

District Review Report
School District No. 58 (Nicola-Similkameen)

March 2 – March 5, 2008

Submitted to the Ministry of Education



District Review Report 2008

District: 58 (Nicola-Similkameen)

Superintendent: Dr. Byron Robbie

Date of Visit: March 2 - 5, 2008

Team Chair: Gary Graf, Retired Superintendent

Team Members: Bobbi Coleman, Teacher, SD 69 (Qualicum)
Craig Gillis, Assistant Superintendent, SD 72 (Campbell River)
Dean Goodman, Coordinator, System Performance, Ministry of Education
Michael Malfesi, Principal, SD 75 (Mission)
Michael McDiarmid, Principal, SD 91 (Nechako Lakes)
Lori Tedrick, Parent, SD 6 (Rocky Mountain)
Afton Wright, Manager, System Performance, Ministry of Education

Context

School District 58 (Nicola-Similkameen), enrolling approximately 2,900 students in the fall of 2007, serves a general population of approximately 16,000 people living in the communities and surrounding areas of Merritt and Princeton. Three industries (forestry, the public sector, and tourism) employ most of the people in this area. Approximately 37 percent of the district's population is rural. Approximately 22 percent of Merritt's population and 4 percent of Princeton's population are Aboriginal. Although there has been a declining school population in recent years, a slight increase in student enrollment was observed in 2007/08 in both Princeton and Merritt. The percentage of Aboriginal students continues to increase.

The communities served by the District face a number of economic and social challenges. Both Merritt and Princeton are ranked at a relatively low level on several provincial social and health indicators, including the *Overall Socio-Economic Indices*, *Youth at Risk Indices*, and *Health Problem Indices* (BC Stats: Local Health Statistical Profiles 2006). A large number of students are under provincial care or come from families that are on income assistance (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2005). Approximately one-third of the district's Kindergarten students have been reported as being vulnerable in at least one domain of their development (Early Child Development Mapping Project; 2003, 2006).

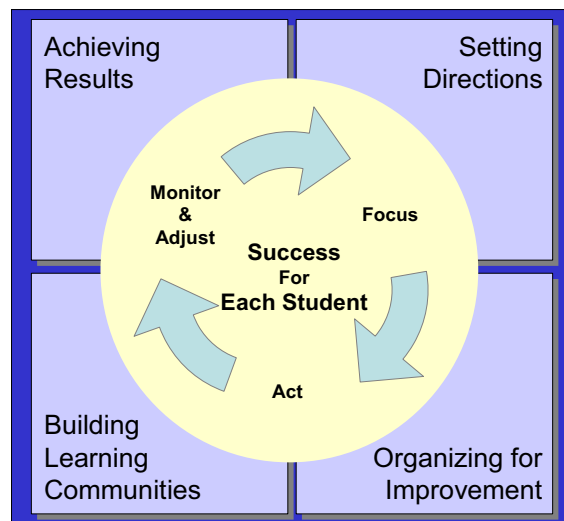
The Purpose of District Review

Continuously improving school districts actively consider and respond to the following three questions in relation to their work to improve the success for each child:

1. What is most important? – Focus
2. What are we doing about it? – Act
3. How will we monitor and adjust our work to get improved results? – Monitor and Adjust

District Reviews are intended to explore these questions as they consider the work of the District in four key areas:

- Setting Directions
- Organizing For Improvement
- Building Learning Communities
- Achieving Results



The District Review report is not a report card to be seen as an end product. Rather, it is a document intended to assist the District in the work to improve success for each child. The report acknowledges District work and provides recommendations in the areas of Setting Directions, Organizing for Improvement, Building Learning Communities and Achieving Results.

Process

The District Review Team:

1. Met with district senior staff including:

Byron Robbie, Superintendent of Schools
Wendy Hyer, Assistant Superintendent
Bruce Tisdale, Secretary Treasurer
Opal Charters, Principal, First Nations Education
Burt Bergman, Coordinator, Technology Education
Kim Williams, Coordinator, Student Support

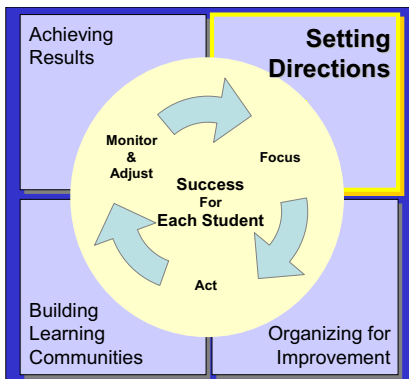
2. Met with representatives of groups including:

