

Subsidize existing programs, early-education operators say

Minister says consultation to determine how junior kindergarten expansion will work

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Two people linked with early childhood education centres in the city say it makes more sense for the territorial government to subsidize existing programs so they're free rather than expand junior kindergarten, which would compete for the same children.

"We love the idea of free care for four-year-olds ... but we've always advocated for funding existing facilities better so care is free there," David Wasylciw, president of the NWT Montessori Society said this week.

"We have all this infrastructure, we have teachers that are trained, we have all this stuff. Instead of actually using that, it's just being thrown aside which is pretty frustrating."

The comments come as the territorial government plans to expand junior kindergarten, a play-based free program for four-year-olds aimed at preparing them for school, to all 33 communities at the start of the next school year.

"Any communities that do have existing programs - families will have an option to put (four-year-olds) into a licensed daycare facility or utilize our junior kindergarten program," said Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) Minister Alfred Moses in an interview last month. He touted it as a cost-saving program for families.

Questions have lingered about how the expansion will work in larger centres like Yellowknife, where there are already options for user-pay junior kindergarten in schools, daycares and play homes.

The Yellowknife Playschool Association has seen a drop in enrolment for its programming for children three- to five-years old, since schools began user-pay junior kindergarten.

"Once this program will be free, we will not have any more four-year-olds attend play school," Hille Stewart, chairperson of the Yellowknife Playschool Association, wrote in an e-mail Thursday.

Stewart wrote the play school depends on four-year-olds for afternoon programs, a time when younger children usually nap.

She echoed Wasylciw's comments about funding existing programs rather than create a competing system.

"We would love to see the GNWT subsidize (part-time) junior kindergarten spots in ECE accredited private educational facilities, like the Yellowknife Playschool Association," Stewart wrote.

Questions about funding and impact on daycares and other early education programs dogged the introduction of junior kindergarten in 2014 and resulted in Premier Bob McLeod announcing a halt on expansion to regional centres and Yellowknife while a review of the program was carried out.

Junior kindergarten had been scheduled to begin here this fall.

The report released this year recommended further engagement on overlap with existing programs and closer consideration about community contexts - meaning the GNWT should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to the program. It also recommended a clear communication strategy for further expansion with "a comprehensive, locally sensitive implementation plan."

Yet questions remain.

"We're kind of all scratching our heads about how JK is going to be implemented," said Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green this week, who said she's written to the education minister seeking clarity.

Green is questioning whether the department has implemented the recommendations in the report.

"I think the question is, what has happened since the whole thing was put on hold? There's been a review but I don't see that the government has implemented those recommendations so we don't seem to be in any different position," she said.

The minister has said how the overlap and funding will be dealt with will be answered following further talks with early education providers set to begin this month. Moses said further details will be presented in the fall to MLAs.

"As we go through the business planning this fall we will be including junior kindergarten in that and making sure that we get feedback and also sharing this with our education boards as we finalize it," he said in an interview last month.

Business plans are proposals drafted by government departments outlining how it intends to operate in the coming year that are reviewed by MLAs.

Those plans form the budget presented later in the legislative assembly.

Green pointed out the plans are expected to come before MLAs at the same time as the government is carrying out further consultations.

Wasyliw laughed when told of the timeline for consultation and development of a junior kindergarten implementation plan.

"That's impressive since they want to start this thing next September and registration starts in February, so they have roughly four-and-a-half months to get it sorted out," he said.

Yellowknife North MLA Cory Vanthuyne said he's heard from Montessori and will raise questions about how everything will work when the legislative assembly resumes in mid-October. However, he supports the program and is excited to see the business plans the department will bring to MLAs.

"I think it will be an excellent option for parents to consider for educating their children," Vanthuyne said.