

Valuing Aboriginal Head Start in BC: Celebrating 15 Years 1995 – 2010



A Narrative Report
by the
Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC



Acknowledgements

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For a detailed list of interviewees at each Aboriginal Head Start site, please see the **Participants** section at the end of the document.



AHSABC Valuing Project Narrative Report

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Executive Summary

The year 2010 marked the 15th anniversary of Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) in Canada. The Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC (AHSABC) has conducted the 'Valuing AHS in BC – Celebrating 15 Years' project as a means of documenting the life of AHS in this province. Program staff, parents and family, former students, Elders, host agency representatives, and Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) staff were interviewed to provide their firsthand insight on the impacts of the program.

Aboriginal Head Start is an early intervention preschool program designed for urban and northern (off-reserve) Aboriginal children across Canada. There are 12 AHS programs located throughout British Columbia. These preschools operate under the direction of established Principles & Guidelines and Parent Advisory Councils. The AHS program is based on the 'Six Components of Aboriginal Head Start,' which guide the activities and curriculum. These are: Culture and Language; Education and School Readiness; Health Promotion; Nutrition; Social Support; Parent and Family Involvement.

AHSABC is a non-profit organization which provides support to AHS centres to promote excellence in programming. With funding from PHAC, they have developed a collection of cultural curriculum resources and trainings over the years for both BC and National AHS programs (in English and French). In addition, ongoing conferences, cultural retreats and training seminars, and online networking support best practices for teachers, staff and parents in AHS programs.

Over the past 15 years, the number and size of AHS sites have grown across the province, and some preschools are beginning to offer services for Early Learners, as well as enhanced programs to increase accessibility in AHS communities. An important factor behind the success of Aboriginal Head Start is that parental involvement is essential and contributes to learning for the entire family. Elders are valued as cultural teachers, and many of them consider the Head Start community as their family and a place for healing their Residential School wounds. Health and community services play a supportive role in the program.

Participants reported that the AHS program has had an impact on the children who have graduated from the preschool by enhancing their health, self-esteem and identity, success in school, and social relationships. Parents, families, staff, and Elders have testified that being a part of Aboriginal Head Start has enriched their lives in countless ways. In addition, community members beyond AHS (kindergarten teachers, community organizations, etc.) report that this program has had a remarkable positive effect. Aboriginal Head Start serves as a 'hub' – the new *village* – by providing the missing sense of community for many Aboriginal people living in urban centres away from their families and cultural roots.

When asked about what change they would make in future, participants saw the need for more AHS program sites to be built across the province to address wait lists and to reach a greater population. They also suggested that increased funding would allow programs to better serve the needs of the AHS participants (e.g., full-day classes, better transportation and more cultural activities).



In summary, the Aboriginal Head Start program gives Aboriginal children and families the 'best of both worlds' in that they are developing pride in who they are as Aboriginal people, while learning how to walk with confidence and enthusiasm on their lifelong educational journey.



Valuing AHS in BC – Celebrating 15 Years Project

The 'Valuing AHS – Celebrating 15 Years Project' was initiated by the Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC (AHSABC) in order to mark the 15th Anniversary of Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) program in Canada. A cross-section of people from each of the 12 sites in British Columbia were invited to share stories and pictures from the past 15 years to celebrate the progress of the program and the impacts it has made on participants' lives.

The Valuing AHS Project involved audio and video interviews, as well as photographs and written contributions, of program members, parents, and family; former students; Elders; program staff; Host Agency representatives; and Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) staff. These interviews are considered 'data' and treated accordingly, with the requisite measures of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as proper data storage and stewardship. As part of developing the Valuing Project, and in consideration of future goals of the AHSABC, Project staff developed an overarching Research Protocol that guides all research-related activities of the AHSABC.

Valuing AHS Project staff included Joan Gignac, Executive Director of the AHSABC; Annie Jack (Beachwalker Studio), Project Manager; and Jeff LaPlante, BC Federal Aboriginal Internship Support. The Project staff met on several occasions to design and steer Project activities, based on data collected and information provided in the participant interviews and through the Valuing AHS Project Advisory Committee. The value of Aboriginal Head Start is best expressed by those who experience it, and interviewing these participants allowed for a personal and direct dialogue about their experiences. Participant interviews were conducted following an informative process, by which AHS centres were informed of the Valuing AHS Project and its goals, and then asked to gather participants among their current and former students, staff, parents, and Elders.

In some cases, participants were interviewed in conjunction with centres' 15 Year Anniversary Celebrations; in other cases they were interviewed at the sites, by phone or by email. Interviews were informal, with Valuing AHS Project staff asking interviewees simple questions about such things as their experiences with Aboriginal Head Start, the lessons they've learned from their involvement, and changes they would make to the program. To gain fully informed participation, Project staff developed an 'Informed Consent Form.' This document provided participants with crucial information about the Valuing AHS Project, the confidentiality of their contribution, and obtained their signature and indication of consent to participate. A 'Release Form' was also signed, giving permission for their comments and images to be published either in print or online.

Please note that only a cross-section of quotes from interviews were included in this summary. Also, only a fraction of those people who wanted to be interviewed for the Valuing AHS Project were available in time for this report.



What is the Aboriginal Head Start program?

Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) is an early intervention preschool program designed for urban and northern (off-reserve) Aboriginal children in Canada. Its primary goals are to support the early childhood development of Aboriginal children and to instill pride in their Aboriginal heritage before they enter the mainstream school system. It focuses on 3 – 5 year olds with the intent of bringing them to the school readiness stage in order to help ensure an easy transition into kindergarten.

The Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC (AHSABC) is a nonprofit society made up of the 12 urban Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) sites in British Columbia, all of which are members of the AHSABC. (See the last page of this report for a list of the program locations.) Each Aboriginal Head Start site is represented by their Program Coordinator and their elected Parent Representative, and together with the AHSABC, work in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada to continue to improve the quality of AHS. The AHSABC also works in collaboration with the Provincial Government to strengthen the quality of Aboriginal Early Childhood Education in British Columbia. To this end, they have sponsored a growing collection of learning resources and professional development training, as well as networking opportunities, to fortify the AHS program curriculum.

“We all know Aboriginal Head Start is so critical, building the foundation for our kids now. Decades from now, we’re going to see the difference.”
– **Audrey Sam: Executive Director, North East Native Advancing Society, Fort St. John**

Since AHSUNC receives funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), Agency staff work closely with the Aboriginal Head Start sites and are appreciative of the lessons they learn, and impressed by the Head Start staff they meet through their work. As **Stephen Bujnowicz, PHAC Program Consultant**, says *“One of my early lessons in this job was really to listen to the people in the community; some of these people have been delivering Head Start for 15 years now, so they’ve got a lot of experience and a lot of know-how behind them.”* Similarly, **Program Consultant Megan Brown** adds that *“...there are so many people who have been involved with the program for so long... there is much to learn from them.”*

“(Head Start) is not just a preschool – we don’t just look after children during the day – and we have a philosophy that includes all the children plus their family. So we get to know them almost as family members.” – **Anita Zakresky: Senior Manager, Family Wellness Programs, Prince George Native Friendship Centre**

“The program is excellent. My children feel loved and cared for. They look forward to going to school. It’s family. They have a parent room so I can go off and talk to parents or the staff at lunch time. Respect and love is what you get here and that’s hard to find.”
– **Roxanne Gray: Parent, Eagle’s Nest AHS**

“We have Head Start graduates that are now graduating from high school, and we’ve all played a part in that; I think there’s a level of pride that comes with that accomplishment.” – **Christine Burgess: Acting Regional Director, BC Region, Public Health Agency of Canada**



AHS Principles & Guidelines

The AHS program is guided by 'Principles & Guidelines' which were developed by Health Canada and the National Aboriginal Head Start Council in consultation with the Aboriginal community across Canada including parents, Elders and other community members. They serve as the basis for comprehensive Aboriginal Head Start standards of service delivery. Local projects are encouraged to develop their own principles and guidelines that address the centre's more specific needs.

The foundation of the Aboriginal Head Start programs are the 'Six Program Components' which are taken from the Principles & Guidelines:

1. Culture and Language

By providing children with an understanding and experience of their cultures and languages, they will develop a positive sense of self as Aboriginal persons and participate in their communities' cultures.

2. Education and School Readiness

By providing Aboriginal children with enjoyable opportunities to learn in a preschool setting, they will develop intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually, and become school-ready, maintaining a desire for lifelong learning.

3. Health Promotion

By providing regular healthy lifestyle practices and opportunities to access assistance from medical professionals, traditional healers and special therapists, AHS participants and parents are empowered to take charge of and improve their own and their families' health.

4. Nutrition

By providing children with wholesome food and parents with information about nutrition (e.g., Aboriginal Food Guides), families can develop healthy eating habits that enhance children's physical, mental and social development.

5. Social Support

By providing children and their families with referrals to and information about community resources, they are assisted to seek the help they need from local service providers, who become part of the AHS community.

6. Parent and Family Involvement

By acknowledging parents and guardians as their children's primary teachers and ensuring their active involvement in the program, they are supported and encouraged to become more confident and capable caregivers and to participate more fully in their child's development.



The 6 Components: the foundation of the AHS program

The six components on which the program is based are what makes Aboriginal Head Start unique. These building blocks meet the needs of Aboriginal children, families and community .

“Health, nutrition, life skills, language and culture, all of this is so important and most kids aren’t getting that, but the Head Start program is giving it to them.”

– **Steven Evenden: Former Staff, Parent, Power of Friendship AHS**

“I have thanked Audrey Sam, our Executive Director, for all the hard work she has put into the AHS program from day one. She can’t stress enough how the 6 components are so important for our young children; we have to teach them young, and those are the most important years, which I strongly agree.” – **Darlene Conley: Program Coordinator, Sas Natsadle AHS**

Culture and Language

Aboriginal Head Start instills in children a positive sense of identity through culture and language curriculum related to their First Nations, Inuit and Métis cultures. A connection to their ancestry, through traditional activities and languages, provides children (as well as parents, staff and Elders) with a positive sense of themselves, their families, and their communities.

“We have 12 Urban AHS programs in BC, each very unique and reflective of their communities and families. Each year the AHS program looks different as new families come in and others graduate. The AHS shifts a little with each new family to ensure our programs are reflective of the children’s cultures and Nations. A primary objective of our programs is to inspire pride and recognition in our heritage and our identity; therefore, it is imperative for our programs to honour each family’s roots and encourage them to share what they know with others.” – **Joan Gignac, Executive Director, AHSABC**

“The people here are all involved in their culture. The teachers that they hire are mostly Aboriginal, even the cooks are Aboriginal. They get good food, they get healthy snacks. That was the idea of the whole AHS program was to let the Aboriginal children and families work together and have a parents group. Make sure the parents were involved in what they did, and that still happens today, so it’s a good thing. Everybody’s out there to help the children and we’re all here to help together as a staff.” – **Lavern Henderson:, Culture & Language Teacher, Laichwiltach Family Life Society**

“A lot of the stuff we go through as urban First Nations people is trying to define who we are. I think here at Singing Frog there’s no question about that, about what colour your skin is or what colour your hair is...we’re all First Nations kids, we’re all Indians. The most amazing thing about the program for me is that.”

