



Holy Family Catholic School Celebrates Success

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Holy Family Catholic School in the St. Clair CDSB is located at the southern edge of Wallaceburg, Ontario. Students come together from the surrounding rural areas and from urban neighbourhoods. Enrolment at the school is approximately 300 students with 15 full and part-time classroom teachers and support staff workers. The community is comprised of a high ratio of single parent and blended families coupled with varied socio-economic backgrounds.

A three-year school improvement plan was in place when I first arrived at Holy Family. As a staff, we reflected on, analyzed, set goals with time-lines, identified resources and assigned responsibilities for this plan. We have re-evaluated the plan each year to make any necessary changes. Compiling this information, along with information gathered from EQAO data and data from the Choices into Action survey for teachers, parents and students, set us in the right direction. Many factors have contributed to our success in improving our students' achievement.

In 2003, a committee of primary teachers developed a proposal for an action research project to work with the grade one to three students in mathematics. During math classes, the girls would remain with their classroom teacher and the boys would go to the newly assigned math teacher. In subsequent units, the groups were reversed and the boys remained with the classroom teacher, while the girls had the opportunity to work with the math teacher. The stipulation was that all mathematical learning had to revolve around life experiences and literacy. This small group dynamic fostered many hands-on and enriching math activities

and reached a variety of learning styles. The Learning Carpet was used regularly to facilitate instruction in math. Participation increased and students were highly engaged. All teachers involved planned together and shared success stories - professional learning communities in action. Language was a key component in both settings as books of related topics were used to introduce and address specific mathematics concepts.

Data gathered through EQAO ensures us that we have a well-rounded balanced literacy and numeracy program across all grades, which contributes to our success. Conscientious teachers with high expectations work in partnership and pay close attention to the best practices and research. Teachers engage in shared reading daily. Our next step was to incorporate guided-reading daily because our teachers believe in the benefits of small group and differentiated instruction. In 2006-07 independent reading has been recognized as an essential activity for practicing skills taught in shared and guided reading. Leveling of books in the classroom libraries has made it easier for students to find "just right" books. Shared, guided and independent writing have been a more recent focus as we have been using the *Write Traits* program for the last two years. Literature Circles incorporated in the junior and intermediate classrooms, tying in science and social studies texts as well as other literacy pieces have proven to be successful strategies.

Additional initiatives have supported our school successes. District literacy teachers enter the classroom and model best



practices in shared and guided reading and writing, assessment and planning. With administrative support, goals are set and assessed collaboratively for classroom and professional growth. The literacy teachers also trained staff in DRA - developmental reading assessment. This has been instrumental in gathering data to support the most recent initiative - the boys and literacy independent reading action research project. A data wall with student DRA results is displayed to allow all staff to conference at each staff meeting, throughout the year.

As a Success for All school, because of challenges posed by our demographics, additional professional development has been provided for grades 3 and 6 teachers in the areas of mathematics and language instruction. Classroom teachers were also given additional teacher time with level two students. Supply teachers taught the remaining class while the regular classroom teacher worked with the level two students. By doing this, many of these students achieved level three on the provincial assessment. Additional professional development provided by the province to lead mathematics and literacy teachers must also be applauded for its effectiveness.

Our staff firmly believes and incorporates the words of Regie Routman in *Writing Essentials: Raising Expectations and Results While Simplifying Teaching* (Heinemann, 2005):

All students, advantaged, or disadvantaged, go through similar stages of literacy development. Therefore, they need the same excellent instruction, not different instruction. Disadvantaged students just need more of it: more demonstrations, more shared reading experiences, and more guided practice in order to become successful independent learners.

Differentiated instruction is extremely important. We plan for each student to reach optimal student engagement, recognizing every child has individual strengths and needs.

Continually we have been reviving our school library by purchasing newer and more appealing books and comfortable furniture. Thanks to our librarian and parent volunteers, we have been able to open the library for students in the morning for the breakfast program, at recess and lunch hour for students to complete homework, research, relax with friends and read, play chess or other games. The staff and community value and support a variety of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, including sports teams, student leadership, a social justice committee, a liturgical

dance group, a breakfast program, development of a peace garden, active living and healthy eating, and regular participation in Mass and other liturgical celebrations. New this year is an on-site Best Start program, which provides early learning for children of pre-school age, as well as before and after school childcare.

The staff at Holy Family is always open and willing to share with each other. Everyone in every facet of teaching freely gives support and mentoring to teachers new to the school, to new grades and fresh from the faculty of education. We realize that we cannot work in isolation. All excellence is celebrated at each month's Good News assembly whether it is a student, staff member or the school as a whole. Reading and writing interest is celebrated by a principal's award and a library reading award each month. A frame with the student's picture and the title of his or her favourite book is placed on a library shelf for others to view throughout the year. It is through a combination of efforts, building on successes that we continue to improve each year.

Moreover, combining school, board, ministry and EQAO connections has proven most supportive in furthering improved student learning for Holy Family Catholic School students. In summary, the keys to our success include:

- conscientious teachers working in partnership;
- high expectations for all;
- balanced literacy and numeracy;
- administrative support (coach, materials);
- professional development and support from the school, board and ministry level;
- data-driven goal setting;
- differentiated instruction;
- positive and safe learning environment;
- assessment to drive instruction;
- celebrating successes.

Although we have been recognized for our successes, we realize there is always room for improvement. It is a continuous process of re-evaluating where we want to see growth. We will continue to celebrate the little successes, which will accumulate toward bigger successes.



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