PUTTING PEN TO PAPER
Building enthusiasm for writing

What turns a reluctant writer into an eager writer? How about something fairly traditional? Like... writing to a pen pal!

Children in Falun School have enjoyed writing to pen pals from Ashoro, a town with a population of approximately 8,000 located in northern Japan. Falun’s grade three students wrote to pen pals who attend an elementary school in the Japanese community.

“Having a pen pal has given the children a purpose for their writing and made it fun,” says Meghan Lee-Olson, teacher. “Students knew their letters were going to an actual person, so they did their best work. They wanted to write,” says Lee-Olson.

The connection between Falun School and students from Ashoro was made when a Falun resident moved to Ashoro. Also, Ashoro is Wetaskiwin’s twin city.

The students in Lee-Olson’s class were each matched with a Japanese student from grade one to five. The Japanese students are learning English so that language was used in the letters going either direction. Sometimes Japanese characters were sent with an English translation.

Teachers selected particular themes to write about. “We’ve written about our Canadian winters, New Year traditions, and Halloween, and we sent a recipe for Bannock” for example, says Lee-Olson. “Our Japanese friends sent us origami, and told us about their New Year traditions and winter activities.”...Continued on page 2

DRAMATIC CHANGES = SUCCESS FOR KIDS

Watching the students come and go from Centennial School each day, the smiling faces of happy children are evidence of the staff’s work to create a welcoming environment. When staff occasionally encounter a child who doesn’t have that sense of belonging, they work to change it.

That was the case with Jane*. When Jane first started attending her grade three class at Centennial School, teacher Wanda Fonteyne described her as angry and shut down, and not ready to learn. Fonteyne knew she had to do something, and invited Jane in early each school day for a visit and something to eat. Sometimes it was muffins, other times oatmeal, but always there was a visit. Months later, Jane is improving academically, and most importantly, “she is more willing and ready to try to learn.” Fonteyne says this experience underlined what she already knew: “Our relationship with each child is critical.”

It is that spirit, of reaching individual children and a sincere focus on students that is helping the staff at Centennial through a pivotal challenge.

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Putting pen to paper

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“On New Year’s they get money in envelopes,” says Emma Ewart, grade three. “That’s instead of opening Christmas gifts,” says Katelynn Harvey, also in grade three.

“It’s pretty cool to get friends from a different country, and talk to a new person,” says Katelynn. “I didn’t know origami came from Japan.”

“They eat lots of seaweed,” says Emma. “That’s the one I don’t forget. Ioka said that in her first letter.”

“In the winter they do almost the same stuff as us,” says Emma.

Lee-Olson says, “Students have made connections between themselves and their pen pals. They’ve seen that although there are differences, there are even more similarities.” Students saw that even though [the Japanese students] might look different, eat different foods and live in a different place, “they are all kids who love their families and like to play.” Lee-Olson notes, “This led to students being more open minded and accepting.”

In addition to improving writing skills, the assignment supported other Language Arts goals such as organizing ideas and editing. Also, writing the letters met goals for social studies, art and technology. Writing to pen pals is an activity that excited students at a variety of academic abilities, which is something that can be extremely challenging.

According to Lee-Olson, “This project includes all writers: struggling and hesitant writers were encouraged and excited to write to their new friend and the task became real and fun. Strong writers felt equally challenged.”

High levels of engagement, such as what Lee-Olson is seeing with the pen pal assignment, is exactly what the teachers want.

“We like to see students take ownership and responsibility for their learning. If we have kids that care about what they are learning, they are more successful,” says Lee-Olson.

Partnering with parents through electronic communication

Patty Reid is another parent who likes the new communication system. “My son sometimes doesn’t tell me all the facts,” says Reid. “Knowing what’s happening is immensely helpful. I like receiving the e-mails when there’s a test or a big assignment due. I check to make sure my son is prepared.”

Melissa Humby and Joe Pitzel, teachers at Buck Mountain, are responsible for leading the charge towards electronic communication with parents, at their school. They are using a tool called e-teacher, which has been made available to teachers across Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. The tool operates through the school’s website, and allows teachers to post all sorts of information – from homework and test assignments, links to other websites, or to attach resource material. Both educators are also using e-mail to refer parents to the website when needed, and specifically to remind parents of upcoming tests or assignments.

