

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Fall 2013



Jody Kootenay, director of education, at Alexander First Nation (left) checks in with kindergarten teacher Sandra Auigbelle and elder Isabel Arcand at the Kipohtakaw Education Centre. Alexander is one of four First Nations participating in the First Nation Child Development Project. See story on page 2.

Updated EDI results to be released in spring 2014

Updated Early Development Instrument (EDI) results will be released in the spring of 2014.

The data will be shared with coalitions during the second provincial gathering, which will be held on April 28 and 29 at the University of Alberta Conference Centre.

The ECMap data team is finalizing its analysis of the EDI data collected in the spring of 2013. The 2013 results will be merged with EDI data collected between 2009 and 2012 to create a baseline for the EDI in Alberta.

The baseline will incorporate EDI results for more 80,000 kindergarten-aged children in the province. Updated EDI results will then be prepared for communities and subcommunities, and shared with coalitions at the spring gathering.

The two-day gathering is a follow-up to the highly successful first meeting of coalitions held in November 2012. Coalitions will have an opportunity to discuss:

- the new EDI merger results,
- their work with communities,
- plans and options for sustainability, and
- next steps in building an organizational network.

Community Information Packages (CIPs), containing the first rounds of EDI results, were prepared for and distributed to approximately 100 early childhood development (ECD) communities.

(To find results, go to www.ecmap.ca.)

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Communities now have concrete data on their young children's development in hand, which can be used to inform planning, policy making and programming. Communities, working through their coalitions, are also making an invaluable contribution to ongoing research by gathering information about their community resources. A special tool kit (*Discover your early childhood development (ECD) community assets*) was developed by the ECMap project team to guide coalitions through this process. Coalitions share their findings with ECMap and assist the mapping team to digitally map their resources.

This will help to identify strengths and gaps in community support for young children and families across Alberta and deepen our understanding of the role communities play in shaping critical early development.

Mark your calendars

The second provincial gathering of ECD community coalitions will be held on **April 28 and 29, 2014**, at the University of Alberta Conference Centre in Edmonton. Stay tuned.

Early childhood development

First Nations prepare to share results with their communities

This fall the Alexander First Nation research committee will sit down with its early child development results and decide how to best share the information.

“We don’t want this research to sit on the shelf,” says Jody Kootenay, director of education for Alexander First Nation and a committee member. “We want to look at how we can work differently as a community to meet our children’s needs.”

Community engagement was a primary concern for this First Nation, which is located 55 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, when it signed on to become part of the First Nation Child Development (FNCD) Project.

“Research has generally been done on — not by — First Nations,” notes Kootenay, who grew up in Alexander and has a master’s degree in education. “Researchers ask their questions and go. There is no lasting benefit to the community. We saw this as an opportunity to make our voice heard and to create something longer term.”

Alexander is one of four First Nations, along with Sunchild, O’Chiese and Alexis, partnering in the three-year project with the Community-University Partnership (CUP) at the University of Alberta and Yellowhead Tribal College. Funding is provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Max Bell Foundation.

The project involves extensive community consultation to ensure that the Early Development Instrument (EDI) is implemented in ways that are meaningful and relevant to each of the First Nations. The process has involved the signing of four separate agreements to establish how researchers will work with each First Nation partner and how data and findings will be shared.

Input from the community, from elders to parents and even teens, was sought at every step of the way, including the creation of questionnaires on children’s First Nation language and cultural development.

These supplementary questionnaires, filled



Garrett Strawberry (right) explains his visual graphic to fellow project research assistant Tyson Frencheater.

out by families and teachers, are used alongside the EDI.

The Yellowhead Tribal College and CUP also developed a community-based research course, which was offered at the college last fall. Three of the students were then hired as project research assistants, gaining first-hand experience that will be invaluable in their further studies and careers, says Seaneen O’Rourke, the college’s dean of programs.

As one of the research assistants, Garrett Strawberry learned how to run focus groups and collect and analyze research data. He also made a significant contribution to the project by designing a visual graphic, incorporating a medicine wheel and plant symbolism, to explain how communities described healthy early childhood development within their First Nation context.

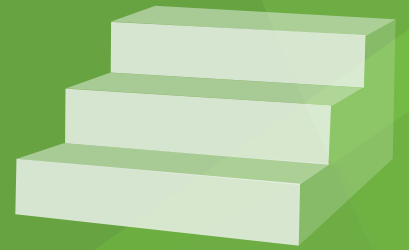
“It can be easier to understand complex information if you have visual aids that are culturally significant to explain things,” says

Strawberry, a self-taught artist.

Alexander First Nation will be discussing their research outcomes and how to best support their young children. Jody Kootenay is proud of the high parental consent rate in her community. More than 90 per cent of parents agreed to have their kindergarten-aged children included in the study. It took a lot of door knocking. The community will now begin surveying its community assets. “This will help us to see what’s available for our kids, what’s working well and what isn’t,” says Kootenay. “Some good, solid recommendations can then emerge out of the research.”

For further information about the FNCD project’s student research assistants, please go to: <http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/yellowhead-tribal-college-students-play-important-role-in-first-nation-child-development-research>

Community coalitions



Lac La Biche responds to high vulnerability: ‘What can we do better?’

Lac La Biche coalition members were taken aback when they received their first EDI (Early Development Instrument) results.

