

September 22, 2006

Excellence - Improving Schools

In my last edition, I asked about examples of excellence and received several responses - thank you. Today we feature an improving school. There are many exciting and innovative initiatives undertaken in our province as teachers and schools seek to make a difference to student learning. I recently heard of one school and asked my staff to look into the work undertaken by teachers and administrators and the results achieved. Kalamalka Secondary School (Kal) is located in the beautiful Coldstream area of Vernon.

A few years ago, Kal set an ambitious and almost unbelievable goal for their students. Each department was invited to set goals to improve the achievement of students in their department. Teachers examined and interpreted various data sources including course final grades assigned by teachers. Based on their analysis, the English department set a goal of 0% failure rate. Other departments set goals for increases in the number of students achieving "A"s and "B"s. What has been the effect on student achievement? Kal has evidence of significant progress showing that student achievement is very high and improving.

Kal is a Grade 8 to 12 school with an enrolment of 720 students. It has attributes that promote high achievement. Its catchment area includes a relatively high socio-economic neighbourhood. Parents of many of the students at Kal have post-secondary learning experiences themselves and are active and

supportive in school affairs. However, Kal does have a number of vulnerable students and students who choose to attend Kal from out of catchment. Like all BC schools, Kal has a number of students who need extra assistance to be successful – and they are being successful.

Five years ago, Kal students were demonstrating above average results compared to provincial indicators. Grade-to-grade transitions were in the high 90s – but the school was able to improve on even these good results. The transition rate for Grade 11 to Grade 12 was 94% and grew to 97% in 2003/04. The first-time graduation rate for Grade 12 students was 90% and grew to as high as 99% in 2003/04 before settling at 95% in 2004/05. This is a case of a very good school with high achievement results getting even better. Meanwhile student success in courses also improved. Kal started from a very low failure rate of 3.0% in teacher assigned marks but was able to cut this almost in half to 1.7%. Such a result might not seem significant but put into context this means that about 30 students passed courses where they would have otherwise failed. How did the staff accomplish this? No magic, but a focus on learning and hard work.

My staff met with a group of Kal teachers and the Chair of the Parent Advisory Committee to ask how the school had achieved these enviable results. They found a number of things that are common in the many highly successful schools in the province

and concentrated at Kal. First, the staff is clear and consistent in the high expectations held for students. Students are assured that failure is not permitted and hear the message from teachers and peers: “No kids fail this class – this is the way Kal is”. Teachers are well supported by non-enrolling teachers and parents. Everyone works as a team when a student falters to support the student and provide for success.

One teacher commented that while Kal has a diverse staff of individuals, one commonly held view through the school was that all students can succeed. “We know that kids can do it and they do.” Success promotes success. There is a culture of ownership for the success of all students among the teachers and support staff of the school. Custodians know the students by name and show interest in their academic development.

This positive ethos has been bolstered by strategic professional and staff development. For the past number of years Kal teachers have focused on a variety of programs that further develop their instructional skills and strategies. Teachers have led the way in promoting assessment for and as learning following the Stiggins model. Students have been encouraged to value learning. Positive social pressure supports high achieving students. Teachers work with their students outside of class time to ensure success particularly for vulnerable students. As one teacher said, “We work hard with our students but also enjoy activities with them in a social way”, reflecting on the recent Kal Karnival that included the participation of almost all teachers.

We asked about the teachers’ view of the value of evidence and data. They agreed that the very positive results were a motivating factor for the staff that encouraged further efforts towards the goal of success for all. The teachers also pointed to the need for a balanced view of assessment – the need to get

underneath the group results and statistics to make meaning of it for individual students. A science teacher commented, “I look at it (evidence) at an individual kid level, the success of individuals, rather than the class size average.” A drama teacher noted that she used course entry and exit interviews as a way of assessing student development in her courses and that this was preferable to letter grades in that area.

The English Department Head said that department has a policy of permitting students to re-submit assignments allowing them to improve their standing. Challenged with “Are you not just lowering your standards – this is not like the real world”, the department head responded, “It is actually about learning and having opportunities to learn, and it is like the real world – you get the chance to make mistakes and try again!” Simple answer, is it not?

The Chair of the PAC had been associated with the school for several years. She voiced unconditional support for the school and its staff. She explained that parents of Kal students expected their kids to get results and Kal staff did not let them down. Children with particular challenges received the attention they needed to be successful.

