



Ross River School Review Report

Ross River

Date of Report: December 7, 2011

School Principal: Thomas Jirousek

Date of Review: October 12 and 13, 2011

School Review Team:

Lori Choquette, School Council Liaison

Wes Malo, Principal, Del Van Gorder

Penny Prysruk, Superintendent Area 2

Sharon Shadow, First Nation Programs and Partnerships Unit

Judy Arnold, Director, DOE

Meetings with the School included:

- Chief and Council
- School Council
- Staff and administration
- Students in classrooms
- Classroom visits

School Context

The Ross River School is a Kindergarten to grade 10 school in Ross River. Most students are of Kaska decent and members of the Ross River Dena Council. School programs and activities are, therefore, culturally relevant within the context of Canadian multiculturalism and the BC/Western Protocol's framework of performance standards. For the current school year the student population is 48.

Norms and Culture:

Characteristics:

Continuously improving schools are socially and culturally inclusive with high expectations for each learner. A focus on continuous improvement is evident.

Observations of the Team:

- The atmosphere in the school is relaxed and the students seemed comfortable;
- Staff Members genuinely care about the students and are concerned about the variety of social emotional and academic needs;
- The school functions as a hub for the community with funerals held in the gymnasium and breakfasts and feasts offered to the community;
- There are permanent art and historical displays on walls but bulletin boards with student work were not consistently completed;
- As almost all students are from Ross River, it is interesting that the school building is not strongly reflective of Kaska culture nor are there places in the foyer that serve to welcome visitors with places to sit down and talk;
- Chief and Council, School Council, staff, and students want high standards of achievement at the school so that the students can successfully transition to Whitehorse schools,
 - There was also a desire to have options for students who are unsuccessful in Whitehorse and return to the community;
- It was not clear to the Team whether the school and community had a collective vision of what student success looks like.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Possibly using a facilitator, work with staff and community to establish a clear collective vision for the school and its place in the community;
- To strengthen a warm and welcoming atmosphere at the school:
 - Create a seating area outside of the office where parents could wait for their children or engage in conversation with each other and the staff;
 - Explore ways to celebrate Kaska culture and the successes of the students through art, crafts, and displays of student work. For example, students could work together with First Nations elders or community members to create culturally relevant murals, similar to the murals at Johnson Elementary or a wall of photos of Kaska leaders and Elders;
- Ensure there is a focus on high standards and continuous improvement;
- Work with the Department to explore options for secondary school for those students who return from Whitehorse or wish to remain in the community.

Community

Characteristics: In continuously improving schools build a shared commitment to success for each learner. The school collaborates with parents, students, school council, First Nations and community to support student learning. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture and the school communicates about progress and challenges in multiple ways.

Observations of the Team:

- The school focus on literacy appears to have brought the staff together to discuss common approaches and strategies with a Professional Learning Community (PLC) approach every three weeks
- The school hosts a number of events for students and the community:
 - Coordination of daily Snack and Breakfast Program for students
 - *Principal's Pizza* for students with best attendance
 - Breakfasts, dinners for community on a monthly basis.
 - Recently optional programs offered to parents/community members (quilting once a week) and *Card Games Club*, once a week
- Ross River Dena Chief and Council, School Council and staff want to see students who are able to work at or above grade level supported and challenged to do their best. They also want to understand how to support students with specific learning needs including FASD;
- Ross River Dena Chief and Council, School Council, and staff expressed a desire for a more interactive, student focused relationship between school and community. However, there is a disconnect between the community and the school. The community wants the staff to be more involved with them and the staff feels that they are involved, some as volunteers on committees or volunteer services. Recently some staff have been sitting on the recreation and other committees to help build relationships with the community;
 - However, staff, particularly those new to the community have some discomfort about how they think their presence is received when they attend community events,
- It was unclear how students function in leadership roles in the school or whether older students have opportunities to mentor younger students. Students were not involved in the development of the current growth plan;
- Both the community and the school would like to have a viable school council that is actively engaged in the work to improve outcomes for students;
- The current principal has been at the school for a long time and the school is well organized and takes pride in the number of feasts and events that are planned for students and their families. Moving to a distributed leadership model with staff over the next few years may ease the transition to new leadership.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Consider using a facilitator to help build a new relationship between the school, school council, Ross River Dena Chief and Council, and community. Beginning the process by meeting away from the school possibly at the Yukon College campus may provide a neutral ground for discussion focused on students and their success;
- To strengthen relationships between the school, community and school council invitations from community members through the school council to the staff could be very helpful;

- To strengthen relationships within the school, explore strategies to engage the community casually. Student driven activities could be helpful (A coffee house activity for elders and community members like the one currently in place at Del van Gorder might be an approach);
- Build on the active learning program Wednesday afternoons to encourage older students to assume leadership roles;
- Explore ways to have the parents, school council, Ross River Dena Chief and Council, and community know about the new approaches to learning, how students are supported at the school, and how parents may provide support at home.

