

Spring 2013 Edition

Produced by  
Wetaskiwin Regional  
Public Schools



# OUR REPORT TO YOU!

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Buck Mountain Central School graduate Katelyn Mackinaw, is having a successful first year at the U of A.

## SUCCESS FOR FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS

**Katelyn Mackinaw is having a great first year attending the University of Alberta. The recent graduate from Buck Mountain Central School is now in the U of A's Native Studies program, and has plans to go into dental hygiene.**

"It just feels right," says Katelyn about her studies and career direction.

The optimism and confidence Katelyn displays today was earned. She admits wondering many times if she would graduate from high school.

*Continued on page 6...*



Cody Finley and Emily Getzlaf are two students benefitting from Pipestone School's focus on reading comprehension.

## Building stronger readers

**Pipestone School is on an exciting journey of change. It began when the school's teachers were talking about how much students' reading ability was impacting other subject areas.**

"We found that while many children were fluid readers, they were weaker in comprehension," says Donna Mantai, who is the Learning Support Teacher (and kindergarten teacher) at the school.

The school's principal, Wendy Maltais, says as the teachers talked about the impact of reading comprehension, they asked themselves, "what can we do to improve comprehension across the board?"

"Reading needs to be about more than accurately reading the text," says Mantai. "It's also about the thinking skills that enhance understanding."

"Reading is such an important part of everything," says teacher Leonora Benson. "For example, problem solving in math requires that students can read and successfully comprehend the text. Also, helping students become able to communicate what they've read is key."

Deciding to improve reading comprehension, educators made a plan. They divided all the students in grades one through four into smaller groups of up to eight students. The groups are formed based on reading levels rather than grades, so students from various grades are often

in a single group. The idea behind this approach is that students receive a lot of individual instruction focused at just the right level. It gives them immediate feedback and allows them to be challenged and to be successful, which builds ability and confidence.

"The students are happy being with their group, even when there are students from other grades with them," says Mantai. "I think that's because they know inside that they are doing better with their reading."

The groups meet twice a week for 40 minutes each time.

Each group is led by either a teacher or by teacher assistant.

Teachers are also working with students in all of the

grades throughout regular instruction time, such as when reading a story as a class. Some of the techniques they use to get kids to think about what they're reading include:

- Making predictions
- Making connections from what they've read to their own lives
- Asking questions as they read
- Drawing inferences
- Analyzing characters actions and motives

"Some of the students weren't comfortable with that kind of discussion at first," says Benson. "But it's about getting them to talk and be willing to take the risk."

*Continued on page 6...*

# What is the Learning Cycle?

It's a process teachers use in Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. It helps teachers provide a high quality education for students.

1

## OUTCOMES

– Basing what is taught on provincial curriculum.

2

## PRACTICES

– Using successful strategies to teach curriculum.



## TAKING STOCK OF THE LEARNING CYCLE

### When did the Learning Cycle begin ?

The Learning Cycle began six years ago, and was intended to last nine years. With three years of our journey left, we are taking stock of what has been effective, and we are working to make the most of the next three years and thinking about how the Learning Cycle will impact the future.

### What impact has it had and what are the plans for the future?

Brian Taje, Associate Superintendent of Instruction, for Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools says the Division is pleased about the impact of the Learning Cycle. “We’re seeing consistent gains,” says Taje. These include gains on provincial achievement tests and diploma exams, he says. Also significant are the observations of what’s occurred at the school level.

“Educators have engaged in research about what works best for students, and they are making a difference,” says Taje. “Principals are becoming stronger at leading learning.”

Taje says over the next three years, the division must “start pulling out key practices that we know are making a difference for students. We need to identify, document and share them so we can continue to reap the benefit of what we’ve learned.” Taje says, “That’s what will carry us into the future. The real impact will be when these successful practices become a part of what we do every day. That’s sustainability.”

