

# Still on Track

## Building Community Capacity for Family Literacy



### Summary of Evaluation Report March 2009



# *Still on Track: Summary*



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## Acknowledgements

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The NWT Literacy Council is a not-for-profit organization that supports literacy development in all the official languages of the NWT. Please contact the NWT Literacy Council for more information on literacy, or for copies of this evaluation.

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## **The NWT Literacy Council and family literacy**

The NWT Literacy Council is a territorial, non-government organization with a mandate to promote and support literacy in 11 NWT official languages. The Council does this through training, research, resource development, information sharing, and public awareness.

Family literacy is one of the Council's main types of work. Family literacy programs focus on children 0 to 6 years old and their families. During the 1990s the National Literacy Secretariat supported and funded the Council's family literacy work.

Between 2001 and 2008 the GNWT Department of Education, Culture, and Employment (ECE) provided family literacy funding through the *Early Childhood Development Framework for Action*. ECE and the Literacy Council had three funding agreements: 2001 to 2004, 2004/05, and 2005 to 2008.

### **What is family literacy?**

Family literacy is learning that takes place within the family. It recognizes that parents are a young child's first teachers. Family members build positive relationships as children learn values, culture, language, and other daily living skills through various social interactions.

- ✓ Tell stories and listen to stories.
- ✓ Talk about the family.
- ✓ Read books.
- ✓ Buy, harvest, and prepare food.
- ✓ Gather plants from the land; plant and harvest a garden.
- ✓ Sing and say rhymes.



- ✓ Read labels in the grocery store.
- ✓ Make things with cloth, paper, wood, stone, hide, or other materials.
- ✓ Do homework together.

Research clearly shows that early learning such as family literacy can have lasting positive effects. Quality programs enhance parenting skills and people are more likely to develop healthy lifestyles and contribute to healthy families and communities.

### **Objectives of the Family Literacy Project**

From 2004 to 2008 the objectives of the Family Literacy Project were:

- 1) To promote family literacy in all NWT official languages.
- 2) To produce and distribute practical and culturally relevant family literacy resources.
- 3) To develop and deliver family literacy provider training.
- 4) To distribute funding and provide other supports to community-based family literacy projects.



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## **Objective 1: Promotion**

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Promotional activities raise the profile of family literacy among leaders, families, and communities. Promotional activities increase awareness that literacy plays a fundamental role in individual and collective successes.

From 2004 to 2008 the Family Literacy Project carried out these activities to promote family literacy:

- ✓ Translated family literacy public service announcements (PSAs) from English to the other 10 official languages, and regularly aired the PSAs on CBC North television.
- ✓ Developed and distributed:
  - Five *Family Literacy Times* newsletters.
  - *Family Literacy in the North* booklet.
  - Two family literacy posters.
- ✓ Organized and participated each year in National Family Literacy Day.

Promoting literacy, including family literacy, is an element of most Literacy Council activities such as:

- ✓ Visits with authors like Richard Van Camp, special activities, puppet shows, and school visits.
- ✓ The Peter Gzowski Invitational (PGI) Golf Tournament.
- ✓ One-time activities such as a literacy calendar or a writing workshop.
- ✓ Annual celebrations such as NWT Literacy Week and Aboriginal Languages Month.
- ✓ Family literacy training events and resources.

## **What people said during the evaluation**

Family literacy providers agree that there can never be enough family literacy promotion. They see a need for a more complete and lasting campaign that includes Aboriginal languages. They encourage the Council to be more physically present in communities and regions.

“(Parents) don’t understand the importance of learning new things and working with their children.”

“... literacy is developed in the home before school starts.”

Literacy providers recognize that promotion is an ongoing need, and must be assertive and help people understand that:

- ✓ Literacy is part of home and community activities. It doesn’t just happen at school or on its own.
- ✓ Literacy is more than reading and writing and applies to Aboriginal languages, not just English and French.
- ✓ Family literacy contributes to healthy individuals, families, and communities. Parents have an important role as their child’s first teachers.
- ✓ Literacy is connected with all parts of life in a community. We need to work together to support and develop literacy.