What did we learn from this school? A culture of high expectations and belief in every student’s potential for success is one of the keys to this high performing school. Teachers share the belief that universal success for all students is really possible and set targets that maximize success and minimize the number of courses failed by students. A focus on teaching skills and strategies and commitment to assessment for and as learning are central to the practice of the teachers in the school. Teachers examine and interpret their results and work with their colleagues to find new ways to help their students succeed. Finally, hard work by a dedicated staff that

is willing to put in the time it takes with students to ensure their success, together with effective classroom support by non-enrolling teachers equals high achievement levels for students.

Can this formula for improving achievement be transferred to other schools? I believe it can, and I know there are many others school like it in the province. The criterion of an effective school is, in my opinion, that it is an improving school that believes in its students and provides evidence of success.

(For further inquiries about Kalamalka Secondary School, School District 22 (Vernon), contact Joe Rogers, Principal at jrogers@sd22.bc.ca

enhancing student achievement. Every district in the province is invited to send a two-person learning team to share the district's innovation and creative practices with BC's education community.

Details regarding participation in the Showcase can be found on the website at www.learninginactionshowcase.ca Deadline for completion of an online application process is October 1, 2006 with all materials forming part of the presentation due by October 20. The Ministry of Education will provide a grant of \$1000 to each learning team for further development of innovative practices.

Check the website without delay.



Learning in Action Showcase – Celebrating Innovation in BC Schools

On December 8, 2006, the British Columbia School Trustees Association, in conjunction with the BCSTA Innovation Academy, will hold a Learning in Action Showcase at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The Showcase offers a chance for school districts to demonstrate and celebrate the creative ways in which they are

First-Ever Teachers' Congress

The Ministry of Education is planning the first-ever Teachers' Congress. This will become an annual event to hear the voices of teachers on important educational matters. The theme of this year's Congress will be "Reaching Higher for B.C. Students". The Congress will be held all day November 6, 2006 at the Wosk Centre with over 100 teachers, and other partners and officials present. The Honourable Gordon Campbell, Premier, and the Honourable Shirley Bond, Minister of Education, will be present and preside over the Congress.

It is planned to include a diverse group of teachers from many different roles in B.C. schools. Teachers will come from various geographical areas representing views from urban and rural centres. Classroom teachers, non-enrolling specialists, teachers from all levels, independent school teachers, band school teachers and student teachers will be included in this important dialogue. The Ministry has opened a website to facilitate a web-based application process for teachers interested in participating: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/edinfo/edevents/atc Teachers selected will be randomly chosen from the pool of registered teachers. Everyone registered will be advised of the status of their applications, the goal being to include teachers with a wide array of experience and knowledge. If you know of teachers in your schools who would be interested in this Congress, please encourage them to register.

Executive members of partner organizations who are also members of the Learning Roundtable will be present. Other organizations will be asked to send representatives from their executives or senior staff.

The agenda for the day includes a variety of activities – presentations, opportunities to ask questions, discussion sessions and wrap-up activities. Topics of general interest like Aboriginal Education, Literacy, Safe/Healthy Schools, Curriculum, Rural Education and Lifelong Learning will provide the substance for the day.

Quality Instruction: The Great Equalizer for Rural Schools

Just a reminder that today (Friday September 22nd) was the deadline for team registration to attend the Rural Schools Renewal Conference “Quality Instruction: The Great Equalizer for Rural Schools” to be held in Richmond, October 19-21, 2006. If you have not already done so, please forward your team registration to Sharon Roode at sroode@bcssa.org.

Districts who have more than 5 participants wishing to attend the conference are advised that conference sessions are being webcast into the following districts; School District 8 (Kootenay Lake), School District 10 (Arrow Lakes), School District 53 (Okanagan-Similkameen), School District 54 (Bulkley Valley), and School District 72 (Campbell River). Local and regional registration information is available from:

Lynn McRann	lmcrann@sd8.bc.ca
Barb Williams	bwilliams@sd54.bc.ca
Wayne Orenchuk	worenchuk@sd53.bc.ca
John Spry	john.spry@sd72.bc.ca
Brenda Bueger, SD No. 10	250 265-3638 ext 0

The conference organizing committee would like to thank these five districts for making a great learning opportunity available in their local area.