Strengthening reading comprehension... one classroom at a time

Monica Miller feels passionately about helping children learn to read.

“Reading is very important. It’s a part of everyday life,” says Miller, a grade 2 teacher at Alder Flats School.

“I love seeing kids learn to read. I never get tired of seeing the light bulb go on.”

Miller has keyed in on reading for a number of years, although recently she and others in her school are trying some new approaches, with positive results.

Reading comprehension: a key skill

According to Principal, Sean Madill, staff are specifically working to improve reading comprehension skills. “If a child has good comprehension, it means they understand what they are reading,” says Madill. “That is an important skill because it impacts all of the subject areas.”

The Principal says scores on standardized tests in grades four, five and six are good, but not as strong as the results younger grades achieve. Madill says staff have wondered if the students are struggling because they don’t understand the questions.

“The kids can do the tasks we ask them to in the classroom,” says Madill. “We can see they understand the curriculum in various subjects. But then on the standardized tests, they are not answering correctly on the same material. We believe it’s because they may not be understanding what’s being asked.” That’s a reason to take action, but more importantly than test scores, the staff’s primary motivation is to do what’s best for kids.

The plan to improve reading

Alder Flats staff chose to spend time - twice each week - during the last school year, with their students grouped according to reading levels. For instance, kids in grade four might be in the same group as kids in grade five or even grade two.

The idea was to provide the right amount of challenge to nurture growth without overwhelming a child. The groups are smaller than regular classes, allowing the teacher to focus more on each student, and to work on specific skills.

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Strengthening reading comprehension... one classroom at a time

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The program the school is using aims to have students develop these skills:
- Connect (to your own life)
- Predict and infer (what will happen next)
- Question
- Monitor and clarify (identifying words you don’t know and figuring them out)
- Summarize
- Evaluate

Basically, the program nurtures problem solving skills. “I am seeing a change throughout the school,” says Madill. Even though test results weren’t back by the end of the 2012-2013 school year, staff are pleased.

“The kids are all using the same terms,” says Madill. “When I hear a student say ‘I see a connection between this book and...’ that’s a big deal. It means they’re thinking about what they’ve read.” Madill says he also sees that kids are more focused and engaged. And, informal evaluations show some students have climbed 7 or 8 reading levels in one year.

The staff also did a novel study with students and their families in early 2013. “Parents were very supportive. Ninety-five per cent of parents were involved on a daily basis. It makes a difference for their children.”

Seeing such strong results has “reignited and reinvigorated the staff,” says Madill. “It’s been wonderful watching them get excited.”

Taking it even further Monica Miller is taking the school’s focus even further. She, along with the grade four teacher, have expanded the school’s twice a week reading sessions into something that happens daily.

“This has reignited and reinvigorated the staff. It’s been wonderful watching them get excited.”

Sean Madill, Principal

“I’ve always done 40 minutes of reading a day with my kids,” says Miller. “What’s different this past year is grouping kids according to their reading levels. That allows us to monitor each student more often so it’s easier to give the help they require, right when they need it.”

Miller is excited about the results. “I see the kids talking more. They can make predictions, and they’re making connections in subjects other than Language Arts.” According to Miller, the majority of students in her class are “making bigger jumps as compared to other school years.”

Why teachers shouldn’t laminate lesson plans Miller and her colleague made the decision to do more with reading comprehension because they saw a need with students.

That’s exactly what good teachers should do, says Madill. “Every year and every group of students is different. You have to adapt to what each group needs.”

Miller feels the same way. “Every child is different. You have to teach the ones in your class.”

What’s ahead? In Monica Miller’s class the emphasis will stay on reading comprehension. Also, building on the success of last year, Miller wants to work on helping the kids make inferences about the material they’re reading.
model and adapted it for use at their school. The “Pyramid of Response to Intervention” addresses how to respond when kids don’t learn. The three sides of the pyramid are academic, social/emotional, and behavioral. Not only does the school’s model describe specific student concerns, it identifies how the school will respond. The goal of the staff is to address the challenges as they arise before they escalate into something more serious.

