



St. Elias Community School

Final Review Report

St. Elias Community School Review
April 2010

School Principal: Ruth Lawrence
Vice-Principal: Heather Paquet
Date of Review Report: May 3, 2010

School Review Team:

Judy Arnold, Director, Student Achievement, Systems Accountability
Kelly Collins, Principal Takhini Elementary School
Bob Laking, Chair, Association of Yukon School Councils, Boards and Committees
Penny Prysruk, Superintendent Area 2
Ed Shultz, Director, First Nations Partnerships and Planning
Bob Walker, School Council Liaison, School Evaluation Coordinator

Meetings with the School on Monday April 19 and Tuesday April 20 included:

- Staff as goal area groups
- Whole staff
- Students
- School Council Representatives
- Discussions with the Principal

School Context

St. Elias School is a K-12 community School in Haines Junction, Yukon. The school serves 130 students, about half of whom have First Nations ancestry, within a stable community. Many of the staff have been at the school a long time and the Principal, Ruth Lawrence, the Principal of nine years, has been teaching at the school since 1991, and will be retiring in June, 2010. Staff and School Council expressed regret at Ruth's retirement, along with the hope that the new Principal will build on the strengths of Ruth's work as they move into the future.

For the last three years, the focus of school growth plan has been literacy, numeracy, the integration of First Nation culture and social responsibility. The staff at the school have worked in goal focused teams and come together for discussions. In September of 2009, the school, in collaboration with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nation and the Department of Education embarked on an innovative bi-cultural program in the kindergarten class. The program provides the kindergarten learners with twenty minutes of immersion Southern Tutchone language and culture each day.

School Norms and Culture

Observation of the Team

- The atmosphere in the school is relaxed, positive and students and staff demonstrate respect for each other.
- There is a clear culture of caring for students in the school, and teachers were committed to addressing student needs and providing a variety of opportunities and interventions to support student success.
- The school works to address individual needs and support students who are beginning their learning journey or have dropped out and are returning to the school.
- The staff enthusiastically supports the pilot bi-cultural program and sees it as a significant step in the continued focus on integrating First Nation culture into the daily operation of the school. However, staff also observed that more effort needs to be made to encourage the participation of First Nations parents and Elders in the school.

Recommendations for moving forward

- Working with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nation, build on current work to further engage the community and embed First Nation language and culture across the curricula and throughout the grades.
- Work collaboratively to strengthen the focus on continuous improvement in order to support each learner in doing their personal best.

School and Community

Observations of the Team:

- Students at the school are proud of their school and actively focused on learning. Examples included: students examining their ancestry for the heritage fair, the grade 12 woodworking students and the grade one class creating a solar system.
- Staff appears very collaborative and accepting of varying opinions on issues related to priorities and directions. At the same time, there was also an underlying sense of uncertainty related to the future which is to be expected, given the impending retirement of the long-time Principal.
- Although the connection of the review team to the parents and community was limited, staff and students suggested that the school has an open door policy in relation to parent involvement and from the perspective of the School Council; the community views the school as “its” school. However, like the staff, the School Council expressed a desire for more parent involvement in planning and the efforts of the school to improve the success of each student.

- As the school continues to work through the new school growth planning process the school is working to engage a wider range of stakeholders in its school planning process.

Recommendations for moving forward

- Use the 2010-2011 School growth planning process and the resultant school growth plan as a way to engage staff, students, and community to confirm the many strengths of the school as well as to chart a new course that will serve to guide and support the new Principal.
 - Develop strategies to address the timing and travel challenges related to engaging the community in the school growth process. Consider an electronic share point to review documents, conference calling and meetings connected to other school events.
 - Engage the First Nations community and Elders in the school growth process and efforts to enhance student success.
- Use a variety of processes to encourage and strengthen communication links with parents particularly those reluctant to come into the school. Staff was supportive of the need for this and commented on the effectiveness of positive phone calls and email which could be expanded to include online events.

