Our report to you

Making teaching and learning stronger
in Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools

The Learning Cycle has been underway for several years in Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. For your children that means instruction that is more engaging and tailored to meet individual needs.

Staff in each school have worked to learn and plan in sessions at the division and school level, as well as on their own in classrooms. They’ve tried new ways of teaching and adapted their plans to respond to students. Teachers have done this – all with a focus on doing what’s best for kids.

“We are proud of our teachers and all staff who have worked together to make so many positive changes that impact our students,” said Terry Pearson, Superintendent, Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. “The Learning Cycle is a very important process that is helping us along the path we need to travel in order to prepare students for their futures.”

How far we’ve come
In the last few years, educators have:

- Become very acquainted with provincial goals for curriculum - called ‘outcomes’ – so that teaching is based on that and is consistent from class to class
- Ensured assessments are based on provincial outcomes
- Developed a consistent vocabulary division wide, allowing teachers to collaborate more effectively

Also, the division sees that principals are taking a leadership role in their schools. They are setting clear expectations. At the same time, “Teachers see they have the flexibility to achieve what they want,” says George Ollenberger, Director of Instruction. “It’s important that they are understanding that this is not just a divisional

Continued on p.2

Achieving the ‘highest marks in the province’
Wetaskiwin graduate thanks her teachers for helping her overcome challenges

Out of all the students who graduated from grade 12 last year in all of Alberta, Emily Ervin from Wetaskiwin, had the highest Diploma Exam results. Emily scored 100 per cent on three of her Diploma Exams, was designated as one of only 10 Rutherford Scholars in Alberta, and of those 10, Emily had the highest average score. She was also valedictorian at Wetaskiwin Composite High School.

You might think with marks like that, school came easy for Emily. Not so. In fact, if it weren’t for the efforts of teachers throughout her schooling, and support from her family, Emily may not have fared nearly as well.

Ten years ago, by the end of grade two, Emily could not recognize her own name printed on the black board. Although she was a very bright girl, Emily faced a disability in decoding letters. Without appropriate help, such a disability could have severely impacted her future. Emily’s parents were concerned.

“We agonized about what to do,” says Emily’s mom, Linda Ervin.

Fortunately, Jacqueline Fortin, Emily’s grade 2 teacher, intervened. She addressed Emily’s disability by participating in specific training. Also, she ran a reading group on Saturdays, which Emily attended to receive help.

“I remember using colored blocks that each represented a sound. That’s what helped me,” says Emily.

Emily’s mother also did everything she could, staying involved at Emily’s schools, and modeling reading and learning at home.
Achieving the highest marks in the province  
... continued from p.1

Results didn’t come over night but gradually, over a period of years, Emily’s reading skills improved. By grade six, Emily was reading at grade level.

“Grade six. That’s when I remember I started enjoying reading,” says Emily. And by grade seven, she was the top student in her grade.

“How do you ever thank a teacher who helps your child like that?”

“They went above and beyond…. and the care they showed for us – we really appreciated it. It had a huge impact.”

- Linda Ervin

Although Emily had improved in reading, there were more obstacles ahead. In grade eight, Emily contracted a virus that caused her to miss more than 100 days of school during that year as well as in grade nine. She had swollen glands and lymph nodes and there were issues with her respiratory system. Doctors weren’t sure what the problem was, conducting numerous tests trying to find answers.

“Because she was so sick, it seemed high school for Emily was just a dream. We just didn’t know what was happening or how it would turn out,” says Linda.

While doctors struggled to understand Emily’s illness, Emily slept; most days for about 21 hours. Attending school wasn’t possible. Yet, Emily was able to keep up with her school work, thanks to her teachers. “They went above and beyond,” says Linda. “All the packages they prepared, the time to explain the material to Emily, and the care they showed for us – we really appreciated it. It had a huge impact.”

“Emily has a wonderful personality and I truly enjoyed every minute I spent with her,” says Jo Krause, who taught Emily during her illness. “No one can truly explain how rewarding and good I feel inside for making a difference in someone’s life.”

“Emily has a wonderful impact.”

- Linda Ervin

Making teaching and learning stronger  
... continued from p.1

push, its something they can embrace while retaining their style of teaching. We’re not telling them what to do. We’ve given them a process they could use to reflect on their own practice, empowering them to choose to become a better teacher.”

These steps are important in laying the foundation of what can happen in the future. Throughout the province, as schools become more focused on engaging students and on collaboration, the quality of teaching improves.

“Many teachers ask [themselves] ‘did that work for my students?’ The Learning Cycle has taken us further, opening things up to give us a way of sharing that we haven’t had before. The Learning Cycle requires us to ask what our teaching has done for each student.”

- Brian Taje, Director of Administrative Support

Did that work for my students?” says Brian Taje, Director of Administrative Support, WRPS.

