Thinking outside the books

Welcome back to school! We are excited for another school year to begin!

Your children are the focus of everything we do. We’re ‘thinking outside the books’... which means we’re working together to make positive changes - to shift the way we do things. We know the world is changing, and so we must change the way we educate students to ensure your children are prepared for the future.

As you read through this publication, you will see what we’ve been working on - so that each child receives an outstanding educational experience.

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools (WRPS) has been using the Learning Cycle for the last few years, and it will continue to be our focus. In a nutshell, the Learning Cycle describes a process that teachers use to improve teaching and learning the classroom.

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Strategies that work for engaging students

Students don’t have to wonder “why I am I learning this?” any more, when they are participating in an English class at Wetaskiwin Composite High School (WCHS). At the beginning of each class, students see the outcome, a curriculum objective written in student friendly language, written on the board. Teachers refer to outcomes and use them to focus student learning and their own teaching.

“Outcomes align teaching with provincial curriculum,” says Norm McNeill, English Department Head, WCHS. “When we communicate the purpose students know why they are doing a particular activity.”

“We want students to see relevance and make connections to their own lives.”
Norm McNeill

In the 2009-2010 school year McNeill surveyed students to see if outcomes were being posted and discussed, and what students thought about it. McNeill

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In WRPS classrooms, you can expect that teachers:

- help students know what is expected, through awareness of outcomes based on provincial curriculum.
- work to engage students in learning.
- use High Yield Strategies – teaching methods proven successful through research.
- employ a variety of observations to ensure classroom experiences meet the needs of individual students.
- ensure evaluation is based on provincial curriculum.

“The Learning Cycle is making a big difference in how teachers are teaching and engaging students in instructional activities and the success students are experiencing with their learning,” says Terry Pearson, Superintendent, WRPS. “Student success is the key and teachers are critical to that success.”

McNeill says the emphasis on students understanding outcomes is one of the High Yield Strategies - teaching techniques proven by research to be successful - that the division has been focusing on through its Learning Cycle. The next goal for the English department is also a High Yield Strategy: to improve teachers’ descriptive feedback on students’ written assignments.

Improving the quality of teacher feedback
“Students should get something meaningful from teacher comments,” says McNeill. “After reading the comments, a student should have a clear idea about what to do to improve.” For example, instead of a teacher commenting that a student needs better character development, the new goal would have the teacher giving specific ideas as to how the student could better develop the character.

“This should be helpful for each student no matter their skill level, because the comments will be tailored individually,” says McNeill.

McNeill says the Learning Cycle has represented a significant shift in teaching culture as well as increasing the accountability of teachers to improve their skills.

“It puts teeth into professional development,” he says. “We need to get beyond the excuses, accept the various circumstances that exist, and then still ask what we can do differently. We each need to look at the proven research, and use it to embrace change.”

Using technology to engage students
Also embracing change at WCHS is science teacher Paul Way.

“I know there are a lot of visual learners,” says Way. “For years, I spent a significant amount of time at the board drawing various diagrams to help students understand a particular concept. The SMART Board changed all of that.”

After 21 years of teaching, Way says “Without this technology I might have started to stagnate as a teacher. With this technology I can enhance learning. I am interested and excited about teaching.”

With a SMART Board, Way can use the internet to find visual simulations such as the effect of a current on a boat crossing a river, how gravity works to keep the planets in orbit, or the how to calculate the kinetic energy of a pendulum.

“I liked watching the process astronauts go through when they face g-forces,” says Jennifer Ruskowsky, a grade 12 student. “It’s not something you get to see every day.” Ruskowsky says “I’m a visual learner. When I can see it, I remember it.”

Way also uses other technologies to make learning interesting, such as a Van de Graaf generator, which demonstrates how electricity works. Another popular unit, ‘how pigs fly’, utilizes toy pigs, tied to a string and the ceiling. As the pigs circle around the students’ heads, they learn about forces involved in circular motion.

“Technology is a means to an end,” says Way.

“Technology is good as long as it helps students understand and learn. Whether it’s technology or something else, teachers need to use what engages students.” Paul Way
Making learning engaging
one step at a time

Marcie Hofbauer says she’ll never forget a recent experience. The grade six teacher at Norwood Elementary School says given the circumstances, one particular day could have been frustrating and exhausting, but because of some new strategies she tried it was one of the best of her teaching career.

