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## Strengthening Small Schools Fieldbook

by James Gunningham

This resource was commissioned by the Saskatchewan School Boards Association to strengthen program delivery in small schools.

There are many small schools in Saskatchewan that educate a large percentage of our students under challenging conditions.

By definition, many of the schools in rural and urban Saskatchewan are considered small schools.

Read this report as a resource guide for developing a plan to deliver effective programming to strengthen small schools. Included are:

- ✓ the conditions which must be in place,
- ✓ identifying effective planning and implementation processes, and
- ✓ examples of creative strategies used by Saskatchewan school divisions to meet these challenges.

Research Report #04-04  
Revised August 2006

## **INTRODUCTION: THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMING CHALLENGE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS**

Saskatchewan has lost 10,000 students in the past five years and it is projected to lose another 13,000 students in the next five years. There has also been a population shift to the larger urban areas and the rural areas immediately surrounding them. In the rural areas the largest percentage of the population is elderly, birth rates are declining and farms continue to become larger, resulting in a decrease in the farm population. These demographic factors have had a dramatic impact on the operation of schools, especially in the rural and small urban centers. The result has been a proliferation of small schools and numerous school closures.

There have been numerous studies regarding small schools. The research indicates that small schools can be very effective noting that students earn higher grades, come to school more often, are less likely to dropout and participate in more extra-curricular activities. Teachers and students get to know one another, feel less anonymous, learn to trust one another and work together. Teachers are more satisfied with their jobs and collaborate more than in large schools. The definition of a small school in these studies is a school with a student population of 400 to 600 students. This is definitely not considered a small school in Saskatchewan.

Small schools in Saskatchewan may have fewer than 10 students and usually have fewer than 20 student per grade. When small schools are referred to in this fieldbook, the definition provided by O'Bradovich (1995) will serve as the guide. It is: " Small schools are operationally defined as those where low enrollments negate the efficiencies of scale advantage of the traditional school." These small schools are primarily found in the towns, villages and hamlets of fewer than 1000 people.

There is very little research available regarding their effectiveness, but the challenges of instructional programming are well documented. " Instructional programming, "the how "of education which includes the manner in which programs or courses are organized, scheduled and delivered, plus the resources and strategies used in delivery" according to Wagner. The challenges as noted in the Small Schools Report include:

- Limited number and variety of curricular offering to students due to the availability of teacher time and expertise.
- Administrators with large teaching loads as well as their full time administrative responsibilities.
- Teachers with large and varied teaching assignments in numerous grades, sometimes at the same time, and many extra-curricular responsibilities. This makes it difficult to introduce new curriculum or improve instructional practices.
- Lack of specialty programs, especially vocational programs.

Challenges notwithstanding, all schools regardless of size are expected to provide the core requirements for all their students.

Studies indicate that there are substantial instructional savings as a school's enrollment increases from 10 or fewer students to 400 students, with savings continuing until 1600 students are enrolled. The high instructional cost in small schools, as reported in the Small Schools Report, can be attributed to such factors as:

- Low student-teacher ratios; instructional costs where the ratio was 15:1 were one-third higher than schools with a ratio of 20:1.
- Higher instructional support services were higher; schools with 100 students have similar support costs to schools with 500 students.
- Utilization of resources and equipment; the utilization cost of libraries, computers, gymnasiums and equipment will increase because the resource is not used all day.

Cost also varies with the grade organization. Senior high school and middle years programs are more expensive to operate because of the diverse programming and equipment requirements.

Busing students to a centralized school has been a tool used in school closure and it has been a part of a package for communities which are losing their schools or where students can no longer reasonably walk to school. Studies on busing suggest that students who are bused have the same rate of success in school as their non-riding peers. Extremely long bus rides may contribute to lower grades, however bus rides of less than two hours one way do not appear to affect student performance.

While innovation invites growth, school systems have been historically preoccupied with preserving the status quo and minding the past. There has been very little incentive for boards or staff to embrace anything new. The innovators or early adapters were grudgingly tolerated but usually ignored. Today's immediate and growing challenges to deliver effective instructional programming that meets the skills and competencies students will need to be successful should be the catalyst for innovation so desperately needed.

The Strengthening Small Schools Fieldbook has a student learning focus. An outline of the critical components required for innovation to occur is included. Also listed is a variety of effective, creative strategies and innovations and where they can be found in Saskatchewan school divisions and across North America. Vignettes and summaries will be included. The critical requirements for implementation are delineated, along with appropriate processes and tools.

Any school division can replicate or adapt the best practices and apply the implementation strategies used by others to strengthen small schools. As Ellmore (2000) stated, "The application of adoption of practices still needs to be demystified. The notion that a good strategy or system does not travel well is too often overblown."

The challenge to a board is, does it continue with the status quo, or meet the challenges by being proactive and implementing strategies that will strengthen the small school by focusing on student result?

### **VIGNETTE 1**

In the 2002/2003 school year, Tisdale School Division began discussions surrounding the delivery of programming in the three smaller K - 12 schools in Arborfield (130 students), Bjorkdale (100 students), and Zenon Park (85 students). With declining enrolments, discussions began to center on the ability of small schools to deliver adequate programming to secondary level students. As a result of the discussions and a cooperative initiative with the Cumberland Regional College, the school division designed a plan for a Community Learning Network. The larger plan includes the regional college, Metis Nation and Kinistin Reserve and the Tisdale School Division. Within the plan, Tisdale School Division planned, piloted and began delivery of programming online, with a focus on broadening elective offerings and ensuring the delivery of core subjects in all high schools. With declining enrolments in rural Saskatchewan, it has become increasingly important to look at creative ways of delivering academic programs while maintaining efficiency. The program has begun in 2003/2004 with the delivery of four courses online within the school division. Students in Arborfield, Bjorkdale, and Zenon Park will receive instruction online in Math A, B & C30 and Media Studies 20 delivered by a TSD teacher. Additional online courses will be delivered by the Central School of Sask Learning. A teacher will be assigned to supervise the students during the "school" period. In addition, computer assistants are available in each school to provide support to students and teachers.

The Tisdale School Division Board of Education has been instrumental in supporting the initiative through increased staffing allotments for smaller high schools, the provision of computer assistants in each school, funding for appropriate technology to facilitate online delivery, and funding for professional development of online teachers. The Board has also hired a full time Instructional Technologist to provide support to online teachers. The internal capacity of Tisdale School Division teachers to deliver programs online has increased significantly, and with continued support of the Board, online delivery of secondary level programs will become the norm.

Central office administration has provided support in several ways. Through the office of the Superintendent of Business, the appropriate hardware and software has been put into place. In addition, the resources of the Tisdale School Division technicians has been accessed to ensure that hardware is appropriate and that technical barriers have been removed. Support will continue to be available through the delivery phase of the program. The Director of Education initiated the project in collaboration with high school principals. Meetings were held to discuss the scope of the project, to develop cooperative timetables among high schools and to coordinate the overall project.

The implementation of the project was effective due to the pilot phase of the program. Initial attempts at online learning were piloted in Arborfield School in 2002/2003, with the teacher in the classroom, but delivering the course as if at a distance. The result was reduced frustration for students, immediate feedback for the teacher, and an opportunity to fine tune the delivery for year two. The teacher learned how to use the Blackboard Program provided by Sask Learning, and offered inservice opportunities to two other teachers who had volunteered to deliver programming online. In addition to this inservice opportunity, online teachers had an opportunity to attend the summer workshop held at Waskesiu regarding online teaching and learning. Continued inservice will be provided by the Instructional Technologist.

Support for this initiative was garnered from local boards through meetings with the Director of Education, as well as through ongoing information provided by Principals. Local Boards were very receptive to the concept and recognized the need to look for alternative methods of delivery to ensure that quality of programming was maintained and that the breadth of offerings was maintained or even expanded. Staff was provided information through Principals, and individual staff members were approached to determine their interest level in becoming involved in the program. Student skill in the use of technology is very high, so the support of students was very high. In many cases, students approached teachers about involvement in the program once word was out.

