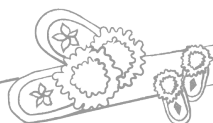


What We Heard Report Toward a 2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy

December 2021

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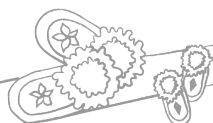


Executive Summary

Early learning and child care is a priority for the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT). The Mandate of the 19th Legislative Assembly (2019-2023) identifies actions to advance universal child care by expanding availability and affordability. This includes the development of a *2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy (Strategy)*.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) developed a discussion paper (Appendix A) and associated PowerPoint (Appendix B) to provide an overview of the current status and achievements within the early learning and child care sector in the Northwest Territories (NWT). These were used to guide discussions around key elements known to contribute to increased availability and affordability of early learning and child care for families in the NWT.

During May and June 2021, ECE engaged in government-to-government discussions with Indigenous Governments and held virtual engagement sessions with key stakeholders, including licensed early learning and child care program operators and early childhood educators. This *What We Heard (WWH)* Report provides a summary of findings from these discussions. Key points of feedback raised during the discussions centred on: cultural programming, attendance-based funding, staff wages and benefits, staff qualifications and professional learning, and parent fees. ECE will use the information gathered during these discussions to inform the development of the *Strategy*. ECE anticipates the *Strategy* to be completed before the end of the 2021-2022 fiscal year.



Introduction

Across the NWT, many young children participate in a variety of early learning and child care programming. Participation in these programs can complement family life and have a positive impact on children's wellbeing and learning that lasts a lifetime.

The [Mandate of the 19th Legislative Assembly](#) includes advancing universal child care by increasing availability and affordability. This includes a commitment to develop a formalized strategy to increase availability and reduce the costs of child care in communities (p. 26). ECE intends for this work to build on current strengths within the sector and focus on initiatives that improve access to sustainable, high quality, affordable, and inclusive early learning and child care options for families in the NWT. This will not necessarily result in child care becoming free for all families. To be sustainable and effective, improvements will need to be grounded in community need and interest, and include quality infrastructure, trained early childhood educators, and financial investment and time to support the sector as it grows.

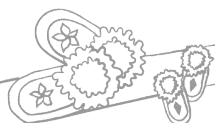
ECE is currently undertaking the development of the *2030 ELCC Strategy* which will lay out actions and commitments on the part of ECE for:

- advancing universal child care by increasing availability and affordability;
- establishing best practices for early learning and child care programs and building from current strengths within the ELCC sector to enhance programming that reflect the people, land, and cultures of the NWT; and
- allocating funding support provided by the federal government for promoting the creation and operation of licensed programs, and the successful recruitment and retention of staff.

An important step toward developing the *Strategy* is to incorporate current perspectives from Indigenous Governments and key stakeholders, including licensed early learning and child care programs and early childhood educators. To do this, ECE created a discussion paper to share an overview of the current status and achievements within the early learning and child care sector in the NWT and to invite discussion around key elements known to contribute to increased availability and affordability of early learning and child care for families.

Through these discussions, ECE has developed the present WWH report. This report is designed to capture and summarize input from discussion participants and will inform the development of the *Strategy* in line with current best practices, research, and consideration for federal funding opportunities.

ECE would like to thank all of those who participated in the discussions throughout the engagement process. Your time and effort are valued and appreciated as you thoughtfully and constructively contributed to discussions. Thank you for sharing your feedback, concerns, and ideas.



Methodology

Discussion sessions were held separately by:

- professional group: Indigenous Governments, licensed centres, or licensed family day homes;
- region: Beaufort-Delta, Dehcho, North Slave, Sahtu, and South Slave; and
- NWT-wide session for all participants to discuss together.

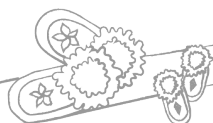
Participants could choose up to three possible sessions. Some participants attended more than one session.

All regions and professional groups were represented to varying degrees. An active offer for participants to participate in French first language sessions was presented but not selected by participants.

