



# Teslin School Review Report

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## Teslin School

Fall 2010

**School Principal:** Dennis Darling

**Date of Review:** November 8 & 9, 2010

**School Review Team:**

Thomas Jirousek, principal, Ross River

Marc Legault principal, Tantalus

Sharon Shadow, First Nations coordinator, Department of Education

Bob Laking, AYSCBC

Judy Arnold, Director, Department of Education

**Meetings with the School included:**

- The School Growth Planning Team
- School Staff
- Students
- Teslin Tlingit Council Members
- School Council and parents

### **School Context**

Teslin School serves 57 Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 9 students in a rural setting. Almost all of the students (95%) are of aboriginal ancestry, with the majority being citizens of Teslin Tlingit Council. Teslin Tlingit Council maintains a high level of involvement in the school and is very supportive of school programming and efforts to improve achievement of students and their levels of social responsibility.

Teslin School has gone through a major change in philosophy and approach in the past two years. The administration and staff have carefully planned a shift from an authority driven approach to a system that recognizes developmental concerns and human attachments and relationships as the primary motivators for children. The school makes the inclusion of Tlingit culture and traditions a priority for school programming and integrates community norms with school events. Relationships, attachments, restorative practices, culturally relevant programs and activities function as prerequisites to the overriding priority of academic achievement and success for every student.

## **School Norms and Culture**

### **Observations of the Team:**

- The school has a positive tone and energy and staff and students are proud of the school
  - The atmosphere is calm and focused on students throughout the instructional day and after school hours;
- The changes in philosophy and practices over the last two years are evident and the support of staff and community will support its further development;
- Good citizenship forms a solid base for all school programs and activities which often function as motivational factors;
- Cultural inclusion is an integral part of the school and the connection to the Teslin Tlinget First Nation is evident in the art displays and focus at the school;
- The school has high expectations for improvement for students
  - There is a focus on trust, respect and good behaviour as foundations for academic success,
  - Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions so rather than punishment as a focus the school works toward restorative justice;
- The ESW works diligently with the school on school-community relationship, cultural relevance.

### **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- The recent philosophy and approach led by the current principal, founded on social responsibility is still at a vulnerable stage, and will need to be deepened for it to become sustainable and embedded in culture of the school. To achieve this the school needs to
  - Communicate with parents and the community in order to enhance understanding and support about how the social responsibility focus creates the conditions for learning for all students,
  - Heighten the focus on academics now that most students are in a place where they can function within a framework of cooperation and respect,
  - Articulate as story or outline, the journey that the school has undergone to reach the current philosophy, organizational structures and approaches.

## **School and Community**

### **Observation of the Team:**

- The community acknowledges the positive change in the school's policy, philosophy, cultural and pedagogical practices;
- The emotional connection to School by all players is obvious. Stories depicting school life speak of successful school/community "cultural bridging";
- The strong relationship with the Teslin Tlinget Council (TTC) is a model for other schools in the Territory. Mutual respect and trust is evident. Not only the learners and staff, but also community members feel they are included in the school life and have a sense of belonging
  - Samuel Johnston, one of the Elder at the school commented " Finally, there is a right alignment with First Nations tradition and belief system";
  - The TTC has a focus on education. Although they are working on a vision for the future, the immediate directions are clear and in line with school directions;

- The collaborative work of the staff to implement changes in approach and classroom practice to support students is exemplary
  - Staff have generously given of their personal time and engaged with the community beyond school time to support the effort;
- The School Growth Planning Team includes staff, School Council and TTC members and works with the community and students;
- School Council members are positive and eager to support the current directions;
- Students like the school and the new approaches including
  - The “Cool Kids” program,
  - The split grades as a way to review and see what is ahead,
  - The desire for more attention to developing a love of reading at early grades;
- Some parents expressed concern about
  - Split grades,
  - Retention of students in school when they move on to secondary school in Whitehorse and the need to find other options for students who return to the community,
  - The relationship between the cultural focus and academic success.

### **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- Continue to use student and community assemblies as a way to celebrate progress
- Work to build understanding in all parents particularly those skeptical of the new approach
  - Extend invitations to parents to observe and participate in the activities of the school in order to understand how cultural programs are part of academic curriculum.
  - Clarify how differentiated instruction and flexible groupings address individual needs in split classes
- Work with the Department to
  - Connect with secondary schools to build understanding of student needs, ease transitions and improve retention rates,
  - Explore alternate options for secondary school for students, especially those who are not successful in Whitehorse;
- Find ways to provide staff with more collaboration time within the school day.

