



Watson Lake Secondary School Review Report April 2015

Watson Lake Secondary School Review April 2015

School Principal: Jean McLean

Date of Review: March 31, April 1-2, 2015

School Review Team:

Simon Blakesley, Director, Student Achievement
Debbie Gohl, Secondary Curriculum Consultant
Nicole Morgan, Director, Learning Support Services
Souhail Soujah, A/principal, Porter Creek Secondary School
Sharon Shadow, First Nations Education Consultant
Tammy Stoneman, Principal, Teslin School

Meetings with the School included:

Students
Teachers
School Administration
School Council

School Context

Watson Lake's contemporary role as a commercial, transportation and government services centre for the nearby communities of Lower Post, BC and Upper Liard has deep historical roots. The lake was known as T'etseluge Mun, or White Fish Lake, and was situated close to the two main transportation routes. An extensive trail system used by the Kaska passed close to the lake and provided trade, cultural, commercial, political and military linkages and the Liard River was used as an alternate transportation route across a vast northern area. Watson Lake is a town of approximately 1,000 people, about 400 of whom are Kaska.

The student population at Watson Lake Secondary School (WLSS) has shown a small but steady increase over the past three years. As of February 2015 there are 89 students registered. 77% are First Nation. Since 2001 the school has had 9 different principals and numerous staff changes. In the past three years staff turnover has diminished and the current principal, being a Watson Lake resident, has demonstrated a long term commitment to the development of Watson Lake Secondary School and the community.

The vision of WLSS is dedication to academic and social success for our learners and the definition of success will be unique for each student.

Values:

- Creating a healthy, safe, supportive environment for all learners
- Developing a strong Kaska language and cultural base
- Fostering respect for others and the development of productive citizens

- Recognizing and accepting personal and cultural differences
- Developing lifelong learners

In order to realize this vision, WLSS has instituted a blended learning model at the high school level since the previous review- an initiative which is showing promise as a model that helps students achieve academic and personal success.

WLS Enrolment History for the school years 2014/2015, 2013/2014 & 2012/2013:

Grade	2012/2013		2013/2014		2014/2015		Grade
	Sep-12	May-13	Sep-13	May-14	Sep-14	Feb-15	
8	16	14	10	10	28	28	8
9	17	17	11	10	11	11	9
10	35	25	29	23	25	25	10
11	10	9	16	11	12	8	11
12	7	5	10	19	12	17	12
Total	85	70	76	73	88	89	

WLSS BC Provincial Exam Pass Percentage Rate 2014/14, 2012/13

Grade	BCP Exam	WLS School 2013/2014		WLS School 2012/2013	
		Pass%		Pass%	
10	English 10	100%↑		75%	
10	Apprenticeship Math 10	75%↑		20%	
10	Foundations of Math 10	50%↑		22%	
10	Science 10	75%↑		68%	
11	Social Studies 11	55%↓		71%	
12	Communications 12	50%≠		50%	
12	English 12	33%↓		44%	

Grade	Course	WLS School 2013/2014		WLS School 2012/2013	
		Final mark average		Final mark average	
10	English 10	74.2%↑		71.2%	
10	Apprenticeship Math 10	67.4%↑		36%	
10	Foundations of Math 10	59.6%↑		57.4%	
10	Science 10	61.4%↑		58.6%	
11	Social Studies 11	64.2%↓		72.6%	
12	Communications 12	64.2%↑		60.6%	
12	English 12	61.2%↓		66.8%	

Note: This data needs to be considered understanding the small student numbers and annual change of cohort

Norms and Culture:

Characteristics:

Continuously improving schools are socially and culturally inclusive with high expectations for each learner. A focus on ensuring continuous improvement is evident.

Observations of the Team:

- The team observed a mutually supportive relationship between staff members and school administration at WLSS; staff also work to maintain positive relationships with students. There appears a willingness to work together in the best interests of students, ensuring that the conditions for learning are solidly in place
- The school is warm, open, and welcoming. The front foyer has been remodelled to include meeting and work spaces for students that create a positive atmosphere from the moment one enters the school, and the implied pride of the school can clearly be felt. For example, a “100% Board” is posted in the front area of the school to celebrate student achievement
- The team heard of what could be described as a “wrap-around” approach for providing support to students. Community agencies such as counselling services and public health have accessible, yet private offices through which students can access supports
- Many of the students shared with the team that they felt their teachers care about them, and that individual differences are respected and supported. While not all students indicated having a “go-to” adult at the school, the large majority feel respected and heard by their teachers. Students feel that they have safe spaces to go when needed
- Students are welcomed where they are at: The team heard the expression “We feed them, we love them, we teach them” used multiple times during the review when staff were asked to describe their work with students
- The introduction of the Moodle platform has assisted with the implementation of a blended learning approach, which enables the school to individualize instruction to meet students where they are at. A further benefit has been the ability at WLSS to offer a wider range of courses to students than otherwise would have been available. This has brought about a cultural change at the school that has fostered increased engagement and improved behaviour
- Related to the above, the team heard from staff that students have been highly respectful of their laptops and that there has not been one issue as a result of misuse or abuse of computer hardware