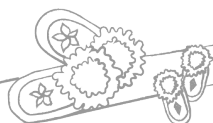
All sessions were two-hour virtual discussions facilitated by ECE staff with a minimum of one facilitator and two note takers who took detailed minutes. Sessions consisted of a 20-minute recorded PowerPoint presentation followed by an open discussion guided by 15 questions. While not requested nor required, some participants also sent written follow-up feedback. Discussion questions were categorized based on key elements known to contribute to increased availability and affordability of early learning and child care. Table 1 lays out the key elements, the rationale for the elements, and the discussion questions.

Table 1 Discussion Questions and Rationale

Key Element	Rationale	Discussion Questions
Honouring Indigenous Worldview, Languages, and Cultures	A key aim for the development and implementation of the <i>Strategy</i> is to ensure that programs are supported in incorporating the Indigenous worldviews, languages, and cultures of the children and families who are a part of their programming.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you see your culture(s), language(s), and community values reflected in the early learning and child care programs within your community and/or region now? 2. Do you have suggestions for how early learning and child care programs can be structured, supported, or governed to better reflect Indigenous worldview(s), language(s), and culture(s)?



<p>Qualified Early Childhood Educators</p>	<p>The definition of ‘qualified’ must extend beyond the Western Eurocentric value placed on post-secondary education to recognize and build from the strengths, experiences, and skills that exist in the NWT and place increased value on community and cultural knowledge and language.</p>	<p>3. From your perspective, what skills or knowledge would a qualified early childhood educator need to have?</p> <p>4. What barriers exist for early childhood educators to gain formal training and qualifications, including post-secondary education? What barriers exist for other ways of learning about early childhood development?</p> <p>5. What factors are involved with recruiting and retaining qualified staff?</p>
<p>Inclusive and Responsive</p>	<p>An inclusive and responsive early learning environment is a place where all children are welcomed as valued members of the community and supported to actively participate with barriers removed to access specialized services while upholding families’ voices throughout the process.</p>	<p>6. How are all children, including those with specific developmental needs, provided with the supports required to participate in early learning and child care programs?</p> <p>7. What services are available to support children with developmental needs into an early learning and child care program? What other services are needed?</p>
<p>Community Driven</p>	<p>ECE does not open or operate licensed early learning and child care programs. ECE licenses, funds, inspects, and provides ongoing support to Indigenous Governments, non-profit organizations, and individuals who are best positioned to initiate and maintain programs that meet their community needs.</p>	<p>8. What early learning and child care programs would best suit your community needs now and in the future?</p> <p>9. How could services in your community/region work together to support children and their families in early childhood?</p>

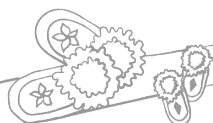


<p>Infrastructure</p>	<p>The construction of new buildings and/or renovation of existing buildings to create safe spaces for early learning and child care programs is an essential piece of expanding access for families.</p>	<p>10. What are the infrastructure needs for early learning and child care in your community/ region? Does your community/region have existing infrastructure that could be modified for early learning and child care?</p>
<p>Affordability</p>	<p>While some early learning and child care programs are free in NWT communities, high costs can be prohibitive for many families who would otherwise choose to access early learning and child care programming.</p>	<p>11. Do families in your region have concerns about child care affordability?</p> <p>12. Are you aware of other supports to families for child care costs in your region?</p> <p>13. What is the range of parent fees in your community/region? Is that an affordable range? If not, what would be?</p>

When the engagement period ended, ECE staff reviewed the minutes to look for patterns in what was said. The staff cross-referenced and discussed responses and interpretations of responses for quality assurance and to be as thorough and accurate as possible to reflect and represent discussions.

