

Free preschool pondered: Territorial government looks at funding education for four year olds ^[1]

Author: Busch, Laura

Source: Northern News Services

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Dec 2011

EXCERPTS:

SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE - Should preschool be free across the territory? The government and Yellowknife school boards are asking the question in an effort to improve early childhood education.

"We've heard from various jurisdictions across Canada, even internationally, that we have to invest heavily into early childhood," said Jackson Lafferty, GNWT minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

Currently, the earliest children in the territory can begin publicly funded education is in kindergarten at age five.

Early childhood education and childcare is the first of four priorities outlined by the Aboriginal Student Achievement (ASA) Education Plan that was tabled in the legislative assembly on Aug. 19. The priorities aim to eliminate the gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal student achievement in the NWT.

"It was found that many of our (First Nations) children start two or three years behind their peers when they start kindergarten," said Reanna Erasmus, program manager of Ndilo's Aboriginal Head Start Program, adding aboriginal youth are the single fastest growing demographic in the territory.

"It's really important that we educate that population because, even though across Canada we might be five per cent of the population, over 50 per cent of people in prison are aboriginal," she said.

The ASA Education Plan recommends full day compulsory kindergarten for all five year olds and optional junior kindergarten, also called preschool or pre-kindergarten, for four year olds.

"I think all positive preschool experiences are good for children," said Erasmus, suggesting standard pre-kindergarten programs across the territory should be half-day because full-day classes are too hard on four year olds.

Because provinces and territories are responsible for education, rather than the federal government, there is no national standard when it comes to early childhood education, and programs tend to vary from school district to school district.

All provinces and territories have free public kindergarten for five year olds and "several also include four year olds in some schools," according to an overview of childcare in Canada, published by the Public Service Alliance of Canada in February.

Ontario is the only province with a junior kindergarten program that is available to all its four-year-old residents, states the report. Quebec is the only province with government-supported child care. In that province, child care costs \$7 per day.

"(Fully-funded preschool) is definitely something that we would love to see happen, but the government, I guess, will have to set its priorities in regards to the budget and see what they can do," said Claudia Parker, superintendent of Yellowknife Catholic Schools.

Lafferty confirmed the government is considering some kind of program for early childhood education, but cost will dictate the scope and time frame.

How free pre-school programming would effect existing programs isn't an issue for Erasmus, who said a need exists for a diversity of educational options.

"I think that it wouldn't affect us all that much," said Erasmus. "We would still have aboriginal children wanting to come to an aboriginal-culture and language-based program. There are enough four year olds across the board to fill all the spots."

-reprinted from Northern News Services

Region: Northwest Territories ^[2]

Tags: funding ^[3]

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/12/free-preschool-pondered-territorial-government-looks-funding> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7861> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding>