



Chief Zzeh Gittlit School Review Report

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School Principal: Steve Climie

Review Dates: May 16-18 2011

Date of Review Report: August 30, 2011

School Review Team:

Janet MacDonald, Coordinator, FNPPU, DOE

Katherine Mackwood, President YTA

Dianne Tait, School Council, Vanier Secondary School

Mike Woods, Superintendent, Area One DOE

Judy Arnold, Director Student Achievement, DOE

Meetings with the School included:

- School Principal
- Staff and students
- Stanley Njootli, Sr. VGG Department's ESW
- School Council
- Vuntut Gwitchin_Chief and Council
 - Tracy Rispin VGG Director of Education

School Context

The community of Old Crow lies within Vuntut Gwitchin traditional territory. Old Crow is a remote, fly-in community in northern Yukon, north of the Arctic Circle. According to the 2006 Census, 253 people reside in Old Crow. Chief Zzeh Gittlit School is committed to ensuring that the school has engaging, culturally relevant, and socially responsible conditions for learning for each student. The school is very proud of the strong connection with the local First Nation, the Vuntut Gwitchin. The enrolment is between 30 and 40 students the majority of whom are members of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation. The students have access to a rich natural environment within easy reach of our school. 2010-2011 is the second year of a three-year pilot program to develop, and deliver a land-based experiential program combining traditional Gwich'in culture with territorial academic learning outcomes. In order to graduate from high school, students must leave the community of Old Crow at the end of grade nine. Most students continue their secondary education (grades 10, 11, and 12) in Whitehorse.

School Norms and Culture:

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

Observations of the Team:

- The school is bright, open and well kept, there are banners and historic photos with messages from Elders,
 - The messages from the Elders are words of encouragement for students,
 - Most classrooms are named in Gwich'in language;
- Students appear happy and engaged and staff members are clearly dedicated to students and very positive about the school. One staff member commented that the school is the best it has been in a very long time with improvements in behaviour, attendance and focus on academics;
- The First Nations Education Support Worker has a large welcoming office adjacent to the principal. This serves as a visible indication of the respect for and the priority placed on First Nations culture in the school;
- Vuntut Gwitchin Chief and Council were largely positive about the progress that the school has made but would like to see increased cultural integration and more First Nations staff at the school as well as providing the skills needed for all students to be successful and have choices and opportunities in Old Crow and across the country;
- There is a holistic approach to learning, integrating social emotional and cultural development with academics and there is evidence of a growing focus on academic success and high expectations for each learner at the school,
 - Culture camp has functioned as a vehicle to connect curricular outcomes with First Nations culture across the entire school and staff and students work at using Gwich'in language during the culture camp;
- Staff, although concerned about improving outcomes for students, noted that most students appear to have a positive attitude toward school. Reading is improving, attendance is better and there is more family support.
 - However, it was suggested that frequent changes to staff could have significant impact on the sustainability of directions and create challenges related to addressing the diversity of student needs.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Given the number of new staff coming to the school in 2011-2012, it will be important for the school to clearly articulate the vision, values and approaches that have moved the school forward in recent years;
- Build on the excellent work done in the experiential program to further integrate First Nations culture with prescribed learning outcomes. As outlined in the school growth plan, ensure that the local First Nations perspectives is reflected in all curricular areas;
- Strengthen the focus on high academic achievement and continuous improvement for each student and build community understanding of the required skills, academic, cultural and the social emotional, supports that lead to success;
- Consider ways to involve School Council and the First Nations in the hiring process;
- Share the experiential approach to achieving learning outcomes with other schools, particularly the secondary school to which the students transition.

School and Community

Characteristics: In continuously improving schools, there is a shared commitment to success for each learner. Relationships are developed and maintained to support students. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture. The school collaborates and communicates in multiple ways about the work to support student learning. Input and dialogue is actively sought and valued.

