



# **Tantalus School Review Report October 2015**

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Tantalus School Review  
October 14-15, 2015

**School Principal:** Morgan Douglas-Alexander

**Date of Review:** October 14-15, 2015

**School Review Team:**

Simon Blakesley, Director, Student Achievement/System Accountability, Yukon Education

Maureen Johnstone, School Council Chair, Takhini School Council

Scott Kerby, Learning Assistant Teacher, F.H. Collins Secondary School

Nicole Morgan, Director, Learning Support Services, Yukon Education

Penny Prysnuik, Superintendent, Area 2, Yukon Education

Danielle Sheldon, Partnership Coordinator, FNPP, Yukon Education

**Meetings with the School included:**

Students

Teachers and staff

School Administration

School Council

Elder in the School

Community Education Liaison Coordinator

**School Context**

Tantalus school is located in Carmacks on the traditional territory of Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation (LSCFN). Approximately 111 students K-12 attend the school. After a succession of principals, there is now greater stability of staff and leadership. This, along with decreased staff turnover, has brought more consistency to the school culture.

The on-going mission of the school states that Tantalus Hats Edan Ku prepares students to be contributing, self-sufficient, and self-confident members of society. Programs reflect the Northern Tutchone values of caring, sharing, and respect. Helping students to become good citizens of the school, and, therefore, the community is a priority.

Currently, the members of the Tantalus School Growth team are the Principal; The Staff of Tantalus School (which includes 3 Elders from LSCFN), The School Council (including 3 members of the community at large, and 3 members of LSCFN, one of whom is an Elder). School Council would like meetings where a larger number of community members are involved with the development of the school growth plan.

The previous school review was held in February, 2012. Representatives from staff and School Council identified the key priorities including creating an inclusive and inviting atmosphere for learning, creating anti-bullying policies, and helping improve attendance. This year there is a focus on literacy development.

## **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 Team heard from staff members that there is a dedicated and thoughtful effort on the part of everyone at the school to work together, to be supportive, and to help one another both professionally and personally
- The Team observed happy, relaxed, and cheerful students at Tantalus School. Consistency of staff at the school was suggested to be a strong contributor in this regard. Students readily talked with team members both formally and informally. When team members visited classes, students were focused on their work and not distracted from their learning
- Students who met with the Team shared that they like their teachers and feel safe at school. They feel that there is a mutually supportive relationship when the school is small and everyone knows each other. Students know their teachers are there to help them, and that they can go to their teachers for assistance should they have difficulty
- When asked about bullying at the school, students expressed that this is very rare, and that should it occur, they know that they can talk with an adult about it
- There exists a positive, prideful, respectful school culture and climate that appears open, friendly and collegial. This was affirmed by School Council, LSCFN representatives, staff, and students. School spirit is promoted through a wide range of activities, such as House teams, Purple Shirt Day, and Pyjama Day. The bright and open architecture of the school contributes to this positive atmosphere, and the Team felt that the school entrance area would lend itself very well to further inclusion of local culture
- The staff hold high expectations for their students and wish to see them succeed both personally and educationally. Staff endeavour to foster the belief that their students can “reach for the stars” and that attending school in Carmacks is an experience on par with other schools. Staff members expressed that there could be more on the land, experiential opportunities for students, particularly for students who may be facing challenges
- With respect to First Nations language instruction, School Council members shared that they have seen progress in this area, and appreciate that teachers attend language classes with their students. School Council wondered if there is a specific curriculum and a scope and sequence for Native Language instruction as students moved through the grades
- At the high school level, Tantalus School piloted the Social Studies 10 Residential School curriculum. The Team heard from staff that this was very supportive to student learning,

and that community members were invited to come in and share. The course was concluded with a potlatch and the wearing of regalia

