



St. Elias Community School Review Report March 2013

St. Elias Community School
March 2013

School Principal: Maggie Mann
Vice-Principal: Lee Drummond

Date of Review: March 27-28, 2013

School Review Team:

Judy Arnold, Superintendent, Programs and Services
Mike Woods, Superintendent of Schools (Area 1)
Simon Blakesley, Director of Student Achievement, Systems Accountability
Georgina Stone, First Nations Languages Program/Curriculum Consultant
Morgan Douglas-Alexander, Principal, Tantalus School

Meetings with the School included:

- The School Growth Planning Team
- The principal and vice-principal
- Staff
- Students
- School Council representatives
- Classroom visitations

School Context

St. Elias Community School (SECS) is a K-12 community school in Haines Junction, Yukon. The school serves 116 students, approximately half of whom are of First Nations ancestry within a stable and supportive community context. The school staff has undergone a renewal over the past three years, with the retirement of the principal, the passing of the vice-principal (both long-serving Haines Junction teachers and administrators) and the retirements of many core staff members. Throughout this period of change, the new leadership and staff have worked to build on the school's strengths and use the school's history of relevant and engaging programming as a springboard to future growth and development.

The previous growth plan (2012) placed a priority on the inclusion of Champagne and Aishihik culture and traditions. With this in mind, St. Elias Community School, in collaboration with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nation (CAFN), SECS School Council, and the Yukon Department of Education piloted a Southern Tutchone Bicultural Program in 2010. The program offers 30 minutes of immersion in Southern Tutchone language and culture each day to students from Kindergarten to Grade 2.

The school building and grounds are spacious, well-maintained and in excellent condition. Indoor facilities include the Tish Tomlin Resource Centre, a large gym with stage/theatre and well-equipped adjoining music room. There is an Industrial Education shop, an up-to-date computer lab, a dental care office, and a well-equipped and spacious Home Ec. room. A number of small meeting rooms provide space for support programs for students: Reading Recovery, counselling, learning assistance, and a CAFN Education Support Worker.

Norms and Culture:

Characteristics:

Continuously improving schools are socially and culturally inclusive with high expectations for each learner. A focus on continuous improvement is evident.

Observations of the Team:

- The atmosphere and educational climate at SECS is warm and welcoming. Staff members are very friendly, and students are confident, polite, and positively engaged with their learning;
- Staff members know their students and their families. Staff are student-centered, and see their work as a journey that they are on together to improve outcomes for students;
- Students identified feeling a 'sense of community' at SECS. They expressed that they get help from staff whenever they need it. They believe their teachers to be dedicated professionals who know them and can relate to them;
- The concerted focus on one school goal (rather than three or four) has fostered a collaborative culture where all staff work together to infuse literacy throughout the school's programming through the use of rubrics, self-assessment, and Reading Power;
- Outside resources (e.g. Artist in the School) are employed in a whole-school K-12 approach and in ways that also includes parents and community members;
- School Council expressed their unequivocal support for the Southern Tutchone Bicultural Program, now in its fourth year at SECS;
- The Review Team was very impressed with the behaviour of the students, their level of engagement, and quality of dance presentations at the assembly.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue to foster the open, supportive, caring climate that facilitates a positive professional culture and meaningful relationships with students, parents, and community;
- Maintain and enhance the focus on literacy development and reading comprehension and continue to support across all grade-levels;
- Continue to celebrate the Southern Tutchone culture, language, and traditions of the area within the school through a diversity of approaches that extends culture into other curricular areas;
- Work with CAFN and the ESW to explore ways to have Elders at the school on a regular basis (e.g. a Resident Elder) in addition to special events.

School and Community

Characteristics: In continuously improving schools build a shared commitment to success for each learner. The school collaborates with parents, students, school council, First Nations and community to support student learning. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture and the school communicates about progress and challenges in multiple ways.

Observations of the Team:

- The staff is enthusiastic and appreciates working as a team. The staff at the school works with community agencies and works to continually foster positive relationships with other stakeholders;
- The principal engages with the CAFN, community agencies, and stakeholders in weekly interagency meetings where matters of shared importance can be discussed;
- The School Council is very supportive of the leadership team and is highly appreciative of the work of all staff members. Communications between the school leadership, staff, and School Council are open, honest and proactively focused on working together for the benefit of all students;
- The School Council expressed appreciation in regards to the improved relationship with the CAFN: this was evidenced through feasts, the bison hunt, the involvement of elders, and on-the-land activities;
- Staff and School Council acknowledged the need to reach out to the parent community on matters of improving student attendance and learning why some students may not attend as often as they could;
- Students appreciate and enjoy learning through experiential programs offered at their school (e.g. the bison hunt, music/band, the WISE program, Industrial Education);
- Staff members observed that there were challenges to ensuring that school activities captured the interest and involvement of high school students. Examples were shared by staff where high school students did not willingly take on leadership roles in school events as in previous years;
- High school students shared that they felt many of the school's activities were more geared towards elementary students. Staff suggested that a specific, comfortable space for high school students to congregate with books, magazines, and music (but no computers) could be beneficial.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Maintain and enhance the positive relationships already in place among staff, School Council, CAFN, and community agencies;
- Begin research on barriers to attendance, and engage the broader community in the dialogue about student attendance, the relationship of attendance to student achievement, and the importance of school;
- Consider the development of a student government (as one example) for high school students as a way to provide leadership opportunities for older students as they develop their own identities. This could also help to serve as a vehicle to increase high school student-engagement in school-wide activities;
- Identify a space in the school for high school students to call their own.

