



Chief Zzeh Gittlit School Review Report May 2016

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School Principal: Eleanor Charlton

Date of Review: May 2-4, 2016

School Review Team:

Simon Blakesley, Director, Student Achievement/System Accountability, Yukon Education
Janet McDonald, Director, First Nations Programs and Partnerships Unit, Yukon Education
Shari Worsfold, Primary Consultant, Learning Support Services, Yukon Education
Liz Woods, Experiential Consultant, Learning Support Services, Yukon Education

Meetings with the School included:

- Students
- Former students
- Teachers and support staff
- School Council/VGFN Education Support Worker (ESW)
- School Administration

School Context

Chief Zzeh Gittlit School (CZGS) is committed to ensuring it provides each student with engaging, culturally relevant, and socially responsible conditions for learning.

The community of Old Crow lies within Vuntut Gwitchin traditional territory. Old Crow is a remote, fly-in community in northern Yukon, 112 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle. Approximately 245 people live in Old Crow. Between 25 and 35 students attend CZGS and most are members of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation.

CZGS has five combined grade classrooms – the Kindergarten classroom, the primary classroom, the intermediate classroom, the senior classroom, and the alternative learning centre for high school students. This year CZGS offers a full day Kindergarten for K5 students, with the option still available to K4s to attend every afternoon.

Students in Old Crow have access to a tremendously rich natural environment within easy reach of the school. Every year, the senior class goes out on the land to participate in the fall caribou harvest and the meat from this harvest is contributed to the school's hot lunch program, which runs from November to April. As well, every year, all CZGS students take part in the spring Culture Camp that delivers a land-based experiential program in honour of both traditional Gwitchin culture and knowledge and Yukon Territory academic learning outcomes.

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 staff is a cohesive, adaptable group of professionals who take a “we’re a team” approach to working together in support of student learning. Participants shared with the review team that this is a welcomed improvement from previous years: this sentiment was also echoed by School Council
- There is a warm, open, feeling to the school. There is open access to the school that sees workers from other government departments drop in to the staff room to visit. This approach contributes to a welcoming environment at CZGS
- Students who the team met with felt that their school was a nice place, and that they were supported by their teachers. Students shared relatively few things that they could suggest to make the school a better place. Students enjoy skating, snowshoeing, and especially the culture camp and its many activities
- A former student (now substitute teaching in the school) identified the importance of having key staff people who believed in their students’ abilities. Similarly, VGFN staff shared their view that students want to be at the school, that students are more confident than in past years, and that staff are passionate and want to be at the school
- There is a prominent, large display of Elders photos in the front foyer of the school, with messages from them on the importance of the land, education, and being respectful of one-another
- A new values and respect mural will be added to the front foyer in the near future to further complement the central meeting area of the school. This aligns with the aim to foster increased respect, virtues, and other characteristics which align with Gwitch’in values
- The team heard repeatedly of the strong successes of the spring culture camp. Students, staff, ESW, principal, and school council member all spoke to the dedicated efforts to make the camp a success, the wide range of culture and language activities, and the integrations of curriculum that were made during this valued community and school event
- Related to the successes above, the team also heard of the desire for more on the land activities to be interwoven into school event and activities throughout the year

- Teachers shared with the team that they feel supported by school administration with respect to professional development and projects that teachers might like to try. In this regard, the team felt that the school is a safe working community where risks can be taken, and that expectations for students are held high
- Staff members talked of their students with care, and readily advocate for them. The majority of students the team spoke with felt they have a “go-to” adult that they can connect with should they have a problem or concern. In some cases, this is due to family members working at the school
- Support staff with extensive experience at the school felt that the school has made large improvements over the past few years. Cultural activities are a strength, along with students receiving more 1:1 teaching support from staff members
- Classroom and hallways reflect projects which incorporate local knowledge and relevant learning activities (e.g. charting local snowfall and temperatures for Math, the retelling of local stories, and Heritage Fair projects displayed at the John Tizya Heritage Centre)

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Based on the successes of culture camp and other on the land activities, consider developing a scope and sequence continuum of activities and learning outcomes across all grade-levels. These experiences can then be linked to curriculum and resources, and serve as a guide for new staff in order to avoid duplication of learning activities from year to year
- Explore and consider ways to include more intensive immersion-based language activities both in and out of the school as a means to further promote Gwitch’in language acquisition
- Related to the above, the development of new activities to add to the already-successful repertoire of culture camp activities may help to continually “grow” the camp in ways that ensure its continued success and interest for students
- Continue to seek ways to bring Elders and community into the school as well as out on the land in order to benefit student learning and Gwitch’in language development
- Maintain the dedicated efforts towards making CZGS a welcoming and safe place for children

School and Community

Characteristics: In continuously improving schools build a shared commitment to success for each learner. The school collaborates with parents, students, school council, First Nations and community to support student learning. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture and the school communicates about progress and challenges in multiple ways.