Hofbauer had just returned from a professional development session that focused on strategies to get students more engaged in learning. She got back from the conference in the early morning hours the same day she was to be in her classroom, so she hadn’t had much sleep.

The scheduled lesson that day was on grammar, usually something Hofbauer would do by presenting material to students and then have them go through worksheets. But that day, fresh in her mind was strategies for getting kids engaged. Without any preparation time, Hofbauer decided to try something different.

“There was a lot of sharing,” says Hofbauer. “I had the students read something then tell their neighbour what they had learned. They were up and moving and talking more.”

“By the end of the hour I couldn’t believe how much material we covered. And the students were energized about material that usually is not their favourite. I was energized too. It was a real eye opener for me,” says Hofbauer.

“I had one student say ‘can you please be tired more often?’” says Hofbauer. “That stuck with me.”

“I realized I need to let go a little more and get the kids working in a more engaging way.” Marcie Hofbauer

Rick Venance, Principal, Norwood School says although teachers understand the research, changing to use more active and engaging strategies in the classroom hasn’t happened suddenly. “It’s taken us a while to understand how engaging students works in implementation,” says Venance. “We’re taking baby steps.”

Hofbauer is not the only teacher who is seeing wisdom in the move towards student engagement, and on High Yield Strategies, strategies that are proven through research to be effective with students.

Research tells us quiet classrooms are not necessarily best

Decades ago, educators felt that the ideal classroom was one with students quietly sitting in desks working on an assignment.

“Research tells us that isn’t necessarily true,” says Jodie Mattia, Vice Principal, Norwood School.

“We want students to enjoy learning, and have lots of opportunities to be successful.”

Melissa Johnson, Learning Support Teacher, Norwood School
Would you want to know why we as humans, need thick or thin liquids? If you would, you are like the students in Mary Lang’s grade 2/3 combined class last year at Gwynne School. Their lesson on viscosity is one of their favourites - they get to race pancake syrup and water down tilted cookie sheets.

It’s also a favourite for Lang, because the students’ responses to her exit questions showed that student comprehension is strong. For the viscosity lesson, Lang asked “why would we, as humans, need to know about thick or thin liquids?” Lang says one of her student responses was, “water is thin because it has to roll down our throats, but pancake syrup is thick so it won’t roll off my pancake.” That response showed Lang the student understood the main point of the lesson.

“I got the idea of using exit questions from a division wide professional development meeting,” says Lang. Lang says at the beginning of a class or unit, she will tell the students the question she will ask them at the end of class. “Asking exit questions and listening to responses makes it so I easily see whether or not students understood what I taught. Then I can adapt what I’ll present next time.”

“It also has helped me slow down a bit and not try to teach so much,” says Lang. “I have eliminated outside material, staying only with the curriculum.

“I'm teaching what students really need to know. This makes a difference for students because it frees up time, and we use that time to strengthen what they know, and focus on higher learning.”  Mary Lang

While Lang is using exit questions with her students, other colleagues at Gwynne School are using a variety of strategies. “They each chose one or two goals to set for the way they teach which are directly related to the Learning Cycle,” says Karen Elgert, Principal, Gwynne School. “The staff have been great, and we’re learning from each other.”

E-journals give insights into learning styles
Teacher Trevor Van Someren, is having junior high students use e-journals to provide feedback on various topics, including how they learn best. The results have helped Van Someren better understand his pupils, and how he should plan lessons to best meet their needs.

“They told me they like using the SMART board, knowing the outcomes (what they are expected to know), and doing hands on projects,” says Van Someren. Group work was also important.

For example one student wrote: “In English what helps me is group work because it helps me get a different mindset of what the teacher just told me.” Another said, “Getting to go on the computers to research things because it helps you get other view points from other people. Going in groups helps me to get other view points from my classmates.”

Van Someren says working in groups, working at projects and using technology to make learning interesting and engaging are all part of the division’s focus on “High Yield Strategies” – teaching techniques proven by research to improve learning.

Being able to better tailor his teaching to students is rewarding for Van Someren.

