

Inuit kindergarten keeps kids connected ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Jane Kigutaq, a cultural teacher at the first Inuit kindergarten in Ottawa, shows a picture of a beaver to a class of four-and five-year-olds.

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When Kigutaq points to a window and says "What side is this?" everybody knows the right answer.

"North!"

The Canadian North, mostly Nunavut, is where the 15 Inuit children or their families come from. Living in Ottawa (called simply "the south" by the parents) they are learning their language and culture in a classroom in the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre on Mc-Arthur Road.

"Not only are they learning their ABCs, they're learning about polar bears and the northern lights," says Karen Baker-Anderson, executive director of the centre.

The kindergarten is the first full-day junior and senior Inuit kindergarten in Ontario. It opened last October and was organized by the centre, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, and nearby Robert E. Wilson Public School.

The children are bused from across the city.

"This wonderful partnership, which blends the best parts of Inuit culture and language with all of the elements of full-day kindergarten, serves as an outstanding example for other communities partnering to serve First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children and their families," said Jim Grieve, assistant deputy minister for the Early Learning Division in the Ontario Ministry of Education.

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Ottawa is home to the largest Inuit population outside of the north with the number estimated to be 1,800 (the whole population of Nunavut is about 30,000). They come for work, school and medical treatment.

"The best way to continue to have a strong resilient community is by having strong resilient children who know their culture," says Baker-Anderson. Feeling connected to a community helps children's mental health and success in life, she says. "You can imagine, moving from the north, you're isolated from your family, what you know, the way that you've lived your life. When you come here and hear your language and eat traditional food you feel a sense of belonging."

Kigutaq, the cultural teacher, is paid by the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre, which receives funding from various sources including the federal, provincial and city governments. The teacher is paid by the school board. About 260 primary-school teachers applied for the position.

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It took just six months to organize. "I think we would all agree in Canada that we want to support our native and indigenous people in terms of maintaining their culture," says Barrie Hammond, the board's director of education.

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- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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