



## **Mount Carmel Catholic School: Increasing Student Achievement**

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Mount Carmel Catholic School overlooks downtown Kenora and Lake of the Woods in the northwest corner of Ontario. We educate 140 students from junior kindergarten to Grade 6. Students come from three nearby Native reserves and from Kenora and its surrounding neighbourhoods. Ninety-five per cent of Mount Carmel's school population is Aboriginal. Most of our students come from mid to low socioeconomic backgrounds. There are 13 teachers including a French teacher, an Ojibwa language teacher, six educational assistants and a half-time library technician.

Some students come to Mount Carmel in kindergarten with significant delays in speech and language and they are neither fluent in English nor Ojibwa. For many of our students, junior kindergarten is their first experience in a structured environment. Our staff works very hard through speech and language programs and targeted interventions to close this gap as quickly as possible.

Mount Carmel is in the final year of the Ministry's Turnaround Program, which falls under the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) umbrella of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The Turnaround Program began in 2004 when Mount Carmel was one of 100 schools working within this initiative.

Success was evident from the first year. All students from kindergarten to Grade 3 participated in a school-wide assessment to establish reading and comprehension levels. Students were placed into cross-grade reading groups according to their PM Benchmark reading levels. The students' reading progress was tracked along a continuum using a data wall.

Staff training began with explicit instruction in guided reading, ongoing assessment, shared reading and read-alouds. This training included all primary staff, educational assistants, retired

teachers as well as the French and Ojibwa teachers. Our training came not only from the Ministry but also from within our own staff. This created a distributive model whereby all teachers shared leadership. This team approach was crucial in order for the school as a whole to move forward. The training also included the school principal, Trudy Cederwall in order that she could support the staff during this change and challenge them when there were lapses in progress.

A common literacy block was established for the entire primary division. Due to attendance and lateness issues, Mount Carmel's literacy block was scheduled from 10 a.m. until noon to allow late students to participate. Interruptions were kept to a minimum to allow for the maximum teaching time and increased time on task. Each trained staff member was responsible for a reading group of no more than eight students. At 10:00 each morning, students would pick up their book boxes and head off to their reading groups for 30 minutes. They were in every nook and cranny of the school: supply rooms, the computer lab, the library, classrooms and hallways. The teachers could focus on their specific group without having to monitor a full class of students. At the end of the guided reading block, students returned to their classrooms for the other components of the literacy program.

Teachers began to see progress in reading levels very quickly. This sparked much discussion and enthusiasm among the staff. They became very focused on the components of a Balanced Literacy program with emphasis on the understanding of the structure of language. The first year *Mosaic of Thought* by Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman became an anchor resource. This year teachers studied *Reading with Meaning* by Debbie Miller through a book club format, as well as reading other resource books independently.



During the second year, teachers had enough confidence to move from the small guided reading group model to a whole class Balanced Literacy model. Students were now receiving guided reading instruction in their own classroom, with their own teacher, within the Balanced Literacy framework. An educational assistant was placed in each primary classroom during the literacy block. A reading recovery teacher was also instrumental in targeting and moving students forward. Aside from the reading recovery students, this teacher also worked with needy students in the afternoon outside of the literacy block to allow extra focused instruction to target their specific needs. The special education teacher model changed from a withdrawal program to working within the classroom in collaboration with the teacher and the educational assistant.

Talk about student progress among teachers began to happen at all times and all over the school. Teachers were discussing student achievement after school, in the lunchroom, on the phone after hours and in classroom corners at recess. All the students became “our kids” and this led to a very strong team bond between all staff but in particular between the primary staff.

Our teachers focus on assessing and reassessing our students to ensure that their needs are met. Teachers and educational assistants collaborate to plan ways to meet the needs of struggling students by putting in supports and interventions as necessary such as reading recovery, resource, small group or individual instruction, peer support, book buddies, sharing students and one-to-one focused interventions. Having a common literacy block across the division allows students to be able to work in a classroom where their specific needs can be addressed. For instance, a child who is well below their reading level can work in another classroom with students at their level. Time on task is crucial and our students are closing the gap.

Mount Carmel also has cultural circumstances that are recognized and considered when meeting the needs of students. These include understanding aboriginal culture and using our aboriginal staff to help us understand issues when they arise.

Through the Turnaround Program, funding was allocated for resources to create a comprehensive literacy library. We now have many levelled resources for guided reading. We have used a number of publishers including Eaglecrest Books. Their set of Grade 1 levelled books represents First Nations children. Stories reflect experiences of First Nations children involved in cultural activities and in everyday life at home and school. For read alouds, we have accumulated many titles and author sets that include aboriginal content for our students. We assess how we can use these to teach comprehension strategies, such as making connections, legends, questioning and making inferences. We have a good selection of non-fiction resources as well as big books to teach many strategies

from reading for information to text features in non-fiction. Our literacy library also includes materials for building oral language such as Retell Tubs with a story and props included in a plastic bin, flannel sets and puppets whereby students can sequence, retell or innovate favourite stories.

Oral language activities include classifying objects in order to broaden vocabulary by criteria such as colour, shape, size, material and function. Other activities include think pair share, oral retellings of stories, news sharing and modeling of appropriate language structures. We try to have an immediate transference of reading and writing whenever possible using chalkboards in K-1 and paper and pencil in K-3. We also give the students many different kinds of graphic organizers to help them organize their thinking.

All of these measures over the past 3 years have helped substantially to increase Mount Carmel’s EQAO scores. We find that our children are eager to come to school and that our attendance and lateness issues are decreasing. Our children’s needs are still being met but our focus has become the academic over the social. We have learned that high expectations yield high results with our students. This year 30 out of 32 students in Grades 3 and 6 are writing EQAO.

Parent communication is improving as we are finding better ways to communicate with our families such as staging a powwow dance demonstration that includes students and their families during our Open Houses. We make phone calls to inform parents of important events and information, as letters home are frequently neither received nor read. We communicate through the reserve’s band office and send home digital DVD portfolios as we have discovered that most families have access to DVD players. This is a great way to share student learning.

Due to Mount Carmel’s recent successes, we have had the attention of many distinguished agencies. The Society for the Advancement of Aboriginal Education conducted a study of our school community that was released this spring. Curriculum Services Canada created a web cast on *Unlocking the Potential in Aboriginal Students* that was filmed at our school and released in May 2006. All of this has reflected positively on our students. Their confidence has grown and they continue to make gains.

The staff and students of Mount Carmel are moving to a new school in September 2007. We will be amalgamated with another school and staff in our board. We are committed to making sure that our students’ needs will continue to be met in our new environment with new staff and administration. As Michael Fullan says, “Change takes time” and over time, we know that our students will close the gap as we continue to work toward our common goal, increasing student achievement.