

Ten Years of Aboriginal Head Start in the NWT



**1996
to
2006**



**NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
ABORIGINAL
HEAD START
PROGRAM**

Acknowledgments and Thank You

We express our gratitude to the Aboriginal Head Start Programs across the NWT, their staff and parents and children for their participation in this ten-year anniversary booklet.

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The views presented in this booklet are solely those of the authors and do not represent the views of the funding partners, the Public Health Agency of Canada or the participating First Nations Communities.

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Forward

This booklet “Ten Years of Aboriginal Head Start in the NWT, 1996 to 2006”, highlights the dedication of many people who believe in and work for a better future for Aboriginal children, families and their communities.

Part 1 of this booklet includes an overview of Aboriginal Head Start, the history of its ideas and other background information of the Head Start movement.

Part 2 of this booklet includes a site-by-site tour of the eight NWT AHS (Northwest Territories Aboriginal Head Start) programs. To celebrate the successes of these programs, each site has provided highlights which demonstrate the uniqueness of each AHS community, language group(s) and culture. Each site overview is a snapshot of the site, and the reader is encouraged to visit the AHS site in their home community.

Part 3 of this booklet includes a summary of the NWT 2001 and 2004 Outcome Evaluations, which includes a roll-up of the AHS sites which provided data.

Finally, a brief discussion is included of the future of evaluation of NWT AHS in a growing and developing territory, as well as for Aboriginal families and communities.

PART I



Overview of Aboriginal Head Start

PART I

Overview of Aboriginal Head Start

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) is a Health Canada funded early intervention program for Aboriginal children and their families, who live in urban, northern and on-reserve, communities. Aboriginal Head Start was initiated to fulfill a government commitment to develop an early intervention program for Aboriginal children and their families.

Aboriginal Head Start, Urban and Northern Communities, was first announced on May 29, 1995 and Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve followed in 1998. There are over 4000 children who participate in Aboriginal Head Start programs across Canada in Urban and Northern Communities, and over 7000 Aboriginal children who participate in AHS programs that are On-Reserve.

The initial investment from Health Canada during the four-year pilot phase from 1995 through 1999 was \$83.7 million. An expansion of AHS to On-Reserve communities included \$100 million dollars from 1998 to 2002.

Aboriginal Head Start was designed to build on Aboriginal people's commitment to positive change. Projects include the promotion of culture and Aboriginal languages, school readiness, health, nutrition and parental support. Parental involvement is a cornerstone of Aboriginal Head Start.

*"I am sure glad my son gets to be in Head Start.
He is such a comedian, and he makes me laugh."
(AHS parent in the NWT, 2003)*

Aboriginal Head Start is distinctive because of the extent of input and involvement of Aboriginal people and communities. In the early years of project development, and to this day, programs involve parents and community members in the design of AHS programs.

Where did Head Start Come From?

Head Start was conceptualized in the United States in 1962 by Sargent Shriver and Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who had a vision to improve the school performance of disadvantaged children. Head Start is that, a way for children/families in need of a “running head start”, which is where the name Head Start originated. A Head Start planning committee in 1962 realized the importance of early intervention for young children, which at the time was a new concept.

Today, early childhood, birth to age 6 years, is widely believed to be the most important and sensitive timeline for brain development, social-emotional development, physical development and readiness for lifelong learning.

“The intent of early intervention is to work with the family and community to enhance this support and thus lay the best possible foundation for future health and for future school and social functioning.”
(Investing in our Children, 1998)¹

Throughout the 1960’s, child development studies addressed the influence of early child development programs that involved parents and communities. Today, parental involvement remains a core part of many early childhood programs including Aboriginal Head Start.

¹ Karoly, C. (1998). *Investing in our children. What we know and don't know about the costs and benefits of early childhood interventions* (pp.4). Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

Cost Effectiveness of Early Childhood Programs

*“Investing in children is vital to our economy..”
(Daniel Keating and Fraser Mustard, 1996)²*

It is important to recognize that today’s children are tomorrow’s work force. Research has proven the place of high quality early childhood learning environments in providing the stimulation and nurturing that children need for healthy development.

The Perry Preschool Project or High Scope Study is by far the best example of a high quality early childhood project for preschool children. A study of children attending this program has been in place for over 30 years, and continues today. Findings include the following:

- Adults, who had attended the preschool program as children, had high employment.
- Adults, who had attended the preschool program as children, had lower rates of social-welfare involvement, higher school achievement and literacy.
- Adults, who had attended the preschool program as children, had fewer problems with crime and mental health problems.
- Adults, who attended the preschool program as children, have better job and financial success.

² Keating, D., & Mustard, F. (1997). *More reasons to invest in children.*
In Kathleen Guy (Ed.). Our promise to children (pp.22).
Ottawa, ON: Health Canada.

In 1993, Perry Preschool researchers concluded that early childhood intervention that is high quality and well-funded, demonstrated success in reducing the costs to society through crime prevention and improved social-economics. In many cases, targeted early childhood interventions did yield measurable benefits for families at-risk in the short run and that many benefits persisted long after the program ended.

“For every dollar spent on early childhood, seven dollars are saved in the long run...”
(Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikert, 1993)³

As for Aboriginal Head Start in Canada, the Perry Preschool Project and its web of program supports through the High Scope Curriculum, have provided a foundation from which to build an Aboriginal early childhood program.

“Fix little problems in Head Start before they become big problems. In twenty years, there will be well-educated Gwich’in to run our communities.”
(An AHS community member, 1998)

³ Schweinhart, L.J., & Barnes, H.V. (1993). *Significant benefits: the High Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 27, Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Number ten. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.*

Aboriginal Head Start in the Northwest Territories

There are eight AHS sites in the Northwest Territories (NWT) including Fort McPherson, Paulatuk, Inuvik, Fort Providence, Hay River, Yellowknife/Ndilo, Behchokö(Rae-Edzo) and Fort Smith. Most programs have been open since 1997; Behchokö started in 1999 and Inuvik in 2004. The cornerstone of Aboriginal Head Start in Canada has been to support children and their families intellectually, emotionally, physically and culturally.

Projects provide programming in 6 key areas:

- Culture and language
- Education and school readiness
- Health promotion
- Nutrition
- Parental involvement
- Social support

Aboriginal Head Start Principles include:

- 1) Support the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical growth of each Aboriginal child.
- 2) Support and encourage each Aboriginal child to enjoy life-long learning.
- 3) Support parents/guardians as the primary teachers and caregivers of their children.
- 4) Recognize and support the role of the extended family in teaching and caring for Aboriginal children.

- 5) Include the broader Aboriginal community as part of the project from planning to evaluation.
- 6) Make sure the project works with and is supported by other community programs and services.
- 7) Make sure the resources are used in the best way possible in order to produce measurable and positive outcomes for Aboriginal children, their parents, families and communities.

The NWT Outcome Evaluations of 2001 & 2004

The NWT Outcome Evaluation projects of 2001 and 2004 were initiated by the Western Arctic Aboriginal Head Start Council or WAAHSC as an evidence-based evaluation of the NWTAHS programs. The purpose of the NWT evaluation projects was to assess program quality, school readiness, social skill development and program satisfaction with culture and language activities. The NWT programs initiated this first outcome evaluation to provide feedback regarding program activities, staff development and training, and accountability to stakeholders, parents and communities.

In addition, a follow-up study was done with Head Start graduates in one community, Fort McPherson, to determine if the Head Start program was achieving its goal of school readiness. Overall, both the 2001 and 2004 NWT Outcome Evaluation projects have provided much support and direction for ongoing program enhancements. Further discussion of these Outcome Evaluations is presented in Part 2 & 3 of this Booklet.

PART II



Site-by-Site Tour of Northwest
Territories of Aboriginal Head Start
(NWTAHS)

PART 2

Community Information: Hay River

The Town of Hay River is located on the south shore of Great Slave Lake, just 200 km southwest of Yellowknife. The town has a population of approximately 3800 and the Hay River Reserve has approximately 300 people. Hay River is a central community along the Mackenzie Highway that connects Alberta and the NWT.

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

The name of the AHS site is Dezoa Undaa Gogha Goghaonete and is on the Hay River Reserve, just 20 km from the Town of Hay River. The Aboriginal Head Start program is a classroom setting, with many highly involved child learning centres that support Slavey culture. The centre opened in the spring of 1997 and 34 children are enrolled.

The AHS site on the Hay River Reserve is located in the Chief Sunrise Education Centre. The classroom was changed in 2005 to allow for more space, easier access in and out of the building and closer proximity to administrative support. The AHS program uses all the facilities of the school, including the gym, outdoor play equipment and cultural camp at Sandy Creek, 14 km from the Reserve.

For the past six years, South Slavey cultural activities have been integrated with the program throughout the year. The AHS teacher speaks fluent Slavey and provides much support to the AHS program on a daily basis with culture and language activities.

The children set snares in the woods, pick berries and learn to identify plants that are used to treat ailments. Other traditional activities include cooking outdoors, watching elders pluck ducks, making dry fish or dry meat, skinning and cutting up animals for meat and learning how to sew traditional slippers.