### Reaching each child

Within these pages are examples of the Learning Cycle at work. In each story, you will find the evidence of educators applying solid teaching practice and seeing the impact it has had. From strengthening reading and writing skills, to building understanding of First Nations culture, and working to ensure a child who had come from a difficult experience in the previous year had a chance to be successful... these each show how the Learning Cycle can be applied to individual learners successfully.

“Engaging students in important learning is rightly considered to be the key to teaching,” says Dr. Terry Pearson, Superintendent of Schools. “What teachers do in their interaction with students is what matters most in influencing student learning.”

“We know that the greatest growth for teachers comes from conversations among educators about their practice,” says Pearson. “As such the first, and in some respects the most important, contributor to professional growth is a culture of inquiry, which is what the Learning Cycle is all about,” said Pearson. “We have worked hard to ensure that culture and the resulting professional conversations are imbedded in our practice.”

“I know our teachers care about their students,” says Taje. “That’s very clear to me. It’s our professional obligation to make that caring apparent. The Learning Cycle has helped us with that.”

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# ENGAGEMENT



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 – 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

# DIFFERENCE

## IS THE LEARNING CYCLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

### YES.

**AND HERE'S HOW WE KNOW THAT.**

- More students are reaching the acceptable standard on Provincial Achievement Tests. We've gone from 70.5% achieving acceptable standard in 2008 to 79.1% in 2012.
- More students are achieving a level of excellence on the PATS. In 2008, 13% of students reached the level of excellence. In 2012, that climbed to 17.6%.
- Our participation rate on PATS has gone up. This means we are including as many students as possible, reflecting our commitment to each child.
- The standard of excellence on the grade 12, Diploma Exams has also gone up, to 20.4% in 2012.

STUDENTS

We see that WRPS students are more engaged and more active in their learning. This means they have more involvement in how learning happens and how they participate. We know students are more active from survey results.

**Here's what students have to say:**

- 79% say their teachers use a variety of activities in class – compared to 67% in 2010
- 76% say they like the way teachers teach – 68% in 2010.
- 81% say most of their teachers go out of their way to help students – 70% in 2010.
- 88% say most of their classes are well organized – 76% in 2010.
- 80% know their teachers won't accept a zero from them - 67% in 2010.
- 87% say they are able to understand most of the material covered in class – 77% in 2010.
- 80% say they know what good work looks like because their teachers show them examples of student work – 68% in 2010.
- 86% say they are learning a lot in school – 76% in 2010.

TEACHERS

Teachers and principals are working more closely together to improve how teachers are supported in their own growth as educators. Educators have reported improvement in their own practices over time.

From survey results, **here's what teachers say:**

- 85% say students are given opportunity to determine their learning activities – compared to 82% in 2010.
- 97% say they plan to provide diverse activities and experiences for their students – compared to 91% in 2010.
- 95% say they are skilled in the use of a large repertoire of instructional strategies – 89% in 2010.

# HELPING KIDS BE GREAT WRITERS

If you've ever read "The Giver", by Lois Lowry, you'll know this fictional book prompts a fairly deep question: 'what are we willing to give up - in order to get what we want the most in our society.'

Imagine working to get a group of grade nine students thoroughly engaged in answering that question. If you were their teacher, how would you design a lesson so the kids would be invested in the assignment and eager to read and digest the book?

Teachers at Clear Vista School decided to have students design their own city. By having students weigh the trade-offs they would make in the process, teachers hoped students would feel more interested and invested in reading the book and to make stronger connections to it. The assignment had great success.

"We had to describe our perfect city and what it would include, as well as what we were willing to sacrifice," says Taylor Gardiner, a grade nine student at the school. "It got my brain working differently. It made me come up with new ideas. I really liked it."

Taylor's Mom, Sherri Gardiner, says she loved seeing Taylor come home excited. "It's the way she talks about her school work," says Sherri. "This kind of project makes school interesting and relatable." Sherri says her daughter has always been a good student but, "it seems she's really zooming along in language arts this year." Taylor's marks have gone up, but even more than that Sherri says, "Taylor is enjoying the work. She's not just putting in her time."

