



Palliser Regional Schools Leadership in Literacy

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Literacy culture in bloom

Palliser staff continue to develop as teachers of reading, writing

Palliser Regional Schools' focus on literacy took its first tentative steps just five years ago, but today it's racing ahead full steam.

"It's been incredible to see how far we've come," said Associate Superintendent Education Services Pat Rivard. "Literacy is very much engrained in our division's culture. It's just what we do."

The Human Resources department welcomes new teachers with a copy of Donalyn Miller's "The Book Whisperer." Literacy, technology and inclusion experts in Central Office work with classroom teachers to offer support for a single, struggling reader. Individual teachers have carefully crafted classroom libraries catering to their students' interests. Truly, the division is committed to nurturing readers of all ages.

With reading work now engrained in many classrooms, the next evolutionary step seems to be rethinking how teachers teach writing.

"We have said all along that literacy is more than just being able to read," Rivard says. "It's being able to express yourself clearly, to give voice to your thoughts, and to think critically about the voices of others."

The shift in writing instruction is being driven by teachers themselves, says Director of Learning Cynthia Gietz, who led a committee of teachers

and administrators rethinking writing instruction.

"We are seeing some amazing work in the teaching of writing already," Gietz says.

When teachers see evidence that their instruction has been effective, the process becomes even more powerful.

"That's like candy to a teacher," Rivard says. "It motivates them because they feed off their students' success."

Division-wide there are encouraging signs that teachers' literacy work is making a significant difference in elementary schools. Students in Grade 3 this spring have been part of the reading assessment system since it began in 2013-2014. As a group, they show the greatest growth in the percentage now reading at expected levels. When they were in Grade 1, just over half were reading at grade level. This spring, more than three-quarters are reading at or above expectations.

The division's goal is for 95 per cent of Grade 3 students to be reading at or above expected levels by March 2019, a significant, but achievable milestone, Rivard says.

"Our teachers and administrators can be very proud of their achievements so far in creating a culture of literacy," he says. "There's excellent teaching going on across Palliser and we've only just begun."



Director of Learning Laurie Wilson shares tips for helping your young reader at home this summer.

Watch the video at www.pallisersd.ab.ca/literacy/literacy-in-palliser

STEP up to summer reading

The school year lasts just 10 months, but learning should be a year-round effort. That's why Palliser Regional Schools is using a grant to help carry literacy efforts through the summer.

Palliser is hiring a student through the Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) to put the brakes on summer slide. Research has shown a lack of regular reading over the summer holidays can result in a child's reading level deteriorating significantly.

On a positive note, Laurie Wilson found with a little intervention children's reading skills can be restored and even improved upon with as little as 15 minutes of reading time a day.

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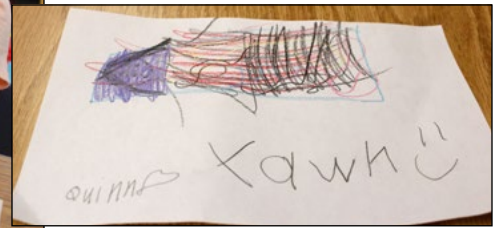


Website
www.pallisersd.ab.ca





Sunnyside teacher Mona Slusar and kindergarten student Quinn Ross read a book called “The Yawn.” Later Quinn drew a picture of herself, signed her name and wrote “Yawn.” Reading and writing is part of the routine for all ages at the school.



Young learners focused on fun

There is joyful noise coming from the kindergarten class at Sunnyside School, northeast of Lethbridge, where 19 children are ending their school day with free play time.

Some are gathered around a plastic wading pool “fishing” for letters and plastic fish using magnetic rods. Others are dressing up in costumes, while one young entrepreneur is scribbling food orders on a notepad before hustling back to the kitchen centre to “cook.”

The busiest centre is a writing table, where children are “reading” step-by-step instructions on how to draw an octopus. “Mine only has six legs,” one young artist says, before sketching two more.

The teacher and lone adult at the centre of this high-energy gathering is Mona Slusar, who quickly navigates from group to group, offering encouragement and occasionally negotiating a truce when turn-taking goes off the rails.

The fishing pond is a new addition to the classroom, and earlier in the day, Slusar had students fishing for “popcorn words,” like “the” or “and” that pop up frequently in print.

Slusar holds up the popcorn word “it.”

“Are you going to try to catch a ‘W’?” Slusar asks.

“No!” her students yell in unison.

With about a month left in the school year, these students recognize their printed names, know letter sounds, and can recognize many words by sight. They don’t realize how much they’re learning because they’re too busy having fun.

That’s the goal of Palliser Regional Schools’ early learning and kindergarten programs, says Palliser Co-ordinating Principal of Early Learning Nathan Sillito — to build vital emotional, social, physical and communication skills through children’s natural instinct to have fun.