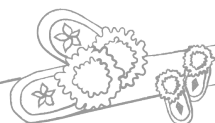
Responses to questions were examined by professional type (i.e., Indigenous Government, centre, and family day home) and region. Responses were analyzed to find any themes shared either between or within groups. There were no criteria for how many participant responses were needed to constitute a ‘theme’. The purpose of theming the responses is to capture the feedback that we heard while summarizing as much as possible. Where appropriate, quantifying language (e.g., ‘several’, ‘most’) is built into the descriptions of the themes in the What We Heard section. Any comments made by only one participant were noted and discussed, then represented in the document if/where possible so as not to identify the speaker. All findings are presented so that no one person, program, or Government can be identified.

One of the questions asked participants to rank the five key elements known to increase availability and affordability from one (most important) to five (least important). Ranked voting methods were used to identify the first and second most highly ranked priorities. To analyze this data, each priority was treated as a ‘candidate’ and respondents’ rankings as ‘votes’ for those candidates.



Rankings were then analyzed using several methods for ‘counting’ votes on a ranked ballot, all of which produced the same results.

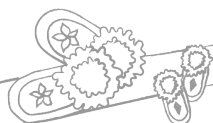
The unique differences across responses at varying levels, including by type of early learning and child care program, will be reflected in the creation and implementation of the *Strategy* that will balance an overall territorial approach that also recognizes unique contexts to support children and families.



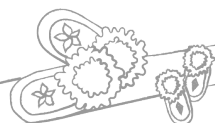
Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

Table 2 Limitations, Impacts, and Mitigations for Limitations

Limitation	Impact	Mitigation Strategy
<p>Relatively small size of the program’s target group posed threats to confidentiality of early childhood professionals and providers interviewed.</p>	<p>The limitation does not directly impact validity or reliability of the findings.</p>	<p>In the process of transcription and reporting, summary of discussions were edited to exclude identifiers in the document.</p>
<p>Dependence on voluntary participation of Indigenous Governments, and early childhood professionals in interviews.</p>	<p>Low participation rates in interviews and survey may adversely affect reliability and representativeness of the data. Unrepresentative and unreliable data cannot be used to confidently make decisions on this basis.</p>	<p>To create favourable conditions for participation, ECE staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) offered multiple opportunities to participate at different times of the day, week, and month; b) sent the engagement presentation, including discussion questions and the accompanying discussion paper to all participants in advance of the sessions; c) sent a reminder email to participants.
<p>Engagement and report conducted internally by ECE.</p>	<p>Engagements coordinated and facilitated by those who are seeking the feedback may receive more positive feedback than external facilitators as respondents feel less anonymous. Moreover, respondents may be bound by professional or</p>	<p>Following meetings with Indigenous Governments, a discussion summary was sent to Indigenous Governments for their review and input. As well, the findings as presented in the WWH Report, was provided to all participants for review for accuracy</p>



	<p>personal relationships with the facilitators given that they work in the same sector. Both of these may impact the integrity of the evaluation or create barriers to collaboration in the process.</p>	<p>and feedback for changes. This provided participants the opportunity to reconsider or add to their feedback with more anonymity.</p>
<p>Dependence on the note takers' abilities to capture discussion points in real time.</p>	<p>The level of detail may vary by engagement session and note taker in attendance.</p>	<p>There was a minimum of two note takers for every meeting to doubly cover discussions. Notes from both note takers were merged to create comprehensive minutes.</p>



What We Heard

Honouring Indigenous Worldviews, Languages and Cultures

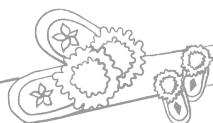
- 1. How do you see your culture(s), language(s), and community values reflected in the early learning and child care programs within your community and/or region now?*
- 2. Do you have suggestions for how early learning and child care programs can be structured, supported, or governed to better reflect Indigenous worldview(s), language(s), and culture(s)?*

Participants from across the groups shared the view that human resources are an important way to bring in local cultural values to their programming. For many, this included hiring local early childhood educators from communities, employing Indigenous staff, and inviting Elders into programs.

Indigenous Governments and licensed centres shared the different ways that Indigenous cultures and languages are embedded in their daily programming and activities.

