



Watson Lake Secondary School Review Report

Watson Lake Secondary School

School Principal: Jean McClean

Date of Review: May 1 -3 2012

School Review Team:

- Gayle Bedard, Director First Nations Programs and Partnerships
- Gloria Coxford, Principal Grey Mountain Primary School
- Peter Gubbe, Principal Selkirk Elementary School
- Roberta Hager, School council Chair and Director of Education Natcho Nyak Dunn
- Robin Lord, Education Coordinator Carcross Tagish First Nation
- Penny Prysruk, Superintendent, Area 2
- Greg Storey, Superintendent, Area 3
- Judy Arnold, Director, DOE

Meetings with the School included:

- Staff
- Meeting with students
- Meeting with Liard First Nation Chief and Council (LFN)
- Meeting with School Council representatives and parents
- Classroom visits

School Context

Watson Lake's contemporary role as commercial, transportation and government services centre for the nearby communities of Lower Post, BC and Upper 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 history of schooling in Watson Lake began with the Lower Post Residential school that operated from 1940 - 1975 for status First Nations. Children of non-First Nations employees of the ministry of transportation went to Watson Lake Secondary which was located at the Watson Lake airport. In 1965, St. Ann's Catholic School was built in Watson Lake, providing education to Catholics and First Nations people, which did not serve to unify the community. In 1970, St. Ann's Catholic School and the Watson Lake High School became one school, providing an elementary and high school. The new school was built in 1990.

The student population and the economy in Watson Lake have been in decline for a number of years. Currently in a student population of about 90 students, 75% are Kaska. Of significant importance to the context of the school and its work to support student learning is the fact that since 2001, the school has had 9 different principals, and numerous staff changes. These changes have made it difficult to establish cohesion among staff and consistency of approaches and directions to support learning.

Norms and Culture:

Characteristics:

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

Observations of the Team:

- Watson Lake Secondary School has a great facility with the capacity to support the development of students in academics, the arts, and applied skills.
- In relation a welcoming approach, students, staff, and School Council commented that although there is a long way to go, there has been a significant improvement this year. The success of the food for learning program that provides breakfast and lunch for students was mentioned often;
 - However, on entering the school, little is visually inviting for students and community or reflective of the culture of the school and community. The main foyer, library, and hallways would be good places to display more First Nations art and student work.
- Staff, School Council, parents, the Liard First Nation (LFN) and students were concerned about the lack of success of many of the learners. Everyone wants high expectations at the school and to do what is best for each student but from the perspective of the Team, are not sure how to move beyond the current, sometimes adversarial, situation.
- The Team noted that that the principal, teachers, educational assistants, and custodians care about the health, well-being and the futures of the students. However, there is a need for unity among the staff in relation to developing a shared direction based on current educational research and consistent approaches to behavioural expectations and instructional practice in order to address the wide variety of skills that students bring to the school;
- Some students expressed frustration at the fact that with so many student absences, teachers do not cover the curriculum or provide challenging activities for those who do attend or are capable students,
 - Students also commented on bullying and racism at the school;

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Work with students, staff, and community to use art work, murals and student work to have the front foyer and the halls be more inviting for students, staff and community,
 - This may include identifying conversation areas for students and community;
- To create the conditions for learning needed for all students, work with the superintendent and other Department staff in the fall to bring the staff together to first identify the educational levels and needs of the students and then clarify behavioural expectations and the instructional practices to support the learners,
 - This includes:
 - A more individualized and/or differentiated approach to learning,
 - A restorative approach to behavioural issues,
 - A consideration of ways technology or experiential education can address grade level expectations and engage students,
 - Ongoing, well organized support from the Department;
- With Department assistance work with staff, students, School Council and LFN in the fall to develop a school growth plan for 2012-2013 that begins to give direction to the

academic and behavioural directions noted above as well as identify strategies to enhance cultural sensitivity and address bullying issues.

- Work with the Department, the First Nation Programs and Partnerships Unit and LFN to:
 - Integrate First Nations culture and language across the curriculum especially English and mathematics,
 - Make use of local resources including Elders and community members to engage students.

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 current principal makes use of newsletters, phone calls and letters home to parents, keeping the community informed and connecting with LFN. The School Council was very positive about this work and anxious about how things will be sustained during the principal's leave in semester 1 of 2012-2013;
- School Council, parents and LFN Chief and Council and several staff acknowledged the value of working collaboratively but expressed concern about the current inability of the partner groups to work productively together,
 - Chief Liard Macmillan strongly suggested that the groups need to move beyond blame and be brought together to find ways at the school, in the community and with other agencies to address the needs of the students.
 - To begin this process Chief Macmillan suggested a community summit or gathering in the fall where issues can be discussed without pointing fingers and strategies identified that will help students be more successful;
- The Team observed and some staff at the school commented that staff do not yet function as a cohesive team;
- The Team noted that students would like to have their voice heard more often;
- Chief and Council expressed concern about the high needs of some of the students including those requiring special education support, the number of students in the judicial system, the number of teen pregnancies and the need for counselling and an interagency approach to helping students be more successful,
 - It was noted that staff at the school may need professional development and interagency support to work with the most vulnerable students and engage the community;
- It was clear to the Team that a communications strategy needs to be in place so that parents, School Council, LFN Chief and Council and community better understand the processes used and strategies in place to support both vulnerable and capable learners;
 - Some staff and the School Council commented that they feel there is a lack of support from the Department in relation to resolving issues and addressing the needs of students.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Use the work to develop the directions and growth plan for 2012- 2013 as an opportunity discussed to build a cohesive team approach among the staff at the school;
- With representation from all partner groups, collaborate with senior Department staff to:
 - Design and organize a facilitated summit or gathering for the spring of 2013 to bring senior education officials, staff, students, School Council, parents, LFN and community agencies together to:
 - Establish positive student focused working relationships among all partners,

