

## ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

### QUESTION 590-19(2)/605-19(2)

#### INTERNET ACCESS FOR LEARNING

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. I noted in my statement that YK1, YCS, CSFTNO and Aurora College share the same meagre bandwidth through a data feed provided by GNWT for all four institutions. Can the Minister confirm that he's aware of this problem, and what is he doing about it? 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. I am aware that everyone in the territory has bandwidth issues. There're bandwidth issues here at the Legislative Assembly. There're bandwidth issues at my office in Hay River that's on the government Internet. There're bandwidth issues at my house. I know there's bandwidth issues, and yes, I'm aware that schools also have them. It's been brought to my attention. ECE works with the school boards and with the Department of Infrastructure as a facilitator because it's not ECE who operates the Internet, who invests in the infrastructure. That's a different department, but we do act as that intermediary, and we bring those concerns forward. I'd like to say the four schools in Yellowknife -- I'll leave it at that. There's some technical stuff I don't want to get into it because I don't want to get it wrong, so I'll perhaps leave it for my colleague at another date. Thank you.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I want to thank the Minister. I know he's a fabulous facilitator, and I look forward to him working even harder on this issue. I mentioned dissatisfaction that has been expressed by teachers, the poor response times for Internet and technology issues that GNWT's supposed to help with. Will the Minister take this up with his colleague the Minister of Infrastructure and make sure that service calls affecting our educational needs receive the necessary attention?

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** Already done.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I want to thank the Minister. I'm on a roll here. I better keep going. As bad as the situation may be here in Yellowknife, I'm sure it's much worse in other regions and communities, and it creates a real digital divide here. Can the Minister explain what his department is doing to ensure accessible and affordable Internet access for all of our students?

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** This is a topic discussed frequently around the Cabinet table. ECE doesn't have responsibility over this. Of course, the Minister of Finance is often answering questions about this in the House. The Minister of Infrastructure is responsible for the government infrastructure, but I have conversations with both of them. At the national level, I have conversations with the other Ministers of education of Canada, and we've approached the federal government about the need for investments in broadband infrastructure. The Student Financial Assistance program has provided a

monthly technology grant of \$100 to help students access funding. Students who attend Aurora College were eligible for a one-time grant to help set up Internet.

There's a number of different things that we're doing. We also need to look at how Internet is being used in schools. We need to monitor it. There is hardware in place for that, and I think we can be more effective with using that. We also understand that you don't need Internet for everything in schools. Yes, it's great, but I think most people in here got through school without using the Internet in every single class, for better or for worse, but it can be done. Through blended learning, we can also mitigate some of those challenges.

**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. Sure. I recognize that this issue cuts across many departments, but this is becoming a real issue for low-income families and post-secondary students. Unless our students have access and affordable Internet, education is not universal. I want to ask the Minister, within his authority, what is he doing to remove barriers related to Internet accessibility and affordability for families and students? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** I would just be repeating everything I said. Maybe I jumped the gun and answered the question too early, but the Member can refer to my last answer. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

QUESTION 605-19(2):  
ACCESS TO INTERNET FOR STUDENTS

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Infrastructure. I just want to follow up on questions I had for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment about access to the Internet for students. In my statement, I mentioned the low bandwidth that is shared between four educational facilities in Yellowknife. Can the Minister confirm that she is aware of this problem and what is she doing about it? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Infrastructure.

**HON. DIANE ARCHIE:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I was made aware of this probably about 40 minutes ago. It is something that the Department of Infrastructure, as well as the Minister of Finance, as she is responsible for the bandwidth, we heard concerns from the Member regarding Education, Culture and Employment and the need for online schooling. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I'm glad that the Minister became aware of this problem 40 minutes ago. It's a long-standing issue, and I'm surprised that it has taken her this long to recognize that it is an issue. I mentioned earlier that there is dissatisfaction amongst some of the teachers with regard to Internet and technology issues that GNWT should be helping with. Is the Minister aware of these issues and what is she going to do to help speed up service calls related to educational needs?

**HON. DIANE ARCHIE:** Yes, I am aware. That was his question, so yes, I am aware. Network capacity and Internet access is the responsibility of the Department of Infrastructure, that is correct, our Technology Service Centre. We've been working closely with the TSC throughout the year to facilitate the exchange of information and support between TSC and the department of education. To this end, we have shared concerns from some of the schools in the territory and provided updates on the work to address some of the connectivity issues, which, in turn, we have passed along, where appropriate.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I want to thank the Minister for that. I think I heard an explanation of the problem, but I didn't actually hear any solutions. As bad as the situation is here in Yellowknife, I'm sure it's much worse in the regions and communities, which creates a digital divide. Can the Minister explain what her department is doing to ensure accessible and affordable Internet access for all of our students?

**HON. DIANE ARCHIE:** As a longer-term solution, TSC has been working on an RFP for increased Internet services for some of the education bodies, and perhaps some of the other departments in the GNWT.

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

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. That's great. That's a solution. The RFP is out there, but I'd like to know when the RFP is going to close and when the Minister is going to report back to the House on progress on this issue. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**HON. DIANE ARCHIE:** Like I said, I was made aware of this 42 minutes ago. I don't have much of the details on the RFP or let alone some of the timelines on where we're at with this RFP. However, I will commit to getting back to the Member with further information on where we're at with this. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.