- Some described on-the-land, outdoor play, and cultural activities such as camps, rabbit snaring, and scaling fish.
- One Indigenous Government mentioned that some licensed programs in their communities use a curriculum that is reflective and inclusive of Indigenous cultural programming.
- Several licensed centres identified immersion programming, language, and staff training as ways that culture and language are reflected in programming.
- Most family day homes mentioned serving Indigenous food as a way to connect the children in their programs with Indigenous cultures as a part of exposure to multi-cultural foods from around the world. They expressed they would like to explore this more through materials, books, resource packages, inviting Elders into the program, or accessing community supports. COVID-19 was mentioned as a recent barrier to having guests in programs and limiting interactions with community members.
- A family day home operator described incorporating her Indigenous culture and language in her program.

Respondents from all three groups expressed that strengthening the presence of Indigenous culture in licensed programming requires the use of specifically cultural materials such as drums, books, or



museum kits. One individual recommended that each region have their own cultural centre and regionally specific kits to support the unique contexts of each region.

Other suggestions for how early learning and child care programs can be structured, supported, or governed to better reflect Indigenous worldview(s), language(s), and culture(s) included:

- more funding to support the purchase of culturally specific materials and the cost of training their staff in Traditional Indigenous Knowledge,
- aligning government funding processes with seasonal cycles,
- mandating parental involvement,
- increasing access to Indigenous foods,
- requiring language nests, or Indigenous language and culture programming, in all programs,
- providing funding directly to Indigenous Governments,
- creating a contact list of knowledge holders in each community, and
- bringing the land into programs with plants, nature, and hands-on activities.

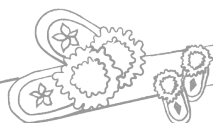
Qualified Early Childhood Educators

- 3. From your perspective, what skills or knowledge would a qualified early childhood educator need to have?*
- 4. What barriers exist for early childhood educators to gain formal training and qualifications, including post-secondary education? What barriers exist for other ways of learning about early childhood development?*
- 5. What factors are involved with recruiting and retaining qualified staff?*

While participants from all groups mentioned that formal education was important, such as a certificate, diploma, or degree in early childhood, it was not the only definition that participants shared of ‘qualifications’ for early childhood educators. They also valued early childhood educators with the following attributes:

- Knowledge about local culture, beliefs, language, and traditions;
- Experience working with children, including as a parent;
- Having essential traits such as love of children, patience, adaptability, resourcefulness, a strong work ethic, energy, observation skills, empathy, good communication skills, and commitment;
- Experience with and knowing how to support children with specific needs.

Family day home operators added a need for knowledge and training in administrative skills, such as bookkeeping. Since they are business owners, they expressed that additional knowledge and



skills related to financial reporting, organizing, and accessing relevant paperwork, and taxes was required.

Discussions about staff training revealed three main barriers across the groups: time, funding, and accessibility.

Time was cited as a barrier because it is very difficult for full-time staff, many of whom have families of their own, to dedicate time in the evenings and/or weekends to further their training. Post-secondary programs were mentioned to be especially out of reach because of time. Post-secondary programs often take one to two years, which is a long stretch of time to be working evenings and weekends.

Funding for training was cited as a barrier given that supports are not available to everyone. For those who said they did have access to funding supports, having to pay up front and be reimbursed later was a disincentive.

Access to training was cited as a barrier for those who may not have the educational or language requirements to take the training. For example, prerequisites for formal education often require a minimum of a high school diploma and strong fluency in English. Suggestions to ease these difficulties included offering flexibility for different entry/exits points and/or providing training in their first language.

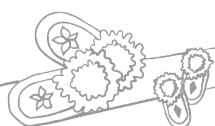
Another concern about access to training regarded the geography of the NWT and the need on the part of residents to remain in their home communities. Concerns were raised about leaving their home to attend a post-secondary program. For example, they may have to uproot their family, causing stress not only to themselves but to other family members. They may have to leave their jobs with no promise of being rehired on their return. They could even lose their housing if they leave, given the severe lack of housing in some communities.

