

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 286-18(2): IMPACTS OF JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN ON EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING PROGRAMS

March 2, 2016

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment. Aboriginal Head Start operates in eight NWT communities. Each program site is community driven. It's fully resourced and staffed with early childhood educators. It scores well on evaluations. It connects children with their language and culture. Does the Minister support the continuation of the Aboriginal Head Start program in the NWT? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And, yes, we do support the Aboriginal Head Start. I support Aboriginal Head Start program in the Northwest Territories. Any type of early childhood development programs that we can offer in all of our 33 communities in the Northwest Territories, I do support. It is a mandate of this government. I know where the Member's going in terms of bringing in junior kindergarten, and that's also one essential piece of the mandate developed by this 18th Legislative Assembly, and that is to support quality early childhood development in collaboration with existing organizations. Our department is working with Aboriginal Head Start in seeing how we can work together to provide these essential and critical programs and services to families and to the children.

MS. GREEN: What I'm interested in knowing is how the Minister is going to accommodate Aboriginal Head Start and, for that matter, the Montessori school in Yellowknife, as well, while introducing junior kindergarten in every NWT community? How will they coexist, especially in the small communities?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: And, yes, it is a priority to try to get some early childhood development programs in all of our communities throughout the Northwest Territories. We are continuing to meet with Aboriginal Head Start. I believe we just had a recent meeting with them this -- earlier this month. We want to see how we can implement the two programs together. Moving forward, in August, we're going to be holding our third annual early childhood development symposium here, in Yellowknife, and, at that time, we'll sit down with all daycares, licensed daycares, day homes. We'll get information from Aboriginal Head Start.

As the Member knows, September 2015, we did have a technical review of junior kindergarten which became public in January. And, out of those, out of the review, we did get input from Aboriginal Head Start. We also got input from licensed daycares. So we're continuing to work with these organizations to ensure that we're all on the same boat in providing early childhood programs and services to families and to the children that need it.

MS. GREEN: It's my understanding that Aboriginal Head Start came away from their meeting referred to by the Minister without feeling that they'd been heard, let alone accommodated. So I am going to back to my question about what the government is going to do to address the concerns about JK implementation that was raised, has been raised, by Aboriginal Head Start. It's just simply the case that there are not enough children in the small communities to have both programs, so how will the government choose which one to continue funding?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Just going back a little bit further, to the report. There was eight recommendations that came out of it. We are following the most critical one, is that going out and doing more consultation. In terms of the Aboriginal Head Start, we do fund them yearly of \$100,000. The junior kindergarten is an optional program. We are working with communities. I believe we have one community right now that does provide Aboriginal Head Start as well as junior kindergarten. And we also had recommendations of having Aboriginal Head Start in the morning, junior kindergarten in the afternoon to look at all ways we can show support to the organization but to the families, as well.

In terms of Aboriginal Head Start, as well, we are looking across Canada at other jurisdictions that offer Aboriginal Head Start and have been almost forced to look at two- and three-year-old admissions when junior kindergarten was implemented within their jurisdictions, and we want to see what kind of successes that's coming out of those. So we're looking at jurisdictions in that sense that have had to look at enrolling two- and three-year-olds and seeing the impact of that. So we're looking at all different options to move forward. And I said the most critical piece of that review was to go out and consult and continue discussions. We'll hear more at the symposium in August, and we'll take it from there.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. It's my understanding that the Aboriginal Head Start and Montessori schools are staffed with early childhood educators rather than Bachelor of Education teachers, so I'm just not clear how, what, the government's commitment is to the resources to put all of these programs in play in all the communities of the NWT. And, most particularly and to my colleague's point, what will happen to the 40 staff who are now associated with Aboriginal Head Start? Mahsi.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Earlier in the session, I did make a statement in this House, changes to early childhood program funding. We're focusing on three areas: operating subsidies, early childhood intervention programs, as well as supporting new early childhood licensed operators. I'll get new stories right across the Northwest Territories. Aboriginal Head Start, we'll continue to support them. We give \$100,000 every year, and we're looking at what other jurisdictions are doing where they've had to implement, who are implementing, junior kindergarten took effect. And we're seeing what kind of successes, challenges, are there, and we're going to take those, that kind of information, moving forward and see how we can make it successful here, in the Northwest Territories. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.