The project will be monitored by online teachers at each of the three sites involved in the project. At Arborfield, one teacher will be delivering Math A & B 30. At Bjorkdale, one teacher will deliver Media Studies 20 and Math C 30. At Zenon Park, the teacher will act as a facilitator for the courses. In future years, the roles will shift depending on teacher interest and expertise. The overall project will be monitored and evaluated by the Instructional Technologist. His role will be to provide feedback to the larger CLN Committee as well as to provide recommendations for improvement of the program in future years. Included in the evaluation will be data related to student achievement, student preferences in online learning, barriers to learning using technology, and the effect on quality of life for rural students.

The outcomes have not yet been seen, but predictions suggest an increase in access to optional classes for secondary students in our smaller high schools. Access to qualified instructors will also be ensured, particularly in the math/science areas. An often overlooked outcome is the improved quality of life achieved by delivering programs in the students' home community. Tisdale School Division hopes to create a community of learners in its smaller communities, developing networks which will lead to increased capacity in rural Sask to deliver programs to its youth.

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## VIGNETTE 2

The Golden Plains School Division is a sparsely populated area of 7615 square kilometers. It went through an amalgamation in 1997 and now has six centers with schools. The closest major centers are anywhere from one to two hours driving distance from the furthest point. The Board considered a number of models and alternatives when doing long-term planning to deal with factors such as declining enrollments in a rural community, and decreasing staff numbers resulting in reducing extracurricular and program offerings. When examining alternatives, it was felt that the most important educational component that must be protected was instructional time.

### **Alternative School Year**

The Board did a great deal of research before initiating the alternate school year model, including literature reviews, consultation, committee establishment, stakeholder surveys, and data review from Scenic Valley School Division.

The Board of Golden Plains School Division #124 initiated a pilot project for the alternate school year during the 2002-2003 school year. The rationale behind considering an alternate school year included: the Board felt that it could maintain or increase the amount of instructional time with a model that reduced the number of interruptions.

In the end, it was felt that the alternate school year model would cut down on travel costs, teacher absenteeism, student absenteeism, and provide a day for curriculum support for teachers and students. The Board adopted policy that included:

- Professional development should take place on Fridays.
- Extended learning is scheduled for students on Fridays (.ie., ATEC, Work Experience).
- Students are expected to schedule extra school help and tutoring on Fridays.
- Extracurricular events are scheduled for Fridays and the calendar for these events is drawn up and posted before school starts (as much as is possible).
- Parents are expected to schedule any out-of-town trips for Fridays.
- Community sports events (i.e., hockey tournaments) now use the Fridays as the first day of the tournament.
- Teachers are available on the school site for three of the four Fridays in a month. When there is a Monday holiday, there is still a four-day school week.

While there will be times when the above cannot be followed, but having a reasonable expectation that they will be has reduced the number of teacher and student absenteeism. The community culture has changed to the extent that when a teacher phones in for a dental appointment they are scheduled for Fridays.

The alternate school year is now beginning its second year. Results have indicated that there is planned and extended use of the schools on Fridays, teacher absenteeism has

decreased, student absenteeism has decreased, instructional time has been protected, students have access to extracurricular events, and the extension of one full day of parents with their children appears to be viewed in a positive light.

### **On-Line Teaching Program**

The Golden Plains School Division is a large, sparsely populated rural division. One response to declining enrollment and reduced teacher numbers and the resultant reduction in course offerings was to encourage the training and development of on-line teachers and on-line teaching courses. To this end, the Golden Plains Board has provided support, personnel, and resources to encourage the development and implementation not only of this alternative but to all aspects of technology.

### **The Career and Work Exploration Course**

During 2002, Golden Plains participated in the development of this course. It was piloted within the division and during the 2002-2003 school year the school division received grants to develop resources. It meets very specific needs within the division and has a provincial base as well. Currently there are 62 students enrolled at the 10, 20, and 30 A and B levels within the division as well as 27 students within the province, with 18 students having been turned away due to the large enrollment. At present there is ongoing development to expand the teacher training base to allow for the enrollment of more students.

The Golden Plains teaching staff and support personnel also participated in the development of a Creative Writing 20 course with an on-line component. This course allowed time for guest speakers to meet with students on Fridays for seminars and discussions. This course was unable to continue this semester; however, there is a division on-line teacher for English Language Arts 30.

### **Board/School Luncheons**

After the initial setup meetings, the Board invites each school to bring student representatives to have lunch with them at the Board Office. This allows the members to maintain contact with the most important component of the education system and to receive input from them. Initiatives are reviewed with students and they are encouraged to provide input. As a precaution, students are provided with sample questions and interaction is encouraged.

### **The Agriculture Technician (ATEC) Course**

The Agricultural Technician (ATEC) course includes a work experience component done on Fridays, as well as an educational component (speakers, tours, etc.). This course involves parents monitoring student work as well as an instructor that visits the work sites. Work experience placement is typically at the student's family ranch or farm. This

course provides a pertinent, practical, and timely focus for students planning on becoming engaged in any type of career with a base in the agricultural industry. Course content is designed to meet student needs and includes all aspects of cow/calf and field crop production. It is interesting to note that one of the students, when at a luncheon meeting with the Board, mentioned that his family had been having water management difficulties and that water management is now included as a topic in the course. The ATEC course numbers currently stand at 37. This course, judging by the enrollment numbers, is meeting the needs of both students and the community.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout each of the initiatives that the Golden Plains School Board has been involved in, there has been a process of research, decision making, and risk taking. The initiatives that were implemented undergo a review process on a regular basis that includes surveys, an examination of student marks, and parental satisfaction. Teachers have undertaken major tasks with the support of the board and central office staff. Support is gained from the parents, students, and the communities through public awareness meetings, school newsletters, inserts in the newspapers, and open communication. The process of engaging in pilot projects to test different projects has been one that has proven successful in this division.

The Board continues to brainstorm ways to deal with declining enrollments and the resultant teacher reductions and decrease in the variety of programs being offered. The Board, Central Office staff, teachers, students, and communities realize the difficulties that lay ahead for education as well as for their children and are working together to develop a vision to address these concerns.

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## **REQUIREMENTS FOR INNOVATION**

**Education appears to lack imagination.** Boards and administrators have a tendency to see things in a way that was, content to maintain the status quo. To overcome inertia, leadership from the board is essential. Leadership, as defined by Heifitz (1994) is mobilizing people to tackle tough problems. As he states, "Instead of looking for saviors we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face the problems for which there is no simple, painless solution - problems that require us to learn new ways." In school divisions where small schools were strengthened that leadership was evident.

Leadership, Fullan writes, is to mobilizes all affected to solve difficult problems and takes staff, students, parents and community where they have never been and are not sure they want to go. This leadership must start with the board and its administrators.



Leadership is about creating a sense of purpose and direction. As Fullan noted the purpose has to be explicit and make-a-difference; there must be strategies that will mobilize many people to make a difference.

**Boards must provide competent administrative leaders**, support, and resources to accomplish the task. The role of the central office administrator should be that of a gentle bulldozer pushing all for successful implementation. The administrator's role is to create an effective problem-solving forum and develop guideline for success. It is also the central office's role to see that the time and resources are used most productively.

**The board's view of how its schools should be organized for learning has a dramatic impact on the education that will be provided and its method of delivery.**

Boards should ask themselves:

- Is the education system is driven by students' acquisition of knowledge or by the students' ability to apply knowledge?
- Is the best way to learn in a school building, presenting a fixed curriculum, using textbooks, timetabling the programs around the delivery to students and according to age in defined classrooms or do students learn at different rates, in different ways with the location dependent on the resources required by the learner?
- Is learning a product best measured by courses, and years within a fixed time frame or is learning mandatory, with the essential skills and competencies being learned and applied by the student?
- Are the skills and competencies taught in the 1970's the same skill and competencies required by students to be successful in today's world and the future?

Before the board can develop strategies for strengthening the school, they must first answer the question. What do students have to know, be able to do, and be like to interact with the technology in such a way they can control their own futures?

**Small schools should not act like large urban schools.** They must concentrate on a few goals and insist that all students meet them. Subject selection is limited, however, there are methods which can be implemented to honour student choice through the development of projects, and other learning opportunities. A culture has to develop around hard work, high standards, respecting others and the expectation that all students will succeed. The traditional extra-curricular activities will be on the periphery of school life.