Limited access to online training was also identified as a barrier. Even with the option to do online training in their home communities, participants noted that technology and internet services made it difficult to connect with online learning options.

Other barriers mentioned specific to early childhood educators gaining formal training and qualifications included lack of family support, resistance to change, not wanting to work, and addictions. The need to support the wellness of current staff was emphasized by a person from a licensed centre while stressing the importance of treating staff well and supporting their wellness such as giving time for wellness breaks.

A strong theme repeated across the groups about recruiting and retaining qualified staff was the issue of poor wages and benefits for early childhood educators, combined with the high cost of living in NWT communities.

Indigenous Governments and licensed centres stressed the high turnover of staff who ultimately leave the field to assume other jobs in the community (i.e., within the health sector, schools, or



other areas of government) that come with a higher wage and better benefits, including paid holidays. They explained this is exacerbated by increased education since staff members often leave once they receive more training and education.

Family day home operators indicated that while they are able to make a decent living because of the profits they make and tax exemptions related to owning a business, they recognized the same is not true for educators employed in licensed centres. Some family day home operators were concerned that many educators working in centres do not make a living wage.

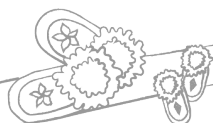
Inclusive and Responsive

- 6. How are all children, including those with specific developmental needs, provided with the supports required to participate in early learning and child care programs?***
- 7. What services are available to support children with developmental needs into an early learning and child care program? What other services are needed?***

Respondents from all groups expressed that working and communicating with families about children's specialized needs is important but can be difficult. Some would like assistance communicating with parents regarding concerns, observations, potential diagnosis, and needs of children, as some parents of young children are not ready to acknowledge their child may have additional needs and require more support.

Licensed centres and Indigenous Governments cited varying levels of services available for the children with specific needs who attend their programs, with more services available to those in larger regional centres and Yellowknife. Nevertheless, all stated a need for increased regular and ongoing specialized Health and Social Services (HSS) such as occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, play therapists, rehabilitation professionals, and counsellors to support children attending programs. It was suggested by operators in discussions with licensed centres and family day homes that children should be screened by HSS before starting a program and that screening could be done through nurses or well child record appointments. One program has increased support through an external company to fill the gap of access to health and social services. Barriers to accessing such services, according to licensed centres and Indigenous Governments include: long waitlists, equitable access to HSS services for all children in a community regardless of enrolment in licensed early learning and child care programs, and COVID-19.

Supports for children with specialized needs mentioned by licensed centres and Indigenous Governments also included funding from Jordan's Principle (available through the Government of



Canada) and the Supporting Child Inclusion and Participation (SCIP) funding offered through ECE. Some respondents, however, noted limitations to SCIP funding including: a narrow proposal window, lengthy paperwork requirements, and the perception that medical information is required, which can be invasive and difficult for families and the ELCC provider. Other outstanding needs for supporting children with specialized needs mentioned were: staffing and more training for staff, navigating the support system, and for ECE and HSS to better work together as a team to support children and families.

Family day home operators had less discussion about supporting children with specialized needs. They stated they rarely had children with additional needs, other than their own family members. They also felt they did not have the required education to meet those needs. One family day home operator said she has referred families to the centre-based day care in her community where she said staff have more capacity to address required needs. Some family day home operators who said they did currently care for children with specific needs mentioned that additional funding would increase their ability to support these children.

Community Driven

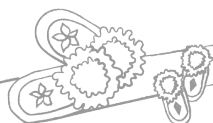
- 8. *What early learning and child care programs would best suit your community needs now and in the future? (check all that apply).***
- 9. *How could services in your community/region work together to support children and their families in early childhood?***

Across the groups, all types of early learning and child care programs were identified by at least one participant as being needed in NWT communities. These types included: licensed centre-based care, licensed family day homes, parent and tot and/or family drop-in programming, part-time and before/after school care, and non-standard hours of child care. Some participants identified additional types of services that could benefit their communities, such as prenatal programming, summer camps, toy lending libraries, and recreation centres.

