

# Premier's Board of Education Award For Innovation and Excellence in Education

November 2006

- I. **School Division:** Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13
- II. **Chairperson:** Mr. Dan Danielson
- III. **Director of Education:** Dr. Jim Jutras
- IV. **Program Nominated:** *Literacy for Life*

The following provides a brief description of the three major components of *Literacy for Life*:

### *Early Literacy*

The *Early Literacy* component involves all of our Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers and is intended to capitalize on children's capacities to learn language at a very early age. Supported with intensive and sustained staff development (approximately 10 days in a school year), teachers receive training in powerful teaching and learning models, with a focus on the Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM). PWIM is a structure that begins with students 'shaking out' the words representing the objects in a large picture. Students then practice the new words by spelling them, speaking them aloud, and reading them; they learn to organize words into categories; and, finally, they use the words in sentences and paragraphs. The learning models used in our classrooms have been shown to be successful in the teaching of young children to become accomplished language learners.

### *Read to Succeed*

*Read to Succeed* is aimed at helping over-aged beginning readers in Grades 4 - 12 develop their reading skills and, at the same time, experience success as readers - many for the first time. Most of the students arrive in *Read to Succeed* with well-developed aversions toward reading and writing and, because of this, tend to display considerable resistance to language instruction. Each of our schools has established at least one *Read to Succeed* classroom of approximately 15 students who

receive literacy instruction for 90 minutes per day beyond the typical English Language Arts classes. Through sustained staff development (approximately 10 days in a school year), *Read to Succeed* teachers build their capacities to use powerful instructional strategies that help our young people not only learn to read, but to become more confident learners.

### *Just Read*

*Just Read* is a Kindergarten to Grade 12 component that encourages a partnership between schools and the wider community for the purpose of increasing our students' out-of-school reading. The intent of *Just Read* is to build the lifelong habit of reading and instill the love of reading in our students. *Just Read* encourages parents, staff, and community members to spend time reading with their children, to model the behaviours of good readers, and to motivate students to increase their reading. Students establish individual reading goals and contribute to school and division-wide goals relative to the number of books read outside of school. Schools initiate a variety of activities to support students' reading and they visually display their progress toward specified targets. The school division promotes reading in the community through television and radio advertisements, and through partnerships with businesses and the Public Library. In May of 2006, our school division hosted the First Annual Literacy Conference which included sessions for students, a Literacy Banquet, and a business luncheon.

## V. Goals of the Program

*Literacy for Life* is designed to help students develop strong literacy skills with the overall goal of **all students reading at or above grade level**. This initiative engages all members of our learning community to work together to help students become better readers and writers by:

- providing effective, research-based literacy instruction in our classrooms,
- building teachers' capacities to use the most powerful teaching and learning strategies through intensive and sustained staff development,
- collecting and analyzing a broad range of student learning data in an effort to monitor and measure our results, and
- promoting a lifelong reading habit in our community.

## **VI. Brief Description of How the Program Addresses the Award Criteria**

### ***1. Board involvement/influence/participation in the innovation***

The Board of Education has taken a direct role in all aspects of the *Literacy for Life* initiative. In 2004, the Board sponsored a series of focus groups consisting of members from the public and staff. These groups were presented with data related to a number of potential priorities for the school division. Following the group dialogue related to the data, all groups indicated strong support for literacy as an area of focus for the Board. The Board subsequently identified *Literacy for Life* as one of its two long-term priorities for the school division.

In each of the last three annual budgets, the Board authorized considerable resources to support the *Literacy for Life* priority, including:

- resources related to the professional development for all Kindergarten - Grade 3 and *Read to Succeed* teachers (i.e., substitute costs and external consultant costs),
- materials and supplies required for the initiative (e.g., pictures, books, assessments), and
- the hiring of literacy teachers and a *Literacy for Life* Facilitator.

The Board monitors the progress of the initiative on an on-going basis. This monitoring includes monthly updates from Administration at public Board meetings with a final progress report presented at the end of each school year. The Board makes a concerted effort to communicate to the public regarding the results of the initiative in the following ways:

- year-end progress reports and information regarding the initiative are posted on the public web-site,
- highlights of the initiative are provided to the media,
- results of the initiative are presented in the Board's Annual Report,
- trustees speak about the results of the initiative and advocate for supports for literacy at many informal and formal meetings, and

- window displays in the Board's central office are used to highlight and celebrate the initiative.