**Being proactive about student learning results is absolutely critical in order to strengthen small schools.** Successful schools focus on three areas: goals, teamwork and assessment data. The goals, no more than three, detail student growth and clearly state what the ends will be. The teachers and administrator form a learning community. They collect and analyze student achievement data to identify specific learning deficiencies, brainstorm for best way to improve learning, including changes in practices to get better results and create a plan which all will follow.

### Vignette 3

#### 2003 – 2004 St. Mary School K / 5 / 6 Blended Classroom Project

##### Why was this specific initiative selected and implemented?

The past five academic years have seen Kindergarten enrollments drop, at a steady pace, to under 12 students in this specific area of the city.

Initial Kindergarten registrations for the 2003 – 2004 year indicated that only 6 students were committing to attend.

The Director and school administration discussed numerous options with the Kindergarten teacher (who taught the K – 1 split during 2002 – 2003). The options were as follows:

- (A) Bus the 6 students to Sacred Heart School
- (B) Have a K / 1 / 2 blended classroom.
- (C) After significant deliberation and thought the Kindergarten teacher presented a different option, that being a K/ 5 / 6 blended classroom. The teacher having experience at the Gr. 5 and 6 level knew the opportunities for enhanced success that existed. Cross age tutoring, enhanced Gr. 5/6 maturation due to the opportunities to play leadership role. The number in a K / 5 / 6 classroom was also more conducive to success than the K / 1 / 2 blended classroom.

A meeting was held with prospective parents, Central Office administration, school administrator and Kindergarten teacher. The options were presented to the parents and it was through the enthusiasm and confidence of the Kindergarten Teacher's presentation that option C was chosen. The school was staffed to facilitate this initiative.

##### How was leadership demonstrated by the Board

1. The Board was supportive of the locally developed option as chosen by staff and parents.
2. The Board funded the installation of doors between the Kindergarten and Gr. 5/6 classroom.
3. The Board supports the professional development of the teacher in terms of her new role.

##### What role did Central Office play in the development and implementation.

1. Central office personnel were supportive of this staff developed initiative and consulted with the teacher with respect to her beliefs about blended classrooms and age groupings

2. Central office personnel lobbied effectively for resource allocation in the area of facility modifications.

What resources and training were provided to make the implementation effective?

1. Financial resource were provide to adjust the physical arrangement of the two classrooms to make this project viable in terms of classroom space.

How was support gained for the strategy from the staff, students, and parents?

Staff: St. Mary, a small staff with a professional component of five, do not hesitate to participate in innovative practice. This was a teacher driven initiative.

Students: Having taught Gr. 5 / 6 students before, the teacher had a good grasp of the personalities and pressures of this age group. She was confident that they would respond well to this challenge. With St. Mary being a very small school she also knew the specific Gr. 5 / 6 students of the 2003- 2004 class and had a good sense of how they would learn in such an environment.

Parents: St. Mary parents are very supportive of the school program and their school. They quickly realized that the only viable Kindergarten option was option C. The greatest influencing factor in their decision to support Option C was the confidence and enthusiasm presented by the teacher.

How will this project be monitored for effectiveness?

The school and central office administration will monitor the student and parent attitudes towards this grouping. The school division administers the English Language Benchmarks as a way to monitor student growth. These will be used to track academic achievement. The school division has a four member team from each school training for the Mathematics Assessment program. These indicators will also be used to track academic achievement.

How will this strategy affect student achievement?

This will be monitored. We know that there is significant research to indicate that students in blended classrooms perform as well academically as their single grade counterparts. Our intent is to collect data to confirm or deny that research.

What will be the outcome of this initiative?

We will monitor the project from two perspectives 1) the attitude of students, the teacher, and the parents, and 2) the academic achievement and development of the students.

We will monitor this program carefully to with respect to a number of factors:

- a) What role do student personalities play in the success of this initiative.
- b) Any significant changes in student learning? Positive/negative.
- c) Any significant changes in the degree of parent support for this initiative as the year progresses.
- d) Are there hidden financial costs to such a program that were not foreseen at the time of implementation?
- e) Does such a program possibly motivate other parents in Moose Jaw to consider St. Mary as their educational destination.

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## **VIGNETTE 4**

### **RESOURCE SHARING**

The Melville Area School Divisions consists of four boards and eight schools, ranging in size from one k-9 school with 30 students to a comprehensive school with approximately 500 students. All students except Ituna's feed directly into the comprehensive system. The administrators from all schools, working together, developed three student learning goals: students using the correct writing form would write at or above the quality standard, all students, grade 1-10, would master the common essential math skills, and all students would use the technology skills in the content areas at the quality standard.

The project was initiated by the administrators in order to provide all schools with access to a wide variety of resources, both print and non-print, required to support the student learning goals. No one school or school division could afford to do this on its own; to rectify the problem each administrator pooled some of his/her money allocated from the school's budget. The amount each school contributed was determined by the cost of the resources purchased and the number of students that could use the resource in that school.

The project was designed to extend the resource access regardless of division size by pooling money to purchase resources, pooling existing resources and circulating them among the participating schools. For language arts, a committee of teachers,

administrators and a library consultant reviewed, selected and assembled resources into various themes. Theme boxes were developed which containing a novel study, supporting materials including audio-visual or software, and a binder with lesson plans which were successful, tasks, assessments and rubrics. The theme boxes were catalogued, a master list was compiled and circulated designating when each teacher could access the resource. This concept has been expanded in the other content areas: science, social studies, mathematics and health.

In order to integrate technology into the curriculum a committee of k-9 teachers and administrators reviewed the current practices and developed a curriculum for teaching computer skills and integrating them into the content areas. This committee also reviewed and selected kits and software to support each of the learning objectives for every grade.

All teachers in the area were given five days of inservice over a two-year period, targeted specifically for each teacher's needs. At the inservices teachers learned to use the kits and software and learned how to integrate technology into the content areas. Targeted inservices in mathematics were also employed to meet the specific needs of each teacher, not the group.

The sharing of resources and the focused inservices have significantly improved student learning. In writing, the percentage of grade 1-5 students who met the quality standard went from 38% to 81% in three years. Grade 6-9 students, in the same time period, went from 32% to 72%. In mathematics the number of students performing at the quality standard in problem-solving has doubled and 95% of all student reach mastery in the teachers' designated core learning. All students can use the computer skills taught in the content areas at a quality standard.

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## **STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING SMALL SCHOOLS**

Small schools are expected to meet the same minimum program requirements as large schools. Declining enrollments are challenging program delivery efforts. Many Saskatchewan school divisions have meet these challenges in creative ways, through the implementation of an effective strategy or strategies. The strategies are presented under one of the three broad categories: technological, utilization of current resources, and organizational re-structuring. The instructional support strategies are included in the vision-to-practice section. The strategies are varied, ranging from the traditional approaches to organizing schools for learning to strategies that challenge those concepts. The way boards view how a school is organized for learning will influence

which strategies will be explored. The strategies can act as a way for boards to challenge current thinking, but the challenges being experienced may serve as the catalyst for reviewing the boards' thoughts on learning and how it organizes that learning.

## **A. TECHNOLOGICAL**

These are strategies that use technological solutions to deliver program to students. Usually the students and the teacher are separated by a physical distance. The programs created using technology may be used to complement programs in small schools, provide for students with various special needs or as an option for any student desiring to use this form of learning as a part of their regular studies.

### **1. VIRTUAL LEARNING**

Virtual learning is a form of distance education. The term refers to the delivery of educational materials and instruction using a combination of information and communication technology to deliver programs to students. It has been referred to in literature as online learning, learning networks, cyberschooling, tele-learning and web-based training. The learning environment is flexible and interactive. There are a growing number of school systems that are using this solution to deliver programs to strengthen their small schools.

