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Minister elusive on school board cuts

Junior kindergarten funding 'slippery as a dead fish,' says Frame Lake MLA Kevin O'Reilly

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SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

After a week of squabbling in the legislative assembly over the rollout of junior kindergarten, the education minister isn't ruling out whether school boards will need to make cuts next fall despite stating the play-based program for four-year-olds will be "fully funded."

Education Minister Alfred Moses took to the house floor Monday to "provide clarification" about funding for the program, which he said would be doled out to school boards "when it is needed."

"Once we know the actual enrolment figures, the government will bring a request for supplementary funding to the legislative assembly in the fall of 2017 to fully fund implementation," Moses told the legislative assembly.

The total cost of junior kindergarten wasn't included in this year's territorial budget because it will depend on how many students enter the program, he said, and that can't fully be known in advance.

The government will pay for the cost of junior kindergarten in 2017-18 and "into the future," he added.

But Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green questioned whether the minister has considered all of the additional costs and planning associated with implementing the program before September.

School boards are currently developing budgets for next year, she said, and they need to know by the end of March whether they will have to hire or cut staff.

"If the money is not going to be available until the fall, how are school boards going to plan for the implementation of junior kindergarten this fall?" she asked the minister.

Moses said the Department of Education, Culture and Employment has been meeting with superintendents to work out the fine details and ensure the program is implemented smoothly.

As for whether or not schools will still need to make cuts?

"The reductions ... is a decision on the school boards themselves, and that is something that they are going to have to go back and look at," Moses said.

School boards have a lot to discuss with the department, according to Moses.

When asked by Frame Lake MLA Kevin O'Reilly about whether funding for junior kindergarten will include money for inclusive schooling and buses, Moses again said there are conversations going on between school boards and government to figure that out.

"Those discussions, as I mentioned, are happening right now," Moses said.

"So we are going to have to wait to see what comes out of that."

O'Reilly asked how the minister can say the program is going to be fully funded when there are still so many outstanding issues to resolve.

"Nailing down this junior kindergarten funding issue is almost as slippery as a dead fish," O'Reilly said.



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