

The First Nations Kindergarten Transition Program in York Region: Action Research in Students Achieving Outstanding Social and Academic Success in Full Day Kindergarten.

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Article:

Historically, schools in First Nation communities, have not included positive experiences for their students. Fortunately, the world is finally discovering the truth behind the Residential School and Indian Day School Experiences. Looking toward the future, however, provides excitement and encouragement as First Nation communities, schools and students begin their educational journey forward.

York Region District School Board continues to house the only, “Indian Day School” in the area, located on Georgina Island, in the heart of Lake Simcoe. It was only four years ago that the official school name and government documents were changed from the *Georgina Island Indian Day School*, to **Waabgon Gamig First Nation School**, which simply means, ***Blossoming House***. This article includes a glimpse of student life, cultural norms, professional practice, and perhaps a solution to increasing academic success for students in First Nations schools, and possibly every Early-Learning Kindergarten Program in the province. The answer lies within a special little program called, **The Junior Kindergarten Transition Program.**

School Profile: The little red two-room school house, is a quaint and compact building adjoined to the community Public Library. It is located on the main road of the Island, and is accessible only by ferry, airboat, or ice road. It is funded by the Department of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, Ogemawahj Tribal Council, and the Chippewas of Georgina Island. Waabgon Gamig First Nation School employs two teachers, (seconded from York Region District Board,) a Team Leader, a Child and Youth Worker, an Educational Assistant, a Native Language Teacher and a part-time Secretary.

Waabgon Gamig educates approximately 25 students per year in grades SK-5. After grade 5, they are bussed to the local mainland school. Just a few metres down the road however, is the Niigaan Naabiwag Child Care Centre. This is where the students often begin their educational journey, ending up in the Full Day, *Every Day*, Senior Kindergarten Early Learning Program. The Daycare and the Kindergarten classroom, are two places in which the magic begins. For the past three years, students in this transition program have achieved far beyond their grade level expectations, both socially and academically.

Equity for students in First Nation Schools, literally means receiving an equitable education, comparable to education on the, “mainland”. Closing the gap means providing quality resources,

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quality teaching, quality learning experiences, an investment in teacher training and on-going professional development. Incorporating culture components into the programming also assists students in their educational journey. Children do far better in life, when they have a solid grasp of their culture and identity. They become confident, life long learners, with a willingness and eagerness to explore the world, and other cultures of the world. And isn't that we all want for our children?

Student Life: Students begin their week on Monday mornings, with all staff and students present. A smudge bowl, burning Sage, and an Eagle Feather set the tone for the day, clearing any negative energy. Students hear the daily announcements and sing O'Canada in either English, French or Ojibwe. Then, they make their way to their classroom, where the focus tends to be, building a community of respectful learners. Academic programming provided by determined teachers also sets the academic tone. The motto for learning tends to be, "***raise the expectations, and they will succeed***". Students enjoy personal Mac laptops, a smart board in each classroom, highly trained teachers, individualized programs for each student, and perhaps most importantly, a calm and warm approach to learning and behaviour expectations. Students receive individual programs as a professional practice, to ensure students are always challenged and reaching their full potential.

Cultural Norms: Having cultural content embedded within the curriculum, allows students to see a reflection of their identity, one that they can be proud of. Their pride of heritage is apparent in the hand drumming songs, hoop dancing teachings, and perhaps most importantly the Native Language Program. The Native as a Second Language Program (NSL), begins at the Child Care Centre and continues into high school and university level studies. *Anishnaabomowin*, also refers to the language of Ojibwe, which is the mother tongue of the Chippewas of Georgina Island.

Professional Practice: *Aboriginal* and Northern Affairs Canada, funded a three year program entitled, the *First Nation Student Success Program*. Education Managers and Team Leaders in many First Nations Schools are now responsible for the collection of **DATA** to track student progress. Collecting *data* does inform teaching practice, and collecting *data* does allow administrators to find gaps in learning or programming. But how does **DATA** close the gap in student success? Especially when there isn't much *data* collected in Kindergarten, as much of the assessment is anecdotal. Certainly, schools need to act immediately, rather than waiting ten more years to see what the *data* reveals.

So what else can schools do in the meantime? Waabgon Gamig invests in their teachers, by providing opportunities for Additional Qualification courses, attendance at conferences, and technology training. ETFO and The Dream Catcher Fund in Six Nations, Ontario, also financially assisted the Kindergarten teacher so she could attend the Harvard University Summer Learning Institutes for two years. All of these supports have ultimately contributed to the success of the students, *especially* the Kindergarten students. So how does it all begin?

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The answer: The Junior Kindergarten Transition Program. This program is intended to a) provide students with a seamless transition from daycare to school, and b) arm them with social and academic learning skills that will prepare them for a fantastic educational career. The transition program that was developed by the daycare and the school after many attempts at a balanced Kindergarten Program. The following information is a month by month overview of what the program looks like.