The AHS classroom setting is full of early childhood activities, with an extensive dramatic play area, fine and gross motor play areas, sand and water table, manipulatives and smaller centres that are rotated throughout the year. The Hay River AHS has consistently been strong in its development of child-centered learning through structured and unstructured learning activities.



Three and four-year-old children attend the Hay River AHS. A small school bus transports the children to the program.

Program Highlights (1997-2006)

- **Culture and language** activities are integrated throughout the program on a daily basis, including much exposure and teaching in South Slavey.
- **The school setting** allows for interactive activities with older children, school and community activities, and staff and administrative support.
- **Children are given traditional foods** prepared on the Reserve that provide good nutrition and also teach about traditional ways of living.
- **Parents and the larger community of Hay River** are involved in the program; for example High School students come and help in the classroom.



- **Program staff** has training in culture/language instruction and early childhood development; the staff also work with children with special needs.
- **Evaluations of classroom quality** have been strong since 2000, with strengths in child-centered activities such as dramatic play, language activities and use of early childhood education play materials.

What do the People Say? (1997-2006)

“One day, our MP Ethel Blondin-Andrew and our Chief came to visit our site. The children offered them some of our dried caribou meat. We are very proud of our dry meat that we made.”
(AHS program staff, 1999)

“I like doing crafts. I learned how to make rabbits.”
(AHS child, 2005)

Community Information: Fort Providence

Fort Providence is located on the northeast bank of the Mackenzie River, and has a population of approximately 835 people. The Hamlet of Fort Providence is a vibrant community of Dene and Métis. The community is a three hour drive south of Yellowknife, the capital of the NWT. Access to the south occurs by crossing the Mackenzie River by ferry until there is access by a winter ice road.

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

The name of the AHS site in Fort Providence is Dezoah Undaa Etleh Koke, which in the Slavey language means “learning for the future.” The Aboriginal Head Start program is located in its own building that is easily recognized in the community as the oval red building.

The AHS classroom setting is full of child activities, with a large play area, a small area for fine motor activities and surroundings that highlight on-the-land activities. The centre exposes the children to Slavey culture throughout the day through instruction by the Language Nest Instructors and through culture camps in the fall/spring. Children are taught traditional knowledge and are exposed to traditional foods, local wildlife and nature.

The Fort Providence Aboriginal Head Start program opened its doors in 1997, and provides a program for 32 children, ages 3 and 4 years. Activities are organized around community elders, who provide the children with old-time stories and learning about culture. A dental health program, use of traditional food for snacks, and many educational activities for the children make up the program. Parents/guardians are involved in the program by helping with putting on “indoor shoes” and assisting with free play activities. Parents check for program information and upcoming events on the bulletin board. Parents also help with clean-up and providing traditional snacks. Community organizations also volunteer their time and donate traditional foods throughout the year.

The community has been a leader in addressing the unique needs of children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). As early as 1998, school staff, together with the AHS staff, made changes to their program structure and classroom activities to be consistent with and sensitive to the unique learning needs of children with special needs, including FASD.





Program Highlights (1997-2006)

- **Culture and language** areas are well integrated in the program daily and through the seasons.
- **Children enjoy** singing, dancing and learning in the outdoors, especially at culture camps.
- **Children are prepared** to enter kindergarten, and school teachers comment on their readiness to learn.
- **Parents and community** are involved in the running and planning of the AHS program.
- **Social skills** such as learning to share, playing with other children and respecting the rules are taught.

- **Evaluation of classroom quality** demonstrated improvement in set-up, social skill development and staff interaction with the children from 2000 to 2004.
- **Special needs children** are provided with program supports where possible.

What do the People Say? (1997-2006)

*“Visiting our culture camp is the highlight of the year for me.”
(AHS coordinator, 1998)*

*“The play room is very spacious, and allows for a good set-up of different learning centres.”
(Evaluation team member, 2002)*

*“He probably knows more than me when I went to kindergarten.”
(AHS parent, 2003)*



Community Information: Yellowknife/Ndilo

Yellowknife, the capital of the NWT, is located on the shores of Great Slave Lake. The Yellowknives Dene are the original inhabitants of Yellowknife (Somba K'e - "money place"). These Aboriginal descendants are members of the Akaitcho Treaty 8 First Nations, which today are 3100 status members who speak Chipewyan, Slavey, Tâichô and the Weledeh dialect of the Tâichô language.

Today, Yellowknife has a population of 20,000 and is the centre for the Territorial Government.

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

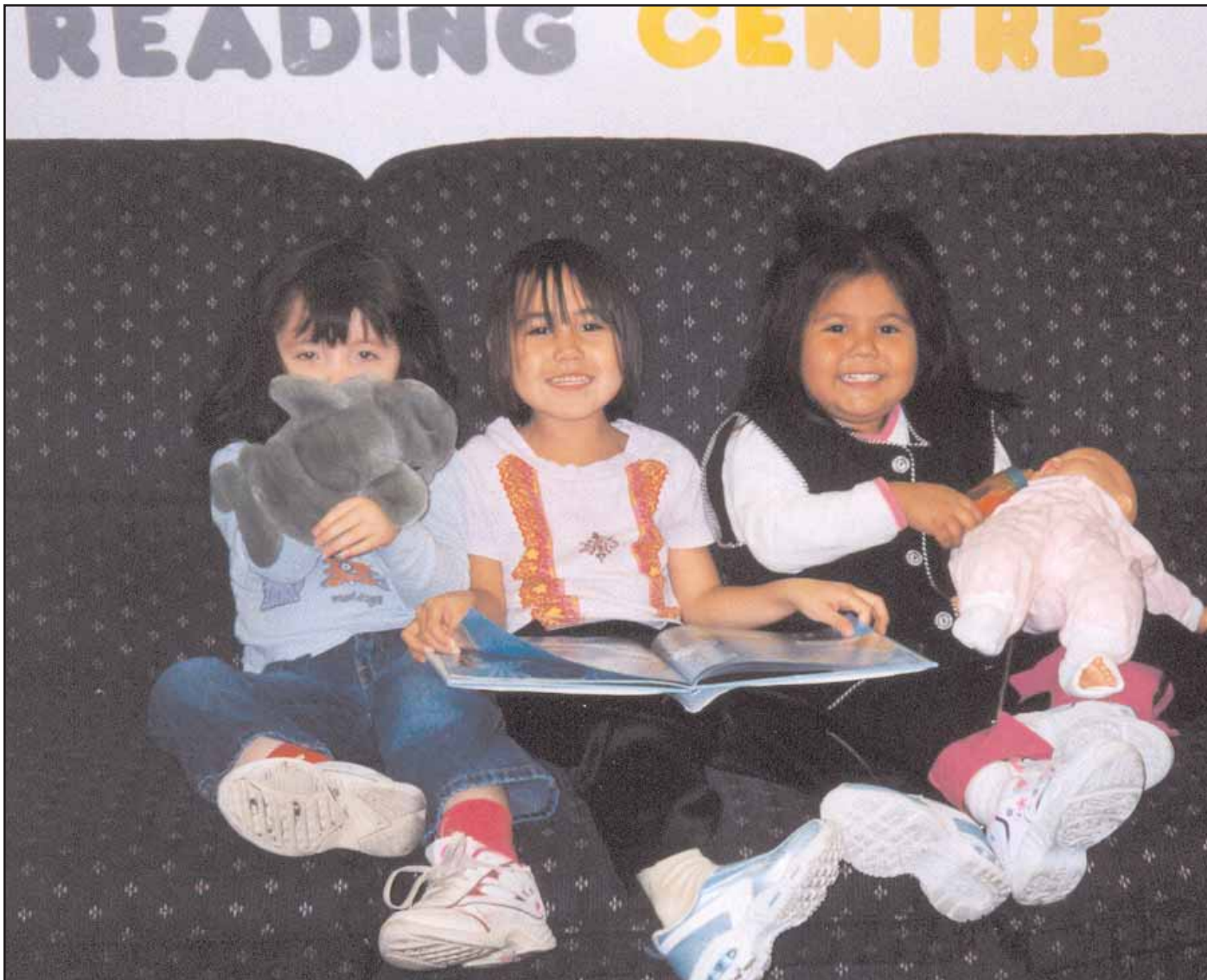
The name of the Aboriginal Head Start Program in Yellowknife/Ndilo is Done Necha-lia Gha Enitl'e Ko ("School for Little People"). The centre opened its doors in 1997 and the project sponsor is the Yellowknives Dene First Nation.

The AHS program provides an early childhood program for 32 four-year-old children. The program runs four days a week, with children attending mornings or afternoons. A school bus has transported the children since 1997, and is a contributor to strong program attendance. Children who attend the program come from different Aboriginal groups including Yellowknives Dene, Tâichô, Chipewyan, Métis, Slavey, Inuvialuit and Inuit.

Children who attend the Yellowknife/Ndilo program learn the Weledeh language and culture. Elders visit on a regular basis. They share stories and demonstrate traditional skills, where the children learn drumming and preparing meat. Parents love the Aboriginal culture part of the program.