At Sunnyside kindergarten, for example, a group is playing

a bean bag game in the hallway. Players grab a bean bag featuring an umbrella picture and then try to throw the bag down an alphabet-covered mat to “U.” The children are tossing beanbags, cheering, and running back to grab another.

“There’s so much going on. The activity in the hallway involves turn taking, following directions, beginning sounds and letter recognition,” says Principal Connie Adserballe.

“The activities are planned and strategic.”

This is play-based learning at its best, says Amy Hass, who has four children in the rural school located just a five-minute drive from north Lethbridge.

Hass says she’s witnessed “exponential growth” in her son’s speech and communication skills thanks to Sunnyside’s twice-a-week morning program for three- and four-year-olds.

“Sunnyside has a plan,” she says. “That plan is intentional and that plan takes the guesswork out of where kids are, where they need to be and exactly what they need to get there.”

These kindergarten students regularly participate in writing workshops. One student opens his writing folder to two pages of a work in progress about a family trip to Waterton. On the back of one page, the word “store” stands out as the lone printed word on the page. The young writer explains his friend spelled it for him in case he needed to use the word again sometime.

Slusar smiles, watching it unfold. She says in her five years teaching kindergarten, her goal has never changed: “That they go home loving to learn.”

For information on Palliser’s literacy-focused, play-based early learning and kindergarten programs, contact the Palliser elementary school near you or visit <http://www.pallisersd.ab.ca/early-learning>.

Reading, writing and leadership

Three keys to success elevate students, invigorate staff at Jennie Emery

Sherrie Nickel, principal of Jennie Emery Elementary in Coaldale, has attended a great many professional development opportunities, but none was as powerful as the half-day spent at an Edmonton school this spring.

That elementary school is in its eighth year of a literacy journey that has created a high-performing, academic culture grounded in reading and writing.

“We saw incredible teaching,” Nickel says. “We saw incredible student work. We also saw that the culture and climate of the school is likely as a result of the rigour and the student engagement.”

The visit left the small group of JEES teachers “invigorated for writing.” At the next staff meeting, they shared what they saw and began discussing a plan to breathe daily life into excellent writing instruction, similar to the consistent reading instruction already found in the school.

Jennie Emery, like all Palliser schools, has been literacy-focused for a few years, with teachers honing how they teach reading. It is also completing its first year as a Leader in Me school. Every student is encouraged to demonstrate and celebrate leadership daily, whether by being a buddy, sharing or problem solving.

The resulting leadership, reading and, now, writing create a triangle of student success, each elevating the other. Through leadership, elementary students discover their inherent value. Through reading, they can connect to limitless ideas. Through writing, they can express their own ideas and identities.



Sherrie Nickel

“The power of writing has given them a new sense of who they are,” Nickel says of her young authors.

Teachers aren’t explicitly trained on teaching writing and there’s no standardized path to building writing skills from one grade to another. Nickel is part of a Palliser committee looking to change that. It’s daunting work.

As principal, she’s well aware the one person with the greatest impact on the student is the teacher, and she’s confident her teachers are growing as professionals and focused on doing the right thing for every student. As a result she’s already seen students gain confidence through

writing about what they know, and sharing their unique knowledge with classmates.

“I see children who would have been defined as ‘struggling’ being successful and being celebrated by their classmates.”

Next year, teachers will work in their grade-level groups on developing a common approach to writing instruction and sharing student writing to ensure assessments and expectations are common from one teacher to another. Over time, they’ll create a road map so students entering a new grade can pick up where writing lessons left off the year prior.

Before that work even begins, Nickel is seeing even her youngest students producing stories, expressing opinions or sharing facts they know. Their letters may not be perfectly formed and words may not be perfectly spelled, but their ideas are clear.

That bodes well for the future.

“If we can give every child that gift, that will be profound.”

Our librarians suggest great reads

Peter Nimble and His Fantastic Eyes, Jonathan Auxier, for children 9 and up.

Peter Nimble is a blind, 10-year-old orphan living on the streets. He comes across a set of eyes that not only give him special abilities, but transport him to far off, fantastical places where he is presented with a quest to help those in need. — *Desiree Krahn, Noble Central School*

The Illegal, Lawrence Hill, for adults and high school students.

