



Holy Family Elementary School Review Report November 2013

Holy Family Elementary School

Date: November 5/6/7, 2013

School Principal: Ted Hupé
Vice-Principal: Lina Radziunas

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School Review Team:

Simon Blakesley, Director, Student Achievement and Systems Accountability (YE)
Yolande Cherepak, Executive Director, Catholic Education Association Yukon (CEAY)
Michel Emery, Learning Resource Pedagogical Consultant (YE)
Ashraf Mahmoud, Data Analysis Coordinator (YE)
Danielle Sheldon, First Nations Partnerships Coordinator (YE)
Ryan Sikkes, Principal, Vanier Secondary Catholic School (YE)

Meetings with the School included:

- Teachers and support staff
- Principal and vice-principal
- Students
- School council

The review team conducted observations in all classes and attended a whole-school celebration during the last afternoon of the review. An evening meeting was held with the HFES School Council. The team also met with the HFES School Growth Planning team for a presentation on their response to the recommendations of the previous review (2010).

School Context

Holy Family Elementary School is a K – 7 Catholic school located in the Porter Creek area of Whitehorse, Yukon. The neighbourhood encompasses a wide socio-economic and cultural community. This year, there are 175 students enrolled, reflecting the diversity of the population that the school serves. At HFES, 67% of students are Catholic, with the remaining non-Catholic families choosing a Catholic faith-based education for their children. At Holy Family, 11% of students are of self-identified First Nations ancestry.

Holy Family is a community school that has developed and continues to model a strong sense of “family.” At Holy Family, parent engagement is high, and there is openness between staff members, children, and their families. There exists a culture which motivates staff members to take risks and try new initiatives should they feel that they will foster student learning.

In developing the minds, bodies and spirits of each student, the school is proud of the academic, faith-based, sport and social justice initiatives which are often integrated with each other. The school takes pride in fostering a positive school culture and believes it is very important for students to feel that they are a part of the community and have a sense of pride in their school.

HFES offers Core French (6-7), pre-Intensive French (grade 4) and Intensive French (Grade 5). Daily PE classes are supplemented with class and school-wide swimming and skating, and primary and intermediate students engage in intra-murals. The music room is well-equipped and organized, and music is an integral aspect of school programming and of school celebrations.

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:

- Irrespective of the intense pace of life in an elementary school, there is a calm, safe, atmosphere and deliberate focus on student learning. There is a 'genuine' or authentic feeling to the school, whereby all are accepted for who they are and not judged
- There is a strong leadership culture throughout the school which fosters an atmosphere where educational leadership is a resource that is distributed amongst all staff. There is a supportive culture of "Yes" when new ideas, theories, and strategies are introduced. There is a focus on the best interests of children when new initiatives are explored and potentially implemented
- Staff members feel empowered to contribute at HFES. Teamwork is a shared norm, there is an ethic of putting others first, and there exists an atmosphere where all voices, contributions, and ideas are heard and considered
- Some upper intermediate students signalled that there were instances where bullying or ostracism occurred. Perpetrators were covert in their actions to avoid detection by adults. Those being bullied may not feel safe speaking up for fear of retribution. School staff are aware and are working with students to ensure a safe environment
- The school exudes a familial, faith-based atmosphere whereby faith is not 'taught' as an academic subject alone but is integrated throughout academic practice in an organic manner. Morning prayer, quiet meditation, bible readings, and the rosary are evident to varying degrees depending on the classroom
- The above notwithstanding, all students, regardless of denomination, ethnicity, or background are accepted and welcomed at HFES

Recommendations for moving forward:

