

# School Health Promotion in Yukon

## Yukon in Profile<sup>1</sup>

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 32,000 people, 24,000 of whom live in the capital city of Whitehorse. Approximately 25% of Yukon residents are of Aboriginal origin. While 1.6% of the current population are Francophones, more than 13% have some French ancestry.

## The Yukon Educational System

Approximately 5,000 K-12 students attend 30 Yukon schools. 16 of these schools are located in Whitehorse. The Yukon Department of Education employs over 700 school-based personnel, including teachers, educational assistants, remedial tutors, and aboriginal language teachers, and Department of Education staff.

The Assistant Deputy Minister (Public Schools) is responsible for school operations. The ADM is assisted by three Superintendents of Schools and Superintendent of Programs & Services. Parental input into educational priorities is facilitated through their representation on school councils. Where requested, First Nations have guaranteed representation 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. Instruction is English-based for the majority of students. French and Aboriginal languages are also offered as second language instruction. French Immersion and French First Language education are offered in Whitehorse schools only.

The 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. Yukon Schools are among the most 'connected' in Canada. All Yukon schools have access to high-speed internet service.

## 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 a cottage hospital and 14 community health centers. The Health Promotion Unit of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sources: *Yukon Facts*, Government of Yukon, accessed August 27, 2007 at <http://www.gov.yk.ca/facts/#land>; Public Schools Branch, Department of Education, at <http://www.education.gov.yk.ca/psb/index.html>; Yukon Public School Directory, at <http://www.education.gov.yk.ca/psb/directory.html>; Yukon Health and Social Services, at <http://www.hss.gov.yk.ca/>

Department collaborates with professional nursing and other staff at health centers and supports school health promotion programming by providing information and materials, providing in class presentations, offering training opportunities to teachers, and working with schools to create healthy school environments.

### **School Health Initiatives in the 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 Department of Education and the Health Promotion Unit (HPU) of the Health and Social Services Department share the role of school health coordination in Yukon. 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 (3 permanent, 3 terms funded by the Territorial Health Access Fund to Mar. 31, 2010). All Health Promotion Coordinators are involved in school health-related activities in program areas including tobacco, sexual health, healthy eating and media awareness. The manager of the unit is the main contact for school health and liaises directly with the consultant for health, career and community resources at the Department of Education. The manager also represents 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 Yukon School Health Advisory Committee (YSHAC). This committee is made up of health professionals, educators, and administrators representing both government and non-government organizations. YSHAC provides guidance and acts as an advisory committee for the school health initiative. A goal of the committee is to help create environments where Yukon school communities can maximize opportunities for student health and learning. One of YSHAC’s first objectives was to produce the document “*Why do we need health promoting schools in the Yukon?*” emphasizing the interrelatedness of health and learning.

In September of 2008, YSHAC hosted a pan-northern Health and Learning Symposium, funded by the Canadian Council on Learning. Educators, administrators and health professionals from all three Territories participated in an event planned “by Northerners for Northerners”. Particular attention was given to innovative activities in the area of health and learning with a focus on the three broad themes of *Schools as communities and within communities, Engaging youth, and Health, culture and the arts.*

## Implementation

The Health Promotion Unit is a key point of contact for coordinating health activities in conjunction with the Department of 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:

- 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:

- Helping schools develop non-smoking policies and reclaim former smoking areas
- Working with the Recreation and Parks Association of the Yukon (RPAY) to deliver the Active Yukon Schools program
- Training teachers to deliver school health programming in the classroom
- Maintaining a lending library of support materials
- Delivering interactive classroom presentations and workshops on health issues
- Establishing and promoting the confidential sexual health information and referral phone line 877-YK Style
- Developing other tools and resources, e.g. [Smoke Screening](#), an interactive video presentation of tobacco ads from around the world and [QuitPack](#), a smoking cessation tool kit. Currently under development are a Smokeless Tobacco Kit and Media Awareness and Gender Roles kit for use in the classroom in fall 2007.

In 2007-08, the HPU made presentations on sexual health, media awareness, nutrition, and tobacco to over 1,000 students. The pan-territorial tobacco awareness project saw 790 Yukon students in grades 6 to 12 view [Smoke Screening](#).

Resources supporting healthy school programming may be developed locally or adapted from other sources. For example, [Drop the Pop](#) challenges students and teachers to make healthier drink choices. In 2006, 20 schools (108 classrooms, 1733 students) participated. In 2007, the challenge involved 19 schools, 108 classrooms, and 1813 students. In the first year, the initiative was complemented by [Drink to Your Health](#), a mass media campaign which included radio and newspaper ads, a brochure and fridge magnets. The brochure and magnet were distributed to parents throughout the Yukon to support their children's effort to avoid pop. In the second year, *Thinking Outside The (Lunch) Box* provided parents with tips on healthy, fun lunches.

RPAY's [Active Yukon Schools](#) program is a school-based initiative that furthers the integration of daily physical activity and healthy living. The program provides ideas,

training, and resources to help students and teachers build more physical activity and fun into their daily routines. As of February 2007, 24 of 30 schools had registered in the program. RPAY also facilitates access to school-based resources promoting healthy eating as part of their Diabetes Prevention Project.

Many examples demonstrate the desire to promote healthy school communities. One high school has reclaimed their former *smoke pit* and converted it into a more positive student-centered recreation space; an elementary school instituted a *Fruit Snack Recess* to support healthier eating. One school has introduced a *Health Matters* course for Grade 8 students, drawing on many community resources. Four Whitehorse schools have also implemented a reverse or “play-first” lunch in order to promote healthy eating and physical activity for children.

- The Yukon Children’s Dental Program is 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
- The *Volunteer Vision Screening* program is operating in many Yukon schools through the efforts of the Association of School Councils
- The Health Promotion Unit collaborates with Alcohol and Drug Services, the Yukon Liquor Board, RPAY and secondary schools in Yukon to provide *health promoting grad packs* to all high school graduates in the territory (390 in spring 2007). The congratulatory kits reinforce the message “making healthy choices for your future” and can include a water bottle, pocket flashlight, health information and a “grad” condom.

Recent developments in school health are described in the [Tracks Newsletter](#).

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

Healthy schools initiatives depend on the support and interest of educators and health professionals alike. A dedicated school health coordinator position advances the promotion of health in the school setting with a broader perspective, thereby including the activities of professionals in community health centers, other government departments and non-governmental organizations by sharing information and materials and collaborating when possible.

The following challenge has been identified: Rather than focusing exclusively on risky youth health behaviours, there is a need to identify and enhance factors related to good health, high self-worth, and low anxiety. Although many examples of this do exist, the challenge to work within the distinct culture and contexts of each Yukon school community remains. A balanced approach to engage educators, administrators, health professionals, and families to foster health promoting schools remains elusive.

## **Benefits of JCSH Membership**

Membership in the Joint Consortium for School Health has provided the impetus to create the interdisciplinary Yukon School Health Advisory Committee (YSHAC) as one means of fostering the partnerships required to ensure that school health initiatives are successful ones.

The Consortium also helps connect Yukon with national and international expertise in school health and provides opportunities to share what works in Yukon communities. Membership has led to building relationships with other Northern, rural and remote jurisdictions that have similar needs and perspectives.

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