

MEMBER STATEMENT—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAM FUNDING OPTIONS

March 9, 2017

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. On Tuesday I spoke about the work the Standing Committee on Social Development will be doing during the break. We will be reviewing Bill 16, An Act to Amend the Education Act. In addition to reducing instruction hours, the amendments to the act will establish junior kindergarten as a territory-wide program.

Mr. Speaker in his response to my written questions earlier this week, the Minister failed to answer two questions. They concerned the viability of other, non-school-based programs that serve four-year-olds.

Mr. Speaker, the larger communities like Yellowknife, Hay River, and Fort Smith -- Fort Smith, yes, but I was thinking of Inuvik -- the larger communities have non-profits that offer parents options for educating their pre-schoolers outside the education system. Here in Yellowknife, that includes Montessori School and the Yellowknife Play School; and in Inuvik, that is the Children First Association. These are fee-based programs. The cost of a full-day Montessori program is \$8,000 per year. That compares well with the cost of full-day childcare, but it is a lot of money for a low-income family, as you can appreciate, and many families who would like to send their children to the Montessori school cannot afford to do so. Of course, parents have to go with what they can afford, despite what they think is the best style of learning for their children.

Mr. Speaker, it does not have to be this way. The department could decide to fund individual four-year-olds rather than funding a whole program. What I mean is that the total money invested in JK, \$5.1 million, could be divided among the total number of four-year-olds in the NWT, which is probably about 500 students, or 500 children, which I think is a bit of a generous estimate. The cost per student, then, is \$10,200. In other words, it would cost less to attach the subsidy to the child than it would be to pay for the children to be in a school classroom. In fact, costs are less than half of those that are estimated by the department per child per year. I do not understand why the department would not consider this option; they have not given me a reason. It represents a real choice for parents about early childhood development, and it protects the financial viability of the non-profits.

Mr. Speaker, how are existing pre-school programs going to stay in business without four-year-olds? This is a serious question. I am not aware that ECE is planning to increase early childhood development subsidies to these programs. A very real possibility from the introduction of JK is that parents will have less choice in the future than they have now, whatever their income. I will have questions for the Minister. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.