

# AT YOUR SERVICE: NWT Literacy Council

*'Literacy involves everyone,' says executive director Kathryn Barry Paddock*

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July 9, 2019

For nearly three decades, the NWT Literacy Council has followed a simple yet powerful mantra: “Everyone has a right to literacy.”

It’s a vision that has helped the non-profit organization support and strengthen literacy in the NWT by bringing families, communities, cultures and languages together through an array of specialized programs.

“Literacy involves everyone – individuals, families, communities, business, labour, government,” said executive director Kathryn Barry Paddock. “Literacy and essential skills are the foundation of life-long learning,” added Barry Paddock, who has headed the council since 2015.

To lay the groundwork for that foundation, the NWT Literacy Council focuses on a handful of programming areas: Indigenous language and literacy, youth and adult literacy and family and community literacy – an area Barry Paddock calls the council’s “flagship.”

Family literacy relates to the many ways families learn together, whether through conversing, cooking, singing, reading or being out on the land. Running for over 20 years, the program – funded by the Department of Education, Culture and Employment – offers training and workshops to librarians, early childhood workers, recreational leaders, parents, caregivers and children from communities across the territory, who then “choose the programs that work best for them and their families in their communities,” said Barry Paddock.

Within the council’s youth literacy program, training is also offered to community-based organizations so educators can provide programs – from financial and digital literacy to health and workplace literacy – in their own communities.

“Literacy nights” see young people take the reins themselves, organizing feasts, sporting events and tea gatherings for elders, with the goal of getting young people back onto a path of learning.

“They’re gaining lots of skills by carrying out those activities,” said Barry Paddock. It’s not happening in a typical classroom setting – and that’s the point.

Barry Paddock said an enduring barrier to literacy in the North is rooted in the long and painful history of the residential school system. That's why the council aims to offer informal and non-judgmental programming to youth and adults alike, to "break down some of those systemic barriers," said Barry Paddock.

Working with the Indigenous Secretariat and language coordinators in various communities as part of Indigenous literacy programming, Barry Paddock said "we've heard loud and clear," that community leaders and students don't just want resources translated into Indigenous languages.

"They want an opportunity to come together and share different things going on in the community," she said.

The council usually hosts an Indigenous language gathering annually, inviting elders and youth from various regions in the territory.

Through Immigrants, Refugees and Citizenships Canada (IRCC), the council also runs a program aimed at connecting new Canadians to their new communities through informal literacy activities and classes – from a cooking class at the Calvary Church and a women's swim night to trips to the on-the-land Indigenous healing camp in Yellowknife.

And, of course, there's the Bison Bus, one of the driving forces behind the council's family and community literacy program.



*Christine Barker of the NWT Literacy Council talking to Bison Bus visitors in Fort Resolution about NWTLC resources. Photo courtesy of Katie Johnson.*

Purchased with funds raised solely from community donations, the one-time diamond mine shuttle bus now travels from community to community with a trove of donated books free for the taking.

The Bison Bus just returned from a stop in Fort Resolution and another in Hay River during the town's Hay Days celebration. The book-mobile will stop for a picnic at Fred Henne Park on July 21, before heading out to Fort Smith and Enterprise on Aug. 7.

When literacy in the North is nurtured, its residents gain "a lot," said Barry Paddock. "We gain citizens who are confident in their abilities, citizens who then have the ability to hopefully come up out of poverty ... to then have the skills to get a better job and to support their families," she said.

"We know it's linked to how people feel."