– **River Hill: Parent & Volunteer, Singing Frog AHS**

“Somebody has to keep the culture going and I feel we have to show them... The children that do come here, they’re well behaved, they’re happy and they enjoy having me here and the other Elders that come.” – **Lyle Lloyd: Elder, Power of Friendship AHS**



"We have to be proud of who we are as First Nations... be proud of our culture. Our culture is strong – we still do dry meat making, moose hide making... teaching our children how to snare rabbits, and things like that." – Maisie Metecheah: Elder, Sas Natsadle AHS

Parents, staff, Elders, and former students have acknowledged how Aboriginal Head Start has given them invaluable lessons in their own and other Aboriginal cultures, shaping their identity and encouraging a sense of pride in who they are and where they come from. As expressed by **Tania Mitchell**, a parent whose children have been attending **Singing Frog AHS** in Vancouver, "They can be proud of who they are and what they can become." **Barbara Ward-Burkitt**, **Executive Director of the Prince George Native Friendship Centre**, sees the fostering of identity as part-and-parcel of the learning process, noting that it "...gives us the confidence that it takes to learn things in a good way, and to learn things as they connect to us with those parts of our being."

"Language is the most important thing for children to learn – it was lost to us in Residential School and foster homes." – Willie Alphonse: Elder, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS

"I learnt a lot of my own culture too, watching and being in the program, and being in circles, and the language." – Jeannie Bourgeois: Former Staff, Power of Friendship AHS

"Learning the culture... makes the [children] feel special... It makes them proud of who they are and the things they know." – Jaclyn Reyes: Parent & PAC Chair, Eagle's Nest AHS

"For some of these children, this is the only exposure they get to the culture, so it gives them a sense of who they are and where they come from and a feeling of pride that I hope will stay with them forever." – Gloria Roze: Elder, Qwallayuw AHS

"I thought (the children) didn't understand or didn't want to know the language but they took it over from their parents.... I'm so honoured that I'm sitting in a classroom like this, to learn the colours, to learn the Nations, to learn the strength of our people. I'm so grateful that the preschool is bringing it back, not just for today but preparing for the future..." – Eugene Harry: Elder, Eagle's Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS

"I was part of the planning committee 15 or 16 years ago... We wanted to teach 3 different languages and to teach the children the preparation of our traditional First Nations food and the value of this. We wanted to have the children learn respect for Elders, respect for parents and first of all, respect yourselves. I think this has been well implemented by all those that are involved in the program." – Margaret Adkins: Elder, Prince Rupert AHS



Education and School Readiness

The AHS preschool program provides a solid preparation for young children entering the school system. The first day of kindergarten can be stressful for both children and parents, and it is necessary for everyone to be prepared for this next step. Aboriginal Head Start staff are trained in helping families with this transition, and regularly go out of their way to facilitate early meetings and visits with kindergarten teachers in their classrooms. This preparation makes a difference for not only the students, but also their parents. Many kindergarten teachers speak strongly on the benefits of the AHS program, such as Amber Knezacek and Rose Monsees in the Terrace School District, who work with children and families from Kermode AHS.

*“The children coming in to school having participated in the Head Start program really have a respect and understanding of what school is. They understand who the teacher is, how to sit, and they know there’s a schedule and expectations, and generally they’re looking forward to school because they’ve had a good experience at preschool... I also think it’s been a good experience for parents. They come in ready to interact with the teacher more and ready to interact with the children more... I really credit the Head Start people for developing those good relationships with families, and saying that your involvement with the school is really important and that you’re just as important a teacher as the teacher.” – **Amber Knezacek: Kindergarten Teacher, Terrace***

Adept at refining their best practices, Aboriginal Head Start programs show leadership in the area of school readiness. For instance, Comox Valley Head Start stays closely connected to the local School District and enjoy representation on the School District’s Aboriginal Education Council. **Comox Valley AHS Program Coordinator, Audrey Waite**, described how the preschool hosts yearly Kindergarten Transition Meetings with graduating students, parents, kindergarten teachers, administrators and Aboriginal Education personnel, and at their graduation ceremony, the children are welcomed into the mainstream school system by the Aboriginal Education Administrator.

“If we’re truly saying that we’re dedicated to ensuring that our young people are the leaders of tomorrow, then we need to do something about making sure that those pieces are in place in order for them to be successful right from the very beginning of their education.”
– **Barbara Ward-Burkitt: Executive Director, Prince George Native Friendship Centre**

*“It’s important to have my kids here because it’s a ‘head start’ before they go to kindergarten and elementary school.” – **Scott Nelson: Parent & Bus Driver, Eagle’s Nest & Singing Frog AHS***

Parents in all the AHS preschools seem more than pleased with the measures of school readiness the program provides their children. Some have even expressed surprise that the preparation was so thorough, noting that their children have gained precious social skills they know are essential to success in their future education. The circle in which the children sit and learn lesson is thought to be critical in their development of the concepts of sharing, cooperating, speaking, and listening. **Elder, Jean Walker, at Power of Friendship AHS** says “By having the circle here, they learn to sit quietly in the circle and listen.”



"I didn't know he was going to receive such preparation for school. He was learning habits like sitting still at a table, a big challenge for a 3 or 4 year old, yet here he was, and wanting to draw and colour and get more involved. He'd want to show me what they did at school. Now Luke's an A student and I think that has a lot to do with Aboriginal Head Start, because of that early training that he had and to discipline himself in a classroom." – Roxanne Gray: Parent, Eagle's Nest AHS

The goal of the AHS program is to engage young children in the possibility of learning so that they carry forth the enthusiasm, self-esteem and initiative to learn in the future. By involving the parents at this early stage, they are more able to support and encourage their children in their ongoing education to ensure lifelong learning for the entire family.

"I think that helped, them learning so much before they got to school. My nephew that went to Head Start... he picked up everything up so fast and he wanted to learn, because they were teaching him to learn... he's been a Principal's List student ever since he left preschool." – Lorraine Westrand: Former Parent, Power of Friendship AHS





Health Promotion

Aboriginal Head Start programs strive to empower all those involved with AHS to increase control over and improve their health and well being. In many centres, a variety of medical practitioners volunteer to visit in order to familiarize the children with health care. Some programs offer speech therapy, counselling and physiotherapy for special needs children.

*“While my youngest son, Zachary, was a student at AHS, his speech and language progressed rapidly.” – **Glenna Johnson: Family Involvement Worker and Former Parent, Kermode AHS***

“We have had a big success story at Little Moccasins. For many years, we’ve taken our Head Start children to Interior Health for dental and hearing check-ups and the speech pathologist there also works with some of the kids. However, there has not been an optometrist available there for years.

I called the Cariboo Eye Clinic and spoke with Dr. Lam, the optometrist, explaining to her the importance of testing our children’s vision as part of their preschool screening. She offered to book a whole day at the Interior Health office to see our morning class for no charge. Dr. Lam was overwhelmed to see how many children out of 20 children had problems with their eyesight, so she booked another two days to test the rest of the children in the afternoon program.

*Six out of the 40 children had severe vision problems. They are now wearing glasses and doing much better at school. Dr. Lam is still seeing several other children for follow-up appointments to monitor their vision difficulties too.” – **Ana Rawlek: Family Involvement Worker, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS***

The goal is for all AHS community members to take actions that contribute to holistic health; i.e., healing on the spiritual level, as well as physical, emotional and mental. Some storytellers share lessons about personal safety and getting along with others. Others teach about traditional healing rituals, such as ‘smudging’ and teachings about the ‘four sacred gifts’ (sage, sweet grass, cedar, and tobacco).

*“We do... the Cree language being the main thing, our traditional foods, medicines, I teach them traditional medicines, our drum, jigging... as much as I know, I will teach them.” – **Leona Neilson: Cultural Teacher, Power of Friendship AHS***

*“Smudging is to clean our minds and our bodies from all the negative stuff that’s going around us, and what we’re thinking. That’s what the smudge is for – cleansing for the day, to help us have a good day.” – **Willie Alphonse: Elder, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS***



Nutrition

The Aboriginal Head Start program ensures that children are provided with nourishing food on-site, helping meet their nutritional needs and fostering their ability to learn and develop. All programs offer snack time, while some provide breakfast and lunch, as well as celebrations and feasts for the families. Many centres feature traditional foods as part of the cultural experience. **Stephen Bujnowicz, Program Consultant with the PHAC, BC Region**, explained that each AHS centre addresses the component areas differently, and that some sites have Aboriginal nutritionists and dieticians that visit and provide expertise and information.

“[Children are] given healthy nutritional food to sustain them throughout the day, which will help their learning process.” – Lise Tougas: ASCD Support Worker, Awahsuk AHS

“We did a lot in our Head Start to ensure the children were not hungry in the morning. The first thing we would do was make sure they were fed, and at the end of the day when they were leaving, double-check.” – Renata Heathcliff: Cultural Teacher, Prince George AHS

“Healthy snacks... the school in particular, and the community here, is very earth-conscious and earth-friendly. They do composting here.” – Harley Rose: Former Parent, Eagle’s Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS

Social Support

Aboriginal Head Start programs provide the structure for a new ‘village’ for Aboriginal families in urban areas. The centres become a place where families can network and develop meaningful relationships. AHS parents remark on how staff are very helpful and generous towards the families, as well as being a kindly source of information on resources and community services available to impact their quality of life. Friendships among staff, parents, Elders and students take root in this AHS community. The centre provides a home for those who are far from their families or are newcomers to the city. These friendships often last a lifetime.

“I like that the staff is helpful outside the school, they have clothing drives, they get donations... they help out with that.” – Tania Mitchell: Parent, Singing Frog AHS

“Supporting our families is most important. Especially, I see young single moms with 2, 3, 4 kids. We can give them a bit of a break and at the same time, it’s an honour and give us an opportunity to play with their children and socialize. It’s a lot of fun. Helping out families, that’s where I find a lot of pleasure.” – Yves L’Archeveque: Bus Driver/Maintenance & Former Parent, Qwallayuw AHS

*“With more and more families living in urban settings and away from their home territories and extended families, it is crucial for our AHS programs to become those ‘villages’ for our families. Our identity is strengthened when we are surrounded with family. For our families who live in urban settings, our Aboriginal Head Start staff, Elders, families and children become their extended families.”
– Joan Gignac, Executive Director, AHSABC*



“Maybe some of (the parents) don’t have family; maybe they don’t have that support. I try to talk with some of the young parents too. Because I think they need some positive things too, even if it’s just to sit down and have coffee, sit down and I can hold their baby, and just ask how their day is going.” – Ellen Antoine: Grandparent & Volunteer, Eagle’s Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS



One goal of the program is to empower parents to access resources, assistance and community services which will support them to be active participants in their children's lives and the AHS Program. Many preschools are housed in or associated with Friendship Centres or other organizations which serve as their Host Agency. These groups often provide support services to the community, such as parenting courses, addiction counselling, food banks, Elders’ Groups and cultural activities, among others. Local agencies, such as Aboriginal Supported Child Development and Infant Development services, play a role in the AHS Village.

