



Ross River School School Review Report November 2016

Ross River School Review November 22-23 2016

Principal: Fran Etsel
Vice-principal: Paul McFadyen

Date of Review: November 22-23, 2016

School Review Team:

Simon Blakesley, Director, Student Achievement/System Accountability, Yukon Education
Bob Walker, School Council Liaison, Yukon Education
Melanie Tourangeau, LA/Reading Recovery Teacher, Tantalus School, Carmacks
Flora Asp, High School Teacher, Tantalus School, Carmacks

Meetings with the School included:

- Students
- Teachers
- Support staff
- School administration

Review Context

The 2016 Ross River School review was conducted five years after the previous review. The longer than typical interval between reviews was due to a number of factors: a change of principals in one year led to a postponement. The following year, the school was decommissioned for a considerable length of time due to structural safety concerns as a result of the school being located in an area of discontinuous permafrost.

Interview times were requested with the Ross River School Council and the Ross River Dene Council in advance and incorporated into the review schedule by the review team. When the review team arrived for the review it learned that the school council would not be available to meet, and that the RRDC was out of the community for other business. The review team was contacted by one RRDC counsellor the day prior to the review: attempts were made to meet but the counsellor responded with confidence that the review was going well and no meeting was required.

School Context

The Ross River School serves 55 pre-kindergarten to grade 12 students in a rural setting 410km by road from Whitehorse. All students are members of the Ross River Dena First Nation. The Ross River Dena Council supports school initiatives and provides funding for school supplies

and field trips. The Ross River Dena Council support also includes funding for an Education Support Worker in the school, Resident Elders, and cultural and experiential activities.

Staff, students, parents, Ross River Dena Council and the School Council all work hard to make the Ross River School a place of learning. The main vision is to have happy, respectful, confident, proud and caring individuals, and a sense of “community” has been established within the school. This was done with Cultural Inclusion funding from Yukon Education, First Nation funding, and the dedication and commitment of staff and school council members.

This year the classes are split into 7 multi-grade classrooms due to lower student population and to support classroom management. This is the first year that Ross River School is offering grade 11\12 in Ross River.

The on-going priorities of Ross River School are:

- To strengthen a warm and welcoming atmosphere at the school
- To introduce students to the growing world of Robotics, starting with the absolute basics, assessable to even the youngest child
- To increase students’ understanding of using technology (projects using a 3-D printer)
- To increase the number of cultural artwork and murals throughout the school (plus exterior)
- To continue the Self-Regulation initiative
- Build a positive relationship between the school, school council, and the community
- Promote culturally relevant Kaska programs and activities
- Build positive relationships and attachments between staff and students
- Employing restorative practices with situations where behaviour needs to change
- Ensuring that there is a focus on high standards and continuous improvement
- To placing an emphasis on experiential learning strategies and techniques
- To improve the overall attendance (focus: chronic non-attenders)

These guiding principles and ways will remain priorities for the Ross River School with a continued emphasis on growth in social responsibility and respect for others. A safe, caring, and respectful atmosphere is essential in order for learning to take place. Ross River School will continue using the principles of self-regulation to help children grow in their social responsibility, and continue to do everything necessary to include the community, Chief and Council, School Council, parents, and Elders in the lives of our children.

