Yukon
Education
Éducation

Takhini Elementary School Review Report
May 2015

Takhini Elementary School
May 2015

School Principal: Katrina Brogdon
A/Vice-principal: Trevor Ratcliff

Date of Review: May 26-27, 2015

School Review Team:

Simon Blakesley, Director, Student Achievement and System Accountability
Bob Walker, School Council Liaison, Yukon Education
Diana Knopp, Primary Teacher, Elijah Smith Elementary School
Gordon Miller, Vice-principal, Christ the King Elementary School
Kyla Piper, School Council member, Holy Family Elementary School

Meetings with the School included:

Students
Teachers
Support staff
School Administration
School Council members

School Context

Takhini Elementary School is a K-7 school located in one of Whitehorse's oldest neighborhoods. Takhini School currently enrols 147 students, and this number stays somewhat stable throughout the school year.   Takhini School is the designated "overflow" school in Whitehorse, which means the school enrols students who are not able to enrol in the schools in their catchment areas. Yukon College is in Takhini School's catchment area, meaning adult learners moving into Yukon College family housing with their school-aged children enrol at Takhini School.

Takhini School has a very "transient" student population. Students arrive from northern communities often after school begins and sometimes leave before the end of the school year. Some of these students transfer in and out of Takhini School twice in one year. At the end of 2013-2014, over eighty students transactions (enrolling or leaving) had occurred. This creates a unique set of circumstances and for transient students, teachers, and students who are not transient.   Takhini School staff make a concentrated effort to make students and their families feel welcome from the moment they arrive.

Takhini School currently has a diverse cultural and ethnic mix of students. Approximately 53% of our students are self-identified First Nation students. Of those who indicate First Nation affiliation upon enrolment, over twenty-four different First Nations are represented. However, because no First Nation has a numerical majority at Takhini School, the school is without a consistent CELC or ESW, and thus there is no specific First Nations support person as a presence in the school.

Parent engagement and participation with school events is strong. Parent-teacher conferences are well attended (90% or higher for every class this year) and parent attendance at events such as Family Fun night, and Literacy night is very high.

Takhini School has undergone a number of significant changes over the past three years. For example, the school piloted a single-gender configuration for six years and reverted back to mixed-gender classes two years ago. The school has also taken part in the first wave of three schools implementing self-regulation. The current principal will be leaving at the end of the 2014-15 school-year, with a new principal beginning in August 2015.

Vision statement:

Takhini Elementary School is a safe, respectful, caring school community where everyone works together to become successful life-long learners.

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:

- The Review Team observed and heard that the staff at Takhini School is dedicated, resilient and flexible, displaying a willingness to try new things and adapt accordingly to meet the needs of students

- Many of the bulletin boards in the school display a positive, caring message or theme. For example, themes include "Happiness", "Love", "Caring", "Empathy", and "Belonging". In addition, student work is displayed prominently in hallways and in classrooms, contributing to a vibrant feel at the school

- The Takhini School Council and some staff expressed that there exists a stressed, at times chaotic environment that results primarily in a reactive rather than proactive environment. School Council expressed their desire to be supportive of the school and want to help out

where possible for them to do so. In this regard School Council understands it has been a steep learning curve both for them and the school's administration team

- Related to the above, the school's administrative team expressed frustration with a context which sees them needing to be being focused on behavior and discipline rather than placing their emphasis on supporting teachers through instructional leadership

- A strength shared by the staff is the willingness and desire for them to work and collaborate together. For example, there is a common approach taken towards professional development, and Intermediate and Primary teachers work well to collaborate and be adaptable with each other

- The Team heard from some staff that there appears to be 'brand' or 'label' attached to Takhini School in the community that may not necessarily present a representative or complementary identify of the school. These staff members do not feel that being viewed as an overflow school is complimentary to the school, and feel there are some parents in the neighbourhood who choose not to send their children to Takhini School

- Linked to the above point, the Team sensed a level of frustration on the part of staff who feel that Takhini School is struggling to do too many things and be too many things (overflow school, school for the College, high transiency population, etc). Exploring the concept of a neighbourhood school was suggested by staff as a means of giving the school a more positive focus or identity

