



Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Framework

June 2025

Une version française de ce document est disponible.

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Background

The Government of the Northwest Territories recognizes that early learning and child care plays a role in helping children develop the skills that are needed in life. Yet, access to adequate early learning and child care infrastructure across the Northwest Territories (NWT) continues to be a challenge. Developing new infrastructure or retrofitting existing spaces can be expensive and take a long time to complete.

To support families and improve early learning and child care in the territory, the Government of the Northwest Territories [*2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy*](#) and [*Canada – Northwest Territories Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*](#) provide the goals for transforming early learning and child care in the Northwest Territories.

In June 2023, the Government of Canada announced a new Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund, which provided provinces and territories with a total of \$625 million over four years to support the achievement of their respective Canada-wide Agreement targets, related to space creation and inclusion. This funding supports major and minor capital projects that advance inclusion in child care, as a key principle of the Canada-wide system.

In May 2024, the Government of Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories announced that the territory would receive approximately \$10.6M over the next four years to support the development of early learning and child care infrastructure. Therefore, one of the immediate goals is to support the creation of up to 300 net new licensed child care spaces for children birth to under 6 years of age by March 31, 2026. To increase the number of licensed early learning and child care spaces across the Northwest Territories, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment reviewed various approaches to space creation and funding and outlined them for input. The three options for funding and supporting early learning and child care space creation in the Northwest Territories presented were capital contributions, modular or ready-to-move construction, and asset ownership.

In June 2024, the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment began engaging with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, not-for-profit licensed centre-based early learning and child care facility operators, education bodies, and the Northwest Territories Early Childhood Association on the approaches to creating net new licensed centre-based child care spaces in the territory. There were 11 engagement sessions hosted in which a total of twenty-five (25) participants from all regions of the Northwest Territories participated. The Standing Committee on Social Development was also engaged regarding the Plan in September 2024.

The *Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Framework* was developed to ensure the best use of the federal Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund and the existing territorial funding through the Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund.

This Framework prioritizes:

- Working with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, communities and not-for-profits to create licensed child care spaces in communities that currently do not have access to licensed centre-based early learning and child care facilities.

- Supporting inclusive child care and participation by providing funding to support the diverse needs of children, including those from equity-seeking families and children who have specific developmental needs.
- Supporting rural and remote communities where Indigenous people and families face barriers to accessing licensed child care programs.
- Providing solutions that meet the needs of diverse communities.

What we heard

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment engaged in discussions with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, education bodies, the Northwest Territories Early Childhood Association and operators of centre-based early learning and child care programs in the territory. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment also engaged the Standing Committee on Social Development. Feedback received from these engagement sessions has informed aspects of the Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Framework,

The engagement was framed around elements for supporting the creation of new centre-based early learning and child care spaces for NWT families. The following key findings emerged during the engagement:

- Consider completing a needs assessment to inform early learning and child care infrastructure implementation.
- Ensure that the space-creation approach for each community is context-dependent.
- The design of new early learning and child care spaces needs to be culturally appropriate.
- Address funding-related barriers, such as surplus restrictions and inadequate funding.
- Strengthen partnerships through improved engagement, support and communication.

Participants provided the following specific feedback regarding options for creating new licensed centre-based early learning and child care spaces.

Capital Contributions Approach

- New facility constructions under capital contributions can enable buildings to be tailored to community needs. For example, communities with smaller populations may build multi-purpose facilities that include early learning and child care and kindergarten spaces.
- Cost-effective since communities can utilize available land, and potentially eliminate the costs associated with shipping or barging modular or prefabricated buildings.
- It could build the capacity of the local labour market, enhance the employability skills of community members, and lead to employment in construction and project management.

Modular Structures/Ready-to Move Approach

- Has been successfully used in several communities.
- Ideal for communities that face construction challenges due to barriers accessing the community.
- The best approach for meeting the urgent need for new child care spaces.

Asset Ownership Approach

- Ideal for creating a sustainable, long-term increase in the number of child care spaces.
- An easy option in communities with vacant buildings (community government owned or Government of the Northwest Territories owned).
- Offers opportunities to re-profile or renovate existing government (community and Government of the Northwest Territories) spaces and facilities in the region.

Participants also told us:

- That barriers to accessing funding need to be addressed. Barriers include onerous application processes, limits on surplus funds, and inability for some operators to cover maintenance and upkeep costs without raising fees or compromising service.
- The goal of 300 new child care spaces by 2026 is unrealistic with the current funding allocations.
- To include a plan for sharing information regarding licensing and other resources.
- Renovate existing office buildings or community hall spaces to add child care spaces.
- Embed the need for new child care spaces at the community planning level and encourage developers to include child care spaces in new infrastructure projects (e.g., a new office space should include child care spaces).
- Work with Indigenous governments when building early learning and child care centres in communities.
- Reach out to all community governments to determine ELCC space creation opportunities.



