

## EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

June 13, 2006

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Schmidt, Acting Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Vernon Barford School – Focus on Student Achievement

ORIGINATOR: S. Lynch, Principal, Vernon Barford School

RESOURCE  
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### INFORMATION

Vernon Barford is a junior high school located in southwest Edmonton. Its current enrollment is just over 800 students. It is a district site for English as a second language, academic challenge and enrichment, and literacy programming.

In the spring of 2001, Vernon Barford staff, after reviewing and analyzing HLATs, PATs, and school-generated results, made the decision to select “Higher Level Thinking Skills” as an instructional focus. Students already had a strong grasp on reading, writing and math skills and there was a history of high achievement. It became clear from the analysis that students were quick to acquire “knowledge” and demonstrated good “comprehension” but demonstrated difficulty with “application” of newly learned information. There was also a concern of students’ ability to transfer information from one subject area to another. Staff underwent professional development to better understand and use Bloom’s Taxonomy (a system for categorizing the level of abstraction of a question) as a basis for creating and asking better questions to help elevate student achievement. The next step was to expand the students’ thinking skills to include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, resulting in the following Instructional Focus Statement:

At Vernon Barford School all students will show measurable growth in their ability to use higher level thinking skills. Indicators include provincial achievement test and school-based assessments.

To support classroom teachers and help guide the implementation of the instructional focus, an instructional leadership team (ILT) consisting of seven lead teachers and the principal, was formed. This group meets formally once per month and in turn ILT members organize and chair meetings with their respective teams.

Between 2001 and 2005 student achievement showed continuous growth as measured by Provincial Achievement Tests, especially at the standard of excellence. Students achieving at the acceptable standard has increased by an average of 6% (in all subjects at least 90% of the students achieved at or above this level); standard of excellence by 16% (in all subjects at least 40% of the students achieved at or above this level).

During the past two years staff have participated in several professional development sessions to deepen understanding critical thinking and its role in increasing student achievement. Current best practices include: distinguishing between facts and opinions; challenging the reliability of a claim; thinking critically about what you read; identifying causes and effects; considering other points of view; asking good questions; and creative problem solving.

This year, the latest staff initiative is the promotion and encouragement of creativity, risk-taking and perseverance. Current research by Yong Zhao (2006) indicates that creativity may be the driving force behind an effective education system. He states that creativity cannot be directly taught, but it can certainly be encouraged. His findings indicate that by enriching the educational environment and school experience, students will remain interested in school, excited about learning and are more likely to complete high school. By giving the students at Vernon Barford the opportunity to choose project types, methods of assessment and modes of presentation, students are experiencing continued success.

Assessment for learning professional development has taught the staff that by encouraging student involvement in assessment activities they are more likely to take risks with their learning. Vernon Barford students now know that early assessment is solely to guide them in their learning, not for summative purposes.

The classrooms at Vernon Barford School provide a safe environment where students are encouraged to venture into the unpredictable. The risk-taking student is one who is willing to press past what is known ... into the unknown. At Vernon Barford they define thoughtful risk-taking as a leap of faith that allows the student to go beyond self-imposed expectations. It may be a creative or emotional choice, a leadership decision, or a physical challenge by which the very action itself, rather than the result, creates an opportunity for personal growth.

Through ongoing, job embedded, professional development, the staff at Vernon Barford will continue to build their expertise in effective instructional strategies with the goal of achieving Superb Results from all Students.