

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 25, 2000

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Dosdall, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Balanced Literacy Research Project

ORIGINATOR: G. Reynolds, Department Head

RESOURCE

STAFF: Anne Brailsford, Sandra Carl Townsend, Anne Mulgrew, Lorie Welk

INFORMATION

Three years ago a group of principals expressed the desire for a structured program for primary grades, which would address the full range of curriculum outcomes for Language Arts. The group approached Dr. Anne Brailsford, a reading specialist in Consulting Services. Dr. Brailsford designed the Balanced Literacy program, the intent of which is to increase reading and writing achievement of primary aged students and to provide teacher professional development on specific instructional strategies and resources.

The Balanced Literacy Program is based on current research and high quality teaching practice. The program is quite structured and requires teachers to spend two hours and twenty minutes every day on Language Arts instruction. The focus is on word recognition and spelling strategies, on supported and independent reading techniques and guided writing. There are specified teaching techniques for whole class and group activities. Whole class lessons are designed to be multi-level in nature. Small group sessions focus on teaching specific literacy strategies and using materials that are at individual children's reading level. The teacher professional development component is intensive. Initial training days are followed up by monthly inservices and visits to the school by the reading specialist. Each school visit is composed of model teaching demonstrations, observations of the teacher with coaching feedback and a lunchtime meeting to share ideas. During the second year of implementation the coaching and inservicing continue on a less intensive schedule.

During the 1997 - 98 school year, four schools were involved in a pilot of Balanced Literacy. The HLAT results for these schools in June 1998 indicated that 94 per cent of participating grade ones and 93 per cent of grade twos were reading at or above grade level. In the two schools where Balanced Literacy was combined with Reading Recovery, 100 per cent of the grade one students were reading at or above grade level. The results were sufficiently encouraging to extend the program into the 1998 - 99 school year. Eighteen schools, forty-one teachers, 1112 students and five reading specialists participated in the program. The participating schools were the four original pilot sites, Duggan, Garneau, Hazeldean and Mount Pleasant, as well as Brander Gardens, Calder, Clara Tyner, Grovenor, Hillview, King Edward, Lauderdale, Lorelei, Meadowlark, Mee-Yah-Noh, Parkallen, Rideau Park, Steinhauer and Woodcroft.

The principals of these schools wanted to collect data to support their intuitive belief that this program was in fact increasing student achievement in the areas of reading and writing. Information from two sources was analysed. One source was from testing done on a sample of students in the Balanced Literacy program.

A randomly selected sample of students from the participating grade one classrooms were individually administered three standardized tests in October 1998. The same tests were administered in June 1999 to those students who were still enrolled at the school. The tests used were:

- Woodcock Word Identification
- Woodcock Passage Comprehension
- WIAT (Wechsler Individual Achievement Test) – Spelling

Table 1 provides information on the average grade level equivalents for each of the three subtests administered.

**TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF RESULTS
FOR INDIVIDUALLY ADMINISTERED TESTS**

Test	Number Of Students	Average Grade Equivalent for Pretest October 1998	Average Grade Equivalent for Post-test June 1999	Change in Grade Equivalence
Woodcock Word Identification	143	1.3	2.5	+1.2
Woodcock Passage Comprehension	100	1.2	2.2	+1.0
WIAT Spelling	142	1.1	2.5	+1.4

The number of students completing the Passage Comprehension subtest was lower than for the other two subtests, due to an irregularity in the administration of the test at five sites. The pre and post testing took place eight months apart. All three measures show an increase in average grade equivalence of a year or more, which represents more than the expected student growth over the same period of time.

Analysis was also undertaken using the results from the Highest Level of Achievement Tests for reading and writing. The information was aggregated for the eighteen pilot schools who participated in the Balanced Literacy program. Table 2 provides information on the percentage distribution of the 1999 HLAT reading scores.

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF READING RESULTS FOR
THE BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM TO THE DISTRICT

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF 1999 HLAT GRADE LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT READING SCORES BY ENROLMENT GRADE					
Grade	Group	N	Below Enrolment Grade	At Enrolment Grade	Above Enrolment Grade
1	Bal. Lit.	533	8.0	68.7	23.3
1	District	5560	15.0	67.1	17.9
2	Bal. Lit.	383	12.0	67.4	20.6
2	District	5866	16.0	64.7	19.3
3	Bal. Lit.	177	9.6	71.2	19.2
3	District	5854	14.6	66.9	18.5
4	Bal. Lit.	19	5.2	57.9	36.9
4	District	5746	17.1	67.1	15.8

All enrolment grade levels show a lower percentage of students at the Balanced Literacy sites reading below grade level than was true for the district:

- 92.0 per cent of the students enrolled in grade 1 at the Balanced Literacy sites were reading at or above grade level as compared with 85 per cent of the students in the district.
- 88.0 per cent of the students enrolled in grade 2 at the Balanced Literacy sites were reading at or above grade level as compared with 84 per cent of the students in the district.
- 90.4 per cent of the students enrolled in grade 3 at the Balanced Literacy sites were reading at or above grade level as compared with 85.4 per cent of the students in the district.
- 94.8 per cent of the students enrolled in grade 4 at the Balanced Literacy sites were reading at or above grade level as compared with 82.9 per cent of the students in the district.