School Organization

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools organize structures, actions, and interventions to ensure success for each learner. Work in the school is coherent and aligned to focus on improvement. Actions and interventions include effectively differentiating resources, time and professional development to get results. The Department supports the school and makes connections across the Territory to build capacity.

Observations of the Team:

- The school is operationally well organized and behavioural issues appeared to be very limited;
- In relation to programming for students :
 - There has been an Active Learning/Optional Program (since 2006) in partnership with *Skills Canada Yukon*,
 - Kaska Studies established with financial assistance from provincial and federal funds in 2003,
 - Caribou hunting trips (every February/March) with the participation of elder hunters,
 - *Encounters with Canada*, student week-long participation in Ottawa (Feb. 2012)
 - *A variety* gr. 9/10 field trips, Edmonton in 2011 and planned trip to Vancouver 2012,
 - Participation in the Skills Canada Exhibition/Competitions since 2006;
- The school growth plan identifies balanced literacy as a priority and staff appears to be eager to engage in this work:
 - Staff have visited other Yukon schools,
 - Staff is working together on a common approach,
 - Staff will be involved in further professional development this year;
- Students in the primary classrooms are experiencing positive gains in literacy skills. However, consistency of approach across the grades is in the early stages of development;
- The land-based experiential approach has the potential to enhance the use of natural resources in the local area and strengthen the sense of pride in community. However, it is important to enhance sustainability over time and to connect the activities with the curricula and prescribed learning outcomes;

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue to develop consistency of language and approaches across the grades in literacy;
- Explore the readers' and writers' workshop approach for students from grade 6 to 10;
- Develop a scope and sequence of literacy skills so the staff, students, and community can see the "end in mind";
- Explore ways to have all staff engage in some land-based or experiential programs which are embedded in the work to meet outcomes in literacy;
- Ensure that there are strategies in place to challenge stronger students;
- Work with the Department's assistance, to engage with Faro to explore the possibilities of collaboration related academics and applied skills. This partnership could allow for high school experiences that are positive and less threatening;

School Processes and Progress

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools take responsibility for improving outcomes for students. They use evidence to guide decisions and actions and have processes in place to collectively monitor progress and make adjustments in key areas of their work. They demonstrate improvement over time – for individual students, groups of students, and the school.

Observations of the Team:

- Although there are students who have been successful in senior secondary school in Whitehorse, students from Ross River often struggle, socially, emotionally, and academically when they transition to senior secondary school in Whitehorse.
- The school developed a new school growth plan in conjunction with the staff focused on literacy in the early spring of 2011. The school is working hard to implement the plan including:
 - Coordination of a *Balanced Literacy* approach,
 - Professional Learning Team meetings,
 - Establishment of class libraries through *Innovation Funds and School Trust Fund*,
 - Coordination of complex year-long staff training and embedded training,
 - Coordinating new approach to Kaska program (improved planning, program delivery, student assessment, classroom management),
- The staff is increasingly using evidence to guide their decision and identify actions;
 - Staff is in the early stages of using assessment for learning and building a baseline of data to assess student progress and the effectiveness of the new strategies progress;
 - The use of rubrics and student self-assessment is under development.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Develop a detailed transition plan for students as they go in to Whitehorse for grades 11 and 12. This should include visits and participation by videoconference during the grade 9 and 10 year,
 - Work with the Department to consider options for students who are, or may not be successful in Whitehorse,
 - Fully involve The Ross River CELC in the process.
- Continue to refine the growth planning document so that it is increasingly focused on the things that support learning;
- Engage students and parents and school council in the process so that they understand the directions being taken by the school;
- Begin to develop individual student profiles so that students are on a learning continuum and challenged to move forward.

Conclusions:

Ross River is a school that is on a journey to a new way of approaching learning and literacy. Essential to the success of this venture will be a student-focused, collaborative, inclusive, approach that ensures that the voices and concerns of the staff, students, the Ross River Dena Council and community are included in the process.