“It’s a phenomenal way to communicate with parents,” says Joe Pitzel. “Students are responding, knowing it’s harder to play us against their parents now. It helps students take responsibility for their own learning.”

Melissa Humby agrees. “It makes kids more accountable.”

In one year of utilizing e-teacher and e-mail, Pitzel’s students’ results climbed 12 per cent across every class. Humby has seen significantly fewer assignments missed, and the quality of work handed in is stronger. Another unexpected but interesting result for both teachers is a decline in attendance at parent teacher interviews.

“Parents are choosing not to attend because they don’t feel a need,” says Pitzel. Humby adds, “They feel they already know what’s going on with their child.” While both teachers remain open to meeting with parents in person, they are not bothered with lower attendance. “We want to work with parents to achieve success for students. And that is happening. That’s what is important,” says Humby.

“Technology is fostering stronger home-school communication,” says Humby. “It is allowing parents to play a larger role, and that’s making a difference for kids.”

Being able to know immediately how her grade 10 son is doing in school, is great, as far as Carmen Pietsch is concerned. Pietsch’s son attends Buck Mountain School, where teachers are working to make information readily available to parents online.

“In the past he might have said his marks were fine, or that he didn’t know what his marks are,” says Pietsch. “Now I can see for myself how he’s doing, and if his marks are dropping a bit, I can help him study more.”

Pietsch says she uses the school’s website to check test dates, and marks occasionally. Also, she uses it when her son has been away to know what homework is due.

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Setting students up for success... by anticipating how they’ll respond to an assignment. That is exactly what teacher Oystein Guren strives for with students at C.B. McMurdo School.

Last spring, the students were learning the concept of polynomials. Based on his experience with individual students, Guren anticipated some would want to forge ahead and need a challenge. He figured others would need time to practice basic concepts and the opportunity to ask questions. So, Guren decided to divide the class into two groups, and asked Vice Principal Sandra Wilson for assistance. Wilson took the group that Guren anticipated would want to ask questions, and she worked with them until they understood the concepts.

“It was a brilliant idea,” says Wilson, “and very proactive on the teacher’s part. It set the students up for success.” Wilson explains that when kids get frustrated, they can shut down and then learning stops. She was excited to see a colleague avoiding frustration for the kids and clearing the path for success.

For the students in Guren’s math class, there were tangible results. The students who needed the additional practice all passed the questions that dealt with polynomials on math tests. Most importantly, “they got to see success,” says Wilson. “They saw they could do it.”

CONNECTING LEARNING to real life

When grade 11 student Laci Schmidt started a project for her biology class at Pigeon Lake School, she didn’t realize it would help her understand more about her own family farm.

For years, she had walked around seeing the cattle pen up-hill from a dugout, with natural plants as a separation. She hadn’t realized there was reason behind the set up. “I learned why that was done,” says Laci. “It was so the plants would filter the water before it reaches the dugout.”

Laci and her partner, fellow student Melissa Hirsekorn, were assigned by their teacher Aaron Weimer to find something that would improve the watershed in their own community. “We wanted to do something simple but effective,” says Melissa.

The girls decided on a rain garden. A rain garden is created by digging a shallow hole in the ground and filling it with native plants.

“Because plants like phosphorus and nitrogen, they act as filters, taking contaminants out before the water goes into the ground,” says Laci.

The girls’ project was entered in a provincial competition sponsored by Agrium and the Battle River Watershed Alliance at the Reynolds Museum, in which the girls placed 7th and received a $450 award. Their school also received a $450 award.

Teacher Aaron Weimer was thrilled to see the girls receive an award, but even more pleased that the assignment turned out to be so meaningful for them and other classmates.

Other successful projects included researching the use of hay bales in Pigeon Lake to reduce algae blooms. Another project focused on the way water is processed.

Applying what they’ve learned in their own community gives students a sense of value and worth about what they are learning,” says Weimer. “If students don’t see value, they don’t remember what they’ve learned. They pass a test and know they are done.”

According to Pigeon Lake School Principal Audrey Looker, the application of classroom learning to real life situations is critical.

“What we’ve learned about the human brain is that it will retain more if the information can be connected to prior learning,” says Looker. “Any opportunity we have to help students make connections to the real world, helps them move beyond a memorization of basic facts.”