There were also group-specific contributions regarding what would best suit their community needs and how services could work together to support children and families.

Indigenous Governments suggested expanding parenting programs and including information available in the community with increased access to parenting websites.

Licensed centres identified a general need for increased infant and preschool spaces as well as a growing need for before and after school care. There was a difference of opinion whether non-standard hours of care, such as overnight for shift workers, was a need for families. One participant from a licensed program said that Junior Kindergarten (JK) was not needed in her community and that it should be assessed and potentially eliminated.



Family day homes stated there are not enough existing spaces to provide universal child care for all families who need it and identified a specific need for infant spaces in their communities. They provided suggestions to modify regulations for infant ratios so that family day homes could have a higher number of infant spaces that is on par with licensed centres. Another suggestion was for family day homes to primarily care for infants and centre-based programs to specialize in care for older children. On the other hand, one family day home operator said she has seen a decrease in infant space need since maternity leave was changed to 18 months for parents.

Another community programming need identified by family day homes was part-time care. They said this need was difficult to fill without resulting in a decrease in revenue on their part, especially when their full-time spaces are in demand. Family day home operators suggested that attendance-based funding should be changed so that day homes are not penalized financially for children who do not attend. One licensed family day home operator also said she would consider taking children part-time if ECE continued to provide full-time funding for those spaces.

Additional comments from individual family day home operators included the option to have a co-worker in the program such as a spouse, a need for flexible hours, and the ability for closures one day a week to be able to attend appointments.

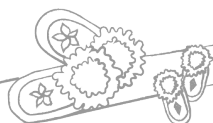
As for coordination of services, most licensed programs noted some level of collaboration with government, community organizations, and/or other licensed early learning and child care programs. Suggestions for increased collaboration included working with HSS's Healthy Family Program, online social media groups, increased access to parenting workshops, creating a community preschool, and planning field trips.

Infrastructure

10. What are the infrastructure needs for early learning and child care in your community/region? Does your community/region have existing infrastructure that could be modified for early learning and child care?

The general consensus regarding infrastructural needs across the groups was that buildings for day cares and/or family day homes was an overall need and that existing buildings are either not available and/or not worth the money for retrofits.

Responses regarding infrastructure needs for early learning and child care varied across regions and group type. The Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund (ECIF) is available to Indigenous Governments and licensed centre-based programs but there were concerns across the groups that it was not enough funding and that there often was not enough time to complete construction. One family day home pointed out that they do not have access to ECIF and suggested that ECE's Health and Safety funding should be increased and available for long standing programs, beyond the start-



up phase, to address their at-home learning environments' repair needs, including smoke detectors, fencing, and decking.

Most other comments by participants about infrastructure were quite specific to the individuals expressing them. Some needs mentioned were:

- unmet construction needs;
- a need for a community indoor playground;
- needs for more funding to cover high shipping rates for larger items such as tables for children;
- a need to use existing buildings more efficiently;
- an early learning and family resource centre in one building.

One centre-based program said that all infrastructure needs seem to be currently met in their community.

Other infrastructure related comments included pros and cons of licensed centres located in schools. While there are fewer expenses and no bills for heat, electricity, etc., there is a feeling of insecurity if the space is needed for a classroom. A family day home noted that it is not well known that some landlords allow tenants to open and run programs in rental units including adjustments to the home to meet licensing requirements.

Affordability

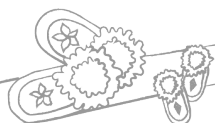
11. Do families in your region have concerns about child care affordability?

12. Are you aware of other supports to families for child care costs in your region?

13. What is the range of parent fees in your community/region? Is that an affordable range? If not, what would be?

Questions about affordability of child care asked to participants probed for regional/community responses. As such, responses differed mainly by region and community and only some by professional group.

Indigenous Governments and many licensed centres said that their programs are free for parents. Many of the free programs are located in small communities whereas the fee-based programs tend to be located in larger communities, regional centres, and Yellowknife. Of those that do charge fees, the monthly costs ranged from \$500 to \$1,380 per child per month. Licensed family day homes said their parent fees ranged from \$900 to \$1,100 per child per month.