Students were given the option of how they would showcase the city they had created, so Taylor designed a website. Others chose different methods.

"I'm really interested in reading the book now," says Taylor. "I want to see what their community sacrificed."



Clear Vista student Taylor Gardiner created a website to showcase the fictional city her group designed.

Taylor isn't the only student excited about the project. According to Chris Kirwan, Vice Principal and teacher at Clear Vista, evidence that the project was going well was the students' behavior during 10 days of class time they were given to work on the project. "They were focused," recalls Kirwan. "There were no behavior issues."

Kirwan says teachers strive to create projects like this because they're effective. "Students are more likely to invest and be engaged and that begets learning and better results," says Kirwan.

## AISI project targets writing skills

Planning engaging assignments like this, is one of the many things teachers are doing with specialized provincial funding this year. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS), allows schools to target areas teachers feel would best benefit their students. It encourages them to do their own research about what

is effective. At Clear Vista, the AIS project is focused on improving writing skills.

In grades one, two and three, teachers use exemplars to show students what beginning, good and excellent work looks like, at various stages of development through the year. In grades four, five and six, educators are using a number of tools to help them break up the parts of the writing process - such as spelling, grammar, content, etc. In grades seven, eight and nine, teachers are using descriptive feedback about

students written work, provided in a relatively short time frame. This gives students immediate feedback on how to improve. In all the grades, teachers are using pictures or questions to prompt kids' creativity and get them writing.

Project based learning, such as the one based on "The Giver", is just one part of what teachers are doing with AIS at Clear Vista, but it's possible because they have time to collaborate.

## Teacher collaboration is critical

"Teachers having the time and opportunity to collaborate with each other is key to success," says Chris Zarski, Clear Vista Principal.



Grade eight students Landon Feldberg, Morgan Crawford and Kaden Morrow "show what they know". The students completed reading "King Lear" and got to show what they learned in a format they chose themselves. Teachers see better results by engaging kids in this way.



# Having fun with your child to **ENCOURAGE** writing

**It is busy being a parent. Balancing work, home, homework and after school sports, music, dance, clubs and activities is a huge challenge. When it comes to helping your child improve in their writing there is a lot parents can do to be involved and it's surprisingly easy:**

## **1 TALK, TALK, TALK, WITH YOUR CHILD**

Tell stories about when you were young. Tell your stories with a beginning, middle and an end. Include a problem or conflict with your story and freely apply enthusiasm and style (voice) to your story. After you have modeled storytelling, have your child tell a story of their own. They could tell you about a family vacation, a trip to the park or about Christmas. Story telling is the beginning of story writing. When you make it fun you are bonding with your child and increasing their literacy skills. Shut off the DVD player in the car and try the story telling game – it will be worth the effort!

## **2 READ, READ, READ WITH YOUR CHILD**

Reading and writing go hand in hand. Children who love reading explore a variety of writing styles without even knowing it. A love of literature inspires good writers. Read with your child nightly and allow them to read when they are ready. Take turns reading whenever possible – if there is a predictable part in the story, make that part your child's. Take opportunities to discuss the words used in the book, the suspense or humor that the author creates, and if your child can relate the story to their own life.

For example, Andrew's Loose Tooth is a popular Robert Munsch book where Andrew is frustrated because he can't get his loose tooth out and he gets help from some unusual characters along the way. Questions throughout this book could be: have you ever felt frustrated like Andrew? When? What happened? What did you do?

Or: Is this how you thought the tooth fairy would act or look like? Describe how you think the tooth fairy should help Andrew.

## **3 MODEL WRITING**

Grocery lists, recipes, activities on a calendar, planning a birthday party, sticky note reminders and notes of encouragement all show the importance of writing in our lives. Share with your child how you write in your work; memos, emails, parts orders, invoices, forms, and advertising are in almost every job and will show your child the value of writing skills. Involve your child in everyday writing. Make creative grocery lists. For example, think of words to describe each item, start easy and progress to more challenging. This week "green grapes"

and next week "juicy green grapes". Keep this fun and only do as many items as your child is interested in describing. When you make a grocery list this way you are practicing the use of describing words which play a key role in the tone and style of writing.

