

MEMBER STATEMENT—KEVIN O'REILLY MLA FRAME LAKE

INTERNET ACCESS FOR LEARNING

February 26, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to talk about adequate and affordable access to Internet services and the barriers facing students and families, especially our post-secondary distance learners.

First, on the elementary and secondary school side, in a recent Yellowknife school board meeting, it was revealed that the Internet connectivity volume shared by the three boards and Aurora College is grossly inadequate, especially given distance learning requirements imposed by the COVID pandemic. Astonishing as it sounds, YCS, YK1, Aurora College, and CSFTNO share an Internet connection of 300 megabytes per second provided by the GNWT. Just for context, that's about equivalent to your cable modem at home. This is for four entire school organizations. This is a totally inadequate allotment, considering that there are 1700 users in YCS alone, and this usage is not streaming content or videos, just for day-to-day operations.

Even without the increased distance demands of COVID-19, providing students adequate opportunity to learn and use technology is an essential part of modern education. Failure to provide needed technical infrastructure puts our students at a disadvantage compared to learners in other jurisdictions and even within communities here. Inadequate connectivity was rated in a recent teacher survey conducted by YCS as the number one problem affecting performance and wellness. The school board also noted that routine service calls to GNWT's Technology Service Centre were not resolved in a timely manner, which adds to frustration with teachers and students. Accessibility and affordability present further problems for distance education. Even though so-called unlimited bandwidth is coming to northern communities, the \$100-plus cost of adequate home plans creates a digital divide in communities, including Yellowknife.

Likewise, students of post-secondary distance programs face increasing Internet charges that can be crippling. Although there is now a technology support grant as part of Student Financial Assistance, it is not adequate to allow for the access that students require. I will have questions for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment on putting our students on adequate and affordable technical footing. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.