- The school has made progress with respect to inclusion of First Nations culture in school activities and displays. HFES is encouraged to continue to move further along the continuum of cultural inclusion
- Continue to incorporate Yukon First Nations ways of knowing more broadly into the curriculum via art work, Dene/Arctic sports, culture camps, partnering with other schools, and elders visits (Resources can be found at: <http://www.yesnet.yk.ca/firstnations/index.html>)
- With respect to the school's Catholic mission, practice and symbols appear varied across classrooms throughout the school. This is not identified to suggest there should be uniformity: rather, the team wondered whether each staff member would be able to articulate their own philosophy of Catholic education in relation to the school's Catholic philosophy. This may signal the need for faith formation, staff retreats, or other opportunities in which these aspects can be further explored and developed
- The team observed a potential 'gap' between primary and intermediate divisions. The development and articulation of a continuum of learning (perhaps similar to the model offered by Sandra Herbst, as an example) from K-7 may help provide staff, students, and parents with a framework that models the continuous progression throughout the grades
- There is a culture of strong organization and collaboration at the school, though communication around large school events may require greater attention to ensure all staff are aware of all plans and coverage in a timely manner
- A system of safe reporting (e.g. student surveys, a "safe" contact, or other mechanism) for students to signal that they are being bullied should be developed and communicated to students

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 size of the school optimizes the ability for the school to be a community where all students are known to all staff. The students with whom the team talked both formally

and informally like their school, and believe their teachers to be supportive and caring of them

- The school creates multiple opportunities for service learning and community service at the local, national, and international levels: food drives and support for schools overseas engage students and teachers to be compassionate, to reach out to the community, and help and care for others
- The school effectively employs multiple communications channels to share information and engage the community and parents: newsletters (classroom and school-generated), notes home, phone calls, interviews, email, informal conversations in the community are all used to reach constituents
- Staff members believe in the importance of knowing the whole family situation as a means of understanding students better, thereby supporting both students and their families as best as they can. Celebrations, spring music concerts, barbecues, pancake breakfasts, bison feasts and other opportunities that bring family, school, and community together are seen as important to all staff
- The school has fostered a strong relationship with Vanier Secondary Catholic School, given that many HFES students make the transition to VCSS to begin high school
- The school chaplain is a visible and valuable member of the school community. He is a vitally important resource who supports the Catholic faith community at HFES. He connects well with students and staff through both regular weekly and unscheduled visits
- School Council expressed appreciation with respect to how the school administration guides the Council through decision-making processes in an informed, supportive manner.
- School Council expressed appreciation towards the staff for the ways that they will take on new initiatives with enthusiasm and will go out of their way to be helpful and supportive of children and their families

Recommendations for moving forward:

- There appears room for growth in relation to the fostering of meaningful relationships with the parish (Our Lady of Victory and/or Sacred Heart). This could also lead to stronger, more meaningful connections with the other Whitehorse Catholic schools through experiential and faith-based activities for students

- HFES has made progress in regards to the incorporation of First Nations culture since the last review. Further opportunities exist whereby the visual arts and cultural content and understandings can be more deeply integrated into daily teaching and events
- The team appreciated the activities HFES engages in on an international level to support others in need. HFES is encouraged to continue these activities while concurrently seeking new ways to involve students in activities that help to support local needs
- HFES is encouraged to seek ways to create more opportunities (both in and outside of the school) for inter-generational activities which involve seniors, elders, and children learning together
- Students expressed interest in seeing more in the way of gym supplies (hockey sticks, scooter boards), and wished for more activities on the playground. Suggestions offered by student were a larger big toy to spread students out more, another tire swing and slide, and a small hockey rink

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:

- HFES uses creative ways to organize in order to maximize benefits for students. The reverse lunch hour, partnering with Ghuch Tla Community School (Carcross), and conducting School Based Team meetings during the day and including all staff are examples where the school has examined its practice with a focus on improvement
- In response to the 2010 review, the team observed that HFES staff organize to provide opportunities for higher achieving students to grow through additional enrichment activities
- Teachers collaborate and plan instruction across grade levels: organization and student planning is done well in order to meet student needs. As one example, the Kindergarten and Grade 3 teacher are concurrently using the theme of “Space” to provide opportunities for students to learn with and from each other
- At the primary levels, teachers have broken out of grade levels and instead are grouping students by ability levels. There is a distinct recognition that students require differentiated instruction, and teachers are responding accordingly
- Rules and procedures are straightforward and known to staff and students. There is consistent and clear messaging with respect to expectations, communications protocols, values, and daily school operations

