

November 24, 2006

Community Literacy – School Districts are important partners

Literacy Now is promoting the development of Community Literacy Plans across B.C. through grants to assist planning and implementation. When schools and school districts become significantly involved in these undertakings, good things happen as illustrated by the activity in Lillooet.

A consortium of community agencies called “Lillooet Learns” came together at the Adult Learning Center in Lillooet. School district personnel -- teachers, principals and district administration -- are part of this consortium. The Community Literacy Plan, now in its implementation stage, is resulting in new services accessible to residents in Lillooet and the small communities in the surrounding area.

The key to these services is the “Words on Wheels” school bus – this bus is made available at no charge as part of the School District’s commitment to the Community Literacy Plan. A local journeyman mechanic together with the Lillooet Secondary automotive teacher and his students renovated the bus for this new purpose and provide necessary maintenance and repairs at no cost.

Staff on board the bus include the driver and a coordinator. They travel about the community trying to spend time in each area at least twice per week. The bus includes a small meeting area that also serves as a reading room for adults, parents and children.

The list of services and agencies integrated through the Community Literacy Plan is impressive. Included in the outreach activities supported by the “Words on Wheels” bus are:

- Teachers providing the Parents as Literacy Supporters (PALS) program to parents and children
- Community Library Services
- Adult Literacy Outreach
- The Lillooet Employment Center – Career Counselling, Job Searches, Resumé Development.
- Lillooet Infant Development Center – Mother Goose Program
- Lillooet Friendship Center – Cultural Activities
- Upper St’at’imc Culture, Language and Education Society - Language Classes
- Interior Health – Hearing, Vision and Language Services

In addition to other supports, the School District shares print materials and resources to assist in the collection available through the Community Literacy Project.

Community Development can be a powerful force when different agencies pull together. I am interested in other stories of School District involvement in Community Literacy Plans.

Minister's Parent Congress – Very Successful

The Honourable Shirley Bond, Minister of Education, spent last Thursday with close to 100 parents and ministry staff in Kelowna at the first Parent Congress. During the morning, the Minister, staff and parents co-presented on a number of initiatives of interest to parents. The parents were very appreciative of being able to hear directly from the Minister and enter into dialogue with her. The Virtual School, on-line tutoring and other e-learning initiatives were of particular interest to parents.

In the afternoon, Gervase Bushe led the Congress through an Appreciative Inquiry that resulted in some very imaginative thinking for improvement of public education. Dr. Bushe described appreciative inquiry as a way:

- To promote positive change in schools by having people involved discuss the best of what they have experienced.
- To create new ideas, models, and visions by inquiring into the past.
- To build relationships and energy needed for real change to occur.

Feedback from evaluation forms indicates this format of gathering and the program of discussion were highly valued. A couple of comments from the evaluations caught my eye:

- » *"Parents voices are being heard and actions are being internalized by the ministry. The door is open for hot topics concerning our education system."*
- » *"...our Ministry is moving forward with technology and diversity"*
- » *"...government is willing to look at reinventing the education system to meet the needs of students in the 21st century."*

A glimpse of Parent Attitudes towards FSA and School Planning Councils

During the BCCPAC conference that followed the Parent Congress, there was a panel presentation addressing School Communities Working Together. During the panel presentations, a teacher representing the BCTF explained her union's views of Accountability, Foundation Skills Assessments (FSA) and School Planning Councils (SPCs). She explained that teachers wanted to work with parents but would not participate on SPCs because the teachers' voice was a minority and that nothing meaningful happened at SPC meetings. On FSA, the BCTF representative said these assessments introduced too much stress for teachers and students, that teachers spend all their time teaching to the tests and that the results were meaningless.

Other panel members responded. BCCPAC President Kim Howland noted that FSA could not be an onerous time commitment as they only happened at grades 4 and 7 for a few hours each year. Parents need and expect to know how their children are doing. BCSSA (Superintendents) President, Harry Janzen, explained that FSA provides a snapshot of achievement that is useful information about individual students, schools, districts and the province – information that is helpful in planning for improvement.

A number of parents raised questions regarding accountability and the statements of the BCTF representative. Parents asked if the BCTF had constructive suggestions for alternatives to the SPC structure and suggested some teachers want to be involved in SPCs but felt they cannot because of the union position. Parents also suggested that the message be taken back to the union that parents were not happy with the BCTF position on SPCs, FSA and accountability. The last parent to speak asked why union rights were being put ahead of student rights.

I think these views are something principals should be aware of and be taken into account. It is clear that many parents support the accountability and planning measures that are in place. Parents are frustrated that these measures cannot be fully implemented in some schools because of the BCTF's direction to its members. Parents expect the system to seek to improve, to be accountable for its results and to provide information about their child's achievement. Parents, likely more so than ever, expect to be included in their child's education and planning improvement.

Old news now!

Most of you already know, but I have been successful in bringing Bendina Miller, Superintendent, School District 6 (Rocky Mountain), and Jacquie Taylor, Superintendent, School District 33 (Chilliwack), to the Ministry as seconded superintendents to join Rick Davis in our new Achievement Department. The work of the Department will be very field focussed as they will lend support to districts as we move forward in improving student achievement. It will be their job to identify areas that need improvement and to provide support in making and implementing improvement plans. Within our Ministry structure, all three Superintendents will report directly to me, as does Sherri Mohoruk, Superintendent, Liaison and Julie MacRae, Superintendent, Rural Strategies.

Rick, Bendina and Jacquie will be meeting over the weeks ahead to design their approach in detail, and these details will be shared with you as they take form. It will be several weeks until Bendina and Jacquie are with the Ministry full time, as they still have substantial district responsibilities to hand off to their successors. I would like to publicly thank and acknowledge the

School Boards of Rocky Mountain and Chilliwack for accommodating these secondments so that Bendina and Jacquie can contribute to improving student achievement provincially.

A New Feature

Some principals as well as parents have suggested that articles or points of interest included in these weekly bulletins should be shared with the greater parent community. As such, I will try to include a section that you could use directly in your newsletters to parents, if you so wish.