“Every interaction with a child is an opportunity for intervention,” says Heinrichs. “We are becoming very intentional in using moments that come up on a regular basis.”

The plan in action
Rearranging the timetable
Staff are intentionally creating moments for intervention. They have rearranged the timetable to provide each teacher with a core subject, one 27 minute period with each class every week to do review, tutorial work or other academic assistance.

“The point is not to introduce new material,” says Heinrichs. “We’re setting up an opportunity for the kids who are having challenges in the class to redo assignments, get a different explanation for something they didn’t understand, or get other needed help.”

Another shift was to form two grade nine classes last year. One for students who wanted the regular amount of work and another for kids who wanted more of a challenge.

Putting their minds together
Another action the school took was to create time in the schedule for teachers to talk to each other. Teachers meet twice a month to discuss individual students who might need support. Comparing notes allows them to achieve a more accurate view of the child’s progress and work together as educators to provide the right assistance.

Restorative Justice
The changes extend beyond academics, because educators know that when there are behavioral or emotional challenges, those get in the way of learning. The school is using an ‘adaptive restorative justice practice’. It is roughly based on a First Nations approach which focuses on the needs of victims and offenders rather than merely punishment.

Heinrichs is pleased with the result. “The first time, an adult leads the students through the process. Now we’re finding the kids lead their own process.”

There are a number of other changes the staff are working on as they seek to help individual students. As a collective, the efforts are already making a difference.

Positive results already
- In the past, out of the school’s 140 students, approximately 15 would not pass an individual course. By the end of the 2012-13 school year, that number had dropped significantly to two instances of a student not passing.
- After dropping for a few years, satisfaction survey results with students and parents are going up.
  - 95% of students feel welcome at school (79% in 2012)
  - 85% of students feel teachers care about them (69% in 2012)
  - 95% of parents feel staff at the school care about their child
  - 82% of parents are satisfied with the staff’s approach to behavior concerns or problems

Students appreciate the changes
Students from the grade nine challenge class say they can see a difference.

“The teachers are willing to adjust the times of tests if it’s a busy time. It makes me feel that they care,” says Bethany Barthel.

Kory Machin, who recently moved from the United Kingdom, says “I love all the hands on and project work here. It’s good.”

“This has been a good year for everyone,” says Samantha Hoflin. “There’s not a lot of drama anymore.”

“It’s like we’re all family now,” agrees Montanna Christie.

Melissa Ramm says she has really felt the impact of the teachers’ efforts. “Even though this is a teacher’s job, it feels teachers here are taking it further than that.”
The Learning Cycle

What is the Learning Cycle? Teachers in WRPS are focused on these four aspects of teaching. This focus strengthens the learning experiences of students.

1. Outcomes: Basing what is taught on provincial 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.

We’re proud of what we’re achieving, and specifically with the positive impact of the Learning Cycle. As you flip through the pages, you’ll find out what that is and how it’s helping students learn better.

For instance, you’ll read about how staff at Wetaskiwin High School are making learning more personalized for students. Because students know what they are expected to learn in each class, they’re focused and able to take responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, teachers know which outcomes require more attention, and their teaching responds to how the students are learning.

At Lakedell School, staff are using a strategy to improve reading comprehension that is making a significant difference for learning and engagement. Leveled reading groups are a hands-on strategy that focus students on what is important. Also, teachers know if students comprehend what they are reading.

Alder Flats School is also focused on reading comprehension and personalization. Students at the school are able to focus on reading at a level they are comfortable at, no matter what their age or ability. Student success is what education is all about. Reading comprehension is important in all subject areas, and with this focus, student learning should improve in all subjects.

At Griffiths-Scott Middle School there is an emphasis on the well-being of each student. Collaboration between staff, using this student centered approach, ensures each child’s needs are met, and supports are put in place to improve learning.