Responses across regional groups were mixed regarding concerns for costs to families. Many respondents mentioned that existing child care fees are too expensive for parents, especially for single parent families and those with multiple children, and that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this causing many parents to struggle to pay for their spots. One participant suggested that \$500 per month was an affordable goal; whereas, another respondent stated that the federal target of \$10/day (approximately \$200 per month) is still too much for some parents to afford. Other suggestions for child care pricing tended to land within this range.

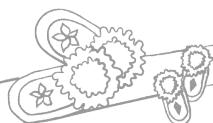
Participants identified funding supports available that directly or indirectly address child care costs for families. These included Income Assistance (IA), HSS funding, ECE's COVID-19 essential services parent fee grant, foster care, education funding, Jordan's Principle (federal program), and SCIP. Some respondents raised issues with some of these sources of funding. For example, it was noted that IA supports can be inaccessible to parents given the lengthy process and paperwork involved and the stigma to receive it. Another participant noted the difficulty some parents have in trying to access existing supports if they make too much money to qualify for IA but not enough to afford child care. One participant's understanding is that only families who are Indigenous, have low income, and/or who have children with identified needs can access supports for funding.

Participants from licensed centres also brought up some of the ways they have been able to support parents such as scholarship or tiered systems for payment, subsidized food and bussing to attend the program, an option for parents to help out around the centre if they cannot afford the fees, and reduced rates for parents based on income and/or multiple children in the program. One family day home operator also said she provides discounts to families with multiple children enrolled in her program; whereas another said that parents should be willing to pay for their child care costs.

Participant discussions about ranges in parent fees also touched on approaches to universal child care. For example, one family day home operator said that universal pay rates should be set for child care across the territory, while another expressed concern about the government regulating what family day homes can charge. A family day home operator expressed concern that reducing parent fees will only benefit wealthy individuals and that ECE should take a different approach to focus helping people from lower income groups. Increasing operating costs for licensed programs was raised with one person commenting that when government considers reducing parent fees, they need to think of the impact to early learning and child care programs.

General Questions

Participants were asked to prioritize the five key elements discussed from most to least important. All respondents acknowledged that prioritizing them is difficult. It was recognized that all areas affect each other. For instance, an early learning and child care program needs qualified staff to run it and must be affordable for families to access it, but neither will matter if there is no building in which to operate. The inter-connectedness of many aspects reveals that building and strengthening the early childhood sector in the NWT is complex.



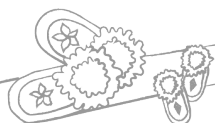
Scores across the professional groups were ranked using ranked voting methods (as outlined in the Methodology section of this document). Qualified Staff came out as the number one priority among licensed centres and day homes followed by affordability. When both qualified staff and affordability were removed from the data, the remaining three priorities could not be ranked without resorting to a tie breaking rule, suggesting that they are regarded as equally important across the respondents. There is no general pattern across responses by Indigenous Governments nor was there a single priority that was consistently viewed as most important according to all Indigenous Governments.

When provided an opportunity to openly add any additional information or comments, the most common responses centred on suggestions to improve funding provided by ECE, namely to remove the attendance-based approach, requests for additional training, and an expressed appreciation to ECE for existing funding. Other responses included suggestions for:

- education expectations to be lowered for staff in licensed centres to align with the family day home operators who may open and operate programs without education;
- more infants allowed in family day homes similar to licensed centres and/or to allow for more overlap between age groups as children transition from infant to preschool;
- increased ECE visibility in communities;
- more promotion of funding programs;
- funding to be provided directly to Indigenous Governments;
- a focus on opening programs in communities with no licensed early learning and child care programming;
- specific funding to support further education.

