



Mezi Community School Review - Executive Summary

2020-2021

Review conducted by: Linsey Hope, TCSA Director of Education

Documents/Evidence: School Improvement Plan, School reports (3), two school/class walkthroughs, PLC team meeting minutes, four staff interviews, one parent engagement session, two interviews with board representative Alex Nitsiza, and one interview with Chief Alphonse Nitsiza

Summary

Evidence for this school review was collected between August 2020 and May 2021 (see list of documents/evidence considered above). Key interviews were conducted with Chief Alphonse Nitsiza, Board Representative Alex Nitsiza, Principal Josh Linkletter, and other school staff, including teachers, secretary, custodians, and support assistants. The parent engagement session was not well attended, and a second virtual engagement was conducted in May 2021. Students were also interviewed as a class and submitted their visions of how to improve the school.

Mezi Community School is located in Whati, has 176 students in the 2020-21 school year. Whati is a fly-in community with limited ice road service for a few weeks each year; an all-season road is planned for 2021 and may significantly impact the school and community. Whati has 16 teaching staff and 16 school support staff, including custodians, secretary, support assistants, and Health and Wellness Elders. In 2020-21, the school faced significant vacancies in teaching positions related directly to housing units typically reserved for teachers being reallocated and two teachers taking unexpected leave. In total, the school had 9 of 16 positions filled. In February, the school was forced to reduce to $\frac{3}{4}$ time for Junior and Senior High. The enrollment at MCS has remained steady, with a moderate increase from 2019-2020 (160 FTE) to 2020-21 (166 FTE). The school wide average attendance was 64.3% below the regional average of 72.5%. The school has, like other Tlicho schools have seen an increase in students with severe complex needs. Through measures such as the Early Development Index (EDI) and Middle Years Development Index (MDI), MCS reports very few students who are 'on track' or 'thriving.' MCS, like most Tlicho schools, have a significant number of students on Student Support Plan, Modified Education Plan, and Individual Education Plans.

The Principal and the Director of Education are satisfied that the curricular learning outcomes for all students are within, or above, the range of reasonable expectation, given the context of the school and any applicable Departmental direction. The TCSA uses a rotating schedule for school reviews, and the following review is scheduled to take place in 2025-2026.

Strategic Goals and Evidence

1. In line with the TCSA's key strategic goals (Tlicho language and Culture, Literacy and Numeracy, Student Health and Wellness, and Lifelong Learning) and MCS' School Improvement Plan, the school has demonstrated:



Target 1: Tlicho Language and Culture

Goal – Fully integrated and functioning Indigenous Language Education (ILE) team, daily and weekly language improvement, systemic implementation of Our Language Curriculum, and fully integrated Culture-Based Integrated Planning using the Dene Kede (CBIP)

Results

- *MCS has an ILE team that is well established, with dedicated time and various staff participating. The team has used the 'phrase of the week' approach and promoting students to do the daily prayers in Tlicho. The team also spearheaded events like family stew and bannock nights.*
- *The Our Language Curriculum and associated resources were readily used and supported with coaching from territorial supports.*
- *There is strong instructional evidence of the use of Dene Kede in CBIP classrooms, including lesson plans, teacher resources, and posters.*

Target 2: Literacy

Goal – School-wide reading level target of 300, regional target for Teacher Rating of Oral Language and Literacy (TROLL) of 60% above the 25th percentile, regional target for 50% of students to improve more than one-year reading growth, 50% of students to improve more than one-year math growth, dedicated PLC team approach to improving reading and early literacy, increase approved resources and coaching within the school

Results

- *MCS achieved 139 reading goals by May 2021*
- *MCS TROLL: 50% of kindergarten students were at or above the 25th percentile in the TROLL assessment*
- *MCS ARW, F&P, and CTBS results were not available at the time of this report*
- *Over \$100,000 worth of new resources to support oral language, literacy, and reading were purchased for MCS. The school staff spent considerable effort to clear out older resources in favour of regionally supported materials. A reading resource room was created to ensure all staff had access to these valuable assets.*
- *Coaching was provided to all staff to improve reading instruction.*
- *PLCs are functioning to improve the instructional approach by examining and responding to evidence*

Target 3: Lifelong Learning

Goal – Improve transition programming and supports for students (CEA, MAP sessions, work experience), targeted PD for staff (SLP and early literacy, and use of F&P reading resources), improve attendance