## **LINKS TO SOURCES**

### **SASKATCHEWAN**

Chinook S.D. # 204  
[c.deibold@gien.com](mailto:c.deibold@gien.com)

Good Spirit S.D. # 211  
[admin1@mcs.msd.sk.ca](mailto:admin1@mcs.msd.sk.ca)

South East Cornerstone S.D. # 209  
[Tim.tarala@cornerstonesd.ca](mailto:Tim.tarala@cornerstonesd.ca)

Prairie Spirit S.D. # 205  
[www.svsd.sk.ca/grassroots/2001/project1/proj9/index.html](http://www.svsd.sk.ca/grassroots/2001/project1/proj9/index.html)

Sask Learning  
[www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/branches/elearning/2005-06\\_site\\_guide.pdf](http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/branches/elearning/2005-06_site_guide.pdf)

## ALBERTA

Alberta Education

[www.ataoc.ca/](http://www.ataoc.ca/)

ALBERTA EDUCATION

On-line Learning: best practices for Alberta school jurisdictions

[www.education.gov.ab.ca](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca)

Red Deer Catholic Regional Division No. 39

Cyber-school-St Gabriel

[www.stgabe.com/contact](http://www.stgabe.com/contact)

## ONTARIO

The EDEN Project

[www.eden.scbe.on.ca/](http://www.eden.scbe.on.ca/)

Virtual High School

[www.virtualhighschool.com/](http://www.virtualhighschool.com/)

## MANITOBA

Garden City Collegiate, Manitoba

<http://www.7oaks.org.gcc>

## BRITISH COLUMBIA

NECHAKO LAKES SCHOOL DISTRICT NO90

[kroberts@sd91bc.ca](mailto:kroberts@sd91bc.ca)

Vernon School Board

[www.sd22.bc.ca](http://www.sd22.bc.ca)

## 2. Learning Projects

A variety of information and communication technologies are used to teach students the skills of organizing creating, communicating and the disseminating information through active, problem-based collaborative learning.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

J. Percy Page High School  
[www.percypage.com](http://www.percypage.com)

Hunterdon Central Regional High School  
[Harley@hcrhs.Hunterdan.k12.ny.us](mailto:Harley@hcrhs.Hunterdan.k12.ny.us)

### 3. Video-Conferencing

Video-conferencing is the transmitting of compressed video signals over phone lines or on a high speed communications network. The system takes a signal from a video camera, digitizes and compresses it through a decoder, transmits it to a receiving decoder and broadcasts the signal on a tv monitor. The system enables schools with this equipment to teach classes to one another. It also allows for spontaneous visual and auditory interactions between students and teacher, or between students.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

Sun West S.D. # 207  
[Cheryl.bashutski@sunwestsd.ca](mailto:Cheryl.bashutski@sunwestsd.ca)

### 4. Computer-Assisted Learning

Computer-assisted instruction involves using a computer and a specific software program, usually to enhance or supplement instruction. While not intended as a stand alone virtual learning program, The Learning Equation Math software math programs grade six to ten have been used in this manner with significant student learning results.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

Alberta Education  
[www.education.gov.ab.ca/](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/)

## **B. UTILIZATION OF RESOURCES**

The way resources, such as facilities, materials and equipment and personnel are utilized by a board can strengthen small schools. The resources to be accessed can be ones from within the division, other school divisions, business, post-secondary institutions and the community.



- DIVISION-WIDE
5. Students Bussed To Program

Instead all of schools in the division of trying to offer all programs, two or more schools will specialize in the programs and courses offered based on the expertise ,equipment and facilities found at that location. Students are bussed to the school which is to provide the program required by the student.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

- a) Busing elementary students into a central location to ensure single grades

Holy Trinity RCSSD #22  
[del.wagner@htcsd.ca](mailto:del.wagner@htcsd.ca)

- b) Busing students to a Comprehensive school from small high schools for Practical and Applied Arts programs.

Chinook S.D. #211  
[ichoofoo@chinooksd.ca](mailto:ichoofoo@chinooksd.ca)

- c) Leasing space and equipment from another school and busing teachers and students

Prairie View S.D. #208  
[Keliherschool@qvsd.ca](mailto:Keliherschool@qvsd.ca)

- d) Teacher and facilities travel to students.
1. Assigning teacher specialists to two or more schools
  2. Providing mobile labs with specialized teachers so that students receive the best facilities, equipment and instruction, regardless of school location.

Grasslands Regional School Division No. 6  
[www.grasslands.ab.ca](http://www.grasslands.ab.ca)

## 6. SHARING RESOURCES

Divisions or schools can extend resource access by pooling resources and circulating them among themselves. Pooled resources may include software programs duly licenced for sharing, textbooks, professional development expertise and materials, equipment, assessment tasks and instruments.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

Good Spirit S.D. #204  
[admin1@mcs.msd.sk.ca](mailto:admin1@mcs.msd.sk.ca)

- PARTNERSHIPS

Learning can and does take place in many setting, not only in the classroom. Communities provide a source for a wide array of potential educational opportunities. Learning opportunities provided by home, workplace and other community settings connect the school to the community.

A partnership between the school and the community resources is an effective strategy for meeting the educational, cultural and training needs of students. Partnerships minimize financial, geographic, technical and skill barriers while providing a comprehensive education program for students.

### 7. POST-SECONDARY PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships with post-secondary institutions that offer specific skill training, apprenticeship training and recognition, advanced knowledge and /or access to equipment have great potential. The Partnerships may also include business, community members and organizations providing programs in fine arts, apprenticeship and entrepreneurship.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

Apprenticeship Program  
[intrepid2@sasktel.net](mailto:intrepid2@sasktel.net)

Calgary Board of Education  
[www.cbe.ab.ca/Partners/partner\\_learning/jan06postsecondary.asp](http://www.cbe.ab.ca/Partners/partner_learning/jan06postsecondary.asp)

Conference Board of Canada award winners  
[www.conferenceboard.ca/education/awards/](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/education/awards/)

St. Clair School District  
[www.st-clair.net/mobilelab.html](http://www.st-clair.net/mobilelab.html)

- COMMUNITY

## 8. VOLUNTEERS

Divisions can take steps to recruit community members as volunteers who will participate in enhancing and extending student learning. Volunteers may provide numerous services such as mentoring, expertise for special classroom projects, coordinate special events, coaching sports teams, acting as reading buddies, field trip supervision and clerical help for teachers.

## 9. Community Partnerships

### a) Pre-school Programs

[d.davenpo@sd69.bc.ca](mailto:d.davenpo@sd69.bc.ca)

### b) Fine Arts

[www.tuconpriaartscouncil.org/programs/community//artsEducation.html](http://www.tuconpriaartscouncil.org/programs/community//artsEducation.html)

## C. ORGANIZATIONAL RE-STRUCTURING

The organizational system in -place was never intended to assure successful learning for all students. It was primarily designed for compulsory attendance with learning being optional. Schools were organized along factory model of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Learning was divided into distinct disciplines, courses of one hundred hours, with uniform schedules, uniform curriculum and uniform instructional strategies for students. The students were run through the mill for selection and sorting. The top fifteen percent were to be leaders; the next sixty-six percent learned enough to become the skilled and unskilled labourers required and the remaining were the extra with very little hope for regular employment.

Being skilled is a necessity in today's society. To accomplish this, the organization of learning has to be structured and designed to increase the actual time a student spends engaged in learning and on-task.

## 1. CURRICULUM MAPPING

This is a process where teachers come together to examine articulate the curriculum vertically and horizontally. Vertical articulation begins when subject teachers from the grade above, and grade below meet with the subject teacher to map out skills, knowledge, and processes to be learned. This provides the teachers with a knowledge of what has been studied previously and how to build on that knowledge so the student can be successful and be ready for the next year's learning.

The curriculum for each discipline is laid out horizontally. This process exposes possible gaps in learning, identifies repetition and identifies potential areas for concurrent teaching through interdisciplinary units. This can become a powerful tool, leading students to greater insights and understandings, increasing retention of the learning. Effective thematic units and interdisciplinary units only happen when there are natural links found between the disciplines, such as parallel content, thinking skill, process or problem to be solved. For this to happen, teachers need time to collaborate.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

Hutterian Teachers Association

Kroeger, L. (1997) Curriculum Management Plan For Hutterian Schools. Regina, Sk: Saskatchewan School Trustees Association.

