



**Nelna Bessie John School Review
Report
April 2013**

Nelnah Bessie John School
April 2013

School Principal: Cynthia Wagner

Date of Review: May 2/3, 2013

School Review Team:

Simon Blakesley, Director of Student Achievement, Systems Accountability
Maggie Mann, Principal, St. Elias Community School, Haines Junction

Meetings with the School included:

- The principal
- Staff members
- Students
- School Council representatives
- Classroom visitations

School Context

Nelnah Bessie John School is a small, rural K4-9 school in the semi-isolated community of Beaver Creek, located on the Alaska Highway near the Yukon-Alaska border. The school officially opened as Beaver Creek School in September 1961. At that time, the school had primary and intermediate classes, with a staff complement of two. Over time the student population has fluctuated, resulting in many changes from school-year to school-year.

In 2005, Beaver Creek School was renamed Nelnah Bessie John School in honour of respected White River First Nation Elder and Native Language Teacher Bessie John. Nelnah Bessie John School offers primary, intermediate, and junior-high education with a staff of one Teacher/Principal, a 0.4 Native Language Instructor, and a 0.5 Educational Assistant/Remedial Tutor.

The school has two multi-grade classrooms upstairs, and a stage, a library area, and Native Language classroom with kitchen in the basement. Students access gym facilities across the street at the Beaver Creek Community Club. In 2013/2014, the Beaver Creek community library will be moving into the basement of the school, resulting in substantial renovations to the school.

The school enrolls both First Nation and non-First Nations students. From time to time, students from Northway, Alaska, also attend when they relocate to stay with relatives in the White River First Nation.

The vision for student success has its focus on connecting learning to life through the individualization of student learning as an instructional focus. Transitions into the school, between grade levels, and as students move on are also a focus. The values of the school center on cultural inclusion and linking the school to community in a variety of cultural and academic programs. With the support of the White River First Nation and the broader community, learning is extended from the classroom and school onto the land.

Norms and Culture:

Characteristics:

Continuously improving schools are socially and culturally inclusive with high expectations for each learner. A focus on continuous improvement is evident.

Observations of the Team:

- Nelnah Bessie John School is a warm, welcoming, and safe school for students. Children expressed that they like the school and get to do fun things there.
- The teaching staff at the school work together as a cohesive team, supporting each other in the differentiation of student learning. The staff team regularly attends inter-agency meetings together.
- Students expressed interest and like for school programs, especially Fine Arts and Upper Tanana language and cultural activities.
- The one older student enjoys the school, and expressed not necessarily wanting to leave to go to a bigger school.
- All students receive Upper Tanana language and cultural instruction, and enjoy participating in land-based culture camps. This was expressed to be a strength by School Council members.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue to maintain the focus on student learning and a learning climate where students feel welcomed, safe, and engaged in learning.
- Given the interests expressed in culture and land-based activities as vehicles for student learning and broad-based community engagement, seek ways to expand the current offering of cultural activities to include new opportunities.

School and Community

Characteristics: In continuously improving schools build a shared commitment to success for each learner. The school collaborates with parents, students, school council, First Nations and community to support student learning. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture and the school communicates about progress and challenges in multiple ways.

Observations of the Team:

- The school works with White River First Nation, Kluane Lake School, and Vanier Catholic Secondary School to hold culture camps each spring. These are important events for the school, students, and community.

- There appears a shared awareness of the need to enhance communications within and across the school community.
- There appears a desire for improved understanding between and across all stakeholders with respect to education for children.
- As both the Principal and Remedial Tutor are new to the school and community, staff are appreciative of the role the Aboriginal Language Instructor plays in linking school to the community.
- A consistent instructional focus on Social Emotional learning and the implementation of self-regulating strategies are beginning to have a positive impact on student learning and academic achievement.
- The school employs strategies to work through student conflict, though these processes may not be fully known or understood by the community.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Consider holding monthly parent nights as opportunities to showcase student learning at community locations (such as the new Tourism centre) as a means of increasing opportunities for school and community interaction.
- Monthly parent nights and/or Elders' teas promoting educational conversations could form part of a strategy to enhance school and community awareness, engagement, and partnering.
- Explore avenues for 'work experience' opportunities within the community for older student(s) to engage in and build on interests like small engine mechanics and other workplace skills.
- Seek to support the work and commitment of School Council members through the organization of Yukon Department of Education-facilitated School Council training opportunities.

School Organization

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools organize structures, actions, and interventions to ensure success for each learner. Work in the school is coherent and aligned to focus on improvement. Actions and interventions include effectively differentiating resources, time and professional development to get results. The Department supports the school and makes connections across the Territory to build capacity.

Observations of the Team:

- A focus of the staff this year has been the identification of student learning levels. Staff members organize themselves in ways that allow for the identification of individual student levels and differentiation of instruction.
- School Council members expressed that a strength of the staff is their ability to identify student strengths and respond to individual needs.
- As a result of the review of individual student abilities and progress, there are different learning expectations for individual students.
- Staff are organized in ways which help them to meet the learning needs of all students.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue to seek ways to differentiate instruction, using creative means to deploy school staff in ways that help to meet student learning needs.
- Continue to regularly employ Department of Education staff and resources to support student learning.
- Consider programming options and modes of delivery that will meet the academic needs of older students (Example: video conferencing with St. Elias Community School).
- Identify a scheduled time for the principal and administrative assistant to plan ahead and to work together on school administrative functions.

School Processes and Progress

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools take responsibility for improving outcomes for students. They use evidence to guide decisions and actions and have processes in place to collectively monitor progress and make adjustments in key areas of their work. They demonstrate improvement over time – for individual students, groups of students, and the school.

Observations of the Team:

- Balanced Literacy strategies are employed in the promotion of early reading and writing acquisition in the primary grades.
- Staff were recently trained in the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Acquisition, allowing for effective programming of student's literacy strengths and needs.
- MindUp is utilized in the school to help students become more aware of their feelings in order to promote the self-regulation of behaviours.

- Being a small school, attention is given to the concern whether students will be academically and socially prepared to pursue new challenges once they leave Nelnah Bessie John School.

Recommendations for moving forward:

- For older students who express emergent career interests, seek ways to identify community resources that could be employed to increase learning opportunities that meet their needs and interests.
- Consider Department resources as a means of providing diverse learning experiences for students (e.g. a visitation from the “trades trailer” and experiential educational consultants could provide important learning opportunities).
- Explore blended, on-line learning opportunities as a means of expanding programming options for older students.

In conclusion

The review team thoroughly enjoyed visiting Beaver Creek and Nelnah Bessie John School. The team was reminded of the unique and special nature of learning in small schools, and of the need to continuously think of ways to provide meaningful and diverse learning opportunities for students. The importance for all stakeholders to communicate effectively to work together- the primary focus being student growth and development- was clearly reaffirmed.

Practices to share:

- The partnering between Nelnah Bessie John School, Kluane Lake School, their respective First Nations, and Vanier Secondary Catholic School in the muskrat camp is one example of a rich, diverse, and inclusive learning opportunity.
- The co-operative approach taken by the instructional staff highlights the benefits to students when the human resources in a school align to work together.