“We’re not just dealing with the children from 9am to 3pm every day, we’re helping families access services when they need it, we’re lending a listening ear to them when they need it, we’re getting them to build on the resources that they already have, and building capacity within our families to move forward...” – Anita Zakresky: Senior Manager, Family Wellness Programs, Prince George Native Friendship Centre

“We’re offering the Head Start program in the low income housing, so the families there don’t have transportation issues and they feel comfortable because it’s in their neighbourhood.” – Lorraine Kok: Program Coordinator, Qwallayuw AHS

“Many of the parents that are involved in our Head Starts access other programs within the Friendship Centre as well.” – Barbara Ward-Burkitt: Executive Director, Prince George Native Friendship Centre



Parent and Family Involvement

It is well understood among Head Start staff and coordinators that the success of the program, and more importantly, the success of children's education, very much depends on involvement and participation of the parents. Parents are encouraged by Aboriginal Head Start staff to take a proactive role in their children's current and future education. As their child's primary teachers, parents are empowered to bring forth gifts and further develop as role models for their children and in their communities.

"Being involved with the Aboriginal Head Start program has encouraged me to branch out as a parent and take an active role in the education and schooling of my children."
– **Karla Wright: Former Parent, Prince George AHS**

"Increasing the parental and guardian involvement is definitely a pillar; it varies from site to site how successful each site is, so I think that supporting that more is really key to the program." – **Megan Brown: Program Consultant, BC Region, Public Health Agency of Canada**

"I asked for some of the rules that they use here and I took them home; those are the structures for discipline and for parenting.... Not only does the program give us structure but it gives Brandon the same structure here and at home."
– **Chantelle Leung: Parent, Eagle's Nest AHS**

A few Aboriginal Head Start staff members have noted that parents can sometimes feel intimidated or out of place when dealing with kindergarten and elementary school staff and concerted efforts are made to help parents gain the confidence to assert their wishes for their child's education, and familiarize the children with kindergarten before they attend.

"We've had some wonderful success stories around engaging parents.... One of the strengths of the program is that welcoming environment... We've had parents become educators in the Head Start centres, we've had parents go back and learn their traditional languages, we've had parents go back and complete their education... it really does create a positive impact when you have that welcoming environment."
– **Christine Burgess: Acting Regional Director, Public Health Agency of Canada**

"We've had some parents... it's life-altering for them. I think it sets them up for success and it gets them feeling confident that they can talk... those interpersonal skills sometimes can be unimaginable for people". – **Vanessa Hickman: Program Coordinator, Awahsuk AHS**

"It's so important that the parents are willing to work with us as a team. [Head Start parents] work together with us to help their child." – **Rose Monsees: Kindergarten Teacher, Terrace**

The requirement that the parents become active participants in their children's education is a unique strength of the AHS program. In learning about and sharing their own gifts, they become leaders in their family's education.



"I was casually chatting with one mom and told her that I was so proud of her son the other day when he had gotten up and drummed with the cultural worker at the preschool. He was quiet and respectful and kept the beat so perfectly that it almost made me cry. His mother explained that she was a drummer, so her son had heard the drumbeat since before he was born. Starting next week, she's coming in to sing and drum with the kids in the program... We have another parent who learned the Cree alphabet song, so she sings it, alternating with the kids. A dad comes in and sings too; he's been teaching the kids 'The Blueberry Song.' We honour these PAC parents at the end of the year." – Susan Horton: ECE, Future 4 Nations AHS

Parent Advisory Council

Parents and guardians become members of the Parent Advisory Council (PAC), making decisions about school functions, fundraising, and learning to advocate for their children. Many find that participation helps them build community and new relationships with peers. PAC meetings provide an atmosphere where parents feel welcome and appreciated for their involvement.

"This year and last year we really made a concerted effort to work closely with the PAC and really support them... It's really amazing to see how many people are going out to their community gatherings and raffles and things... The main part is they worked for this money and now they're having a choice in how it's spent." – Susan Horton: ECE, Future 4 Nations AHS

"When I was here I was the PAC Chair, the PAC Secretary, a Parent Rep, and the Fundraising Coordinator... I did a lot of volunteer work and spent time with the kids." – Jessica Field: Former Parent, Power of Friendship AHS

"[I liked] ...being involved in the PAC meetings, to help the kids, to help learn with their learning. I try to come to every PAC meeting and I try to help out with whatever they need done here." – Tania Mitchell: Parent, Singing Frog AHS

"Seeing how... the Parental Advisory Councils are so involved in the program and guiding its development is a really enjoyable experience." – Megan Brown: Program Consultant, BC Region, Public Health Agency of Canada

"Sometimes the parents are really nervous about getting onto the PAC Executive, but it's a real training ground for parents... We're really pleased with our PAC Executive. They decided it would be best to model after the school district, since they would be going there when they leave here." – Audrey Waite: Program Coordinator, Comox Valley AHS

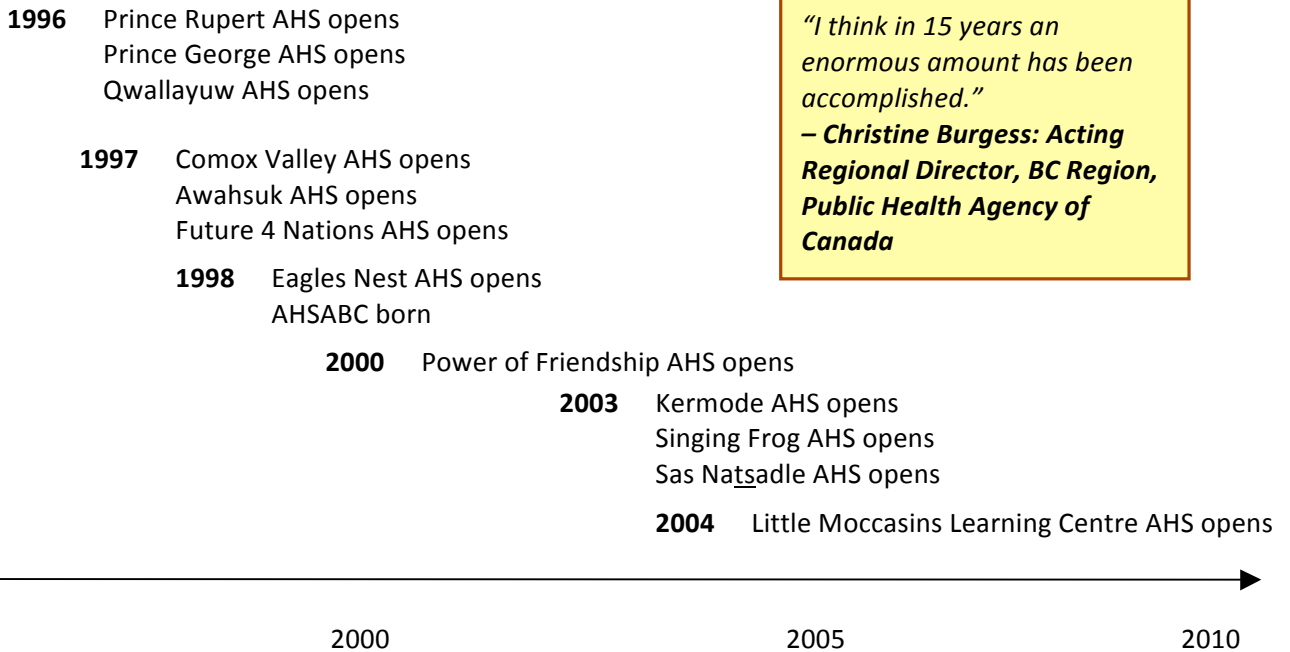
"The PAC is like a PAC at an ordinary elementary school except it's better and smaller so they can care more about the things that are needed, like family resources." – Jaclyn Reyes: Parent & PAC Chair, Eagle's Nest AHS

"I've been involved with Head Start since the fall of 2000. I started going to the PAC right away and I've been involved with PAC since then... Head Start is not just the preschool. They do have workshops for parents too. They've done the Self Defence for Women... we try to learn the different languages... They offer rides to pretty much everything... Most of the time, we supply a sitter; we have child minding for PAC meetings, and rides to and from PAC meetings, there's food, snacks, there's door prizes. There's no reason why anybody shouldn't be able to make it." – Lisa Johnson: Parent, Qwallayuw AHS



How has AHS grown over the past 15 years?

Timeline and History of the Aboriginal Head Start Project Sites



"I think in 15 years an enormous amount has been accomplished."
– Christine Burgess: Acting Regional Director, BC Region, Public Health Agency of Canada

1996

Prince Rupert AHS originally opened in 1996 under the name 'Cedar Road,' with the First Nations Women's' Group as the host agency. In 2007, Prince Rupert AHS took on its current name and switched host agencies to the Prince Rupert Aboriginal Community Services Society. Elders in their program teach the three main cultures and languages of that region: Haida, Tsimshian and Nisga'a.

"About 16 or 17 years ago, a few of us from Prince Rupert went to an educational conference in Victoria where the Ministry was talking about this new program. On our way home, we said we should start a program like Sesame Street and make it into 'Cedar Road' and teach that concept – it was so expressive and fun!

We wrote up a grant with a women's group and bought a house near the High School in Prince Rupert. Then we had to request a rezoning from city hall and we got turned down. One of the council members told us it was because the neighbourhood was worried and didn't want a bunch of Indian kids running around.

I told city council that that was really racist and our kids have a right to a good education. On top of that, this is First Nation's territory and we have the blessing from the Tsimshian People already. So they took the request back to the neighbourhood and their response was that there was 'no parking.'



*So then the Latter Day Saints across the road offered us their whole parking area. I never realized there was so much racism but there were lots of other groups that supported us too. It split the whole town in half – bizarre. It was on CBC and all over the north... Anyhow, we went back with some parents and confronted city council and after 2 or 3 months, we got our rezoning. We got another grant to refurbish the house and that's where the Head Start is today.” – **Arlene Roberts : Former Host Agency representative, Prince Rupert First Nations Women’s Group***

Prince George AHS began in 1996 with the support of the Northeast Aboriginal Health Council and their host agency, Prince George Friendship Centre. Their program respects the traditional land of the Lhedli T’enneh and focuses on the Carrier culture and language.



