

## **School Health Promotion in Nunavut**

### **Nunavut in Profile<sup>1</sup>**

**Nunavut**, which means ‘our land’, is Canada’s newest territory. Established in 1999, Nunavut stretches some 2.1 million square kilometers and is over one-fifth the size of Canada. About two thirds of the territory is within the Arctic Circle. Its 25 communities are isolated and accessible only by air.

The territory has four official languages: Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English, and French. The majority (85%) of the population of 30,800 are Inuit. Nunavut has a young population, children and youth make up more than 60% of the population, and there are just over 9,000 students enrolled in school.

There is an emphasis on teaching in Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun in Nunavut schools, as well as English and French. The schools are organized in three regions: Qikiqtani, Kivalliq and Kitikmeot. Communities administer their own schools through 26 District Education Authorities across the territory and one Francophone School Board, Commission scolaire francophone du Nunavut in Iqaluit. District Education Authorities are composed of five to seven elected community members.

Health & Social Services are administered through regional offices headed by Executive Directors staffed by the Government of Nunavut for each of the three regions with headquarters in Iqaluit, the capital. Each Nunavut community has a Health Centre; most health centres have a Community Health Representatives (CHR) on staff to provide culturally relevant health promotion activities that are often linked to the schools as well as the community at large.

Nunavut faces some social and economic challenges that have a significant impact on the population’s health. For example, we know that compared to the rest of Canada, aboriginal children and families have a higher incidence of poor nutrition, poor mental and physical health, pregnancies in young adolescents, suicides, tobacco, alcohol and substance abuse<sup>2</sup>.

Nunavut was created as a result of the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement. The territory has a deep connection to Inuit culture and heritage. Within the public government, elders provide advice to staff and decision-makers on how to integrate Inuit cultural values and approaches into the work being done.

---

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, Land and Freshwater Area, by Province and Territory, Population by year and by sex and age group, by province and territory; The Education Act of Nunavut; Government of Nunavut website and personnel.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada, A Canada Fit for Children 2004, page 46-47.

## Context of School Health Promotion

The Government of Nunavut's mandate is set out in [Pinasuaqtavut: 2004–2009](#). One goal is to build healthy communities, including the healthy development and well-being of children and youth. *Pinasuaqtavut* holds as a fundamental belief that the health of Nunavut depends on the health of each of its physical, social, economic and cultural communities. The values that guide the health communities' goal are:

- People come first;
- People are responsible and accountable for their own well being;
- Building the capacity of communities will strengthen Nunavut;
- All levels of government working together will strengthen Nunavut, will provide for those who are not able to care for themselves, and provide options and opportunities which build the strengths of individuals, families and communities.

The territorial government has several working groups that respond to the commitment to building healthy communities, two examples are:

1) [Annirusuktugut: A Suicide Intervention and Prevention Strategy](#) focuses on intergovernmental and interagency cooperation to reduce suicide and promote healthy living in Nunavut. Based on the wisdom of Inuit elders, the strategy is focused on learning from traditional knowledge and supporting community capacity to address suicide. The identified priorities are strengthening support networks, increasing preventative services such as suicide intervention training and assessment tools, collaborating with existing community organizations and programs, and improving distribution of mental health services to all communities. Implementation of the strategy is coordinated by an office in the Department of Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs.

2) [Illagitsiarniq](#) (Inuit approach to healthy family relationships and well-being) is an interdepartmental government working groups contributing to the well-being of children and youth. This group is responsible for coordinating Child Abuse Response Protocol, a formal agreement between Education (schools), Social Services, the RCMP, and Justice Canada to work together and share information. Illagitsiarniq also links to the government's new family violence intervention legislation. The working group is coordinated and chaired by the Deputy Minister of Justice and membership includes Deputy Ministers and senior officials from the Departments of Justice, Health & Social Services, Culture Language Elders and Youth, Education, Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs, and the Nunavut Housing Corporation, Justice Canada, the RCMP, Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council, and Nunavut Tunngavik.

## **Improved Education and Training Outcomes**

Nunavut should have a wider range of options for education, adult learning and training. We need to recognize all types of accomplishments to empower our youth to take on leadership roles that reflect their personal aspirations and culture. Our goal is to have more graduates and to reduce the gap between unemployed people and job opportunities. Families will be encouraged to work with schools to find more ways to support students and help them continue learning.

## **Implementation of School Health**

A Health Promotion Specialist from the Department of Health and Social Services undertakes the duties of School Health Coordinator representing Nunavut on the Joint Consortium for School Health.

The Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth (CLEY) that has the mandate for the promotion, development and implementation of physical activity initiatives is undertaking a number of programs to help build healthy communities by providing healthy active lifestyle choices.