- With respect to the physical design of the school (built in 1961) the Team noted that some classroom doors do not have windows in them. When closed, this contributes to an isolated or closed-off feeling that does not necessarily align with the rest of the school

- All students who met with the Team shared that they liked their school and felt that they had a "go-to" adult with whom they could talk if they had difficulties or concerns

- Related to the above, some students in the upper-intermediate grades shared with the Team that they do not feel the school is as safe as it could be, based on the behavior displayed by some of their peers. Further, some primary students wish that there were "no mean kids" as they feel that bullying is of concern to them

- Most, if not all of the students the team met with like their school and their teachers. The feel that there is a good atmosphere at the school though did remark that some of their peers attempt to overtake the class and diminish the positive atmosphere with their behaviours

- Teachers appreciate their current administration team, though given the change to a new principal next year, the team sensed a heightened level of angst or worry on the part of the staff. Conversely, the school's administration team also appreciates the supportive, flexible, and open staff at Takhini School

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Work with the Takhini School Council to help actualize their role in meaningful ways with teachers and school administration in order that they can better support the work and directions of the school

- Consider more clearly identifying and communicating a clearer identity of what Takhini School represents and aspires to be. For example, there are some schools that have adopted a particular philosophy or approach over a period of years as a means of providing focus and transmitting what their philosophy and goals are. Conversations on these aspects of the school would require involvement of the School Council, Superintendent, staff, students, and community

- Explore the replacement of solid classroom doors without windows, or have windows placed into existing doors as a means of increasing openness and security that is consistent with the rest of the school

- While most students feel they have a "go-to" adult, work to ensure that concerns expressed by students in regards to bullying, behaviours, and safety are addressed

School and Community

Characteristics: 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:

- There is a diversity of students at Takhini School. For example, there are over 20 First Nations represented by students, with the largest proportion of First Nations students coming from northern Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Additionally, there are immigrant students who are also new to Canada. Given this diversity, the Team heard that it is difficult to receive support through a Community Education Liaison Coordinator (CELC) position

- Related to the above point, based on the diversity of cultures at Takhini School, there is an open and respectful atmosphere at the school that strives to embrace difference and the multi-cultural fabric of the school. This openness to diversity is considered by staff to be a core strength of the school

- With respect to celebrating diverse cultures, the school has moved away from a "multi-cultural week" and is thinking more broadly to culture as being an asset that is supported and celebrated in an ongoing way. For example, drumming and dancing takes place at Kindergarten regularly rather than in an episodic manner

- As identified in the 2011 school review, the student body at Takhini School is a transient one: Given the proximity to Yukon College, numbers of students arrive in the fall and leave in April at the end of the College Year as their parents follow this calendar. When students return to their home communities, they may or may not re-enrol in school. The Team heard from staff that, at times, it can be difficult to contact parents or have them come to the school if required during the College instructional day

- Students shared with the team that they appreciate their playground and the natural spaces around the school. Those students with whom the team spoke felt that they had sufficient and engaging playground equipment. Given the physical location of the school, students are able to go on the forest trails, use the adjacent baseball diamonds, Yukon College, and the Yukon Arts Centre

- Staff members expressed their desire for increased parental support and presence during the school day. In some primary grades, teachers voiced concern in regards to low levels of parental engagement. For example, when holding Kindergarten family luncheons, sometimes only 2-3 parents will attend. To help address this, some teachers wondered whether a Learning Together program, or similar model of early orientation to school and learning could be helpful in increasing parental engagement

- To promote family involvement in the school, there are extra-curricular activities, community/family barbecues, and art shows held after school hours. These events appear to be well-attended. Staff shared that they strive to get to know their students and families well, despite the transient nature of their school

- The Team heard that the school has participation from local experts and retired teachers and administrators who have worked both at Takhini School and other schools help support programming for students

- With respect to sharing information with parents, the Takhini School Council observed that communication may not be as timely as it could be, and that the school website needs to be updated, particularly with respect to the newsletter page

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Explore a liaison/support position with Yukon College as a means of assisting students whose parents are transitioning to and from the College. This position could also help support consistent school attendance, and to provide support in serving as a bridge for communications between teachers and parents