School Organization

Observations of the Team

- The music program developed by Richard Godson is a strength at the school. His legacy is evident in the commitment to music and the appreciation of staff and students.
- The school is organized to provide opportunities to maximize the success of students—for instance, class organization is planned to create small primary classes and scheduling at secondary appears to be flexible.
 - The school based team meets monthly to respond to the needs of vulnerable students.
 - Given the size of the school and the relative stability of the student population, administration and staff are aware of the needs and challenges faced by each learner
- Some staff is working with using rubrics to assess progress and help students assess themselves. One teacher rewrote the BC rubric in a kid friendly way so the students could assess themselves.
- Staff, particularly those involved in the bicultural program, sees the program as a success, students are using the language outside the school and there is positive feedback from the community.
 - Although looking forward to extending the program to Grades 1 and 2, staff suggested that finding or creating resources and people in the community with the expertise to support the program will continue to be a challenge.
- Staff expressed concern about the shifting directions at the Department and the time away from the school to attend meetings and training sessions, which are particular

challenges for small schools where one staff member may have to attend several meetings.

Recommendations for moving forward

- Provide opportunities for staff to consistently work on collaborative, evidence-based inquiry related to assessment for learning, student self assessment and classroom practice focused on differentiated instruction.
- Deepen the use of technology to support learning across the curriculum including making virtual connections for secondary students to access courses not offered at the school and using assistive technology to accommodate learning styles.
- Expand on the positive aspects of experiential programs that integrate curriculum outcomes and First Nation perspectives as a way to further engage students in their learning.
- Work with the department to find creative ways to participate in Department professional development so that time away from the students is minimized.

School Processes and Progress

Observations of the Team

- The Principal provided the team with a review of the current evidence of student performance, attendance and behaviour at the school. There are many positive indicators related to student success including the fact that of the students who reach grade 12 at St. Elias close to 100% graduate and about 59% seek post secondary education including university, college or trades programs.
- The school is working to dig more deeply into evidence comparing Yukon Assessment Test scores with the school-wide writes to identify areas where students need further assistance. In relation to the analysis of data concerns related to:
 - Students that have dropped out of school (11 since 2000). Staff described the efforts made to reconnect with them and discussed the need to continue to reach out to these students.
 - Middle years, grades 5 to 10 as the area where some students seem to struggle. Boys and students new to the school are most challenged and some within this group drop out of school.
 - The need to focus on reading comprehension across the curriculum with an emphasis on critical thinking.
- Given the historic Department requirement for four specific goals in the school growth plan, some staff suggested that the school growth plan has, in the past, been regarded as something of a compliance document rather than a process to identify and track key improvement efforts. However, the school is currently working to use student focused evidence to determine an area of focus and establish a new growth planning process.
- Staff observed that Department and school evidence essential to guiding improvement is hard to access, collect and track over time.

Recommendations for moving forward

- Narrow the focus of the school growth plan and ensure that strategies identified relate to classroom practice and the needs of those not yet meeting, minimally meeting and meeting and exceeding expectations and also addresses the challenges outlined in the review of data above.
 - Some staff discussed focusing on one goal with specific objectives related to primary, intermediate and secondary students.
 - For example, the current social responsibility goal may better be a school priority with the social responsibility performance standards used to chart progress.
 - Ensure that the evidence used for targets in the growth plan pertain to expected outcomes for students rather than a count of discrete events.
 - Ensure that processes are in place to engage students, parents, School Council and First Nation in the development and implementation of the school growth as well as the monitoring of progress and the adjustment of actions to make the plan a living document.
- Work with the Department to create sets of data that are meaningful to the school and will help the school assess progress as it works to improve student success

Conclusions:

St. Elias is a well organized community school embarking on a change process in relation to school leadership. Change is also occurring as the school staff engages in the new school growth process to improve the success of each student. Although the review team understood that there is some apprehension about the future, the school has much strength to celebrate including the achievement of many of the students, the growing focus on individualized learning, the pilot bicultural program, and the eagerness of staff and School Council to further engage parents and the First Nation community. The review team heard from staff, students and School Council about the exemplary work of Ruth Lawrence during her time at the school, she will be greatly missed.

As the school moves forward, deepening the work to use evidence to consistently inform instruction, creating opportunities for staff and community to collaborate and using the school growth process as a road map to improvement will serve to enhance the success of each learner at the school.

Practices to share:

- The pilot Champagne and Aishihik immersion program including information about the logistics and supports required for implementation.
- The creative staffing and classroom arrangements designed to maximize learning.