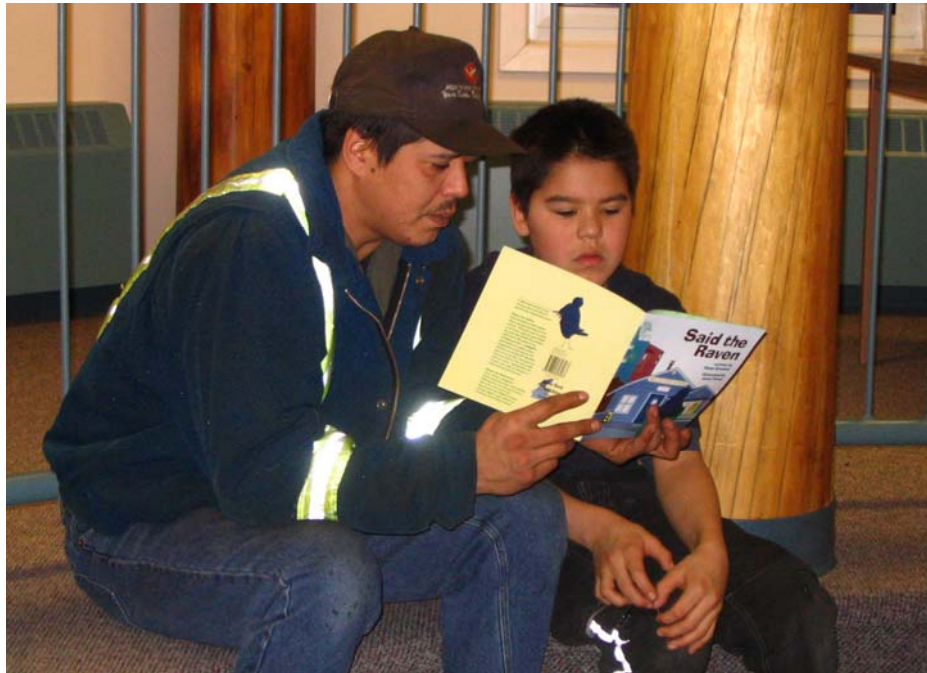
“People get hung up on the program and don’t connect the dots or link programs so that more can be done in communities.”

Effective promotion can:

- ✓ Encourage people to support and participate in programs.
- ✓ Help efforts to recruit and retain quality staff and volunteers.
- ✓ Engage a wider range of community programs and groups in family literacy projects.

"Parenting and child development is crucial to healthy families. If we can support families in solving issues in a healthy way we will have stronger families and eventually less social issues in the community."

"Parents told us that this was an opportunity for their family and especially community members to get together and visit and teach their children the language. We think this project is really worth it."



### **Recommendations related to Promotion**

- ✓ Develop, implement, and sustain an assertive campaign to promote family literacy.
- ✓ Increase the Council's profile and presence in all NWT communities and regions.
- ✓ Actively support community-based family literacy projects to work with partners and to promote family literacy at the community level.





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## **Objective 2: Resources**

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Good resources are the essential tools that literacy providers need and use, to run successful family literacy projects.

From 2004 to 2008 the Family Literacy Project carried out these activities to produce and distribute practical, culturally relevant family literacy resources:

- ✓ Developed and revised *Books in the Home* packages.
- ✓ Distributed several 'How-to' kits such as *More literacy Games*, *Family Literacy Fair*, and *Storysacks*.
- ✓ Produced and distributed family learning kits – backpacks with a variety of books, tapes, parent information, parent-child activities, and writing materials.
- ✓ Developed northern materials for *Families First* and *1-2-3 Rhyme with Me* programs.
- ✓ Offered resources in hard copy, on CDs, and on the website.
- ✓ Distributed resources at training institutes, workshops, mentoring activities, and special literacy events.
- ✓ Put information about resources in Council newsletters: *Literacy Matters*, *Family Literacy Times*, and E-news.
- ✓ Developed Aboriginal language resources:
  - *Building Aboriginal Literacy: Share your Language, Share your Culture Literacy Activity Cards*.
  - *Building Aboriginal Language Skills through Family Literacy* – a resource guide to include language and culture in literacy programs.
  - *The Annotated Bibliography of Aboriginal Books* Volumes 1 and 2 - for preschool to adult readers.

- ✓ Carried out research:
  - How to adapt for the north the HIPPY program - Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters.
  - A baby tumbling and literacy program.
  - The four-component family literacy model – an integrated approach to adult education, early childhood education, parent-child interaction time, and parenting education and support.
- ✓ Carried out research into home support and family tutoring programs and produced the *Family Tutoring Resource Manual*.
- ✓ Shared information about resources with partners such as GNWT early childhood coordinators.
- ✓ Developed and distributed resources to support the use of the Nipissing District Developmental Screening Tool, *Supporting Literacy Development at Different Ages and Stages* – to help people early on identify possible developmental delays.
- ✓ Developed and distributed resources: *Brain Basics – Understanding Brain Development and Emergent Literacy*, and *Planning for Family Literacy Activities*.