Board of School Trustees
Principals and Vice-Principals
First Nations Education Council
Aboriginal Support Team
Nicola Valley Princeton Teachers' Union
Parent Advisory Council Executive
CUPE Executive

3. Met with school staff, students and parents at the following schools:

Collettsville Elementary
Coquihalla Middle School
Diamond Vale Elementary
John Allison Elementary
Kengard Alternate Program
Merritt Bench Elementary
Merritt Central Elementary
Merritt Secondary
Nicola Canford Elementary
Princeton Secondary
Vermilion Forks Elementary
South Central Interior Distance Education

Setting Directions:



Expectations:

Continuously improving districts set directions that will enhance success for each child. Priorities are identified through the examination of evidence from a variety of sources at classroom, school, and district levels. The focus of district priorities is evident in district goals and objectives, and the related rationale.

Observations

- The District develops plans and allocates funds in a thoughtful, collaborative manner based on the needs of each student.
- Schools utilize student performance evidence in goal setting, interventions, and planning.
- The District has formed an Achievement Committee involving partner groups to assist with development of future Achievement Contracts that recognizes and supports the individual needs of students.
- Some authentic school and district-level assessments and data exist (e.g. district-wide write).
- Schools have collaborative processes to identify and develop school goals. These goals, however, may not be clearly articulated in school plans.
- Connections between school and district plans and priorities were observed. Greater efforts to discuss school and district-wide priorities between schools and among partner groups would be helpful.

Recommendations

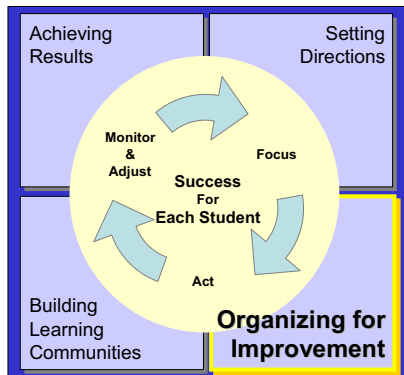
Initiate or build on efforts to:

- Enhance the focus on success for each student in the district.
- Clarify planning documents to accurately reflect the work being done in the district and at schools to improve success for all students.

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- Establish a variety of forums to share and discuss the work to improve student success.
 - Create opportunities for dialogue to build understanding of district and school priorities.
 - Share promising practices.
- Review and refine the focus and direction of the alternate program.

Organizing for Improvement:



Expectations:

Continuously improving districts organize their efforts and activities to ensure success for each child. Work at all levels in the district is coherent and aligned to focus on improvement. School uniqueness and district directions are both supported. Strategies and structures selected to achieve the goals are a blend of research, best practice, and innovative thinking. This includes effectively differentiating resources, time and professional development to get results. The district supports connections among staff and schools to build capacity.

Observations

- A focus on continuous improvement and the provision of a variety of learning opportunities is supported at every level.
- A variety of leadership and staff development opportunities exist to support instructional practice.
- The District considers and makes available to schools a variety of research-based instructional programs. Schools have the flexibility to select and develop programs, supports, and interventions that address individual and group learning needs.
- Early learning opportunities exist through district and community-based initiatives that include two community Strong Start centres and a number of Ready, Set, Learn initiatives.
- A number of effective strategies are in place to support socially responsible student behaviour.
- There is a strong focus on identifying and assessing individual students with specific learning needs. However, some concerns were raised about the timeliness and ongoing availability of assessment services.
- Clear student entrance/exit criteria and clear lines of responsibility for the alternate programs were not evident.
- Very few students enrolled in alternate programs complete secondary school.

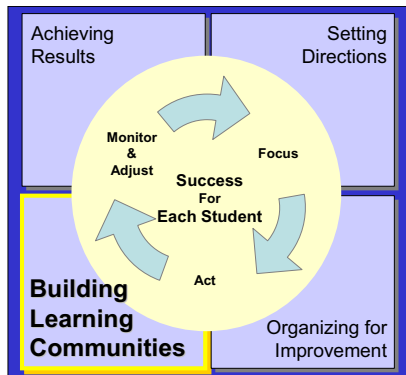
Recommendations

Initiate or build on efforts to:

- Assess for effectiveness strategies to improve student success.
 - Share findings across the district.
 - Revise or refine strategies that do not lead to improved success for students.