“I don’t teach lesson plans. I teach kids. And I love teaching them.”
Trevor Van Someren
A lot has changed since you attended school, including the way teachers evaluate your child’s progress. In previous generations, assessment included tests and report cards. Now teachers collect a wider variety of evidence to evaluate what a student knows and can do.

“Classroom assessment is no longer something that is done to your child, but rather something that is done with and for your child, based on the professional judgement of teachers.” (Alberta Assessment Consortium, “Conversations About Assessment; a Parent’s Guide.”)

When trying to work together with the teacher in this changed learning environment parents can keep in mind the following tips:

**Give specific feedback**
When your child asks you for feedback, be specific. Rather than simply saying that you like your child’s writing, describe what you notice or ask a question that will help improve the work. For example:

- I like the way you gave lots of detail about the characters
- How could you change the beginning of your story so you grab the reader’s attention?

**Find coaching opportunities**
When your child brings home a test or an assignment, look at it as a coaching moment that will help him / her next time. You could ask your child the following:

- What went well with your work?
- From doing this work, what do you know about how you learn?
- What is one thing you would do differently next time?

**Ask the teacher to show you your child’s work**
When you visit the classroom such as during parent teacher conferences, ask the teacher to show you the many ways that your child shows what he/she knows and can do. Looking at all the different information about your child’s learning will help you understand why he/she received that particular mark.

When you meet with your child’s teacher, please ask:

- How can I tell if my child knows and understands what he or she is expected to know at the beginning of each lesson?
- What can I do to help you engage my child in his / her school work?
- What assignments were used to help my child understand what he/ she needs to know?
- How does my child know what assignments are for practice, and which are for a mark?

**Build your child’s sense of responsibility**
By working with your child’s teacher and talking with your child about how to meet the expectations of the assignment, you are making your child more responsible for the work. You are making it clear you expect your child to be part of the solution.

**Ask your child to show you rubric or criteria for assignments**
When you are helping your child with an assignment, ask to see the criteria or rubric. Help your child look at his/ her work to see how well it measures up to what is expected. Encourage him / her to make any necessary changes before handing in the assignment for marking. If neither of you understand the criteria, have a conversation with the teacher.

**Focus on learning rather than achievement**
It’s okay to praise your child for a good report card, but remember to celebrate learning, rather than just achievement. Use the information in the report card to talk with your child about what has been learned. Help your child talk about his / her strengths and areas for growth.

**Use goals to encourage improvement**
Attend celebrations of learning and /or parent-teacher conferences. Remember that while the grade is about past performance, you are interested in improving future performance. Help your child set goals to improve. Be sure your child knows what improvement would look like and what steps would help him / her get there.

From “Conversations About Assessment; a Parent’s Guide”, by the Alberta Assessment Consortium"
Kelly Bjornson loves her daughter’s school so much that although they recently moved closer to a different school, she and her husband chose to have their children stay at Centennial School. “The thing that keeps us in Wetaskiwin is Centennial Elementary School,” says Bjornson. Specifically, Bjornson and her daughter Samantha love the emphasis the school has placed on using technology to enhance learning. “It’s more interesting than a text book,” says Bjornson. “I hear more about what Samantha did on the SMART Board each day than anything else. It keeps kids wanting to learn.”

Hilda Beerwort, a parent of twin daughters attending Centennial, agrees. “I hear more about what Samantha did on the SMART Board each day than anything else. It keeps kids wanting to learn.”

Technology opens new realms of possibilities
Wanda Fonteyne, a grade three teacher at the school says, “I’ll be honest. The thought of using technology was intimidating. However, we recognize this generation of students will actively use it.” Fonteyne says she now loves using the SMART Board.

“It’s recharged my teaching. Our energy is up. Students pay attention better. It has made a huge impact in my classroom.” Wanda Fonteyne

Mary Lynn Kary, a kindergarten teacher, also loves using SMART Board and other various technologies in her classroom. “You can tell the students are turned on to learning,” says Kary. “Even when we split up to do various centers, students who are not at the SMART Board will often turn to watch what is happening.”

Kary has used technology to have students make their own movies on various topics including a recent field trip to the farm and a letter video about the sounds that letters make.

“They love watching themselves, and in the process they learn so much.” Kary uses the SMART Board throughout her teaching and observes that students understand the curriculum better. “Because of the students’ successes, I would never go back to teaching without it.”

