

JK DELIVERING STRIKING RESULTS IN THE NWT



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When early learning programs are universal, participation soars. This broad reach delivers undeniable benefits, particularly for vulnerable children who stand to gain the most.

That's what makes the [latest report on the state of NWT's JK- Grade 12 educational system](#) so striking. The territory boasts the highest proportion of 4- and 5-year-old children attending kindergarten programs in the country (94%), and the developmental gains are holding steady over time. This success is even more remarkable given the unique challenges many NWT schools face—63% are in small communities, and a significant proportion of students are Indigenous, a group historically underserved by the education system. The fact that NWT's approach makes a meaningful difference suggests that this "made-in-the-NWT" model deserves national attention.

JK was [first introduced to the territory in 2013 through a series of highly successful demonstration pilots](#). Inspired by the recognized need to improve school readiness and educational outcomes, the territory reached full implementation by the 2017/18 school year. In 2022/23, the first full implementation cohort reached Grade 4, making this latest annual report particularly interesting.

School readiness

At Grade 1, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) identified that the percentage of children who are vulnerable in at least one domain has fallen consistently from 42% in 2015/16 to 37% in 2022/3, despite the interruptions of COVID-19. Furthermore, 38% of children with JK were considered “developmentally on track” compared to 32% who did not attend. The EDI team concluded that “the introduction of Junior Kindergarten has had an overall positive impact on children in the NWT.”

Health and Well-Being

The Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) summarizes children’s social, emotional and physical health. It combines five measures: Optimism, Self-esteem, Happiness, Absence of sadness, and General health. Caution is given that the results varied greatly, with inconsistent participation during COVID. The MDI showed an overall decrease in the number of children scoring as “thriving.” However, the reduction for Grade 4 students with JK (approximately 35% to 28%) was significantly less than those in Grade 7 who did not have access to JK (approximately 35% to 15%).

The MDI also identified the number of children who report having a high-quality relationship with an adult in their school -- an indicator of stronger social and emotional outcomes and better academic outcomes. Grade 4 students remained relatively unchanged between 2015/16 and 2022/23 (approximately 62% and 64%), while Grade 7 students declined from 62% to 55%). Children from smaller communities reported the greatest increase in their connectedness with an adult. The JK group in Grade 4 went from 46% in 2015/16 to 61% in 2022/23; the non-JK Grade 7 group increased from approximately 50% to 53%. These results on mental health indicators are consistent with international research on the compensatory nature of JK and the ability of JK to foster better mental health outcomes.

Special need students

The number of children with an Individualized education plan and the number on a modified curriculum is trending down, though the number receiving academic accommodations is up. This is not surprising given the academic disruptions of COVID and the introduction of Jordan’s Principle, which has increased the number of children being assessed. These results are also consistent with the research that a two-year pre-Grade 1 program lowers participation in special education.

The territory willingly acknowledges that continued improvements are needed, but the benefits from the foundation that their youngest children are receiving are increasingly evident. While the years ahead require continued scrutiny, “well done NWT” is warranted.