

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

March 25, 2003

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Harry Ainlay Instructional Focus: Reading Comprehension

ORIGINATOR: C. McCabe, Principal, Harry Ainlay High School

RESOURCE
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INFORMATION

In depth work on developing collaborative teams and establishing a school-wide instructional focus began at Harry Ainlay in the fall of 2001. During the previous school year and throughout the fall we had been examining student achievement results to determine areas of strength and weakness. Through collaborative discussions in all departments and with the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) it had become evident that although our results were very good, there were areas for improvement. Writing skills emerged as a measurable strength across all subject areas but it became clear that we needed to focus additional efforts on students who were not meeting the acceptable standards and not successfully completing courses. A number of staff activities focused on identifying reasons for poor student performance. Our November 2001 professional development day was devoted to identifying an instructional focus that would benefit all students. Out of these activities emerged our focus:

“The Instructional Focus for Harry Ainlay High School is growth in reading comprehension in all curricular areas. This focus will be accomplished by incorporating research-based instructional strategies in all courses thus offering students new tools and greater opportunities to build on their reading comprehension foundations. A continued emphasis on character traits of respect, responsibility, honesty, forgiveness, fairness and integrity will guide and support our Instructional Focus.

The progress/success of our Instructional Focus will be measured by interim internal assessments as well as by external diploma examinations and district survey results. Evaluation of results and reflective practice will allow for modification of strategies in the implementation of the Instructional Focus.”

Gaining the internal expertise to address reading comprehension across the curriculum was our next challenge. Through research, professional development, and inservices provided by district consulting services our Instructional Leadership Team began to gain a deeper understanding of what makes a good reader. Further, strategies were identified for improving every student’s reading skills. Department meetings and staff meetings became opportunities for the ILT to share this knowledge and for staff to recognize the best practices that were already in place in their classrooms. New practices were also presented.

Professional development days, collaboration time and staff meeting time in the 2002–03 school year have been directed at providing multiple opportunities for staff to learn about and experiment with a wide range of reading strategies. Vocabulary development, read alouds, graphic organizers, visual representation, and interactive notes are but a few of the many strategies that are being employed by teachers in their classrooms. Opportunities to observe fellow staff members as they teach, cross-curricular discussions about what constitutes a good assignment and protocols for sharing good assignments have all contributed to a sense of collegiality and shared vision.

Students have also become more aware of the importance of developing good reading habits in their learning process. As teachers consciously focus on the skills required to be a good reader, students are made more aware of the processes they employ. They are then able to plan their learning and studying in more effective ways. Raising student and parent awareness of the essential role of reading in the student's daily life is currently one of our goals. Staff, parent and student knowledge of reading strategies is increasing as a result of changing practice and the realignment of resources.

For a school of our size (2150 students and over 100 staff) the most powerful dimension of this work has been the growth of our professional learning community where focused discussions on teaching and learning take place on a more regular basis in both formal and informal settings. The use of a variety of techniques to provide opportunities for sharing and collaboration has opened new avenues in professional dialogue. One of the challenges of this work is to continue to provide appropriate venues for this collegiality to grow.

Another major benefit of the focus on teaching and learning is the development of peer leadership. In addition to our ILT of 20 members, a restructured Professional Development Committee shares the responsibility for formal staff training. Consisting of members from all departments this committee sets the agenda and plans activities for staff meetings and PD days. These staff members support the ILT in identifying school wide best practices and in determining future directions.

As an administrative team, the opportunity to spend a significant part of our time in classrooms has greatly added to our understanding of the day-to-day work being done with students. We are constantly exposed to good teaching and learning and evidence of the use of best practices is clear and pervasive in all settings. Realignment of our priorities has been a critical factor in supporting the work in classrooms but continues to be a challenge. The sense of team and the open discussions that have resulted from increased involvement on a daily basis make the effort worthwhile.

What results have we seen that this work is paying benefits? Initial analysis of first term results shows that more students in all course levels are successfully completing courses. Our results on the January diploma exams and teacher awarded marks for Applied Math 30, English 33, Science 30 and Social Studies 33 have shown significant improvements. Providing support to students reading below grade level and employing teaching strategies for successful reading has greatly helped our students-at-risk. We know that our retention rates for all students have improved and that attendance statistics are improving.

Our interim measure based on the Gates McGinity Reading Comprehension examination showed no significant change between November and February administrations. This could

be attributed to a number of causes and we are not discouraged by this result. Finding appropriate interim measures at the High School level remains one of the greatest challenges of this work. Meaningful assessment and measurement are not simple tasks. It is important to look at a broad base of results to measure our successes but it may not be possible to show growth or improvement with a single measure. It may take time to provide clear evidence of our successes.

The work we have done in the past eighteen months has moved us towards a better understanding of ourselves as teachers and learners. It has also highlighted the vital relationships we have with each other and with our students in improving reading comprehension. We are confident this work will lead to superb results for all students.

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