

## July 27 Principal Update; Staffing and Return to School

I trust summer is treating you well. It's certainly taken on a character of its own with our ongoing pandemic situation and the unseasonal weather.

Over the next four weeks, you'll be receiving a weekly update on return to school; this first one being more general in nature. As you are likely aware, Robert Service School students will be **returning to school for face-to-face instruction on Wednesday, August 19<sup>th</sup>**. As per usual, Kindergarten with Mrs. Laurel Betts has a staggered - gradual start, and she'll be informing parents directly of this process in the next day or two.

In this update 'd like to provide some information on staffing and on return to school protocols.

### **Staffing Appointments:**

First, the staffing appointments were completed last week, with the EA positions being the final process.

Stephen Ferguson has been appointed to the Grade 5 Intensive French position. Stephen and his family come to us from Prince Edward Island. He has extensive experience in Intermediate Years French programming internationally and nationally, including having previously taught at Hidden Valley, Holy Family and Emilie Tremblay in Whitehorse.

Micah Quinn has been appointed to the interim science position replacing Mrs. Betsy Wilson, who returns at the end of October from maternity leave. Micah and his family come to us from Iceland, having taught in Reykjavik for the past five years. He previously worked in an educator role at Yukon College and at Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.

We have hired two Educational Assistants to replace Mrs. Dawn Dyce, who is moving to Haines Junction, and Nijen Holland, who is on leave for the school year. We are currently in the process of hiring a third EA. Micah will be part-time EA during his interim science role, and then full-time thereafter. We have also appointed Madison Betts, who is likely known to many. Madison is a graduate of RSS, and during her high school years, tutored students, mainly in mathematics. She has completed her first two years of university study.

I was really impressed with the quality and number of applicants for all positions and the genuine interest for working at RSS and in Dawson.

Craig Hunter also returns this year, having recently completed Educational Leave. Craig will be the Kël (Resource Teacher) working with individual and groups of students providing additional support for students in Grades 7-10.

I'd like to mention that Ms Susu Robins and Mr Bryan Laloge are not returning this year because we could not accommodate them in our staffing allowance, which is really unfortunate because of the contribution they've made to students and their learning.

## **Return to School**

Second, you will have received information from the Deputy Minister about 'return to school'. Over the next few weeks, further information will come your way, but for now some preliminary information is necessary. We want all staff, parents and carers and students to know in advance of the 19<sup>th</sup> what school will look like in our current pandemic situation. In order to advance this information, over the past week I've connected with the majority of our 35 staff members and some parents and School Council members about their response and concerns regarding return to school for staff on August 18<sup>th</sup> and for students on August 19<sup>th</sup>. A large part of our August 19<sup>th</sup> teacher-only-day will be committed to professional learning on front-loading health-related protocols across the school.

The overall message from these conversations is that we are all in agreement that there's a tangible anxiety in the community - staff, parents and students - about return to school, coupled with an overall relief that there'll be a return to school. Because of this uncertainty, our school reference to **tëk'ätr'ënocha (taking care of each other)** will become a greater necessary reality this year and there'll be several levels this will need to play out - individual, classroom, teams (k-3, 4-7, 8-12), school and school-community wide. Our planning and communication over the next few weeks is central to working to alleviate some of this anxiety. It can't eliminate it, but it can help to alleviate some of this anxiety through practical measures.

Comments indicated that the staff and school-community have confidence in the school's ability to collectively action and monitor protocols to assure confidence in us all and reduce anxiety. The main message that arose from the conversations was the need for a collective approach to responding as a school-community to the pandemic. **The highest emphasis was on being conscious of our decisions and how we are individually accountable for making decisions that do not put ourselves or others at risk. We all have a part to play in tëk'ätr'ënocha.**

Yukon Education has recently sent detailed health and safety guidelines to mitigate risk, and these will inform our planning coupled with the conversations we've had at the school and community level over the past week. There's not - at least, not yet - a YE/YG imposed limit on class sizes, but we are very aware that there are several pressure points in the school - to list three of several: Foods/ Culinary Arts, Grade 5 & Grade 7 - and where there may be identified issues, we have to assist individual teachers in their programming. It's not a one-size-fits-all delivery model across our school. This will likely mean non-teaching staff, such as me as a principal, may be appointed to support a particular class for a portion of the day to support the demands caused by distancing requirements; that is, I may be regularly assigned to Mr Ferguson's Mathematics learning time to support a smaller group of students.

**Major attention for us at the school will be given to promoting (1) social distancing at the classroom, area group and school level; (2) proper cleaning and sanitizing across the school, and (3) monitoring of student and staff health and processes to monitor and support stay at home/working from home procedures if students or staff are symptomatic.**

**In brief, staff members and parents/ carers are very comfortable with high to moderate interaction among teaching staff and students at the classroom level, moderate interaction amongst grade levels in K-4, 5-7 and 8-12, and limited interaction at the whole-school level.**

This would mean that at a grade level, students would be working individually, in pairs or table groups, but there would be limited movement, a seating plan, and restricted resource sharing. When the class transitions to recess or another class, sanitizing would be required.

We feel the school is physically structured and currently operates in a supportive way to promote social distancing at the classroom level. For example, our three areas of the school currently have minimal to moderate interaction at the school level. K-4 grades are on the ground level, and Grades 5-7 and 8-12 are on the upper level but in designated areas. Further, these grade groupings have different entry and exit doors into the school and staggered recess and lunchtimes. We feel comfortable in being able to minimize whole school interactions and reduce cohort across the three areas of the school. There will not be full-school assemblies and open-gym in their current format. Our classrooms, overall, can accommodate our class sizes although attention will be given to accommodating some smaller group interactions for Grade 5, 7 and, likely, 10.

It is important to note that some staff and students will choose to socially distance. We have students and staff that are immuno-compromised or live with family members that are immuno-compromised. Closer to the date we will seek from you any information that can help us in planning for individual preference. Face-shields and masks will be worn by several staff, and this becomes a personal choice for all. Currently, we do identify some spaces where mask use will be essential, such as the school-community library or on school bus travel. Depending on how plans unfold for movement of students through high-flow areas in the school, mask wearing may be essential in these areas. We will work to provide masks for students, but we encourage your child to have a mask or lower- face covering (in a zip-lock bag) for use at school on August 19<sup>th</sup>.

There are ongoing discussions around return to school, in light of the information that will continue to come in from the Department. Again weekly information will be going out to staff and the school community allowing for comment and, if necessary, adjustment. **It's my view that the major preparation that is necessary in advance of school return is having open communication to consciously/mentally prepare in an effort to reduce anxiety through a confidence that we are working to take care of each other being mindful of concerns.**

Take care,

Brian