During this section, some of the previously discussed topics were repeated for emphasis. Some of these revisited points included:

- the need for higher wages and benefits for staff working in licensed centres;
- issues with attendance-based funding, general funding processes, and barriers to opening programs such as intimidating paperwork and/or health and fire requirements;
- JK programming: one participant said it is not needed in their community; another does not think JK reaches who it is intended for because families who are struggling do not send their kids to JK out of fear it exposes them to being apprehended by HSS for not having food, clothes, etc.;
- conflicts about whether there should be funding for universal child care: one participant believed child care should be free for all families, whereas another said that universal child care does not fit all needs and what might be good in one community might not be in another.



Summary of Findings: Discussion Themes

Themes that emerged during the discussions highlighted existing strengths of licensed early learning and child care programming and/or identified gaps, areas for growth, or needs. These themes are summarized below.

Culture(s), Language(s), Community Values Reflected

Although programs acknowledged the importance of grounding early learning and child care programs in local, Indigenous cultures and languages that are reflective of NWT communities, current implementation varies widely. Some programs are naturally established Indigenous programs with Indigenous staff delivering immersion programming with embedded cultural activities. Other programs have a more multi-cultural focus and Indigenous content is visible through books and materials. Most programs expressed an interest in increasing this part of their programming through funding, materials, language nests, and the hope of inviting Elders and community members to visit programs.

Attendance-based Funding

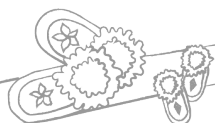
Programs expressed concerns regarding attendance-based funding including the uncertainty of funding, onerous paperwork, and inadequate coverage. Participants mentioned difficulty with their ability to cover fixed costs, such as electricity, heat, and staff salaries, regardless of children's attendance. Many participants suggested a shift from the current attendance-based model, to a more secure and consistent approach based on the number of licensed spaces and/or enrolment.

Wages and Benefits

There was consensus that staff working in licensed centres do not receive adequate wages or benefits. This topic was elaborated on extensively with participants advocating for higher wages, benefits and pensions to attract more educators to the early childhood sector, retain existing and experienced staff, and to encourage further education without losing staff to other jobs offering higher pay and benefits.

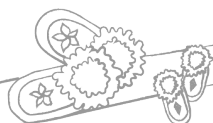
Staff Qualifications and Professional Learning

The definition of a 'qualified' early childhood educator included recognition of some formal education, such as a certificate, diploma, or degree in early childhood; however, emphasis was also placed on hiring local staff from communities in the NWT with experience, knowledge, commitment, and passion for working with children. Most participants described a desire to balance formal post-secondary education, professional development and training, and on-the-job experience. When asked to rank the key elements of discussion, Qualified Staff was ranked as the most important priority.



Parent Fees

Many programs in the NWT offer free early childhood programming in their communities. However, of those that do charge fees, many said that costs are too high. Affordability was the second highest ranked priority overall.



Next Steps

The information in this WWH report will help inform the drafting of the *Strategy* that supports and guides investments and initiatives for a cohesive early learning and child care system in the NWT. In addition to what we heard during the government-to-government discussions and engagement sessions with licensed early learning and child care programs, the *Strategy* will incorporate multiple pieces of work including:

- the GNWT Mandate;
- the *2015 Feasibility Study of Universal; Affordable day care in the Northwest Territories (Feasibility Study)*;
- the Early Development Instrument (EDI);
- the review of Early Childhood Program (ECP) funding, Early Childhood Scholarships and the Early Childhood Staff Grant;
- the action plans related to federal funding provided through the *Early Learning and Child Care Bilateral Agreement*;
- summaries of two territory-wide events the *Imagining the Future of Early Childhood Education in the NWT* (event held in the Fall 2020) and *Universal Child Care in the NWT* (event held in the Spring 2021).

Together, the WWH Report and the ELCC Funding Review are important sources of information that will inform development of the *Strategy*. The *Strategy* will reflect an overall territorial approach to early learning and child care in the NWT that considers the unique context of each region and community. Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work to support the needs of children and families, ECE will work in partnership with Indigenous Governments, and continue ongoing collaboration with licensed early learning and child care programs to advance the early learning and child care sector in the NWT.

