

# YUKON NEWS

## Yukon First Nation School Board's literacy program gets stamp of approval from Dyslexia Canada



[Jim Elliot](#)

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*The Yukon First Nation School board's new approach to teaching reading is being viewed favourably by Dyslexia Canada. (Pixabay Image)*

The literacy program the Yukon's First Nation School Board is embarking on has been favourably noticed by a Canada-wide organization that focuses on helping students with dyslexia.

Both the lead literacy coach at the school board and a representative of Dyslexia Canada see the new literacy program as a more scientific approach to teaching reading. The new literacy education program is in its first school year. October is observed as dyslexia awareness month.


Megan Norris, the school board's lead literacy coach, described the style of instruction as direct and systematic. She said the new system of instruction is based on a range of skills that build on each other from simple to complex.

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As an example of what that might look like in the classroom, Norris said teachers will introduce the sounds that make up words a few at a time.

Among the tools employed for this style of teaching are “decodable books.” Norris said these books feature words with the specific sounds that are being taught.


“As you work through the lessons, the teacher will introduce more and more sounds so that it's building on itself and the students really feel success working through that way,” Norris explained.

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She said students are being encouraged to sound out all the sounds rather than relying on pictures or other context clues.

The change in views on literacy education began its implementation this fall after visits to schools and discussions with educators. Five literacy coaches are now on the staff in total: Norris is joined by three coaches to support primary and intermediate classrooms and one supporting early years and kindergarten education.

Norris said the literacy program is based on five pillars: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Phonological awareness is the awareness of the sound and structure of words.

“When we provide this direct explicit instruction, we are casting the widest net possible. It’s crucial for learners with dyslexia and beneficial for all of our learners,” Norris said.

Norris said the approach being taken by the First Nation School Board is taking some cues from parts of the Northwest Territories where literacy coaches support schools and from a “right to read” inquiry report published by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in 2019. That report found that the way

reading was being taught failed students with reading disabilities such as dyslexia and many others by not employing the sort of evidence-based approaches that Norris and the school board are using.

Dyslexia Canada executive director Alicia Smith told the *News* that because the curriculum at Yukon schools not overseen by the First Nation School Board is based on the British Columbia curriculum, it fails in many of the same ways that the Ontario curriculum does.

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“That approach is failing kids with disabilities. It’s failing children who are poor children. It’s failing Indigenous children. It’s just not an evidence-based or effective approach to teaching children to read,” Smith said.

Reporting closer to home has also shown challenges with literacy here in the Yukon. The 2019 auditor general of Canada report that looked at the state of education in the Yukon found notable gaps in outcomes between First Nations and non-First Nations students across a range of subjects including reading. It also found gaps between rural and urban schools when it came to literacy and it found that there had been little in the way of improvement since a similar report was conducted in 2009.

Those reports were often cited in the lead up to the creation of the First Nation School Board. The board was established in early 2022 before taking over management of 11 schools in the territory that chose

the new approach by referendum.

While the literacy coaching and other approaches will not only benefit students with dyslexia, it is being viewed favourably by those who advocate for those students.

Smith said the approach being used by the Yukon First Nation School Board schools bucks a trend in how students have been taught to read across much of the English-speaking world for the last 30 years. She said the dominant approach does a disservice to students with dyslexia or other barriers that make it more difficult for them to learn to read.

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Smith said the information that a better way is possible has been out there for decades but those who make decisions regarding education have been slow to take it up. As a result she says that about a third of students nationwide leave high school without the literacy skills they need.

“Dyslexia is the most common reason that children struggle with learning to read. Again, it’s not the only reason. But it’s very interesting, because the research that has been well established now for over 20 years, really shows that all kids benefit if you change the approach to instruction, to be in line with what the First Nation School Board is starting to do now,” Smith said.

“That approach is effective for all children.”

Smith said Dyslexia Canada is thrilled to see these approaches being implemented in Canada and wants to see them used more, including in the Yukon schools not managed by the First Nation School Board.

Along with methods of instruction that assist learners with dyslexia both Norris and Smith mentioned the screening that the First Nation School Board plans to use to identify students who need more assistance. Norris said the First Nation School board's literacy coaches are urging all teachers, especially primary grade teachers to complete standardized assessments in an effort to figure out what students might need more support.

Smith said early screening and intervention can go a long way in helping prevent students with dyslexia or similar conditions from developing reading difficulties later in life.

"The overall goal is that we have students who can read, and that our students will be able to pick up any book off the shelf that they want, and they'll be able to read it, that our students will be able to choose the life that they want, rather than have it decided for them," Norris said.

"Research shows the strong correlation between literacy levels, and you know, employment outcomes, poverty, incarceration, mental health, mental well being. And so you that's really the end goal is that we have students who are who are well and enjoy reading."

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### ***About the Author: Jim Elliot***

I'm a B.C. transplant here in Whitehorse at The News telling stories about the Yukon's people, environment, and culture.

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