Observations of the Team:

- There is a willingness and desire on the part of the community to help and provide support for on the land activities. The team heard of the substantial financial and staff contribution made by VGFN in support of the spring culture camp
- Staff members expressed a strong willingness to incorporate more First Nations language and culture into their planning and teaching, along with the need for more help and guidance from resource people to effect this
- Individual resource people from the community help at the school, and their skills are highly appreciated by the staff. This said, the team sensed as well as heard from School Council that community engagement in the school does not occur in a cohesive or uniform manner and is based on individual connections that have been developed
- Related to the above, the team heard that the principal can call a parent at any time and get immediate response and help. The school endeavours to keep lines of communication open both in routine and in difficult/challenging situations
- Staff members offer extra-curricular opportunities for students after school, and take students on longer-distance field trips to extend their learning. While the review was taking place, students were preparing to depart to Whitehorse and Vancouver for an extended trip
- The team heard, due to changes in personnel and a dissolution of local government, that there have been challenges with regards to maintaining strong contact with community and VGFN allies. This creates complications with regards to broader community involvement in the school, and limits the number of resource people who can assist the school in its work for students
- A concern shared with the team was the barrier to taking students on the land with community members created by Yukon Education's field trip policy. It was felt that this policy imposes norms that are not in alignment with community practices. Thus, these regulations get in the way of taking students out on the land, creating a sentiment of frustration at what is perceived to be an unnecessary obstacle

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Given that school council elections have occurred and VGFN has a newly elected government, in keeping with the growth plan goal of community engagement, use this opportunity to organize a working session at the beginning of the new school year to forge new relationships centered on community/school engagement and mutual support. From there, planning with regards to how best to mutually support each other could occur
- Consider holding student-led conferences at an off-school site in the community as a means to engage with a greater number of parents and provide students the opportunity to lead, show, and celebrate their own learning
- Continue the dedicated efforts to work with community partners to promote and deliver on the land and experiential activities that are engaging and integrate language and culture into relevant aspects of the curriculum
- Continue the thoughtful efforts to keep lines of communication open with parents in order to support students and families

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 team heard from staff that there are unified teaching approaches and resources employed across grade-levels in the aim to boost academic achievement for students. For example, Reading Power (fiction and non-fiction), Foundations, Handwriting Without Tears, Saxon Math, and the Hanen approach to literacy development were examples shared by teaching staff
- The school employs a part-time high school teacher who maintains an open door and a “drop-in” approach for high school-aged students wishing to work on their studies. A former student shared their perspective that having high school at CZGS was important though could be more structured in nature

- In order to provide learning support at the earliest age possible Kindergarten has been expanded to a full-day program, with K-4 in the afternoon in support of the school's growth plan goal #3. The team heard that this approach has been effective as half-day programming was inadequate to prepare students for grade 1
- With respect to transitioning students to high school in Whitehorse, the team gained further awareness of the complexity of ensuring student success in high school. The team heard of numerous activities employed to prepare students for the transition to Whitehorse schools. Multiple participants shared a range of strategies that could be deployed both in Old Crow and Whitehorse to help foster a successful transitions for students
- A classroom has been devoted to the creation of an applied skills and multi-purpose space. Students expressed appreciation for having this room to use for art and other hands-on activities. Destination Imagination has also been utilized to some degree
- Team members who have visited the school previously remarked on the focused efforts to purge redundant or outmoded resources. This has increased substantially the working space available in the school and made a substantial difference at CZGS
- In a similar manner, the kitchen area has also been made more usable and accessible as an educational space with a number of cooking work stations having been created
- The Industrial Education room is being made more functional, and the team heard from staff that there is an increased desire to utilize this space based on student interests
- In order to promote a close working relationship with staff and administration, the Education Support Worker (ESW) has an office directly next to the principal's office
- The open foyer and bright atrium used as a welcoming and open place to gather and eat lunch together
- CZGS is very well-maintained and kept very clean, even at times of year when there is a lot of mud and standing water in the area surrounding the school

Recommendations for moving forward:

- With support from Yukon Education, explore the potential for linkages to Wood Street Centre programs (e.g. CHAOS 9/10) as supports for students in their transition year to high school. Consider additional models that see students being exposed to more of the Whitehorse high school experience, as well as Whitehorse and Old Crow staff spending larger blocks of time in each other's context to promote greater understanding and awareness