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 team was impressed by the warm, welcoming, friendly home-like atmosphere of the school. Throughout the review, the atmosphere was calm, learning-focused, and very open to the team's presence. New staff shared that they felt that they were made to feel very welcome at Ross River School
- Since the last review, there has been a clear, intentional effort by the school to make it more reflective of Kaska language and culture. Many historical photos of life in the community, the presence of Elders, bilingual labelling of all rooms in Kaska and English, displays of local wildlife, and other cultural representations are now clearly evident throughout the school and inform its identity
- Elders and their knowledge are incorporated into the school's programming. During the team's visit, a week-long snowshoe-making project was underway in the Industrial Arts lab. Traditional knowledge, applied skills, and science were all integrated: for example, while brain-tanning the moose hide babiche for the snowshoes, students were monitoring the pH level of the tanning solution with litmus paper and pH strips
- With respect to Elders' involvement in the school, the team heard that four Elders were present in the school and take part in the Residential School teaching unit as a means of moving forward with a spirit of reconciliation. This, and the addition of tanning, drum making, sewing graduation regalia were shared as evidence by staff of very positive growth
- Students and staff all shared their appreciation and enjoyment of the on-the-land learning opportunities that now take place. The building of a cabin and a wall tent by students and staff to make an outdoor classroom are greatly appreciated by the students, whose excitement for this kind of learning environment was clearly evident to the team
- Healthy food is readily available for students throughout the day. In the mornings, healthy breakfasts (fruit and yogurt cups, baked bannock, quiche, breakfast sandwiches, juice) are on a cart at the front entrance of the school. The school is also supplied with cut and wrapped moose roasts and stew meat by local outfitters. At the closure of the exploration season, the school receives substantial high-quality food donations from mining companies

- With respect to food, the lunch room is a regular meeting place at lunch-hour for students, families, Elders, and community members to share in high quality, healthy meals together
- The team noted that there appears to be an inherent shyness and calm demeanour on the part of students at Ross River School. As interviews progressed, students began to more readily express their enjoyment of and appreciation for learning at Ross River School
- Related to the above, all students clearly expressed that they trusted their teachers, thought that they were good at teaching, and appreciated them very much. Kaska school staff who are from Ross River also shared their perception that the teachers strive to work with where their students are at, showing respect and modelling patience as they do so
- The team felt the apprehension expressed by the staff with respect to their school building and its future status due to shifting. Staff and students clearly appreciate their school, and sincerely wish to use it for many years to come

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the strong efforts made since the last review to ensure that Ross River School reflects Kaska values, language, culture, and knowledge
- Continue to seek opportunities to use local resources and places of learning (e.g. the outdoor classroom) to support student learning in both academic and cultural ways
- Continue the emphasis placed on ensuring that students have access to high quality food that supports both their growth and development as well as the building of community in the school
- In order to continue the support for cultural teachings and the Kaska language, explore the potential for a Kaska bi-cultural program at the primary level

School and 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 team heard that Ross River School serves as a focal point for community events: for example, a recent funeral was held at the school. Other events such as beading, sewing, nail club (aesthetics) are also held at the school. The team heard from students that these activities are highly appreciated and that they enjoy them
- Since the last review, there has been a change of leadership at the school. The current principal is from Ross River, and this appears to have promoted a greater level of trust and confidence in the school as it strives to ensure that Kaska language and culture takes a central role
- With respect to school council, the team learned that the council had not met during this school year. The team heard that this was not as a result of a lack of support but rather that the framework of a regular meeting may not fit the local context. The team questioned whether a paradigm shift regarding the operation of the school council was required in this case: Despite not having formalized meetings the team heard that communication still occurs, though in a more organic, unstructured way
- In response to the previous review, it was clearly evident to the team that a distributed model of leadership is now in place at the school. In addition to there being a leadership team with complementary skillsets, staff members also take on a multitude of roles to support learning at the school
- Staff who are also community members shared with the team that there appears greater trust in the school on the part of the community as a result of there being a First Nations principal who is from Ross River leading the school
- When asked about their level of participation in community events, many staff members responded that community involvement was an important part of their lives in Ross River
- The school also works with other community partners such as Selwyn Resources and BMG Resources who support the school with resources, donations, and scholarships for students who graduate

- Similarly, the team was informed that the Ross River Dene Council may not hold regular meetings that the principal could ask to be invited. In order to share information, the principal sends the school's newsletter as a communications tool
- The team heard from multiple staff members that, although there are improved connections with community and the increased presence of Kaska language, culture, and values in the school since the last review, there are still numbers of students who do not attend on a regular basis and may be chronically absent. For example, in 2014-15, the Ross River average days absent was 33 compared to 20 days Yukon-wide

