

# **School Health Promotion in Yukon**

## **Yukon in Profile**

Yukon, at 483,500 square kilometers, represents approximately 4.8% of Canada's land and freshwater area. It is bordered by Alaska to the West, the Northwest Territories to East and BC to the South. It is inhabited by just over 36,000 people, 27,000 of whom live in the capital city of Whitehorse. Approximately 25% of Yukon residents are of Aboriginal origin. Four percent of the current population are Francophone.

## **The Yukon Educational System**

There are approximately 5,000 K-12 students attend 28 Yukon schools. 14 of these schools are located in Whitehorse. Yukon Education employs over 750 school-based personnel, including teachers, paraprofessional staff, Aboriginal language teachers, and Yukon Education staff.

The Assistant Deputy Minister (Public Schools) is responsible for school operations. The ADM is assisted by three Superintendents of Schools and Directors of First Nations Programs and Partnerships, Learning Services, and Student Support Services.

Parental input into educational priorities is facilitated through their representation on school councils. First Nations representation is guaranteed on school councils.

The Francophone community is responsible for French first language education in Yukon, operating its own elected school board, La Commission Scolaire Francophone.

School instruction is English-based for the majority of students in Yukon. French and Aboriginal languages are also offered as second language instruction. French Immersion and French First Language education are offered in Whitehorse schools only.

Yukon is a partner of the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP). This consortium supports the development of common curriculum frameworks for Western and Northern Canada. Yukon uses the British Columbia program of studies as a basis for teaching in the Yukon, with adaptation to reflect local needs and conditions.

## **Health Promotion**

The responsibility for development, delivery, and administration of health services, lies with the Department of Health and Social Services. The department's resources include three hospitals (Whitehorse, Dawson City and Watson Lake) and 14 community health centers. The Health Promotion Unit,

Department of Health and Social Services, operates within Community Health Programs and collaborates with nursing staff and other professionals to support school health. The Unit reports to Assistant Deputy Minister of Health Programs, through the Director of Community Health Programs, and works in partnership with the Department of Education.

The Health Promotion Unit is comprised of a manager and 6 health promotion coordinators. Health Promotion Coordinators are involved in school health-related activities in program areas including tobacco, sexual health, youth engagement and healthy eating. One position has the responsibility of being the main contact for school health and liaises directly with the consultant responsible for health, career and community resources at the Department of Education. These positions together represent the Yukon on the school health coordinators committee of the JCSH.

The desire for Health and Education to work in partnership is reflected by the formation of the Healthy Living Steering Committee as well as shared representation on the Joint Consortium for School Health. The Healthy Living Steering Committee is composed up of health and educational professionals, representing the Department of Health, and Community Services and Yukon Education. The mandate of the steering committee is to coordinate Yukon responses to a number of Federal/Provincial/Territorial and Provincial/Territorial health and wellness commitments, as well as to offer responses to groups external to government. Another objective is to facilitate information-sharing, expertise, joint planning and research on healthy living amongst Yukon Government departments.

### **Comprehensive School Health in Yukon**

“Comprehensive School Health” describes the approach to the school health initiative in Yukon. With the goal of connecting the educators, students, parents, and health professionals who have the interest, skills, and opportunity to promote health in the school setting, the main themes of *Promoting Health in Yukon Schools* are:

- Healthy kids are better learners
- Improved health results from the school and the broader community working together

### **The Health Promotion Unit promotes school health through a number of initiatives:**

HPU is a key point of contact for coordinating health activities in conjunction with Yukon Education. Health promotion coordinators network with, and connect people and services in Yukon to help school communities become healthier, providing leadership in several key areas by:

- promoting school cultures and environments that encourage healthy lifestyle choices and decrease risk behaviours
- supporting the delivery of current classroom-based tools and resources that cover important areas of healthy living
- providing programming on current issues identified as priorities for Yukon youth

Examples of activities within these key areas include:

- Provision of tobacco education and smoking cessation supports to students in school environments. *Smoke Screening*, an interactive video presentation of tobacco ads from around the world and *Get Reel*, a competition for Northern students to create their own tobacco ad are both examples of tobacco education in schools.
- The *Knowledge Xchange with Yukon Youth* and *Next Steps Projects* return the information of the Health Behaviours of School-Aged Children Survey to students across the Territory and provide opportunities for those students to develop and implement their own projects in response to health issues they identify as important in their communities.
- Development and implementation of youth/student engagement processes for use in schools and communities.
- Yukon Grad Gear: The Health Promotion Unit collaborates with secondary schools to celebrate high school graduates in the territory. This has evolved from a simple provision of grad kits (composed of a travel mug, condoms, health-related information) to consultations with grads to determine how to best meet the needs of young people leaving school for the wider world beyond.
- Maintains a relationship with the Recreation and Parks Association of the Yukon (RPAY) to deliver the Active Yukon Schools program
- Maintains and promotes the confidential sexual health information and referral phone line 877-YK Style and website *bettertoknow.yk.ca*.

Additionally, schools participate in the following programs to continually promote health in the school environment:

The Yukon Children's Dental Program - a school-based public health program that provides preventive, diagnostic and restorative services to children in K-Grade 7 in Whitehorse schools, and K-12 in rural schools.

School-based immunization programs routinely bring health care providers and services into Yukon schools.

A Volunteer Vision Screening program operates in many Yukon schools through the efforts of the Association of School Councils.

### **Yukon Education promotes healthy living through a number of initiatives.**

- Yukon Education has a Yukon Self-Regulation Initiative to support children in building the capacity to ensure they have adequate energy, alertness or calmness to deal with everyday life stress. A group of educational specialists provide advice on classroom adaptations to reduce environmental stressors, and introduce sensory and movement breaks, as well as down-regulatory and calming breaks. More intensive interdisciplinary supports are provided to individual students.
- Yukon Education publishes a monthly newsletter, *Wellness Perspectives*, for our school staffs. There are a number of areas highlighted including: Comprehensive School Health, self-regulation, health and wellness, social-emotional learning and inclusive educational practices. Strategies and tips promoting wellness and resiliency in our students as well as for ourselves as educators and parents are provided.
- Training opportunities are being offered to Yukon educators to support students in safe and caring school communities to support health and wellness. Training includes Nonviolent Crisis Intervention and Violence Threat Risk Assessment training. Through community partnering we provide Mental Health First Aid and ASIST, suicide prevention training, to our school personnel and community members to support students who struggle with mental well-being.

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

Healthy schools initiatives depend on the support and interest of educators and health professionals alike. Instituting systemic change is an evolving process. Schools have engaged in healthy pursuits on an individualized basis to suit their school's needs. Food for Learning breakfast clubs, reverse lunches to promote physical activity and dedicated time to consume food afterwards, movement breaks and down-regulating strategies, and farm to table initiatives are some of the activities taking place in our schools. The challenge to work within the distinct culture and contexts of each Yukon school community remains.

We are experiencing a shift towards a strength-based perspective focusing on health and wellness, creating opportunities school-wide, through the promotion of healthier food choices, social and emotional interventions to enhance resiliency, empathy building, and mental wellness, rather than a focus on risky health behaviours

We look towards building a balanced approach to engage educators, administrators, health professionals, and families to foster health promoting schools.

## **Benefits of JCSH Membership**

Membership in the Joint Consortium for School Health has provided the impetus to create a coordinated interdisciplinary team between the Department of Health and Yukon Education. The Consortium also helps connect Yukon with national and international expertise in school health and serves as an efficient agency to facilitate the transmission of interprovincial resources, expertise and opportunities. Membership has led to building relationships with other Northern, rural and remote jurisdictions that have similar needs and perspectives.

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