Board members also take an active role in promoting reading by visiting classrooms to read to students and by attending special school assemblies related to the literacy focus. In fact, they created their own poster showing Board members reading their favorite books (attached)!

## ***2. Innovative nature of the program***

Many successful improvement efforts identified in both Canadian and American research are limited to change within a school or a small number of schools. *Literacy for Life* is about implementing a **division-wide change effort** in a large urban school division. It is no small feat to focus an entire school division toward a new and sustained direction. Related to this division-wide movement, is the fact that this initiative was designed as a **long-term commitment to change** (three to six years). Many school divisions, including Saskatoon Public Schools, have been guilty of jumping on the latest change fad without investing the energy and time to create long-term results.

*Literacy for Life* is unique for our school division, and likely most other Saskatchewan school divisions, in that we are monitoring and measuring the results of our actions with the **use of student achievement data**. In the past, many of our change efforts were guided by what was considered effective practice, but we did not purposefully measure the results of our actions to determine if what we were doing was having the intended result. With *Literacy for Life*, we determined our goals at the front-end and developed an assessment plan used to monitor progress on a regular basis. This approach has had significant impact on our staff, parents, and Board members. The data clearly tell us that our students are making tremendous gains as a direct result of our focus and implementation efforts.

We are exceedingly proud of the **positive student achievement gains** that we have realized in the past two years of our literacy initiative. Never in our history, has our school division had student results that indicate such significant and, in some cases, profound growth. We continuously receive testimonials from teachers who indicate their amazement with their students' achievements. Our parents have been overwhelmingly supportive of the changes they have observed in their children. Without a doubt, this aspect is our greatest accomplishment (*note: our student results are described in item #6 below*).

An innovative and important aspect of the initiative's success has been the **intensive and sustained staff development process**. In the past, our school division has provided teachers with one or two days of inservice prior to implementing a new change effort. With *Literacy for Life* we bring teachers of Kindergarten, Grades 1 to 3, and *Read to Succeed* together on a monthly basis to participate in ongoing development that is aimed at increasing their instructional repertoires while creating a culture of collective inquiry. Teachers attend approximately 10 days of training in their first year, six days in their second year, four days in their third year, and so on. An essential feature of the staff development program includes the submission of a monthly log which requires teachers to monitor their students' learning between training sessions. These logs are used to support the self reflection process and to design the workshops to meet the needs of teachers.

Integral to our initiative has been the **leadership** provided by external experts/consultants (Drs. Bruce Joyce and Emily Calhoun). We recognized early in the planning stages that we required assistance from those who have extensive experience and research backgrounds in the development of successful change initiatives. While we are currently moving toward independence from our external consultants, we know that they have played an invaluable role in the success of our students and our staff. We have also come to understand the importance of the collective and integrated leadership within the school division - from our Board, our teachers, our school-based administrative staff, and our senior administrative staff. When the leadership is aligned to a school division priority, we send powerful messages to our staff and community about what is important.

Given the nature of student transfers on and off reserve schools, the *Literacy for Life* initiative has also led to an important **First Nations partnership**. As of this school year, 17 teachers and teacher associates from the Whitecap, Mistawasis, and Yellow Quill reserve schools will participate with teachers from Saskatoon Public Schools in all staff development sessions held throughout the school year. This allows all participants to share their successes and challenges, and to develop collaborative networks with each other as they build their capacities to use powerful teaching and learning models.

### ***3. Sustainability of the innovation***

As previously indicated *Literacy for Life* was designed as a long-term commitment to change (three to six years). We are currently entering our third year of implementation and recognize that we will likely require the full six years, and perhaps more, to fully institutionalize the magnitude of change that is required to reach our goal of all students reading at or above grade level. We believe that this long-term commitment will assist with sustaining our student achievement results.

True change does not happen without dramatic cultural change in the organization; when the culture changes in a positive direction you have a sustained school improvement initiative. The culture of our school division is changing as a direct result of the *Literacy for Life* initiative. These cultural changes are benefiting our students and their learning, are connecting us more closely to our community, and are strengthening our school division as a learning organization. In particular, our culture is beginning to change in the following four ways:

- Our school division is focused on our purpose – inspiring learning. This renewed focus is contributing to a stronger sense of identity. We have a better sense of who we are and what we stand for. We have a better understanding of our place in the wider community.
- Our teachers are modeling lifelong learning through the continuous study and practice of new learning models.
- We are measuring the effectiveness of our initiatives and actions relative to our intended outcomes.
- The division-wide focus on literacy has instilled a culture of inquiry among all of our teachers. They are learning to inquire into assessment data to find new ways of supporting students' learning.