“I’ve been involved with Head Start since the planning stages of January 1996. Meetings were once a week; a site was chosen; some staff were hired in May. The building at 1945-3rd Ave. was completed in August 1996 and the program opened in September... I’ve enjoyed working with the children for almost 14 years. You get to see the kids grow from 3 years old to just about 5. I’ve seen about 500 kids go through the program... My niece was in the first year and she’s going to be 19 in a few months.”
– **Jeannie Bourgeois: Former Staff, Prince George AHS & Power of Friendship AHS**

Qwallayuw AHS opened in September, 1996, with Laichwiltach Family Life Society as their host agency. The name (pronounced G’Wala’yu) means ‘my reason for living.’ They started out in a small classroom in downtown Campbell River and after a few years, moved the preschool into the Laichwiltach Family Life Society building. Now there is a program for 3 year olds in an adjacent facility and also an enhancement AHS program running at the Makola Housing in the city. Local Elders bring the Kwakwala culture and language to all the programs.

*“When I first got involved, we had a staff of three, doing everything from the cooking to the driving, We had a very small classroom, and we didn’t have very many kids – I think we were licensed for only about 15. So now we have 63 children all together. It’s grown quite a bit.” – **Lorraine Kok: Program Coordinator, Qwallayuw AHS***

1997

Comox Valley AHS opened its doors in the spring of 1997, and took ownership of its current Courtenay site in 2000. It has grown from a basement classroom to an entire building and owns two buses. They are leaders in the province for their strong PAC, who co-govern with their host agency, the Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry. This group of parents developed their own Policies and Procedures, presenting them at National and World conferences. CVAHS also helped to develop a model working relationship with the local School District for ongoing Aboriginal support to students. Métis language and other cultures are taught in their program. They offer a weekly support program called ‘Friday’s Child,’ which helps FASD children and their parents to learn strategies for managing special needs and behaviours.



“In the United States, the National Indian Head Start Directors’ Association (NISDA) is the program that Canada modeled our Head Start program after. Their program is much more rigid and strict than ours is here. So we’re very fortunate here to have the support from the Public Health Agency of Canada and the continued support that they give us in their program consultants and program officers at the national level.” – Audrey Waite: Program Coordinator, Comox Valley AHS and National Aboriginal Head Start Council Representative and former Chairperson

Future 4 Nations AHS opened up in October 1997, hosted by the Mission Native Friendship Centre. In August 2000, Future 4 Nations AHS switched host agencies to Mamele'awt Qweesome Housing Society (formerly Mission Native Housing Society). The name refers to the four tribes in their Mission area: Sto:lo, Sta tlmx (Stat-lee-um), Cree and Métis. These Nations are represented in the cultural component of the program.

“The program has been a great success; it started out small and just gets better and better every year... We are so fortunate that the government released the funding for the Head Start Program 15 years ago. I am grateful to Minister Diane Marleau for initiating this program that supports our First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.”
– Zelda Williams: Manager & Early Childhood Educator, Future 4 Nations AHS

Awahsuk AHS originally opened in 1997. In 2005, Awahsuk underwent some changes in its host agency, and reopened in 2006, newly hosted by Klahow-Eya Aboriginal Centre of Surrey. The resilience and determination of the staff and the parents in this program overcame administrative obstacles and ensured the continuation of their work and improvements in their preschool.



“These parents were instrumental and brave and just showed so much courage... They did enquiries, they used Information for Privacy Act and got information to see, and they just kept on. They were talking to people back east in Ottawa and finally, it was reopened in 2006.”
– Vanessa Hickman: Program Coordinator, Awahsuk AHS

1998

Eagles Nest AHS opened in East Vancouver in 1998 with support from their host agency, BC Aboriginal Child Care Society. Elders bring Coast Salish and other cultures to the program, teaching the children to dance and sing in the local First Nations language. They have performed at many significant events, such as National Aboriginal Day at the Museum of Anthropology, Provincial AHS Conferences, etc., bringing awareness of the AHS program to the public.



"I think Eagles Nest is a good program. It really shows the diversity. We have different kids – some of our kids are African American and Aboriginal, some have Swedish or Chinese heritage... so I think it's a great program." – **Candice Harris-Rivera: Bus Driver & Childcare Worker, Eagle's Nest AHS**

2000

The second site in Prince George, **Power of Friendship AHS**, opened in August, 2000. This preschool focuses on Métis culture with many Elders taking part in the program. Cultural teacher, Leona Neilson, and other staff members have developed an extensive Cree cultural curriculum which is featured in *Tips & Tools* as well as other AHSABC resources.

"I'd just like to say that I'm proud to have been involved with this program for 15 years and I'm very proud to do it. I love coming here." – **Jean Walker: Elder, Power of Friendship AHS**



Power of Friendship AHS in Prince George

"Martina loved it here... Our younger daughter also came here. Now we have our nieces, our nephews and our grandchildren – all our relatives are coming here too. We always have somebody in Head Start..."
– **Angie Clayton: Former Parent & Grandparent, Kermode AHS**

2003

Kermode AHS began in September, 2003, sponsored by and housed at the host agency, Kermode Friendship Society in Terrace. Many other community programs are accessed there as well, such as the CAPC parenting program, Early Childhood Development program and the Child Development Center, the licensing office including the nutritionist and environmental health office, and the School District. Nisga'a language and culture is the main focus for the program.

Singing Frog AHS is the second Vancouver site supported by host agency, BC Aboriginal Child Care Society. It originally opened in October, 2003 under the name 'Vancouver AHS' in a different location and hosted by the Indian Homemakers Association. In 2004, parents voted to change the name to the current 'Singing Frog AHS' and in 2008 the program site moved to its current location. A wide range of Nations are served in this urban centre, and Elders are shared with the other lower mainland sites.

"Years ago our Nation was only allowed to go to grade 8, to grade 6, just to learn your name and that was it and learn nothing else. The system now, today, the preschool are teaching the [language]." – **Eugene Harry: Elder, Eagle's Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS**



In 2003, the **Sas Natsadle AHS** program opened its doors to the Fort St. John urban Aboriginal community. *Sas Natsadle* (which means ‘Little Bear’ in the Beaver language) shares a new state-of-the-art facility with the North East Native Advancing Society, their host agency. There is a diverse background of Aboriginal peoples in this northern setting, so the program includes Inuit, Métis, Tahltan, Cree, and Dane-zaa cultural activities.

“Audrey Sam and Vivienne Kish were two of the people who got the ball rolling to initiate the Aboriginal Head Start program in Fort St. John. I was hired in April of 2003, along with Shelly Yahey, the Head Early Childhood Educator. We began by developing the Parent Handbook and working directly with our Licensing Officer to get the program up and running. We also worked on the Policies and Procedures, Licensing Requirements, getting newsletters and brochures out to the community to get children enrolled in our new program. John Cardinal started in September of 2003 and was responsible for coordinating the scheduling of the bus runs and bus program operations. John has brought in many Elders to be part of the program, such as teaching the Beaver and Cree language, and having Elders participation at event gatherings.

We opened our doors in October 2003, sharing a basement room in a church for the first year. This was challenging since we had to set up each morning for the two classes and pack up everything in the afternoon. We had to travel to and from the offices of our host agency, NENAS for computer use, to hold our staff meetings in their Board Room, as well as for planning each week. We were thrilled when they offered us space in their new building where we would have our own classroom, and have our Host Agency help out tremendously with resource library, computers, job search, resumes, and parents wanting training all under one roof to benefit the families we serve. Two moms from our AHS program were employed as construction workers on the new site. There were a couple of huge snowfalls that fall, but we finally got moved in and classes began in October 2004. We’re still there today and the program is thriving.” – Darlene Conley: Program Coordinator, Sas Natsadle AHS

2004

Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS opened their doors for 40 children in February of 2004. The Cariboo Friendship Society is our host agency and the preschool is located in Williams Lake, the centre of the Cariboo. The three prominent Nations in this large area are Chilcotin, Shuswap and Carrier, and the cultural component involves those as well as others represented by the families in the AHS program.

“I’d like to congratulate [Head Start] for being here for 15 years...I’ve been involved with Little Moccasins for the last 5 years... called in to be one of the Elders; teach a little bit of language, drumming and singing, a bit of dancing. It’s an excellent program. My grandchildren have been here, my great-grandchildren have been here. And the staff is excellent! We do our darnedest to get them ready for school. Give ‘em a good start.”
– **Willie Alphonse: Elder, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS**



The Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia

The Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC (AHSABC) is a nonprofit society made up of the 12 urban Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) sites in British Columbia, all of which are members of the AHSABC.

History of AHSABC

The Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia was born in the spring of 1998, evolving in December 2001 to an incorporated, nonprofit society. Today, its membership consists of Program Coordinators, who make up the Board of Directors, as well as elected Parent Representatives from each site in BC. The Executive Committee is elected by the membership and consists of the President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, the BC Representative to the National Aboriginal Head Start Council (NAHSC) and the Provincial Parent Advisor. The Lead AHS Program Consultant from the Public Health Agency of Canada and the AHSABC Executive Director also participate as ex-officio members on the Executive Committee.

“In 2004, I was contracted to work with the Board of Directors of the AHSABC. I loved this role instantly and was inspired by leaders on the board as they operated ‘outside of the box’ and held a vision for 5, 10, 15 years to ‘contribute to urban Aboriginal children and families in the province.’ The initial goals of the Association were to provide a ‘clam shell’ that would hold up the 12 Head Start centres so they could do their job and provide the best programming to the children. Our philosophy was opposite to most organizations – we said, “Tell us what you need and how we can best be of service to you.” This attracted the Ministry of Children and Family Development to offer their support.

The first contract with MCFD was for limited funding to support AHS programming. The Board recognized that for future funding, it was critical to make sure this working relationship had the best possible outcome, so the accounting and deliverables were met ahead of schedule. Further funding was awarded and the Association was responsible for 5 key projects that reached, influenced and provided support province-wide to Aboriginal and First Nation communities. The major focus of these projects were weaving culture and language within programs that benefited children and parents. MCFD was positively impressed by the intention of the AHSABC Board to support Aboriginal communities regardless of whether they were on or off reserve, and that jurisdictional boundaries would not become barriers to this commitment.

