



Government response to the *Review of Inclusive Education Practices in Early Learning and Child Care settings in the Northwest Territories*

February 2025

Une version française de ce document est disponible.

K'ákshó got'jne xáda k'é hederi ḡedjhtl'é yeriniwé ni dé dúle.
Dene Kádá

Ɂerihlt'is Dëne Sųliné yati t'a huts'elkér xa beyáyati theɂą ɬat'e, nuwe ts'ën yólti.
Dëne Sųliné

Edi gondı dehgáh got'je zhatié k'éé edat'eh enahddhé nide naxets'é edahtí.
Dene Zhatié

Jii gwandak izhii ginjik vat'atr'ijahch'uu zhit yinohthan jì', diits'at ginohkhii.
Dinjii Zhu' Ginjik

Uvanittuaq ilitchurisukupku Inuvialuktun, ququaqluta.
Inuvialuktun

Hapkua titiqqat pijumagupkit Inuinnaqtun, uvaptinnut hivajarlutit.
Inuinnaqtun

kīspin ki nitawihtin ē nīhiyawihk ōma ācimōwin, tipwāsinān.
nēhiyawēwin

Tł̄chö yati k'èè. Dı wegodi newo dè, gots'o gonede.
Tł̄chö

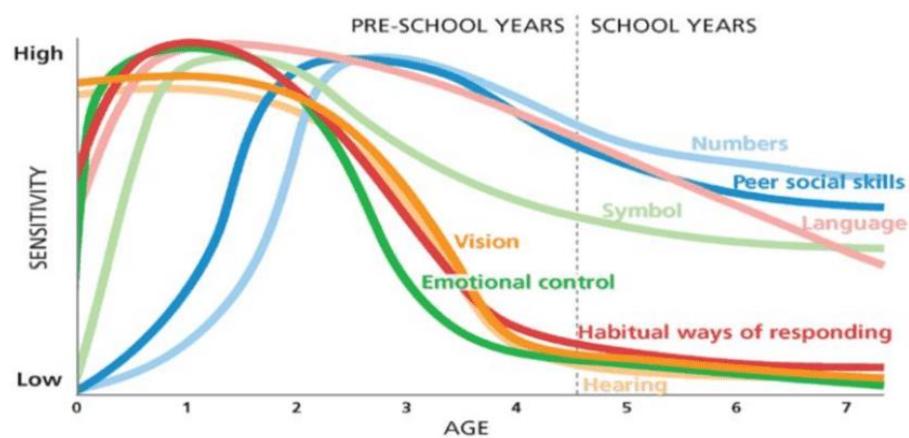
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Overview

The early years, from birth to starting school entry, are essential for a child's brain growth. As children grow, the things they learn in their early years become the basis for all their future learning. It is shaped by the connections kids make with the people, places, cultures, languages, and beliefs in their families and communities.



The graph above shows the significant influence a child's environment can have on the developing brain in the early years. Adapted from Nash, 1997; *Early Years Study*.

The Government of the Northwest Territories recognizes that children are the future and that access to high-quality, inclusive early learning and child care is an important support for young families. Our [vision](#) is that high-quality early learning and child care opportunities should be available for all families who want or need it. We believe families should feel welcomed and supported to fully participate in early learning opportunities that are culturally sensitive, responsive to their needs, and that foster the healthy development of mind, body, and spirit.

To help us develop a responsive approach to inclusive early learning and child care for families in the Northwest Territories (NWT), Malatest was contracted to review current inclusion-related practices and supports relevant to licensed early learning and child care programs across the NWT. The review was conducted between June 2023 and July 2024.

Throughout the review, inclusion was defined as the practice of involving children with disabilities and/or those requiring enhanced or individual supports in the same early learning environment or setting as their peers, using specialized approaches and supports for them to be successful.

Responses and next steps

This document outlines the Government of the Northwest Territories' response to the findings of the *Review of Inclusive Education Practices in Early Learning and Child Care Settings in the Northwest Territories*. The information below summarizes information gathered through interviews with members

of the early learning and child care sector, provides context for consideration, and our next steps in the development of a renewed approach to inclusive early learning and child care.

Educator knowledge regarding inclusion

Findings

The review examined how early childhood educators and program operators understand inclusion in early learning and child care. Most staff had a basic understanding of the terms inclusion and inclusive child care, often associating both with equal access to programs. When the terms were differentiated, inclusion was described as providing safe and welcoming spaces for all, while inclusive early learning and child care focused on the teaching practices, resources and staff required to support the individual needs of children in early learning.