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the efforts to reach out to, communicate with, and involve the Ross River community and other community agencies/partners in the work of the school, given the positive work done in this regard since the last review
- Seek ways to continue the work with Ross River School Council and Ross River Dene Council to ensure that they are informed of and included in the work of the school
- Collect and analyse data on student attendance from K-12, and use the findings to generate solution-focused conversations with students, parents, and community in order to improve attendance and link its importance to student achievement

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:

- Staff members shared with the team that a strength of the school is the ability to be flexible and adaptive to student learning needs. The school's administration supports teachers to individualize and customize learning to the benefit of students
- The team was impressed that Ross River School is now offering high school to a number of students. The graduation program is clearly laid out on a large bulletin board in the hallway in the high school wing. Posters labelled "Where I am now", "Where I want to be", and "How do I get there" provide directions, advice, and the Graduation Planner template

- With respect to high school graduation, Ross River School also supports a number of Adult Graduation Program students to complete their studies. The different paths to graduation are clearly laid out, communicated to parents, and related to potential goals that students might wish to pursue once they graduate
- The school has made a shift to more of an ILC model of high school delivery in response to the irregular attendance on the part of some students. Doing so allows individual students to forge ahead and not be held back by their peers. In order to support and promote positive attendance, teachers call parents and share attendance spreadsheets to communicate with them
- Technology in support of learning has taken prominence at Ross River School. All black boards have been removed from the school and replaced with Epson white boards, interactive tables, and updated computers. While the computer lab is still a place for group learning, some computers have been returned to classes and the side of the lab used for art lessons
- While staff shared with the review team that there is no formal student leadership group, student assemblies are designed to include time where students can suggest ideas on what they believe could make the school even better from their perspective
- Related to the above, the team heard that there appears an inherent shyness on the part of many Ross River students. Acknowledging this and wishing to build capacity, staff are starting small with reading buddy groupings between young and older students, greater student engagement in field trips, the and the Rural Experiential Model (REM) in the aim to build greater student confidence and pride in learning and engagement
- Related to the above, the team heard from staff and students regarding the community contribution, leadership opportunities, and skill development that exists through student operation of the “Kaska Café”
- In order to promote applied and experiential learning, the school has employed Yukon Education’s consultant to bring the Industrial Education lab online and hired a staff member whose expertise is in Industrial Arts to ensure safe and meaningful use of this resource
- With respect to the use and space allocation of the school, the team heard that organizing the school into wings helped to promote learning and the overall function of the school

- The allocation of the Vice-principal position by the Superintendent was viewed to be a very positive addition to the school and an effective organizational approach to supporting the school's work
- Given that the school is offering many good programs to students, some staff wondered whether there may be a benefit to having a dedicated PE specialist to deliver PE and sports programming to students

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the very positive work done to date to communicate the high school graduation information that students and parents need to know, and the progress of students as they move through the graduation program
- Explore with other similar rural schools the kinds of activities and initiatives that they may offer to students in order to foster student leadership and promote engagement in school. For example, some students suggested they could take a leadership role by helping younger students with learning the Kaska language
- Given the interest expressed by students in learning Kaska language and culture, explore ways to offer further Kaska language teaching at the grade 10-12 levels
- Consider the development of a continuum of cultural and on-the-land activities that spans the grade levels and connects with academic learning outcomes so that an integrated framework can help guide future teaching, learning, and assessment

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:

- The team learned that there is 1.5 FTE Learning Assistance currently deployed at Ross River School. When asking about how learning assistance is delivered to students, the team was left unsure of whether or not there was a specific delivery model in place. For example, there does not appear to be a defined school-based team or process in place to identify students, develop and monitor IEPs and review them with parents