## **What people said during the evaluation**

Literacy providers, funders, and educators within and outside the NWT know and respect the family literacy resources. Providers say the resources deal with a range of topics, integrate northern cultures well, and offer many ways to support family literacy development. They are easy to understand and use, innovative, thoughtful, eye-catching, appropriate, and useful.

"The annotated bibliography is a very good source of northern books."

The most popular resources are the well-established, ready-to-use ones. They particularly appeal to providers who lack time or skills to develop their own ideas and activities.

"Everything is there so they are ready to go. The materials are laid out well, easy to use, and the format is excellent."

"They (providers) would be happy to have one new Books in the Home kit and How-to kit every month."

Providers suggest that the Literacy Council could improve the less used resources so they are more user-friendly and appropriate for literacy staff, volunteers, and parents. Providers also see opportunities to improve the more popular resources, so they more easily adapt to local needs, dynamics, and limitations.



Family literacy providers use Aboriginal language resources less than other resources. They suggest several reasons for this including:

- ✓ Staff or volunteers don't know about the resources, or lack the confidence or skills to use them.
- ✓ Resources aren't suited to local circumstances, practices, and needs.

"There were a lot of students that asked questions and wanted to know how it was long ago using tradition and knowing our culture."

Providers see the need for resources that:

- ✓ Integrate Aboriginal language and culture within existing family literacy resources.
- ✓ Engage families in cultural literacy activities.
- ✓ Offer a multi-cultural perspective and place Aboriginal people within this context, and strengthen the role and profile of Aboriginal languages, oral traditions, and cultural practices.

Family literacy happens in the context of rapidly changing social and economic conditions in northern families and communities. Providers offer several suggestions for new resources to keep pace with changing needs – resources that:

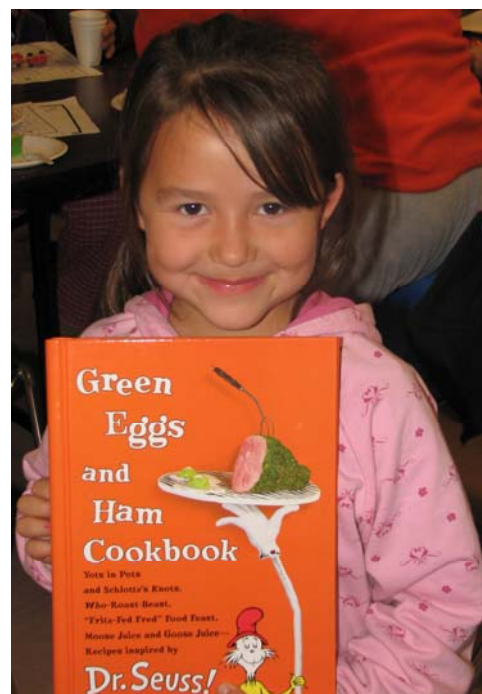
- ✓ Recognize mentorship and teaching roles, and help build bridges among family members.
- ✓ Engage men in family literacy.
- ✓ Help build relationships among families from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

- ✓ Apply non-print media such as videos and CDs, to support oral traditions and experiential learning, and parents and staff who lack confidence.
- ✓ Have catchy innovative add-ons to help families make the 'literacy connection'.
- ✓ Compile best ideas and practices from across the NWT.
- ✓ Use local readers or narrators to read books.
- ✓ Appeal to young parents and accommodate diverse skills and family circumstances.
- ✓ Serve school-age children within the family environment.
- ✓ Engage a broad range of community partners: wellness, social service, justice, employment, income support, housing, etc.

"It is no one's job, not even teachers', to work with families of school aged children."

"Some people speak their language so well that you could listen to them all day."

Many literacy workers agree that early literacy must be part of all early childhood services and to achieve that, it must be part of early childhood education training and certification.



### **Recommendations related to Resources**

- ✓ Continue to expand and revise popular resources. Make sure they support local inputs and illustrate literacy's holistic nature.
- ✓ Increase awareness of less popular resources. Review and revise them as needed. Make sure they meet changing family and community needs.
- ✓ Develop and promote Aboriginal language resources through strong partnerships between the Literacy Council and local or regional Aboriginal groups and individuals. Integrate Aboriginal language and culture into existing family literacy resources.
- ✓ Develop a plan to build and sustain community capacity to serve the literacy needs of school-age children within their family.
- ✓ Work with partners to include family literacy as part of early childhood education training and certification.