One of the strategies that we incorporated from the outset of the initiative was to identify a cohort of master teachers, known as our Literacy Teachers. These teachers receive intensive and continual training in the teaching of reading/writing and in leading staff development. In this, our third year, our Literacy Teachers are assuming significant leadership of the staff development program for all teachers. In addition to providing the training for teachers, this cadre of leaders teach half time in *Read to Succeed* classrooms to ensure that they have practical experience with the aspects of literacy that will be addressed in the workshops. The development of these teachers will allow us to move forward with the

literacy initiative, independent from our initial reliance on external consultants.

The sustainability of the initiative depends greatly on many levels of leadership. Our Board's unwavering commitment to *Literacy for Life* and our senior administrators' active role in facilitating the literacy initiative ensure that literacy remains a strong priority for the school division. School-based administrators were involved from the start in the planning and implementing of the literacy initiative. Their leadership within our schools is essential for achieving a sense of ownership by our staff for the initiative - an element that is necessary to ensure sustainability. The leadership of many of our teachers also contributes to ensuring that literacy remains a priority in our classrooms.

As a school division, we have learned many valuable lessons regarding the implementation of a district-wide change initiative. These lessons not only assist us in sustaining the literacy initiative, but will also be helpful in the design of new priorities for the school division.

#### ***4. Cost of the innovation related to the benefits achieved***

The total cost of implementing *Literacy for Life* is approximately 1% of the Board's entire budget. The funding is used to support the following:

- resources for the intensive and extensive staff development program for more than 300 teachers per year, including substitute costs to release teachers for workshops and costs associated with the external consultants who assist with the training and planning of the initiative;
- the materials and supplies, including the pictures used for PWIM, assessment materials, and books; and
- additional staff, including 10 literacy teachers, one facilitator, and increased school-based staffing to support *Read to Succeed* sections.

This is a significant expenditure in that Boards of Education do not typically allocate this level of funding toward a learning initiative. However, the resources allocated to *Literacy for Life* have resulted in tremendous achievements, including:

- students reading more and developing stronger literacy skills,
- struggling readers making great gains in their reading skills,
- teachers adding powerful learning models to their repertoires, and
- positive changes in the organizational culture.

There is definitely an associated cost with implementing a change initiative of the magnitude of *Literacy for Life* across an entire school division. Considering the achieved results (see section #6 for more detail) and the impact of such results on students' future learning, the costs associated with the literacy initiative are clearly a wise investment.

The literature often refers to the dollars saved in social safety nets and justice programs when money is spent on investing in children. If this is truly the case, then we can say with confidence that we are saving future governments large sums of money by investing in today's young children. Furthermore, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (May 2005) found that 42% of adult Canadians lack the basic literacy skills needed to participate in a knowledge-based economy and society. This study further indicates that adults who can read, achieve higher career and health levels compared to those who cannot read. Anticipated benefits to future generations may some day be attributed to the wise governance of the Board of Education for Saskatoon Public Schools.

While there are costs related to the literacy initiative, never before have we been able to cite with assurance that our change efforts have had such dramatic impact on student achievement. In an external report (May 2005), Dr. Joyce (our external consultant) stated that, in one year, the school division came to the forefront in terms of staff development and school improvement. He suggests that this achievement "is due to the divisional leadership and the visible fiscal and spiritual leadership of the trustees." He further states in a 2006 report, that he "is not aware of any school system in United States or Canada that is doing a more thorough job of trying to improve literacy."



## **5. Client support for the innovation**

As part of our assessment of the literacy initiative, we have gathered perception data from our parents, staff and when appropriate, students. Parents express overwhelming support for the initiative and speak to the increase in confidence that they notice in their children. Students in *Read to Succeed* comment on having a second chance to learn how to read. Our staff often speak about the extra effort required to change their instructional practice and the great pride they have in their students' achievement. Client support for *Literacy for Life* is best expressed through the following parent, student, and staff testimonials:

### **From parents of Kindergarten students:**

*I am sure my child [in Kindergarten] is reading as well as my daughter [who is] most of the way through Grade 1. There is nothing he won't try to read.*

*[She] is always so excited when they start a new picture and she's eager to tell us what her sentence was. She recognizes words from the picture outside of school. The literacy initiative has instilled a love for reading in my daughter at a young age which has already crossed over into a passion for learning.*

