

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 327-19(2): Support for Child Care and Early Childhood Education

June 11, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. I would like to follow up on a letter that I tabled in the House a couple of days ago regarding support for childcare. Has the Minister had an opportunity to review the letter from the Children First Society in Inuvik and the Yellowknife Daycare Association? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes.

MR. O'REILLY: That is the kind of answer I am looking for. Thank you to the Minister. There has been almost \$5 million designated to support early childhood care and education during the COVID-19 pandemic by GNWT. Supports include a subsidy to lower childcare costs for essential service workers, wage top-ups, funding for cleaning supplies, and money available to assist with reopening. Of course, we don't want to take steps backwards. The child carers would like to maintain this positive momentum. Will the Minister commit to continuing these additional supports for childcare beyond the COVID-19 pandemic?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: ECE gives out a lot of money. The Members are always asking me to give out more money. I have to let them know there is a process. There is a process in the government whereby I have to go to the Financial Management Board and present this. That being said, these funds were put out there for a reason. It's because COVID-19, we were afraid it was coming to the territory, and we needed to be prepared. As such, we put a lot of time into it in a short period of time. We put a lot of hours each day into this.

We are in a different place now. What we have to do is go back, look at what we have in place, look at these supports. Maybe they are not the right supports. Maybe we need different supports. There are some things in there, for example, helping ensure that childcare centres that have closed can keep paying their bills so they don't disappear. Why would we do that if we are just going to now let them disappear? It would make sense that we have to look at what ongoing supports we can provide. Once we figure that out, then I will come back to the Financial Management Board with a plan if that is what is needed, and we will go from there.

MR. O'REILLY: I was hoping for a "yes." Look, I take the Minister's points, but what I would like to hear him say is that he is actually prepared to take that proposal to FMB. During COVID-19, there has been a global recognition of how childcare workers provide an essential service. Early in this sitting, the Premier reiterated her support for universal childcare. I agree with it, too. We also have an early childhood development framework and an action plan in place that will start

to help us get there. Can the Minister commit that he'll get his senior staff to discuss with early childcare providers, and they are ready and eager to enter discussions about looking at making some of these changes during COVID-19 more permanent, to increase the availability and affordability of childcare?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: I know that every time we talk about universal childcare for the next four years, it's going to come back to the quote from the Premier saying, "I am all about universal childcare." I thank her for that. In the government's mandate, there is a commitment to develop a 2030 early learning and childcare strategy in consultation with stakeholders that considers the availability of childcare spaces and reduction of childcare costs. This is under the commitment to advance universal childcare. What the Member's asking is what is in the mandate.

This is what we plan to do, how can we move towards a universal childcare and early learning education system, essentially, across the Northwest Territories. I can't commit to the date when those talks will happen. The department is in constant contact with early learning and childcare providers. There are ongoing conversations, and there are a lot of good ideas that we already know about. Given the situation right now where a lot of employees are working from home, some have gone to other departments to help with the COVID-19 efforts, I can't commit to making this happen today. That is exactly the type of work that ECE is planning on doing.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that fabulous display of Cabinet solidarity. More seriously, I do appreciate his commitment on this file. He has done a lot of work in the department, as well. I commend him for his commitment to work with childcare providers moving forward. Of course, we are still in a pandemic. I have raised the issue of lessons learned several times in this House, Mr. Speaker. One of those lessons learned is that we need to continue to improve access to affordable childcare. Can the Minister tell us how he and his department intend to approach lessons learned about childcare during this pandemic and make permanent changes that bring us closer to universal childcare? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Unfortunately, I wouldn't say there are necessarily a lot of lessons learned. It's highlighted a lot of the things that we already knew: that there are a limited number of qualified early childhood educators; the pay scale is not quite comparable to other fields. In the letter the Member referenced, it talks about the pay scale for early childhood educators and people who work at childcare centres. It's much lower than, say, teachers, for example. A lot of times, people who have those qualifications move on to the JK to 12 system. It's tough to hold onto them.

The department has been trying to respond to these types of things over the past number of years. We have grants for people who want to further their education in this field. There are dual credit courses that students can take in high school so that they can get an early start into this. There are a couple programs at Aurora College. We are doing a lot of the work that needs to get

done here. We already know about that work. If this helps us get there faster, then I will take advantage of that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Oral questions. Member for Monfwi.