- Where a school-wide initiative has been instituted, the articulation of a common language amongst staff and students across grades is clearly evident. Examples include Social-Emotional Learning, the Mind-up Program, problem-solving skills, and brain-based learning
- Many classrooms are physically equipped and organized to support student engagement in learning. For example, multiple couches are used in classrooms to support guided reading, as students find it easier to learn when sitting on them
- There is a sense of shared accountability between teachers and students, both in the academic and social domains

Recommendations for moving forward:

- The team observed that HFES is running to near-capacity with respect to student enrolment. HFES is encouraged to explore ways to maximize instructional space: perhaps through the addition of storage space or shelving
- The team wondered whether Promethean technology was being maximized to its fullest capabilities in all classes, and the extent to which Promethean boards were used beyond their projection capabilities. This could indicate that further training/in-house professional development and/or upgrading of equipment is required
- A process to assess the effectiveness of technology and the extent to which it is used in the school may free resources which could be directed to HFES's identified need for adaptive technology in support of student learning
- Some students expressed a desire for a brief 2:00pm snack break as that may be a low-point for them where they get hungry.

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:

- Problems are identified and acted upon proactively in a child-centered manner at HFES. Staff feel that each member is looking out for and is supportive of one-another when addressing challenges.

- A systematic approach to guided reading is employed across grade-levels, and the staff assess and re-organize groupings as required in order to meet student needs. HFES staff are more comfortable with formative assessment and are conversant in the use of the BC Performance Standards.
- Staff members employ computer programs that have indicators and ways of tracking student progress. The 'Mathletics' program is one example where students and teachers receive immediate feedback on progress as they develop their math skills
- Sports, music, and the arts are integrated into student and school activities. HFES strives to balance the opportunities presented to all students. As a result, there is not a sense of elitism fostered as the school attempts to attend to the needs of all students regardless of socio-economic situation
- HFES takes proactive steps to work with the schools that its students feed into to ensure the Grade 7 to 8 transition is an effective one. Data is used to track where HFES students move on to after they have left the school
- The reverse, or "Play First" lunch is regarded very positively by all at the school, and has become "standard operating procedure" in the daily life of HFES

Recommendations for moving forward:

- HFES is a school which is running very well and is offering many learning opportunities for its students and their families. At this point in time, the School Growth Planning team acknowledges that they are unsure of their potential direction(s) as they take the school forward. The HFES staff is encouraged to future-forecast its demographics and the needs of students in relation to demographics, ELL, cultural background, and socio-economic levels of students as their population becomes more diverse.
- In response to the 2010 review, and looking ahead from the 2013 review, the School Growth Planning team identified the need to focus on the reinforcement of math skills for students with respect to base math skills and problem solving. The team encourages the HFES staff to explore this potential growth area using available data to focus their efforts.
- HFES has done an excellent job of establishing a common 'language' amongst teachers and students regarding social-emotional learning (e.g. Mind-up). In similar fashion, HFES is now encouraged to establish a common language of assessment amongst teachers and students, whereby benchmarks and a continuum of learning is clear across K-7 levels
- Looking ahead, the team noted HFES's observations regarding the changing demographic and level of SES of its students. The school may wish to explore further the nutritional needs of students and seek ways to ameliorate this concern

In conclusion

The review team thoroughly enjoyed their visitation to HFES. It was a pleasure to be welcomed by students, teachers, and support staff to a well-run, caring and thoughtful school. The pride

taken in the school and its mission is abundantly evident. The review team was particularly impressed with the professionalism of the staff, the engaging and respectful nature of the students, and the warm and caring atmosphere prevalent throughout the school.

The team appreciates that the school's current status is the result of strong, distributed educational leadership, built upon a solid foundation of caring, trusting relationships, and meaningful interconnections between the school and community. The team believes HFES to be very well-positioned to chart its course for the next three years and beyond.

Practices to share:

- The creative use of furniture to build learning spaces that students enjoy
- The creation of a “Yes” first atmosphere and “Can Do” culture where new ideas can be explored safely and proactively
- The fostering of leadership as a distributed property throughout the school
- An urban school bridging learning with a rural school- to the benefit of all students
- Grouping students by level rather than grade
- Faith and Catholic teachings which permeate all aspects of teaching and learning