

The Record

District's new learning programs successful

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Page: 2

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A group of New Westminster teachers who taught SmartReading in their classrooms saw a huge improvement in students' grades this year, according to Susan Close, assistant superintendent for the school district.

She presented the annual findings of the district research team - made up of about 40 teachers - at the school board's last meeting before the summer break on June 27.

"We're really impressed with the gains we've had and the breakthroughs of some of the children," Close later told The Record.

"We've been working with SmartReading for a few years now, and I think we're seeing the cumulative effects of that."

The teachers collaborated on ways to teach Word Work and SmartReading, programs developed by Close that provide students with innovative ways to think about and respond to words.

For the 2005/06 school year, one of the goals of the team was to see more students move into the categories of meeting and exceeding expectations: the grading terms used in lieu of letter grades.

They were very successful, Close said.

"One little boy with a learning disability has gone from not yet meeting (expectations) to fully meeting (expectations)," she said.

This year, teachers also chose a specific skill to improve.

For grades 3 to 5, teachers focused on teaching children to understand reading material on a deeper level, while grades 6 to 8 focused on learning how to make inferences and justify their reasoning.

"Having seen how it benefits my son's reading, it's just a wonderful program," said Lori Watt, vice-chair of the school board. "We're very lucky."

The results of the team's findings also pointed out the areas that need to be improved for the 2006/07 school year.

Close said they plan on looking at how they can boost the grades of specific demographics.

There are many fewer boys in the 'exceeding expectation' category, for example.

They will also study the results of aboriginal and English as a second language students.

"Our goal is to continue to see more kids reaching higher levels and to study the effects on different populations," she said.

While there is room for improvement, SmartReading has put New Westminster schools on the map for their new and seemingly effective approach to teaching.

Teachers from as far away as Trinidad and the U.K. have registered to attend a conference in September that will show other teachers how to use the program.

The conference sold out before they even had time to advertise it.

Schools in other provinces are also taking notice.

"There's other districts looking at what we're doing here," Watt said, recalling a story Close told at the school board meeting where a former New Westminster student was able to help her new Alberta teacher introduce SmartReading to the classroom.

"What's so exciting," Watt said, "is (students) get so engaged and so excited to share their ideas about it."

The statistical results of the research team will be available in September.

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