- Continue the focus on balanced literacy and work with Curriculum Consultants to help all teachers understand the thinking strategies every student needs to know to become independent and proficient readers and writers. Extend and unify Balanced Literacy across all grade levels, integrating language and culture as the basis for writing and reading.
- Consider charting literacy achievement on a monthly basis to ensure growth and provide guidance and direction for instruction. Work with teachers to administer and interpret running records
- Given the resources already in place at CZGS, explore Project-based Learning and place-based learning as ways that support students to lead their own learning in experiential and inquiry-based ways
- Given the combination of multi-grade classes and staff turnover, consider the development of a checklist or sheet which indicates what each student has completed by year-end as a means of informing new staff and avoiding repetition of what has been taught

School Processes and Progress

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

Observations of the Team:

- Staff shared with the team a wide range of locally deployed assessments that they use to gauge learning levels and progress. This is, in part, due to concerns that large-scale external assessments may not necessarily be congruent with student learning at CGZS. Given the emphasis on assessment, the team sensed that staff have a strong understanding of individual learning needs and student progress
- Based on their understanding of student learning levels and needs, staff group students by ability and adjust these groups in order to best address student needs and improve outcomes

- Given the strong emphasis being placed on students needing support, the team wondered the extent to which the needs of students approaching, or at grade level, were being supported
- All staff attend School-Based Team (SBT) meetings to discuss student learning needs in order to be aware of and support all students at CZGS
- In its review of the 15-16 school growth plan, the team observed that the principal the planning team had employed research and relied upon the VGG Education Summit report “Honouring Choices and Inspiring Success” in order to include community priorities in its development
- Related to the above, the school growth plan indicates broad community and First Nations participation in the development of the plan. School Council expressed that they take the opportunity to contribute to the plan and feel that suggestions and changes are heard. A challenge shared with the team is the ability to carry a plan through to its end due to staff and administrator turnover

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue to employ a wide range of assessments as a means of understanding student achievement levels and areas of further need. Suggestions include charting writing growth by taking a monthly writing sample at the beginning of each month and using the BC Performance Standards to assess and chart student progress. Conducting running records on a monthly basis would also help to gauge student growth
- Review the ways in which students approaching or at grade-level are supported in order to ensure that they achieve to their potential

In conclusion

The review team was very pleased to visit Chief Zzeh Gittlit School and the community of Old Crow. Given the school’s remote location and air-only access, this creates a unique context with both distinct opportunities and challenges for the provision of education for students in this community.

The review team was impressed with the dedication of staff and their care for their students. The team-based approach of the staff is commendable, as is their strong desire to work with community allies to provide the most meaningful educational opportunities for students. At the time of the review a new school council had just been elected, and one evening during the review the VGFN Chief and Council elections were held. Nonetheless, the team was still able to connect with support members from VGFN and School Council. The team views these new elections as

an opportunity to forge new relationships and to plan ahead together as a school and community on behalf of students.

Working together and supporting one-another will be imperative to future educational successes. Balancing and integrating land-based activities, crucial to the fostering of language, culture, and identity, with preparation for educational and personal fulfilment at the high school level remains a central challenge requiring a team-approach by school, families, Yukon Education, the Vuntut Gwitch'in First Nation, and community allies.

Practices to share:

- The school and community efforts to hold an extensive culture camp with many opportunities for students to use Gwitch'in language and integrate land-based activities into curriculum
- The development of a team-based approach to staff working together on behalf of students and their families
- Multi-age ability groupings that allow students and teachers to work together across grade-levels
- The implementation of full-day Kindergarten as a means to prepare students adequately for Grade 1
- The creation of a multi-purpose space for students that allows for art and other applied activities to take place in a workable environment

Considerations for Yukon Education

- Explore English as a Second Dialect (ESD) training and resources to help meet the needs of students
- Review with the school the freight allowance allocated to the school given the high cost of shipping to Old Crow
- Consider arranging education consultant visits at the beginning of the school year (rather than at the end) in order that teachers are better-equipped to work with their students as the year progresses
- Continue to encourage key resource people at the high school level to spend a week-long visit to Old Crow in order that they experience the

- Review the need for a therapeutic counsellor position at the school to provide meaningful support for students who have experienced trauma
- Review the current administration allocation for the school, based on observations of staff regarding the workload of a principal in a context where there are few educational allies with whom to share the work of community engagement or counselling services
- Engage in consultations with Department of Education staff, VGFN Education and Social Services departments, Chief Zzeh Gittlit School and School Council regarding transition planning for students who attend school in Whitehorse