

Uniform Delight

This B.C. rural school stayed open by reinventing itself as a traditional school.

By Jeff Rud

These days, ten-year-old Emily Cooper has one less decision to make after the alarm goes off each school morning. The Cowichan Valley grade 6 student no longer has to choose what to wear, because every day it will be pretty much the same. Cooper will pull on a navy-blue skirt or jumper, along with a matching navy-blue, red, or white school top.

Cooper is one of 133 students enrolled At Cowichan Station Rural Traditional School, formerly Cowichan Station Elementary. These students are part of a highly-structured program that features a dress code, an emphasis on teacher-driven learning, and a consistent, fundamental approach to education.

"I like it a lot," Emily said during an interview early in the year. "I found that before I sometimes got picked on because of the clothes I wore, but that doesn't happen now. And I find it a lot easier to talk to the teachers (within a more structured format)."

Cowichan Station Rural Traditional is one of 29 new schools or programs "of choice" which opened in 20 school districts across B.C. this fall. The provincial government is encouraging school boards to provide more options to students and parents — when viable — to bolster enrolment.

"Public schools need to compete better," says Education Minister Christy Clark. "We need to provide choices for kids just like they do in private schools. The one-size-fits-all solution for public education simply does not serve parents and students well."

The move to a traditional school format has paid dividends at Cowichan Station, which was among six schools being considered for closure by the Cowichan Valley School District less than two years ago.

Enrolment at the school, located about halfway between Cobble Hill and Duncan, has jumped from the expected 92 students before the format change to 133 now.

"It's been very successful," said principal Jackie Barker of the change. "Our enrolment is up 45%".

The structured learning environment features a consistent approach from kindergarten through grade 6, using compatible resource programs from year to year.

Barker said communication with parents is vital, with weekly reports sent home for intermediate students. Students must also adhere to a fairly rigid dress code.

Although an actual school uniform is not mandatory, one is available, and Barker said at least 95% of students have been wearing it.

But even if students don't wear the uniform, they are encouraged to don navy-blue, red or white tops and aren't permitted to wear torn clothing.

Clothing with highly-visible logos or pictures isn't allowed, and neither are halter or crop tops.

"It suits our rural atmosphere," Barker said. "It does really look kind of sharp, and the kids seem to like it."

Barker stresses the traditional school approach is not backward. "We are not ignoring the research in learning that says some group learning works, and we encourage critical thinking. We are not producing robots."

What they are trying to produce is an atmosphere in which children and parents know exactly what to expect and what is expected of them, Barker said.

"We were quite happy with our school the way it was until it was threatened by closure," said Carol Cooper, Emily's mother and the vice-president of the school's parent advisory council.

"But now that it (the traditional format) is in place, I really believe this is what I want for my child."

The Cowichan Valley School District has also started programs of choice to challenge high Cowichan Secondary and for early achievers at French immersion at Duncan Elementary.

Clark said Cowichan Valley is a prime example of a smaller district being able to offer these sorts of choices.

But some trustees see danger in competing for students in a climate where resources are scarce.

"I personally think it is very sad that we don't have the support for maintaining a standard of education across the province," said Saanich Board Chairwoman Hanne Kohout. "We are now seeing districts and schools competing against each other."

Kohout, whose district has several programs of choice and is considering a fine arts school at Durrance Elementary, said it's important that such programs are created out of need as opposed to simply out of need for enrolment.

Charley Beresford, Chairwoman of the Greater Victoria School Board, whose district has added a soccer academy at Reynolds Secondary and has long-established schools of choice at South Park and Sundance, said she would prefer a "co-operative, collaborative attitude" when it comes to starting these programs.

"I think your basic motivation (for these programs) has to be doing something that is educationally worthwhile."

(Reprinted with permission from "Schools Specialize to Gain Enrolment", the Victoria Times Colonist, September 3, 2003.)