Looker has taught for 30 years. She sees significant shifts in the way teaching and learning occur, as a result of research on how children learn. “It’s forced us to look at the way we teach,” she says.

“We used to see a typical classroom with four walls, textbooks and desks in a row,” says Looker. “Now we see technology such as video conferencing and the internet being used as powerful tools. Collaboration and interaction is the norm.”

Looker says one result of the change in teaching and learning is student creativity. “It’s exciting, because these students will need to be critical thinkers and problem solvers,” says Looker.

Laci and Melissa appreciate hands on learning like what they’ve just experienced with their rain garden project.

“You learn more from the assignment because you are actually doing it,” says Laci. “You might not understand it if the teacher is just talking, but getting to do it makes it easier.” says Melissa.

The school plans to utilize the girls’ research to build several rain gardens throughout the school yard.
Those who know seven year old Jaden Yarocki best, say he’s changed... a lot. They say the ‘night-and-day’ shift in attitude and behaviour started when Jaden began attending Millet School.

The Yarocki family moved to Millet part way through the 2011-2012 school year from another Alberta community. The move was due to a shift in employment, and not related to Jaden’s school experiences. Although the change in Jaden’s learning environment may have been unintentional, it has turned out to be pivotal.

“He used to [at the previous school] be very uncooperative,” says Jaden’s Dad, Jonathan. “Jaden just didn’t want to be there. He used to hide in the corner or under the desk. He broke two pairs of glasses. He was unresponsive and wasn’t learning much. It was frustrating.”

Jonathan recalls not knowing what to do to help his son.

But Jonathan said within weeks of the move to Millet, Jaden was regularly coming home happy, and with enthusiastic comments such as, “guess what I learned today.” Jonathan says, “He was so happy to tell me about his experiences at school.” Within a week, Jaden was coming home able to read words. Within a month, he was reading books.

Jonathan was extremely pleased to see Jaden making significant strides in what he was supposed to know in grade one – catching up what he missed at the beginning of that school year. “He’s doing so well now. It’s fantastic.”

Jaden says, “This is a fun school. There is lots of stuff to do, like math and science. We get to do experiments. In art we make pictures and paint.”

Jaden recognizes that he has grown since entering Millet School. “I have learned to read and to relax more. I don’t get angry because there is stuff for me to do.”

Linda Meller-Liepert, one of Jaden’s teachers, says, “Jaden has more self discipline and his whole attitude towards schoolwork has also improved. Jaden’s work habits and social growth progressed steadily throughout the year and he came to realize that school is a place where we learn, work, play and cooperate with one another.”

Yarocki gives a lot of credit to two women who team teach his son. “They’re amazing,” says Yarocki. “They go above and beyond.”

Giving students the opportunity to succeed

“We give kids the opportunity to succeed,” says Lynnmarie Clark. “It’s just what we do here.”

“Lynnmarie Clark and Linda Meller-Liepert are terrific teachers that have that grade one magic for blending a caring classroom with high expectations,” says Principal, Kevin Gibson.

“They help their students understand the importance of being responsible for behavior and learning, but don’t lose sight of the joy of spending every day with primary learners.”

Gibson says Clark and Meller-Liepert are good examples of how the entire school operates. “The success of this story is based on the way educators make the extraordinary become the ordinary,” says Gibson. Gibson also credits the good relationship between teachers and parents.

Clark says a lot of Jaden’s growth came as a result of building his self confidence. “Jaden’s a smart kid,” says Clark. “He needed to know he could do what he was asked to do,” says Clark.

Jonathan Yarocki is so grateful. “Jaden is willing to try and cooperate. He wants to be at school. That’s huge.”
HAVING TO RETHINK THINGS
Faced with the reality of significantly fewer teachers and the same number of students to teach, the staff at Centennial knew they needed to rethink what they were doing. The staffing reduction occurred at the same time as the provincial priority for the inclusion of all students in the same class. The result? No more teachers focusing solely on special needs students. Rather, homeroom teachers are addressing the wide range of academic and social abilities of all students.

“As a staff we asked what we could do differently to respond to the challenge,” says David Luck, Principal of Centennial School. Staff opted for a number of strategic investments to improve reading, writing and math skills.