Enjoy the publication and again, welcome back to school!

Sincerely,
Deanna Specht
Board Chair

Back to school: an exciting time of year!

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, I say welcome to those who are new to our schools, and welcome back to returning families.

For parents of students, as well as community members and our own staff, we hope this publication is interesting and helpful. We hope the stories provide some good information about what happens in our schools, and most of all, a feeling about who we are as a school division.

Students might not know what the Learning Cycle is. It may be difficult for them to define “quality education.” But when surveyed, their responses help us know how WRPS is doing. Each February, students in grade four, seven and ten are surveyed by Alberta Education. This year, approximately 1000 students participated*. This is what they reported:

- Over 90% of grade four students say teachers are good to very good.
- Over 90% of grade seven and 10 students report the quality of teaching at their schools is good to very good.
- Approximately 90% of grade four students think their schools are good to very good.
- Approximately 85% of grade four students are proud of their schools.
- Over 90% of grade four and seven students report they get the help they need with reading and writing.
- Approximately 90% of grade seven and ten students know what they are expected to learn at school.
- Approximately 90% of grade seven and ten students believe the core subjects they are learning are useful to them.

What’s next?

“As we continue implementing the Learning Cycle, we need to become a learning organization,” says Brian Taje, Associate Superintendent, Instruction.

“When students benefit from our own exemplary teaching practices, we need to know what they are and use them throughout WRPS.”

When WRPS started the Learning Cycle, it was centrally initiated and there were start-up challenges.

Taje credits teachers and principals for persevering. He reports, “Teachers earnestly studied the research, asked themselves how students were doing in their classrooms and examined their practices with one another to make improvements.

Also, principals recommitted their support of teacher efforts.”

The evidence clearly points to overall gains in achievement and quality of education in WRPS because of the Learning Cycle. As WRPS moves forward, the goal is to sustain what’s working and continue to improve the academic success of all students.

*In small schools (fewer than 120 students in grades 4-12) the survey includes students in grades 4 and above.
It’s the
most wonderful time
of the year

We have all seen those Staples commercials... Parents are deliriously happy that their children are going back to school. Parents are twirling and dancing through the store aisles, picking up school supplies; while their children look on somewhat sullenly.

While a new school year is very exciting, for various reasons, there is always a hump to get over when readjusting to the routine of school life. After long, lazy days of summer, late nights, and sleep in mornings, it can be very difficult for families to readjust.

Here are a few suggestions that may help your child and your family ease back into a more school friendly routine and help prepare your child to be ready for learning.

Throughout the summer:
• Continue reading to and with your child.
• Find a Math app to practice basic facts.
• Find ways to keep writing / pencil skills sharp.

Our brains tend to forget things when we quit practicing them and it would be a shame to lose all the hard work your child put in last year. Make “thinking” fun and something you do together.

About a week before school starts...
Re-introduce a bed time. Pick a time that is about half an hour earlier than your child has been going to bed during the summer. If they have been going to bed at 10 or 10:30 pm, start a bed time of 9:30 or 10 pm.

Then most importantly, wake them up half an hour earlier in the morning. You are re-training their body and their sleep patterns which takes time to do.

If possible, 2 days before school repeat this so your children are going to bed at 9 or 9:30 pm and again, waking up a half an hour earlier.

This will lessen their physical and emotional shock on the first day of school.

The night before school...
Get ready together. Create a team effort as much as possible; supplies all labeled and ready to go; outfit selected, lunch made, after school arrangements set.

Make sure your child knows what bus they are taking or who will be picking them up so they aren’t worried.

Discuss how they are feeling. Ask: What are you excited about for tomorrow? What are you worried about? etc., and try to help prepare them for their day. Be sure to leave extra time for your child’s bed time routine as it most likely will take longer than usual to complete.

Why go to all this effort?
Research shows that if we are tired it is more difficult to learn.

Teachers everywhere have seen tired children disengage from lessons, have emotional/behavioral issues and get into conflicts with their peers.

