

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

February 24, 2004

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: D.S. MacKenzie: An Environment for Success

ORIGINATOR: Bev Sawyer, Principal, D.S. MacKenzie School

RESOURCE

STAFF: Heather Agrell-Smith, Alyce Ayre, Bonnie Ewasko, Cal Jensen, Garry Pho

INFORMATION

D.S. MacKenzie School, located in south-west Edmonton, serves a diverse student population of 540 students in Grades 7-9. It is a district site for the Strategies Program, Behaviour and Learning Assistance, and English as a Second Language. The proportion of special needs students at the school is slightly above the district average for junior high schools.

Identification of our instructional focus began in spring 2001. During that school year, teachers engaged in extensive discussion of our achievement test results. Particular attention was given to steps that might lead to improvement. When we began pinpointing specific skills that would benefit all students, it quickly became evident that reading comprehension was the area that would be of most value. The following statement, developed during the 2001-2002 school year, expresses our focus:

The instructional focus at D.S. MacKenzie is a school-wide effort to improve students' reading comprehension, and therefore student achievement in all subjects. Teachers will identify best practices and will implement them in all classes. Additional support will be provided to selected students. Results will be measured through large-scale testing (CAT scores, HLATs, and Alberta Achievement tests) and in-school measures (skill checks and diagnostic materials).

Two needs were immediately apparent: we needed to develop a clearer understanding of how to improve students' reading comprehension, and we needed to determine a means of measuring progress. Several teachers registered for the series on improving reading comprehension for junior high school students offered by Consulting Services. As there was at least one teacher from each of the four academic areas, they were able to bring this information to all staff members. In subject teams, teachers discussed how best to proceed. Our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) decided that each of the four academic subject teams would select a strategy for before reading, during reading, and after reading. All teachers of that subject would use the selected strategy in their classes.

Meanwhile, our ILT discussed the type of measures that would be useful. Achievement test scores and HLATs were an obvious selection. However, these were external measures, and we wanted to establish internal targets and measures. After examining various possibilities, we decided to use the Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies (CARS) and Strategies to Achieve Reading Success (STARS) series, which provides lessons and assessments based on twelve reading strategies. Instruction is carried out during extended morning homeroom time. Since the strategies are consistent through the various levels, teachers can build on them year by year. As well, teachers use these strategies as part of their instruction in various subjects. The CARS (assessment) portion of the series is used to establish targets and review our progress. In addition, we have now used the Canadian Achievement Test Level 3 (CAT 3) measures twice, September 2002 and September 2003. This provides another internal measure of our students' progress in reading.

We have taken a variety of other steps. One Grade 7 Language Arts class has been designated for students identified by their Grade 6 teachers as needing additional support in reading. This class is smaller than others. As well, we have purchased "Academy of Reading" software, which is used by Strategies and ESL students, as well as other students not coded but also not reading at grade level. Teachers continue to attend inservices, to learn together, and to apply what they learn in their classes.

Both internal and external measures show that our students have made achievement gains over the past three years. These gains can be attributed in large part to an environment focused on student success, with specific attention to reading comprehension. We recognize that effective implementation of an instructional focus requires attention to a number of other matters. At D.S. MacKenzie, implementation of our reading focus is built on a base of staff collaboration and development of positive attitudes for learning.

The work of our Grade Co-ordinators, a counseling type of position whose responsibilities are to "predict, prevent and repair" various student difficulties, has been essential. Establishment of an Honours Program for high-achieving students has also been significant. As well, we have agreed as a staff on certain pro-active steps – including a staff-developed character education program - that we believe helps establish a positive school climate so that students are prepared to learn. The totality of all these efforts, carried out by a strong and highly skilled staff are, we believe, key to establishing our environment for success and to achievement of superb results from all students.

BS/rl