### **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- Continue the work being done to promote a safe, open, caring, and supportive school culture and climate at Tantalus School. In support of this, consider identifying a space specifically for high school students that they can call their own
- In order to further promote Northern Tutchone language and culture throughout the school, consider identifying all rooms and other important areas with Northern Tutchone labels or name plaques
- Share with School Council the curriculum and scope and sequence of Native language instruction in order that they can be informed with respect to student progress through the grades
- Consider ways that the front entrance of the school can be capitalized upon and be further developed to showcase the school's identify and local First Nations culture as a means to further encourage parental/community involvement
- Working with LSCFN staff, identify ways that more on the land, cultural and experiential learning opportunities could be offered for students that would benefit most from this form of engagement

### **School and Community**

<p><b>Characteristics:</b> 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.</p>
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### **Observations of the Team:**

- The Tantalus School Council is an engaged and supportive group who wish to see the school and students succeed. The Council commented that they believe the atmosphere is calm and positive at the school and that staff genuinely care for their students. The Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation representative on Council also affirmed this observation
- The observation shared with the team is that that Council has seen growth and increased stability since the previous review in 2012 and the arrival of the current principal. A consistent staff has been a contributing factor to the positive school climate. School

Council members shared their desire that there be more community involvement in the school

- There exists a supportive interagency group, and Tantalus School strives to foster a positive relationship with stakeholders- and vice versa. For example, a local mining operation makes a substantial contribution to the school's meal program each year, LSCFN staff bring speakers into the school, and there is participation at the school by RCMP and Yukon Health and Social Services staff
- The linkage between the school and community is fostered due to there being a number of teachers and educational assistants who have family ties to the community
- An Elder in the School program has commenced this year. The Elder is in the school three times per week for five hours a day
- Some staff shared that they would like increased levels of parental presence and engagement at the school. The Team also heard from staff who felt that there was already a good level of engagement, and primary parents come in and lend support to cultural activities. Teachers expressed that they felt the principal takes a lot of time to communicate with parents
- Related to the above point, the Team heard that there are many school activities intended to increase parental inclusion, such as literacy teas, dancing and drumming, open days, and community barbecues
- Staff and other support personnel shared that students could benefit from increased opportunities to learn workplace skills and about future careers, and receive career and course selection counselling as they engage with work experience opportunities
- Tantalus School has a distinctive, spacious, and open front entrance, and the Team heard that there are plans to make the entrance more representative of local history and culture. In order to communicate the welcoming school identity and news about the school, the Team wondered whether a parent/community information board might also help to serve this purpose
- When asked what the vision was for their school, some participants were hesitant or unable to articulate this without having to pause or reflect on what their vision for the school may be. This is in no way suggested to imply that there is no vision for the school, but some participants felt that a clearer refinement and articulation of a vision could help to guide the school as it continues to grow

- Related to the above point, with respect to the development of the School Growth Plan, the process shared with the Team is that the principal creates a draft, school staff dialogue around the plan in focused sessions, and then an updated draft is shared with the School Council for input in the latter stages of the process. The Council shared with the team that, while they appreciate these efforts, they would like to be include earlier in the process of growth plan development

### **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- Given the efforts undertaken by the school and the community to support students, take steps to identify, develop, and articulate a shared vision for Tantalus School in ways that are open and inclusive of all local stakeholders. Once developed, the vision should be communicated and used as to guide the ongoing work of Tantalus School
- Seek ways to decentralize and distribute the work and promote the distributed leadership required to develop/refine the School Growth Plan. One potential approach would be to facilitate sessions with School Council, staff, the school superintendent, resident Elder, and LSCFN education staff in attendance. At such an event, data and evidence could be reviewed together, and discussions on successes, challenges, and goals and aspirations of community take place. From that point of departure a draft plan could then be created, reviewed, and finalized by all stakeholders as a roadmap that would serve to guide the school community
- Explore the potential of a parent/community news board in the front entrance area of the school as an additional communication channel for parents and the community
- Consider hosting a career day/event that would give the opportunity for students to learn more about local work opportunities as well as future educational choices and career options
- Provide opportunities for the Elder to work in classrooms and with students in support of their learning