“The Learning Cycle has taken us further, opening things up to give us a way of sharing that we haven’t had before. The Learning Cycle requires us to ask what our teaching has done for each student.”

“When looking at the results of surveys done with WRPS students and teachers conducted locally and by the province, we can see

that our efforts are making a difference,” says Ollenberger.

Ollenberger says the division is continuing to move forward, to reach more students, but feels proud of the progress that has occurred.

The Learning Cycle in 2010-2011

This year, WRPS is focusing on Learning Improvement Goals. These are goals that teachers set, based on the needs they observe in their own students. Teachers are asked to select goals that are directly tied to student learning, and ones that can be measured.

“This is more than a professional development goal,” says Ollenberger. “Professional development sometimes can be limited to goals a teacher has for him or herself and may not be related to student learning. Although that kind of growth is important, what we’re asking

for as a division is for a goal that can be measured by student success.”

Ollenberger says the division anticipates these goals will build on the foundation that has been laid. “When teachers find a need they feel is important to address, they will be able to call on their past experiences with the Learning Cycle to meet their students’ needs.”

Ollenberger says, “We believe this will strengthen our ability to deliver a high quality education.
It's a process teachers use. It helps teachers provide a high quality education for students.

The cycle includes four elements:

1. Outcomes – Basing what is taught on provincial curriculum.
3. Assessment – Using a variety of observations to know if learning has occurred. Then we adapt to give students what they need next.
4. Evaluation - Measuring if learning has happened based on provincial curriculum.

What does this mean for you? As a parent, you can expect:

- Classrooms are different than they were when you went to school – there is more interaction, group work, and hands-on activities
- Teachers are working to engage your child
- Your child is given opportunity to learn and 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

The Learning Cycle at work

Four years ago... we implemented the Learning Cycle in Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. Since then we’ve rolled up our sleeves and got to work.

We’ve made some changes in the way we teach, and how we evaluate success. Now we are seeing some results. In a survey of more than 1500 students in grades four through 12, a few months ago we learned:

- 77% of students are actively engaged in day to day classroom activities
- 72% of students make their own decisions about what to study to help make their school work worth while
- 73% of students are rarely late for school
- 78% of students feel it is important to gain knowledge and develop skills through their school work.
- 84% of students feel teachers expect them to always do their best
- 77% of students feel they know what they need to learn and be able to do at the end of each lesson
- Participation rates on Provincial Achievement Tests are increasing

Why are these results important? They tell us the majority of kids want to be at school and that they’re having an engaging learning experience.

“We’re in the business of helping kids learn,” says Brian Taje, Director of Administrative Support, WRPS. “We’ve been doing that for years. What we’re trying to do now is create a system that better supports the magic of learning. Teaching and learning is not simple – it’s a dynamic, ever-changing process,” says Taje. “One teaching strategy may not reach all students. The Learning Cycle supports teachers as they work to engage every child.”

“The Learning Cycle supports teachers as they work to engage every child.”

- Brian Taje, Director of Administrative Support
A visit to Griffiths Scott School in Millet shows you the Learning Cycle in action. This year’s WRPS aim of having teachers set “Learning Improvement Goals” can be seen clearly.

Charlene Saunders, who teaches physical education and science, has a goal of helping students achieve provincial standards when it comes to fitness and health. “I want to help students understand the importance of participating in physical activity and making nutritious food choices,” says Saunders. Saunders made the goal after noticing a lack of awareness and healthy choices. Saunders says, “But it’s so important – I felt strongly about addressing it.”

“At the end of the year, I want each student to be able to articulate a goal for themselves about their own activity or food choices,” says Saunders. To achieve the goal, she is not only addressing the topics in class. Saunders has organized “Fit Friday”; Saunders does a ‘healthy lunch check’ and enters the names of successful students in a draw. A running club is also underway. And, Saunders intends to do a survey of activities that occur outside the school, so she gets an accurate picture. So far on Fit Fridays, 80 percent of grade five and six students have attended. In grades seven through nine, slightly more than half of students participate.

“I sure know it’s different than when I went to school. Students are not just sitting at a desk taking notes any more. School is a lot more interactive.”

- Glenna Mageau, parent

Similarly, Jackie Nicol has set Learning Improvement Goals in her classroom. Her class this year has a large proportion of boys – two thirds of her class is boys. Before the year started, the veteran teacher knew she would need to do something if the boys were going to be engaged in reading. As a part of her goal to engage all of her students, Nicol carefully selected novels she knew girls and boys would be interested in.

Another one of Nicol’s Learning Improvement Goals for the year is to increase the variety of assessment she uses. Traditionally, she has used multiple choice and true/false types of tests. This year she is doing more project work, allowing students to express what they’ve learned in formats other than a test. For example one assignment had students creating a ‘diary of a tree’. In the diary they had to describe events in a tree’s life. “It was a different way that students could demonstrate what they know,” says Nicol.

