

Following the Reindeer: Nomadic schools in Siberia

In the extreme northern conditions of Siberia, Russian Federation, certain schools follow the reindeers' migration routes, making education accessible for the herders' children. Called nomadic schools, these experimental primary schools date from the 1920s and 1930s. Thanks to the revitalization of indigenous culture, they are currently undergoing modernization, with UNESCO support.

“Nomadic schools educate children in their community and natural surroundings, far from population centres, “explains Sargylana Zhirkova of the Nomadic Schools Development Centre in Yakutia. “This allows their herder parents to follow the reindeer undisturbed”. In many cases, she adds, “those who run the schools are members of the herder community themselves”.

The nomadic schools project, supported by the UNESCO Moscow Office since 2005, began in the Nomadic Schools Development Centre at the Scientific Research Institute of the National Schools in Yakutia in the far north of the Russian Federation. It aims to support the nomadic school system of the region's indigenous people: Dolgans, Evens, Evenks, Ukagirs and Chukchis. These ethnic groups live in the furthest reaches of northern Yakutia and are striving to revive their traditional way of life.

The main characteristic of the nomadic school are the small number of pupils and the variety of subjects taught by one teacher.

Several interconnected approaches are used to help the schools ensure adequate education. These include providing textbooks in the mother tongues of the indigenous peoples; introducing information and communication technologies (ICTs) and distance education as well as training staff in planning, management and monitoring educational quality.

The Nomadic Schools Development Centre proposes seven different models for nomadic communities:

The combined nomadic school – kindergarten brings nomadic pre-schoolers closer to the traditions and way of life of their people through daily communication with their families.

The community school is a small mainstream school, integrated in the community where the minority lives.

The private tutor moves in with the nomadic community and teaches the children in local conditions.

In **the Taiga (forestry) school**, the parents tutor their own children. This study programme is combined with sessions in a mainstream school.

Pupils in the **Combined basic-nomadic school** alternate between mainstream school and the nomadic community.

The network nomadic school moves between several herder communities. The teaching combines regular and correspondence classes. Frequent meetings take place between teachers and parent-tutors.

The **nomadic summer school** teaches native languages and traditional culture. It targets children who no longer speak the indigenous mother tongue.

“The nomadic school is a vital institution for indigenous people who lead a nomadic way of life,” declares Sargylana Zhirkova. “It provides education while adapting traditional culture to the 21st century”. However, to increase the quality of education in nomadic schools more trained teachers are needed. The requirements of the job are: a university degree, a good knowledge of teaching methods; familiarity with culture and language of specific nomadic people - and psychological readiness to endure severe weather conditions.