

'It makes my blood boil': Nunavut government wants to strip DEAs of ECE funding authority ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Government of Nunavut wants to strip local district education authorities of some of their powers, but some parents and community members are calling the move unfounded — particularly when it comes to early childhood education.

Currently local DEAs manage funding agreements with ECE providers. The government says that funding is going unused — citing a lack of interest from already "overburdened" DEAs — and hopes transferring authority to the department of education will ensure more ECE programming is available in the territory.

The change is part of a proposed set of reforms to the 2008 Education Act, after a review in 2015 noted that the "majority" of DEAs are not meeting their obligations.

'It makes my blood boil'

"It makes my blood boil to see the sentence saying government funding for ECE programming is underutilized... because of a lack of interest," said Alethea Arnaquq-Baril.

Arnaquq-Baril served as the chair of the DEA in Apex from 2008 to 2011, and is also a former member of the Coalition of Nunavut District Education Authorities.

"I don't think there is a single DEA that has a lack of interest in ECE programming," she said. "It's just impossible to access if you don't jump through a thousand hoops."

Arnaquq-Baril knows first-hand how difficult it can be.

In 2009, the Apex DEA wanted the community's Nanook School to deliver its own version of ECE, but quickly realized it wouldn't be able to become a licensed provider because of the kind of program it wanted to deliver.

'They wanted our school to act like a daycare'

"The initiatives that we thought would be the best would be to provide support for four-year-olds, so that they would have a good transition into kindergarten," said Anne Crawford, a current member of the Apex DEA.

"The [department of education] wanted our school to act like a daycare," but the DEA envisioned something more like a pre-kindergarten program.

"We were told we would have to fence our playground, we were not to allow our four-year-olds in the hallways or classrooms at the same time as the other kids," said Crawford, noting that would never have worked.

"[Nanook] school operates on a family model where we do multi-age learning, so the older kids work with the younger kids, so... it didn't make any sense."

In 2010 the DEA went ahead with its plan without government money, and Crawford says things are going well.

"Our four-year-olds are learning really well, and they're working with the five-year-olds... and we haven't taken any extra money."

But Crawford said the government is overlooking their success — and they're being penalized for thinking outside the box.

"We're in that category of school that is indicated as either not being competent, or not being interested, or whatever it is that you don't get the money."

An uncertain future

Apex's program could come to an abrupt halt next year, regardless of who manages ECE funding agreements.

Another proposed change would give the department authority over registering students who are older or younger than the school age — 5 to 21.

The government says students under the age of five should be in early childhood education programs, and students over the age of 21 should generally be registered in the Pathway to Adult Secondary School graduation program.

That change "would once again not permit us to deliver ECE in the way we envision," said Crawford.

The department also wants to reclaim authority on registering students who are outside the jurisdiction.

Support the DEAs, don't take away responsibilities

That reform in particular worries Franco Buscemi, whose children attend Nanook School.

"We don't live in Apex, so our child, if we were going by jurisdiction, would actually be going to a different school."

Buscemi said his children are happy in Apex, and he's happy with the education they're getting.

But Buscemi is also worried about the government's plans for DEAs as a whole, and doesn't think their authority should be weakened.

"The DEA is representative of the community and the students, so when they are challenges unique to a community, the people in the community are in the best position to identify the challenges and identify potential solutions."

Buscemi wants the government to focus on supporting the DEAs that are having "capacity issues," rather than "taking away responsibilities."

He says the latter approach does "not address what the communities want to be, which is involved in education."

MLAs are expected to review the proposed legislation in February. If passed, the government will start implementing changes in 2017.

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Region: Nunavut ^[3]

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