For the past five years, the Yellowknife/Ndilo project has been involved in a yearly outcome evaluation process which has demonstrated that the children are learning important skills. K'alemi Dene School staff have shared that they can tell which children have attended AHS, as they are well prepared to learn.

The children engage in activities they may not otherwise participate in such as field trips to the fire hall, airport, horse ranch, nature walks, skating, sliding or swimming, which all help to broaden the experiences of these young children. The healthy snack program shows the children how to eat a variety of healthy foods and other daily health activities include brushing teeth and washing hands.



Program Highlights (1997-2006)

- **Culture and language** activities are integrated throughout the program. At the end of the year, the children can sing “You are My Sunshine” in the Weledeh dialect at the yearly program celebration. Parents, staff and visitors beam with pride and everyone’s hearts melt.

The school setting has linkages with community organizations. The classroom equipment is well suited to the developmental levels of the children for each year. Putting evaluation to work through improvements in the program has been a priority.

- **Parents** are supportive of the program in their feedback regarding the importance of the program for their children.
- **Program staff** has training in teaching, culture/language instruction and early childhood development. Many compliments are paid to the staff, often from children who are school age and who fondly remember their days at AHS.
- **Evaluations of the AHS program** use measures to assess school readiness, social skills, program quality, vocabulary and program satisfaction. The Yellowknife/Ndilo AHS has made evaluation and accountability a priority.

What do the People Say? (1997-2006)

*“My son could not stop talking about the duck plucking, he was so excited”
(AHS parent satisfaction survey)*

*“Continue to teach the kids Dogrib and the culture.”
(AHS parent satisfaction survey, 2002)*

*“I like playing in the playground.”
(AHS child, 2005)*



Community Information: Fort McPherson

Fort McPherson (Teetl'it Zheh - "town at the head of waters"), is located approximately 200 km south of Inuvik. The community sits on a hill overlooking the Peel River facing the Richardson Mountains. The Hudson's Bay Company established a post in 1840, and the site was named after Murdoch McPherson, the first Chief Factor for the Company. Today, Fort McPherson is home for Tetlit Gwich'in, has a population of 850 people and is a frequent tourist stop on the Dempster Highway.

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

The program sponsor for the AHS in Fort McPherson is the Tl'oondih Healing Society, which has a mandate to support social programs for the Tetlit Gwich'in. The Aboriginal Head Start site in Fort McPherson is called the Tetlit Zheh Child Centre, which is located in the Sarah Simon Hall.

The facility was built as an addition to St. Matthew's Church in 1995. The Sarah Simon Hall includes one large classroom, a kitchen facility, storage rooms and washroom facilities. An outdoor playground was re-built in 1999.

The AHS classroom setting is well situated in the community and access is good for parents and community members, who are often invited into the classroom for cultural activities. A greeting area with bulletin boards and individual lockers for each child are at the front of the hall. The rest of the classroom is open-style.

The Fort McPherson AHS program opened its doors in 1997, and provides a program for 20 three and four-year-old children. Two of the early childhood staff have been with the program since 1997. A highlight of the Tetlit Zheh Program has been the teaching of the Gwich'in language. Parents comment that the Gwich'in Language Nest instruction is a strong feature of the program, and how much they enjoy hearing their children speaking their native language.

Twice a year, the young children visit a local culture camp, where they are introduced to seasonal activities done by the Gwich'in. Throughout the year, a variety of activities occur in and around the Head Start classroom, including elders' teas, learning about local animals and many core early childhood activities such as play centres, structured activities, circle time, outdoor play and early literacy activities.



Program Highlights (1997-2006)

- **Culture and language** program areas receive many compliments throughout the region.
- **New children to the program** are proud and “in a hurry to come to school.”
- **School staff give good compliments** to the program, as they can tell which children have attended Head Start.
- **Follow-up outcome findings** have showed that AHS children do better in kindergarten to Grade 4, than children who did not attend AHS.
- **Special needs children** with speech and language delays have received additional support over the years, due to program support from regional partners.
- **Community support** for the program is established, and the program is recognized by leaders.

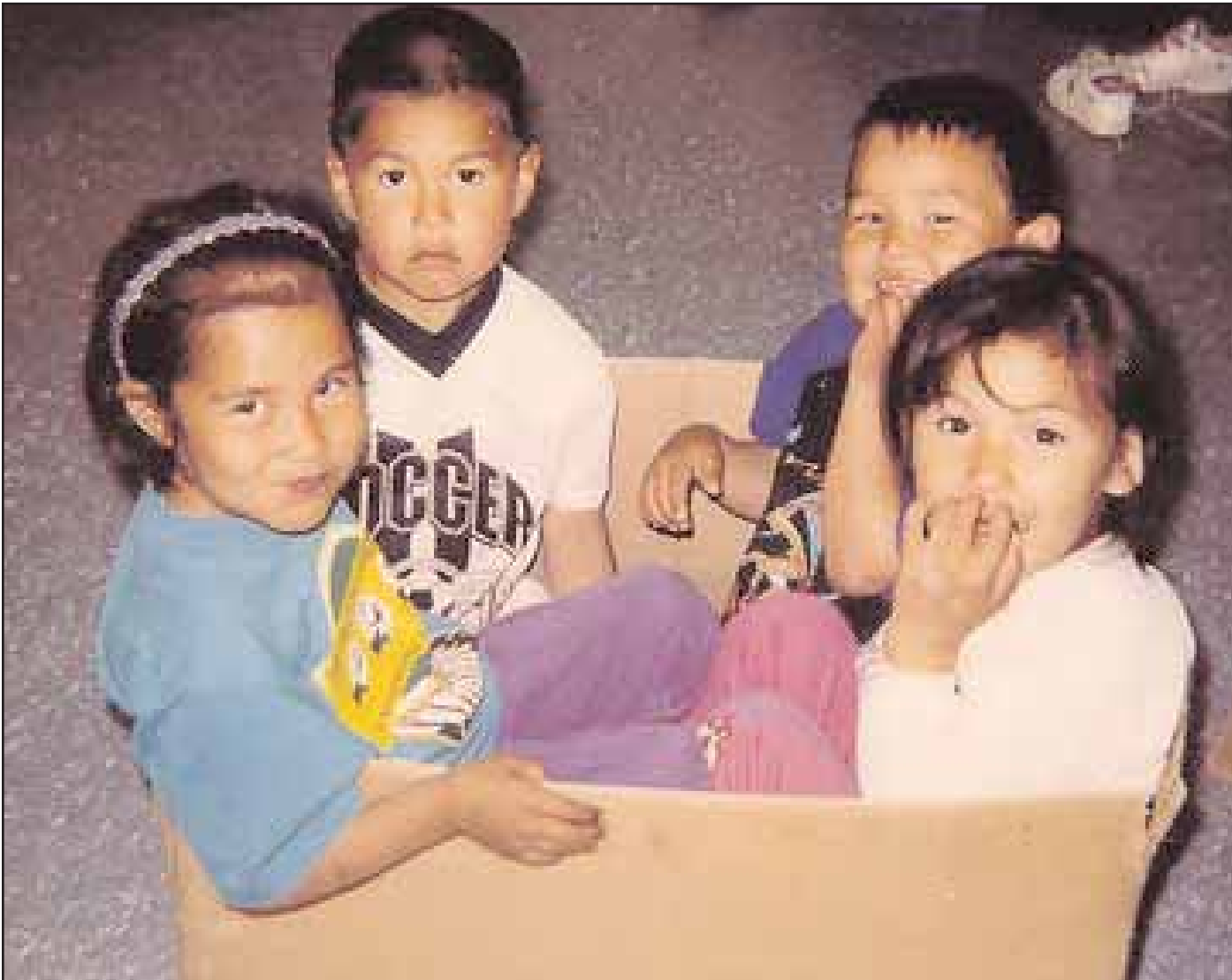


What do the People Say? (1997-2006)

“Keep the program. Work on continuity in the community. In 20 years, you will have good strong, healthy Gwich’in.”
(Community Member in 1998)

“Head Start is our future for our young people.”
(Community Leader in 2001)

“We have good parental involvement.”
(Head Start staff member, 2006)



Community Information: Paulatuk

The community of Paulatuk (Paulatuq - “place where one finds soot of coal”) is located on Darnley Bay, about 400 km east of Inuvik and 900 km northwest of Yellowknife. It is the nearest community to the Tuktot Nogait National Park and the Horton River.

Today, Paulatuk has a population of 325 where Inuvialuit still depend on hunting and trapping for a living. In addition, geological exploration in recent years has indicated that the Paulatuk area contains great mineral wealth.

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

The name of the AHS program is Isaksaqtuak Inuvialuktun Paulatumi Mikiyuayaat Aboriginal Head Start, which means “a new beginning in Inuvialuktun for the small children.” The Centre opened its doors in 1997 and the program is administered by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, which has its central offices in the Town of Inuvik.

The AHS program in Paulatuk provides an early childhood education for three and four-year-old children. Children participate in a half-day preschool program where the languages spoken are Inuvialuktun and English.