## **4 HAVE WRITING MATERIALS AND TOOLS AVAILABLE FOR YOUR CHILD**

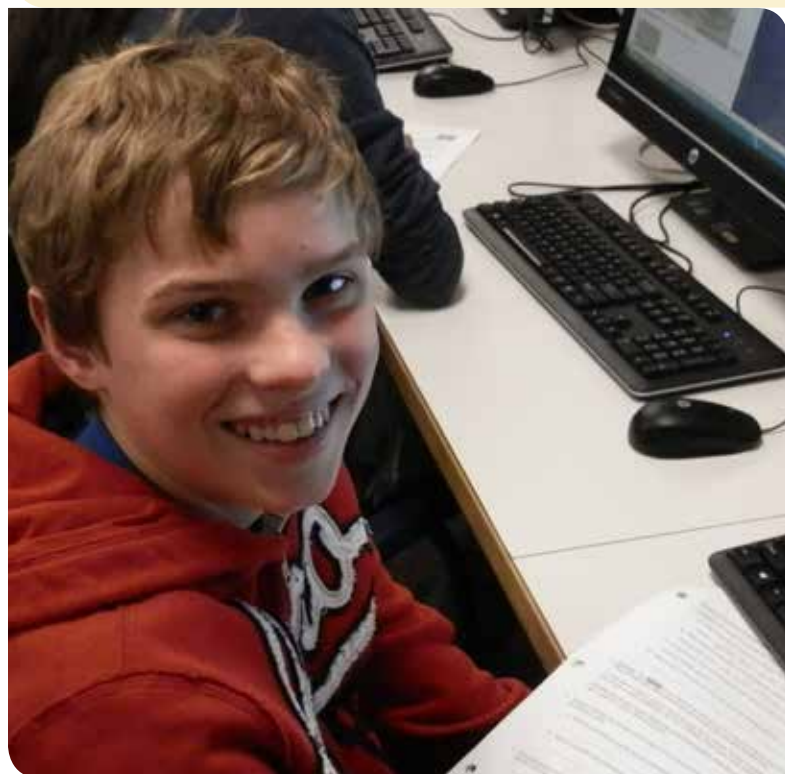
to use freely whenever they wish. Lined loose leaf, blank paper, note books, mini-note books, sticky notes, paper of all colors, size and styles will encourage your child to write at will. Pens, pencils, colored pens and pencils, markers, and crayons should be readily available as well. Remember that emergent writing takes the form of "scribbles", in lines that mimic adult writing. Encourage and be positive about any interest in writing shown from your child.

## **5 FOCUS ON POSITIVES**

When your child is older and at the stage when you are editing their work, focus on positives before making any suggestions. As an editor, we tend to only point out what needs to be fixed. Instead of saying "you start all your sentences the same way" try a positive first and then rewording the suggestion so it's less critical. For example, "I really enjoyed reading how you fell in the mud. You used a great describing word: "goosey". When you re-read your writing do you see your sentences starting in a variety of ways? Let's pick one sentence to make it start differently from the others." Writing is an expression of self; be sure to reaffirm and encourage before supporting your child in enhancing their written work.

Writing can be hard for children. It involves many functions of the brain at once; putting thoughts into words, organizing those words, remembering the words, and making the pencil print. Writers must simultaneously perform all these skills and it can be very difficult. If your child is struggling with writing, talk to their classroom teacher and ask for specific strategies to help your child. Writing is a skill to be practiced and nourished. With parents involved as partners in education, students have the best opportunities for success.

*Submitted by Cordalee Fiveland*



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Success for first nation students.