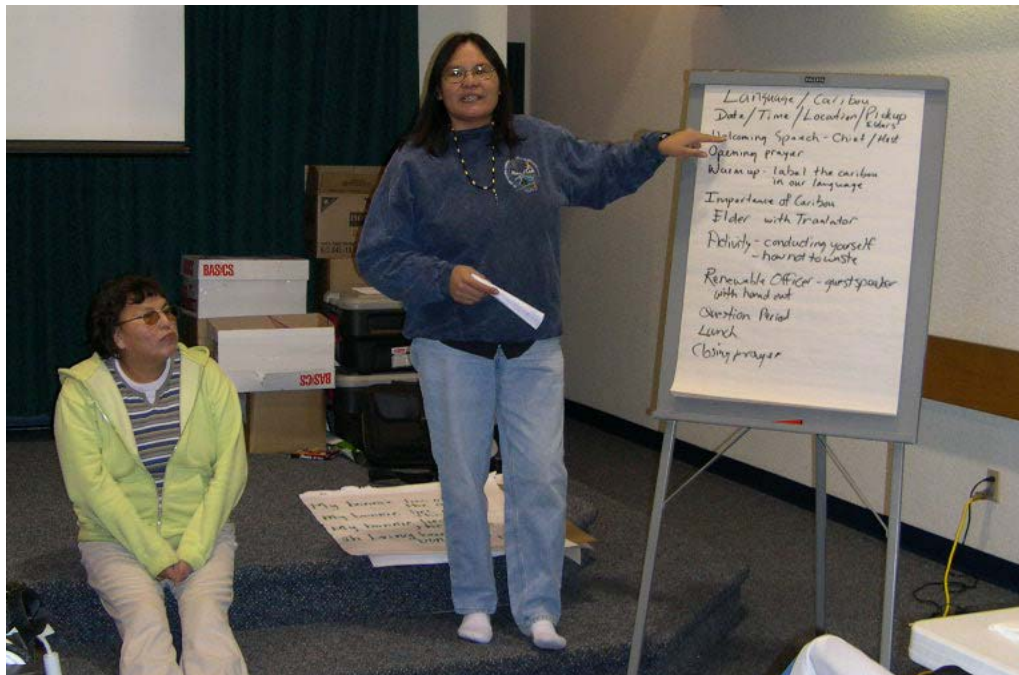
## Objective 3: Literacy Provider Training

Literacy provider training offers participants opportunities to:

- ✓ Learn about family literacy research, learning models, and approaches.
- ✓ Develop and practice early literacy and facilitation skills.
- ✓ Learn skills to develop and implement community-based family literacy programs.

From 2004 to 2008 the Family Literacy Project carried out these activities to develop, deliver, and evaluate provider training:

- ✓ Week long family literacy training institutes: basic and advanced.
- ✓ One- to three-day community / regional workshops on a specific topic.
- ✓ One-on-one mentoring with individuals or organizations.



## **What people said during the evaluation**

Training activities are popular, appealing, and well attended, with participants from all NWT communities. Training activities motivate and stimulate literacy providers.

“The training is really good and expands understanding of the role of programming and teaching – its not just about giving out books or reading books.”

Training is one of three main reasons that providers keep working with family literacy activities, along with ‘the kids’ and ‘positive feedback from parents’. Training gives providers a chance to network and learn from each other. Providers noted that training helps integrate family literacy into various community-based programs such as: day care and child development, Aboriginal Headstart, family support, adult learning, and women’s programs.

Training has created a core group of family literacy providers - all women and mostly middle age. Not all communities have a skilled provider. Turnover is high among new family literacy workers. Several individuals who participated in training haven’t run a community-based family literacy program. The main reasons were:

- ✓ Job change.
- ✓ Other priorities more important.
- ✓ Lack of community support or interest in participating.
- ✓ A view that literacy is the school’s job.

Many providers advocate regional training activities – training in smaller communities that involved other regional communities.

They recognize certain potential advantages to regional training:

- ✓ Stronger connections among early childhood and literacy workers.
- ✓ Local or regional mentors.
- ✓ Lower costs.
- ✓ A broader range of participants and more of them.
- ✓ Increased public awareness of literacy and the NWT Literacy Council.
- ✓ Potential for the Literacy Council to partner with Aboriginal governments.

Literacy providers see a need to extend family literacy beyond the early childhood focus. They advocate partnerships and literacy training with an array of government and non-government groups, to share information, find common ground, and engage more people in family literacy activities.