A house-like setting is where the AHS program is situated, providing for good contact between staff, children and parents. As well, the house setting is inviting for elders to join in traditional activities such as making drymeat and dryfish, setting traps and playing traditional games such as string and tent games.

Paulatuk's program is focused on providing early support to and interaction with its youngest community members. Its small size allows for careful attention, pride and excellent support through much staff interaction with the children of Paulatuk. It also provides the community with a centralized area for parenting support and early childhood programming, all in the Inuvialuktun language and the traditions of the local area.



Program Highlights (1997-2006)

- **Culture and language** activities where the children learn about Inuvialuit culture.

The house setting is well used by the Paulatuk AHS program and the layout of child centres are focused on local themes and activities.

- **Music and dance activities** occur in partnership with the AHS program, such as fiddle dance, drum dances and other activities with local elders.
- **Program staff** have engaged in additional early childhood training and culture/language instruction.
- **Evaluations of classroom quality** have been consistent since 2000, with strengths in child interaction, health and personal care and the incorporation of local culture and traditions.
- **Program structure and staff interaction** have been very strong in the last two program evaluations.



What do the People Say? (1997-2006)

“It is important for our children to be proud of who they are.”
(AHF project coordinator, 1998)

*“The staff really care about the children and they assist the children to explore
and learn through play.”*
(Evaluation team observation, 2000)

“I like counting in Inuvialuktun.”
(AHS child, 2005)

“I like playing outside.”
(AHS child, 2005)

Community Information: Fort Smith

The Town of Fort Smith is located on the Slave River, and is just north of the NWT/Alberta border. By 1870, the Cree lived along the Slave River Valley after driving the Slavey north. In 1874, the Hudson's Bay Company established a trading post in the area. Later, the Caribou Chipewyan moved into the area and signed Treaty 8 in 1899.

For many years, Fort Smith's location provided a water traffic link between southern Canada and the Mackenzie River. Today, Fort Smith has a population of 2500 and is a regional centre for many services and Aboriginal groups.

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

The name of the AHS site in Fort Smith is the Nihkanis Aboriginal Head Start Centre. The term Nihkanis is Cree meaning "Leader of Children." The Centre opened its doors in 1998, following an initial delay. The Centre is administered by the Salt River First Nations.

The AHS program provides an early childhood education program for 32 three and four-year-old children. As Fort Smith is a regional location for post-secondary education, many young children attend the program while their parents engage in post-secondary education.

The Cree language is taught throughout the program. Some children speak Chipewyan and common activities to "Chip" and Cree culture are planned throughout the year. These activities include culture camps, making dryfish, setting snares, learning how to drum and drum dance, making bannock, taking nature walks and listening to stories from the local elders.

The AHS classroom setting is a highlight of the Fort Smith program, where early childhood activities are planned for the different levels of children in the program. Some children come to the centre with early reading skills, while others are just developing these skills.

AHS staff have recognized the unique learning needs of their children and plan their activities to meet these different levels. Free play is semi-structured so as to optimize the individual needs of each child, and the program staff interacts with the children in positive and stimulating ways.

Program Highlights (1997-2006)

- **Culture and language** activities are integrated throughout the program on a daily basis, including much exposure and teaching in Cree and Chipewyan.



- **The AHS setting** is centralized in the town for easy access and allows for much linkage with community organizations. The classroom equipment is well suited to the age groups and developmental levels of the children attending the program.
- **Children are given many opportunities** to learn about local culture, traditions and experiences.
- **Parents and the larger community of Fort Smith** are supportive of the program in many ways, and it is a model program as noticed by Aboriginal governments, community agencies, the community school and people of the community.



- **Program staff** have training in teaching, culture/language instruction and early childhood development. Staff members are committed to the learning needs of the children and have worked with the program for many years.
- **Evaluations of classroom quality** have been strong since 2000, with strengths in child-centered activities, dramatic play and language activities, and the use of a variety of early childhood materials.

What do the People Say? (1997-2006)

*“The program is filled to capacity
and has been each year since it opened its doors.”
(AHS staff, 2005)*

Community Information: Behchokö (Rae-Edzo)

The community of Behchokö is located on the shores of Marion Lake, close to the north arm of Great Slave Lake. Behchokö is 107 kilometres northwest of Yellowknife on the Mackenzie Highway, and is comprised of two communities, Rae and Edzo. The Tâichô have lived in this area for thousands of years and have passed on their traditional knowledge and language to the present-day Tâichô people. Today, Behchokö has a combined population of about 2300 and is the largest community in the Tâichô region.

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

The name of the site in Behchokö is Do Nàowo k'e Chekoa Hoahaaeto. The centre opened its doors in 1999 and is administered by the Tâichô Community Services Agency. The program is located in the Elizabeth Mackenzie Elementary School, where students and staff welcome the children to share the school facilities such as the gym, the kitchen and the library.

The AHS program offers quality early childhood education to all four-year-old children in the community. Children are registered for either a morning or afternoon class, Monday through Friday. The average number of children attending each year is 34, and no waiting list is maintained, as all children are welcome in the program.

Children who attend the AHS program learn school readiness skills which help them make the transition from home to kindergarten. Staff focuses on teaching activities that include participation in large and small motor activities and that stimulate cognitive development. A large part of the teaching focuses on social skill development, emotional and spiritual health.

Tâichô culture and language activities are integrated throughout the program on a daily basis, as the AHS staff are fluent in Tâichô. Children learn and practice Tâichô language skills, where they learn the names of objects, colors, numbers, months of the year and days of the week during circle activities, as well as regular program activities.



Program Highlights (1999-2006)

- **Culture and language** activities occur throughout the year. Children learn the traditional names and use of plants and animals, they pick berries and practice setting snares and nets under the ice. They help prepare the camp sites and eat traditional food cooked over a fire.
- **Health programming includes** children receiving dental check-ups and fluoride treatments from the Community Dental Therapist.
- **Baking Days** are held every Wednesday. Children are actively involved in preparing healthy snacks which include bannock and caribou stew.
- **All Program staff speak** Tâîchô and were born in Behchokö. Two staff have post-secondary Early Childhood Certificates, and one is working towards an Early Childhood Diploma. Two program assistants are enrolled in Early Childhood Certificate programs. All staff have received training in culture and language instruction and working with children with special needs.
- **Evaluations of classroom quality** have provided consistent results in cultural and language programming, fine motor skill development, staff/child interactions and child-centered learning.

What do the People Say? (1997-2006)

*“I like going to the gym.”
(AHS child, 2005)*

*“I like eating fish.”
(AHS child, 2005)*

*“What did you learn to do this year that was the most fun?
Checking the fishnets with the skidoo and sled.”
(AHS teacher and child, 2005)*



Community Information: Inuvik

The Town of Inuvik, the largest Canadian community north of the Arctic Circle, is located on the east channel of the Mackenzie River, and 1000 km northwest of Yellowknife. Inuvik (“living place”) was created in 1954 when the federal government attempted to relocate the entire community of Aklavik, which had just undergone severe flood damage. (Aklavik remains today)

The Town’s population and economy expanded in the 1970’s and 1980’s as a result of oil exploration in the Beaufort Sea. The boom went bust by the mid-80’s when oil prices collapsed.

Today, Inuvik has a population of 3600, and has grown from a government centre to a northern hub, as well as a transportation, health and education centre for the region. The economy of the Town has recently benefited from oil and gas exploration (Mackenzie Gas Project). Inuvik is home for the Inuvialuit and the Nihtat Gwich’in (“mixed people”).

Aboriginal Head Start Site Information

The Inuvik Aboriginal Head Start program is administered by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and is located in a house-like setting in a residential part of Inuvik. This gives parents easy access to the program.

The program in Inuvik is the newest AHS program in the NWT and opened its doors in 2004. The program provides an early childhood education program for Gwich’in, Inuvialuit and Métis children in the community of Inuvik.

Program Highlights (2004 to 2006)

- **Culture and language** activities include instruction in the Gwich'in and Inuvialuktun languages.
- **Children are given opportunities** to learn about local culture and traditions. Every Thursday, there is a traditional food day, when children have caribou, moose or fish to eat. The children use snowshoes and serve native foods to elders; this includes loche, caribou, rabbit and muskrat.



- **Many cultural activities** such as visiting a local bush camp where the children learn Gwich'in and Inuvialuktun, how to set snares, make an emergency shelter and to enjoy being out on-the-land.
- **Program staff members** have teacher training and language teaching training. The site has program support from the NWTAHS programs and two core Aboriginal groups, the Gwich'in and the Inuvialuit.



What do the People Say? (2004-2006)

*“Inuvik needed an AHS program to meet the needs of Gwich’in and Inuvialuit children.”
(Community leader, 2005)*

*“The program is wonderful, and I love the emphasis on social skills and traditional activities.”
(AHS grandparent, 2006)*



Conclusions to Site-by-Site Tour of NWT AHS

The site-by-site tour of the eight AHS in the NWT reveals a depth of knowledge and skill in early childhood education and a passion for the integration of local culture and language into each AHS program.

These eight programs have surpassed expectations of what an Aboriginal Head Start program requires, and they have become leaders in the NWT early intervention movement.