By helping your child be ready for school, you are helping them be ready to learn, and ready to be with (or deal with) their classmates.

It could be on the school supply list:— 1 child; ready to learn.

- by Cordalee Fiveland

“What impresses me most about the stories in this publication is how dedicated professionals continually reflect on teaching and learning and the impact it has on their students.

“Such professionals continually alter their practice to ensure they are meeting the needs of their students. This is an example of the highest level of professionalism.”

- Terry Pearson, Superintendent of Schools, WRPS

“Parents are deliriously happy that their children are going back to school. Parents are twirling and dancing through the store aisles, picking up school supplies; while their children look on somewhat sullenly.”

- Terry Pearson, Superintendent of Schools, WRPS
English teachers at Wetaskiwin Composite High School are really excited about something they tried with students for the first time last year. It’s a fairly simple tool, but its having a dramatic impact.

“It has changed how I teach,” says English teacher, Dawn Marshall. “Rather than focusing on my teaching, I am focused on the kids’ learning.”

The department staff developed the tool: a piece of paper with a table on it that is given to students at the beginning of each English class. Students copy the objective for the day that is posted at the front of the room, into the table. The objective states what the student is supposed to know at the end of the class. The other cells in the table ask the students to rate 1) their own level of motivation that day, 2) their knowledge of the subject before the class, and it asks them to 3) at the end of class evaluate how well they learned the intended objective.

“It has changed how I teach. Rather than focusing on my teaching, I am focused on the kids’ learning.”  
-Dawn Marshall, teacher

Principal Audrey Looker says she’s pleased how well the tool has worked. “It has all sorts of applications,” she said. For instance, it could be used in math class or in other academic subjects.

“We have great teachers with great ideas here,” says Looker. “We’re getting better at sharing those pods of genius.”

says Marshall. “What’s different is the objectives are written in student friendly language. Also, a key component is having students think about the objective. It really sets the stage for learning.”

“At first I was a little worried the students would try to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear,” says Marshall. “But I told them no marks were attached to it, and within two weeks, they were coming into class and filling it out on their own.” Marshall and other educators feel the students give honest responses. The teachers are seeing multiple positive results from the exercise.

“I can quickly see whether or not students feel they understand the material,” says Marshall. “As a result, I know whether to spend a lot of time on a concept or move more quickly through the material.”

Department head Norman McNeill says the strategy came out of conversations that English teachers were having about giving good feedback.

“We have worked on providing high quality teacher feedback, and arranging opportunities for peers to give feedback to each other,” says McNeill. “This tool takes the process one step further. It has created a way for students to be self-reflective in respect to what the teacher has said. That reflection has increased each student’s ownership over the intended objectives for each day.”

“I think it really helps because the teacher knows what areas to focus on and what we already know,” says Jill Rogers who was in grade 10 last year. “It also showed me when I needed to get extra help.”

“It’s nice to know what’s expected of you; what you are supposed to know,” says Charlotte Lemieux, a grade 10 student last year. “It makes you more confident that you are getting something out of the class.”

The question about motivation, or emotional readiness, is something the students appreciate too.

“There were days when I wasn’t feeling good and this showed me how I feel affects how much I am picking up,” says Jill. “It has opened my eyes about how I am as a learner,” says Charlotte. “It’s made me a better student.”
Every student a successful reader

Last year when Vanessa Bosworth’s son, Justice, came running in after school, she wanted to know what he was so excited about.

“He said ‘I’m reading chapter books now, Mom’,” recalls Bosworth. Justice, who is in grade two at Lakedell School, explained he had been put in a new reading group that day and had picked out his first chapter book from the library.

“He was so thrilled,” says Bosworth. “He had read the entire first chapter on the bus ride home and he wanted to keep reading. I had to work to get him to eat supper, and I asked him if it was okay later for us to watch some TV. The next morning he wanted me to wake him up early so he could read before school.” By the next morning Justice had read seven chapters in 120 minutes.

