

Taking the



# Pulse

of Palliser Regional Schools

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## SUPERINTENDENT'S MESSAGE



Another school year is off to a roaring start offering a range of challenges, opportunities and reasons to celebrate.

On the challenge front, we are all aware that the economic downturn has left our provincial government looking for efficiencies, which means we are all challenged to do the

same. Every challenge presents an opportunity to rethink how we do business. Out of that process, creative ideas emerge. Education Minister Dave Hancock has referred to the road ahead as a "transformational opportunity." Whatever shape this transformation will take, I can assure you Palliser's focus will not waver — to ensure learning success for our students.

This issue of Pulse speaks to the creativity already found in our schools to meet changing needs including the use of videoconferencing technology to give students at one small school access to resources at a larger one, and the opening of the new Low German Mennonite program at John Davidson which encouraged dozens of families to join the public education system. While Palliser's embrace of technology captured national attention in September's successful downlink from the International Space Station, in this issue we also see that Palliser staff haven't forgotten the low-tech benefits of the personal touch, as Kate Andrews High School staff reached out to parents one-on-one.

Palliser changes with the times, but we haven't forgotten that it's the relationships we build, and our focus on students, that make a world of difference.

Kevin Gietz, Superintendent of Schools



### NOMINATE A PALLISER UNSUNG HERO

We know they're out there — quietly, competently accomplishing every task that comes their direction and then some. With little fanfare, they are the thread that holds together the fabric of our schools.

#### We call them **Palliser's Unsung Heroes.**

Help us shine a light on those who light up the room around them.

Nominate someone from your school or district staff for a Palliser Unsung Hero award and let an upcoming edition of the Pulse sing their praises.

## JOHN DAVIDSON REOPENS

"I don't like school," a student recently announced to Janice Loitz, principal of the newly reopened John Davidson School in Coaldale. Before she could get too alarmed, the student continued. "I love school."

The words are music to the ears of Loitz and the small staff at the school which reopened to students Aug. 31.

Most of the 97 students enrolled at John Davidson were home schooled before Palliser opened its new alternative program catering to a Low German Mennonite population, Loitz says. Many were unaccustomed to the routines and expectations of a traditional classroom setting.

But they seem quite happy to be adjusting.

Isaac Neufeld, a Grade 8 student, was one of those former home schooled children who takes the bus to John Davidson with two younger sisters. Neufeld says school is simply more fun now that he's surrounded by friends all day, instead of working through lessons with just a dozen other children in home schooling.

The school, which had been used for office space by community groups in recent years, was a beehive of activity and renovations even days before classes resumed. Freshly painted and with offices reconverted into classrooms, John Davidson looks like any Palliser Regional School once again, with art projects adorning the walls and backpacks lining the hallways.

In most ways, it is just like any other school. Instruction is all in English, except for 60 to 90 minutes a week per student devoted to reading and writing and religious studies conducted in German. Here, students hone their first language, Low German, and learn High German as well.

"High German is the language of church and school," explains Palliser's LGM liaison worker Dan Doerksen. "Low German is the language of the

heart and home."

There are other accommodations made at the school as well, out of cultural respect. There is no Internet use in the classrooms, although some parents have said they would be open to their children learning how to use computers for word processing or other practical purposes.

As Agatha Wieler, parent of three students at John Davidson, says, she appreciates that this school is careful about what kind of books children can access in the library and that there are no Halloween celebrations.

"Their goal is not to be here to be assimilated," says Doerksen. "We're giving them the opportunity to get a good education while totally respecting their convictions and beliefs."

Loitz is no stranger to respecting cultural differences, having served as Palliser's principal of colony schools before being enlisted for the John Davidson job.

Trusting that such a respect for their faith and culture exists, parents have already taken a real ownership stake in the school, Loitz says. Turnout at the meet-the-teacher evening was high, and Loitz says she's already noticing some parents connecting as they drop off or pick up their children each day.



Principal Janice Loitz now has nearly 100 students.

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## CAMERAS + SOFTWARE + INGENUITY ÷ 100 KM = MATH CLASS AT BRANT, CCS

When Danielle Wineberger started teaching 10 years ago, she never envisioned she'd one day be teaching students sitting at desks nearly 100 kilometres away from her classroom.

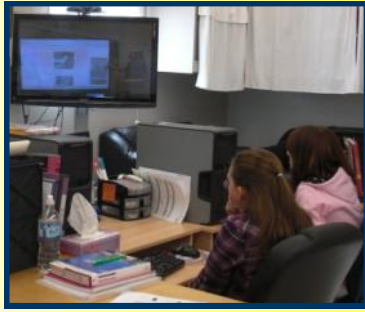
Yet that's the daily reality since the start of this school year, as Wineberger, a teacher at Calgary Christian School, leads Math 10 Pure instruction for 17 students in Calgary and four students at Brant Christian School, northwest of Vulcan.