- The team heard from staff members that there is now a desire to focus on academics and a greater willingness to explore practices that may support greater academic achievement. For example, the implementation of Moodle has led to conversations regarding the extent to which teachers need to provide instruction and the degree to which students should be self-directed in their learning

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue to strengthen the positive work already begun to develop strong relationships with students, understanding that not all students at WLSS currently feel they have a go-to adult with whom they can connect
- Related to the above, continue the work already begun to create more of a climate of individualized and differentiated approaches to learning and improved engagement with the support of the Department of Education
- While the Moodle platform has opened many doors, ensure that student self-directed learning through Moodle does not result in some students on their own. A balanced blended model of self-directed and teacher-led instruction needs to be supported and maintained
- Given the focus to shift the learning culture at WLSS, continue to work to foster a culture of distributed leadership in order to capitalize on the many strengths of staff and share the work in order to avoid implementation fatigue and/or burnout

School and Community

Characteristics: In continuously improving schools build a shared commitment to success for each learner. The school collaborates with parents, students, school council, First Nations and community to support student learning. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture and the school communicates about progress and challenges in multiple ways.

Observations of the Team:

- The team heard that a strong interagency approach comprised of a number of community agencies works well with the principal and staff in order to support students. The principal liaises with a wide-range of community allies on a regular basis
- Elders are invited and welcomed into the school as a means of bridging Liard First Nations students with their community and culture, and to support all students in their learning at WLSS

- Food is effectively used to help create and maintain community- a strong cafeteria program helps to support student nutrition through serving healthy meals, though not all students are on-board with the vegans option currently provided
- WLS students participate in and enjoy REM as a means to earn credits and to build student-community both within WLSS and between participating schools. This has been a very positive initiative, and WLSS is hosting the next REM in Spring 2015
- The team heard from school administration, teachers, and school council that, given the diverse needs of the community, multiple communication streams (e.g. emails, paper newsletters, website development) would be helpful to communicate to parents how students were progressing in a timely manner, share the positive work that was happening at the school, and serve to inform the community regarding the blended learning approach
- Affirming the above, School Council shared their view that there could be improved communication with parents regarding student progress and supporting students in meeting deadlines. This would also be an opportunity to share positive results and successes over time, further increasing parents' comfort level with Moodle
- Many of the initiatives and work currently underway were developed, in part, as a result of an education summit organized in 2012. The team felt that it now may be time to organize another summit with a different focus than the previous event

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Identify and implement a number of communication channels that serve to communicate student progress and success, the broader work of the school, and help support the public relations work with the community
- Consider the development of a future educational summit on the areas identified in the previous section: sharing the successes of WLSS to date, developing a greater focus on literacy, and reconnecting with non-attending students and those who have extensive absences
- Continue to support good nutrition with healthy choices that students enjoy eating by providing breakfast and lunches to students
- Continue to promote positive public relations with Liard First Nation and all stakeholders, sharing the good news and telling the story of the progress that WLSS is making

- Continue the use of collaborative time twice per month as a means of supporting staff members to work and plan together, and continue to support parents learning Moodle in order that they can assist their child(ren)

School Organization

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools organize structures, actions, and interventions to ensure success for each learner. Work in the school is coherent and aligned to focus on improvement. Actions and interventions include effectively differentiating resources, time and professional development to get results. The Department supports the school and makes connections across the Territory to build capacity.

Observations of the Team:

- Emerging from the previous review, the team commends WLSS staff in the way that they have reorganized, trained, and adapted their practice to institute a Blended Learning pedagogical model over the past 18 months at the high school level. The team heard that the majority of students appreciate this approach and find it helps them to achieve success at school
- Computer access has been well-monitored and controlled, but not in a way that reduces student access to laptops. For example, the team heard that students who are single parents can sign out computers after regular school hours in order to keep up with their studies and get their work done
- The team also heard from students that, while they appreciate the flexibility of blended learning, clearer timelines/deadlines in regards to when work needs to be completed would help motivate them complete assignments in a timely manner. The team noted that enrolment has increased from 64 to 109 students in the past three years
- Diverse opportunities are available to most students based on timetabling and staff expertise at WLSS. Drama, woodworking, construction, music, and metalwork are examples of some of the courses available to students. A homework club also provides the opportunity for additional academic support
- Breakfast and lunch programs have been instituted to ensure that students are fed and ready to learn each day. The school has a well-organized, clean, and bright cafeteria area that students enjoy
- The team heard of the work that has taken place to develop better transitioning of students from Johnson Elementary School (JES) to the high school environment
- The school has a flexible timetable, with “Flex Fridays” that allow students to focus on particular school subjects/projects requiring further time and support. Students have

choice with regards to signing up to the type of activity they would like to engage in on these days