- Related to the above, the team learned that there is not a specific learning assistance schedule in place, nor a ‘common language’ or approach/strategies amongst staff when approaching students who may be struggling or non-readers
- In the elementary grades, “Class Craft” is used as a positive behavior support system, coupled with self-regulation practices, furniture, and a classroom layout that is supportive of student learning. To further provide elementary/intermediate students an opportunity to foster responsibility and contribute positively to the rest of the school, students organize, make, and sell snow-cones once per week to their peers
- School staff shared that the school is in a better position to employ data and evidence in a more systematic way now that disruptions (e.g. having to vacate the school) appear to be addressed. The team learned that this work was commenced in concert with the focus of the past 3 years being on setting appropriate conditions for learning at the school
- The team heard that there is a desire on the part of the school to begin more systematic collection and analysis of data and evidence, and for the development of a consistent language of assessment throughout the school. This collection would include: attendance, running records, writing, teacher observations, and other educational assessments
- With respect to commonality, some staff shared with the team that greater consistency of approach and a common language and a continuum of learning spanning grade levels would help generate more unified efforts in regards to work on literacy
- With respect to reporting to parents, parent/teacher interviews were held the day before the review. The team learned that there was a 75% participation rate, whereas in the past no parents used to attend these conferences. Follow-up is made with parents who do not attend this session in order to reschedule and arrange a meeting time
- Staff shared their concern with respect to the low levels of language on the part of students just beginning school. The team heard that while there used to be a day care in Ross River, it was no longer open. As a result, staff observed that this affects student readiness and generates a heightened level of parental concern and stress

Recommendations for moving forward:

- With assistance from Student Support Services at Yukon Education, develop a School Based Team model that meets the needs of staff, students, and families
- Ensure that the model of student support and learning assistance is clearly communicated amongst all members of the team in order to ensure that responses to student needs are timely, well-understood, and include parents
- Develop a framework and continuum across grades for data and evidence gathering that outlines not only the data gathered but the rationale and application of what is learned from the analysis of the data/evidence collected. Doing so should help to focus data gathering work and aid with what can be learned
- Review how literacy instruction is approached at Ross River School with an emphasis placed on developing a common language and range of approaches that supports both students and teachers. Consider how consultants at Yukon Education may be of help in this important work
- Given the lack of pre-school learning opportunities in Ross River, explore with Yukon Education early-intervention strategies that would support literacy at the Kindergarten level

In conclusion

The Review Team enjoyed its visit to Ross River School. The team reflected that the school has transformed positively in ways that make elements of the previous review incomparable to the current school context. As a central example, the ongoing embodiment of Kaska language, culture, and values throughout is clearly evident, as is the pride in the school that is reflected by students and staff.

The review team believes that Ross River School is now at an important point in its history: first, as a result of the excellent work done to create the conditions for learning that are now in place, greater emphasis can be applied towards strengthening literacy, numeracy, and developing a common language and continuum of learning and assessment that spans grade levels.

A second challenge relates to ensuring the longer-term successes of Ross River School, understanding that there will always be personnel changes in the future. Articulating together with the community the vision, mission, and mandate of the school will be an important step towards ensuring that the current educational and cultural aims and accomplishments of Ross River School both remain and continue to grow in support all learners into the future.

Practices to share:

- The clearly communicated and accessible path to graduation bulletin boards and graduation planner worksheets in the high school wing
- The strong emphasis on placing Kaska language, culture, and values clearly at the center of student learning, on the land activities, and the learning culture of the school
- The high-quality Industrial Arts program that integrates Kaska culture and curriculum in meaningful ways
- The preparation of accessible healthy meals for students, and the open lunch venue for students, staff, and community to regularly share in meals together
- The Kaska Café as a vehicle for student engagement that teaches skills and provides a service to the community

Considerations for Yukon Education

- Provide support to Ross River School with respect to helping staff develop a common language of literacy and assessment across the grades
- Provide support to Ross River School with respect to developing a School-based Team and learning assistance delivery model that responds to student needs and facilitates the inclusion of teachers and parents