

SPRING

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Wetaskiwin Regional
Public Schools

KIDS



Our report to you

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Planting the seeds of student success

Students at Wetaskiwin's Queen Elizabeth School see their knowledge grow.... along side the seeds they've planted in their Earthbox Program

Perhaps the last thing you'd associate with January and February in Alberta is planting seeds. But for students from Queen Elizabeth School in Wetaskiwin, that's exactly what was happening.

In January students began planting tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers and other seeds in

small pellets of soil. In February and March, they moved sprouted seedlings into "Earth Boxes" in a sunny room just off the school's science labs. The students will keep careful watch over the plants until they are ready for harvest before the end of the school year.

"The students really enjoy this project," says Amanda Merriman,

the Queen Elizabeth School teacher who started the program last year.

"They like it because it's a hands on learning activity. It reaches a lot of kids. It's equally interesting to the academic kids as well as to the students who might not always receive the highest marks. And it addresses many different learning styles; students who are tactile, visual or auditory all enjoy this type of learning experience."

"It's better than learning out of a book," says Karlee Podritske, a grade eight student who participated last year. "You get to experience what you've learned for yourself."

"I liked working in groups," says Liam Haggarty, also a student who participated last year. "And I enjoyed making salad at the end. The lettuce tasted better because we grew it ourselves."

The Earth Boxes and other supplies such as soil and fertilizer were supplied to the school through a special grant from Alberta

Agriculture. The boxes are designed so plants can be watered from the roots and so that they drain properly.

Merriman says the boxes are amazing; last year the crop was so successful that the tomato plants were



"It reaches a lot of kids. It's equally interesting to the academic kids as well as to the students who might not always receive the highest marks."

- Amanda Merriman, teacher

several feet high. The students harvested the produce and made themselves a salad that they ate, and donated the rest of the food to the school's cafeteria.

Also, there were left over tomato seedlings that were sold to the school population as bedding plants, with

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LOOK INSIDE:

MAKING HOMEWORK SUCCESSFUL

Tips that parents can use at home with their children.

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How teachers at Buck Mountain School are learning what kids understand, so they can tailor what they teach.

pages 6 & 7

REACHING TODAY'S STUDENTS

Educators at Gwynne School are trying new approaches to teaching, with great results for kids. See how it all adds up!

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HOW THE LEARNING CYCLE IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

What is the Learning Cycle? Why does it matter? Check out what students and teachers are telling us about that.

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CONNECTING LEARNING TO THE REAL WORLD

Creative assignments that students at Clear Vista school are thoroughly enjoying. Read how the tasks connect students to the real world, making them more meaningful.

pages 2



Connecting learning to the real world

Take 60 grade nine students, a classroom, a couple teachers... and what do you get?

How about four hours of students fully occupied, interested and engaged in an activity?

If you're surprised at this result, you aren't alone. Teachers at Clear Vista School who planned the assignment had no idea it would be as successful as it was.

"It was amazing to watch," says Chris Kirwan, a teacher at Clear Vista School. "Students of every ability level were equally engaged. It was exciting."

The activity came as a result of teachers evaluating results on the Provincial Achievement Test. While the school's results are generally high, educators at the school were concerned that their students were not as strong as others in a particular Language Arts skill: critically examining characters in what they had read.

Grade nine Language Arts teachers asked students to create their own t-shirt, based on a character they selected from a book they were reading. The assignment required that

particular elements of the character be analyzed critically, and that these elements be included on the t-shirt.

The school's principal had already time-tabled all the Language Arts classes for that grade at the same time so students in all of the grade nine Language Arts classes could work together.

And while the t-shirt assignment started off as a Language Arts project, it quickly

grew into more. The math teacher got in on the t-shirt project as well, including what students were learning in her class. For example, scale factors, and color

combinations are a part of the grade nine math curriculum, and the t-shirt assignment was a perfect opportunity to put these skills to use.

"We had students telling us they liked only having one assignment for both classes," says

Kirwan. "What I appreciated was this really captured their imagination."

Not surprisingly, such an engaging

"We want learning to be meaningful for students. We strive to help students make connections between what they are learning and the real world."

- Chris Zarski, Principal

project made a difference.

"When it came to the Provincial Achievement Test last year, every question that dealt with character analysis was above provincial average," says Kirwan. Language

Arts teacher, Traci Aubut comments, "the answers students give are far more analytical; they are deeper."

