

Canadian No-Excuses Schools

Fort Fraser Elementary School

By Andrew Nikiforuk

Fort Fraser Elementary School in northern British Columbia sits on the edge of an expansive wilderness. Its students come mainly from farming, logging or mining families, but almost one-third are proud First Nations residents of the Nadleh Reserve.

Seven years ago, just about everyone was concerned about the students' reading and discipline problems. In fact, more than half of Fort Fraser's 120 students needed extra help with reading.

So in 1994, the school took its reading-challenged pupils in hand with a radical pilot program, *Reading Mastery*. It takes a step-by-step, phonetic approach to reading that gets kids hooked on the printed word. Principal July Six, her staff, and the school board liked the results so much that they decided to apply the program throughout the school.

This major shift required some intensive teacher training at Seattle's Morningside Academy, a laboratory school that specializes in effective pedagogic practices and smart teacher training.

Before Six and her teachers began using the new programs that got all of Fraser's students learning, the school scored at the 30th percentile in reading on the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills. That meant 70% of Canada's elementary students did better than Fort Fraser's students. But now, the majority of the school's pupils score at or above the national norm of 50%.

As for math, the school switched to the excellent *Saxon Math* series, a step-by-step system that develops a student's skills incrementally. The move resulted in similar dramatic gains. Fort Fraser's grades 5 and 7 students now have math percentile rankings in the 70s or higher.

These formidable achievements — the educational equivalent of scaling Mount Everest without oxygen — have come with a host of exciting side benefits. The number of students needing special programming has declined from 60% to a mere 15% over seven years. And the behaviour problems? "I rarely see anyone in my office anymore," admits Six. "The culture of the school is that it's cool to be good."

Even those hardest to teach have done well. One student with fetal alcohol syndrome displayed violent behaviour in grade 1 and required a full-time attendant. Now the pupil is in an intermediate class with no attendant and is reading at the proper grade level.

The secret to Fort Fraser's achievement includes grouping children not by age but by ability and using scripted lessons that take the guesswork out of teaching. It also consists of offering timed activities so kids don't get bogged down and bored, and having them do plenty of reading out loud — all practices considered very controversial by many contemporary educators.

(Adapted with permission from the April 2001 issue of Treehouse Canadian Family magazine)

Chase Primary School

By Janet Steffenhagen

Four years ago, tests showed that almost one third of students in Chase Primary School were behind in reading. The numbers were even worse for aboriginal students, with as many as 60% below standard in some years.

Last May, testing found 93% of children in grades 1 and 2 in the Kamloops-area school were meeting or exceeding expectations, and First Nations students were on a par with their non-aboriginal peers.

The difference was a back-to-basics reading program that has won accolades from the B.C. education ministry. Called *Open Court*, it emphasizes skills instruction, an aspect of language-arts teaching that largely disappeared in the early 1980s when whole language came into vogue. At the time, it was felt that a large portion of students don't need that type of instruction, but now views are changing.

John Zordell, who was principal at the Chase school when the new program was brought in, describes it as highly-structured, with heavy use of student workbooks — two features that were decried after whole language instruction edged out phonics in North American schools. "Workbooks have been out of favour . . . but kids love their workbooks," says Zordell, who now teaches in Kamloops. While highly structured, the program also emphasizes good literature, which is part of the whole language approach, according to Zordell.

The program marked the first time Chase Primary was able to close the learning gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal students, he added. "It was quite dramatic. Actually, it was amazing."

That aspect of the program is of particular interest to BC educators, who have been concerned for several years about the performance of First Nations students. According to province-wide tests, roughly 80% of BC students are able to read at expected levels, but that figure drops to 56% when results are assessed for aboriginal students.

The school has made other efforts at the same time to help aboriginal children, but say that the reading program is the top reason for the improved performance. They even noticed better behaviour on the playground. In 1996-97, there were 239 referrals for misbehaviour. By 1998-99, that had dropped to 107.

"The children feel more confident. They want to go to school now," says Donna Jules, education coordinator for the Adams Lake Band. "There's less misbehaving, and school is seen as a positive experience."

Fran Thompson of the International Dyslexia Association describes the findings at Chase primary as "a huge thing with huge implications for the success of our children." While insisting she isn't endorsing one program, Thompson said she is pleased the ministry is promoting a reading program that is based on research and has a proven track record.

(Adapted with permission from the Vancouver Sun, April 4, 2001)