

Junior kindergarten questioned

Cabinet votes in favour of motion calling for costed plan for expanding program for four-year-olds

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SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

Members of the legislative assembly want more information about how the expansion of junior kindergarten will happen, including how the government will pay for it.

The free, play-based program for four-year-olds is run in schools and is aimed at better preparing children for school.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment plans to expand junior kindergarten across the territory in September 2017 but has released few details about how it will pay for it and how it will work with existing programs such as Montessori in Yellowknife or Aboriginal Head Start in Ndilo.

The search for answers led to Yellowknife Centre Julie Green to introducing a non-binding motion last week calling on the government to provide answers within 120 days, including a "fully-costed budget."



Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green last week spearheaded a motion calling for the GNWT to provide more information about how it plans to fund and implement junior kindergarten when it goes territorywide next year. - James O'Connor/NNSL photo

She also pointed to the need for answers on overlap with existing programs.

"I really believe that there needs to be a nuanced approach to the introduction of junior kindergarten that takes into account the different contexts in different communities," she said in the assembly Oct. 26.

Yellowknife North MLA Cory Vanthuyne said "concerns have not necessarily been alleviated" over the past several months.

Kam Lake MLA Kieron Testart also supported the motion. He said he supports junior kindergarten, but "we need to make sure it's done right and we can't jeopardize existing programs and we need to make sure that our schools have the resources they need to make space and provide this service to Northerners."

The introduction of the motion had echoes of 2014 when regular MLAs passed a similar motion calling on the education department to find more funding for junior kindergarten.

The program was introduced that year in small communities with it set to expand to regional centres the following year and then to Yellowknife in 2016.

Amid rising pressure, Premier Bob McLeod announced in October 2014 a halt in expansion in order to carry out a review. The review concluded the program was generally supported but needed more work on funding and a clear plan for how further expansion would work.

There was little mention of the program until this summer when it was revealed the expansion was going ahead next year.

Green's motion was supported by all regular MLAs, and perhaps surprisingly, cabinet.

Education Minister Alfred Moses said the GNWT will implement the recommendations of the review. The minister said consultation is underway with various groups about junior kindergarten across the territory.

"We continue to engage with stakeholders to make sure that we know what each community needs, and the best way to implement junior kindergarten across the Northwest Territories," Moses said

Two days after the motion passed, Testart asked whether schools feeling pressure to potentially accommodate a wave of new, young, students would be provided additional resources. Moses said a survey was issued to gather input on what schools may need.

"I feel like some deja vu," Testart said. "The last time this was attempted, surveys were sent out, consultations were done, and a plan was still adopted that left many schools outside of the ability to provide exactly what the school board is looking for."

Moses shot back that Testart should provide specific examples.

"The gap in resources, I'd like to hear if it is anything specific," Moses said. "We've been out engaging, we've been hearing the responses that needed to be met."

At an Oct. 19 Yellowknife Catholic Schools meeting, board members expressed concern about the capacity of St. Joseph School with junior kindergarten looming next fall.

The school is currently at 90 per cent capacity, and the board is hoping to acquire portable classrooms in order to accommodate the expected influx of junior-kindergarten students.