This cross curricular project was

the first of its kind at Clear Vista School, but it likely won't be the last. Teachers have felt the power of collaborating amongst themselves, and providing the chance for kids to work together too.

Another positive result is that kids see the connection between the classroom and the real world. "We want learning to be meaningful for students," says Chris Zarski, Principal at Clear Vista School. "We strive to help students make connections between what they are learning and the real world."

Zarski has seen from personal experience, "When kids make the link between what is happening at school and their own lives, they are more motivated and successful."

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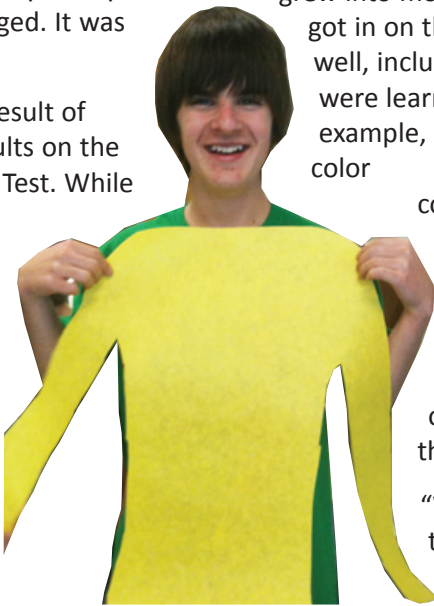
INNOVATIVE MATH ASSIGNMENTS

Some recent math assignments at Clear Vista include:

- **Cake decorating.** Students had learned about rotational symmetry, color combinations, and calculating surface area and volume. They used these skills to create professional, bakery-worthy cake toppings. (See images above for samples!)
- **Gingerbread house design.** Students were to use skills such as calculating surface area and volume as well as cost analysis.
- **Plan to create a municipal asset in Wetaskiwin,** such as a playground, rink or water park. Students calculate surface area and volume, use equations for slope and designs of equipment, prepare a cost analysis and budgeting and 3-D modelling – as a part of their math class. For Language Arts, the students write business letters to city councillors, who will be invited to the presentations.

The opportunity to be collaborative, and the expectation that learning will be engaging and connected to the real world, is changing teachers and ultimately the experience of students at Clear Vista School.

"I am a more reflective teacher than ever before," says Kirwan. "There is no laminating a lesson plan today. I use experiences that I have with students to change what I do."





Planting seeds...

... Continued from page 1

the profits used to support French Immersion students from the school who were saving to go to Quebec.

Those who have learned about Merriman's project immediately see the benefits for students, as well as the connection of the project to Wetaskiwin Regional School Division's Learning Cycle; specifically the effort of the division's teachers to focus on learning activities that engage students.

"The kids were so excited to participate," says Merriman. "You can tell when students want to learn, and this is one of those assignments that captures them. If you can get them wanting to learn, that's obviously ideal. Then their experience becomes more meaningful."

"The Earth Box project reinforced the science curriculum," says Merriman. "But it did more than that. It gave students a sense of responsibility and community, as well as a better understanding of where their food comes from. These are all important lessons, and ones I know the students will remember."



Making homework successful tips for parents

Helping your child study

- **Establish a routine.** Setting a regular time and sticking to it helps children complete their homework assignments.
- **Set the mood.** Ensure the room your child studies in is quiet, has plenty of light, and has school supplies close at hand. Remove distractions by turning off the television and discouraging social phone calls during homework time.
- **Show an interest.** Ask your child about school activities. Talk about what was discussed in school that day. Take your child to the library to check out materials for homework, and make time to read with your child as often as you can.



Monitoring homework assignments

- **Be informed.** Find out about the school's policy on homework at the beginning of the school year. Ask your child's teachers about the kind of assignments that will be given and what kind of time frame the children have to complete them.
- **Be involved.** Ask the teacher how you can help with homework. Be available to answer your child's questions, look over completed assignments, and encourage your child to share returned assignments so you can read teacher comments.

Providing guidance to homework assignments

- **Learn how your child learns.** Understand your child's learning style and develop routines that best support how he or she learns best.
- **Encourage good study habits.** Help your child get organized. Ensure your child has scheduled enough time to complete assignments.
- **Talk.** Discuss homework with your child. Talking about an assignment can help your child think it through and break it down into small, workable parts.
- **Provide encouragement.** Find ways to support your child's efforts in completing assignments.