Each NWT AHS has its own unique design, program and staff complement, together with a solid basis in early intervention programming for children at-risk. Parental involvement and community support go hand-in-hand with each project, as well as partnership support with local groups.

Many programs are still developing, enhancements are ongoing. With change in the NWT due to oil, gas and mineral activities, a strong foundation in early childhood programming is vital for NWT communities. The next section, Part 3, describes outcome evaluation results that continue to tell the story of the success of NWT AHS.

PART III



Evaluation of NWTAHS
2000 to 2006

PART 3

Evaluation of NWT AHS 2000 to 2006

The NWT Outcome Evaluation of 2001

The NWT Outcome Evaluation of the 2000-2001 AHS year (2001 outcome evaluation) was an evidence-based evaluation of AHS programs that addressed program quality, school readiness, social skills and program satisfaction regarding culture and language activities. The NWT programs initiated the 2001 outcome evaluation to provide feedback of the AHS program.

A follow-up study was done with Head Start graduates in one community, Fort McPherson, to determine if the Head Start program was achieving its goal of school readiness. Overall, the 2001 Outcome Evaluation in the NWT provided a good basis for ongoing program enhancements.

The NWT Outcome Evaluation of 2004

Since the 2001 Outcome Evaluation, many of the NWT Head Start sites have continued to collect information about the program, student readiness and parent satisfaction. In the winter of 2004, NWT AHS agreed to collect a second round of outcome data. The following data collection instruments were used in the 2001 and 2004 Evaluation projects:

- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)⁴ - includes 37 scales measuring quality-related processes occurring in the AHS classroom. AHS teachers rated their programs on a 7-point scale.

4 Harms, T., Clifford, R.M., & Cryer, D. (1998). *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*. New York, NY: Teacher's College

- Brigance Preschool Screen⁵ - a tool administered by AHS teachers that highlights school readiness skills.
- Social Skills Rating Scale⁶ - a tool used by AHS teachers to identify prosocial skills in young children. A parent version was used with one AHS site.

The following measures were added in 2004 on a trial basis:

- Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Third Edition (PPVT)⁷ - a measure of children's emerging literacy through the evaluation of receptive vocabulary.
- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Abbreviated (WIAT-II)⁸ - an abbreviated measure of reading, spelling and math skills for elementary school children, who had previously attended AHS.

As with the 2001 NWT Outcome Evaluation, there were limitations to the interpretation of the 2004 evaluation. These limitations and areas of bias include variability in data collection procedures, sampling errors, bias in use of standardized instruments and other factors.

5 Brigance, A.H. (1998). *Preschool Screen, Kindergarten Screen and First-Grade Screen*. North Billerica, MA: Curriculum Associates.

6 Gresham, F.M & Elliott, S.N. *Social Skills Rating System*, Teacher Form Preschool. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service Inc.

7 Dunn, L.M., & Dunn, L.M. (1997). *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (3rd ed.)*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service Inc.

8 Wechsler, D. (2001). *Wechsler Individual Achievement Test- II- Abbreviated*. Toronto, ON: The Psychological Corporation-Harcourt Assessment

Procedures for evaluation and interpretation of the data were followed according to psychological standards of test interpretation with minority populations. As well, the interpretation of the evaluation results, measures were made by qualified professionals and licensed psychologists with relevant psychological testing training and experience.⁹ The respective test instruments were selected according to these same standards.

A number of limitations are evident throughout the 2001 and 2004 evaluation projects. Despite these limitations, the NWT Outcome Evaluation projects reveal an important story of the ongoing success and work done by AHS programs in the NWT.



9 American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association & National Council on Measurement in Education. (1999). *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Washington, DC: Author.

Evaluation Findings

Result 1 Success of Western Arctic Aboriginal Head Start Council (WAAHSC)

The National Aboriginal Head Start Council (NAHSC) was established to provide a partnership between AHS regional representatives and Health Canada. Their mandate has been to provide a voice for Aboriginal children, parents and families, share information about AHS programs, and to develop policy for AHS, training and evaluation.

Once the NWT AHS programs were underway in 1996-97, the AHS sites established a network of AHS projects in the Western Arctic similar to NAHSC. In 1998, the Western Arctic Aboriginal Head Start Council or WAAHSC was started. The voting membership of the Council was composed of the original NWT AHS projects: Paulatuk, Fort Providence, Hay River, Fort Smith, Fort McPherson and Yellowknife/Ndilo. Behchokö was added in 1999 and Inuvik in 2004.

Successes of WAAHSC:

- Established terms of reference for WAAHSC (1998).
- Liaison with federal government (1998 - ongoing).
- Monthly conference calls with NWT AHS (ongoing).
- Delegation of NAHSC member and liaison with national office (1998 - ongoing).
- Established and directed 2001 and 2004 outcome evaluation projects.

- Conducted regional training events (1998 - ongoing).
- NWTAHS website development and site information- see www.nwtheadstart.org
- Public relations and liaison with the territorial and local governments, public and non-profit groups.
- Supportive network formed between NWTAHS sites; also support for new AHS sites in 1999 and 2004.
- Exchange visits with NWTAHS sites to share knowledge, information and program ideas.



Result 2 Participatory Evaluation

The first evaluation of NWT AHS was completed in 1998. This was just one year after many of the programs first opened their doors. At the time the 1998 evaluation included Nunavut communities. It was up to each NWT AHS to provide a contracted writer with material for their AHS site report. These reports served the purpose of describing each AHS site, their program and accomplishments.

As well, the National AHS office started to conduct a process survey of AHS sites across Canada in 1998. These yearly surveys collected program and demographic information.

Early in 2000, the NWT AHS programs requested further evaluation expertise in early childhood development, so as to start an outcome evaluation of AHS children and graduates. They wanted to know how effective the programs were, where to improve, and to share these results with other interested groups in the NWT and across Canada.



Later in 2000, a participatory evaluation was designed with NWTAHS. This included 30 evaluation questions, selecting standardized tools, designing on-site training for AHS staff to collect child outcome data and integrating a consultative process to guide each step of the evaluation process.

Both the 2001 and 2004 Outcome Evaluations of NWTAHS were done as participatory evaluations, whereby much of the data was collected by AHS teachers. In recent years, participatory evaluation has been used in Aboriginal communities in consideration of issues of evaluation ownership, dissemination and community autonomy.

Highlights of the NWTAHS outcome evaluation design are:

- AHS staff and WAAHSC directed the evaluation process from start to finish.
- AHS staff and WAAHSC selected the child outcome tools with guidance from evaluation experts.
- AHS staff collected child outcome data and classroom quality measures, with on-site training assistance.
- The tools for the outcome evaluations were selected as a starting point for ongoing evaluation.
- The evaluation process was designed to be consistent with the demands for program monitoring and funding accountability.

Result 3 Classroom Quality

The NWT Aboriginal Head Start classroom quality results have improved from 2001 to 2004. The sites have consistently scored at the level of “good quality”, as measured on the ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale). The NWT AHS programs consistently score high in the classroom areas of variety and safety of play equipment, positive adult-child interactions, child-centered learning and cultural/diversity programming.

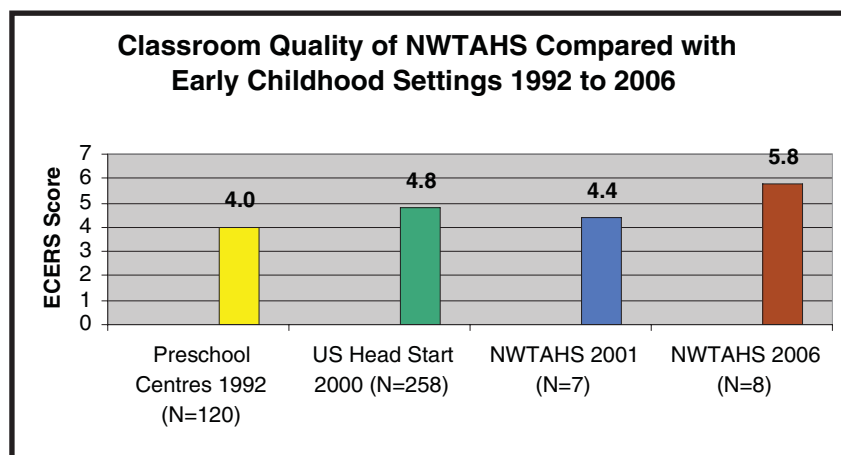


Table 1 The Classroom Quality Measure for NWT AHS in 2001 and 2004 was measured with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale or ECERS. It includes 37 sub-scales that assess space, furnishings, personal care routines, language and child centers, staff and child interactions, program structure and staff supervision. Items are rated on a 7-point scale.

Overall score of:

- 1- Inadequate quality
- 3- Minimal quality
- 5- Good quality
- 7-Excellent quality

Result 4 School Readiness

One of the main priorities of the Head Start movement has been school readiness. A delay in school readiness has the potential to influence a child's success in school, and often leads to a continual process of catch-up. Early childhood programs that address school readiness have proven especially useful for children at-risk of school failure¹⁰.