*The first three years demanded a huge amount of volunteer time on behalf of the Board and Executive committee and were full of immense successes and deep challenges within the Association itself. The Board’s vision of ‘making a difference for all Aboriginal children and families’ caused people to reflect on their own personal values and beliefs. I learned a great deal about myself over these three years and was privileged to work with such extraordinary and committed individuals.” – **Monique Gray Smith, Former Executive Director, AHSABC***



Growth and Future Goals

The Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC's growth has been guided by a 'strategic plan' developed by the membership. The plan is reviewed annually to ensure it is reflective of current interests, needs and priorities of the AHS programs in BC. The 2008-2011 AHSABC Strategic Plan Vision is 'The Aboriginal Head Start Association of BC is a leader in Aboriginal Early Childhood Education. We provide support to Aboriginal Head Start sites to support excellence in programming.' The identified areas of commitment for the association are guided by 'Inspiration and Leadership' as the overall direction. The Association aims at reaching this goal by focusing on the following four areas:

- Influence and Representation
- Finances
- Education and Culture
- Relationships

"In 2008, I joined the AHSABC as their Executive Director and quickly learned just how much this small Association was accomplishing. I was most impressed by the strong relationships that spanned the province through the AHS Program Coordinators. Our AHS sites work so well together as a provincial body and demonstrate how we can learn from each other and be strong leaders for our Children and Families." – Joan Gignac, Executive Director, AHSABC

AHSABC has in many ways reached these goals and vision set in 2008 and is evident in the roles it plays in the province of BC and Nationally through participation on Aboriginal Early Childhood Development committees, networks and leadership tables. AHSABC actively demonstrates its leadership role also in developing current and relevant resources and training that promotes and supports excellence in our AHS sites across BC and Canada.

Resources and Best Practices

Since 2006, AHSABC has become a national leader in creating curriculum resources that are used in Aboriginal Head Start centres across Canada. Most of these are focused on incorporating culture into the preschool program, as well as recruiting Elders. These have been developed not only for BC programs, but also some (in English and French) for the National Aboriginal Head Start Association for use in sites across Canada. The resources are shown on the AHSABC website (www.ahsabc.com) and are available for purchase by contacting the Executive Director.

Tips & Tools for Creating Cultural Curriculum is the most popular guide, and a new updated edition is in preparation this year. A perpetual *Cultural Calendar* demonstrating cultural events, language, and activities from each of the 12 sites in BC is printed on a large laminated format for staff to use in planning their cultural curriculum. To encourage language revitalization, re-usable *Language Posters* have been created showing photos from both BC and national sites, in both official languages, with a space for writing in the 'word of the day' in the Native dialect being taught. Another bilingual resource developed for AHSUNC is the nutrition resource called *Our Food Our Stories: Celebrating Our Gifts from the Creator (Notre cuisine, nos histoire: Célébrons les dons du Créateur)*. This is a unique collection of traditional recipes and customs from across the country, providing stories about Hunting, Fishing and Gathering in Head Start's diverse First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures.



Because working with Elders is such an important part of AHS, several resources have been developed, including a book called *Honouring Our Elders: A Guide to Elder Participation in AHS Programs* and a DVD called *The Gift of the Elders*, which provides information to Elders about what to expect when becoming involved in Head Start. Brochures provide take-home reminders from the video.

“Audrey Waite always says that she found me. In May of 2004, I wandered into the Comox Valley Head Start and showed her some booklets I had created. She thought aloud about doing something like that to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of AHS, and then had to run off to a meeting. Six months later, I got a phone call and the voice said, “Hi, it’s Audrey. I got the funding for that Anniversary booklet.” It took me a while to remember who she was and what she was talking about, but that became my first project with the AHSABC. It was the beginning of a great relationship.

I have learned so much from working with Monique and Joan and AHS program staff on the many resources we’ve created together since then. Each year, I’ve been invited to the cultural retreats and other gatherings, where I get to see the faces behind the familiar voices. I’m full of admiration for these dedicated people who do the work of guiding our children so lovingly. This work is close to my heart since my own children learned Hulquminiw in the Cowichan Preschool years ago, which inspired me to obtain my ECE. Now, being a part of the Head Start community makes me feel that I belong to this great big wonderful family. Meegwetch, Audrey.” – Annie Jack: Editor & Designer, Beachwalker Studio

“These dedicated [staff] people who were shaping our future were highly valued, so they were honoured with the best that we could give them at every meeting and whenever they needed support. When we lost a key leader from one of the AHS centres, we supported her family and community at our Cultural Gathering. AHSABC leaders had the inherent wisdom and commitment to follow protocol and to do business in as traditional manner as possible.” – Monique Gray Smith, Former Executive Director, AHSABC

AHS Early Childhood Educators, Program Coordinators, Language Teachers, Elders, Cooks and Bus Drivers take pride in their work and participate in training to continue growing to better understand how they can contribute and make a difference. Through this commitment, AHSABC has led, supported and sponsored numerous training opportunities in our communities.

The AHSABC website is quickly becoming a ‘virtual AHS Village.’ Many other program resources and links to professional development opportunities are also offered. In the future, online seminars and interactive communication formats will be used to enhance learning and networking for AHS community members anywhere.

“AHS continues to invest in my educational pursuits. We have dollars budgeted for the staff to attend training, and the support from our host agency to be able to access training that staff may be interested in. There are opportunities that are made available through the efforts of the Executive Director of AHSABC in seeking funding to train all of the urban sites in BC. That is awesome!! All of the sites with the same training!! That is pretty remarkable.” – Leona Antoine: Program Coordinator, Singing Frog AHS



What is the Impact of Aboriginal Head Start?

There is no doubt that the AHS program is making a difference for all involved in it. Furthermore, the greater community is reaping the benefits of the Head Start members' success.

Making a Difference for Staff

Aboriginal Head Start staff love their jobs. They repeatedly articulate sentiments of being "blessed" by being able to work at their Head Start centre with the children. When asked what keeps them at Aboriginal Head Start, staff members spoke of their love for their jobs, and often say they can't imagine doing anything else because this is where they feel they belong. Furthermore, staff often note that their work is about much more than the job, it's about making a difference to the children, their families, and the community. For example, **Janice Silver, Program Coordinator at Future 4 Nations AHS** says, "It's a breath of fresh air to do what I love to do, and have people that are grateful for what they're receiving who come and volunteer."

"What inspires me the most is watching some of our families that have had several children go through the program. I've been here 10 years now and we've seen several families that had 4-5 children that have gone through the program, I think watching the growth in the families and parents is probably the biggest inspiration for me, and knowing that you are making a difference in their lives."
– **Janice Silver, Program Coordinator, Future 4 Nations AHS**

"I don't want to be anywhere else. I've worked in a couple of different of centres, and they're all great... but I find this is where my heart is. I feel blessed that I have the opportunity to be here, and to help them grow and help their children learn and become their own individual people." – **Leila Aubichon: Program Assistant, Prince George AHS**

"To see the children succeed is amazing. To see their faces when they come in; their first day of school or just any day, it's amazing. It's an amazing thing that we can go through as educators, as First Nations, just to see the children come in and want to be here and know that we can make a difference and make an impact on their lives."
– **Zelda Williams: Manager & Early Childhood Educator, Future 4 Nations AHS**

"(There is a) level of respect that is there for me as staff, for me as an educator... You're valued as an ECE educator; you're made to feel wanted, so you definitely want to stay."
– **Geeta Harpalani: Early Childhood Educator, Singing Frog AHS**

"Our ancestors shared their wisdom through stories, which is why it is so important when our AHS Program Coordinators, Staff, Elders and Parents get together throughout the year, they share their program successes and challenges and learn from each other through their stories. Demonstrating and valuing our Oral Tradition is proving it to be alive and well and necessary for the ongoing growth of our AHS programs. We come together at least twice a year for our Annual General Meeting, Cultural Retreat and Strategic Planning, bringing together AHS program leaders, educators and parents to share, learn and grow." – **Joan Gignac, Executive Director, AHSABC**



The enthusiasm of Aboriginal Head Start staff is truly inspiring; their stories, their passion, and their dedication to the children. In addition, they also speak about their own personal benefits from being involved in the AHS Village.

“Prince George and Power of Friendship Aboriginal Head Start have had many special people that we’ve been lucky enough to call staff members come and go since 1996. They have all made an impact on our programs. There have been many happy moments, many tears of joy and sadness, but all worthwhile because we have worked for the children. The children are our future, and it warms your heart when each and every one of them remembers you years later, and hugs you and says, ‘You were my teacher.’ Children keep you young, make you smile and laugh, and make you proud.”
– **Jeannie Bourgeois: Former Staff, Prince George AHS & Power of Friendship AHS**

“I do singing, dancing, we drum, we do stories and we do a little bit of language. And to make sure that I was enunciating properly, I ended up attending language classes once a week with a wonderful Elders group here in Campbell River. So I shared with the children that they make me want to learn also.” – **Gloria Roze: Elder, Qwallayuw AHS**

“It makes me feel good at the end of the day to know that I’m trying my best to make a difference in a little child’s life because I know that I had a lot of teachers that made a difference in my life.” – **Annette Francis: Former Student, Future 4 Nations AHS**

“Working as a parent volunteer, I became really attached to the Family Involvement Worker, Caroline Daniels, who I saw as my mentor... I started working as a First Nations Role Model in our public schools, thanks to the FIW who referred me.”
– **Glenna Johnson: Family Involvement Worker & Former Parent, Kermodé AHS**

“Children in the program from about ten or 11 years ago wave at me and remember my name. Talk about a powerful experience to see them carrying their books and proceeding with their education. It’s empowering to see that growth... It’s taken me from being a lumberjack to a bit more sensitive to other people’s needs. After 11 years, I sure have grown personally and spiritually. So, thank you.”
– **Randy Trelinski: Bus Driver, Comox Valley AHS**

“Head Start helped me grow as a person, and I’m grateful for that. It’s empowerment of who I am... That’s helped me over the years.” – **Carolyn Reed: Senior ECE, Awahsuk AHS**

“It has been a huge privilege and honour to work with the Aboriginal Head Start Association. This work had profound impact on me personally and professionally, in a good way. It affirmed my desire to contribute to the Early Years and to those who are helping raise up our future generations. It also was a catalyst for a deepened commitment to ensuring all of our children have the opportunity to participate in programming where culture and language are not an add on, but rather the heartbeat of the programming.” – **Monique Gray Smith, Former Executive Director, AHSABC**



It is not uncommon to see family of staff members become involved at the sites, also volunteering their time and drawing inspiration from the children and the learning environment. For example, **Ashley Cameron**, sister to **Awahsuk Program Coordinator Vanessa Hickman**, got involved at that centre by accompanying Vanessa to work at class time and on field trips, helping out and eventually acquiring her ECE and Special Needs Certificates. Parents often stay involved after their children have graduated from the preschool. Many told stories of returning as volunteers, and eventually becoming part of the staff. They also spoke of how their connection to the program enriched their lives as much as their children's lives.