"... (we need) to grow programs and evolve beyond early childhood."

Providers noted other important training needs:

- ✓ Develop new workshop content to:
  - Deal with changing social and economic conditions.
  - Consider whole family literacy: preschool and school age children, adults, and elders.
  - Develop a broader understanding of literacy.
  - Consider different learning styles, languages, and cultures.



- Encourage use of newer and less popular resources.
  - Support use of technology to access resources, mentors, and other benefits.
  - Help providers better evaluate literacy projects.
- ✓ Repeat training on two or three year cycles to accommodate staff turnover and give providers a chance to refresh their skills.

"Sometimes people give out too many books so there is a need to refresh training on *Books in the Home*."

### **Training institutes**

Providers recognize the need to attend training institutes, to keep learning and growing. Many providers have attended more than three institutes. Each institute has a mix of topics and materials to meet varied participant needs, and usually requires several facilitators to provide the right variety and depth of training. The Literacy Council invests a lot of human and financial resources to develop and deliver training institutes

"The training is appropriate and the methods are very good for shy people, which many of the new workers are."

"Participants formed friendships and supported each other ... Participants also had opportunities to resolve some issues in their lives through the discussions during the sessions."

## **Workshops**

Limited financial and human resources caused the Literacy Council to offer fewer workshops from 2004 to 2008 than from 2001 to 2004. Providers say they need regular workshops to sustain benefits of increasing awareness of family literacy, exploring ways to support providers and family literacy projects, and helping front-line workers connect and build relationships.

## **Mentoring**

Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship between Literacy Council staff and a literacy provider. Staff and provider get together by phone and email, and sometimes in person in the provider's community. Literacy providers see an ongoing need for mentoring support, particularly as follow-up to training institutes and workshops. Experienced community-based literacy providers may be another good source of skilled mentors.





## **Recommendations related to Literacy Provider Training**

- ✓ Continue to offer institutes, workshops, and one-to-one mentoring.
- ✓ Develop and promote a regular schedule of community and regional training.
- ✓ Take steps to engage more diverse groups of front-line workers in community and regional training institutes and workshops.
- ✓ Emphasize more workshop follow-up. Support participants that have problems launching a community-based project or coping with changing family and community dynamics.



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## Objective 4: Community-based Projects

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Forty percent (40%) of the *Framework for Action* funding supported community-based family literacy projects. NWT community groups applied to the Literacy Council for funding.

From 2004 to 2008 the NWT Literacy Council carried out these activities to distribute funding and provide other supports to community-based family literacy projects:

- ✓ Developed and distributed applications and reporting guidelines for family literacy funding.
- ✓ Reviewed applications and provided a maximum of \$3000 per community for family literacy projects.
- ✓ Provided updated project reporting forms.
- ✓ Monitored and evaluated project effectiveness.
- ✓ Supported projects through sharing information, community visits, and contact via phone, fax, email, and the website.



## **What people said during the evaluation**

Participation is strong. Each year since 2001 the number of communities with family literacy projects ranged from as many as 28 to as few as 14. From 2004 to 2008 up to 823 adults and 1391 children took part in family literacy projects each year.

"Literacy Council funding is small but it is consistent."

A wide variety of groups apply for funding. With the exception of two or three first time applicants, groups that apply for funding tend to be the same each year. Projects may be a one-time event, a small number of special events, or ongoing, regular activities. Projects may stand alone or be blended with or added to other programs.

"Children were excited about books, reading, and activities."

"(Family literacy funding) leads people to other projects and to work in partnership with others to integrate or combine projects."

Projects tend to offer similar activities year after year and can vary widely among communities. Each project depends on the skills, knowledge, and confidence of literacy providers, the available financial resources, and the community's support and participation.

"Our program was both fun and educational. The moms expressed an interest in attending similar programs in the future. Children and parents were offered an opportunity to learn new skills and interact with each other."

Four main factors affect project success and satisfaction:

- ✓ Engaging activities based on community needs.
- ✓ Enough trained staff and volunteers.
- ✓ Home and community participation.
- ✓ Enough funding.

"Definitely worthwhile because children and their parents worked on various literacy activities ... and felt positive about their achievements."

"Because we see the participants come each time, we have literacy for children and families."

Family Literacy Project activity reports show increased use of Aboriginal languages between 2004 and 2008. Currently about one third of all Projects use an Aboriginal language. This increase may reflect:

- ✓ Providers have more confidence.
- ✓ Literacy Council has some resources and other supports.
- ✓ Local concerns about language health and a need to more aggressively promote its use.

