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## **Innovative Program Produces Superb Test Scores**

**February 14, 2012**

“The literacy test results have been amazing,” said Maidstone High Principal Brennan Becotte. “On average, we’ve had a 27% increase in reading skill levels for our students in grades 7, 8 and 9 –which means that roughly 92% of our students are working at or above grade level.”

This dramatic improvement in the past 5 months is due to an innovative program brought into the school this past fall.

After literacy tests demonstrated that many students would benefit if a way could be found to enhance student reading comprehension, fluency and understanding, Principal Brennan Becotte ensured that 7 staff members attended a Professional Learning Communities conference held in Regina this past September. The staff went to the conference with the specific intent of critically examining their current teaching methods in order to find ways to make changes to those methods that would result in better student outcomes.

“I think it was Einstein,” said Becotte, “who defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results –we obviously needed to make a change in the way we were doing things.”

Upon their return to the school the team recommended that the staff consider increasing the amount of time allocated within the school day for remedial, tutorial and enrichment activities for students, and making allowance for collaborative team (staff) time to assess the success of the program on a weekly basis. Their model is based on the Response to Intervention concept (RTI) developed within the last 6 years by educators in the United States.

Given the go-ahead to implement changes by Director of Education Duane Hauk, principal Becotte changed the school’s schedule so that almost a full period daily was allocated to the new program. Students who were identified as being in need of extra help to reach the standard were given time each day from Monday through Thursday with an expert teacher at a 4:1 ratio. The students in these small groups typically read 200- 250 word passages aloud and worked on decoding, fluency and comprehension. Other students meanwhile proceeded to enrichment activities, or tutorial sessions (when teachers saw a need to expand or reinforce topics), or mandatory homework labs. Then, on Fridays, time was provided for teams to meet and assess the results.

“The RTI approach to remediation of student learning is methodical,” said Becotte, “and it’s student specific. We analyze the problem for an individual, we collaboratively come up with a plan, that plan is implemented and then we look at the results regularly and closely to ensure that the plan is working and that the student is improving. To ensure efficiency students working at similar levels are grouped together, regardless of grade placement. We found that when we measure and record their results on a daily basis, the students develop an appetite for success.”

When asked about how she viewed the changes that stemmed from the conference in September, second-year teacher Nicole Grypiuk was clear and enthusiastic. “The PLC conference opened up my eyes as to what a professional learning community is and how it should function. It gave me (and all of our team) a lot of ideas about how we could transform the way we do things.”

“At first, when the seven of us brought the ideas back to our staff, there was some hesitation, and I commend our staff for being open to trying it because it is, after all, something that’s very new. We went through some growing pains in the beginning but once we started going through the process, and we began to see that it was working, people came on side as they saw the progress and the change in the students. It was so encouraging, and now they know how the system works they’re willing to try and be a part of it. That is such a great thing because with everyone on side we know we can collectively reach out to every student.”

Several other schools in the Northwest School Division are currently considering adopting the RTI model, and when asked about what she would say to school staffs that are thinking about trying it Grypiuk responded enthusiastically. “The process of working out a PLC can be difficult, and time consuming,” she said, “and the changes to the schedule and to the routines can sometimes be frustrating –but once you find what works for your school it is an incredibly rewarding experience. It gives a person a really good feeling to see a child who may have struggled in an area have this ‘oh-my-gosh *I get it and I understand it*’ moment and watch them light up as they realize that. Those students feel competent and confident, and seeing that on their face is just awesome!”