A fictional story about refugees fleeing from oppressive regimes, trying to start a new life in a foreign land. Some refugees are so desperate they will attempt to come into a country illegally at great risk. This subject is very relevant today. — *Michelle*

Gerstenbubler, Coalhurst High School

The Twits, Roald Dahl, suitable for all ages, especially Grades 2-4

This hilarious book follows this horrendous couple called the Twits. They play mean tricks on each other; for example, Mr. Twit puts a frog in Mrs. Twit’s bed, and she gets back at him by putting worms in his spaghetti! It is unbelievable the lengths each will go to to out-do the other. — *Lisa Kasper, Arrowwood Community School*

Frindle, Andrew Clements, for students in Grades 4-6

A fictional and funny story about students at Lincoln Elementary School. The main character, Nick, challenges the norm and makes authority figures question their deep-set beliefs. — *Annie Jaferi, Calgary Islamic School, Omar Bin Al-Khattab campus*

Connect the Stars, Marisa de los Santos

and David Teague, for Grade 5-8

Two misfits are sent to a summer survival camp where they experience adventure as well as the mysterious disappearance of a fellow camper. — *Sharon Bueckert, R.I. Baker Middle School*

Seven (The Series), Eric Walters, John Wilson, Ted Staunton, Richard Scrimger, Norah McClintock, Sigmund Brouwer and Shane Peacock, for Grades 7 to 10.

The books are about David McLean, beloved grandfather and avid adventurer, who dies at the age of 92. He leaves behind an unusual will that outlines seven tasks for his seven grandsons. Each book is written by a different author. Author Eric Walters will be coming to our school Sept. 30. — *Cheryl Armstead, Calgary Christian Secondary School*

For more book recommendations, visit <http://www.pallisersd.ab.ca/literacy/literacy-resources>

Meet Orishia, our Literacy Specialist



Orishia Asher

The vast boundaries of Palliser Regional Schools offer challenges to a new Literacy Specialist, but Orishia Asher says the rewards make the effort well worth it.

“It’s hearing from teachers or administrators that the ideas, strategies and activities I suggest to use in the classroom have made a difference and consequently there was reading and writing growth,” she says. “Nothing is better than hearing that. That’s the ultimate.”

Asher’s 15-year career as an educator included work as a literacy specialist with Foothills School Division out of Okotoks. When a similar position opened up in Palliser Regional Schools, she jumped at the opportunity to work in a division known for its “laser-like” focus on literacy and its commitment to Fountas and Pinnell, an effective reading assessment system to pinpoint the work that needs to be done.

Since she began in late January, Asher has found that reputation well-deserved.

“I’ve noticed that from visiting schools and working with teachers there are many wonderful literacy ideas being implemented and I see students who are engaged and excited about reading and writing,” she says. “I’ve also noticed teachers who are dedicated to creating literacy-rich classrooms.”

As Palliser’s Literacy Specialist she works with teachers – either one-on-one, or as part of the division’s Academic Wrap-Around Team – who might require support in helping a particular student improve their literacy skills. Asher is a resource provider for staff in regards to current best practices.

Her priority for this coming school year is helping put together a common writing assessment framework similar to the benchmark now in place for reading in Palliser. It’s important school staff are all speaking the same “language” when it comes to assessment if they are to meet the individual needs of every student.

“It’s not that teachers need to throw away what they are presently using but the resources provide some good instructional strategies,” she says. “Mostly it’s about consistency.”

Asher is also excited about offering a monthly blog on Palliser’s website beginning in September. The focus will be on reading comprehension strategies and ideas teachers can use in the classroom and parents at home to enhance a child’s learning experience.

The website posts are part of her effort to build relationships.

“I believe that my role is not only to connect with teachers but also engage them and the parent community in learning new literacy techniques and practices – best practices based on accredited research – that will improve children’s learning overall.”

STEP up to summer reading

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Proof positive was supplied by one of a handful of elementary school students involved in a research project last summer carried out by the Palliser Director of Learning.

“One girl came in with her arms folded and said: ‘I’m not a reader. I don’t like reading,’” recalls Wilson. “By the end of the project she made herself a little t-shirt that said ‘I love reading.’”

It was that young student who coined the activity a “reading camp.” When asked why, she replied that all fun things happen at summer camps.

Armed with data from that research project and literacy success stories at schools across the division, Palliser applied for the STEP grant.

“The idea is let’s provide our principals support and have a student co-ordinator to support whatever their vision is in their respective communities,” says Associate Superintendent Education Services Pat Rivard.

While the exact nature of that student’s literacy work is still being determined, he says letters were sent out to parents looking for commitment for their child’s involvement in a summer slide program. Once the demand for the service is established, the best ways to meet it can be determined.

That could mean teaming up with southern Alberta communities to see what the student could lend to reading programs that might already be available over the summer months at the public library and the like. Partnerships are a key.

“We don’t see literacy as a school issue. It’s a community issue and there are payoffs to the community,” he says, adding students who are good readers have a better chance of being contributing members of society.

Even if parents aren’t able to involve their children formally in the program, Wilson says they can still provide them with means to get off to a quick start next school year. It’s as simple as making sure they have access to books of their choice every day.

“And the difference you can make just by having a positive attitude about reading at home is huge,” she says.