



Engaging our Aboriginal Learners:

Fort William First Nations, St. Patrick High School & St. Ann Elementary School Literacy Partnership

By Leona R. McEwan, Principal, St. Ann Elementary School, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board

“Together we can succeed. Together it is fun to read!”

It was to be the first program of its kind in Thunder Bay and the first one of this magnitude. When the idea was first presented to the staff of St. Ann Elementary School in Thunder Bay, all twelve teachers collectively said, “Yes!” When the idea was pitched to the St. Ann Catholic School Council, all members exclaimed, “Fantastic!”

The new program was designed to create a partnership among St. Ann Elementary School, St. Patrick High School and the Fort William First Nations. The program plan was to benefit students at both the elementary and secondary level, with the following objectives clearly articulated:

- to improve literacy levels for elementary students of St. Ann Elementary School
- to provide mentorship for Native students by Native students
- to reduce violent behaviour and bullying at St. Ann School
- to provide cooperative education opportunities for Native secondary students of St. Patrick High School
- to improve attendance for Native secondary students
- to engage Native secondary students in leadership opportunities in the education field
- to encourage Native students to give serious thought to a future career in education
- to foster an increased level of self-esteem among elementary and secondary Native students
- to increase the level of value for formal education among Native students

To be successful, the plan needed the support of the teachers from St. Ann School. Following a presentation to staff, every teacher from JK to Grade 6 agreed to host a St. Patrick High School cooperative education student for a second semester placement. Each teacher would open his or her classroom and heart to a special group of Aboriginal high school students, mainly from Fort William First Nations, who had been identified as having potential leadership ability. While these students had the capacity of being positive role models, some were struggling

Photos courtesy of Leona R. McEwan



with attendance, others had difficulties completing credits or some were just experiencing other problems at school.

So began the Fort William First Nations, St. Patrick High School, and the St. Ann School Literacy/Cooperative Education Partnership. This partnership would prove to be a winning situation for everyone involved and a rich, learning experience that would guarantee success for all students, both secondary and elementary.

The main focus of this initiative was to help improve the literacy skills of the primary and junior students of St. Ann School, particularly reaching out to Aboriginal students. In addition, the program was designed to help the co-op students develop confidence, pride and experiences of success, while being exposed to a variety of career possibilities. Not only would the co-op students be helping the younger students with reading, spelling, and phonics, they would observe first-hand what it is like to be a teacher, a student support worker, a secretary, a custodian, and even a principal.

This exposure was intended to encourage the high school students to stay in school, graduate and consider post-secondary education and future career choices.

The St. Patrick students were welcomed to the school with a celebration that was held in the St. Ann Gathering Room. The Gathering Room is located in a section of the library and it is a special area designed for Native Language classes. This beautiful room reflects Aboriginal culture and pride with Native artwork and inspirational teachings on display.

During the orientation expectations were outlined and discussed. For the secondary students school expectations included wearing the



St. Patrick school uniform, helping with primary and junior literacy, assisting students on the playground, coordinating the school healthy snack program, assisting teachers with a variety of jobs and tasks and being present every day in order to develop a relationship with students and staff.

The “Success by Seven” literacy resource teacher also made a presentation during the afternoon. This teacher shared various strategies that could be used to help improve the children’s literacy skills with the St. Patrick students. Strategies included activities with sight words, sound combinations, sounds, word wall words, rhyming, blending and word building activities, comprehension strategies included activities (predicting, making connections to the book, fiction/non-fiction), and guided reading at various instructional levels. In a very short time the high school students were eager to get started, make a commitment to the program and begin to make a difference in a child’s life.

Placements began the following week and each day the co-op students grew in confidence and became more comfortable in their new educational setting. For many it felt like coming home.



The Grade 5 teacher held a workshop about Active Playgrounds for the co-op students and they had an opportunity to enhance their leadership skills while learning about playground games and activities that could be used with the primary and junior students. Once the high school students were familiar with all the games and activities, it was their job to teach them to groups of two grade five students.

In turn, these students would become an awesome team that would venture into the playground during recess and invite other students to join in the fun. And, as predicted, the younger students were eager to get active and get involved. The number of playground incidents decreased and students started making new friends and cooperating with each other. The younger ones looked forward to seeing their new buddies every day. They enjoyed the extra attention, extra help with their reading, math or school work in general and becoming more active on the playground.

The partnership the school has with the Red Cross for the Healthy Snack program would not be running as efficiently as it was, without

the help of the senior students. The seniors helped order the fruit, unpacked it, washed each piece, then delivered the baskets of fruit to each classroom. Once again, the younger students looked forward to this special delivery from their high school helpers.

As the semester continued you could see the co-op students working with youngsters in hallways and every nook and cranny of the school - reading, using flash cards, playing games, helping to do up jackets, turning skipping ropes, washing fruit, designing bulletin boards, helping students log on to computers, heating up lunches, answering the telephone, and helping in a variety of other ways.

Field trips were planned for the co-op students to visit Lakehead University and Confederation College to inquire about future programs that they might be interested in pursuing. Many of the students expressed an interest in becoming a teacher or a child and youth worker. They are now thinking beyond graduation and looking toward the future.

Designing a large piece of artwork that will be hung in the main hall of St. Ann School is a project that is in the works. This painting will depict a traditional medicine wheel titled, “Believe in Your Abilities”. The message that the co-op students want to leave the students of St. Ann is to always believe in their own abilities and be guided by honesty, trust, love, kindness, humility, bravery and wisdom.

This initiative was truly a rewarding experience for staff and students alike. Teachers counted on and appreciated the extra pair of hands and eyes in the classroom each day. The students enjoyed and looked up to the older kids as positive role models. The program was so successful that teachers are eager and willing to participate again in the fall.

The driving force for this project was to believe in the abilities and commitment of these young people. To have a large number of high school students in one elementary school was comforting and less intimidating for these quiet, sensitive young Aboriginal individuals.

This is a wonderful model that can be adapted to any school provided staff is open and willing to give these high school students a chance and provide them with an opportunity to discover their own abilities, desires and dreams. Tapping into this natural resource was truly a gold mine that was a winning combination for everyone.

If you have a vision and you trust the young people of today to help carry out the vision, great things will happen “if you just believe.”

For further information about this program contact Leona R. McEwan at lmcewan@tbcdsb.on.ca.