Month	Location	EL-K Teacher Role	ECE Role	Parent Role
JULY	Staff Retreat/ Daycare	Teacher listens to Daycare Staff, Evaluates Program from the previous year, and plans for the year ahead	The Daycare has a graduation for kids who have completed the JK program. ECE's provide feedback to the Teacher and plans with the EL-K Teacher	Parents of children who just finished the JK program attend the JK graduation. NEW JK parents Register their child
AUG	Daycare/School	Develops long range plans/ learning goals/ and parent workshop	ECE Teacher carries out long range plans for the year	Attends Welcome to Kindergarten
SEPT	Daycare	Students stay at the Daycare FULL TIME. EL-K Teacher visits daycare once per week for 45 minutes to build a rapport with kids	ECE Teacher provides one hour of instruction to students, kids continue to nap, Students receive Native Language	Monthly newsletters begin to go home, parents fill out a survey/questionnaire about child development and interests
OCT	Daycare	EL-K teacher begins academic interactions, primarily literacy focus, 45 minutes once per week	The Daycare and EL-K program take their first field trip together to a local farm and pumpkin patch	Parents are invited to a family literacy night put on by the Daycare and the School. Parents attend field trip with school
Month	Location	EL-K Teacher Role	ECE Role	Parent Role
NOV	School	Students begin to visit the EL-K classroom once per week to play for 45 minutes, with an ECE staff member, who stays in the room	ECE teacher provides one hour of focused academic instruction to the students at the Daycare, (early literacy and numeracy skills)	Parents are asked to take children on a routine vision and hearing screening test, even if there are no visible symptoms displayed
DEC	School	Students visit the EL-K classroom once per week to play for 45 minutes, with an ECE staff member, who leaves the room for a few minutes per session	ECE teacher provides one hour of focused academics to the students at the Daycare (early literacy and numeracy skills)	Students and parents attend the community Christmas Concert. Informal progress reports are sent home by the EL-K teacher

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JAN	School	Students visit the EL-K classroom once per week to participate in regular classroom programming for 45 minutes, with an ECE staff member, who leaves the room for the session, but stays in the building	ECE teacher provides one hour of focused academics to the students at the Daycare (early literacy and numeracy skills). Informal assessments occur, i.e. letter recognition, with the EL-K Teacher and the ECE	Informal progress reports are received. Parents are invited to the Family Literacy Day at the school.
FEB	School	Students visit the EL-K classroom once per week to participate in regular classroom programming for 45 minutes, with an ECE staff member, who begins to DROP off the students in the morning	ECE teacher provides one hour of focused academics to the students at the Daycare (early literacy and numeracy skills). The ECE begins learning skills such as raising hands, taking turns to speak etc.	Parents invited to meet with EL-K teacher to discuss any concerns, and review progress
MAR	School	Students visit the EL-K classroom once per week to participate in regular classroom programming for 45 minutes, with an ECE staff member, who begins to DROP off students in the morning with other students	Daycare staff picks up students after first recess. The ECE begins learning skills like lining up, hanging up their bags in their cubby independently, zippers etc.	A parent session is held to help parents with homework, math and literacy strategies
Month	Location	EL-K Teacher Role	ECE Role	Parent Role
APR	School	Students visit the EL-K classroom once per week to participate in regular classroom programming for the morning, an ECE staff member, Drops Off students in the morning with other students	Daycare staff picks up students after lunch recess	Parents invited to meet other staff at the school
MAY	School	Students visit the EL-K classroom once per week to participate in regular classroom programming for the morning	Daycare staff picks up students after lunch recess	PARENTS drop off their children in the morning so they experience a smooth transition to school routines as well
JUNE	School	Students visit the EL-	Daycare staff picks up	Parents attend year

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		K classroom once per week to participate in regular classroom programming for the morning	students after lunch recess. Daycare and School go on their year end trip	end field trips and the year end awards, assembly and BBQ at the school
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Professional Development of Staff includes the ECE Staff and the EL-K teacher spending time together, developing plans, and planning events at the annual summer retreat. The Kindergarten and Daycare teachers also decide to attend one professional development session together per year. Some of the PD sessions include Handwriting Without Tears workshops, Early Learning and Literacy Sessions, Kindergarten workshops, and workshops held by York Region. These ladies also presented their program to the York Region Early Years Program, highlighting their successes and accomplishments in regards to their students.

Parental Involvement Strategies include building a positive rapport with parents, having Welcome to Kindergarten sessions, Lunch and Learns, monthly communications, inviting parents on field trips and to the school assemblies. They also held two Thanksgiving Dinner/Literacy Nights entitled, the Thanksgiving Family Fun Fest, and the Medieval Thanksgiving Fair. These events were a huge success in creating a common language for literacy and learning between the home and school.

The Proof is in the results, specifically the literacy results. When the students achieve higher reading and writing results, they become fluent in other subjects, because they feel successful, and are actively engaged. The following table highlights the PM Benchmark results. The findings show that every year, in each coloured cohort, students succeed beyond expected grade level.

PM Benchmark Results 2008-2011

GRADE	Expected Level in September (beginning of grade)	Expected Level in June (end of grade)
SK	1	5
1	5	16
2	16	24
3	24	28

	1 st year Sept/08	June/09	2 nd year Sept/09	June/10	3 rd Year Sept/10	June/11	4 th year Sept/11	June/12
SK	0	6	5	13	2	8	9	?
	0	5	5	12	2	7	2	?
	0	5	4	10	1	2	2	?
			4	10			2	?
1	/	/	6	16	13	28	8	?

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	/	/	6	16	12	28	7	?
	/	/	5	16	10	24	2	?
					10	24		
2	/	/	/	/	IPRC	IPRC	28	?
	/	/	/	/	IPRC	IPRC	28	?
	/	/	/	/	IPRC	IPRC	24	?
							24	?

The ultimate goal of this article is to share with other educators strategies that can be used in any early learning program. The intent is that daycare providers, Early Childhood Educators, parents and Kindergarten teachers start to have conversations with each other, build relationships with each other, and eventually begin programming together. The main priority of Learning Programs should eventually be, the development of programs that meet the needs of the students and parents, as opposed to a one size fits all approach.

Finally, the success of this program has been shared by everyone in is this tiny First Nation Community. Its' success has manifested from trial and error, constant revision of programming, positive feedback, and continued support. This program has been nominated for both a Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Teaching, and a Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Early Childhood Education. The results are expected sometime after the election.

For further information, visit the Waabgon First Nation School website.

<http://www.waabgongamig.ca>

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