“I liked it better than a test,” says Holly Hahn, one of Nicol’s grade six students. “It was less stressful.”

Also less traditional, but proven to be more effective, is Nicol’s approach on completing the assignment. “There is no option for failing,” says Nicol. “I say to my students ‘we’re working together until you’ve grasped the material.”

Frank Heinrichs, Griffiths Scott School Principal says “we’re not allowing kids to settle for mediocre or low. Teachers are pushing students for more.”

Students and their parents have noticed the difference in approach.

Jasmine Jackson, a grade nine student says, “I like one-on-one talks about essays I’ve written. Then I know exactly what I need to do.”

“I sure know it’s different than when I went to school,” says Glenna Mageau, a parent of students who attend Griffiths Scott Middle School in Millet. “Students are not just sitting at a desk taking notes any more. School is a lot more interactive.”
No scheduled recesses

How a timetable change is developing stronger readers

If you’re a parent with a child attending Lakedell School, you’ll know about changes staff have made this year. Students have a portion of the day – either morning or afternoon depending on the grade – assigned to their class as an “uninterrupted learning time”. What this means, is there is no assemblies, events, or even a scheduled recess during that time. Breaks still happen, though. They are taken at various times that are selected by each teacher, changing from day-to-day, depending on what the students in his or her class need.

“What teachers were telling us is that they sometimes would just get started teaching something, and then they’d be interrupted by recess or some other part of the school’s schedule,” says Kristien Holtby, Principal of Lakedell School. “Changing that gives teachers power to respond to student needs, and do what’s best for kids in the moment. That’s what the Learning Cycle is all about. We change what we do and how we teach to match what our students need.”

During the uninterrupted time, teachers are focusing on reading, reading comprehension and writing. Staff wanted to focus more closely on Language Arts, feeling that results on provincial achievement tests in that area were not as high as the teachers wanted them to be.

And while it may be a little early to see the full impact, staff are already seeing results. “What teachers are telling me is they have time to dig deeper into the writing process,” says Holtby.

Kindergarten teacher, Kristine Becker says with the school wide language arts focus, she has looked for opportunities to include language skills in all areas of learning. For example, after spending some uninterrupted time learning letters with her students one day, she could see that one or two letters were challenging for a few of her students. “I could see exactly what they knew, and what they did not,” says Becker. So later, when they were in the gym, Becker combined language arts into her physical education lesson. She used bean bags to make letters on the floor and had the kids running, hopping, twirling etc. to the various letters.

Cathy Wyley teaches a combined three and four class, and has observed a number of changes this year as well as in previous years as a result of the division’s Learning Cycle. “Thinking of all the changes, it’s been quite drastic,” says Wyley, who didn’t like the WRPS’s focus on the Learning Cycle at first. “I thought it was a make work project to be honest,” she says. “But now it’s just what we do. Everyone has embraced it. It’s good.”

“Students are asking better questions and searching for answers rather than waiting for me to answer them. They are more excited about learning.” - Cathy Wyley, teacher

Creating readers who think deeply

One of the aspects of the Learning Cycle that really makes a difference is encouragement for teachers to examine data and closely observe what is working and not working for their students. As a result, teachers have power to change and adapt what they do, based on what their students need.

According to Susan Coleman, Millet School’s Vice Principal, that’s exactly what occurred at Millet School. Teachers had been working for two years on strengthening reading skills. They were giving students time to work on their own and with other students reading at their own level. Teachers noticed that word recognition and fluency had improved. They also wanted to see reading comprehension improve as well, so they decided to focus on that. The school’s goal is to have each student advance one year in reading, including comprehension, by the end of June.

“Students are asking better questions and searching for answers rather than waiting for me to answer them. They are more excited about learning.” - Cathy Wyley, teacher

Continued on p.6
**Reaching First Nations students**

**Staff at Falun School want to improve the successes of their FNMI (First Nations Metis Inuit) learners.**

When the school looked at the research about FNMI students, they identified a successful approach they thought could help. The research shows that FNMI learners have a history of visual learning, says Michele Ruff, Vice Principal at Falun School. “First Nations students are more successful by making visual representations of learning – such as a mind map,” says Ruff.

“We know lots of kids respond to mind-maps, actually,” says Ruff. “And, we knew if we found something that was successful for our First Nations students, it would be a good strategy for all of our learners.” Also, with the division’s emphasis on the Learning Cycle – staff knew the impact of using good methods, so they were ready to try something they hadn’t before.

Mind maps are circles on a page, filled with information about a specific topic. Similar to a bicycle wheel, a center circle connects to other smaller circles by lines or spokes. It’s meant to be a visual summary, or a living study guide that makes connections between ideas very clear. It also helps kids see what they have learned and what is yet to be learned.