Good Spirit S.D. # 207

[2maseres@mcs.msd.sk.ca](mailto:2maseres@mcs.msd.sk.ca)

[www.ascd.org/readingroom/books/jacob97book.html#chapt2.](http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/books/jacob97book.html#chapt2)

[www.warrenschoools.com/limestone.k12.il.us/curmap.html](http://www.warrenschoools.com/limestone.k12.il.us/curmap.html)

## 9. BLOCK SCHEDULING

School scheduling should be designed for the effective usage of time, space and resources available, improving the instructional climate and solving problems of instructional delivery. In contrast to the traditional daily five, six, seven or eight period schedule, a block consists of three or four daily longer periods. Widely used forms of block scheduling included the alternative day schedule, the 4/4 semester plan, and the trimester plan. Some schools work with a schedule which is a variation or combination of these plans.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

[www.blockscheduling.com](http://www.blockscheduling.com)

[www.education-world.com](http://www.education-world.com)

## 10. FOUR-DAY WEEK

An alternative school year is utilized to expand current curriculum, make time for on-going professional development, increase student achievement and as an economic saving. It is usually associated with extending the day. The four-day week involves

longer instructional days to provide the same overall student attendance time as the traditional school year. Weeks alternate between four and five days, the fifth being used for professional development, tutoring, staff meetings and interviews.

#### LINKS TO SOURCE

Prairie View S.D. #208  
[David.steele@pvsd.ca](mailto:David.steele@pvsd.ca)

#### 13. Facilities Relocation

Are the locations of some of your schools, not conducive to effective programming? Demographic and economic changes within a planning sector challenge a division to provide optimum educational services to students in their existing schools. The schools' location are no longer conducive to delivering the educational programming to students or serving the community. The traditional method of consolidation or relocation of students to another school for specific programs may not be the most effective method of program delivery.

After a comprehensive study of the area's demographic data and infrastructure is completed, the solution may be facility relocation. This is the establishing of a school which is centrally located, where main transportation arteries converge and the infrastructure is viable to support the facility's and communities needs. The new location selected may not be located in a built up area, but is best located to serve the students' needs, such as those found around major cities in Alberta. The school is developed to deliver effective, efficient programs in an area which may have served two or more schools. Edmonton Catholic School Division used this approach in the inner city.

#### LINKS TO SOURCES

Edmonton Catholic School Division  
[www.ecsd.net](http://www.ecsd.net)

Boise School District  
[www.boiseschools.org/newsltr/comm\\_update.pdf](http://www.boiseschools.org/newsltr/comm_update.pdf)

## **VIGNETTE 5**

### **A Professional Learning Community of Teachers**

The following description speaks to a process of building the capacity of teachers. A process based on the premise that the level of knowledge and skill of the teacher is the single most important indicator of successful student learning. The other important caveat relates to time, time to learn and time to internalize. Our board advocates professional development for staff and supports it financially. They are generous in their funding of necessary resources to support that professional growth.

#### **Description of Setting**

Swift Current School Division is a small combined division consisting of 3 elementary schools, 2 middle schools and 1 comprehensive high school. The 3 elementary schools vary in size, the largest being 350 and the smallest 150 students. The central office staff consists of a director, an assistant director, a program coordinator, a special ed. coordinator and a secretary treasurer. We have a board that advocates professional development for staff and supports it financially. As well, they are generous in their funding of necessary resources to support that professional growth.

#### **Description of the Strategy**

Guided reading, one of many strategies deemed effective in teaching a balanced ELA program, is very complex. This strategy relies on the observational skills of teacher and requires a high level of understanding of the processes readers use. Based on that knowledge, judgments are made regarding what reading processes need to be taught to allow the reader to make meaning.

Guided reading involves small group instruction but is in no way similar to the ability groupings of the past. Guided reading groupings, consisting of about 6 children, are fluid and flexible and change membership regularly. The needs of the reader dictate the teaching that takes place to the group. Teachers teach children reading strategies at the point of need.

A guided reading lesson consists of four parts and can be twenty to thirty minutes long. The lesson begins with the reader reading a familiar book. This develops fluency and enjoyment. Observing the familiar “read” provides the teacher much information about the processes that have been internalized by the reader. “New” book introduction constitutes the next component of the lesson. This addresses the “before” reading habits all readers use to prior to reading to make sense of text. Examples of text introduction may be strategies to solve unfamiliar words, picture walks to build background knowledge and predicting strategies to engage the reader. The introduction sets the stage for a successful reading experience and models reading strategies that the reader can access before beginning to read. The third and most important

component of a guided reading lesson is “scaffolded” reading. Each reader in the group reads the text independently and the teacher observes and supports (provides scaffolds) the reader. The teacher monitors to identify what strategies are being used and provides guidance when needed. This precise and timely guiding embeds the strategy in the reader’s mind as the reader engages with the text. It is at the point of need, not taught in isolation as it once was. Text extension makes up the final component but concentration on this component is not emphasized as much as it once was.

As readers embrace these ways of understanding text, they become competent and confident readers. The strategies extend beyond language arts to any type of reading activity.

## **Other Components**

### **A. Assessment**

Guided reading begins with an assessment of the reader to identify what strategies the reader is using, and what skills and abilities the reader possesses. Many assessment strategies accomplish this task. An assessment called a running record is one of the tools used to give teachers this information.

#### ***Running Record***

- A Running Record assessment instrument consists of a set of leveled books accompanied by an analysis sheet that teachers score. The score is multifaceted in that it asks teachers to make judgments about the fluency level of the reader, the level of comprehension, and an analysis of the reading strategies the reader uses. The assessment is individual and requires one on one interaction between reader and teacher. The child reads and teacher observes.

### **B. Leveled Books**

- The books used in the assessment are leveled according to criteria identified by Fountas and Pinnell, two experts in the field of early literacy. The amount of text per page, the placement of text on a page, the concepts presented in the book, and how well the illustration match the print are some of the criteria. The level of difficulty of the books in the assessment increases and as readers read, they demonstrate the ways they come to make meaning.
- The leveled books purchased for each school also addressed Fountas and Pinnell criteria. These were books teachers used on a daily basis for the guided reading lesson.

### **C. Variety of Texts**

- We tend to teach the story/narrative structure in schools. When we looked at available resources in our schools, this in fact was true in our system as well. As we purchased new resources, we attempted to add to our existing materials, a variety of non-fiction texts on a several of topics as well as selections that addressed gender and ethnic equity.

### **D. Learning Centres**

- Since guided reading is small group instruction, what is the rest of the class doing while the teacher instruct the small group? Learning centers are developed around skills students have been taught. Centres provide students with the opportunity for independent practice.

### **E. Team Structure: Roles and Responsibilities**

The teams at each school differed slightly depending on the personnel available to support the initiative.

#### ***School #1: Single Class Model***

- Grade 1 teacher and a teaching assistant managed 4 groups of leveled readers for a 40-minute period daily. As teacher presented a guided reading lesson to one group of readers, the teaching assistant worked on developing vocabulary through word work with the other two groups of students

#### ***School #2: Double Class Model***

- Two grade 1 teachers, 2 teaching assistants, a teacher librarian, and a resource teacher, instructed 40 emergent readers for 1 hour 3 times a week. Observations and assessment of students were taking place the first 6/8 weeks of school while classroom routines were being established. During this time, all team members interacted with students to develop relationships. After team discussions and information sharing, 6 students were grouped according to like needs.
- Students moved through 3 stations on a guided reading day. Both Grade 1 teachers presented the guided reading lesson. The teacher librarian read stories accompanied by other activities with books. These reading are beyond the level of the reader and promote language development and the joy of story. One teacher assistant worked on the oral component, helping young readers differentiate sounds, hearing the sounds of letters, rhyming words, and playing with words. The other teacher assistant worked more on phonics, matching the sounds to the letters they represent in words. The resource room teachers worked on writing since writing is vital in learning to read.



## Year 1

### **Step #1 Establish Relationships/Choose a Focus**

As the new program coordinator in the division, I was as unfamiliar with the teachers in this division as they were unfamiliar with me. I went round to each school and teachers so that I might learn what they were interested in learning professionally. As I interviewed each teacher, there were commonalities between groups of teachers. (For the purposes of this account I will speak only of the Grade 1 team.)

Guided Reading became our focus. There were many other elements that needed to be in place before we could become "Guided Reading Teachers". We needed:

- to understand the components of the process,
- to understand the criteria for leveling books,
- to become familiar with reading strategies,
- to learn how to assess the child's use or non use of these strategies,
- to understand how the assessment provides a view of what to teach next.