Early learning and child care partners (e.g.: Regional Early Childhood Consultants, Regional Inclusive Schooling Coordinators, NWT Disabilities Council, and rehabilitation professionals from the Government of the Northwest Territories' Department of Health and Social Services) noted that access to programs and support across the NWT is a key aspect of inclusion. They also recommended that educational materials in programs like toys and books should reflect the diverse culture and abilities of children.

The review also stressed that inclusive early learning and child care requires family engagement. Involving families promotes continuous care between the home and early learning and child care settings, helping families feel comfortable discussing concerns about their children.

Context

Historically, the term inclusive education was used to describe specialized resources and adaptations needed to fully include children with disabilities. This definition continues to evolve and has come to refer to programs and services that are accessible and welcoming to all. Inclusive education has come to consider the unique needs of all learners, regardless of their characteristics or their family backgrounds or structures. This vision of inclusion consists of minimizing barriers and creating flexible environments that are responsive to the learning needs of all children.

Next steps

We will explore and promote a shared understanding of what inclusion and inclusive early learning means in the NWT.

Inclusion related legislation, policies and procedures

Findings

The review found that a lack of clear guidelines and expectations has created gaps in understanding and support for the development of inclusive early learning environments. Limited support is available through legislation, policies, procedures, or other documentation to support centre-based and home-

based programs to provide inclusive early learning and child care. Both centre-based and home-based programs faced various challenges and inconsistencies due to the absence of formal policies supporting inclusive early learning and child care.

Context

Licensed early learning and child care programs in the NWT are legislated under the [Early Learning and Child Care Act](#) and [Early Learning and Child Care Regulations](#).

Early Learning and Child Care Regulations require licensed operators to create a daily program that reflects the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the children as much as possible. As well, if a child with enhanced developmental needs attends the program, the operator is expected to modify the daily program as much as possible, to ensure that the child can participate, including providing any necessary specialized equipment. The inspection and licensing process provides an opportunity for program operators to identify any children with enhanced or individualized needs and discuss how best to adapt their programming to meet the child's needs. There are no specific procedural manuals or guidelines to support programs to meet these regulations.

Next steps

We will review and enhance current regulations, policies, and guidelines to support our partners in offering welcoming, supportive, and inclusive early learning and child care across the NWT.

Access to funding, materials and human resources

Findings

Funding

All participants noted that accessing adequate funding and resources to provide inclusive early learning and child care was challenging for both providers and families, and that adequate funding is required to appropriately implement inclusive early learning and child care. Reports indicated that funding is needed to access materials and modify early learning and child care settings, as well as hire well-trained staff who are trauma and culturally informed.

Reports suggest a lack of clarity regarding what the funding programs can be used for and how to access them. Funding allocated for training related to inclusion was reported to be insufficient to meet the needs of all their staff.

Human resources

Even when funding is available to hire staff to provide additional inclusion support, reports suggest that they often do not have the knowledge and skills related to inclusion best practices to optimally meet the needs of children in question.

Context

Funding

The Government of the Northwest Territories has two funding programs to support the inclusion of children with enhanced developmental needs in early learning and child care: the [Supporting Child Inclusion and Participation](#) funding for centre-based programs and a special needs rate available through the [Home-based Operational Funding](#).

The Supporting Child Inclusion and Participation funding program, established in 2019-20, provides funding to centre-based programs to promote access for children needing enhanced or individualized support. This includes funding to hire an ‘inclusion staff’ to enhance the child-to-staff ratio or a program consultant to assist with program development. Children do not need a diagnosis for the centre-based program to access the funding, but they do need a recommendation from a child development specialist external to the program which includes their regional [Early Childhood Consultant](#). Inclusion grants of up to \$1,000 for staff training or resources related to inclusive early learning and child care area available annually.

Every year, a portion of the Supporting Child Inclusion and Participation is provided to the NWT Disabilities Council to support inclusion for children in early learning and child care through their Early Childhood Intervention Program in Yellowknife.

Through the Home-based Operational Funding, a special needs rate is available to access additional funding to assist with costs associated with providing care to a child with enhanced needs. A medical note that states that a child has an enhanced need is required.

Human resources

Having highly trained early childhood educators designing and delivering early learning programming is critical for providing inclusive child care. Findings indicate that across Canada there is a lack of post-secondary programs and professional development for early childhood educator development which focuses on inclusion practices. Participants report that human resource factors, such as child-to-staff ratios and access to training, pose a significant challenge in the NWT.

Initial steps taken in early learning and child care sector transformation have included initiatives to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators. The eligibility for [Early Learning and Child Care Scholarships](#) has been updated to reach more educators, particularly those already working in licensed programs. This will support educators who want to enroll in part-time post-secondary education. In addition, the recent implementation of a wage grid for center-based programs aims to attract and retain early childhood educators by establishing a minimum standard salary. An annual retention allowance has also been created for Indigenous educators and educators who have worked within the sector in the NWT for an extended period to promote culturally responsive programming tailored to communities.

Next steps

We will continue to offer initiatives to enhance educator recruitment and retention as well as streamline and improve our communication about available resources and funding for inclusive early learning and child care.

Access to professional learning and support personnel

Findings

Educators in both centre-based and home-based programs reported being able to access professional learning. However, the content offered by the Government of the Northwest Territories and accessed through external providers tended to be general in nature and not specifically geared to inclusion practices. Challenges identified with accessing professional learning included cost, timing, and access to training, especially in small communities with unreliable internet service. Centre-based programs are often unable to cover the costs, both in terms of training fees and staff time.

Licensed program operators reported difficulty participating in training as they need to close their programs. For home-based operators this means a loss of income and they have minimal spare time outside of work hours in which to complete work-related training.

Centre-based staff indicated a need for additional training to develop their skills and confidence to engage with families in identifying their children's needs and making referrals for potential supports. Without these bridges, families may not receive needed supports and could become increasingly isolated, especially if they do not have the capacity to advocate for themselves or their children.

All partners reported that there were challenges with accessing support personnel particularly outside Yellowknife. While the NWT Disabilities Council was identified as a valuable resource for obtaining support, it was noted that the assistance was limited mostly to Yellowknife.

Context

We currently offer professional learning opportunities through virtual and in-person workshops. Professional learning currently offered focuses primarily on developmentally appropriate educational practices for early learning rather than inclusion-related professional learning opportunities.

Next steps

We will explore ways to improve the delivery of professional learning to enhance the ability of early childhood educators to meet the diverse needs of young children and their families in the NWT.

Transitional supports

Findings

The process of transitioning from the early learning and child care system into the public school system for children in the NWT with enhanced or individualized needs is inconsistent. Out-of-school providers report that they often are not supplied with information on children who attend their after-school programs, therefore, find it challenging to meet their needs.

Participants noted the lack of transition supports between early learning settings and schools impacted the continuity of educational programming for children and families. The ability to put supports in place depended on schools knowing the children who would be attending their classes in the upcoming school year.

Junior kindergarten/kindergarten teachers and regional inclusive schooling consultants stated that transitioning children from early learning and child care often involved working with students, families and other professionals within the health and education systems. They stated that having time to plan and put resources and supports in place was valuable for everyone involved.

Context

It's important to consider the factors influencing children moving from early learning and child care to the school system. This transition represents environmental and cultural changes, exposing them to new surroundings, routines, people, and expectations. Education systems need to promote smooth transitions for sustained learning that will help children build on the gains made in their early years.

Research suggests that a successful transition between early learning and the public school system involves several components: alignment between early learning and child care settings and schools, collaboration, trust, and mutual respect among families, teachers, educators and communities, a shared understanding of a child's needs, and the ability to be flexible and tailor transition practices to these individual needs.

Next steps

We will work to promote continuity of learning and explore ways to create a smooth transition between early learning and the public school system for children with enhanced developmental needs.

Moving forward

Inclusion means that all children are welcomed and supported to participate in every aspect of their early learning and child care program. It requires educators to create an environment that supports meaningful connections and caring relationships with children and their families. Inclusion is based on a

system of guiding principles and beliefs combined with a set of best practices that focus on the children's well-being, sense of belonging, development, and engagement in learning.

To date, early learning and child care system transformation changes have focused on enhancing affordability and access to high quality early learning and childcare through a variety of initiatives to lower costs for families, increase the number of licensed spaces available, provide higher wages to recruit and retain qualified staff, and enhance access to post-secondary and professional development opportunities for educators. We know there is more work to be done.

As we build upon these initial successes, the information that you have provided through engagement will help to guide the next steps to increase the quality and inclusivity of early learning and child care in the NWT.

Looking forward, we will:

- strengthen and develop community and service partnerships to create a strong foundation of support for licensed ELCC to grow this important work (to Spring 2025);
- develop a document outlining areas for action to support inclusive early learning in the NWT that is culturally responsive and supports educators to develop the knowledge and skills to meet the learning needs of all children (to Spring 2025);
- connect and work with early learning and child care operators, early childhood educators, and families on achievable supports for inclusive early learning within our current financial and human resource investment (Spring 2025 to Spring 2026); and,
- implement actions using a system-wide lens to remove barriers and enhance supports toward inclusive early learning (Starting Spring 2025).

Timeline