It was also exciting for Justice’s teachers to see him succeed at reading. And his is not the only success story. Below provincial average on standardized test scores for a number of years, Lakedell has now improved to the point where the school has matched the provincial rates.

“It’s pretty exciting,” says Trevor Van Someren, who was a new Principal at the school last year. “The staff have done some amazing work together. They take ownership. They’re cognizant about what teaching practices are most effective, and we’re employing them with great success.”

“What’s also impressive is Lakedell School serves a high number of First Nations students and families,” says Dr. Shauna Bruno. “As the Maskwacis Trustee, I am aware that schools across this Province struggle with improving results for First Nations students but Lakedell School has found a way.”

Brenda McLeod, Justice’s grade two teacher, is also excited about the results in all subject areas, but in particular with reading. McLeod set up small reading groups in her grade two class, with students organized according to individual reading levels, with no more than six students in a group.

The results were very encouraging. “If you compare the results from last year to previous years, the grade two’s were testing at higher reading levels than any other year,” says Brenda McLeod.

In the guided reading groups, which McLeod calls “learning groups” in her classroom, students read out loud either to a teacher or a teacher assistant who is trained to do the program. Reading out loud and talking about the text is key because, according to McLeod, “there is no evidence that silent reading positively impacts new readers. Research shows that reading out loud to an adult, benefits all levels of readers.”

In the learning group, the adult is armed with props to guide the conversation. For instance, there is a crystal ball. When a child holds it, they must make a prediction based on what they know about what will happen next in the book. A toy microphone enables the holder to ask a question about a word or something else he or she doesn’t understand. Also, kids link their own fingers together to make a chain, reminding them to make connections between the text and their own lives.

“We know that reading comprehension can be taught,” says McLeod. “The idea is to get kids really engaged and excited.”

McLeod has had so much success with the reading program that she is using some of the same strategies, such as predicting, in other subjects. Also, she is starting to work on writing skills using a lot of the same strategies. For instance, students use the crystal ball to predict what happens in their own stories.

Key to success with a new approach is for the teacher to stop and take stock. “When I see growth in students, I know the teaching practices are effective. If students are not progressing, then I know I need to revise how I’m approaching that,” says McLeod. “You can’t expect to change how students learn.”

Watching the success with the reading groups is both exciting and rewarding, says McLeod. “I love teaching. Some would say I’m addicted to it. I love to see the students come to school excited to learn.”

“We know that reading comprehension can be taught. The idea is to get kids really engaged and excited.”

-Brenda McLeod, teacher
We welcome your feedback!

If you have any comments, ideas or suggestions about this publication, please contact:

Sherry Knell at:
knulls@wrps.ab.ca
call 780-352-6018
or call toll free:
1-877-352-8078

We appreciate any comments, and especially welcome good news stories about things happening in our schools!

Has a teacher or another employee made a difference for your child? We'd love to hear about it!

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School registration dates

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Wetaskiwin Comp. information:
RLS, ALS and GOALS students will register on September 3 when you arrive for your first day of school.

New students who need to register at WCHS will be accepted on August 26 - 28, by appointment. Please call 780-352-2295.

Students who are already registered, pick up timetables, books, locker assignments & pay fees as follows. No timetable changes on these days.

August 26 Grade 12
Last names A-L 9:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m.
Last names M-Z 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

August 27 Grade 11
Last names A-L 9:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m.
Last names M-Z 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

August 28 Grade 10
Last names A-L All students at 9:00 a.m.
Last names M-Z - All students at 1:00 p.m.

Off campus students can register for storefront programming on September 3 at 4802A – 50 Avenue (Eastgate Mall).

WRPS Board of Trustees

Back row left to right: Glenn Norby, Barb Johnson - Vice Chair, Clint Neis, Stanley Harsch, Shauna Bruno. Front row left to right: Ed Zacharko, Deanna Specht - Chair, Donna Hogg.

For more information about us: www.wrps.ab.ca