

## Literary arts flourish in Parkland

### Professional Learning Community rewarded with outgrowth of young authors

**Angela Spanier, Parkland School Division**

The next time you find yourself inside a Chapters or Coles in the Edmonton area, stop by the section for young readers to pick up a copy of Gezina Baehr's *The Good Prince and the Evil Witch Hazel*.

Guaranteed to delight young people, this epic voyage depicts the triumph of good over evil and was penned by a Grade 2 student from Brookwood School, a K–4 elementary school nestled in the heart of Spruce Grove, located west of Edmonton.

Baehr is just one of a growing list of young authors from Brookwood to receive the attention of local and national publishers. Two of Baehr's peers, Clayton Lane and Shandell Meyer, recently were short listed to have their fairy tales published in the Young Writer's Poetry Institute of Canada Anthology *Once Upon A Dragon*, due out this fall.

The flow of literary success stories from Brookwood is no coincidence. Over the past two years, staff have focused on enhancing student writing, while working within the context of Dufour and Eaker's Professional Learning Community (PLC) model with colleagues from Millgrove School, a neighbouring elementary school that also serves students in K–4.

"Less has definitely proven to be more," said Joyce Sherwin, principal of Brookwood School. "Teachers were frustrated by their inability to effectively implement the strategies they were learning from the vast number of workshops and professional development sessions they had attended.

"By bringing staff together in a collaborative environment to focus solely on the writing process, our teachers have been afforded the opportunity to assess and revise their own instruction and improve the likelihood of student success across all grade levels. Our goal was to develop sound literacy skills in written language—and we're doing it," she said.

Under the guidance and mentoring of writing consultant Mary Sullivan, teachers at both schools have been engaged in grade level collaboration, planning sessions, class mentoring and individual coaching to identify the essential components of the writing process and to create programming that enables students to move along a continuum of competencies.

"Our intent was to introduce common practice across the grade levels through simultaneous implementation," said Sullivan. "A shared understanding of the development of writing coupled with common practice establishes a true articulation of writing skills throughout the school.

"At every grade level, writers learn the same elements of the craft of writing, but in increasingly sophisticated forms. When learners move to the next grade, the approach to writing is consistent and predictable in terms of the criteria for good writing as well as the process of revision. This spiral revisiting of the concepts allows students to internalize the criteria for strong writing in a number of genres and to become successful in creating a variety of formats for particular audiences," she said.

Sullivan explained that students need to experience writing as a process that begins with generating and collecting ideas and materials for writing, and then moves through organizing those ideas, creating interesting and effective sentences, and finally culminates with editing the work for correct use of conventions to complete a polished composition.

Several strategies have been employed by teachers to facilitate this learning process. The study of literature is incorporated for students to identify and analyze elements of the craft in models of good writing.

"Students who read a great deal tend, in most cases, to develop as strong writers," Sullivan said. "In part, the subconscious acquisition of vocabulary, sentence structures, use of conventions, spelling and so on occurs continuously while we read. When children have the distinctive features of a particular genre pointed out to them and demonstrated for them they learn more quickly how to be successful writers."

Other strategies deemed effective included teachers modeling writing through shared and collaborative writing projects. While mentoring teachers in the class, Sullivan said sometimes they involve students in creating a piece of work collectively, while at other times they ask students to present their work or even share writing done by the teacher.

"Students need to see what other writers are doing in order to widen their own repertoire of skill and imagination for writing," she said.

Parents, too, have been asked to play a role in developing their children's writing skills. Parents were made aware of the PLC and its focus during a collaborative education planning process during the first year of its implementation. Parents also were invited to a joint parent information evening, led by Sullivan, where they learned of strategies that parents could use to enhance their child's writing development at home.

According to Patricia Penner, principal of Millgrove School, a key to the success of the PLC thus far has been the teacher-driven professional development model used to engage teachers in the exploration, research, and development of effective writing skills.

"Each grade level PLC operates interdependently with the schools—each has its own budget to access resources, such as our writing consultant or to pay for teacher release time. They are also provided some release time during our staff planning and development days to meet," she said.

"The PLC model is a systematic process in which teachers and school staffs work together to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results."

Outside of increasing staff capacity and group IQ, Penner said the PLC's quantitative results have also been telling. Last year, Millgrove reported an 11 per cent increase in the number of Grade 3 students achieving the standard of excellence on the writing portion of Alberta Education's Language Arts Achievement Test. Ninety-six per cent of Millgrove students cited their participation in the PLC's descriptive writing projects "worthwhile, fun, interesting and challenging." Staff feedback from both schools has been overwhelmingly positive. And parents have indicated a desire to have mini-presentations from staff at the beginning of school council meetings so they can keep abreast of new research and school based best practices.

Most recently, Brookwood and Millgrove were awarded the Alberta Teachers' Association 2005 Julius Buski Leadership Grant, which recognizes projects and practices that have contributed to the enhancement of teaching and learning in schools. Sherwin and Sullivan have agreed to share the Enhancing Student Writing Project at the Western Canada Educational Administrator's Conference in Edmonton on October 26–29, 2005.

As the schools head into their third year, the PLC will shift its focus to developing a K–6 scope and sequence of writing expectations, as well as grade-level scoring guides to represent expectations and provide focus used on a daily basis.

Nurturing young authors aside, teachers from both schools are reporting increased confidence levels in students, as well as enhanced critical thinking skills. The fact that all of the proceeds of Gezina Baehr's *The Good Prince and the Evil Witch Hazel* are being forwarded to the Stollery Children's Hospital in Edmonton, might lead one to conclude that Brookwood and Millgrove Schools' collaboration towards an important goal is modeling for students the importance of community and working together for the benefit of all.

To find out more on this project, contact Brookwood Principal Joyce Sherwin at [jsherwin@psd70.ab.ca](mailto:jsherwin@psd70.ab.ca). To contact the project's writing consultant Mary Sullivan, e-mail her at [maryesullivan@telus.net](mailto:maryesullivan@telus.net).

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