

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE
QUESTION 523-18(2)—QUESTION 534-18(2)—QUESTION 536-18(2)

JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN IMPLEMENTATION

February 7, 2017

QUESTION 523-18(2)

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to a couple of question that I asked yesterday that I didn't feel I had satisfactory answers for, and they are questions for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. Mr. Speaker, when the department briefed the standing committee at the beginning of December, the department said that the school boards would have to invest some of their own money in the implementation of junior kindergarten and that that would be no problem for them because schools had been consistently funded above required legislation.

So when I went to the town hall meetings at the beginning of January, the school boards presented their budgets, or not their budgets but their sort of high-level plan for the year, and they reflected that they were going to have to contribute money to JK in order to have it implemented. So, in the case of the Yellowknife Education District Number 1 --

MR. SPEAKER: Member for Yellowknife Centre, what is your question?

MS. GREEN: Sorry. That relates to the question. As simply as possible, could the Minister either answer yes or no, will these internal reductions to implement JK still be necessary? Thank you.

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

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No, any decisions that the school boards do in their budgetary process is up to the school boards. You did hear clearly here earlier on in the Budget Address that we are going to be fully funding junior kindergarten. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: Thank you for your patience. What I understand, then, is that there will be no need for the schools to cut their internal staffing in order to staff JK. Am I correct in understanding that?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: As I mentioned, the education boards and education councils make their own decisions. We provide funding, and those are decisions that are on the board.

MS. GREEN: These staffing reductions are made necessary because the school boards are expected to fund 13 or 14, I guess, at this point, grades with 13 grades of funding, so the kinds of internal reallocations that were made necessary by having to create another year of school. Will those in fact be paid for fully by the department, meaning that the school boards don't have to do any reallocations to make JK happen?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Any reallocations that the boards make are decisions of their own. We said in this House that we are going to fully fund junior kindergarten.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my final question has to do with the timing of making the funding available, or at least the announcement that the money is available and exactly what amount. The school boards need it by the end of March because they are told to create a budget by ECE and it's due to ECE by the end of March. Will they have a firm idea, to the dollar, of how much money they're getting from the government for September by the end of March, yes or no? Thank you.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: We are having those discussions with the superintendents right now on how things are going to be rolling out in the fall. We have still got to see what enrolments there are in the school boards. Those final decisions have not been made. I know they are going out doing the enrolments, trying to get students coming to their schools and to their boards. We do not know what those numbers are yet. When we do, we will be working on having that smooth transition for junior kindergarten in the fall. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

QUESTION 534-18(2)

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, junior kindergarten is going to be a grade like no other within our school system for several reasons. It has to do with the way that this program is funded. In the first case, the government has committed to providing inclusive schooling to help children who are falling behind within the school system, but this inclusive schooling funding is not extended to junior kindergarten. When is that going to change, Mr. Speaker? Thank you.

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

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned, our staff is meeting with the superintendents right now on the roll-out of junior kindergarten. We are listening to any concerns that they may have had, as well as what we have heard from residents from across the Northwest Territories. Those discussions are going on right now. Once those meetings are completed, we can get better updates to the Member. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: It is my understanding that ECE sends draft budgets to the school boards on almost a daily basis. In the most recent budget that was sent last night, there is no money for inclusive schooling. My question is: this is the Minister's pot of money to spend; when is he going to include JK in the inclusive schooling funding?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Junior kindergarten itself is a play-based program. Inclusive schooling is focused on helping students who need that extra assistance from the K to 12 system, and right now as we're implementing it we're continuing to evaluate the program and we'll see what comes out of these discussions with the superintendents and the boards.

MS. GREEN: The Minister can't have it both ways. He can't have junior kindergarten as a grade of education within the school system paid for by the school budgets and then

say it's somehow exempt from the standard programming that applies to all the other students there, especially something as important as inclusive schooling, which is already being reduced in this budget. So my question once again is: when is the Minister going to include the money for inclusive schooling to extend to junior kindergarten?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: When we are implementing junior kindergarten in the fall in the schools, students in the JK system will have to access to all programs and services provided in the school, so there will be some supports there for them.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister just said there would be some supports there for them. Could the Minister please elaborate? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Mr. Speaker, support for students in the JK to 12 system that focus around inclusive schooling, they'll have access to those services and supports as well as even more teachers in the school system. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

QUESTION 536-18(2)

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, one of the ways that junior kindergarten is different from the rest of the other grades in school is that busing needs to take into account the fact that some of those students are as young as three years, eight months. They're very little. And so the school buses need to be equipped with seatbelts and they need to have additional staffing on them. That means the cost of busing children to attend junior kindergarten is going to go up. Will the Minister of Education pay for those extra costs? Thank you.

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

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned, those discussions are happening right now. We're working with the superintendents and the school boards to find out how we address some of those concerns that are being brought forward. We'll wait until we get the results out of that meeting and how things are going to be progressing, and we will give updates to the Members on that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: It's my understanding that the school boards have asked the Minister to fund the busing of the junior kindergarten students. They anticipate that the cost could be up to \$500,000 here in Yellowknife to accommodate those new 250 students who are going to be in school. Will the Minister pay for the extra costs of busing?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: We did commit to fully funding junior kindergarten this fall. As I've mentioned, we also fund school boards throughout the Northwest Territories over \$150 million, and they make the decisions on how those dollars are being allocated and spent as well.

MS. GREEN: Mr. Speaker, my question at this point is: if funding doesn't include inclusive schooling and busing and funding for Aboriginal activities, then what is the definition of fully funded?

HON. ALFRED MOSES: We made the announcement that we're going to be funding the remainder of the communities in the House here. With inclusive schooling, we're still funding inclusive schooling above the legislated percentage that we do. Funding models haven't changed, and we are looking at a revised approach where we are clarifying rules, expectations, and processes with inclusive schooling; but we're still funding it above what we're legislated to do, and that hasn't changed at all.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, what we're talking about here is making school systems sustainable, making them friendly to the use of children and to help them to be successful there, and that starts from the time they get picked up at the door to the time they come back again and everything that happens in between. And so, once again, I am going to ask if the Minister will include the additional costs of JK as he does with all the other grades when he is having his famous meeting with the superintendents. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: The \$5.1 million to implement junior kindergarten to the rest of the communities is focused on the operations of junior kindergarten moving forward. We still haven't heard the results of what the decision or some of the discussions that have been going on, and also I've got to let the Member know that junior kindergarten is going to be optional for families. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.