Some of the school health initiatives include:

### **No Butts To It: Youth and Schools Challenge**

This is an initiative of the National Indian & Inuit Community Health Representatives Organization (NIICHO) in conjunction with health authorities in Nunavut and in the First Nations communities of New Brunswick is funded by the Healthy Environments and Consumer Safety Branch of Health Canada. The project has two challenges at least six months apart for youth aged 8 - 18 to quit smoking (or not to start) for at least 4 weeks. The challenge is open to both smokers and non-smokers, with the same prizes for each group (iMac computers and iPods). The main purposes of the Challenge are to:

1. Build critical awareness about the problems of smoking in Aboriginal communities, with a focus on youth;
2. Motivate youth smokers to at least consider quitting smoking, or better yet, to take the crucial first step to quit smoking;
3. Encourage youth non-smokers not to start smoking: many are at high risk of becoming smokers in the future.

### **Connecting with Nunavut Youth through Hip Hop**

Funding to address physical activity and healthy eating in Nunavut was obtained through a Bi-lateral Agreement with the Government of Nunavut Departments of Health and Social Services and Culture, Language, Elders and Youth and the Public Health Agency of Canada. Social work through ***Hip Hop*** continues to be an innovative, highly successful element of an initiative that started in Iqaluit in 2006. Ten communities have hosted Hip Hop workshops so far and a Youth Leadership Hip Hop Summit was held in 2009 in Pangnirtung. This initiative has left a legacy of increased physical activity,

building self-esteem, leadership development and encouraging healthier lifestyle choices in the young population.

### ***Drop the Pop***

Annual Nutrition Month activities are funded through Nunavut's Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative. The major activity is the school based Drop the Pop Campaign. This healthy living initiative focus is on the promotion of healthy beverage consumption, dental hygiene and physical activity. A dental health theme in 2009 included a new manual distributed to all schools. In its five years of existence, the participation rate of schools has more than tripled to 90% in 2006-2009. Health promotion resources include a poster, healthy living post card art created by students and a popular Decorate a Door contest was held with a healthy smiles theme.

The [\*Young Parents Stay Learning\*](#) initiative provides access to day care spaces free of charge to allow young parents under the age of 18, who do not qualify for income assistance, to stay in school. The Department of Education, through its Regional Offices and local high schools, provides funding to cover costs of childcare in order to encourage young parents to complete their studies. Some day care facilities are located in schools.

**Aulajaaqtut** 10-11-12 Curriculum and Resources have been developed to meet the overwhelming challenges of our students and give them the tools to make positive life choices. Currently the Aulajaaqtut 11 is a compulsory graduation requirement and the Department of Education with the Aulajaaqtut 10 and 12 in the planning stages of becoming mandatory courses.

These initiatives complement the school health curriculum in Nunavut. Teaching materials are being developed to reflect Inuit culture and tradition. Nunavut has developed its own food guide, which it uses in addition to the Canada Food Guide and its companion Food Guide for First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

### **Challenges and Keys to Success**

Changes in traditional culture, values, and lifestyle over the past few decades have had a significant negative effect on health. An improvement in the high school graduation rates along with active, healthy lifestyles are high priority objectives. Schools can contribute to the achievement of these objectives by validating the traditional cultural and linguistic base while bridging the gap between tradition and the realities of the modern world.

The passing of the Inuit Language Protection Act in September 2008 requires that the Government of Nunavut phase in mandatory bilingual education. This comes into force for kindergarten to grade 3 on July 1, 2009 and for kindergarten through to grade 12 on July 1, 2019. The development of curriculum and resources to teach Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun as a first or second language and English (or French) and the recruitment and training of bilingual teachers (one of the languages being the Inuit Language) are priorities for the Department of Education. There will also be an "increased inclusion of Inuit culture and values" in curriculum and schools, which is being drawn from research

with elders and other groups. Language of instruction is a challenge for students with the need to learn English to graduate from high school along with the importance of preserving their traditional language and culture.

### **Benefits of JCSH Membership**

Sharing and learning are key benefits of membership. While each jurisdiction is unique, a focus on the development and education of children is a common denominator. Participation in the Consortium provides an opportunity for members to share and examine best practices and adapt these to a jurisdiction's context. Member jurisdictions become familiar with general trends as well as specific developments, and have streamlined access to a pool of resources and national and international contacts as they devise or improve their own approaches, as did Nunavut when developing its own active living initiatives.

The opportunity for Nunavut representatives to attend face to face meetings with the funding provided by the Consortium is extremely valuable as this might not otherwise be possible to due to the high cost of travel from the north. Sharing information provides an opportunity to position messages that depict the reality of life in Nunavut which, by virtue of its recent establishment, has frequently been omitted from depictions of Canadian reality in the past. Participation in the JCSH is one opportunity to redress that balance and also to provide other jurisdictions with access to Nunavut resources that might benefit their school health programs. For example, the *Drop the Pop* initiative, which was initiated in Nunavut, is now featured in other territories and provinces.

June 2009.

For further information, please contact Charlotte Borg at [cborg@gov.nu.ca](mailto:cborg@gov.nu.ca)