### **School Organization**

#### **Observations of the Team:**

- The school is organized to accomplish the goals outlined in the school growth plan;
- Breakfast for learning provides student with nutrition and a way to connect with each other and staff to begin the day,
  - Fruit or vegetables are available at the office is another best practice as is the water and juice machine;
- The organizational approach to learning focuses on consistent differentiated and individualized learning strategies,
  - The school revises IEP programs upon thorough assessment of students,

- Technology (classroom, computer room, shop) is integrated into daily programs,
- Balanced literacy (i.e. “Reading Power”, “6+1” writing program, Buddy reading with student and self assessment components) is used across curricular areas,
- Student self-assessment,
- The use of flexible groupings within the classrooms creates positive learning environments;
- The ESW’s and the Elders integral involvement in the learning process provides an important link between school, parents, community, and TTC;
- Tlingit traditional teachings and learning are integrated into curriculum; many students have First Nations names and are in clans. Non-First Nations students indicated that they feel included;
  - The week long camp at Brooks Brook is an example of the integration of cultural and academic activities;
- Concerns were expressed by staff and parents that because there is no consistent French program in the school and no beginning French program in Whitehorse secondary schools that students who require a second language as part of the graduation requirements and would like to take French do not have the opportunity to do so.

### **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- Deepen the work on differentiated and individualized instruction to ensure that the needs of all students, those not yet meeting, meeting and exceeding expectations are addressed,
  - Flexible groupings may afford opportunities to challenge those students who meet or exceed academic expectations;
- Continue the integration of the Yukon First Nations’ culture into the classroom programs;
- Communicate about strategies used and progress made on a regular basis to parents, and TCC;
- Work with the Department to
  - Find ways to support and build capacity with staff to differentiate instruction,
  - Explore ways to provide secondary French programming for students.

### **School Processes and Progress**

#### **Observations of the Team:**

- The current academic success of students at Teslin and at secondary school is a significant concern for staff, parents and TTC and is reflected in the plan;
- The School Growth Plan is sound and provides clear directions in the targeted areas;

- The School Growth Plan reflects on evidence as a basis for planning
  - 2009-2010 YAT results, School Wide Write results, and Social Responsibility results based on BC Performance Standards,
  - Results of Student/Parent Satisfaction Surveys from May 2010;
- The Plan outlines Literacy and social responsibility objectives, targets, and strategies, as well as school organization and structures to support growth in those areas;
- The plan strives to meet each learners needs for improvement and targets are very ambitious and in relation to current evidence (i.e. School wide Write, gr. 6; Social Responsibility, gr.1 and 2; gr. 9 reading proficiency);
- The plan is discussed at staff meetings and the School Growth Planning Team meets monthly. The Plan and progress made are shared at School Council meetings.

### **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- Continue to use evidence to guide decisions and actions,
  - Work with the data coordinator to develop electronic individual profiles for students in order to measure incremental gains;
- Review progress toward meeting targets and adjust as needed to ensure that targets are a stretch but are also reachable;
- Work with the Department and Whitehorse secondary schools to strengthen ties between Teslin and the schools to maximize success at transitions;
- Work with TTC to strengthen connections between the strong start program and the school;
- Evaluate current practices in relation to outcomes. For example, the focus on literacy may need a stronger focus on writing. Work with secondary to ascertain the reason behind students struggles in Math.

### **Conclusions:**

The Review Team was very pleased to find the school to be a calm, positive and efficient social and academic environment. The social responsibility focus, cultural inclusion and differentiated instruction are becoming operational norms at the school but may still be dependent on the current leadership at the school. The relationship with the TTC and the commitment of staff and TTC to the change process are exemplary. With a focus on sustainability of initiatives, the ongoing use of evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of the changes, and a clearly articulated vision that includes standards and operational processes, the school is poised to further enhance the life chances of each student at Teslin.

### **Practices to share:**

- Student self-assessment.
- Student/parent survey.
- Gordon Neufeld attachment Social Responsibility program assessment using the BC Performance Standards.
- Involvement of Chief and Council in the process of integrating the Yukon First Nations' culture and tradition into curriculum and the life of the school
- Full time Elders in the school.