Wineberger and her students are making Palliser history, the first time video conferencing has been used to make a course at one school available to students at another.

"It's a really useful tool, especially for the small schools," Wineberger says.

If not for the video conferencing option, students in Brant wanting to take Math 10 Pure would have had to take the course through distance learning.

Shelina Radvan, a Grade 10 student at Brant, said she's glad the VC option came up, giving her daily



access to a math teacher. "It's really great," she says. "It really doesn't feel that different from being in a regular classroom." With minor technical hiccups now resolved, the students have settled in. The Brant students can raise their hands to ask questions and participate in class discussions just as they would in any other course.

Radvan says she's also getting to know some of the personalities in the Calgary classroom. The students hope to meet in person before Christmas, providing an opportunity to spark new friendships among peers. Wineberger has two cameras in her Calgary classroom to give Brant students a couple of different perspectives on what's going on. They see the image on a TV screen at the front of their classroom.

There's one camera in the Brant classroom, feeding images of students there to a TV screen at the back of Wineberger's class.

Bridgit conferencing software gives Brant students a

### COMING IN NOVEMBER

- **The Palliser Wall of Fame committee gears up for next year's prestigious ceremony.**



- **Wayne Tate takes on the role as Palliser's principal of colony schools and preapres to welcome a new school to the fold.**

view of everything Wineberger has on her computer screen just as though she was working on a smartboard right in front of them. The teacher and students use Moodle to share documents.

Wineberger says videoconferencing requires some extra preparation time just to make sure the cameras are in position and the technology is ready.

While she's pleased with how the class has been going, she admits she does wonder about the direction videoconferencing might lead.

"I wonder, if VC goes so well, why have so many teachers?" Still, she's convinced there's no high-tech replacement for the relationship between a student and a teacher, even if that relationship is forged from a distance.

## KATE ANDREWS CALLS 403-W-E-L-C-O-M-E

Kate Andrews High School put out a huge welcome mat at the start of the new school year, with teachers and administrators making a concerted effort to contact by phone the parents of every single registered student, all 450 of them.

It was a first-time effort Principal Danny Roberts hopes will set a positive tone to the year ahead.

"We wanted that first contact with parents to be positive, an unsolicited friendly call," Roberts says.

The perfect timing for such a contact is right before the start of the school year in what Roberts calls the "honeymoon," when students, teachers and parents are excited about classes resuming.

Armed with a basic script for the call (an introduction, a welcome back and information about the school's website and other resources), teachers began dialing up parents. Roberts said teachers were told to keep phoning the contact numbers until they either spoke to a parent or guardian or were able to leave a message with one.

The response was overwhelmingly positive.

"I was very, very pleasantly surprised," says Debbie Johnson, who was on the receiving end of Roberts' call. Her daughters Rebecca and Vanessa attend Kate Andrews.

Johnson, who says her children have attended school in eight different jurisdictions in three provinces, says she's never received such a warm welcome from any other school.

She admits when Roberts introduced himself as the school principal, she immediately thought the worst.

"I thought, 'It's the first day. What could they have possible done wrong?'" Roberts went on to ask Johnson how Vanessa's first day in her new school, something both Mom and daughter appreciated.

Johnson says when she told Vanessa the principal had called to ask if she had a good first day, the teen's response was, "Really? They cared?" For Roberts, Kate Andrews' principal for eight years and vice-principal for nine years before that, the start-of-year phone calls are just another way to build relationships within the school community.

"The measure of success was would we do it again next year and, yes, we will," Roberts says.



## SKILLS ON DISPLAY

Palliser students had a rare chance to take in a world-class showcase of trades, service and technical programs as Calgary hosted the 40<sup>th</sup> WorldSkills International competition, Sept. 1-7. Junior high students from Menno Simons Christian School were among those who took in the event.

"The WorldSkills Competition showed us many possible trades which we could choose as an occupation in the future," said Carter Siebert, one of the students who took in the event.

Luke Rempel added, "It was like the Olympic Games of trades and we were able to see the best competitors right in front of us!"

"The robots were the best because of the detailed programming of each machine and the intensity of the competitors," said James Rude, another Menno Simons student.

In the hands-on-tent, students could try many trades such as welding, carpentry, mechanics, mudding and dry-walling.

"Welding was definitely the best as I actually welded my name on to a metal plate," Rempel said. "It was worth the wait."

Teachers were equally impressed.

"I really enjoyed the carpentry as it gave my students in my wood working option a real taste of detailed and excellent work," said David Roseke, who also teaches Science at Menno Simons.

Teacher Dayle Vienneau added, "I was so impressed with the intensity and passion for each trade that each competitor showed. ... It definitely inspired my students."

"We know that it was a very unique experience that will not be easily forgotten," said Principal Byron Thiessen.



James Rude, Joseph Braun, Carter Siebert, Luke Rempel and Samuel Braun take in a display at WorldSkills.