Source: www.education.alberta.ca/parents/role/tips.aspx

THUMB HUGS

A creative idea that made a difference



Norwood School Teacher Andrea Kokott gives student Alex a 'thumb hug' (left). Kokott came up with the idea of a thumb hug when Alex was in kindergarten. Kokott says at that time Alex did not like physical contact, but still needed positive reinforcement. The thumb hug was a way of giving that, and is an example of how Wetaskiwin Regional's teachers are innovative in their approach so students can be successful.



facts

1

What is the Learning Cycle?

Teachers in WRPS are focused on these four aspects of teaching. This focus strengthens the learning experiences of students.



Outcomes

Basing what is taught on provincial curriculum

Looking back and forward

The impact of the learning cycle

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools is six years into a nine year project aimed at improving the quality of learning experiences for our students. We call it the “Learning Cycle”.

As we look back, we are thrilled to see the growth we’ve achieved as a result of our efforts with the Learning Cycle. We are:

- Consistently using teaching techniques that are proven to be effective for learners.
- Evaluating students using a variety of methods. As a result, teachers have better information to base their teaching on.
- Strengthening connections between educators so that successful ideas are shared.
- Providing opportunities and support for teachers to hone their craft.

“Student success within Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools continues to show improvement year after year,” says Terry Pearson, Superintendent, Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools.

“Teaching is a complex and complicated endeavor due to the uniqueness of each and every student. Meeting the diverse needs of our students is extremely challenging but improving our skills through the Learning Cycle is critical to our success.”

Pearson credits teachers for the positive change. “That increase in success is due to the dedication and commitment of teachers,” he says.



The principal’s important role

In addition to the effort of teachers, the division has strongly emphasized the role of the principal as the instructional leader, and will focus on this as it moves forward.

“In schools of the past, the principal may have been in charge of the school, but he or she may not have been the instructional leader,” says George Ollenberger, Director of Instruction. “We want every teacher to be an exemplary teacher. It’s the principal’s job to help get them there.”

“Our expectation is that teachers thoughtfully analyze, document and plan their approach. We expect each teacher to critically examine what they want to do better to improve the learning experience of students in their classroom,” says Ollenberger. “It’s the principal that supervises this and supports it.”

There are many examples throughout the division of this strong connection between a principal, the teachers and the significant impact they have together on students.

Leaders who are making a difference

At **Gwynne School**, profiled on page six, Principal Karen Elgert asks that teachers try a new strategy six times each school year. The teacher must submit a lesson plan to her, and Elgert attends the class on the day of the lesson to observe how the strategy works with students.

At **Buck Mountain School**, profiled on page six, Principal Lyle Fittes, is at the helm of educators who are working to improve the way they respond to the unique needs of each child in the classroom. Fittes is instrumental in seeing that educators have opportunities for appropriate professional development and use the knowledge they’ve gained to benefit their colleagues and ultimately the students they teach.

At **Clear Vista School** profiled on page two, Principal Chris Zarski played a key role in a successful cross curricular project. She arranged timetables so that teachers have planning time

together and so that all students in a particular grade, were scheduled to take particular subjects at the same time, allowing flexibility and increased opportunities for the way teachers can work with students.

“When we connect principals with teachers, in the role of instructional leader, that’s when we can truly impact each student,” says Ollenberger. “And we need to reach

each child. Classrooms are changing. We are no longer focused on imparting knowledge. Anyone can google what they need to know.”

“It is the higher level thinking skills that we need students to develop,” says Ollenberger. “And to develop them we have to change the way we teach.”

Ollenberger says, “I’ve seen a really big shift in people’s thinking. People are seeing the value in the Learning Cycle because they see it’s working for students.”

2

Practices

Using successful strategies to teach curriculum

3

Assessment

Using a variety of observations to know if learning has occurred, and then adapting to give students what they need next.

4

Evaluation

Measuring if learning has happened - based on provincial curriculum

What does this mean for you?

Parents can expect:

- Classrooms are different than they were when you went to school – students experience more interaction, group work, and hands-on activities
- Teachers are working to engage your child
- Your child is given opportunity to express what he or she is learning in a variety of ways
- Teachers can tell you about their Learning Improvement Goal and its impact on your child

How the Learning Cycle is helping students



A variety of surveys and other sources of data show us the impact of the Learning Cycle within WRPS classrooms. Here are a few highlights showing the change between results on surveys done in 2010 and 2011.

Students tell us:

- Schoolwork is important. 85%. Up 11%.
- Teachers connect schoolwork to their future. 76%. Up 17%.
- Teachers frequently discuss work with students. 75%. Up 16%.
- Teachers will not accept a 0% from them. Students say teachers make sure they hand in all their work. 86%. Up 19%.