...continued from page 1

“I felt like giving up sometimes,” says Katelyn, pointing to the fact that she is First Nations in a school with a population that is largely non-native. “There were a lot of stereotypes about native people that I didn’t like.” Yet, despite the naysayers, Katelyn chose challenging academic courses throughout high school, encouraged by Corrine Desjarlais, a FNMI worker at Buck Mountain Central School. Katelyn says Corinne was instrumental in helping her stay on track.

“Katelyn is extremely bright, but has at times doubted herself,” says Desjarlais. “She just needed someone to encourage her. When I found out Katelyn had enrolled at U of A, I had tears in my eyes. I am so happy to know she went. She’s a smart person and she’ll do well.”

Katelyn’s mother, Sharon Mackinaw says, “Katelyn’s father and I are so proud of her graduating and making the big step to go to university. Education is so important.”

Katelyn is an example of what Buck Mountain Central School hopes to see happening regularly; high school graduation for First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) students.

Principal Lyle Fittes says in order to achieve this goal, the staff have purposefully set out to make stronger connections with FNMI students and their families, and to create more understanding within the entire school.

One of the major initiatives was training for staff to help them be more aware of First Nations culture. They traveled together to a facility in Hobbema. At that retreat, staff experienced a First Nations ceremony and listened to Band members about their life experiences.



Also, the staff and students at the school have worked together to plan events that build understanding and respect for First Nations culture. These events have included First Nations dance performances, drumming, and workshops where all students can participate in making bannock, learning lacrosse and hearing native elders tell traditional stories. Metis representatives have also visited the school’s social studies classes, and Elders from Hobbema come to the school and specifically connect with First Nations’ boys.

**“All the exposure to FNMI culture has set a tone in the school,” says Fittes. “It has communicated that we are a community of many cultures. There has been a real shift.”**

Staff have noticed that while First Nations students used to sit apart from others during lunches and breaks, now they are more commonly seen with friends who are not just First Nations. And, Fittes says, staff are much stronger at reaching out to First Nations families.

Fittes says in the past, teachers worked through Corrine Desjarlais to reach First Nations families. Corrine’s home visits built a lot of trust with families, and Fittes says the visits as well as Corrine’s work with First Nations students in the school continues to be critical. However, Fittes says it was time to bring more people into the equation.

“We are working to have teachers be proactive in contacting families,” says Fittes.

**“Relationships are very important and we want all of our families to feel our desire to work with them to help their children succeed.”**

Fittes is confident that as the staff continue to work together with all students to build understanding across cultures, it will create even more opportunities for success in the future.

Helping kids be great writers

...continued from page 4

Teachers at Clear Vista meet for a half day every month. They plan assignments, ways to evaluate, and they focus on the needs of individual students. Zarski says there is a wide range of positive benefits of the collaboration time. “We’re seeing more innovation in creating learning opportunities,” says Zarski.

“It’s so much more effective than trying to talk for five minutes during recess,” says Kirwan. “Uninterrupted time with colleagues gives us the opportunity to put things together in the best interest of the students,” says Kirwan. “It allows us to be more effective with students. **We want to move away from being the ‘sage on the stage’ to more the ‘guide on the side’.** It takes a lot more effort at the beginning of a unit to do that, so the collaboration time is key.”

“Although it’s pretty early to measure success, we’re excited about good things that are happening,” says Zarski. Provincial test scores are improving with the students in grades seven, eight and nine. Also, teachers have noticed that, “kids are more creative with their writing and ideas.”

Building stronger readers.

...continued from page 1

Emily Getzlaf, a grade two student, says, “I like to guess about what happens next at story time.”

Cody Finley, a grade three student, says “I like to look at pictures and predict what the story will be about. Sometimes you can tell from the front or the back of the book.”

Educators at Pipestone School are pretty excited about the results they are seeing. Principal Maltais says kids are moving quickly from one reading level to the next, as compared to last year. Also, Maltais says teachers are seeing more students willing to participate in class discussions about what they’ve read.

She says there have already been improvements on tests that measure reading comprehension. Also, according to Mantai, “The students who usually struggle are beginning to use more strategies to help them understand what they are reading.”