THREE SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENTS
Although the province does not fund all day kindergarten, the staff decided that they would invest in it at the school level. Another choice was to invest in having a teacher made available one day a week to assist other teachers with technology in their classrooms. The third significant change was having staff change teaching assignments. Now, 80 per cent of staff are teaching new grades – with curriculum that is new to them personally.

“Our staff has embraced the challenge,” says Fonteyne. “I feel proud of the way we’ve worked together to find solutions.”

The staff have committed to the changes for at least five years, so that there is adequate time to evaluate the impact.

1. All day kindergarten
The hope with all day kindergarten is that students will be more prepared for grade one, and for every other grade as they move through the school. The intent is that students who require more assistance will receive it in kindergarten, and need less of it later, making it easier for teachers to respond to the challenge of inclusive classrooms. Assumptions come from research done in Ontario and in Edmonton Public and Edmonton Catholic Schools. One year in and staff have already seen results.

“What we achieved by June last year happened by January and February this year,” says Mary Lynn Kary, kindergarten teacher. “We’ve had double the time for curriculum, allowing us more time to work on social skills. That means heading into grade one, the teacher will be able to get to the curriculum, instead of having to deal with some of the challenges we’ve already addressed,” says Kary.

Kary says parents are also impressed. Especially those that have had older children move through the school see a difference. “They were blown away by the amount of knowledge their kids had earlier in the school year.”

2. Technology in classrooms
Staff at Centennial believe technology is an important tool. Having a teacher assigned to assist with technology one day a week allows that person to be readily available while classes are underway, building the confidence and skills of all the teachers with technology.

3. Staff switching grades
More than 80 per cent of Centennial’s staff are teaching grades that are new to them. Staff knew the change would force them to take a fresh look at the curriculum. By re-examining how concepts are taught and what the provincial curriculum requires, the anticipated result is a focus on what’s most important: success for each student.

“As teachers, we have found it to be eye opening,” says Luck. “We’re seeing things we didn’t before.” “When you shake things up a bit it can recharge your batteries,” says Kary.

MORE CHANGES
Additionally, Centennial school has invested in a number of reading and math programs / materials. The school has also focused on health and nutrition, providing an exercise room so students can have ‘brain breaks’ and lunches for students who might not have enough food with them. Also, character education is a high priority. Luck says he’s proud of the entire staff’s collaborative decision making and their focus on doing what is best for kids. “We’re anticipating if we do these extra things, we’ll see a number of needs dissipate.”

Fonteyne says, “We think we’re on the right track. It’s empowering knowing we’ve thought about it together and focused on what students need.”

*name has been changed
They may or may not know what educators call it, but the Learning Cycle is visible to WRPS’s students. They are telling us they see a difference in their classrooms and with their teachers.

The data comes from a survey conducted in May 2012, involved students in grades four through 12, in all of the division’s 18 schools. The survey was also conducted in previous years, so the division is able to compare results and use the information to make changes.

This year’s responses from students in grades 10-12, tell educators they are moving in the right direction.

Outcomes
Basing what is taught on provincial curriculum

Practices
Using successful strategies to teach curriculum

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

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

What’s next?
The Learning Cycle was intended to be the Division’s focus for nine years. As we enter the seventh year, teachers are refining skills and ensuring the legacy they’ve built will last beyond nine years.

The Learning Cycle enters its seventh school year this fall. Looking back, educators see the positive results.

“We’ve developed a common language between teachers and between schools, and that helps us work together,” says Brian Taje, Associate Superintendent, Instruction, Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. “Also, we are stronger at connecting the way we teach to the outcomes we want, and we are more reflective about what we’re doing in the classroom.”

Taje says the Learning Cycle has been a lot of work, but as teachers have looked at the way they teach, it is making a difference for students. “We know that quality teaching equals quality learning.” Taje says in order for teachers to know if they’ve been successful, they must consider what learning has occurred.

“In the past we often judged our success by implementing new teaching practices or programs without sufficiently considering their impact on student learning,” says Taje. “When we began the Learning Cycle, we avoided the name ‘Teaching Cycle’ and purposefully emphasized ‘learning’ in the name. We’re better, now, at measuring what learning has happened; the Learning Cycle has given us the framework for discussions that have pushed us the right way.”

“The Learning Cycle has been and continues to be the focus of our collaborative professional development efforts,” says Terry Pearson, Superintendent, WRPS. “Our support staff, teachers and administrators have demonstrated significant professional commitment and diligence in our efforts to improve our skills and abilities so that our students experience success.”

