

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

November 29, 2005

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Schmidt, Acting Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Earl Buxton – Focus on Writing

ORIGINATOR: M. Yurick, Principal, Earl Buxton School

RESOURCE

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INFORMATION

In spring of 2001, after reviewing data from the Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) the staff at Earl Buxton School made the decision to select “Problem Solving in Mathematics” as an Instructional Focus. Working with a district math consultant, the school performed an audit of the nine “best practices” in math instruction, and selected four of the nine for further study and in-service. Under the leadership of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and district consultants, professional development activities included information sessions, modeled instruction, as well as staff working in triads for collaborative planning, classroom intervisitations and debriefing sessions facilitated by one of the district consultants. Between 2001 and 2004, the percentage of our students achieving at the standard of excellence on the grade three and six PATs increased in each of the three years.

In the fall of 2004 a review of the PAT results and the district Highest Level of Achievement Test (HLAT) results provided the school with some interesting data. While students were generally performing well in all areas assessed, staff found a significant number of students performing “just below” the standard of excellence in writing as measured by the instruments referenced above. Also, “students-at-risk” were experiencing difficulties with writing, performing “just below” the acceptable standard on the PAT, or the adequate level as measured by the HLATs. As a result in September of 2004 staff embarked on a new journey relative to the Focus work. The goal was to increase the depth, breadth and complexity of student writing. With that in mind, staff developed the following instructional focus statement:

“At Earl Buxton School we are focusing upon written communication. The growth of our students in increasing the breadth, depth, and complexity of their writing will be measured by teacher assessment, observation and judgment, and the utilization of external data such as the district Highest Level of Achievement tests and the Provincial Achievement Tests.”

The ILT immediately sought the advice of a district language arts consultant to support implementation of a new Focus. A school wide professional development plan that encompassed professional development days and featured job embedded sessions at the school, as well as teacher collaboration, was formulated.

Staff selected the use of graphic organizers and making connections using literature as initial, research based best practices. In order to make the task more manageable, staff also decided to focus on the writing of “leads”. Under the leadership of the teachers, students quickly learned the characteristics of a “good lead” and strategies to increase the complexity of their writing. They began to be more consistent in their ability and willingness to identify and use “million dollar words” to capture the reader’s interest.

Analysis of data this fall indicates gains have been made in writing in both Division I and Division II as measured by the district writing HLATs. Grade six students demonstrated a gain of 9% in meeting the standard of excellence on the English Language Arts PAT. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of results found that students improved in the content and organization of their writing, with the greatest gains being made in the functional writing component of the test.

Job embedded professional development to further support the focus on writing has continued this year. Staff have attended two district level professional development sessions: Assessment for Learning in September and a Writing Professional Development day in October. As a follow up to these sessions, a consultant worked with staff on strategies to help students understand “what counts” in writing through classroom based development of writing rubrics, as well as strategies that will help staff improve students’ use of vocabulary.

The work with trio schools has provided another opportunity for professional development. The ILT teams from the three schools met in August to plan the year. Subsequently, members of the ILT and the Instructional Walk-through (IWT) teams have met on separate occasions to continue the planning process. In late September, Earl Buxton hosted the other two schools for an after school collaboration session and have also hosted the first IWT. Based on the feedback from the IWT the next steps will be to ensure change in writing practices for all curricular areas. Additionally, plans are in place for two more collaboration sessions between the schools which will focus on Assessment for Learning.

In closing, staff at Earl Buxton are pleased with the collaboration and professional development activities to support the focus on writing. Staff are looking forward to increased success as the journey to obtain superb results from all students continues.

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