Roxanne Schmutz, the school’s music teacher, says she has enjoyed internet access that comes with a SMART Board. “I have found a lot of great materials online,” she says. Schmutz has also created her own, including a game that involves rolling the dice. Each roll of the dice uncovers a new rhythm, as well as a new body part to move in time to the rhythm.

“It makes repetition more fun and exciting,” says Schmutz. “Everyone wants a turn!” Schmutz says using technology requires effort on the teacher’s part, “but it’s definitely the way to go.”

“Technology opens new realms of possibilities for students.”
How the **Learning Cycle** is making a difference

**What students say*** about the Learning Cycle

- 84% understand what is covered in class
- 83% know what they’re expected to learn in each lesson
- 85% get along with their teachers
- 75% feel teachers go out of their way to help students
- 91% believe they’ll graduate from high school

*Survey of almost 1,400 students - June 2010*

**What teachers say*** about the Learning Cycle

- 96% use observations to determine if students understand the material. When students are not successful, these teachers use a different strategy to re-teach
- 92% give students a choice on how they will show what they know
- 95% use rubrics or other similar standards to judge a student’s work
- 98% help students understand the reason for learning specific lessons

*Survey of 147 respondents – June 2010*

“We will continue” our focus on the Learning Cycle throughout the 2010-2011 school year,” says George Ollenberger, Director of Instruction, Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools (WRPS). “We were very pleased with recent survey results. They tell us we’re heading in the right direction.”

Ollenberger says the division will continue to emphasize the use of High Yield Strategies, research proven techniques for good teaching, to engage students in learning.

Along with that emphasis, Ollenberger says “teachers will have significant opportunities for professional development, so that they can continually improve classroom practices.”

"We know and clearly understand that teachers must achieve excellence if we want to inspire the same level of excellence in our students," says Terry Pearson, Superintendent, WRPS. "I marvel at how dedicated and resilient teachers are as they strive to get better everyday; they do this because they are committed to their students."
Classes begin!

Thursday, September 2, 2010 is the first day of school for all students, except those on year round education. C.B. McMurdo year round education classes begin Monday, August 9, 2010.

If you are new in our community and have a child who will attend a Wetaskiwin Regional Public School, welcome! We’re pleased to have your child join us for the coming school year.

Registration dates for new students are listed below. Please bring your child’s birth certificate & last report card with you when you register.

If you require more information such as school phone numbers, forms or school year calendars please visit our website at: www.wrps.ab.ca

New student registration dates

August 4
C.B. McMurdo School
August 25 & 26
Parkdale School
Wetaskiwin Composite High School
August 26 & 27
Centennial School
Pigeon Lake Regional School
Pipestone School (and August 31)
August 27
Clear Vista School
Gwynne School
August 30
Ecole Queen Elizabeth Junior High
August 31
Buck Mountain Central School
Rosebrier School
August 31 & September 1
Alder Flats Elementary School
Falun School
Griffiths Scott Middle School
Lakedell School
Millet School
Norwood School
Winfield School

Pre-registered student information
Queen Elizabeth Junior High School
- Grade 7 orientation
  August 31, 5:00 – 9:00 p.m.
  Please pre-register with the school.
- Registration assemblies and homeroom lists posted – September 2

Wetaskiwin Composite High School
Times to pick up timetables, pay school fees, get textbooks and lockers:
- Grade 12
  August 25
  Surnames M-Z 9 – 12
  Surnames A-L 1 – 3:30
- Grade 11
  August 26
  Surnames M-Z 9-12
  Surnames A-L 1- 3:30
- Grade 10
  August 27
  Surnames M-Z 9-12
  Surnames A-L 1 – 3:30

For information about bus routes and times, please call
780-352-6018 or visit
www.wrps.ab.ca

Urban bus passes will be available beginning Monday, August 16th at the WRPS Division Office
5515-47 A Ave. Wetaskiwin, AB

We want to hear what you think!

Tell us what you think about this newspaper send your comments along with your name and contact information to knulls@wrps.ab.ca to be entered in a prize draw for a:

$50.00 gift certificate to Blurbs Bookstore in Wetaskiwin

Your feedback helps us improve our efforts to communicate with you. Or telephone comments to: 780-352-4153, ext. 225