Observations of the Team:

- The Team noted a growing sense of shared commitment to the success of each learner at the school. The school is eager to recognize community concerns, be inclusive, transparent and involve students.
 - Chief and Council would like to strengthen the relationship with the school so that everyone feels that they are involved in efforts to support the students;
- School Council members and parents who spoke with the Team felt welcome at the school;
- The school has benefited from VGG's development of community working groups or advisory committees that support the students. The working group to support cultural development includes Elders and heritage representatives;
- From discussions with Chief and Council and School Council, there was an interest was expressed in more storytelling, interactive learning, and more physical activity at the school. It was clear that there is a need to strengthen communications so that everyone understands what the school is doing to support learners,
 - For example, the community does not appear to have a clear understanding of how students are involved in physical education activities or the ways in which First Nations culture is integral to the school;
- A concern, mentioned by everyone that the Team spoke with, was related to the success of students at secondary school and the transition students undergo as they go to Whitehorse for grades 10 to 12,
 - Transition concerns included:
 - The lack of connection to family and community, especially when faced with pressure related to drugs and alcohol. It was noted that students who have family in Whitehorse or are billeted in homes appear to cope better,
 - The challenges of navigating a larger school and community including, the development of required academic skills, and the lack of options for students at the secondary level or if they return to the community before the completion of secondary school,
 - The number of students that drop out;
- The School Growth Planning Team (SGPT) includes representatives from the school staff, as well as the entire School Council. The school acknowledged that they do not have an elder on the team and that including the input of parents, elders and the wider community in the school growth planning process is an area that needs to be addressed;
- It was not clear how the students are involved in new initiatives, providing input on issues or participating in the school growth process.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Strengthen the connections to the parent community and First Nations Chief and Council so that everyone feels involved in the work of the school and understands the programs provided for students,
 - The school growth process and the School Growth Planning Team may be a vehicle to engage the wider community;
- Explore, with the community, creative ways to work together to engage students in physical activities, develop team sport skills, and experiences in the arts and applied skills;

- Work with the Department, the secondary school and VGG to:
 - Review, with the Department and the secondary school, the function of Gadzoosdaa in supporting students as well as parents including the development of access to electronic connections i.e. Skype or videoconference school to school to allow students in Old Crow to communicate regularly with parents,
 - Build a connection to the schools and students in Whitehorse by ensuring that all grade 7, 8 and 9 students visit Whitehorse each year. Students at the different grades could have different experiences i.e grade 7's get a tour of the city and connect with an elementary school. Grade 8 students visit the secondary school and join a grade 8 class for a few days, and grade 9's begin a class with Whitehorse students and continue the class virtually when they return to Old Crow,
 - Explore options for secondary students so they can go to Whitehorse, an alternate site or stay in the community and ensure that there are options available for those students who are unsuccessful in the “away from home” situation.;
- Engage students in the planning and evaluation of initiatives to support improved outcomes.

School Organization

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

Observations of the Team:

- The school has made exemplary progress in the integration of First Nations culture with prescribed learning outcomes,
 - The Old Crow Experiential project developed through Northern Strategy funding, has integrated prescribed outcomes with VG knowledge and perspective at the culture camp and students have been involved in workshops provided by scientists in area;
- The Gwich'in language classroom provides a culturally rich environment in which to learn the language. Locally made artwork on walls displays Gwich'in letters and sounds. The Gwich'in language phrase booklets create VGG heritage department for staff and student use are outstanding;
- To expand the global perspective of the students, the school working with School Council and VGG organizes a variety of experiences including:
 - Trips out of territory including Toronto and Vancouver Island,
 - Connections with geologists via videoconference to identify rocks,
 - Bringing former graduates to the school to talk to the grade 9's to help with the transition to Whitehorse;
- The school is actively using technology to engage students and support learning by:
 - Engaging students in literacy development in grades 7 to 9 by downloading novels onto i-pads donated by VGG,
 - Providing the grade 7, 8 and 9 class with laptops, which they kept when they transitioned to Whitehorse in grade 10,
 - Connecting with one Whitehorse secondary school for student video conferencing;
- To support social/emotional and academic development the school is considering a daily circle check-in process where students can share what is going on in their lives and in the community at the beginning of the day;
- Staff noted the need to provide early interventions for students as they enter school;
- Staff suggested that support from the Department was much appreciated but needed to be provided on a more reliable or scheduled basis and begin earlier in the year. Staff also commented on the valuable professional development provided by the Department. However, meetings in Whitehorse require a 4-day loss of significant student contact time resulting in unqualified substitute teachers often managing classrooms.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Build on the current work done to further organize the school and curricula to reflect the integration of cultural knowledge with Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOs);
- Review the organization of early education at the school. This may include exploring the possibility of all day Kindergarten for K-5s and Head Start or Learning Together programs for pre-school. Such initiatives will serve to enhance social/emotional development and readiness for academics;
- Work with the Department to explore ways to provide staff with professional development that reduces the time away from students;