### **From parents of Grade 1 students:**

*I appreciate the hard work displayed by the teaching staff of the school which, combined with the new literacy initiative, has greatly enhanced my child's reading. Well done!*

*"Our child has developed a LOVE of reading this year. The literacy for life program combined with our teacher's teaching has been amazing."*

### **From parents of Grade 2 students:**

*My daughter is a rather reluctant reader and I do not think she would be at her current skill level without a program like PWIM and the dedication of her teachers.*

*Our son enjoys reading and reads willingly as a result of the teaching he has had. He has benefited from being able to have a part in his learning using the learning models in Literacy for Life rather than be constrained within a reading/reader program. The vocabulary is flexible to the students' needs and interests. He doesn't view reading as a single subject but as a tool for communicating and exploring his world.*

**From parents of students in *Read to Succeed*:**

*[Read to Succeed] has given my son much more confidence in himself and he sees for himself that if you are persistent, you can and do succeed.*

*Read to Succeed is the best program ever. Some kids don't realize what it means [to read] but they can now see things easier than before and what is most important is that all these things they do [in Read to Succeed] become a pleasure ... in this way, it is very helpful for parents too.*

**From students in *Read to Succeed*:**

*This [Read to Succeed] makes me feel special and the chosen one.*

*Read to Succeed helped me. Since I've been here I'm starting to get better at reading and listening.*

*[Read to Succeed has helped me in my other classes] because [the teacher] makes me write faster and write words that are hard.*

**From teachers involved in the literacy initiative:**

*I was very leery at first but PWIM turned out to be a successful strategy for me and my students. I have found that it really works!*

*My weakest student in September, would almost be in tears attempting to read his new words. He is now confidently reading all of his PWIM words and sentences ... I am convinced that they believe they can read anything.*

*I have learned a great deal and wish that [PWIM] had been around when I began teaching. I can hardly wait to apply what I've learned [next year].*

*I think that setting aside a block of time dedicated to older beginning students makes a loud and clear statement that band-aid approaches don't work and that literacy is crucial.*

## **6. *Evidence of improved student achievement***

As previously indicated, the success of our students as a result of *Literacy for Life*, is our greatest accomplishment as a school division. That success is summarized in the following student achievement data:

### **Kindergarten Results**

Seventy-six percent of Kindergarten students knew all lower case alphabet letters at the end of June 2006 (note: for comparison purposes, only 38% of Grade 1 students, who did not have the literacy instruction, knew all lower case letters at the beginning of the 2006 school year). In addition, thirty-six percent of Kindergarten students were reading at or above the beginning reading level (i.e., reading text that is independent of illustrations), by the end of June 2006.

### **Grade 1 Results**

Grade 1 students, on average, scored at the 2.3 grade level equivalency (GLE) in June 2006. The typical reading level for Grade 1 North American students at this time of year is 2.0 GLE. In other words, our students scored as if they had been in school for an additional three months. Compared with our baseline data (i.e., test results of Grade 1 students prior to the literacy initiative), there was a seven month difference in achievement between the June 2006 cohort and the June 2004 cohort (before *Literacy for Life*).

### **Grade 2 Results**

In March 2006, Grade 2 students achieved, on average, a reading level of 3.2 GLE. The typical reading level for Grade 2 North American students at that time of year is 2.7 GLE. In other words, our students scored as if they had been in school for an additional five months. A conservative estimate of June achievement is 3.5 GLE compared to the North American norm of 3.0 GLE.

### **Read to Succeed Results**

In June 2006, students in our *Read to Succeed* classes showed an average gain of 1.3 GLE during a one year time-frame. The typical growth for these students in the past has been about 0.6 (six months) GLE in the course of a year. In other words, many of these students who struggle with reading, more than doubled their reading gains in one school year.

## **Just Read Results**

Our students (and their families) have made tremendous progress with respect to out-of-school reading. From October 2004 to May 2005, students reported having read approximately 773,000 books. During the same time in 2005/06, students read just over 1.1 million books – a 42% increase. In addition, book circulation rates in our Kindergarten to Grade 8 Learning Resource Centres have increased by 15 percent.

## **VII. Concluding Remarks**

In two years, our school division has seen significant growth in our students' literacy skills and has gained tremendous support from our community for our literacy initiative. We have learned about powerful learning strategies; effective staff development; and, the energy and strategy required to implement and sustain large-scale change efforts. Our success is a result of the collective efforts and commitment of many people working toward a common goal. We are indeed proud of our accomplishments with *Literacy for Life*.