## **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:**

- The Team heard clearly from all staff and students that the addition of a dedicated PE position to Tantalus school is a highly positive strategy to support student engagement and active living. Teachers expressed that there is now the opportunity to develop athletes at an earlier age and build and improve physical literacy
- Junior and senior-high students commented enthusiastically on the variety, creativity, training, and skill development that they can now receive in PE in a variety of sports. Both staff and students remarked on the benefits to school spirit of the House system in PE. Houses are named in Northern Tutchone, are a different colour, and all students K-12 are affiliated with a particular house
- Staff shared with the Team that they feel strongly supported by the principal, particularly with regards engaging in professional development and learning. The principal readily seeks assistance from Department of Education consultants in order to support the work of staff at Tantalus School
- Students felt that the high school staff have a range of specific skillsets (ex: art, science, math) that they bring to the blended learning model. The incorporation of technology and projectors into the school has also been a growth area over the past three years. This said, the team did hear mixed reviews on blended learning from students, in that they have concerns with the way that blended learning is currently deployed. Issues included less access to elective/experiential classes and a limited amount of equipment with which to conduct experiments
- As a teaching and learning method, high school students felt that blended learning instruction had become too independent (like an on-line learning course) for them, and that there were not enough opportunities for direct teacher instruction, group learning, and presenting. Students shared that currently it can be harder to get help in a blended learning model if the teacher is not readily accessible and students are at a variety of learning points (particularly in Math)
- High school teachers shared that a challenge to blended learning is that a teacher can be offering 6-7 courses at once. Carrying such a curricular load can make it more difficult to

offer labs and other hands-on activities. The Team heard from teachers that solutions to this challenge are being worked on and a plan is in development to give students more opportunities for projects and experiments

- In addition to blended learning, the team observed that the Industrial Education lab is updated and that there is a skilled teacher working with students in a safe and organized manner. Students shared that they enjoy working in this hands-on environment
- The REM model is felt to be very positive on the part of students and staff. Students readily shared examples that highlighted how REM was an important and meaningful learning experience for them. The ability to meet new students and be exposed to more course variety was highlighted. Teachers from Tantalus also contribute by sharing their expertise with students from other communities at REM
- Staff at Tantalus School self-organize in order to support their students. For example, staff have implemented a supervision schedule that allows for breakfast and lunch programs to be offered in the Round Room at the front of the school
- The Team heard that Tantalus School has a new Learning Assistant who is highly familiar with the school and students. While the Team heard that Department support has been very positive, the Team felt that further clarity regarding the LA position, the role of school-based team, and the Pyramid of Intervention as a guiding framework could be helpful to staff and students. Some staff shared that they are unclear on communication pathways, intervention processes, and how to develop an IEP
- Related to the above, the Team heard from school staff that there is a backlog of educational psychology assessments, and that this hinders IEP reviews and the work of the Learning Assistant and teachers
- Understanding that there are new Educational Assistants (EAs) at Tantalus School, the team heard that EAs are used in a variety of roles, including teaching and behaviour management
- With respect to staffing, programming, and meeting student needs, the Team heard from staff of the need for a social-emotional counsellor (as distinct from a program counsellor) to assist students with challenges that they may be facing
- Some older students shared that they felt there were few opportunities for them to take on or develop leadership capacity

## **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- Review and discuss with high school teachers the blended learning model, with specific attention given to ensuring that there is an adequate balance of instruction between independent laptop study, group work, presentations, and direct instruction. Doing so will help ensure that the teaching and learning relationship stays intact, and that students stay engaged and meet with success over the longer-term using this model of delivery
- In order to ensure effectiveness of resources, clarify the role of the EA as it relates to the role of the teacher and working with students
- Review with the superintendent the school's staffing allocation and discuss the potential for social-emotional counselling to be offered at Tantalus School
- Consider organizing visitations for staff with other experienced Learning Assistants and Student Support Services personnel to support training and bring clarity for all staff to the Pyramid of Intervention
- Consider exploring opportunities for involvement of older students in leadership activities that are meaningful and motivating for the them to engage in