The June-July 2024 and September 2024 engagement feedback is summarized in the *What We Heard Report: Approaches to Early Learning and Child Care Space Creation*.

The development of this Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Framework is informed by the feedback received during engagement sessions with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, not-for-profit licensed centre-based early learning and child care facility operators, the Northwest Territories Early Childhood Association, education bodies, and the Standing Committee on Social Development.

Although the Department of Education, Culture and Employment was not able to incorporate all feedback received during the engagement in this Early Learning and Child Care Framework, all the feedback has been catalogued and will be considered for inclusion in relevant Early Learning and Child Care program resources and supports.

Building on what works

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment, Early Learning and Child Care Division oversees early learning and child care programs for children from birth to age 12. The Department licenses and monitors centre-based and home-based facilities. It provides funding to licensed early learning and child care programs to help offset the high costs of child care as well as infrastructure development and supports the inclusion of children with additional needs in child care programs.¹ The Department is also responsible for implementing the action plans under the Canada - Northwest Territories Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements, including the Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund.

Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Funding

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment will use both territorial and federal infrastructure investments to support access to child care in the territory by creating new licensed early learning and child care spaces. The details are as follows:

Funding Commitments

- \$1,000,000 annually from the Government of the Northwest Territories.
- Federal Infrastructure funding varies. Available amounts are announced annually and currently committed until 2026-2027 fiscal year.

The **Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund (ECIF)** supports projects that preserve existing child care spaces and costs associated with renovating existing buildings, constructing new buildings, or purchasing physical spaces for the purpose of creating new licensed centre-based child care programs.

The federally funded **Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Infrastructure Fund** supports major and minor capital projects that result in new licensed centre-based early learning and child care spaces. These include, but are not limited to approved costs related to planning, design, construction and renovations; start-up costs such as business plans and feasibility studies; as well as financial incentives to support capital costs associated with creating inclusive spaces.

Other funding supports

- **Developmental Fund** supports child care infrastructure planning and feasibility studies. This funding is administered under ECIF and provides up to \$50,000 based on need.
- **Health and Safety funding:** provides up to \$10,000 to help licensed centre-based ELCC programs with the cost of repairs and maintenance required by annual health and fire safety inspections to ensure all children in programs have a safe and secure environment.
- **New Child Care Spaces (start-up) funding** provides a fixed amount per type of space based on which zone (location), to purchase of equipment and supplies, or to assist licensed centre-based programs who wish to re-profile spaces based on community need (e.g., infant to preschool).

¹ Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., & Mehta, S. (2024). The Early Childhood Education Report 2023. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

Partnerships and collaborations

Community-based partnership is an expressed value in the NWT's *2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy*². By working collaboratively and developing approaches that meet diverse community needs, the Government of the Northwest Territories is taking steps toward supporting the development of quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive early learning and child care programming in the territory.

This Infrastructure Framework builds on the Government of the Northwest Territories' commitments in the *2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy: A Commitment and Vision for Action* and prioritizes working with diverse community partners across the NWT, which include Indigenous governments and local communities to collaboratively build an early learning and child care system and create new child care spaces for NWT families.

Our priorities

The early learning and child care infrastructure investment will support the creation of new child care spaces when and where families need it. This will be done by ensuring that the allocation of the early learning and child care infrastructure funding prioritize diverse NWT community settings and those that are in higher need of child care.



NWT Bureau of Statistics:

<https://www.statsnwt.ca/community-data/>

Additional interrelated priorities include:

- communities where families face barriers to accessing licensed child care programs.
- communities where there are no existing early learning and child care facilities, especially for children birth to age 3.
- access and inclusion for families who identify as vulnerable, equity seeking, and those with children with developmental needs. This priority includes existing facilities that require infrastructure updates to meet the demands of children with developmental needs.

² Government of Northwest Territories (2022). *2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy: A Commitment and Vision for Action*. Retrieved from [2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy \(gov.nt.ca\)](https://www.gov.nt.ca/2030-early-learning-and-child-care-strategy).

