

Childcare centre opens to serve the needs of city's growing Inuit community ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A new, \$1-million childcare centre, opened on the site of the former Rideau High School, will cater to the needs of Ottawa's growing Inuit community.

The Pirurviapik Childcare Centre will play host to 49 Inuit children between the ages of six months and six years.

Its goal is to provide high-quality, culturally-rich programming to Inuit infants, toddlers and preschoolers so as to equip them with the skills and confidence to succeed in school.

The centre will focus on connecting Inuit student to their language, culture and community. Students will be taught the sounds and words of Inuktitut, one of Nunavut's four official languages, in an environment that also embraces French and English.

Children will be expected to have about 200 words of Inuktitut by the time they reach the age of two.

"Language is tied to culture, so it's extremely important to us that they're hearing the sounds of their mother tongue," said Heather Ochalski, director of the early years program at the Inuuqatigiit Centre for Inuit Children, Youth and Families, which will operate the childcare centre.

Children will do a series of activities tied to their culture — building Styrofoam igloos, making snow goggles, sewing mittens, cutting playdough with ulus, eating traditional food — that will expose them to the associated Inuktitut language.

Cultural educators, Ochalski said, will also sing aqausiqs to the centre's youngest children: songs about each child's personal story and kinships. "It's really singing to the child about the child, and the life story of the person they're named after," Ochalski explained.

Literacy skills are transferrable, Ochalski said, so a student able to speak, read and write in Inuktitut will be able to use those same skills to learn English or French.

Studies have shown that early literacy skills are a critical component of future school success: Students who can read proficiently by the end of Grade 3 have a much higher chance of graduating from high school than those who struggle to read at the same age.

There's also research that suggests Indigenous students who study in their first language or have bilingual instruction have more success in school.

Kathleen Jadan, early years manager at the Pirurviapik centre, called it "a unique and exciting program." "This is their first stop on a long academic journey so we want it to be positive and enriching," she said. "We want to help them cope with the demands of school, and we want them to love it."

One section of Rideau High School was renovated over three years to accommodate the Pirurviapik Childcare Centre. Ottawa's CSV Architects designed the space to highlight Inuit art and drew inspiration from the northern lights in choosing the colour palette.

A full-sized polar bear hide decorates one of the walls.

The City of Ottawa, the Ontario government and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board all contributed to the \$1-million project.

The Pirurviapik centre — the Inuktitut word means "a place to grow" — will employ six staff members, including four Inuit early child educators.

Ottawa is now home to about 6,000 Inuit residents, which means the city has the largest Inuit population outside of the Arctic. For decades, Inuit families have migrated to Ottawa for health care, education and jobs.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in its calls to action, said Indigenous children urgently need culturally relevant early child education and childcare programs.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony and open house will be held at the Pirurviapik centre, located at 815 St. Laurent Blvd., on Sept. 17 between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: Aboriginal (indigenous) ^[4]

child care ^[5]

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