- Explore ways that Yukon College can be used as a resource in support of curriculum delivery, particularly in the areas of science and humanities instruction, and for exposing students to future career/learning opportunities

- Update the school's website so that all information is representative of the current school context, and maintain it regularly as a key communication channel for parents and community

- Continue to promote family engagement with the school through after-school events, as identifying events and activities that could help to strengthen parent engagement during the school day

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:

- Self-regulation as a whole-school approach appears to be effective. School staff shared with the team that they believe this approach to be effective in providing a language and framework for working with students. Some staff did share that, while they appreciate self-regulation, more consistent application of the initiative would be helpful

- Two years ago, Takhini School reverted to a mixed-gender configuration after implementing a single-gender classroom organization. This was based on a review of data and a status report commissioned by the Yukon Department of Education. The team heard from staff and students that they much prefer the mixed-gender composition of classes and would not wish to go back to the previous. School administration also shared that the mixed-gender organization offered greater flexibility in regards to supporting students academically

- The Team heard that the entire school staff is planning to institute strategies from the book "The First Six Weeks of School" (Denton and Kriete, 2000) to lay the groundwork for a successful 2015-16 school year

- This year Takhini School has employed a counsellor who is also trained as a school psychologist. This person, accompanied by their therapeutic dog, provides an important service for students, staff, and families

- With respect to space allocation, the Team from heard from staff that the 'calm down' room, or quiet space for students to re-focus and settle is a very effective use of space that is helpful for both students and teachers. Yoga and Mind-up are used as strategies to help students stay calm and focused

- Intermediate teachers meet each Tuesday to collaborate and share concerns, plan ahead, and discuss upcoming events. Primary teachers do a similar meeting on a monthly basis and keep in consistent contact with each other. In a similar way, Educational Assistants suggested that they would appreciate the opportunity to meet regularly to discuss students and their programming

- In support of the self-regulation strategy at Takhini School, a 'soft start' approach is taken each morning for the first 30 minutes: there are no bells, no announcements, and no singing of O Canada. Instead, a quiet approach is taken whereby students can quietly read, work independently, or play a game. A further benefit of the 'soft start' is that it students who arrive late do not miss academic instruction at the start of the day

- A component of each Friday is an options day that gives students the opportunity to experience hands-on activities such as cooking, sewing, Destination Imagination, etc. Students enjoy these activities, and thus have asked for more clubs (such as a gardening club) in addition to music, running, and drumming and dancing

- Given the transiency of the Takhini School population, some staff shared with the Team the concept of a transition room whereby new students could be welcomed, assessed, and supported for a period of time prior to transitioning to the regular classroom. This could provide a 'soft landing' and period of adjustment for new students

- The team heard from staff that there appears to be ambiguity regarding the roles and responsibilities with respect to administrative support and assistance provided by the school office. As a result, some staff are unclear regarding the types of support they could be asking for and what they could expect to receive

- Some staff shared with the Team that there could be more consistency and awareness around policies/protocols and practices (e.g. discipline). With respect to interventions, staff feel that a consistent language-such as is used with self-regulation would be helpful

- Given the transiency and temporary nature of some positions at the school, and its effects on instituting lasting organizational change, newer staff feel that an information binder and opportunities for mentoring with a more experienced staff member would be beneficial, as would the in-servicing of new staff with respect to behaviour management and other school initiatives

- Staff shared the observation that there are programs in the school which appear not to have a staff member assigned to with respect to responsibility. For example, some staff wondered who was responsible for gym equipment, its upkeep, and updating

- The Team heard from some staff that they have noticed a decline in the levels of painting/maintenance at the school, custodial services are not as thorough/hygienic as before, and school furnishing are older and may not fit students physically

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Organize regular meetings for Educational Assistants to meet and discuss students, their work, share ideas, and to collaborate on matters of mutual concern

- Give further thought to developing a transition room for students who are new to the school as a pilot project with clear intentions, guidelines, and assessment strategy

- Consider a Professional Development day at the beginning of the school year as an orientation day to review school policies, protocols, strength areas, and areas requiring further discussion, attention, and resolution as a means of starting off the school year on the 'same page'