**“It’s making a difference for students,” says Maltais, “and that’s what we are all about.”**



How Clear Vista’s AISI project supports Learning Cycle goals

- Teachers are using strategies that research shows are successful. These include: learning groups, reinforcing effort, providing recognition, using cues and questions to guide students, allowing non-linguistic representations, and getting the students to generate and test hypotheses.
- Making learning interesting and relevant to kids – so they are engaged
- Using evaluation methods that best benefit students





# SUCCESS

## LEAVING NO CHILD BEHIND:

### A commitment to success at Norwood School

If you see Jacob Bickford, a grade four student at Norwood School, you might not realize the challenges he's been through. He's a happy and contributing citizen in his school, but he had a very challenging time at the school he attended last year. He was in trouble a lot. His parents were called there often and they were very concerned.

"He hated school," recalls Jacob's Dad, Tom Bickford. "He wasn't choosing to work or participate."

"I used to always be mad," says Jacob.

This year at Norwood School, there has been a transformation. Jacob's Mom, Robyn Bickford says her son looks forward to going to school now. "He sets his alarm and gets up early because he wants to be there," says Robyn. Tom says he sees his son coming home excited to talk about his day. "And he's participating in extra-curricular activities like choir, basketball and skiing. His confidence is growing. He's soaring."

"We even get phone calls with good news about Jacob," says Tom.

When Norwood School found out that Jacob would be attending their school, they put a plan in place to ensure he could be successful. The principal, Jacob's teacher, a teacher assistant, and the school's learning support teacher all attended professional development. The specialized training focused on strategies staff could use to de-escalate situations and extend appropriate support.

"We focused on making sure the whole team was together and that we were prepared," says Jodie Mattia, Principal of Norwood School. Mattia says the team consults together regularly and on as-needed basis, lead by the school's learning support teacher. "She's the connection piece – to make sure our team works together throughout the year."

Mattia is very satisfied with the way things are going. "I see a very happy, involved student. Jacob has chosen to become involved in the school community. In that way, he looks like every other student," says Mattia. "He's a good kid. He has a warm heart. He's honest and he owns his behavior."

"It's about setting appropriate boundaries," says Mattia. "And that's not any different than we'd expect from any of our other students. It's our responsibility to look at each child's strengths and weaknesses and work together to find ways to support each child."

Jacob's teacher, Stephen Horyn, says "it's great to see how well Jacob's doing." There have been some

challenging moments, but the staff work with the strategies they think will help. And Horyn credits the team approach. Horyn says Jacob continues to make progress. "It's extremely rewarding to be his teacher."

When asked what he likes most about school this year, Jacob provides an extended list. "I like the principal and all the teachers. I like writing. I like my teacher – he's very understanding."

I like computers and I like to help out. I love coming to school every day," says Jacob. "When I'm at school, it feels like home. I am my best self here."

**"The school division says no child should be left behind," says Jacob's Mom, Robyn. "Well, this school has taken that challenge seriously, and they've turned it into something beautiful."**



Jacob Bickford is having a great year in school thanks to teacher Stephen Horyn, and the entire Norwood School team.





# 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](http://www.wrps.ab.ca/kindergarten)

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Back row left to right: Glenn Norby, Barb Johnson, Clint Neis, Stanley Harsch, Shauna Bruno  
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### We welcome your feedback!

If you have any comments, ideas or suggestions about this publication please contact Sherry Knull at [knulls@wrps.ab.ca](mailto:knulls@wrps.ab.ca), call 780-352-6018, or call toll free: 1-877-352-8078.

You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter.  
[www.facebook.com/wrps11](http://www.facebook.com/wrps11) and <https://twitter.com/wrps11>.



## 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 Sherry Knull at 780-352-6018 or toll free at 1-877-352-8078 or by e-mail at: [knulls@wrps.ab.ca](mailto:knulls@wrps.ab.ca)**