Table 3 provides information on the percentage distribution of the 1999 HLAT writing scores.

TABLE 3
COMPARISON OF WRITING RESULTS FOR
BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM TO THE DISTRICT

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF 1999 HLAT GRADE LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT WRITING SCORES BY ENROLMENT GRADE					
Grade	Group	N	Below Enrolment Grade	At Enrolment Grade	Above Enrolment Grade
1	Bal. Lit.	533	7.1	91.7	1.1
1	District	5554	16.0	83.2	0.8
2	Bal. Lit.	382	7.1	92.9	0.0
2	District	5857	10.0	88.8	1.2
4	Bal. Lit.	19	5.3	94.7	0.0
4	District	5712	15.8	83.3	0.9

All enrolment grade levels show a higher percentage of students at the Balanced Literacy sites writing at or above grade level than was true for the district:

- 92.8 per cent of the students enrolled in grade 1 at the Balanced Literacy sites were judged to be writing at or above grade level compared with 84 per cent of the districts students enrolled in grade 1.
- 92.9 per cent of the students enrolled in grade 2 at the Balanced Literacy sites were judged to be writing at or above grade level compared with 90 per cent of the districts students enrolled in grade 2.
- 94.7 per cent of the students enrolled in grade 4 at the Balanced Literacy sites were judged to be writing at or above grade level compared with 84.2 per cent of the districts students enrolled in grade 4. The program was being implemented at only one grade 4 site.

In addition to the quantitative information about student achievement, qualitative information about the effectiveness of the program was sought. Teachers (N= 41) who were in their first year of Balanced Literacy training in the 1998 - 1999 school year were asked to provide written comments on the impact of the program, at the end of the school year. Analysis of the comments revealed eight major positive results from being involved in the Balanced Literacy Program.

1. **Improvement in academics.** Teachers observed in their students improved reading and writing ability, as well as enhanced word attack and spelling skills. "The growth in the kids is really obvious."
2. **Strategy and skill transfer.** Teachers observed the students using the strategies they were taught and transferring the strategies to other work. As well the students were able to help each other by suggesting strategies to use. "The children have stronger strategies for figuring out new words and they use them."
3. **Motivation and confidence of the children.** Teachers observed in their students an increased enthusiasm for reading and writing. One teacher felt that the program empowered the students to "become independent learners in the structure provided."
4. **Accommodation of the range of learners.** Teachers felt that the program helped them meet the needs of all the children in their classrooms. "The multi-level learning allows all students to take an active part in learning."
5. **Increased teacher awareness and knowledge.** Teachers commented that the guided reading aspect of the program gave them a real sense of each child's reading level and as a result they could program more effectively for each child. One teacher said, "This is the best reading program I've ever used. Where was it 26 years ago?"
6. **Consistency with the Language Arts Program of Study.** Teachers felt that in using the Balanced Literacy approach they were addressing all aspects of the Program of Studies.
7. **Value of consultant support.** Teachers were very appreciative of the consultant support they received at the sessions and with the follow up visits. Some teachers felt that the consultant follow up was the greatest strength of the program.
8. **Value of core materials.** Teachers were pleased with the prescribed resources both for the teacher and the students. "The book selection is varied and motivates the students and excites me."

The principals of the eighteen schools participating in Balanced Literacy were interviewed by telephone in the fall of 1999. Their comments were also analyzed and six areas of positive impact were noted.

1. **Developing a school literacy community.** Many principals felt that the program offered an opportunity to give a school wide focus to literacy. "Teachers were more able to talk about kids' development. They use the same vocabulary."
2. **Continuity of instruction.** Principals observed a common understanding and language being used to discuss literacy. "When they transfer to another Balanced Literacy school the children can just carry on ...they feel comfortable."
3. **Multilevel instruction.** Principals felt that the program gave teachers effective strategies for dealing with the range of learners in the classroom. "The program reaches all kids. The teachers know what to do to reach the low ones and the high ones."
4. **Growth.** Some principals observed both student academic growth and teacher professional growth. "We've had wonderful academic results."
5. **Inservicing and teacher support.** One principal put it this way: "It's a great example of how to implement change effectively...through long term inservicing, coaching and modeling."
6. **Commitment.** Principals commented on the costs, both money and investment of teacher time. They felt the benefits to the students were worth the effort. One principal cautioned, "You need a lot of teacher commitment to make it work... but teachers are encouraged by the gains they see in kids."

Principals and teachers have found the results for the Balanced Literacy program encouraging.

- The preliminary data shows that the program is accomplishing its goal of increasing reading and writing achievement of primary aged students.
- The data and input from participants show that the Balanced Literacy program is beneficial for a wide range of student learners including those students at risk of being below grade level in reading and/or writing.

For the 1999 - 2000 school year forty district schools are involved in the Balanced Literacy program. As well, based on principal requests to expand the program into division II, a program for grades 4 - 6 was designed. The division II program was piloted in four schools last year and this year is operational at twelve schools. The reading and writing results of schools involved in Balanced Literacy will continue to be monitored.

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