

## Northwest Students Superb in Reading Tests

“Our Grade 1-3 reading scores are really remarkable,” said Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Brian Gislason, “especially when you compare them to the provincial and Canadian norms. They are the direct result of a literacy program that we initiated and supported soon after the Northwest School Division was created.”

The natural question to ask after this statement is, of course, how good are the scores? To get that answer I was directed to a large binder of test results. I examined the grade 1-3 scores from a national test in the categories of Reading, Word Analysis and Vocabulary. Focusing on grade two (in expectations of seeing the results of a year and a half long exposure to the program) I noted that slightly more than 10% of the grade two classrooms in the division were working at least a half grade above their level, and 40% were working at a level that was a full grade above where they were expected to be.

A look at the levels obtained by all of the students across the division revealed that, in comparison with the rest of Canada, grade one students were 5 percentage points higher, grade two students averaged 8 percentage points above the Canadian norm and grade three students were 2 percentage points higher. While an eight percent increase might not seem like much at first glance, when one considers the leveling effect of statistics and compares the results of our little corner of northwestern Saskatchewan to the vast pool of students in Canada, eight percent is nothing less than huge.

When asked how these very impressive results were obtained, Gislason noted that “the literacy movement in the beginning was largely teacher driven—we went at it from an intervention point of view. We looked at the students who were struggling readers and asked what can we do for these children.”

After initial research the division adopted a very successful Early Reading Intervention program from New Zealand. “It was pretty incredible,” said Gislason, “we saw instantaneous results from the kids who spent twelve weeks in the program. That was our primary intervention model, focused mostly on grades one to three, because research shows that the earlier that you intervene the better – the longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes.”

“We provided staff for every school to run the program,” Gislason continued, “we provided training for the staffs, and we provided money to purchase leveled reading books and other support material. We also ensured that the school libraries were adequately staffed and supplied with books, turning them into bright, attractive centres. We have to credit the Board for their support at the outset and for their continued support, and we have to credit the teachers for the magnificent job they’ve done.”

In order to facilitate the program it was necessary to enroll staff in each school in a three- day intensive course of studies. “The training is very intensive for the early reading intervention

specialists,” observed Gislason. “It involves a day of training followed by four weeks of working with the children, then another day of training followed by four more weeks of work with the children and then a final session. Every year we train twelve to fifteen teachers.”

An intervention program to help struggling readers was bound to have a very positive effect on reading scores, but did it alone account for the dramatic results on the test scores I wondered? “No,” said Brian, “there’s a second component, a structured home reading program... the kids take home a different book every day that’s at their level, and they read it to their parents. A lot of schools also have volunteer parents who come in every day and each child goes to that volunteer and reads that book... practicing it before they take it home to read for their parents. This happens every day of the year, primarily in grades one and two.”

Despite the success some challenges remain: “One of the big problems for a program like this is coping with the large number of children who come and go. We lost 580 kids last year and our numbers didn’t go down. That means 580 new kids, and that’s in excess of a 10% turnover. A transient population presents some challenges to the program, especially in terms of ensuring that all students are able to be brought up to grade standards.”

“I think that our teachers, staff members and volunteers deserve our respect and thanks for the hard and consistent work that resulted in this superb division-wide accomplishment, and we need to acknowledge our Board for their vision in providing staff, training and resources devoted to literacy. We talked to the board about what we needed to improve our reading scores and they said O.K. They understood the issue, they knew what was required and they didn’t blink.”

And the results speak for themselves.