- Related to timetabling, students are able to access the trades trailer in order to prepare for pre-apprentice courses
- Staff meetings have been split between Junior High and Senior High in order to provide the opportunity to focus on grade division-specific topics
- The team observed that a consistent daily timetable that is predictable for grade 8 and 9 students is being utilized, and that a Junior High model is being piloted this year. While the team received an extensive presentation on this initiative, the team was unsure of the project-based nature of this approach and of the specific performance standards, literacy strategies, and assessment quick scales employed at this level
- When asked their thoughts on the junior high approach taken this year, the grade 8 students with whom the team met were unanimous in their dislike for the approach. From their perspective, they were unaware that this approach was going to be initiated beforehand. Students were unclear as to why this approach was taken when asked by team members, and felt that the rationale was not explained to them
- Related to the above, the grade 8 students interviewed by the team felt that their current timetable limited them from taking experiential and hands-on activities that they are interested in, such as cooking and industrial education. These students also felt that PE classes were limited and somewhat repetitive
- School Council felt that there was a decrease in the physical literacy of students, and that more work could be done to help students to learn a range of sports at school, given that they may not learn them elsewhere

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Communicate decisions with students to ensure they are clear as to why programming changes and new directions are being taken prior to their initiation in order to assist with “buy-in”, and whenever possible involve students in the decision-making process.
- Give greater attention to the current Junior High model, seeking ways to make the program more project-based and experiential for students, with a range of clear strategies for literacy development. The strengthened expertise of what project-based learning is may help to increase student engagement and reduce absenteeism

- Continue the work to support and refine the use of Moodle to ensure a true blended model is delivered to students, reinforcing timelines/deadlines with students who need them in order to be successful
- Work to develop a comprehensive PE plan for the school, with a particular emphasis on PE at the grade 8 and 9 levels

School Processes and Progress

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools take responsibility for improving outcomes for students. They use evidence to guide decisions and actions and have processes in place to collectively monitor progress and make adjustments in key areas of their work. They demonstrate improvement over time – for individual students, groups of students, and the school.

Observations of the Team:

- The review team was very impressed at the way the school has embraced and responded to the review recommendations and outcomes of the community education summit held in 2012. Much of the school's progress can be tied back to these events and the response by the school to them
- The team appreciates the efforts of the school staff to visually display student progress and achievement in the blended learning model. In senior high classrooms and in the staff room, large charts are displayed, indicating levels of student progress.
- The team was unclear with respect to how the Pyramid of Intervention was used to help identify student learning needs and direct resources accordingly to meet those needs. The deployment of Learning Assistance along with the implementation of a clear literacy strategy were also areas where the team felt there needed to be greater emphasis and clarity
- School Council shared their observation that there has been improved student attendance, improved relationships between the two community schools, and with elders, First Nations community members and other stakeholder organizations over the past three years
- School Council also shared with the team that they would like to play a greater role in the school growth process and have a seat on the school growth planning team

Recommendations for moving forward:

- With support from the Department of Education, develop a school-wide literacy strategy that supports all levels of readers across grades with proven literacy-development approaches
- With support from the Department of Education, ensure that all staff know the Pyramid of Intervention framework as a means of understanding students better and allocating effective support and resources to help meet their needs
- Identify focused, meaningful ways of gathering on-going data and evidence of student success to help guide decisions. This could include educational results data from running records, monthly writing samples as well as perception surveys (such as “Tell Them From Me”) to get a clear snapshot of areas of success and future work
- Consider holding another Education Summit (as in 2012) as a means of bringing community partners and allies together to discuss education at Watson Lake Secondary School. For a future summit topics could include: a presentation of where WLSS has come since the last summit, a focus on attendance specific to those students who have disengaged from the system, and a focus on literacy
- Extend an invitation to School Council to join the School Growth Planning Team in order that Council can share their perspectives and play a role in both short and longer-term planning at WLSS

In conclusion

The team wishes to acknowledge and commend the staff, students, and community allies who have come together in support of the work being done currently at WLSS. While it may still be considered early in the change process, understanding that lasting educational change takes time and dedication, the team was very impressed by the growth that has been nurtured at WLSS as a result of the solid commitment and transformative leadership practices. The team also acknowledges the challenges that the current 3rd party management poses to Liard First Nation’s linkage to the school and engagement through the CELC coordinator position. From the calm, welcoming atmosphere, the focus on learning, the willingness to take risks and make changes- all in the desire to make the school a better place of learning for students- the team feels that WLSS is very well-positioned to continue to grow the initiatives already begun.

Practices to share:

- The introduction of Moodle as the platform that supports blended learning at WLSS
- The wrap-around approach of a wide range of care that is available for students needing support
- The display of student progress data around the school
- The creation of a welcoming student lounge area at the front entrance, and other quiet areas around the school

Recommendations for the Department

- Support WLSS with resources and training to develop a comprehensive school-wide literacy strategy
- Support WLSS with resources and training in order to better utilize the Pyramid of Intervention model to support student needs
- Support WLSS with developing expertise in Project-based learning
- Support WLSS with developing expertise in effective blended learning instructional models-with the emphasis on what teachers can do when students are not on the computer