- To support students going to Whitehorse for secondary school work with the Department and the receiving secondary school to establish a formal transition process, which includes:
 - Establishing the previously discussed three-year Whitehorse visiting program, Strengthening the opportunities to be part of Whitehorse classrooms through “sneak peeks” or video classes,
 - Initiating ongoing discussions about programs and strategies that support student success
 - Having students understand the programs and options available to them in Whitehorse i.e. CHAOS 10,
 - Establishing a clearly defined, collaborative protocol for the selection of courses that includes, staff for the sending and receiving schools and ESWs;
- Taking on the role of advocate for Old Crow, as part of the development of a rural strategy, work with the Department, the secondary schools, and VGG to explore all aspects of secondary programming. This includes:
 - Ensuring individualized support, counseling and mentoring are available to all students,
 - Providing access to residence activities including sports and workshops to increase confidence and organizational skills,
 - Expanding choices for students so that students might remain in the community, go to Whitehorse or have an individualized plan that combines the two to complete secondary school,
 - This includes exploring the viability of offering grade 10 for those students that decide to remain in their community,
 - Assessing the reasons behind drop outs in Whitehorse and remediating identified issues that have implications for Chief Zzeh Gittlit,
 - Providing access to distance learning for all students including those who have dropped out of school in Whitehorse.

School Processes and Progress

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

Observations of the Team:

- Improved student attendance and the recent focus on academics have resulted in many students working on appropriate grade level outcomes,
 - The small student population requires an individualized approach to monitoring progress over time;
- Evidence of student performance over time indicates that many students are not as successful as they might be at secondary school,
 - Chief and council, staff, parents and students are interested in improving outcomes. Of particular concern was the readiness of some students to leave a supportive home community to go to secondary school;
- Staff are beginning to use performance standards and criteria referenced assessments and some students are using self-assessment to identify ways to improve;
- The school growth plan reflects a commitment to looking at a variety of evidence, initiating strategic interventions and the monitoring of progress over the year.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Develop individual profiles to track the incremental progress of students;
- Further develop the use of formative and summative assessments to identify priorities to improve student outcomes through the school growth process,
 - Ensure that evidence used looks at social, emotional, cultural and academic progress including Gwich'in language development,
 - Ensure that interventions reflect the integration of cultural relevance and PLOs;
- Work with the Department to track students in secondary school and determine why some students are successful and some drop out and then work with the secondary school, parents, community, and the Department to take appropriate remedial action;
- Continue to refine the growth plan and the school growth process to include parents, students and community to address areas of highest priority to ensure improved student outcomes,
 - Assess current interventions for effectiveness.

Conclusions:

The Team was impressed with the openness of the staff and students and the progress made at the school in focusing on academic progress and the integrations of First Nations perspectives.

The team encourages the school to continue to work with the community to build understanding about and involvement in the work of the school. The team is confident that by deepening the current vision of cultural relevance, high expectations, and individualized approaches that outcomes for students will improve.

Practices to share:

- The Old Crow Experiential project which has integrated science outcomes along with Vuntut Gwitchin knowledge and perspective in a culture camp process that engages all students at the school on a three-year rotating basis

- The Gwich'in language and phrase booklets
- The advisory groups within the community that support cultural heritage and on the land initiatives