- Clearly define for teachers the roles and responsibilities of the school administration and office administration in order that the types/level of support provided is clear to teachers

- Discuss with the Superintendent concerns with regards to facilities management, custodial services, and furniture upgrades for the school

- With respect to behavioural expectations and approaches to discipline, as a staff discuss, define, and share norms and expectations in order to promote consistency and clarity. Include School Council representation in this work

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:

- The Takhini School Council is a very engaged group which desires to be supportive of the school and student progress. The Council met with the Minister of Education in spring 2015 to present their Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis in the interests of improving the quality of education at Takhini Elementary

- The School Council desires to know more about the administration and management of the school, and to collaborate as members of the School Growth Planning Team in order to be able to contribute, be informed, and assist the school in identifying and supporting the achievement of goals

- Related to the above, the School Council expressed that they were unsure of how Takhini students were doing academically. They would like to learn more with respect to student

assessment practices, BC performance standards, and achievement based on system assessments such as the Yukon Foundation Skills Assessments (grades 4 and 7)

- School Council further requested that they be included in work done with respect to codes of conduct, safety, and discipline guidelines in order that they can contribute and be supportive of the school

- Given their understanding of the school and its students, School Council suggested the idea of a transition room or class as a pilot project to assist with the intake, assessment, and acclimatization of new students to Takhini School

- The Team was left with the impression that the staff knows their students well, and where their students are at academically, and that a central approach to improving academics is creating the conditions for learning throughout the school environment

- Staff expressed to the Team that there is a sentiment of 'over-implementation' as a result of many new initiatives being implemented at the school over a number of years. Staff suggested that there be no new large-scale initiatives considered, and instead a focus placed on growing existing programs

- Staff and administration shared that, while there formerly was a school psychologist assigned to the school, no replacement psychologist has been assigned. As a result, psychoeducational assessments have not been completed and is a contributing factor to the stress level of staff

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Share and discuss with the Takhini School Council student achievement data based on system assessments such as Grade 4 and 7 Foundation Skills Assessments (in ways that do not identify individual students) to advise the Council on the academic strengths and areas requiring further support and attention

- Have a specific time allotted at regularly scheduled School Council meetings to discuss school operations, management issues, and ways that School Council may be involved and support this work

- As a staff, give thought primarily to how current initiatives at the school may be grown and refined (along with what initiatives may possibly be discontinued) prior to developing and initiating new approaches or programs as a means of avoiding 'implementation fatigue'

- With the Superintendent and School Council, discuss ways in which the needs of students transitioning to and from Takhini School can be supported

In conclusion

The Review Team wishes to thank all who participated in this review, and for the welcoming and supportive hosting the Team received. The Team was mindful and appreciative that this review (originally scheduled in November and postponed until May at the request of the school) was held at a very busy time of the school year, while significant staffing changes for the next school year were under way.

The Team appreciated the hospitable, open, and honest contributions of the staff, students, and School Council at Takhini School. Their dedication to their students and 'grit', or determination, is commendable. While the Team observed a committed and thoughtful staff who are working to bring the school-year to a successful close, the Team also observed a level of challenge and measure of frustration that, at times during the review, appeared to limit conversations focused where Takhini School may need and be able to 'grow to'.

The Review Team hopes that the observations and recommendations presented in this report will make a contribution towards alleviating current challenges while concurrently supporting learning and growth at Takhini Elementary School as it moves forward with new leadership in the 15-16 school year.

Practices to share:

- The "soft start" approach to the school day as part of the Self-regulation approach

- The minimal use of bells, announcements, and other interruptions as a means of promoting a calm, learning-focused atmosphere

Recommendations for the Department

- Primary teachers appreciate the Boehm and Early years Evaluation. Consider some form of pre-post testing at the Kindergarten level as a means of gauging progress at this age-level

- Given the levels of transiency and its effect on students, explore the idea of a 'floating' permanent substitute teacher model to help increase consistency of staff for students

- Given the transiency of students and families, examine the administration time allocation to determine whether it is currently adequate for the Takhini School context

- Provide support for the School Council and school administration through the School Council Liaison at the Department of Education, particularly with a new principal arriving in 2015

- Review with Student Support Services the current load of outstanding psychoeducational assessments