They had expected to see a high percentage of young children struggling with communication skills, given the large number of local children starting kindergarten with language delays. But they were surprised to find that 42 per cent of the children were experiencing difficulty in physical health and well-being.

“That was an eye-opener,” says Dana Robb, principal of Vera M. Welsh Elementary School, which serves 400 children from K to Grade 3 in this north-eastern Alberta town and its surrounding area.

“Many of our children are significantly behind,” notes Robb, who is also a member of the Lac La Biche early childhood development coalition. EDI results showed that 40 per cent of the children were experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development.

“We are always asking ourselves, ‘What can we do better?’ ” says Robb.

The Lac La Biche community faces many challenges, including a high level of poverty and an unemployment rate double the provincial average. In many families, dads work in the oil patch and are often away from home.

Seventy-five per cent of Robb’s young students are bussed to school. Many commute 1.5 to two hours each day from outlying areas that include two First Nations communities and two Métis settlements.

The school runs a preschool program for children with diagnosed severe disabilities, mostly language delays. Many of the children can only put together one-word sentences when they arrive, says Robb. The program focusses on improving their language development. By Grade 3, some of the students who were struggling do well — and even excel — on Provincial Achievement Tests. Robb calls these her “happy dance stories.”

Now the school is taking a hard look at its physical education and health programming.



Dana Robb, principal of the Vera M. Welsh Elementary School in Lac La Biche, shares a quiet moment with preschool student Dante Maccagno.

Working with the coalition has paid off, says Robb. The coalition’s spring fair, with its family activities, information booths and keynote speakers, has raised public awareness about the importance of the early years. It has encouraged more parents to attend the school’s annual Early Intervention Fair, held a month later in May.

Service providers involved in the coalition are more aware of each other’s mandates and services. They are better able to make referrals, catch problems sooner and work together more closely and effectively to provide assistance that is needed.

Outreach and education remain top priorities for the coalition. One of the most successful coalition strategies so far has been the production of a colouring book that is also a resource directory for families in the area. One thousand copies of the book, along with a cloth carrying bag stamped with the coalition’s We Can Grow logo, have been distributed. A second print run is in the works.

The coalition has also organized family fun days and events to bring families together and spread the word about the coalition. It would like to involve outlying communities more and encourage more vulnerable families to use existing services.

Profiles

Rebuilding and rethinking priorities

As she ripped out waterlogged carpets and drywall this summer, Debbie Fasoli thought long and hard about the rebuilding that lay ahead.

Not just of her home, which was damaged by a freak thunderstorm that dumped up to 30 cm of hail over a three-kilometre swath from Irricana to Airdrie. She was also thinking about her family and community.

Fasoli, who lives in Irricana, 50 kilometres northeast of Calgary, was among the thousands of Albertans affected by flooding and severe storms this summer. The devastation prompted her — and many others in her community — to do some serious soul searching.

“At times like this, you inevitably ask yourself, ‘What’s important?’ You get back to priorities, like strong families and strong communities. How are we rebuilding those?”

Fasoli, who is the coordinator of Pathways to Success, the coalition for North Rocky View County, says that the self-questioning actually began earlier. It started with the release of local Early Development Instrument (EDI) data last spring. EDI results showed that a third of the kindergarten-aged children in this relatively affluent community were experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development.



Debbie Fasoli is coordinator of the North Rocky View County coalition and can be reached at dfasoli@telus.net.

“That was a shock,” says Fasoli. “But it motivated us, as a community, to really look at our values and what works for our children.”

Community members searched for possible reasons for the high numbers of young children struggling in their development.

“Are we spending too much time logged on and not paying enough attention to our children? Are we living in our minivans, driving our children from event to event? Have we put too much emphasis on getting them all the latest toys and gadgets? Perhaps, it’s time to re-evaluate.”

Fasoli’s roots in the community go back three generations. Her grandparents homesteaded in Balzac and she was brought up on a Charolais cattle and grain farm there. She helped her mother and other community volunteers bake endless cakes for Airdrie’s town-to-a-city party.

After training as a psychiatric nurse, she worked for 14 years with Hull Child and Family Services in Calgary and became convinced that more preventative measures were needed in dealing with behavioural and mental health issues. She then took time off to raise her two young boys, now eight and 10.

When she was ready to return to work, she was drawn by the EMap Project’s research and community-based focus. “I like the fact that there is a valid, credible tool to measure how our children are doing and whether we are using our resources wisely. I also like the grassroots approach. You’re much more likely to have community — and parent — buy-in if what you are doing is relevant and important to people.”

Fasoli takes enormous pride in the number of community conversations her coalition has engaged in. “2,150!”

In addition to her work with Pathways to Success, Fasoli has played an instrumental role in building the First 2000 Days network of coalitions in the Calgary area.

FYI

A recent Ontario study links EDI results to school performance. *Starting Early: Teaching, Learning and Assessment* shows a relationship between EDI scores and Grade 3 provincial assessment results in reading, writing and mathematics. The study was funded by the Government of Ontario and carried out by the Education Quality and Accountability Office and the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University.

You can download it at http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/EDI_StartingEarly_EQAO.pdf

Contact us

The Early Child Development Mapping Project (EMap) is part of the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative, which is funded by Alberta Education. EMap is led by the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (CUP), Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta.

For further information, please go to www.ecmap.ca

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Mapping a bright future for Alberta’s young children