School readiness includes developing physical well-being, motor development, language skills, thinking and problem solving skills, social knowledge and competence and emotional and spiritual health. From the beginning, school readiness has been a major focus for NWT AHS. The NWT AHS prioritized school readiness in the 2001 and 2004 outcome evaluations, and key findings are listed below:

- At the end of the AHS year, Spring 2001 and Spring 2004, NWT AHS children have a variety of cognitive and social skills that signify a readiness to learn in kindergarten (See Table 2).
- AHS programs in the NWT provide programming for children in the 2001 and 2004 cohorts who function at a wide range of levels of school readiness; that is, 31% to 51% of AHS children remain delayed in terms of their school readiness skills, and also, 29% to 47% of AHS children in these cohorts have above average school readiness skills (See Table 2).

10 ACYF. (2001). Head Start FACES 1997: *Longitudinal findings from the FACES study: Head Start program performance measures. Third progress report*. Washington, DC: Author

- Many AHS children in the NWT were able to make progress, regardless of their starting point for the 2001 cohort and a selected sample from the 2004 cohort (See Table 3).
- NWSAHS children displayed a significant improvement in school readiness skills from the Fall to the Spring for 2001 & 2004 sub-groupings (See Table 3).

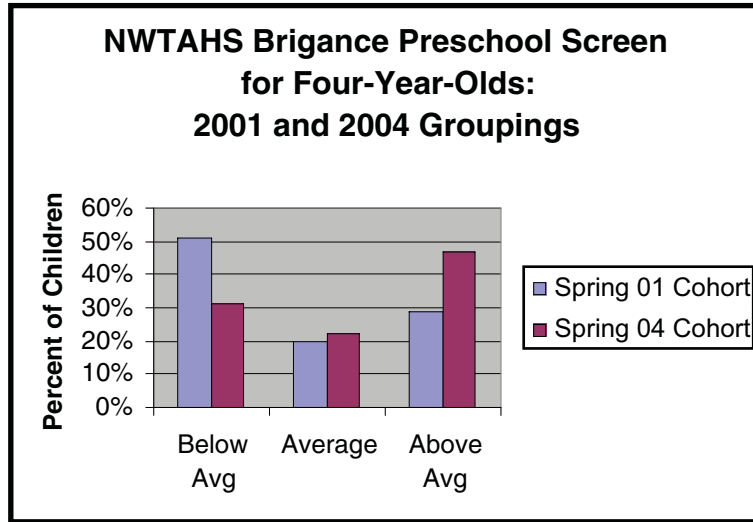


Table 2- NWSAHS Brigance Four-Year-Old Screen for Spring 2001 Cohort (N=84) and Spring 2004 Cohort (N=139).

The Brigance Preschool Screen was administered by AHS teachers and provides an overview of key areas such as language, motor, social-emotional, early reading and early math skills.

Categories of Scores:		2001 Cohort	2004 Cohort
Below 80	Below Average	51%	31%
80-90	Average	20%	22%
90 -100	Above Average	29%	47%

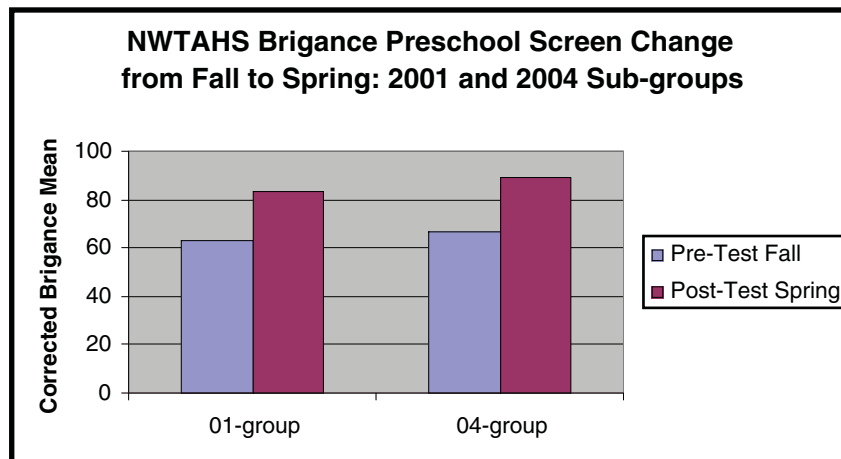


Table 3- NWTAHS Brigance Four-Year-Old Screen for 2001 sub-group (n=43) and 2004 sub-group (n=33). There was a significant difference between the Fall and Spring Brigance scores for both sub-groups. The sub-groups of children for 2001 & 2004 reflect a part of the cohort, as pre-test data was not available for the entire groups.

Variable	Fall Mean	SD	Spring Mean	SD	t-test	p-value
2001 (n=43)	63	20.1	83	9.2	7.5	.007
2004 (n=33)	67	21.9	89	10.0	7.7	.008

- In 2004, an additional school readiness measure was piloted. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test III or PPVT-III is a measure of children’s emerging literacy and receptive vocabulary. Results are consistent with the Brigance Screen, and identify the range of needs of AHS children in the NWT (See Tables 4 & 5).

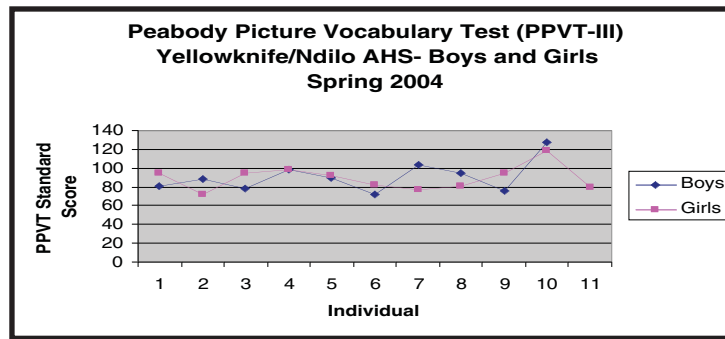


Table 4- PPVT-III for Yellowknife/Ndilo Spring 2004 sub-group (n=21). There was no significant difference between the Girls (M=89.5, SD=13.2) and Boys (M=90.9, SD=16.3) on the PPVT-III in the Spring of 2004.

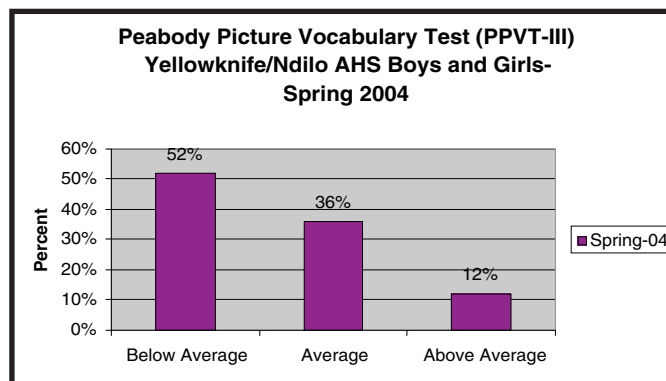


Table 5- PPVT-III for Yellowknife/Ndilo Spring 2004 sub-group (n=21), girls and boys. Findings highlight the wide range of receptive vocabulary levels for AHS children.

Result 5 Social Skills Development

Social development in children includes the ability to interact with adults, peers and community. It is widely believed that prosocial skills in the early years are the basis for good mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health. In addition, long term research studies have proven that acquiring positive social skills in the preschool years can largely determine academic success, social adjustment and good mental health¹¹. Children with fewer prosocial skills have later been found to have poor school outcomes, criminal behaviour and psychological problems.

A teacher rating scale, SSRS (Social Skills Rating Scale), has been used to monitor AHS children's prosocial skills including cooperation, assertion and self-control. One AHS site, Yellowknife/Ndilo, also asked parents to complete a parent SSRS. Below are 2001 & 2004 findings:

- In 2001, AHS children (four-year-olds) had prosocial skills in the average to low average range, as compared to North American children (See Table 6).
- In 2001, AHS boys had more social skills than girls; both improved from the Fall to the Spring, but the results were not statistically significant (See Table 6).
- In 2004, NWT AHS children displayed average social skills. AHS programs continue to make program changes to encourage prosocial skill development in NWT AHS children (See Table 7).

¹¹ Parker, J.G. & Asher, S.R. (1987). Peer relations and later personal adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin*, 102, 862-870

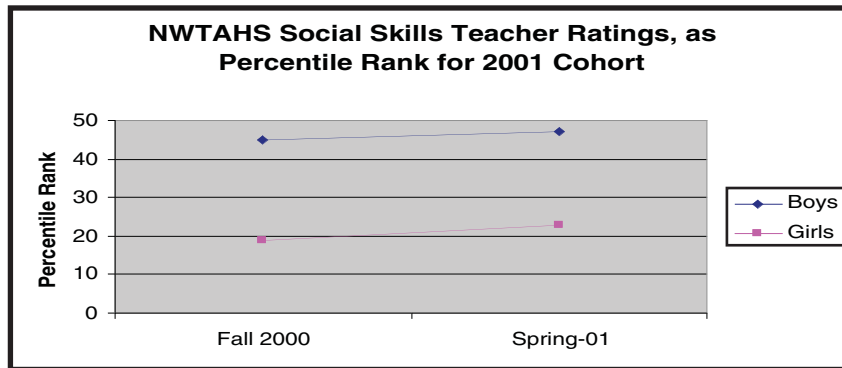


Table 6- NWT AHS boys (n=44) demonstrated social skills in the average range (45th to 47th percentile) as compared to a norm group from the fall/2000 to spring/2001; NWT AHS girls (n=40) demonstrated social skills in the low average range (19th to 23rd percentile) as compared to a norm group. There was *no significant change* in developing social skills from the fall to the spring.