### **Step #2 Develop a Plan**

An invitation was issued and becoming a part of the guided reading team was optional. The plan was developed with the teachers who chose to become part of the learning team.

#### **a) *Read professionally***

- Program Coordinator purchased each teacher a copy of the book, "Guided Reading: Good First Teaching" by Fountas and Pinnell. All agreed to read chapter by chapter and come together to discuss our understanding and "aha's". We met about every 2<sup>nd</sup> week after school and avoided Christmas Concert and Report Card time.

#### **b) *Lunch and Learn***

- Program Coordinator set up sessions where teachers could view professionally made videotapes of strategies that filled out the balanced approach to teaching reading (Interactive Writing, Primary Writing). (These took place over noon hour and I supplied lunch)

#### **c) *After 7 Series***

- Program Coordinator and 2 teachers delivered evening workshops on Literacy Centres and leveling books for primary children.

#### **d) *Half Day In-Service* delivered by Program Coordinator (during school time)**

Agenda

- Taking a running records
- Learning criteria for leveling books
- Learning to teach reading strategies

e) **Administration Information**

- School administration and upper level administration at Central office were kept informed of steps of the plan by coordinator at regular monthly meeting
- Short informational session on understanding the processes/components were also delivered to School Admin teams

f) **Resource Purchase**

- Leveled collection of books purchased for each school
- Assessment binder collated and distributed to each school

**Step #3 Common Assessment**

- A running record was taken on each child in grade 1 in mid June and the results were submitted to Central Office as data on student growth. The eventual understanding of the assessment was collect data over time to provide a system benchmark with respect to the levels of reading of our grade 1 students.

**Summary of Year One**

As a learning team, discussion revolved around understanding reading processes. The team began questioning and experimenting with different instructional methods based on new knowledge of how children learn. As the team at each school melded, the isolation of the classroom was forgotten and the teachers began sharing and analyzing their practice with each other and teams from other schools. They questioned how implementation of this strategy might occur. Each school team discussed how it might look in their context. On a common system PD day, we boarded a van and visited McDermid School in Regina where a master Grade 1 teacher and a master learning assistance teacher implemented a balanced approach to teaching reading using guided reading as a part of the balance.

Teachers spent a great deal of their personal time learning together. Individual chapters could take as much as 2 to 3 hours to read and internalize. Reflection journals were used and shared at the group after school meetings. All exhibited a high level of commitment.

**Year 2 Implementation**

**Step #1 Implementation**

- a) The administrative team at each school designated one common preparation time for the team at each school for this school year.
- b) Each school implemented the process in a way that was suited to their context.
- c) Professional Reading continued, teachers came together to read the Renewed ELA curriculum and "Reading with Meaning" by Debbie Miller
- d) Individual schools purchased more leveled books for their school
- e) Individual School Teams meet at noon to level books. Principals got involved in leveling books and attended Lunch and Learn sessions.

f) Book rooms for the leveled collection were established in each building enabling shared usage of leveled resources by the team

### **Step #2 Continued Central Office Support**

- a) Program Coordinator met regularly with Grade 1 teams at the individual schools
- b) Leveled collection of books purchased for each school
- c) Program Coordinator and volunteer retired teacher continued to level new resources for classroom use and add titles to the growing list
- d) New and different professional materials were purchased for each school professional collection in the library.

### **Step #3 Continued In-Service Support**

- a) Lunch and Learn- Tapes from Year 1 reviewed and/or discussion of identified issues
- b) Guided Reading Retreat- full day workshop with each team from each school  
Agenda
  - Guided Reading at the Emergent Level and Developing Level
  - Characteristics of students in these phases of development
- c) After 7 Series
  - Team came together to collaborate in leveling anthologies and existing materials from past years that currently exist in their building

### **Step #4 Common Assessment**

A running record on each Grade 1 students was submitted to Central Office in November and June as data on student growth.

### **Summary Of Year Two**

There were dramatic changes in classroom practice. Teams collaborated in developing strategies to support young readers and agreed upon common goals for those readers. Weekly meeting discussed each reading group and students were moved as they displayed a change in reading behaviors. Assessment was ongoing and teaching moved readers to independence. The data from guided reading assessments showed reading growth. That along with other individual child data was used to place students in classrooms in the upcoming year. Parents were more informed of the strategies their children were using and the kinds of books their children could read. Teachers had a common understanding of expectations of student progress and a common language with which to discuss it.

### **Year 3**

Having reflected on the past 2 years, I have come to understand that what “we” call guided reading is too simplistic a term for what we have studied. Guided reading and all it involves continues to flourish and improvements are being made daily.

New school teams are established and as students become familiar with the routines of the classroom, teacher teams are making observations and judgments that will inform their teaching. Once again students will be assessed with a common assessment and data will be collected that will add to the information already collected. The data will cause questions around expectations. Questions that will lead to more investigations into how can we improve the learning of these young readers. With the data, we have established a system benchmark for Grade 1 readers.

Another series of Lunch and Learns around other components of a balanced ELA program have started and teams are eager to learn more about the teaching of reading. We continue to read professionally as a large group and come together to talk about our reading. As I look round the table at our first "Reading Meeting" this year, I see new members that have joined the group, I see members that have been there from the onset and I see two Moms of newborns that **should** be on maternity leave. But because of the desire to grow professionally and the sense of satisfaction in the growth that has already been achieved, all want to continue.

### **Outcomes of the Professional Learning Community**

- Teachers are learners.
- Collaboration around effective teaching strategies.
- Increased knowledge of assessment and its supportive ongoing use in the classroom.
- Data: a source for reflection
- Isolation of the classroom diminished.
- Model for professional collaboration established
- Level of knowledge of the team dramatically increased.
- Classroom practice questioned

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## **VIGNETTE 6**

During the 1998-1999 school year, a Language Arts resource program, "First Steps" (developed by the Education Department of Western Australia) was introduced to the teachers of the Melville School Division. We were given an opportunity to peruse the material to check if it was compatible with the provincial Language Arts curriculum and also to decide if we would like to use this resource in our school division. After discussion with our staffs, the administrators and director decided to buy into the First Steps resources/program and the director approached the three school boards in our Division for financial support.

During July of 1999, three teachers, one from each Board and representing early elementary, middle years and high school, departed for Toronto for a three week training course. These three teachers then became the “focus” teachers for our school division when we implemented First Steps the following school year.

The focus teachers were responsible for planning and inservicing all K- 9 teachers and administrators in the Melville School Division. The focus teachers informed all administrators and the director of their plan for implementation of First Steps at one of our first administrators’ meetings in the fall of 1999. It was noted that in order to properly implement, learn and practice using the resource books and continuums of the First Steps program we were going to require a commitment of more than one school year. Therefore, two to three professional development days per school year were set-aside for First Steps for four years. The focus teachers were given extra preparation time within their teaching schedule (4 periods out of 36) to enable them to work together to plan for the professional development days and to be available to go into individual classrooms or schools as resource people. In the fall of 1999, we started to implement the Writing component of First Steps.

Once inservicing within the Division started, each school expanded upon the program at their own pace. At Davison School (a K-6 school with approx. 210 students and 12 staff), we decided to hold Breakfast Meetings to discuss issues, concerns and questions we had about First Steps. These meetings centered around themes such as clarifying the language used on the continuums, ideas for incorporating grammar skills, and sharing of what each of us was trying in our own classrooms. One of our most successful Breakfast meetings centered on the development of editing forms for writing at each grade level. Common editing notations were agreed upon, and the five-step editing form (hand) was used. As the students moved from grade to grade they realized that the procedures for editing in writing remained the same with appropriate additions at each grade level being added.

Expectations in the procedure of writing remained very similar from grade to grade and this became very powerful for our students.

Davison School also started an extra-curricular noon hour writing club. School developed editing forms were used at these sessions as well. Students’ writing from this club has been sent to various contests and publications each year and we have been fortunate to have had several students’ work win national and international contests as well as being chosen for publication in provincial, national and international magazines, journals, and books.