"I worked as a waitress for 17 years and then went to the College, and now I'm an ECE Assistant at Little Moccasins, so it's a big career change from what I was used to – and it changed my life."
– **Laura-Lee Marshall:**
Former Parent & ECE Assistant, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS

"I initially got involved with Head Start when I was doing foster care and I had two young Aboriginal children. MCFD actually asked me to get the boys involved with the Head Start and I said, "What's Head Start?" So that's where it started, and I loved Head Start right from day one. The first day I came through the doors, I felt like I belonged there. I started volunteering three days a week out of four at the Head Start because I just loved the feel of it, I loved everybody, they were so friendly and welcoming, I loved the music and the culture... And when my kids had outgrown the Head Start Program and had gone to school, I sat on the board at Laichwiltach just to keep myself involved. And then when they started the Family Networker job, I applied and I got it! That was eight years ago and I'm still here and I still love it. It's been a wonderful experience."

– **Noreen Pollock: Family Networker, Qwallyuw AHS**

"My time with Aboriginal Head Start began with my daughter's enrolment in the preschool. During my mandatory parent volunteer time, I was encouraged to take the opportunity to work in the preschool and work toward obtaining my certification and licence to practice... I keep coming back, because of my desire to make a difference and the inspiration that I receive from others that I come in contact with." – **Leona Antoine:**
Program Coordinator, Singing Frog AHS

Some parents and staff have become motivated to pursue education in the Early Childhood Development field themselves. At **Prince George AHS, Cultural Teacher, Renata Heathcliff** told of how going back to school and getting her Early Childhood Education certificate prior to working at Prince George AHS gave her a better understanding of children and their learning processes. **Annette Francis**, a recent **Co-op Student at Future 4 Nations AHS** in Mission, states that working at the preschool made a significant impact on her life and educational plans, prompting her to obtain her Family Daycare certificate and eventually her ECE, in hopes of working in AHS one day...*"When I came here it was just amazing... I knew this is what I wanted to do; I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to make kids happy, help them have a safe place and give them some good memories. It's all the building blocks of growing up and being an adult."*

"AHS played a huge role in my educational pursuits. I started as just being a one-to-one support staff and then the bus driver, and ECE. It's nice that now if someone's sick, if Jamie the bus driver is sick, it's easy for me to just jump into the bus driver seat and then go back into the classroom. It's nice that we can all support each other."

– **Susan Horton: Early Childhood Educator, Future 4 Nations AHS**



Making a Difference for Children

*“The whole program is supposed to help the kids have more self-esteem, be able to be more positive, community-oriented people, and I think that it really does.” – **Steven Evenden: Parent & Former Staff, Power of Friendship AHS***

Many parents comment on the holistic personal growth they witness their children experiencing in their time in Aboriginal Head Start, from increased cultural knowledge and identity to developing social skills and emerging as individuals. AHS also offers children increased access to professional health care, such as dental, vision and hearing screening and treatment, as well as speech pathology and other services.

“I keep thinking back to my first son; the difference between when he first started he was very withdrawn and not social to when he left and went to kindergarten, it’s just like night and day. It made a big difference.”

– Scott Nelson: Bus Driver & Parent, Eagle’s Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS

*“Our son began attending Aboriginal Head Start last year and from that moment on, we have noticed a great amount of improvement in him... The program has given him so many skills, especially in his interactions with others. Every day he comes up with something new he has learned through Head Start... He will be starting kindergarten in the fall and we are confident that he will be totally prepared, thanks to the Aboriginal Head Start program. [It] has given him self-esteem and confidence which he can build on throughout his life. Thank you so much.” – **Joyce Morpaw & Winston Pruden: Parents, Sas Natsadle AHS***

*“[Arranging vision screening by an optometrist] has been one of our most important milestones in obtaining health care for our children. Already they have dental and hearing check-ups and speech therapy. We are the only preschool in Williams Lake who offers this free service. Last year, 11 out of 15 children had problems with either vision or hearing alone, so we know this makes a big difference for our kids.” – **Ana Rawlek: Family Involvement Worker, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS***



Former students, now in their teens and attending high school, also recognize the role Aboriginal Head Start has played in the formation of their character, and how bonds they made in preschool can last a lifetime.

Brittany Hebert, a former student at Prince George AHS, stated that Head Start also taught her to respect others and “...to be kind to one another.”

*“I learnt social skills... I really didn’t have that many friends, so when I went to Head Start I met new friends... I still have friends from preschool now.” – **Cassandra Westrand: Former Student, Power of Friendship AHS***



"It was really fun going [to preschool] here... I'm 9 years old now and I go to elementary school and I'm on the honour role, but I still like to come here a lot because my Grandma works here now." – **Cianna O'Connor: Former Student, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS**

"Head Start prepared me for what's going to be going on as I got older... I made lifetime friends." – **Nicole Fusta: Former Student, Prince George AHS**

"My kids' memories of Head Start are wonderful. It's just such a positive thing. They're now in grade 10 and grade 8 and they still hang around with some of the children they came to Head Start, so it's lifelong connections. I ended up adopting those two boys, and Laichwiltach and Head Start gave them roots. They really felt like they had family roots here and they still do." – **Noreen Pollock: Family Networker, Qwallayuw AHS**

Parents and visitors have attested to how Aboriginal Head Start sites are very welcoming and warm, providing a familial and safe community environment that fosters social skills and allows children to come out of their "shells" and open up, as some parents have put it. This openness becomes crucial to making new friends and sustaining relationships throughout their lives.

"[Before my daughter] went to preschool she really didn't have a lot of friends... It brought her out to be with other children and around other children." – **Lorraine Fusta: Cook, Prince George AHS**

"[My daughter] is coming out of her shell more; she used to be super shy and would cry if anybody came around... she loves coming here, talks about the staff all the time. Shows me everything she's learned. And she's learned a lot more and so have I... I've learned that I have to participate at being a parent..." – **Vera Johnny: Parent, Eagle's Nest AHS**



"I see it in Vanessa's kids. You can see the confidence that her kids have built up through the program. Her daughter is asking to bring her drum to school and to show her friends and sing songs... She's built that confidence and pride in her culture that she wants to share with people." – **Kelsie Marchand: Early Childhood Educator, Awahsuk AHS**

"It's been really awesome.... my in-laws saw an immediate change in Brandon's behaviour. He was more cooperative, more outgoing, and a lot calmer than he was at home." – **Chantelle Leung: Parent, Eagle's Nest AHS**

"No matter what is happening at home, they can come to school, it's a safe place, they can enjoy their time and their faces light up." – **Candice Harris-Rivera: Bus Driver & Childcare Worker, Eagle's Nest AHS**



The socialization and learning in Aboriginal Head Start is apparent when the children move on to kindergarten. Staff and parents tell of kindergarten teachers' endorsement of Aboriginal Head Start, noting that children who have been in the program are easily recognizable.

"The biggest change is their language. Every child who comes in from Head Start loves books; every child is willing to sit and look at their own book. In the past, children didn't understand this was going to be a positive experience; they would hold the books upside down and backwards, and that never happens anymore... and their comprehension is significantly much better. So the language and literacy activities you've worked with have shown benefit to the children."
– **Amber Knezacek: Kindergarten Teacher, Terrace BC**

"I've heard kindergarten teachers say "We know which ones are from Head Start.... because they sit in a circle, they listen, their behaviour – they socialize better."
– **Leila Aubichon: Program Assistant, Prince George AHS**

"When the teacher found out that they were in the Head Start program before they got to kindergarten, she said it was the best thing we could have put them in because they were a little bit more advanced than the kids that didn't attend preschool." – **Lorraine Westrand: Former Parent, Power of Friendship AHS**

"My daughter, who has been in (Head Start), is a straight A student, she's on the Honour Role, the Principal's list, she's in 'Peer Helpers,' she's in the 'Iron Man,' she's athletic, she's smart, and it's because of Head Start."
– **Charlet Whitehawk: Former Parent, Prince George AHS**

"My daughter was in preschool there – she's in grade seven now. She excelled when she got into kindergarten. The teacher actually asked me "Where did she go to preschool?", because she knew far more than most kindergarteners..."
– **Caroline Laughington: Former Parent, Qwallyuw AHS**

"I like the field trips... it's nice for the children to be exposed to the different things they go to. They go up to the University... and it's nice for them to know about higher education."
– **Jean Walker: Elder, Power of Friendship AHS**

"The kindergarten teachers call us and they can tell which children have been in Head Start because of what they've learned and how they interact with other children."

– **Darlene Gervais: Administrative Assistant & Bus Driver, Power of Friendship AHS**



Making a Difference for Parents and Families

Aboriginal Head Start has greatly helped some parents become more engaged in their own lives, as well as further invested in their children's futures, through direct participation as a parent. For many, the shared experience of 'who they are' has changed their lives dramatically, resulting in personal growth and well being from the support of belonging to the AHS community.

"Before I came here, I was quiet and I wasn't able to talk... and from being on the PAC and talking to the parents, I opened up more. I had a really good experience."

– Jessica Field: Former Parent, Power of Friendship AHS

"I learned through AHS that the school cared about my child's best interest, and then soon realized that the school wasn't such a scary place. Then I was able to go to the public schools and speak on my oldest son's behalf; he was later diagnosed with dyslexia. If it had not been for AHS, I don't know if I ever would have been comfortable with staff in the public school." – **Glenna Johnson: Family Involvement Worker and Former Parent, Kermode AHS**

"I was really shy, I still am shy. I guess being a part of Head Start has let me come out of my shell a bit. When I first was a parent I would never talking the meetings... but near the end I was a lot more outgoing... (Head Start staff) actually pushed me to start working at the Friendship Centre... There was a job opening there

and the staff here (Prince George AHS) encourage me to apply for it. They were always really supportive." – **Crystal Whitehawk: Former Parent, Prince George AHS**

"I had a parent who was afraid to leave her home – really afraid to leave her home, she would not. We got her into the program... she joined the Parent Advisory Committee and we dragged her out to a couple meetings in Vancouver. She's just a totally different person today, it's just amazing. She's going back to school, she's involved in the community, she volunteers, and she's just a totally different person." – **Janice Silver: Program Coordinator, Future 4 Nations AHS**

As their children gain a sense of identity from the Head Start experiences, so do the parents. In fact, it was common in interviews with Head Start parents to hear that they have reconnected with their cultures through the lessons their children learn in the preschool and share at home. **Parents** like **Crystal Whitehawk**, from **Prince George AHS**, express how they "*didn't know [their] Native culture growing up*" and feel that programs like AHS are fantastic, and filling a void they experienced in their own youth. **Annette Francis**, a former university co-op student at **Future 4 Nations AHS** in Mission, BC, stated she's "*... learned a lot more of my culture being in Head Start too*", and that Head Start "*...helped me too, not only my children, it helps me to know where I belong.*"

"I have seen so many of my nieces, my nephews, my own children, little cousins, go through this program and take so many things home. As for me, I was never exposed as a child to the Native culture as the kids are today... I'm very thankful that my kids came home every day and they would teach me how to say different things... how to count in Beaver, how to count in Cree, how to say 'Mom and Dad'... They've learned the dancing, the culture, the tipis, the drying and the baking, the tanning." – **Jessica Testawitch: Parent, Sas Natsadle AHS**



"I was brought up in white foster homes. I never knew anything about the culture until I started [my daughter] in Head Start, and with me being here working and learning as I go." – Lorraine Fusta: Cook, Prince George AHS

"I teach songs and games to the children with the Kwakwaka'wakw background... The kids are such wonderful children. To see them learning the culture and learning to sing on their own and dance on their own, there's no greater reward because they're excited to learn it and do it. It's a really good program... I really wish I had something like that, because I was 20 before I started learning, and I feel that if had this when I was 5, I would be a lot further than I am now. Gilakasla." – Shawn Decaire: Cultural Teacher & Former Parent, Qwallayuw AHS

Many parents consider Aboriginal Head Start staff as family; people that have proven to be there in times of need, offering assistance and guidance when appropriate. Comments were made by participants at a number of Head Start sites describing staff as helpful when parents were dealing with marital break-ups, single parenting, and being newcomers in the area.