Teachers tell us they:

- Are giving students a choice on how they will demonstrate their learning. 92%. Up 11%.
- Do not give a student the choice to fail; that 0% is not an option in their class. 95%. Up 20%.
- Use data to determine if students have understood what is taught. If the students cannot demonstrate success, the teacher reteaches using a different strategy. 95%. Up 11%.
- Use a variety of sources such as assignments, tests, class discussions and other performance tasks to evaluate a student's progress. 93%. Up 9%.





Joe Pitzel, a teacher who has many years of experience under his belt, had a

surprising experience in his Buck Mountain School classroom recently.

He was in the computer lab working on a lesson on continental shift. After explaining the assignment, he was surprised to see most of his students staring blankly at their computer screens.

“When I asked what the problem was, one of the students explained they didn’t know what a

continent was,” says Pitzel. “I had assumed they knew.” Pitzel, of course, adjusted the lesson for that day, but it made an impression. “If I had done a pre-assessment, the lesson would have gone much better,” says Pitzel.

A pre-assessment helps teachers see what students know and what they don’t know. It can happen at the beginning of a class or at the start of a new unit, and guides teachers in what to teach and how to teach it.

And, it is a major focus for educators at Buck Mountain School, as a means to ensure high quality learning for students.

The power of

“Pre-Assessment is one strategy we can use to respond to the unique needs of each student,” says Lyle Fittes, Buck Mountain Principal. Fittes says the staff’s efforts with Pre-Assessment are part of a larger focus at the school on differentiating instruction.

What does it mean to ‘differentiate instruction’?

Differentiating Instruction means teachers adapt what they are doing to meet the specific needs of learners in their class. For example, if students already understand a particular concept, the teacher moves to the next concept.

If students are struggling with a concept, a teacher slows down and finds another way to help students understand. And in any class, there can be a variety of levels of student ability and understanding. Ideally, teachers want to have each child feel successful as well as challenged, and to do so, they must ‘differentiate’ the way they offer ‘instruction’.

“Over the last number of years, we have focused on the strategies a teacher can use to adapt to student needs, such as making learning more engaging” says Fittes. “And there is no doubt students are experiencing high quality learning at this school. But we always look for ways to improve, and we feel a focus on differentiating instruction is key.”

The teachers at the school are attending outside professional development sessions to bring back ideas that will help them with:

- differentiated instruction
- student engagement (Learning experiences that inspire a student’s interest and desire to take personal responsibility for it)
- backwards-by-design planning (Starting with what you want a student to understand or be able to do at the end of a unit or lesson, and planning everything else around that)

“It’s really easy to talk about theories, strategies and ideas,” says Fittes. “The hard part is to operationalize them.” Fittes says professional



“If we always do what we’ve always done, then we’ll always get what we’ve always got. The goal for teachers is to try something new. When we do, we always learn something that helps us improve learning.”

- Karen Elgert, Principal

You might think the kids in this class at Gwynne School were preparing for the most exciting event of the year. What you might not know is this learning activity is actually a math exercise on estimating and rounding.

Students in classrooms 10, 20 and 30 years ago might have experienced the same lesson with the teacher standing at the front of the classroom, chalk in hand, leading the class discussion on how to round \$2.99 to \$3. Then the teacher would assign students a worksheet that they were expected to complete at their desk.

Because of research about how children learn best, today’s classrooms are changing. Students don’t always sit in rows working quietly. Instead, they are often up and moving around, talking with one another. This grade five lesson shows just how things have changed.

In the class at Gwynne School, students had been assigned to plan a party for the class, deciding what and how much should be purchased to eat and drink. The students were to figure out a rough estimate on what the event would cost. The teacher brought newspaper flyers for the students to reference, letting them arrange themselves in small groups or work alone. As a result, the classroom is a hive of busy activity.

“You could sense their excitement and energy,” says Karen Elgert, Gwynne School Principal. “Every child, no matter what their ability, was completely engaged. I was also excited because students were working in groups, using problem solving skills,” says Elgert. “There were so many positive outcomes of this activity.”

“It helped me estimate and round,” says Emily, a grade five student.

“It was good for adding prices with decimals. You had to look in the flyers for the best deals,” says Jaedon.

“I think it was a good idea because we as students know what to plan for a class party. The math wasn’t too hard,” says Nick.

understanding each student

by differentiating
instruction

development allows teachers to see how other professionals are putting ideas to work in the classroom. Teachers can bring back ideas to share with each other and try within their classrooms.