The Framework for creating child care spaces

The Government of the Northwest Territories Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund (ECIF) and the federally funded Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund provide a significant opportunity to support child care infrastructure projects in communities in the Northwest Territories. The Government of Northwest Territories acknowledges that many challenges exist that impact the development of licensed child care facilities in many communities, including those related to the cost of transporting and delivering construction materials, the short construction period, and the limited funding available for infrastructure projects. Additionally, the Government of Northwest Territories released its Fiscal Sustainability Strategy in February 2024, *Restoring Balance: A Fiscal Sustainability Strategy for the 20th Legislative Assembly*. The intent of this Strategy is to increase revenues or reduce Government of Northwest Territories' expenditures by \$150 million in 2024-2025 and ongoing. Given the context, infrastructure challenges and the limited funding, the Government of the Northwest Territories plans to partner with Indigenous governments, organizations, and operators by pooling together federal, territorial and community funds and resources to create new child care spaces.

Infrastructure funding allocations will also depend on the budget, number of funding applications received, and community needs. Also, to support as many projects as possible, the maximum infrastructure contribution is set at 80% of the total project cost. The preferred cost match is 50%. The funding amount can be varied for reasons related to financial hardship, project costs, and availability of infrastructure funds.

Recognizing that communities have different child care needs and challenges, this Framework adopts a flexible, multi-faceted approach that incorporates various options for addressing child care needs of NWT families in diverse community contexts. The Framework outlines three specific approaches for supporting the creation and for funding new early learning and child care spaces in the territory. Each approach is described below.

Capital Contributions	Modular/Ready-to-Move	Asset Ownership*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capital funding is provided for eligible costs, up to allowable limits. Child care expansion occurs in new and existing facilities that is either owned or leased by the operator. Operators work directly with architects and contractors to design and build the facility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capital funding is provided for eligible costs, up to allowable limits. GNWT works with the community to support design and construction. Operator provides serviced land for the modular. Modular facility is built off-site and installed on a permanent foundation. Asset belongs to the community / operator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ELCC space included in new facility plans, i.e. schools and government buildings. Existing space in a government-owned facility is re-profiled and renovated. Space is provided/leased to an operator for child care program delivery.

*Government ownership of ELCC facilities (asset ownership) is also available to Indigenous governments and communities with vacant buildings or buildings that will become vacant in future, meaning various levels of

government can consider reprofiling those spaces for early learning and child care facilities in their communities.

- Infrastructure projects tailored to community needs.
- Community driven employment opportunities, such as construction and project management

Capital contributions to eligible organizations will be a primary approach to supporting the creation of new early learning and child care spaces in NWT. Through this approach, the Government of the Northwest Territories makes capital contributions to infrastructure projects that create new licensed child care spaces. Funding recipients work directly with architects and contractors to design and construct, renovate or retrofit an existing facility to create new licensed child care spaces.

Under Capital Contributions, eligible projects can receive developmental funding to support project planning, feasibility studies, and business plan development, where applicable.

Eligible project costs, include but are not limited to architectural design, building or renovating/retrofitting space to create new centre-based early learning and child care spaces.

How does it work?

- ❖ Proposals are assessed based on a demonstrated need for new child care spaces that increase inclusion in underserved communities, funding eligibility, project costs, and community support for the early learning and child care program.
- ❖ Applicants are supported throughout the application process by Early Childhood Consultants.
- ❖ Applicants work directly with architects and contractors to design and build the facility on their own land.

Modular structures and modular building technologies are integral to GNWT's strategy for creating new early learning and child care spaces both in the short term and in the long-term.

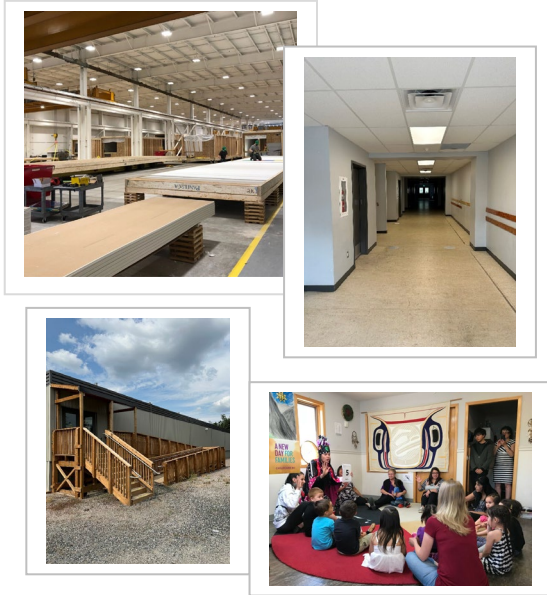
Given the short construction period in the North, the limited ability to get resources into some northern communities, and the Canada – Northwest Territories Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (2021 to 2026) implementation timeframe, GNWT will prioritize the use of modular or ready to move construction technology.