- Create processes for addressing ongoing concerns,
 - Begin to collectively address social, emotional, academic and cultural issues.
 - Build understanding in the community of how the school supports all learners and the meaning of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and the process,
- Ensure that the voices of the students are heard through a student council or group discussions as directions and actions are developed;
- Work with the Department to:
 - Develop an interagency approach to supporting students,
 - Support the staff in dealing with the social emotional issues that come to the school,
 - Explore the implementation of an alternate program and a teen parent centre at the school;
- As part of the 2012-2013 school growth process create a communications plan that keeps students and parents informed about the work of the school, plans for the future and progress made.

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:

- There is a great breakfast and lunch program in place for the students. There is also a music program as well as an after school homework club. School supplies, gym items and after school tutoring are provided for the students. Counselling services are available in partnership with Many Rivers;
- There are some sports opportunities available, however, students were eager to engage in more activities and build school spirit;
- School Council and some staff noted improvements in the Kaska language programs at both schools;
- The high rate of student absence at the school affects the ability of staff in a traditional school setting with a traditional timetable to cover curricula,
- School Council expressed concern that the Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOs) are not all addressed in some courses;
- Students commented that they would like to see more 'hands on' activities in the class and a formal art program,
 - The building has many classrooms that are not utilized and a nice amphitheatre. There is potential for staff to creatively use space and engage community members who may be certified in cosmetology, a trade, carpentry, or the arts to support engagement and learning,
 - This kind of community engagement may entice students to come back to school;
- Some staff have begun to use the BC Performance standards, co-constructed rubrics and student self-assessment to help students understand expectations and see the next steps in their learning journey;
 - It was evident that using formative assessment to guide classroom practice was in the early stages,
 - An understanding of the actual academic strengths and challenges of each student is a place to start in individualizing the approach to learning at the school;
- School Council commented on the need to make better use of technology to provide more options for students and support diverse learning needs.
- Work between the elementary and secondary schools is limited in relation transitions. Consistency of approaches, across both schools especially in development of literacy and numeracy skills would support student learning.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- During the 2012-2013 school year, work with the area superintendent to review the organizational and operational structure of the school and the roles and responsibilities of staff to best support all students in meeting high standards.

- Ensure that the PLOs are covered for the course offered. This may require a different approach with students who are frequently absent;
- Work with Johnson Elementary to:
 - Develop a transition plan for students coming to the high school that begins early in the grade seven year and involves number of visits
 - Create opportunities for the staffs of the two schools to jointly looking at approaches to learning especially in the areas of literacy and numeracy;
- Work with the Department to explore and implement innovative structures and approaches to learning that serve all students, both struggling and strong. This would include:
 - Connecting with other jurisdictions in the second semester of 2012-2013 to learn about successful approaches,
 - Store Front or Alternate programs and a teen parent centre,
 - Strengthening experiential and on the land strategies as a way to address prescribed learning outcomes,
 - Exploring trades, applied skills and the use of technology to create online communities;
- Work with Department consultants and staff, to embed professional development at the school in relation to differentiation or individualization, the use of criteria referenced assessment, and student self-assessment.

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:

- Students who are able to participate in provincial exams in grades 10 to 12 do quite well. However, Yukon Achievement Test data and other assessments indicate that a significant number of students struggle with literacy and numeracy skills in grades 8 and 9.
 - Some students come to the secondary school 3 or 4 grades behind, heightening the need for collaboration with the elementary school;
 - Additionally, 34% of the students were on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and 79% had missed more than 20 days of school;
- The principal and another staff member have been giving two quick informal assessments weekly in literacy and numeracy. They then mark the papers and this is their road map to help students be more successful,
 - However a clearer understanding of where the student are in relation to grade level expectations and what needs to be done to move them forward needs to be in place;
- The school growth plan was not developed collaboratively with staff, students, School Council, LFN, and community and does not function as a road map to the improvement of outcomes for the students;
- Staff do not consistently use evidence of student academic performance and social emotional development to guide classroom practice, the school growth plan, and school wide strategies;
- Some staff expressed concern about how Department support is delivered to the school and suggested that a flexible “in school” approach be considered.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Ensure that staff use formative and summative assessment data and other quantitative and qualitative evidence to establish student levels and student profiles especially in English and mathematics to guide decisions and actions at the school,
 - The Department will assist in creating electronic profiles for each student,
 - Work with Department to support school staff in implementing identified actions,
 - Ensure that the needs of those not meeting, minimally meeting and meeting and exceeding expectations are addressed especially in the area of literacy at the grade 8, 9 and 10 levels;
- Focus on improving attendance. First, work with students, staff, parents, School Council LFN and community to understand why students are not attending school and then put strategies in place to address the issues identified;
- Develop a focused, doable school growth plan that involves all staff, students, parents, the School Council, and LFN and uses evidence consistently to make decisions and monitor progress.

Conclusions:

It was clear to the Team that all partner groups wish to see the learners in Watson Lake experience academic as well as social emotional success and be healthy and involved citizens. The need to set priorities from the recommendations and develop short and longer-term plans at the school, with partner groups, and at the Department of Education in order to support the diverse learners at the school was evident. With the ongoing support and involvement of the Department of Education, creative strategies to address individual learning needs and a collaborative approach that includes all partner groups, the Team believes that improved outcomes can be achieved.