## **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:**

- Last year, Tantalus School introduced a blended learning approach at the high school level. Preliminary indications based on BC provincial exam writing and completion rates show that this model is showing signs of success, particularly at the Grade 10 level. While a small sample size, the Grade 10 exam averages for Tantalus students was higher than the Yukon student average

- In order to keep track of student progress in the blended learning model, the principal and high school staff hold weekly meetings with high school students to monitor progress, lend support, and set goals
- School-wide write and DART data are used as primary indicators for literacy identification and support. The team heard that there has been an improvement in literacy achievement indicated by these assessments
- The Team heard from Council that they appreciate that students are being held more accountable for their learning, and would appreciate regular updates on student progress. While this may be difficult to do in a timely fashion where high school provincial exams are concerned (given that they are offered at specific times of the school year), other achievement/attendance data and evidence may help to inform the Council of student progress
- School Council shared with the Team that council meetings appeared to be more focused on the “issues of the moment” or of immediate necessity with less focus given to dialogue around longer-term matters such as achievement, a review of current school policies, and future policy development
- With respect to policy and practice, some staff shared that they were unclear with respect to how attendance and lates were accounted for and addressed
- The Team heard from school staff that while there were a number of students who disengaged from school last year, they have returned and re-engaged with school this year. The Team wondered if tracking had taken place over time to identify the points/situations at which students disengaged from school
- In order to support primary literacy, Tantalus School is in the first year of a three-year literacy intervention pilot. Additionally, there has been work done to implement a balanced-literacy approach with a common language across grade-levels
- Staff shared with the team that they are working to increase academic expectations, student accountability, and learning by employing BC performance standards for student assessment and grading in order to ensure that Tantalus School students are assessed using criteria and benchmarks

## **Recommendations for moving forward:**

- Continue to use relevant data and evidence of what is known about students to support the on-going growth and achievement of all students
- Consider reviewing what is known about students who have dropped out of school in order to identify the points at which this may be occurring (and why). This may help to inform actions that could help reduce (and hopefully eliminate) students dropping out from school
- At the beginning of the school year, identify with School Council a reasonable number of policy areas (1-3?) that could be revisited, discussed, reviewed, and possibly updated during the school year. School Council could be supportive in this work by seeking policy models from other councils and the DOE School Council Liaison. Once policies are adopted, ensure that staff, students, and families are informed of them
- Continue the work already in progress with respect to the balanced literacy approach being taken, the literacy intervention pilot, assessment for learning, and the promotion of a common language of literacy assessment across grades

## **In conclusion**

In summary, it was clearly evident to the Team that Tantalus School has grown to become more of a safe, stable, and settled place of learning for the children of Carmacks. The students and staff are clearly proud of their school, feel that the school is growing in positive directions, and there is an increased responsibility to ensure that students achieve to their highest potential. The efforts on the part of the staff to try new instructional practices to promote academic achievement while concurrently providing a learning environment that strives to nurture the whole child is commendable. A continued focus on an inclusive approach to planning and the articulation of the vision of the school should help guide Tantalus School on the path to further growth and progress in the future.

**Practices to share:**

- The principal and high school teachers hold weekly student progress meetings
- The creation of a full-time dedicated PE position in a K-12 rural school
- The piloting and refinement of a blended learning model for high school students

**Considerations for the Department**

- Due to increased sports activity, high school students request larger lockers and showers located in the school
- More options for sports activities on the playground. The current school playground does not have the opportunities for track, sliding in winter, baseball, and other pursuits that were there previously. The need for a diverse playground takes on further importance with the addition of a full-time PE position at Tantalus School
- Consistent heating/temperature control and difficulty to keep school warm is a concern for staff