Modular Structures/Ready-to-Move³ refers to a specific approach to building where contractors use ready to move construction technology to develop high-quality modular facilities under controlled factory conditions before they are moved to the final site for assembly on a permanent foundation. Modular or Ready-to-Move construction technology⁴ has been used successfully in

³ [Province of Manitoba | education - Ready-to-Move \(RTM\) Child Care Project \(gov.mb.ca\)](https://www.gov.mb.ca/education/ready-to-move-child-care-project/)

⁴ Government of Manitoba (2023). Innovation as Partnership: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Capital Program. Public Sector Innovation Show, May 30, 2023.

other jurisdictions, such as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, British Columbia, and NWT to create child care spaces. ECE's research also indicates that modular construction ⁵can provide efficient and cost-effective, high-quality, attractive buildings that are affordable, durable, and energy efficient.



Key features of this approach

Community Input - includes processes for community-input into the facility design, based on agreed-upon specifications and budget considerations.

Regulatory Compliance - meets applicable building codes for the design and construction of manufactured buildings and for daycare facilities. The facility incorporates relevant Good Building Practices for Northern Facilities to ensure sustainability and a fit for remote and cold regions.

Quality and Sustainability - The design, construction, installation, and assembly completed by registered professionals.

Faster – can be built under expedited timelines.

To optimize the construction of modular early learning facilities, ECE will

- Work with registered professionals and in collaboration with Indigenous governments and organizations to pre-design culturally appropriate repeatable designs that can be assembled for small, medium, and large early learning and child care facilities. For example, a small facility design for 24 licensed child care spaces that can be scaled up to meet the needs of a medium facility (48 spaces) and/or a large facility (56 to 96 spaces). The breakdown of spaces by age groups will be flexible, but still ensure that staffing ratios are cost-effective and align with regulatory requirements.
- Consider re-purposing, where applicable, existing and vacant modular structures into early learning and child care facilities. The costs of repurposing and retrofitting existing structures will be paid through the infrastructure fund.
- Encourage Indigenous governments and community partners to repurpose suitable, vacant modular structures for purposes of use as an early learning and child care facility.

Funding requests for modular facilities will be administered through the Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund (ECIF) application process. Eligible costs such as facility construction, building foundation, and transport costs to the site, up to allowable maximum funding, will be funded under the Canada – Northwest Territories Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (2021 to 2026).

⁵ Dragicevic, N., Riaz, K. (2024). Seizing the Modular Construction Opportunity.

Infrastructure fund applicants interested in modular structures will be required to provide serviced land for the early learning and child care facility.

- The GNWT has no plans to take over the operation of licensed early learning and child care programs.
- Asset ownership will require the development of relevant GNWT policies and processes.

As NWT transforms the early learning and child care sector, and as child care needs of NWT families increase, a viable long-term solution is needed. Asset ownership of child care facilities is one, out of many possible options available for creating new child care spaces for NWT families.

Under asset ownership, the Government of the Northwest Territories will prioritize the inclusion of child care spaces in government facilities by exploring options to:

- reprofile under-utilized spaces in Government of the Northwest Territories facilities, such as schools for early learning and child care programs,
- incorporate child care space during the design of new school or government facilities, where applicable, and
- Repurpose underutilized Government of the Northwest Territories assets such as modular structures, where applicable, for early learning and child care.

Asset ownership is a viable option for all levels of government through partnerships and collaboration with Indigenous and Community governments. As such, the Government of the Northwest Territories, where possible will encourage,

- Indigenous/communities with vacant buildings or buildings that will become vacant in future to consider reprofiling those spaces for early learning and child care facilities.
- Community governments and developers to embed future child care needs in community planning processes and new infrastructure projects.
- Indigenous/community governments with plans to build new facilities to incorporate early learning and child care spaces.

Applying for infrastructure funding

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment anticipates that some projects will need a multi-year approach to be completed from the moment the funding is approved. These circumstances will be factored to ensure flexibility and adaptability.

Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis, which means that they are continually accepted and reviewed.

Funding decision will be communicated to applicants within a month of the application being submitted.

How to apply

Contact the [Early Childhood Consultant](#) in your region to discuss your application before you apply.

1. Download and complete the [application](#).
2. Prepare your supporting documents.
3. Submit your completed application before the deadline:
 - Email: [Early Childhood Consultant](#)
 - Mail: Early Learning and Child Care, Education, Culture and Employment,
Government of the Northwest Territories, P.O. Box 1320, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

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