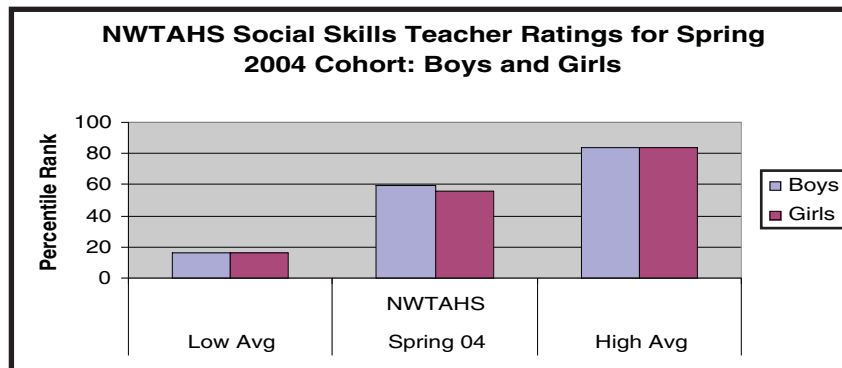


Table 7- NWT AHS boys (n=67) demonstrated social skills in the average range (60th percentile-M=59.7, SD=29.6) as compared to a norm group for Spring/2004; NWT AHS girls (n=82) demonstrated social skills in the average range (56th percentile-M=56.3, SD=30.2). Data from the Fall of the AHS year were not available for comparison.

Result 6 Follow-up of AHS Graduates

AHS, as one of its goals, was to provide at-risk children with early supports so they can meet their full potential. Since 1998, questions regarding the long-term success of AHS have been asked among WAAHSC members.

Questions regarding the impact of NWT AHS

Does AHS give young Aboriginal children in the NWT school readiness skills?

How well do children do in their elementary school years after having been in the AHS program?

Do school teachers notice a difference in the children as a result of AHS?

Do children with special needs fair better as the result of AHS?

Two preliminary follow-up studies have been conducted in one AHS community, Fort McPherson, regarding the impact of AHS on children's achievement and abilities. These studies were conducted in 2001 (n=31 - Kindergarten and Grade 1), and 2004 (n=50 - Grades 3, 4 and 5). Measures of school readiness, individual achievement in reading, spelling and math (WIAT-II-A), in addition to prosocial skill development (SSRS) were used in these two small studies.

The following findings were evident from the analysis of these results:

- AHS children in the 2001 follow-up study of Kindergarten children were significantly ahead of children who did not attend AHS (See Table 8).
- In Grade 1, the effects of attending the AHS program were similar to those seen in the Kindergarten group; Grade 1 students who attended AHS performed better than their non-AHS peers. However, the effect size was smaller in Grade 1 (See Table 8).

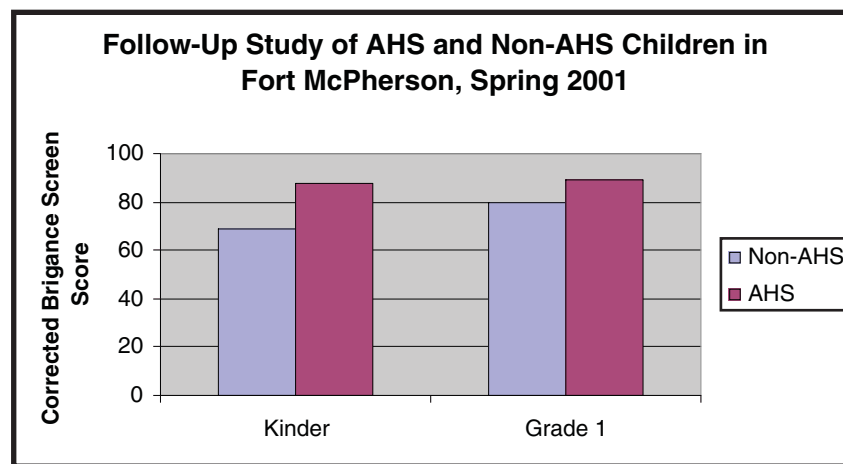


Table 8- Follow-up study of AHS and non-AHS students in Kindergarten and Grade 1 (n=31), Chief Julius School in Fort McPherson, NT; AHS graduates in Kindergarten scored higher on the respective Brigance Screen (M=88, SD=13.2) than their non-AHS classmates (M=69 SD=12.3) in the Spring of 2001.

Grade 1 AHS graduates scored higher on the respective Brigance Screen (M=89, SD=9.1) than their non-AHS classmates (M=80, SD=8.3) in the Spring of 2001.

- Fort McPherson AHS children in Grades 3, 4 & 5 had individual achievement gains greater than their classmates who did not attend AHS (See Table 9).
- Both AHS and non-AHS students in Grades 3 through 5 remain below norm-referenced levels for their age groups (See Table 9). A Standard Score of 90 to 100 is average.

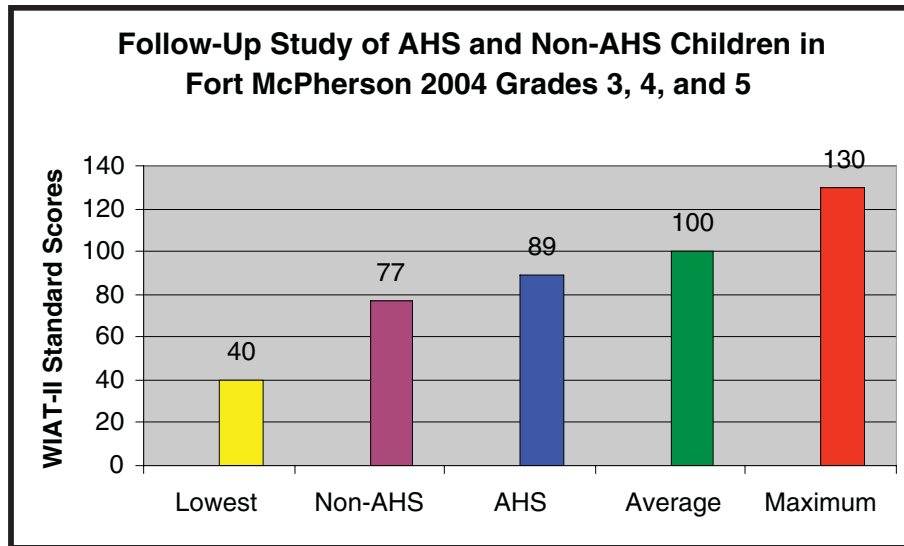


Table 9- WIAT-II (Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-II) results for Fort McPherson AHS and non-AHS children in Grades 3, 4 & 5. AHS graduates had higher scores than their non-AHS peers.

Variable	Non-AHS		AHS		t-test	p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
2004 (n=34)	77	13.5	89	12.8	2.64	.05

Result 7 Culture and Language

Each of the eight NWT AHS programs emphasize a community-based culture and language program in their AHS program. Children who attend AHS in the Northwest Territories engage on a daily basis in two languages, including English and the respective Aboriginal language of their community. The Aboriginal languages in NWT AHS programs include:

- Slavey, Gwich'in, Inuvialuktun, Tâîchô, Chipewyan, Cree and the Weledeh dialect of the Tâîchô language.

For many parents and leaders, the culture and language area of NWT AHS is the foundation of each AHS program, as it is the culture and language that gives each site its identity, and connection to community. Since 1997, the evaluation of culture and language programming has been done via parent and community surveys, program observation, classroom quality measures and staff input.



Result 8 Accountability and Sharing Successes

The NWTAHS programs have been successful in completing two phases of Outcome Evaluation in 2001 and 2004. Also, WAAHSC has shared these results with stakeholders in communities, regional, national and at the 2002 National Research Conference in Washington, DC.

“ I provided consultation to the Canadians about Head Start some years ago. How are they doing up there? Good to see you here in Washington...”

*(E. Zigler, Founding Researcher of Head Start-
Personal Communication, July-2002)*

In sharing the NWTAHS successes and challenges with others, there has been much discussion regarding its relevance to other jurisdictions, and to AHS as a whole, especially with respect to the follow-up studies. To date, there is limited evaluation data available regarding AHS in Canada, with regional evaluation projects providing some indications of the effectiveness of AHS.

