

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

January 28, 2003

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Dickinsfield, Balwin, Highlands - The "Three Amigos" Instructional Focus Project

ORIGINATOR: Philip Grehan, Principal, Dickinsfield School

RESOURCE: Joanne Aldridge, Jerry Bayly, Darlene Jones

STAFF:

INFORMATION

**Background Information:**

The "Three Amigos" Project is a collaborative, professional development undertaking involving Balwin, Dickinsfield and Highlands Junior High Schools. The intention of the project is twofold. First, it is to provide a structured, engaging, effective and efficient professional development plan that supports the district's instructional focus work. Second, and as a direct result of the first, it is to improve student reading comprehension and overall achievement at the three schools.

Balwin, Dickinsfield and Highlands Junior High Schools share many similarities:

- Location – Northeast Edmonton
- Enrollment – between 281-350 students
- Staff size and make up – small, relatively new teachers
- Special needs programs – wide variety offered, at capacity in programs
- Similar achievement test results
- AISI math projects
- Identified instructional focus on reading comprehension

Balwin Junior High School serves 350 students and is a district site for Ukrainian Bilingual, Opportunity, Basic Literacy, and Interactions Programs. It also houses the Rites of Passage program at the Prince Rupert site. Dickinsfield Junior High School serves 281 students and is a district site for Learning Strategies and French Immersion. Highlands Junior High School serves 290 students and is a district site for Opportunity, Basic Literacy and Behaviour Assistance Programs.

The "Three Amigos" Project is truly unique in our district. Since the fall of 2002, Balwin, Dickinsfield and Highlands schools ("The Three Amigos") have been involved in a collaborative, structured professional development plan. The three schools have individual Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) meetings and general staff meetings at their own schools. The three schools then come together for an Instructional Focus Workshop on the

second Thursday and for Subject Area Meetings on the fourth Thursday of each month. In August the three schools also participated in a common professional development day on the topics of “Peer Observations” and “Looking at Student Work.” In this way, staff members become engaged in the chosen instructional focus on reading comprehension while making valuable connections with other professionals.

For the instructional focus workshops, the three staffs have decided to concentrate on a few specific aspects of reading comprehension: activating prior knowledge, dealing with vocabulary, finding the main idea, and finding supporting details. Language Arts consultant, Irene Heffel, in-services the group of 60+ teachers from the three staffs on a monthly basis, providing instruction and guided practice with several best practices relating to various reading comprehension strands. Teachers then choose and implement reading comprehension strategies, blending them into the regular curriculum they teach. Finally, they share their feedback during round table discussions at the next month’s reading comprehension workshop.

During subject area meetings, teachers are linked with other teachers who teach the same subjects/programs from the three schools. These meetings have proven to be extremely beneficial in providing structured, collaborative time for teachers who previously had a sense of isolation within their small schools and small staffs. During these meetings, teachers follow a protocol for looking at student work with the intent of informing practice to best meet the reading needs of students. There is also set time for general discussions within each department.

The overall goal of the “Three Amigos” project is to achieve superb results from students through superb teaching from staff. The teachers from the “Three Amigos” schools are significantly more effective than they were before we began this process. Although it is somewhat premature to look for enduring student results, the day to day results in the classroom show that student learning has improved, simply because students are being taught by people who are becoming experts in teaching reading comprehension. *All* teachers, not just language arts teachers, are becoming teachers of reading. Research has shown (Bloom, 1984) that one of the six most important variables that can affect student achievement is improved reading/study skills. An instructional focus on reading comprehension is proving to be a key factor in supporting students to achieve superb results. At Balwin, Dickinsfield and Highlands, we are committed to promoting better learning and achieving superb results through the combined efforts of the professionals involved in the “Three Amigos” Project.

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