Ruff said she had tried mind-maps before and had felt they weren’t very helpful. But, with new training she discovered what she could have done differently. “Previously, I gave students mind-maps that were complete,” says Ruff. “What I learned is that children need to build their own mind maps, adding a little information at a time,” says Ruff. “That way, they’ve made the connections to what they’ve learned.”

Grade five teacher Monica Robins, says her students are responding well to mind-maps. “It helps kids master concepts and then apply them,” she says. “I like them too because they help me see quickly if students understand the material.” For example, an impromptu query of Robins’ class about their unit on classroom chemistry shows they have gained a deep understanding of the qualities of water. Several students eagerly point to the mind-map on the wall when explaining water’s unique qualities, and can verbalize the concepts in their own words.

Ruff says Robins is not alone. Throughout the school, teachers are seeing successes. “Everyone is so pumped about this,” says Ruff.

**Creating readers who think deeply... continued from p.5**

“We know if our students are good readers that’s the beginning to success in all subjects,” says Susan Coleman, Millet School’s Vice Principal. “It prepares them to be life-long learners, and it engages them in their learning right now. They are more involved, asking a deeper level of questions.

This year, students are finding ‘connections’ in what they read. “We’re having them go deeper into their reading,” says Lynmarie Clark, grade one teacher. “Instead of asking ‘what part of the story was your favourite?’ we would be more likely to ask questions that cause students to wonder about what they’ve read, to connect with it and visualize it.” Students are also encouraged to ask questions, and use strategies to find answers, not depending on the teacher to just give information.

Clark says she likes this change, and others she has seen as a result of the Learning Cycle. “In my 25 years of teaching, there have been a lot of changes. Over the last few years, we’ve really opened up learning for kids. They have the opportunity to learn in multiple ways. It’s great.”

Debra Santos likes the focus on reading comprehension too. She helps her grade three students make deep connections to their reading using sticky notes. During a specific reading time students in the class must find a deep thinking connection – for example: “This part of the story reminds me of...” They put a sticky note on it so they can discuss it later.

“It helps them draw something from their book, and takes reading to a higher level,” says Santos.

Ava Vant, a grade four student is enjoying the opportunity to develop reading skills. Ava says, “I see lots of connections in my reading. Like in Remembrance Day books, people were wearing poppies. My Dad hands out poppies, so I made a text-to-self connection.”

“It helps me learn,” says Ava. “Sometimes I get so excited about a connection I’ve made, I write it down so I can tell about it later.”
TIPS FOR PARENTS: Making the most of parent teacher interviews

Some of you may welcome Parent Teacher Interviews while others may feel a little uneasy about it. Please know we want you to have a good experience.

Parent teacher interviews are an opportunity for you to connect with your child’s teacher, so you can work together in the best interest of your child.

Tips for making the most of parent teacher interviews:

• Talk to your child before the interview. Find out what your child thinks of school, what is hard for him and what his goals are.
• Read your child’s report card, and talk to your child about that.
• Make a list of questions you have. If you write them down, you’re more likely to remember to ask them.
• Think about what you might want to tell the teacher about. Are there challenges at home that could influence your child’s performance at school? What about skills and interests? These can help the teacher better prepare lessons that engage your child.
• Ask about your child’s strengths and weaknesses, and what role you can play.
• Ask the teacher for specific activities you can do with your child to strengthen her skills.
• Ask how much time your child should be spending on homework.
• Thank the teacher for the efforts he or she is making to help your child.
• Follow up with your child, emphasizing positive comments. Discuss plans to help him improve.

Questions you can ask:

1. How is my child doing with provincially outlined goals – or outcomes? What are his strengths and areas for growth?
2. Does my child understand the outcomes? Can she describe them?
3. How engaged is my child in your class? What can I do to ensure she comes to school prepared to learn?
4. What types of assignments do you use to help my child understand what he needs to know and do?
5. How does my child know what assignments are for practice only and what assignments are for grades?

Sources:
Toronto Catholic District School Board www.tcdsb.org
People for Education, www.peopleforeducation.com
Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools – Learning Cycle planning documents
kindergarten
Registration Information

Registration information packages are now available at our schools. Once you’ve picked up a package, and filled in the forms, come to the kindergarten application night at your school.

Kindergarten application nights

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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.

We want to hear from you!

Tell us what you think about this newspaper. Send your comments and your name and contact information to:

knulls@wrps.ab.ca
to be entered in a prize draw for a $50 gift certificate to Blurbs Bookstore in Wetaskiwin

Your feedback helps us improve our efforts to communicate with you. We also welcome phone comments: 780-352-4153, ext. 225

Wetaskiwin Regional Public School Board
Back Row: Glenn Norby, Barb Johnson, Clint Neis, Stan Harsch, Shauna Bruno
Front Row: Ed Zacharko, Vice-Chair, Deanna Specht, Chair and Donna Hogg

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOOKS