

# *Why do we need health promoting schools in the Yukon?*

## **HEALTH PROMOTES LEARNING AND LEARNING PROMOTES HEALTH.**

The core business of a school is maximizing learning outcomes. By promoting and supporting the health of their students, Yukon schools are making a major contribution to achieving this outcome.

Our intuition tells us that when kids are healthy they learn better. This understanding is supported by strong evidence demonstrating that health and learning are directly linked and complementary.

Schools aspire to provide a setting that enables learning to take place. This includes providing a safe environment where dedicated teachers provide learning activities that will engage students. In order for students to benefit from this setting, they need to be present, attentive, well-nourished, free of addictions and secure. In other words, **health** – just like a great textbook or an effective computer program -- is an important resource for **learning**. This is the common ground where learning and health interact; where partnerships with families, health service providers and the community-at-large can play a role in maximizing learning outcomes.

## **WHY PROMOTE HEALTH IN SCHOOLS?**

The values that get transferred in schools help define a society. Schools also serve an important role in promoting social change.

We know that health status of a population varies with education and socio-economic status (SES). A remarkable strength of public schools is that they are places where **all** kids have an equal opportunity to pursue health and learning regardless of their class, gender or ethnicity. In other words, schools have a great levelling effect that allows students of different backgrounds and circumstances an equal opportunity to gain skills and knowledge that will positively impact their immediate and future health. Research shows that students who feel connected to their schools report better health. This is another example of the levelling effect of schools because feelings of connectedness are independent of SES.

This doesn't mean that helping students maximize their potential is the responsibility of teachers alone. When educators, health care professionals and other members of the school and community work together, they can create schools that are healthy settings for learning and working, and positively influence the educational and health outcomes of children and young people.

*“There is increasing recognition that health and educational outcomes are inextricably linked and that the school can be an ideal setting to strive for both”*

World Health Organization (2006)

*Ensuring that students are safe, drug-free, healthy and resilient is central to improving academic performance...Promoting assets and resilience among students is associated with both improvement in academic achievement and reductions in health risks.*

Hanson, T.L and Austin, G.A. (2002). *Health risks, resilience, and the Academic Performance Index.*

*Youth who feel connected to their school report better health, higher self-worth, less anxiety and are less likely to report risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking alcohol, using pot and associating with peers who commit crimes.*

Canadian Institute for Health Information. *Improving the Health of Young Canadians.* (2005).

## NOT JUST “CURRICULUM” ...

According to the World Health Organization, a health promoting school is one that “constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working” (WHO, 2006).

There is strong evidence demonstrating that a **comprehensive** and **coordinated** approach is the most effective way of creating environments where students can maximize learning. School communities that are most successful at promoting health and learning are those that create or take advantage of opportunities to promote student health on a number of fronts. This includes engaging all members of the school community (including parents, administrators, school councils, and students as well as teachers and health care professionals), attending to the physical and social environments in which students learn and live, and using a variety of methods to promote health (including co-curricular curricular activities and policy development as well as classroom-based learning). School health promotion is not just about curriculum and it’s not just about teachers.

There are many examples both big and small from the Yukon that demonstrate the desire to promote healthy school communities.

- FH Collins Secondary School recently reclaimed their former **smoke pit** and converted it into a more positive student-centered recreation space
- At Kluane Lake School first recess is **Fruit Snack Recess** to support healthier eating
- 21 elementary schools participated in the **2006 Drop the Pop Challenge**
- The Department of Education is working with the Environmental Health Services to develop a policy for the use of wild meat in schools
- Porter Creek Secondary School has introduced a **Health Matters** course for Grade 8 students that draws on many community resources
- The **Yukon Children’s Dental Program** and 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
- 18 Yukon schools have been designated as **Active Yukon Schools** by the Recreation and Parks Association of the Yukon (RPAY)
- The Health Promotion Unit collaborates with Alcohol and Drug Services, the Yukon Liquor Board, RPAY and secondary schools in the Yukon to provide **health promoting grad packs** to all high school graduates in the Territory

## BECAUSE HEALTHY KIDS ARE BETTER LEARNERS

It seems like you can’t turn on the radio or read a newspaper these days without hearing about alarming trends in childhood obesity, inactivity and self destructive behaviours. It would be easy to conclude that the health of our young people is quickly going from bad to worse. But this is not the whole story.

Amidst the “doom and gloom” there are reasons to be optimistic. The truth is that most kids in the Yukon are doing great. This is partly because their schools are giving them the chance to be great by providing opportunities and environments which maximize their health and learning. Instead of focusing on risky youth health behaviours, we need to focus on factors related to good health, high self-worth, and low anxiety. As we have seen, there are many superb examples of this happening in the Yukon. The challenge before us now is to work within the unique culture of each Yukon school community to promote further collaboration between educators, administrators, health professionals and families to foster **health promoting schools in the Yukon**.

*comprehensive:* Addressing the complete physical, emotional, intellectual, and social well-being of students.

*coordinated:* Has structures in place that allows many different players to communicate with each other and work towards shared goals

*School programmes that are integrated, holistic and strategic appear to produce better health and education outcomes than those which are mainly information based and implemented only in the classroom.*

International Union for Health Promotion and Education. *Protocols and Guidelines for Health Promoting Schools*. (2006).

*There is a link b/w increased activity and improved nutrition with improved academic performance.*

Shephard, R.J. *Relation of Academic Performance to Physical Activity and Fitness in Children*. (1997). Quoted in *Principals Online* (Vol. 1, No. 13, Feb. 2006)

*“Good health supports successful learning. Successful learning supports health. Education and health are inseparable.”*

Dr. D O’Byrne, cited in WHO *Local action creating health promoting schools*