

March 16, 2007

Next week is spring break, and I know almost all schools in the province are closed and students, teachers and principals will get a week to take a deep breath before the last term of the year. When you return to school, for most of you on March 26, it will be the beginning of Education Week. I think that provides an excellent opportunity to tell some stories about the excellent things that happen in our province's schools that make us one of the best public education systems in the world. A few weeks ago I wrote about the Leadership Academy program developed and delivered by Faye Brownlie. Here is a story from a Chilliwack teacher about another program, SMART reading. Many of you will recognize this program as originating with Susan Close, Assistant Superintendent in New Westminster.

Jonathan Ferris, a literacy helping teacher from Chilliwack, writes:

SMART Reading: Chilliwack's (School District No. 33) Story

During one evening in the spring of 2004, I was flipping channels on the television when I came across an interesting vignette on the Open Learning Network. It showed students working on a variety of topics using a template emblazoned with icons. One particular student who was being interviewed was very convincing in his testimony about how SMART reading had helped his academic performance and being naturally curious about new practices in education, I decided to find out more.

One month later, three other teachers and I visited a grade five classroom in Glenbrook Middle School in New

Westminster. What we saw was truly inspiring. All of the students were completely engaged in a reading lesson involving Jerry Spinelli's book Loser. What really amazed us was when the students started to discuss the text. I had never experienced such depth of understanding and eloquence before as I listened to the students' responses. I knew that I had encountered something very special and needed to reproduce this practice with my own students.

Upon returning to my classroom and beginning to explore a different way of teaching reading, I noticed that my students were becoming more proficient in all aspects of reading and ultimately, they were enjoying reading more than they ever had before. Quite quickly, my students were able to integrate the 9 steps of SMART reading into their learning. Parents were noticing changes and one in particular was floored at her son's improved comprehension and descriptive writing.

It was difficult to restrain my enthusiasm and soon, other staff members became curious about what was going on in my classroom. Colleagues from both my school and others around the district were visiting to see SMART reading in action. In due time, I was asked to become a helping teacher with a focus on literacy. My task was to come along side other teachers and assist them in discovering new ways to approach literacy. Needless to say, I used the SMART reading framework in all of my demonstration lessons.

In the fall of 2006 the district developed a series of learning teams, one of which I led with a focus on SMART reading. Our cohort consisted of about 25 teachers

who were interested in implementing SMART reading in their classrooms. At the present time, there is a growing interest in Chilliwack regarding SMART reading and its benefits in helping all students become more thoughtful and skilled readers. As of March 2007, there are over 30 teachers in 17 different schools who are using SMART reading in their classrooms.

Here is another story of successful capacity building. Gary Doi, Superintendent in School District 67 (Okanagan Skaha), writes about professionalism and collaboration that are making a difference for students in that district.

School District 67 (Okanagan Skaha)

What a difference four years can make!

Judy Scott and Janice Clary started in the role as Literacy Helping Teachers four years ago. Since that time, they have become a formidable force for change in the Okanagan Skaha School District.

Their collaborative efforts with teachers and administrators have helped to build capacity in many significant ways. The main thrust of their work has been to motivate, inspire and engage colleagues in literacy learning and leadership. And, they have been tireless in their efforts to seek out, encourage and support 'best practices'. SD67 staff have, therefore, worked with such noted educators as Susan Close (SmartReading), Adrienne Gear (Reading Power), Faye Brownlie (Literacy Leadership), Cathy Peters (Assessment for Learning/ Guided Reading), Vicki Rothstein (Students with Special Needs), Linda Kaser & Judy Halbert (Network of Performance Based Schools) and Carol Stickley (Pearson's

Literacy in Action). Through it all, Judy and Janice have been mindful of pulling it together in ways that are supportive of the classroom teacher and helpful in building capacity in the school.

As a result, promising practices have developed at all levels - elementary, middle, and secondary. Teams of teachers meet to share research on instructional practices, create and mark reading assessments, develop focus lessons, create literature circles for different grade levels, identify reading resources and develop strategies for students at risk. There is also a cadre of demonstration teachers who model Smart Learning strategies for various groups of teachers. In addition, side-by-side teaching (coaching) is a collegial practice that is emerging in the schools.

Of course, all of this just didn't happen without a great deal of team effort, thoughtful planning, resource support and flexibility. But, with Janice's dogged determination and Judy's humor and energy, they have helped to accelerate the process and make things happen in just four short years.

No wonder learning has become a lot more engaging for everyone!

Both of these stories illustrate the social power of teachers learning and growing together in professional learning communities. Both of these stories illustrate teacher and principal leadership and the impact on teaching and learning. In both cases the stories talk about collaborative implementation of practices that make a difference. We know that teachers and school administrators working together are implementing many innovative and successful practices that enhance student learning and achievement. True professionalism is not practiced independently or in isolation.

As an aside, do you remember the article I wrote early in the fall about Kalamalka Secondary School in Vernon? This was the school that had set some ambitious targets for student achievement and was promoting student success one student at a time. We know that one success will lead to another. Here is a picture of the Kal Lakers women's junior basketball team after the recent provincial championship – Congratulations.



Enjoy the spring break week ahead of you. I will have more stories of celebration during Education Week.

Emery Dossdall, Ed D
Deputy Minister of Education