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# NUNATSIAQ ONLINE

NEWS: Nunavut April 03, 2014 - 9:33 am

## Video technology could improve Nunavut education, mental health

Business consortium, GN, team up to deliver virtual youth services

DAVID MURPHY

Nunavut youth are about to get a boost in education and mental health services from thousands of kilometres away.

A consortium of businesses is donating high-definition video technology so Nunavut teachers can improve how they deliver their lessons and so Nunavut students struggling with depression and other forms of mental distress can get help faster.

April 2 saw the launch of "Connect North," a program that essentially helps Nunavut's youth get psychiatric and expert educational support through a fancy video conferencing technology called TelePresence, which is much like Skype.

Nunavut communities are slated to receive 10 video equipment units from telecommunications giant Cisco Canada for youth psychiatric sessions over the next three years.

Cisco says northerners struggling through mental health problems must currently wait, on average, two years for a psychiatric consultations in the South — now those consultations can happen within days.

And two Nunavut schools will also get a TelePresence device to connect with college and university professors who can lecture to classrooms on a variety of topics.

Business representatives and government officials packed into a small room in front of a flat screen television hooked up with the two-way video communication device April 2 at Aqsamiit Ilinniavik Middle School in Iqaluit to announce Connect North.



Nunavut Premier Peter Taptuna speaks at a event launching new videoconference systems for use in health and education made possible by freebies donated by Cisco Canada and SSI Micro. (PHOTO BY DAVID MURPHY)

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"The launch is timely as the government is focusing our efforts on education delivery in all our classrooms and provide better assets to critical health services," Nunavut Premier Peter Taptuna said.

As an added bonus, the program comes at no cost to the government, Taptuna said.

Cisco Canada is throwing \$1.6 million into the video communication technology and SSI Micro, a wireless broadband Internet service provider, is donating bandwidth to the project.

Through Connect North, psychiatric services will be vastly improved.

Ten of the "best" child and youth psychiatrists and mental health workers from the TeleLink Mental Health Program at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) will work exclusively with Nunavut clients over the next three years.

And the territory could use the help: Nunavut's suicide rate is the highest in Canada, and young people are the most at risk.

Nunavut will receive 10 TelePresence units and although they are slated to go where they will have the most impact, their destination is still unknown.

"The economic impact of leaving your community, leaving your family, looking for services in the South — it's a huge deal," said David Willis, clinical manager at SickKids.

"We're going to bring those services to you and help you develop those services in the communities and you're going to run those services," Willis said.

And kids actually prefer talking to psychiatrists on video rather than in person, Willis said.

"There are studies out there right now that talk about mental health over live video being better than face-to-face, Willis said.

"It takes away that uncomfortable feeling of sitting in front of a 60-year-old psychiatrist when you're 14."

Willis said if it's successful, he hopes the three-year program will continue indefinitely.

On the education side, a pilot program launched this past September at Aqsarniit Middle School connected Grade 6, 7 and 8 classrooms with experts and teachers through the Virtual Researcher on Call (VROC) program.

The program will now be expanded to John Arnalukjuak High School in Arviat and to another school in the Northwest Territories starting Sept. 2014.

The free-of-charge VROC program, with the backing of several Canadian universities, allows northern teachers to present virtual lectures to their students on science, engineering, technology and mathematics from southern university and college professors.

Based on a York University study, the pilot program increased attendance by 16 per cent and 89 per cent of students say the virtual lectures made science more enjoyable said Nitin Kawale, president of Cisco Canada.

The virtual education program also mentors teachers and connects northern classrooms to southern classrooms for cultural exchanges.

The educational boost comes at a critical time.

Canada's Auditor General Michael Ferguson tabled an unflattering report on Nunavut's education system last November.

Ferguson also said Nunavut's education act is "overly ambitious" April 2.

Mary Simon, former Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president and now the chairperson of the National

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Committee on Inuit Education praised the announcement from Ottawa — through the video connection.

“In all my work that I’ve done with education for the last eight years or so, I’ve always connected the mental well being with children with how well they do in school,” Simon said.

“When you help students in the North connect with the larger communities in the south, and perhaps more importantly connect with each other, we are going to see a transformation of our education systems,” Simon said.

“It will help students prepare to succeed in the 21st century,” Simon said.



## (2) Comments:

### #1. Posted by But... on April 03, 2014

You can get all the free equipment you want, but if that equipment is dependent on an internet infrastructure that’s 15 years out of date, and only delivers 1.5 MB/second speeds on average, it’s not going to work well, considering that gear is meant for speeds of 20+ MB/second.

If the fiber optic line is built in another two years, this stuff could be useful for sure, but until then it’s going to be pretty limited, regardless of how much support SSI offers, it’s a hardware problem ultimately.

### #2. Posted by The equipment is already there on April 03, 2014

Each community already has an underutilized video connection at the Health Centres, that can be booked by other agencies or people in the community. It’s not the lack of video capabilities that prevent these consultations, it’s the lack of people available at the other end of the connection to provide them. Psychiatry can be done now via the Health centre connections (and sometimes is).

With Skype and other videoconferencing options available via anyone’s computer (dependent on the internet connection, as #1 points out), it sounds to me like Cisco had some equipment they wanted to get a tax donation slip and some free publicity for before it became totally obsolete.

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