As we had made a long-term commitment to implementing the First Steps program before starting, we had a lot of leeway as a Division, to go back and ‘tweak’ the program to suit our needs as we continued to learn more about it. An example of this was our Division’s agreement to focus on specific writing genres at each grade level. At the beginning of implementing the writing component, teachers were trying to teach all

genres to each grade at a mastery level. We soon realized that this was not going to be successful, so as a Division, it was decided which writing genres would be introduced, focused on or extended at each grade level. Genres taught in a previous grade would be reviewed and other writing genres would be introduced, but for the most part, the specific genre identified for each grade would be concentrated on. By doing this, we were able to ensure that most students would be fairly proficient at using a specific genre at the end of each grade.

Support from the Boards of Education and Central Office were evident as we continued with the implementation of First Steps over the next four years. Schools requested and were granted half days to work on the annual process of completing each student's continuums, or to develop specific strategies to enhance the First Steps program. The planning and preparation time allotted the focus teachers the first year of implementation continued throughout the four years. Liaison teachers from each school within the Division were appointed to work with the focus teachers to ensure that every school was receiving information and completing yearly First Steps goals and expectations. The focus teachers reported to the Director and Administrators to ensure that expectations were understood and followed through at the school level. Administrators were expected to make sure that individual teachers' yearly plans included references to First Steps components and that writing genres for the grade were noted as being reviewed, focused on, or extended. A newsletter, also developed by the focus teachers, was sent to the schools as well, highlighting timelines and goals for each of the components of First Steps. An expectation of yearly long term and short term goals have also ensured that each school continues to incorporate First Steps practices into their planning. As part of our August orientation procedures for teachers new to our Division, the First Steps focus teachers introduced them to this initiative and then followed the initial session with several half days throughout the school year.

At Davison School we have planned meetings to work with teachers new to our staff to ensure their understanding of First Steps and how it works with the Language Arts curriculum. After school sessions with staff from all grade levels have allowed us to continue to develop and build on specific components of First Steps so that common expectations are found throughout the grade levels. As we continue to use the First Steps resources, we continue to modify how we teach using the most successful strategies from each classroom as an expectation for all classrooms. In June of 2003, Davison School developed a basic spelling format using First Steps that has become the expected framework for teaching spelling for all grades in this school. This format includes expectations such as how student's individual spelling lists are developed, specific spelling strategies taught throughout the grades, and common procedures used and built upon at each grade level. The teachers at Davison School realized that in order to incorporate the spelling program the way that we wanted to; extra help in the class was going to be needed. Teachers also wanted more classroom help when teaching Reading and Writing, especially during reading and writing conferencing time. We recognized that although many strategies had been tried, no one on staff was satisfied with how reading and/or writing conferencing was working in their classrooms.

It was decided that myself, as Principal, would use my allotted class time (25%) to work in the classrooms, with the teachers to ensure that procedures such as spelling, conferencing and guided reading could more easily occur. All procedures and strategies used in the classrooms are also followed in the Resource Room. Teacher Assistants in our school are aware of the procedures as well, and use them when working with individual students.

The First Steps program with its four components of Spelling, Writing, Reading, and Oracy has proven to be a valuable resource to enhance our Language Arts curriculum. Davison School's ability to take the information provided at Professional Development days concerning First Steps and implement the strategies to best meet our students' needs is an indication that effective program delivery can happen in small schools in rural Saskatchewan.

I feel that the following criteria were important in developing the framework for successful implementation of this or any program:

- All staff had a chance for input in choosing the program
- There was a long term commitment made by the Boards involved for financial support of the program
- There was a long term commitment by the Professional Development committee to include two to three days each year for the continued expansion, review and renewal of the program
- There was an expected responsibility of teachers, administrators, director and Boards to ensure that the yearly and long term goals of implementing the program were met
- Extra inservicing during August orientation and continuing throughout the year was and continues to be provided to teachers new to the Division
- The Principal must take the role of instructional leader making sure that he/she fully understands the program and then leading by example. This would mean that the Principal would incorporate the program in his/her own class, or become a team teacher within the other classrooms of the school.
- Schools need to recognize that any new program takes time to implement and as staffs work through the new program acknowledging that changes in expectations will occur as they gain a more thorough understanding of the program
- As a school or division continues to modify or expand a new program, it's important to remember that everything we do should enhance the students' learning. As Davison School staff continued to use and adapt the First Steps program we continued to ask ourselves if what we were doing or how we were teaching was going to be better for our students

By working together at the school level, Davison staff has been able to take a Divisional initiative and expand on it to not only enrich the learning of our students, but also to develop as a true learning community. The process that was used with this particular initiative showed us the value of having the time to properly initiate and establish any new program or long-term goals. As teachers we have had the opportunity to try new ideas, expand our teaching strategies, and modify how we teach various concepts. Our students have gained through our efforts and continue to achieve the high expectations we have set for them. Learning for all, continues.

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### **VISION -TO-PRACTICE: THE ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS**

“Success is not whether an innovation itself has been implemented but what has actually happened for students. Carl Glickman believes that the litmus test for a good school is not its innovation but rather the solid, purposeful, enduring results it tries to obtain for its students.” ( Schmoker, 1999)

**The board must first start with a destination in mind, its vision.** It will be the compass which will guides the board, staff and community from its current reality to the new destination. Creating and following the vision is not a check-off activity but one which challenges and stretches everyone involved in closing the gap between present reality and the new outcomes, with enthusiasm and urgency. A clear vision is characterized by simplicity, is compelling, measurable and clearly understood by all, in one sentence. The role and power of the vision in planning and implementing is best summarized by Joel Barker;

“ Vision without action is merely a dream;  
Action without vision just passes the time;  
Vision with action can change the world.”

**In order to transfer the vision into action, clear and measurable goals are required which help maximize the implementation effort, resources and student learning.**

Goals provide the vehicle for focusing our instruction, staff, development and resources towards measured outcomes. Using student achievement system goals all actions and resources can be aligned to accomplish the vision to strengthen the small school.

Goals are not about effort and activity, but focus on student learning. An example of a typical goal used by a board is provided.



GOAL: Our small schools will access online courses.

ACHIEVEMENT: Each school accessed 2 to 4 courses this year.

The goal has been achieved, but what were the intended results? Student learning was not the prime purpose of the goal, only the activity. As a result the board is no wiser as to whether this strategy strengthened the small schools. As a goal is being formulated, board members must ask, "What will this do for our student learning?" Criteria for shaping goals for student results are: Is it making a difference for students? Is it measurable and doable? Does it create a sense of urgency? Is there a visible result? Samples of goals are found in appendices B.

**A results-driven process that navigates continuously towards the division's expectations is a successful planning and implementation process.** Results are student-focused, reporting on the benefits rather than efforts, results being the desired end-product as evidence that something did or did not work. This is an action-oriented process involving the board, staff and public to improve practices. Goals and measurement systems which focus on results for students are agreed to by all before implementation begins. Data is used to guide the continuous improvement effort. The feedback from the data collected provides the direction as to what to do next and how to improve the current practices. Regular monitoring, followed by adjustments, ensures success on a large scale. The Study-Plan-Do-Check model is found in appendices A.

**Data collection is an integral and necessary part of the planning and implementation process.** The focus on data collection and analysis has been the missing component in the process. Groups can use data collection at the beginning of the process, when implementing parts of the plan, updating the plan or for reporting. Collection of data should be a planned, purposeful process. The data will also guide the division in developing goals. The assessment data will come from many sources. The assessments instruments and methods will be aligned with the type of data required.

**Professional development is a critical management strategy; it's the means to achieving success in strengthening small schools.** Teachers will require new skills and process if the purpose is to be achieved. Research shows a clear connection between the quality of the teacher's skill and high student achievement; a forty percent variation in achievement is related to a teacher's expertise. In many systems staff development is optional, leaving learning up to individual interest and initiatives. To be effective, professional development must be targeted and directly related to teaching practices which will significantly improve student learning. This can not happen by chance, it must be aligned with curriculum, assessment, instruction and goals of the division. Responsibility for professional development cannot be left solely with the teaching staff; it also lies with the board.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

GOOD SPIRIT SCHOOL DIVISION NO. 204

[2maseres@mcs.msd.sk.ca](mailto:2maseres@mcs.msd.sk.ca)

**In small schools student learning must be focused on the core learning objectives and not designed around grades.** The administrator and each teacher teach a multitude of subjects and grades, many at the same time, as well as having many extra-curricular responsibilities. The school, due to its location, may lack the wide variety of resources accessed by urban schools. Distance to other schools makes staffs of small schools insular and communication a problem. These schools require more planning time for their teachers, restructuring of the curriculum and the use of different practices to meet the challenges encountered. School division which fail to make these changes will make the implementation of new curriculum and new instructional practices impossible.