“Teachers are seeking opportunities to meaningfully collaborate with colleagues. We’ve got to share the exemplary teaching practices that make differences for our students with one another,” says Taje.

“We also need to document what it is that makes us successful in the classroom. In that way we capture and preserve the practices that are effective, and ensure they become an everyday part of what we do to improve student learning across our division.”

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Question to students
“Do you believe your teachers have changed how they teach over the past three years in order to help you learn better?”
71% of grade 10-12 students said YES!
Back-to-school Tips for parents

Preparing your child for school

• **Ease Your Child into a New Routine.** Have him or her go to bed at school-night bedtime a few nights before the first day. Set an alarm clock for the correct school wake-up time.

• **Try a School Bus Run.** Go over your child’s school bus route with him or her if it’s going to be a first-time bus ride. Find out how long the ride is, and talk about things like bus safety.

• **Get Ready the Night Before.** Establish a routine that requires your child to pick an outfit for the next school day, and to pack a book bag every night before bed. This will help eliminate any last minute rushing in the morning.

Things to consider before the first day of school

About the school

• Is your child registered?

• Do you know when the first day of school is and what time it starts?

• Have you completed emergency contact forms and sent them back to the school?

Getting to and from school

• Have you reviewed safety precautions with your child regarding traffic and strangers?

• If your child is riding a bike, does he or she know the school’s rules for bicycles?

• If your child is taking a bus, does your child know the bus route? Does your child know what to do if he or she gets lost?

• Does your child know whether to come home or go to a babysitter after school?

• Does your child know who will be responsible for him or her, what the rules are, and how to get help in an emergency?

• If your child is going to a babysitter, does he or she know how to get to there?

Going to a new school

• **Talk About It.** Encourage your child to share his or her feelings. Talk about the excitement of starting at a new school, and discuss any concerns your child might have.

• **Take a School Tour.** Call the school and arrange to tour the school with your child. Help your child find their way around the school and the location of their classroom and the bathroom. If possible, meet the teacher and principal.

• **Make a New Friend.** If possible, introduce your child to a classmate before the first day of school.

Source: www.education.alberta.ca/parents/role/tips.aspx
Welcome back to school!

Registration information

School registration dates at your school:

- Alder Flats: August 29 & 30
- Buck Mountain: August 28
- C.B. McMurdo: August 2
- Centennial: August 27
- Clear Vista: August 27
- Falun: August 27-31
- Griffiths Scott: August 28
- Gwynne: August 29
- Lakedell: August 27-31
- Millet: August 28
- Norwood: August 28-30
- Parkdale: August 27-30
- Pigeon Lake: August 27-28
- Pipestone: August 30
- Queen Elizabeth: August 27 & 28
- Wetaskiwin Comp.: See below
- Winfield: August 29 & 30

Wetaskiwin Composite registration information:
- GOALS, ALS & RLS students – you will register on September 4th at school.
- New Students to WCHS: August 28 – 30th by appointment. Call 403.352.2295.
- Pre-Registered Students. No timetable changes for grade 11 & 12 on registration days.
  - Grade 10: August 27
    - Surnames A-L: 9 am – 12 pm
    - Surnames M-Z: 1 pm – 3 pm
  - Grade 11: August 28
    - Surnames A-L: 9 am – 12 pm
    - Surnames M-Z: 1 pm – 3 pm
  - Grade 12: August 29
    - Surnames A-L: 9 am – 12 pm
    - Surnames M-Z: 1 pm – 3 pm
- Off Campus Education accepting registration for storefront students – September 4th.
  - Location: 4802A – 50 Avenue (East Gate Mall)

Please refer to your child’s school website for further information.

Ever considered educating your child at home?

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools offers a Home Education program, giving parents and students a choice of learning paths to best meet their needs. In the fall we will offer several two hour sessions to enhance your ability to provide a home education program for your child. The sessions will cover:

- Web 2.0 tool
- Writers’ workshop
- Reading basics
- Math games
- Hands on science

For more information visit: www.wrpshome-ed.ca

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 appreciate any comments, and especially welcome good news stories about things happening in our schools! Has a teacher or another employee made a huge difference for your child? We’d love to hear about it!

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