- Assess the alternate program.
 - Clearly define entrance/exit criteria.
 - Articulate lines of responsibility.

Building Learning Communities:



Expectations:

Continuously improving districts have a vision for and a shared commitment to success for each student. Leadership at all levels in all roles focuses on student success. Relationships are developed and maintained to support students and ongoing parent involvement is embedded in district culture. The district makes their plans and progress public. Communication occurs in multiple ways about their efforts and activities, and input is actively sought and valued.

Observations

- A positive, caring, proud, and collaborative culture permeates the district and community.
- Open dialogue and communication exists throughout the district.
- District administrative staff and trustees are visible, accessible, and responsive to staff, students, and parents.
- The school and District staff are skilled, dedicated, and collaborative.
- Strong links exist with agencies, organizations, and businesses within the community.
- Parents are actively involved with schools in a wide variety of ways.
- Strong relationships exist with Aboriginal bands. Connections with the off-reserve Aboriginal communities, however, are not as strong.
- There is a lack of district-wide parent networking; however, there appears to be a readiness amongst parents to address this issue.

Recommendations

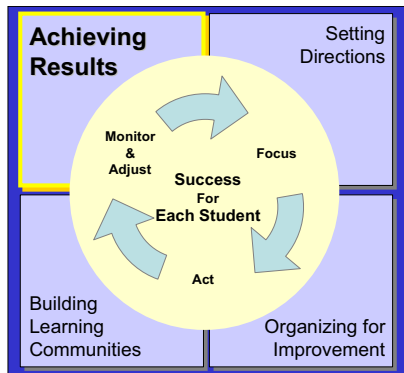
Initiate or build on efforts to:

- Reach out to the off-reserve Aboriginal communities and find ways to hear their voices at the First Nations Education Council.
- Facilitate inter-school parental communication and networking.

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- Involve parents in school, district, and provincial staff development activities and other leadership opportunities.

Achieving Results:



Expectations:

Improving districts continuously improve results. They monitor progress and make adjustments in key areas of their work to improve achievement – for individual students, groups of students, schools and the district.

Observations

- District and school strategies focus on improving individual student achievement results.
- The District is using the Early Development Index data to broaden its understanding of school community demographics and subsequent interventions, particularly in the areas of Early Learning, Literacy, and school readiness.
- There is a common desire to identify student learning challenges and provide appropriate assessments in a timely manner.
- After several years of declining grade-to-grade transition rates at the secondary level, some improvement was observed this past year.
- The District is concerned about results between Grades 4 and 7.
- Aboriginal student achievement, particularly amongst males, continues to be a significant concern.
- The District is supporting a number of assessments that identify the unique needs of students and support the instructional practices of teachers. However, a consistent, unified district-wide approach is not evident.
- A significant number of students leave the system without graduating and the District is working with the Ministry and with schools to gain a deeper understanding of these results.

Recommendations

Initiate or build on efforts to:

- Improve student achievement levels, particularly between Grades 4 and 7.
- Improve the grade-to-grade transition rates at the secondary level.
- Collect and disaggregate student performance data across the district to identify areas of need.
 - Monitor, adjust, and focus intervention strategies for specific groups of students.
- Enhance the success of Aboriginal students by making their success a key priority.
- Work with the Aboriginal communities to review the current Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement and to refine strategies and structures as needed.

Conclusion

The Review Team observed a pervasive positive attitude of caring and commitment within an environment and culture of shared and distributed leadership. Professional practices throughout the district illustrate a “can-do” attitude focused on what is best for each student.

Given the context of challenging and complex needs, the District and schools have nurtured mutually supportive and cooperative relationships with their respective communities in a way that supports student learning. The Team characterized this shared and focused commitment as a moral imperative.

The positive relationship with First Nations communities typifies how learning communities can work collaboratively. These communities are not satisfied with the status quo and are committed to the work that remains to be done.

The Review Team is confident that the District has the commitment and is actively building the capacity to improve student achievement.

Response to the Review

The District will respond annually to the Recommendations in the report within its Achievement Contracts. For further information regarding the District response to this report, please contact School District No. 58 (Nicola-Similkameen).

The Ministry of Education, through the Superintendent of Achievement and the Governance and Accountability Division, will monitor the District’s progress in addressing the Recommendations in this report. This may include discussions/interactions with the District about the Achievement Contract, the completion of or ongoing efforts relating to the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, training and support for school level staff and School Planning Councils, and/or other ongoing dialogue with the School District and its community.