**The role of central office leadership is to deliver the resources and support necessary to strengthen the school. This can be accomplished in the following ways:**

1. Develop leadership teams from within the division's staff; no single person has expertise in all areas. This leadership can aid the school in implementing new processes, instructional materials, teaching strategies, benchmarking and structuring curriculum.
2. Develop a teacher network, a community of learners, at the division level, that facilitates communication about ideas, knowledge, skills and experiences. Teachers working together can access resources and skills not available at their own school, when developing lessons, units, assessments and instructional approaches.

## LINKS TO SOURCES

CHINOOK SCHOOL DIVISION NO. 211

[tlotfsgard@chinooksd.ca](mailto:tlotfsgard@chinooksd.ca)

GOOD SPIRIT SCHOOL DIVISION No. 204

[2maseres@mcs.msd.sk.ca](mailto:2maseres@mcs.msd.sk.ca)

3. Create a community of learners in the school where teachers collaborate and communicate regularly. Groups of teachers focus on student work by collecting data and through analysis change teaching practices where required to improve student learning.

## LINKS TO SOURCE

GOOD SPIRIT SCHOOL DIVISION NO.204

[2maseres@mcs.msc.sk.ca](mailto:2maseres@mcs.msc.sk.ca)

- Be responsible for gathering and co-ordinating the review of the student achievement data, as well as monitor and ensure that the measurable goals are the basis for improvement. Through the analysis of data the leadership will determine what staff development is needed and where resources are required.

Financial resources are scarce, but the plan should not be budget driven. Learning and goals should drive the plan. Budgeting activities will be aligned with them.

## APPENDIX A

### STUDY-PLAN-DO-CHECK MODEL

#### STUDY:

- EXTERNAL REFLECTING
    1. What do we need to know?
    2. What are the trends and issues in education today?
    3. What strategies and innovations have other school divisions employed?
    4. What new ideas do we need to explore?
  
  - INTERNAL REFLECTING
    5. Where are we today?
      - Enrollment projections
      - Staffing
      - Financially
      - Programs
      - Students graduated from post-secondary
      - Student achievement
      - Facilities
      - Special needs
- SELECT INSTRUMENTS  
WHICH WILL PROVIDE  
DATA ON EACH  
INDICATOR.
- COLLECT DATA.  
THE DATA WILL BE USED  
TO HELP DEVELOP  
VISION AND THE GOALS
- i) What is working? What are the indicators?
  - ii) What needs to work better?
  - iii) What are the barriers to strengthening the school?
  - iv) What is driving us forward?

#### PLAN:

- VISION CREATION
  6. Where do we want to go immediately?
  7. What will we continue to do?
  8. What new thing do we want to do for students?
  9. What is the divisions future?
  10. What is our destination?

- GOAL DEVELOPMENT

11. What can we do to close the gap between the future and the present situation?
12. What are the differences between the future plan and where we are at the present?
13. What goals are needed to close the gap?
14. What learning results will each goal create for students?
15. What assessment strategies will be needed to measure the result?
16. What strategies are need to accomplish the result?

USE DATA COLLECTED TO DETERMINE THE GAP BETWEEN THE CURRENT SITUATION AND THE PROPOSED FUTURE.

**DO:**

(IMPLEMENT THE PLAN)

**CHECK:**

- EVALUATION

17. What learning results do we expect?
18. How will we know if the goals have been met or are on track to be met?

DEVELOP BASELINE DATA

- REFLECTING AND REVISING

19. What has been accomplished?
20. What changes do we still have to make to the plan?
21. Are the time lines realistic or are revisions necessary?

USE DATA FROM THE FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF THE INDICATORS.

**NOTE: Adapted from the effective schools writing and NCRTEC' Guiding question and Resources for Technology Planning.**

**NOTE: Prior to implementation, the instruments and what will be evaluated will be agreed to by all involved.**

## APPENDIX B

### GOAL SAMPLES

THE PERCENTAGE OF OUR STUDENTS WHO WILL BE AT OR ABOVE THE QUALITY STANDARD ( mean score , percentage, etc.) IN PROBLEM-SOLVING WILL INCREASE FROM

-----AT THE END OF 2004

-----AT THE END OF 2005

AS ASSESSED BY -----(assessment instrument used or rubric)

ALL STUDENTS IN THE CONTENT AREAS WILL ACQUIRE ESSENTIAL INFORMATION SKILLS SUCH AS ACCESSING, PROCESSING, COMMUNICATING AND USING TECHNOLOGY TOOLS EFFECTIVELY AND WILL DEMONSTRATE THEIR ABILITY IN THE SKILLS THROUGH ASSESSMENT -----(assessment instruments used)

**NOTE :Adapted from Schmoker's Results (1999)**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many rural and smaller urban boards of education and their administrators have an immediate and growing challenge to deliver effective instructional programming, challenges due to declining enrollments and shifting population. This paper will focus on how to meet the challenges by outlining the conditions which must be in place, identifying effective planning and implementation process and providing examples of creative strategies used by other Saskatchewan school divisions and other school systems to meet these challenges. The information provided can be used as a resource guide by boards in developing their own plan to deliver effective programming to strengthen their small schools.

Board and administrator involvement and leadership are critical if a small school is to be effective. If the organizational leaders do not understand and support the plan developed to make the small school effective, successful implementation will be impossible. Effective small schools focus on only a few goals, and are proactive about improving student learning. The board's view on how learning should be organized will influence the strategies adopted, however the focus on goals, teamwork, and the use of assessment data will be critical if the school is to be effective.

Effective implementation requires a change in culture, one that encourages people to think differently about teaching and the learning process. Professional development and positive role modeling are important in changing attitudes and the culture. Also, the garnering of outside support will help the implementation proceed, build enthusiasm and participation to ensure success.

Vision and goals should drive the plan. The plan is likely to be more successful when the division and/or school knows exactly where it is going. Planners set priorities, follow timelines and monitor the progress. Yet, flexibility is necessary; one should expect the unexpected, while be steadfastly committed to the process, focusing on improving student learning.

Effective program delivery strategies are required to bring the vision to reality. Ten school divisions have contributed a strategy or strategies. These strategies have been put into the following categories: technological, utilizing current resources and organizational restructuring.

“Tools and strategies offer many promises but it is the people and the processes that deliver the real solutions.” (Anonymous)

Using this idea many school divisions have met the challenge and are creating effective small schools which focus on student learning results.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

### 1. General Strategies

#### **Saskatchewan Schools Trustees Association: [ssta@ssta.sk.ca](mailto:ssta@ssta.sk.ca)**

- SSTA Report #00-02: New Strategies for Program Delivery in Saskatchewan
- SSTA Report #00-01: Diversifying Opportunities for Learning: Program Delivery in Saskatchewan
- SSTA Report #99-08: Alternative School Year Organizations
- SSTA Report #97-10: The Curriculum Management Plan
- SSTA Report #97-02: Strengthening Strategies For Small Schools
- SSTA Report #95-10: Distance Education Network
- SSTA Report #95-11: Innovations Network
- SSTA Report #95-06: Small Schools Network
- SSTA Report #93-02: Grouping Students for Instruction: A Summary of the Research

#### **Small Schools Network: [www.smallschoolsnetwork.org](http://www.smallschoolsnetwork.org)**

### 2. Technological Strategies

#### **Alberta Government: [www.education.gov.ab.ca](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca)**

- Improving Student Learning in Grade Nine Mathematics
- Technology Implementation Studies ( Best Practices)

#### **Alberta School Board Association: [www.asba.ab.ca](http://www.asba.ab.ca)**

- Small Rural Schools (Final Report) 2001

#### **Saskatchewan Government: [www.centralischool.ca](http://www.centralischool.ca)**

#### **Saskatchewan School Trustees Association: [ssta@ssta.sk.ca](mailto:ssta@ssta.sk.ca)**

- SSTA Report #02-01: Online Education: Implementation Guidelines for Boards

#### **Virtual Schools: [www.futured.com](http://www.futured.com)**