"One dad came back years later to thank us for changing their lives. He said when his daughter first started preschool here, the family just ate junk food in front of the TV. She would tell them, 'No chips, buy carrots' and 'Let's sit at the table instead of in the living room.' The dad said, 'Now every meal is good food and we eat together as a family, because of Head Start.'" – Maria Evenden: Parent & Staff, Power of Friendship AHS

"I was at a time that I had just split up with my wife. There was a lot of good facilitation and help and resources and different things. We joined the board. It was cool to be on the board and be able to meet and get to know the teachers and staff pretty personally. I actually ended up working here for a little while – cooking and doing the kitchen work and the food prep and stuff for the kids, which I love doing too, I love the kids." – Harley Rose: Former Parent, Eagle's Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS

"(AHS staff were) very friendly ladies. Totally understandable, they knew what I was going through and it seemed they did everything in their power to help me. They helped me raise my son for that year." – Wayne Joseph: Parent, Power of Friendship AHS

"All the services that the Head Start program provides – the bus service, the food, those are some of the things that really make the program stand apart." – River Hill: Parent & Volunteer, Singing Frog AHS





“It’s a really great program. It’s free to the public, so there’s no costs. A lot of parents can’t afford childcare for the children, or transportation. There’s also transportation available too for any families who don’t have vehicles, which is a big thing for lower income families.” – Justin Ethier: Family Support Worker, Comox Valley AHS

“This program is such a valuable resource for our families and children in the North East, in particular those that struggle financially and don’t have opportunities of placing their children into programs that allow parents to pursue higher learning.” – Darlene Conley: Program Coordinator, Sas Natsadle AHS

“We’ve seen parents that were unemployed and they were in the program, and just having our support – they’ve gone on to get jobs, go to school and all that stuff, so just having our program support, we helped out a lot of parents.” – Jeannie Bourgeois: Former Staff, Prince George AHS & Power of Friendship AHS





Making a Difference for Elders

Many of today's Elders are the children who were taken away to Residential Schools. Elders and parents alike have also drawn distinctions between the conceptual foundation of Aboriginal Head Start and the historic wrongs of the Residential School system, contrasting Head Start's modern encouragement and support for cultural and language lessons with the Residential Schools' goal of removing the 'Indian' from Aboriginal children in efforts of assimilation. **River Hill, a parent and volunteer at Singing Frog AHS** in Vancouver, told Project staff how his Grandmother continuously sings the praises of Aboriginal Head Start because she didn't have anything like it when she was at that age and instead was forced to attend Residential School.

"Aboriginal Head Start gives back what Residential School took away. It took away our children, it took away our culture and language, it took away the family, and our spirituality as well."

– Audrey Waite: Program Coordinator, Comox Valley AHS, National Aboriginal Head Start Council Representative and former Chairperson

"Most Elders are still in their pain because of Residential School... Lots of us old-timers never had any love in our childhoods... got taken away from our families and never had parenting skills... Being here with the children teaches me a lot because I wasn't a good father to my children, so today I do my best to be a good father and grandfather to all these small children." – **Willie Alphonse: Elder, Little Moccasins Learning Centre**

"There's been a big turnaround in the school system Drumming is most important to our people. There was a story in every song, teardrops, joy, tears of joy, a celebration of life. That was all forbidden for us from a long time ago. In the last 10 years, 12 years or so it's being introduced in schools... All of the things that were

forbidden for us are coming back strong." – **Eugene Harry: Elder, Eagle's Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS**

"I teach Carrier language and songs to the children at the centre... also Level 1 Carrier to parents in PAC – this helps engage them in their child's learning. I'm still learning language on my own, taking courses..." – **Theresa Austin: Elder, Prince George AHS**



For many Elders living in urban areas, the Aboriginal Head Start community provides them with a family, a second home. As well, they often become surrogate grandparents to the children in the preschool.

"I'm going on my 12th year here. So every year, I decide I'm gonna retire, but come September, I'm so excited to see who the new children are, and the ones who've moved up from Little Fry over to Head Start, and then from Head Start up to the afternoon program. I guess I can't seem to quit coming here. Not only do I have fun doing what I do, but I've met a lot of children. They come through my life, they leave... but for that little bit of time that I'm with them, I'm hoping that I have made a little bit of impact in their lives." – **Sophie Hansen: Elder, Qwallayuw AHS**



“When I come into Head Start ... I know that I am appreciated for what I do, and the children appreciate me as well as the staff. It makes it nice to come here.”

– Jean Walker: Elder, Power of Friendship AHS

“We have our Kokum (Christine Auger) who is now 85 years old. She allows us to bring the Head Start children to her home and help her set up her tipi when the weather is dry. She has a variety of displays for the children to ask questions, she shows them rabbit and Beaver furs, baby papoose, campfire, bannock making, tea on the fire, and she shows the children how it was in the old days; she tells them lots of stories.” – Darlene Conley: Program Coordinator, Sas Natsadle AHS

“Ten or 11 years ago, I was asked to teach songs and dance to the children, and with every song and dance there is a story. So I’ve tried to instill in the children the importance of this... The children have such an innocent spirit and I’m really honoured to be involved with teaching them song and dance. I’m also impressed with how they’re learning the Tsimshian language and I think this is very good for them... I’m teaching them Haida songs and a prayer... every day I feel I’m learning from them as well as teaching them.”

– Margaret Adkins: Elder, Prince Rupert AHS



“This is absolutely the most incredible place to work. It is an incredible program. I didn’t know something like this existed and it just gives me a feeling of joy that these children come here and have such a head start! It’s beyond anything that I knew existed. They receive love and they receive discipline and they are encouraged through everything. It’s just an absolutely incredible program and it’s enriched my life. I love to come and see these children grow. What is wonderful about the cultural program is the support system. Every one of the workers participates in it. They learn the language, they participate in the dancing, and it is just an immense sense of pride.” – Gloria Roze: Elder, Qwallayuw AHS



Making a Difference for Communities

Aboriginal Head Start communities are becoming the new ‘village’ for Aboriginal people living in urban areas. They offer a welcoming environment, making newcomers and strangers feel at home and sometimes even like they already know each other. Relationships develop not only between parents and Head Start staff, but parents get to know one another while their children become friends. **Harley Rose, a former parent and volunteer at Eagle’s Nest AHS and Singing Frog AHS** in Vancouver, spoke of getting to know other parents through the school and in the neighbourhood, and how they all share a bond through Aboriginal Head Start. This sense of ongoing community is evident by the number of parents who eagerly participated in this *15 Years Valuing Project* whose children have long since left the program and are now further along in their education.

“[Singing Frog] Head Start has put me in touch with so many people in the community... anywhere I go I know people. It’s a very familiar family feeling in a big city; you get this close-knit community, and it’s a really welcoming, warm feeling.” – **Krista Murray: Parent, Singing Frog AHS**

“All the different people that [my daughter] met here that we still see around in the neighbourhood, they will always be her friends hopefully. It’s really great that she has that connection there, and here.” – **River Hill: Parent & Volunteer, Singing Frog AHS**

“It’s been fascinating to learn what role Head Start plays in the community; it’s not just about the children... its a ‘hub’ for families. Families with children who aren’t in Head Start yet, and families with children who have been in Head Start.”

– **Robin Reid: Program Consultant, BC Region, Public Health Agency of Canada**

“These families from isolation become part of the community, talking with the children, talking with other families, networking, it’s just a natural evolution.”

– **Randy Trelinski: Bus Driver, Comox Valley AHS**

“It’s a protective community here. That’s what I really like about it. I told my dad they pick [my son] up on a school bus and drop him off here and we don’t have to worry about him... It’s a very good school. I love it. A very good staff and they care for the little kids. That’s pretty good.” – **Kelly Amos: Parent, Eagle’s Nest AHS**

“By bringing [children] this ‘head start’ and teaching them how to count and learn their ABCs in Kwakwaka, and learn some of the things that we didn’t get to learn and teach in some of the villages, it’s been a real asset to us People, as an older people; because when they get into their teens, they’re able to teach

as well and to hand that [knowledge] on more and more.” – **Shawn Decaire: Cultural Teacher & Former Parent, Qwallayuw AHS**

“We’ve always helped out as parent volunteers. We helped build that playground out there... The atmosphere [keeps us coming back] – everybody’s always happy and friendly, the good food, the joking...” – **Marty Clayton: Former Parent & Grandparent, Kermodé AHS**



*“One of the most important things that I’ve learnt here is that we are a family. I’ve learnt that I have a family here that I can count on. If anything goes wrong in my personal life, I know that my family here at Future 4 Nations I can count on.” – **Zelda Williams: Early Childhood Educator & Manager, Future 4 Nations AHS***

*“Where I grew up, people were fluent in their language – Algonquin, Cree, Montaignais or Innu – so when I moved here, I was quite shocked to see the effects of Residential School and alcoholism, and family values disappearing... Some of our first children have kids now – 16 years old is young, but its part of our reality here to support them, be there for them. Seeing families doing well also enriches my life because I feel we’re here on earth to support each another and help one another, and we learn from children and hopefully we can teach children also.” – **Yves L’Archeveque: Bus driver/Maintenance & Former Parent, Qwallayuw AHS***

The benefits extend beyond the Head Start Village to the greater communities in which they are located. Individuals from associated agencies attest to the positive impact that being involved with Head Start has made in their own personal lives. In some areas, AHS programs reach out to non-Aboriginals by offering inclusion in the program.