There are challenges in conducting evaluation activities with Aboriginal communities. Some experts argue against the use of mainstream measures or experimental designs, while others suggest that Aboriginal children must be given the full benefits from evaluation activities. Furthermore, many psychological and educational research experts argue that to avoid outcome evaluation with culturally diverse groups or modify standardized child development instruments is to discriminate against these groups.

“Head Start makes him proud to be Aboriginal.”
(AHS parent, 2004)

The NWTAHS evaluation process included a consultation of the literature regarding challenges in conducting evaluation with culturally distinct groups. WAAHSC proceeded with their participatory evaluation plan based on the literature that supports research with minority groups.

The purpose of the NWT AHS Outcome Evaluations was to assist NWT sites in areas of program development and effectiveness and to develop evaluation capacity at the level of the AHS site. The NWT AHS evaluation activities, which required AHS sites in the NWT to invest much time, effort and dedication, has provided good accountability to stakeholders of its successes and challenges.

Ongoing study with NWT AHS, short and long term, is now possible given the capacity that has been built through the work of WAAHSC, AHS sites and by parents and communities who come to anticipate hearing about AHS in their communities. Sharing these results with others can only contribute to the knowledge of early childhood outcomes with Aboriginal children.

As NWT AHS enters its tenth year, longitudinal research and evaluation are now possible, given that projects are fully operational and many cohorts of AHS graduates are now entering their elementary and high school years.



Result 9 Remaining True to Community

One of the strongest features of NWTAHS is the importance of site-specific identity, focus and dedication to the promotion of local culture, language and traditions.

No two AHS sites in the NWT are identical; each site reflects its own identity, emphasis and individual character that respects the group of children attending that program.

It is a real strength to remain true to the needs and values of each NWTAHS community and culture/language group.

In addition, each AHS site in the NWT engages in program training, evaluation and monitoring and community linkages that benefit the program, children and families above that which is done for the WAAHSC evaluation projects.



Result 10 Continuous Improvement

The NWTAHS have through the 1998, 2001 and 2004 evaluation projects demonstrated commitment to making improvements to their programs.

In 1998, the first evaluation report documented program successes and challenges, especially with building problems, equipment and staff retention.

In 2000-2001, further commitment was evident from WAAHSC and their funding partners to document the “story of AHS in the NWT”. The commitment at the time was to provide data to answer questions regarding AHS child outcomes, social skills, parental involvement, culture and language programming, health issues and community involvement.

Evaluation interest was further sparked in 2002 with the ambition to put NWTAHS on the map of the Head Start movement in North America. The “Evaluation of AHS in Remote Communities: Findings from a Two-Year Outcome Study” was accepted for presentation at Head Start’s 7th National Research Conference in Washington, DC in June of 2004, where NWTAHS delegates presented their findings.

*“Watching him have a head start makes me proud.”
(AHS parent satisfaction survey, 2000)*

In 2003-04, NWTAHS committed to producing a second round of outcome measures on classroom quality, school readiness and site-by-site successes. Additional measures were added due to the increased capacity for data collection.

In 2004, evidence of improved classroom quality and consistent child outcome measures once again demonstrated the response of NWTAHS to outcome evaluation activities.

Today in 2006, there remains an interest to use evaluation to support program enhancements and accountability. Furthermore, the NWTAHS has the capacity to continue with long-term monitoring and continuous improvement to meet the changing needs of its AHS population in the NWT.



Summary of Evaluation Findings

Based on the 2001 and 2004 Outcome Evaluations, a number of findings are evident.

- **Does NWT AHS have quality early childhood programs?** According to the results of the ECERS for 2001 and 2004, all NWT AHS programs have quality programs in the good to excellent range. Classroom quality forms the basis of any early childhood program and provides for a safe and nurturing environment with well-developed learning centres, quality equipment and qualified staff. The classroom quality results are the strongest feature of NWT AHS in its first 10 years of operation.
- **Does NWT AHS enhance children's development and school readiness?** AHS works to narrow the gaps for disadvantaged children. The results from the NWT for 2001 and 2004 indicated a positive trend in the area of vocabulary acquisition and other indicators of school readiness. Many AHS children come to the program with deficits in language and social skills, and any and all gains made during the one-year program are an improvement. More study is needed to clarify the wide range of school readiness skills seen in NWT AHS children and comparisons with other children who do not attend AHS.
- **Does NWT AHS influence children's prosocial skill development?** AHS addresses the social-emotional growth of children throughout its program, and especially through traditional culture and language activities. Results for the 2001 and 2004 cohorts of NWT AHS children indicated average prosocial skills acquisition, with a slight difference between boys and girls. Further program work to strengthen social-emotional development is needed, as AHS children remain at-risk for poor school outcomes, criminal involvement and mental health problems, regardless of educational achievements.

- **Does NWT AHS make a difference once children reach school age?** The most pressing question for NWT AHS teachers, program coordinators and NWT communities has been to determine if AHS makes a difference. Parents, community leaders and school teachers can tell the difference between AHS and non-AHS children, from Kindergarten through the elementary grades. Data from two pilot studies in one NWT community, Fort McPherson, indicated AHS children do better on measures of grade level achievement and social skill development when compared to their non-AHS classmates.

Further study is needed with larger groups of children in NWT AHS communities to reveal the true picture of how children are doing years after AHS. It is encouraging to know that initial indicators are positive that NWT AHS is making a difference.

- **Evaluation capacity is growing** with the completion of the 2001 and 2004 Outcome Evaluation Projects. Both evaluation projects were built from the NWT AHS staff questions and interest regarding program successes, challenges and accountability.
- **Evaluation activities in the NWT are progressive** in building on previous sets of data. Also, early childhood assessment skills are increasing through NWT AHS staff development, and there is consistent interest in gaining information about program effectiveness from evaluation information.
- **NWT AHS outcome evaluations were developed from North American** best practices in early childhood research and research with culturally distinct groups. It is an unfortunate reality that a Canadian research base of early childhood and studies with Aboriginal children is lacking in depth and scientific sophistication. Despite subtle program differences, there is overlap of the U.S. Aboriginal Head Start program with AHS in terms of target population, involvement of communities and the integration of culture and language. Learning from U.S. Head Start Research and Evaluation has been a reality because of the more than 40 years of applied research and program expertise with Head Start.

The U.S. Head Start movement has contributed great financial resources to research, largely in response to funding accountability and to further the knowledge base of early childhood intervention. These early childhood investments in the U.S. through instrument and tool validation, research with minority populations, working with English as a second language and Indian Head Start, have provided a good basis from which AHS in Canada can learn from for future research on this side of the border.

- **Longitudinal Research** of AHS programs in Canada is needed. The NWT AHS programs are at the time of this publication in the early stages of planning their own longitudinal research of AHS graduates. This exciting research in several NWT communities can highlight the future needs of AHS programs, at least in the NWT, and can serve to assist others working with AHS across Canada.



Evaluation Recommendations

For NWT AHS:

- Complete longitudinal studies of NWT AHS children and their non-AHS peers in community schools; also, monitor the progress of children with special needs.
- Continue with classroom quality and child outcome measures to support NWT AHS program enhancements, staff development and quality programming.
- Continue to build evaluation and program development capacity. Nurture the research interests of Aboriginal people in NWT communities to further their education and training in this area.
- Engage program partners to conduct a comprehensive community study of AHS graduates and their families. This research needs to look at the influence of AHS on the family, mental and physical health, community economics and impact of AHS on culture and language for the community as a whole.

This long-term impact study would require a multi-year commitment from a number of funding partners to work with NWT AHS and communities.

For AHS in Canada:

- Encourage funding agencies across Canada, including government, non-profit and private sources, to support regional and local evaluation efforts.
- Share evaluation successes and challenges with others to further the research agenda with AHS in Canada. To share with others invites criticism, but makes for stronger research methods and outcomes.
- Commit significant evaluation funding to evidence-based evaluation that is meaningful to communities and consistent with established standards and practices of scientific research. AHS deserves to be funded in the long term, as a solid program in support of Aboriginal families and communities.

The Future of NWT AHS

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) was built on the strengths of Aboriginal people to secure a strong, prosperous and healthy future for the next generation. AHS in the NWT is a foundation to strengthen Aboriginal communities for future generations. NWT AHS gives families and children hope that their future can be prosperous and strong in culture, language, esteem and identity.

Congratulations NWT AHS on 10 years of success and for all that it has done for the children, families and communities AHS has touched! Good luck in the next 10 years, as AHS continues to grow and strengthen right across the NWT and Canada.

For more information and to obtain additional copies, please contact:

NWTAHS - Northwest Territories Aboriginal Head Start at

Internet:

<http://www.nwtheadstart.org> or contact the local AHS in your home community.

Hay River - Ph: 867-874-6548

Fort Providence - Ph: 867-699-4010

Yellowknife/Ndilo -Ph: 867-669-0975

Fort McPherson - Ph: 867-952-2025


Fort Smith - Ph: 867-872-5051

Paulatuk - Ph: 867-580-3923

Behchokö (Rae-Edzo) - Ph: 867-392-3036

Inuvik - Ph: 867-777-4251

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**NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
ABORIGINAL
HEAD START
PROGRAM**