Fittes says there are a range of skills involved with differentiating instruction, and pre-assessment is just one that the staff is working on right now. Judy Miller, a teacher at the school, is a part of the effort. One of Judy's assignments is to work with individual teachers to determine how pre-assessment could be effective with a particular lesson or unit.

"Pre-Assessment is so important," says Miller. "As humans we make assumptions. As teachers, those assumptions are about what kids know. Pre-assessment takes us beyond guessing to accurately determining what students really know. With that awareness, we plan more effective learning activities."

Pitzel, who saw the value of pre-assessment in his continental shift lesson, tried a different approach with another class. Working with Miller, Pitzel decided to evaluate his students' awareness of particular vocabulary related to continental shift, before the beginning of that unit.

Pitzel had the students paired with a partner, and instructed them to act out an assigned vocabulary term without talking to each other first.

Miller, who was observing the day of the pre-assessment, recalls that two boys were assigned the terms 'divergent and convergent plates'. Miller says it was easy to see the boys understood the terms when "they walked towards each other and gave each other a high five. Then they walked apart, just like a divergent plate."

"It was kinda neat," Pitzel says. "Pre-assessment worked well."



Reaching today's students

The teacher, who tried this activity for the first time, was surprised at the response. "I knew the students would like it, but I didn't think they'd be as enthusiastic as they were," says Skippy-Lee Emmerling.

The students will have their party and in the meantime, have learned how to estimate, and have seen how school applies to their own lives. "Learning becomes more meaningful for students when they can see the applications to their own world," says Elgert.

This particular lesson is one example of how Gwynne School is improving learning for students. The principal requires that each teacher in the school 'try something new' in a lesson at least six times during the school year. On those occasions, the teacher writes out a plan describing the new strategy. Elgert visits the class on the day it's put into action to observe how the students respond to the new strategy. Afterwards, Elgert and the teacher discuss what occurred.

"Many ideas work well, others need tweaking, and a few don't work," says Elgert. "The goal is teachers trying something new. We always learn something that helps us improve learning."

Elgert strongly believes having teachers feel safe and encouraged to be innovative is key for student success. "If we always do what we've always done, then we'll always get what we've always got," says Elgert.



Learning support teacher, Trevor Van Someren, appreciates Elgert's requirement, saying "Stepping out of our comfort zone to try something new, and then having a chance to reflect on it, makes us better at meeting the needs of students."

Van Someren says the Principal's push to improve in this particular way makes a huge difference for kids. And, he says, it's especially important in light of the focus throughout the province to include and accommodate students with a variety of abilities all within the same classroom.

"We welcome differences and want to meet the needs of diverse learners," says Van Someren. "That requires we adapt the way we teach, so that we offer learning experiences that reach each child."



REGISTER FOR KINDERGARTEN

Kindergarten registration
is now underway

Kindergarten is an important milestone and the beginning of a lifelong, learning journey. Your child has a promising future ahead and we hope you will give us an opportunity to nurture his or her social, physical and intellectual growth.

If your child turns five years old on or before December 31, 2012 they are eligible to attend kindergarten in the fall. It is time right now to pick up the 'getting ready for kindergarten' application package – available at all WRPS elementary schools.

Once you've picked up a package, and filled in the forms, please come to the kindergarten application night at your school. Detailed information is included in the package or available on our website:

www.wrps.ab.ca/kindergarten

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We welcome your feedback!

If you have any comments, ideas or suggestions about this publication, please contact knulls@wrps.ab.ca, call 780-352-6018, or call toll free: 1-877-352-8078.

We love good news! Do you have some to share?

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools is extremely proud of the many accomplishments of its students, teachers and many staff members. Working with parents we are making a difference for students.

Within this publication, we have featured many good news stories. We recognize that there are many similar success stories that have not been told yet, and we want to hear about them!

For example:

- When your child was struggling with something challenging - at school or otherwise - did a teacher's efforts make things better?
- Did your child feel particularly inspired or motivated by a specific assignment or activity at school?
- Did a teacher or an entire school adopt a new way of doing things that made school an exciting place for your child?
- Was there a time in your child's schooling when the teacher made a big difference?

If you know of such a story, please contact us. By sharing stories of success, we make WRPS a better place for kids!

You can contact us at 780-352-6018 or toll free at 1-877-352-8078 or by e-mail at: knulls@wrps.ab.ca