*“I’m not Aboriginal... but I’ve learned about the culture...The children teach me ...and I’ve been learning from our Elder Eugene the language and different prayers. This experience is awesome! ... My beliefs and their beliefs are the same although a little different, so we respect each other’s culture. It teaches me respect, patience... I feel a sense of family.” – **Candice Harris-Rivera: Bus Driver & Childcare Worker, Eagle’s Nest AHS***

*“When these programs are being funded, it’s good to know that it is benefiting the child and the educational process, and certainly I don’t think there’s anybody in the school who doesn’t have good things to say about the Head Start program... I think all these steps going into intervention are really very good... it’s making a difference.” – **Amber Knezacek: Kindergarten Teacher, Terrace***

*“I became involved with AHS as an Enhancement Worker with VASCD. I enjoy the warm, supportive environment, and the rich and meaningful learning opportunities with the children and the teacher. I feel grateful that being involved with AHS is my work. With each visit, I am reminded of how much I learn from the children about what really matters in life. I can learn about cultural teachings and values, and be reminded of the wisdom of children.” – **Anne Tomlinson: Enhancement Worker, VASCD***

*“In our enhancement program at Robron, we have three seats that are saved for non-Aboriginal children, so that makes a difference. I think it gives the community a better understanding of who we are and what we have to offer, and then there’s not maybe so many barriers out there.” – **Lorraine Kok: Program Coordinator, Qwallayuw AHS***

*“Aboriginal Head Start is making a difference, not only to those families and staff who are a part of Head Start everyday, but also to those communities the AHS is in. Head Start is the place where new friends are welcome and sharing happens, and this helps to raise awareness and cultural safety and appreciation for who we are and the strengths we bring to our communities.” – **Joan Gignac, Executive Director, AHSABC***



What is the future of Aboriginal Head Start?

The Need for Change

When asked if they would make any changes to their site or the program overall, former students, parents and staff are generally at a loss for words because they feel the program is comprehensive, and has met or surpassed their needs. However, many were able to consider the broader context of Aboriginal Head Start, and the expressed need for it in their communities, noting that adding more sites would be a great first step.

“There’s still much work to do, but it’s made such a significant difference. We are concerned about those children who don’t attend Head Start because their language skills are not as good. In general, that ability to speak, that ability to communicate is so important.” – Rose Monsees: Kindergarten Teacher, Terrace

Waitlists and the Need for More Sites

Staff and parents alike, across all sites, recognize and express the need for more Head Start sites throughout the province, if not nationally. As many sites currently have long wait lists, in some cases long enough that program staff encourage parents to enrol their children as soon as they are born, it is obvious that these communities could benefit from additional sites.

“There is such a demand for the program; each of our Projects has wait lists, some up to forty or fifty kids. In a perfect world there would be no one on a wait list... I would be happy if there were no kids on the wait list, if every child who wanted to be in Head Start could be in Head Start.” – Robin Reid: Program Consultant, BC Region, Public Health Agency of Canada

“AHS is a highly needed program in the north. At our very first grad ceremony, we had 150 people in attendance. The Family Literacy program and K-Readiness summer programs are also well attended. From the beginning, even with only word-of-mouth promoting, the community has responded in large numbers. Since the first year, we’ve had a waitlist and it’s very heavy now. We have served a lot of families.” – Darlene Conley: Program Coordinator, Sas Natsadle AHS

“I’m shouting out to all people... as soon as your baby is born please sign them up for Head Start. In Prince George you have the choice of the Carrier Head Start, which I work at, and the Cree Head Start, and both their waiting lists are quite long, so we encourage families to sign up their babies as soon as they’re born. My grandbaby is already signed up for Head Start, and she’s only 4 months old.”

– Renata Heathcliff: Cultural Teacher, Prince George AHS

There is an ongoing need for financial support to make improvements to existing sites and to better serve the Aboriginal Head Start communities. Adequate transportation services is a common challenge for most sites.



*“We’re mandated to deliver all these components and yet, since 2004, our level of funding has stayed the same. Its becoming harder and harder to meet all those mandated components with the dollar value staying the same.” – **Janice Silver: Program Coordinator, Future 4 Nations AHS***

*“I would like to see a bigger building for the kids and teachers. I know it gets very hot in here in the summer and the employees are here all summer. I’ve popped in a few times and I don’t know how they survive in here all day long without air conditioning! Because it is a portable building there’s not a lot of insulation.” – **Krista Murray: Parent, Singing Frog AHS***

*“If I could change one thing... my dream is for all AHS sites to own their own building. I have heard of these wonderful buildings that the ‘All-day Kindergarten’ programs are getting.... I want something beautiful for all of the children, families and staff to call their own, an actual building, something that is permanent.” – **Leona Antoine: Program Coordinator, Singing Frog AHS***

“As the AHS Coordinator along with the AIDP Consultant, I reach out to all three reserves in our community each week, overseeing the Head Start programs on and off-reserve. I work with the Aboriginal Infant Development consultants in their AIDP programs. These reserves are located at great distances, and there are many Elders there who love to be invited and take part in the Head Start program. Transportation is a big issue for us and more funding would help us bring our valued Elders, like Maisie Metcheah, who lives 1½ hours away.”

– Darlene Conley: Program Coordinator, Sas Natsadle AHS

*“Transportation has been an issue every year that I’ve been here. If we had funding for more buses and more bus drivers, that would be great. The poverty level here means that people can’t afford a vehicle, and sometimes they don’t have money for buses so they can’t make it to our PAC meetings. But if government could give us more funding for buses, that would be great.” – **Noreen Pollock: Family Networker, Qwallayuw AHS***

*“I know for other parents involved in the program, there’s no bus service in the morning, there’s only afternoon bus service. I think a morning bus service would help a lot more children be able to attend more regularly, and be able to continue through the program. Whereas other times, personal issues, family issues, things like that could interfere if they’re dependent on transit or a family member.” – **Krista Murray: Parent, Singing Frog AHS***

“We also have to be aware that a child has not fallen out of the apple tree; he or she comes from a family and the family, too, has needs. More resources in the community, more money, more programs – we definitely need to put in a little extra 10%. If you’re giving the rest of the programs 100% then I think Head Start needs 110%.”

– Geeta Harpalani: Early Childhood Educator, Singing Frog AHS

Many AHS staff and parents have good ideas for future growth, such as increasing or improving the program’s existing resources or using them in other ways. For example, **Renata Heathcliff, Cultural Teacher at Prince George AHS**, recommends adding a Community Kitchen to the program site, whereby the families could come to the Kitchen and make their meals for the week while learning about food safety, the food groups, and healthier choices.



The Ongoing Need for Culture

While parents cannot say enough about their appreciation of Head Start's cultural components, they also generally express a desire for more. When asked if they would make any changes to the program, many enthusiastically said "more culture and language." Some asked for greater representation of a variety of Aboriginal peoples, recognizing that children from any and all First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures are included in these urban preschools. The mandate of AHS is that the unique heritage of each participant is honoured and taught.

"I would like to see other Native people come in from different groups... because everybody's culture has a little difference to it, and each one is wonderful." – **Jean Walker: Elder, Power of Friendship Head Start**

"The language and culture is what keeps me coming back... I think our only bet would be to get the little ones going, that's the only way we're gonna get our language back. We're losing the Shuswap language fast. There's not too many, just the Elders are the only speakers we have. There's no new speakers, so I think the little ones are our only hope for the language." – **Cecelia de Rose: Elder, Little Moccasins Learning Centre AHS**

"I'm so proud to be in this school caring for children, caring for the future, that's our future... preparing the children to be our caretakers, as strong as our Elders and our ancestors. One land, one heart, one spirit."
– **Eugene Harry, Eagle's Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS**

Some parents and former students felt a loss of the cultural teachings in Aboriginal Head Start when the children enter the general school system. They idealize a public school curriculum that incorporates cultural content and lessons for them. Language for students with Special Needs is also valued by kindergarten teachers.

"...that's the shortfall in teaching the culture and traditions – it doesn't go on into school, it stops here." – **Ellen Antoine: Grandparent & Volunteer, Eagle's Nest AHS & Singing Frog AHS**

"It's so beneficial when you can combine the expertise of those people who work with Special Needs, so I would love to see that continue. Along with the other good things, such as colours, the counting... I'd like to see possibly more rhyming to aid in literacy... for those who speak Nisga'a at home, I doubt that there is rhyming, but it would help if they can be exposed to more rhyming at the preschool, since it's shown to be a pre-literacy skill." – **Amber Knezacek: Kindergarten Teacher, Terrace**

"I don't find anything should be changed ... but maybe longer days – a full day program would be great." – **Angie Clayton: Former Parent & Grandparent, Kermodé AHS**

"I would like to see funding changed... I don't think they'll have their culture and language and the benefit of Elders when they do the all-day kindergarten... I think if we can work in a better partnership with the School District and if we have funding, then I think that would make a dramatic impact." – **Lorraine Kok: Program Coordinator, Qwallayuw AHS**



The Best of Both Worlds

In his interview with the *15 Years Valuing Project*, **Elder Eugene Harry** spoke of Chief Dan George of the Burrard Nation being very instrumental in the education of his People, using language and the tools of education to help. Elder Eugene added that through his knowledge and wisdom, Chief Dan George wanted children to have the ‘best of both worlds,’ and that Aboriginal Head Start provides that for its students – their cultural identity and a gateway to the education system.

“Immersion in our culture and our language wakes up the stories from long ago and reminds us of the gifts we have and how these gifts will help us to return to our strong and healthy ways of knowing and being. This renewal bridges us from yesterday to today and into tomorrow, with our children inspiring us to continue on in this journey. Aboriginal Head Start is our new village where we feel safe and are supported to learn, grow, and experience more about who we are.” – Joan Gignac, Executive Director, AHSABC

“And my wish is if Head Start could be offered to everyone all throughout Canada, that would be wonderful!” – Lorraine Kok: Program Coordinator, Qwallayuw AHS

“If we have a family coming in and the child hasn’t been in Head Start, if there are siblings, we say to the parents, ‘Could we invite you to go over and take a look at the Head Start. There are things that you can help your child with and Head Start is a really good place to start, because there are people who are willing to work with you’... and usually they enroll their younger children in the program.” – Amber Knezacek: Kindergarten Teacher, Terrace

“AHS is a powerful program for children and families and needs to be expanded in the future. It is one of the answers to intergenerational healing for Aboriginal people and fosters a deep sense of pride in our children and in their knowing who they are. I hope for a much larger presence of AHS in our province and our country.” – Monique Gray Smith, Former Executive Director, AHSABC



“It’s been a joy and a privilege to work with Head Start. All the best in the future!” – Jeannie Bourgeois: Former Staff, Prince George AHS & Power of Friendship AHS



The Participants

The AHSABC is grateful to the participants named below and apologizes for any omissions:

AHSABC

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