

GNWT confirms cuts possible due to junior kindergarten

Changes to affect class size, staff, types of classes offered, says education department

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The education department's plan to fund junior kindergarten by forcing school districts to potentially cut programs and staff is "unacceptable" says one Yellowknife MLA as new details of its impact emerge.

Junior kindergarten is a play-based program for four-year-old children that will be run in NWT schools free of charge to parents, although enrolment is optional.

On Monday, the department told reporters it will contribute \$2 million for junior kindergarten expansion to all communities in the territory from the current 19 that have it now. It's an increase from the original plan to claw the full cost from existing school budgets.

However, the new plan will still see school boards across the territory forced to provide \$3.01 million from their budgets. A previous story indicated an amount of \$2.65 million based on figures provided to reporters Monday.

Education, Culture and Employment Minister Alfred Moses was grilled by Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green during a committee meeting Wednesday where the plan was outlined by Moses and senior department staff.

"I challenge you, instead of just shouting louder and trying to distance the dissent, to really engage in those issues of how you expect this program to be funded," Green said.

When the department presented its plan Monday, the scope of changes required of the education system to bring in junior kindergarten across the territory wasn't revealed.

The department's presentation to MLAs on Wednesday states "changes in the education system will be required." The list includes changes to class sizes, possible reductions to school administration, staffing "adjustments" and changes or limits on non-core courses schools offer students.

Non-core classes are those not required to graduate. Core classes include math, science, social studies, health, phys-ed, arts, career and technology studies.

The added information about the impact of junior kindergarten on existing programming and staff follows concerns voiced this week by school board chairpersons from Yellowknife Education District No. 1 (Yk1) and Yellowknife Catholic Schools (YCS) who said they expect to make cuts. In a meeting last Friday, school district leaders called on the department to fully fund the program instead of removing money from existing school budgets.

While the department has said it expects junior kindergarten expansion will see up to 17 new full-time equivalent positions created, it's not clear where those will be. Yk1 and YCS already offer a user-pay program for four-year-olds that will be replaced by free junior kindergarten.

Green said there's no debate that junior kindergarten is a good program and could help children if implemented correctly. The suggestion to cut non-core programs, however, is unacceptable, she said.

"We can't have a school system that is oriented in its funding and outlook to JK at the expense of the other grades," she said. "A two per cent cut to their funding by asking them to fund JK out of their own money is not acceptable."

Moses defended the plan.

"We have to look at what we're providing in terms of what courses are needed for students of the NWT and also looking at what we're mandated to do in the 18th assembly, which is provide early childhood programming," Moses said.

"There are challenges but we are here today to talk about what we have come up with," Moses later said, saying the department is working with school authorities.

Olin Lovely, the assistant deputy minister, corporate services, told MLAs that while schools will lose revenue from existing user-pay junior kindergarten programs offered by YCS and Yk1, the amount they will get from the GNWT will be "substantially higher" than what they would get from parents.

"I understand the answers but I'm still not satisfied that a school system that I support with my taxes, that I elect trustees to run, is in a position to take on this extra year of education without more support from the department," Green said.

About 75 per cent of the revenue for Yk1 and YCS comes from the GNWT. The rest is raised through property taxes.

Two years ago, an outcry erupted after the department asked Yellowknife school boards to fund junior kindergarten by clawing back their accumulated surpluses.

In effect, it would mean city taxpayers would subsidize the program throughout the territory. It's an issue MLAs at the time pounced on, including former Range Lake MLA Daryl Dolynny.

"The fact is, we're taking these surpluses from Yellowknife and basically spreading them thin everywhere else at no benefit to Yellowknife," he said Wednesday. "These are mill rated monies that you're taking from this area and putting in another area. The question is: is that fair? The answer is absolutely not and hasn't been."

He said the addition of \$2 million is a good step by the government but isn't enough.

Yk1 budgeted to have an accumulated surplus of \$1.6 million this fiscal year.

In 2014, Yk1's chairperson wrote to parents about the plan to claw back the surpluses, which he stated the district has built to respond to changing needs each year, such as class sizes and special needs.

"The surplus is not intended for and not sustainable for a new ongoing expense such as the new junior kindergarten," the March 2014 document states.