"... The children and parents learnt songs and rhymes, interacted together through songs, traditional games, hands on activities, and very healthy snacks. I believe the children picked up more language."

"...we know both languages were taught and the families had enough time to learn some language ..."

"More books are getting into the homes. More parents are showing interest. Parents are learning about the importance of reading to their children."

In recent years the number of applications and funded projects declined. Providers suggest some reasons for this:

- ✓ Competing community priorities, and lack of volunteers and community support.
- ✓ High staff turnover in all family and early childhood programs.
- ✓ The opinion that \$3000 isn't enough funding for a project given the high cost of freight, books, materials, and labour.
- ✓ Reduced capacity of non-government partners to take on projects because of government funding cuts.
- ✓ The perception that other groups are doing literacy projects and the Literacy Council won't consider new applicants.
- ✓ The perception that federal government cuts to literacy means less funding for family literacy projects.
- ✓ Lack of awareness and visibility. Lack of capacity to promote the funding program, the Literacy Council, and literacy in general.

Literacy providers suggest several changes to make community-based projects more successful and sustainable:

- ✓ Provide more money for each project.
- ✓ Distribute a list of potential funding sources and partners.
- ✓ Emphasize more project planning and evaluation, with resources and training.
- ✓ Focus on projects that are sensitive to changing community and family circumstances.
- ✓ Integrate family literacy more with other regular and popular activities.

"Absolutely awe-inspiring to watch the change in our kids when they have a book in their hands.

Our children are learning and exploring so much from books and related activities."

"...(Family literacy) involves the whole family in the development of younger children.

It gets the community involved in a positive and constructive manner."





## **Recommendations related to Community Projects**

- ✓ Seek more funding to increase supports to community projects.
- ✓ Continue funding community-based literacy projects.
- ✓ Increase the maximum amount to at least \$5000 per project.
- ✓ Actively promote community project funding in all communities.
- ✓ Identify ways to help projects cope with increasing costs.



## Conclusions

Literacy is an ongoing, life-long investment. The independent evaluation clearly shows that the NWT Literacy Council achieved the Family Literacy Project's objectives and goal: to help build and sustain community capacity for family literacy work.

Literacy providers and stakeholders agree that Family Literacy Project activities need to continue. The evaluation shows that the NWT Literacy Council needs more resources, ongoing work, and more intense effort in some areas to ensure continued success. Many people believe that the Family Literacy Project is one of the most cost effective programs that government funds today.

"(The Council) has raised the bar with its innovative family literacy work and now it has to maintain a high level of excellence."





## **Summary of Recommendations: The next phase of the Family Literacy Project**

### **Promotion**

The NWT Literacy Council should work with its partners, including family literacy practitioners, to seek more resources to:

- ✓ Develop, implement, and sustain an assertive campaign to promote family literacy.
- ✓ Increase the NWT Literacy Council's profile and presence in all NWT communities and regions.
- ✓ Support community-based projects to promote family literacy at the community level and to work more closely with various community groups.

### **Family Literacy Resources**

The NWT Literacy Council should work with its partners, including family literacy practitioners, to seek more funding to:

- ✓ Continue to expand and revise well-established resources,
- ✓ Improve the use of less-known resources to benefit from the untapped potential of these materials and to help meet changing family and community needs.
- ✓ Build effective relationships with Aboriginal groups and individuals who can work with the Literacy Council to develop and promote the use of culturally appropriate Aboriginal language resources.
- ✓ Develop a plan to build and sustain community capacity to serve the literacy needs of school-aged children and their families.
- ✓ Work with Education, Culture and Employment and Aurora College to integrate early literacy into Aurora College's Early Childhood Education certificate program curriculum.

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## **Literacy Provider Training**

The NWT Literacy Council should continue to offer three training approaches: institutes, workshops, and mentoring; and:

- ✓ Develop and promote a regular schedule of community and regional training.
- ✓ Take steps to engage more diverse groups of front-line workers in community and regional training workshops and family literacy training institutes.
- ✓ Provide more follow up for participants that need help to launch a community-based family literacy project or cope with changing family and community dynamics.

## **Community-based projects**

The NWT Literacy Council should continue funding community-based projects and:

- ✓ Seek more funding to increase supports to community-based family literacy work.
- ✓ Increase maximum funding to at least \$5000 for each community-based project, and encourage applications and partnerships.
- ✓ Actively promote project funding in all NWT communities.
- ✓ Identify practical ways to help community-based projects cope with increasing costs.