 2019 – came as the federal government re-announced its provision of \$51 million over five years to move the NWT toward cheaper childcare.

As first announced in December, funding supplied to childcare providers this year is intended to have the immediate effect of halving childcare costs for most families. That cost is currently an average of \$38 per day across the NWT.

The NWT in December pledged to create 70 new childcare spaces this year and a further 230 by 2026, by which point the territory intends for childcare to cost an average of \$10 per day. Those details were also re-announced on Thursday.

The territorial and federal governments said the amount families save will vary depending on the age of the child and type of childcare provided.

Karina Gould, the federal minister of families, children and social development, said that while few of the details announced on Thursday were new, the progress from December’s initial announcement to rollout of the first fee reduction in early March represented “lightning speed” and the territory was nine to 10 months ahead of its initially anticipated schedule.

How you get the reduced childcare rate

A news conference convened by the two governments did provide some additional detail regarding how changes will roll out and how families and staff will be supported.

“Families will be reimbursed 50 percent, on average, for childcare fees paid from January to March 2022, and will see that fee reduction moving forward,” a briefing document provided to reporters stated, confirming the change will be retroactive to January 1.

Funding will be provided by the governments to childcare operators, who will in turn pass the fee reduction to families.

Asked how the retroactive sum will be recovered by families, Simpson said: “We will work with the childcare providers to flow that money back through to the parents.”

Regarding the creation of new childcare spaces, the governments said they would prioritize spaces in communities that don’t currently have licensed programs for children up to three years old.

A review of the way all children are included in NWT childcare will be carried out this year, accompanied by a promise that by 2026, “all children – including children from equity-seeking families and those needing enhanced or individual supports – have access to childcare spaces to meet their needs.”

The same briefing document said a “wage grid” for childcare staff would be developed in the coming years, alongside a certification process for early childhood educators (by 2024-25). By 2025-26, the NWT expects to increase the number of workers who meet its certification requirements by 30 percent.

“We will work with local NWT post-secondary institutions to deliver early learning and childcare programming through a variety of methods and explore options for providing programming for francophone educators,” the document stated.

Infrastructure need

At Thursday’s news conference, Simpson acknowledged the territory currently lacks childcare availability and staff to change that.

“We need to build physical infrastructure,” the minister said, though it wasn’t clear how much, if any, of the \$51 million included in the most recent agreement will go toward that goal.

Simpson said a separate territorial fund to help communities open buildings as childcare centres had had “great uptake,” and his department was also examining how to take existing money and “reprofile” some of it for infrastructure purposes.

Shelley Kapraelian, the NWT’s director of early childhood development, said: “We are looking, over the next two years, at the best way to support licensed programs and maybe restructure some of that funding.”

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