School Organization

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools organize structures, actions, and interventions to ensure success for each learner. Work in the school is coherent and aligned to focus on improvement. Actions and interventions include effectively differentiating resources, time and professional development to get results. The Department supports the school and makes connections across the Territory to build capacity.

Observations of the Team:

- Students have opportunities to be involved in a variety of sports, experiential and applied skills, clubs, cultural activities and music across grade levels;
- The music programming is part of the SECS identity and is a strength of what is offered to students at SECS. The team observed a dedicated teacher and student-musicians, and felt the music program could further benefit from a larger space to play/practice;
- The principal, staff, and School Council recognize that timetabling for a K-12 school can be difficult when attempting to balance blocks, cover all subject areas, and coordinate with other high school schedules in order for students to access courses through distance delivery (video-conferencing);
- Transitions for students into secondary school are carefully monitored, with the principal and counsellor ensuring high school students are on a path to graduation (100% graduation rate in the 2011-2012 school year);
- Staff and students expressed frustration with an inadequate level of technological infrastructure that limits learning through technology;

- High school students find correspondence courses both difficult to complete and “dry” in content and delivery. Some students expressed the need for an on-site correspondence coordinator to assist them and keep them motivated;
- A shortage of qualified substitute teachers makes regularly scheduled collaboration during the school day difficult. The staff are to be commended for their willingness to be flexible;
- The school is working hard to match students together across grade-levels, and is cognizant of the need to develop activities which engage students across grade levels, and particularly at the high school;
- School Council expressed interest in the exploration of trades training given that the school has a well-equipped Industrial Education lab.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the excellent work in literacy that consistently includes the use of formative assessment, assessment criteria, flexible groupings at all levels, and metacognitive processes through student self-assessment;
- Continue to explore creative ways to organize and timetable the school academically which may include mixing up the configuration of classes at the school to facilitate more interaction across the grades and further facilitate teachers having time to collaborate;
- Explore ways that the use of technology can support distributed learning access and opportunity for high school students;
- Build on the use of technology to facilitate students learning and programming options. High school students suggested the following: 1) have an open WiFi connection to allow them to save work on their Ipods to take home for homework, and; 2) Less website blocking of sites that are otherwise appropriate for learning: Students suggested having a student login to track internet use;
- Work with the Department of Education to explore ways that could increase counselling time to allow for greater engagement with at-risk learners, given that high school-student program planning places a large demand on the school’s current time allotment.

School Processes and Progress

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools take responsibility for improving outcomes for students. They use evidence to guide decisions and actions and have processes in place to collectively monitor progress and make adjustments in key areas of their work. They demonstrate improvement over time – for individual students, groups of students, and the school.

Observations of the Team:

- The School Growth Planning Team is comprised of most, if not all staff members who are focused on talking about goals and growth. The School Growth Plan is used throughout the year at staff meetings and other planning meetings;
- The school reviews a wide variety of evidence (e.g. assessment data, parental participation at student-led conferences data) in the continuous development of the school growth plan;
- Both the team and staff observed that the current, more streamlined school growth plan with one broad, overarching goal permitted them to work more closely and with more focus as a cohesive group across grade levels;
- The School Council greatly appreciates the progression of School Growth Plan document, suggesting that it could be further enhanced through the future inclusion of specific school data that was measurable and would gauge growth over time;
- The Team heard of the positive parental engagement (90-95% attendance) that has resulted due to the school making the shift to student-led conferences;
- There appears to be interest in breakfast/lunch programming at SECS. This concept, along with funding, could be explored in greater detail through conversations with the CAFN, Food for Learning Yukon, and the School Council, and other stakeholders.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- When looking at the variety of data available, determine what data could be incorporated into the School Growth Plan to indicate progress over time;
- Continue to concentrate School Growth Plan Team efforts on one clearly defined and agreed-upon area of focus in future growth plans
- Explore in greater detail opportunities to develop and sustainably fund a breakfast and/or lunch program at SECS

- If a student government was developed to foster high school student engagement, student representatives could provide input into future growth plan versions

In conclusion

The review team enjoyed visiting St. Elias Community School, and appreciated very much the open, warm, and collaborative culture of the school. It was noted that the school has made meaningful progress since the last school review, in light of the challenges and many transitions the past three years have posed. The SECS staff, as collaborative team of professional educators, has worked persistently to maintain a positive learning environment for students and fostered processes aimed at enhancing student learning and community relationships. The school community is encouraged to reflect upon and maintain the numerous strengths indicated in this report, with a view towards incorporating suggestions for further growth and improvement.

Practices to share:

- The strengths of having one clearly focused growth plan goal which permeates the school's function and planning
- The Southern Tutchone Bi-cultural language program
- The music program