Results

- *MCS offered an increase in planning sessions specifically focused on individual student transitioning; several students with complex needs were supported to transition to a post-secondary program to support their IEP, life, and career goals*
- *MCS offered personalized coaching for staff to improve their literacy instruction, assessments, and interventions*
- *MCS used 'soft start,' house team, developing and enhancing extracurricular activities, increased communication with families, and increased participation in community meetings as tactics to improve student attendance. This was partially successful; however, MCS continues to have low attendance, and due to operational constraints (high teacher vacancy and COVID), most extracurricular activities were limited.*



Target 4: Student Health and Wellness

Goal – integration of CYCC services, improve access to services that support the delivery of SSP/MEP/IEP and increase monitoring of those plans, form a functional School-Based Support Team (SBST)

Results

- MCS has a full-time CYCC that is working closely with community partners to increase access to counselling services for all students and families
- SBST is established and working towards providing targeted PD and support for teachers in areas such as understanding EDI/MDI results and trauma-informed practice.
- Through regional wide efforts, SSP/MEP/IEP have focused on targeted goals based on student assessments. Significant resources were purchased to support these targets (social, emotional, academic, and life skills).
- MCS created a sensory/self-regulation space to support OT, self-regulation, and social-emotional learning program delivery.

2. Summary of 'conversation' evidence: quotes /insights from interviews, surveys, self-evaluations

The common themes in all engagements can be collected and summarized in four main areas; community engagement, student achievement, culture and language program, and additional opportunities/needs that are recommended.

- **Community Engagements** – "The school is called 'community school - not student school, need more parent involvement" – Alex Nitsiza (Whati TCSA Board Member). Other community members and staff shared that the school is somewhat disconnected from the community/families. Chief Alphonse Nitsiza spoke to the need to engage parents in Parent Advisory Committees and how the community highly values education. Other suggestions were to increase the student councils.
- **Student Achievement** – "Teach us to read and write so that we can be successful after high school" – junior high school student. Staff have identified through several student achievement indicators that many students are working below grade level. As a result, the school principal has prioritized oral language and literacy as a critical area for improvement in the SIP. The school has implemented regional initiatives such as Professional Learning Communities (PLC), which use student reading data to drive responsive instruction and intervention. Staff reported a clear purpose to improve reading with appropriate resources to support this effort. Several interviews suggested that the school is not using the resources provided by the territory, region, and community, such as the full implementation of reading programs, Tlicho history resources, and local traditional knowledge.
- **Culture and Language Programs** – All stakeholders have identified the need to increase the language and culture program but reference improvements over the last year in this area. Staff point to Health and Wellness Elders, outdoor education programs, and an increase in camps. Several community members shared concerns about the language programs failing students; more and more students cannot speak or understand Tlicho.
- **Opportunities and Needs** – Students and parents were concerned with the lack of extracurricular opportunities at MCS. The TCSA Board member and Chief also spoke about the need to work with the resources within the community to provide additional opportunities to students, hiring more local staff, partnerships with Tlicho and Community Government, and partnerships that give students work experience.



3. Summary of walkthrough evidence: insights, checklists, celebrations, pictures of student achievement

- The Director and principal completed three school walk-throughs – they focused on building safety, Tlicho language and cultural programming, and the academic programs.
 - Example of best practice: MCS looks and feels like the Tlicho school (Elders pictures, artwork, pictures of students, and regionally produced posters). The school has daily prayers in Tlicho, and Tlicho can be heard throughout the school.
 - Example of the area improved during the review: The appropriate resources are being used to support learning. Initially, it was observed non-approved programs were used as a core program in several program areas (math, integrated subjects, and ELA). Staff worked diligently to organize and implement the approved (territorially or regionally) curriculum resources.
 - Example of the area to continue to improve: PLC teams have been implemented but are working towards using student assessments to drive responsive instruction. In particular: F&P reading assessment, running reading records, ARW, phonological and phonemic awareness tools, and CTBS math assessment.
- Celebrations and evidence of success



Celebrations/Commendations

- MCS staff and students care about each other. Mutual respect is evident in the interactions. There are very few suspensions and many engrained trauma-informed practices in place in the school. MCS invites the School Counsellor to participate in regular school functions.
- MCS has made significant increases in their cultural programming over the last two years. The school has a regular camp schedule and works to provide outdoor on-the-land instruction for all students. The school looks and feels like a Tlicho school. The principal has put considerable school resources to improve the materials required to safely run these programs, including hiring local experts to ensure traditional knowledge is a critical component of the learning at MCS. Camps have focused on beaver, fish, hide preparation, shelter and other camp skills, and cross country skiing.
- Through the review process, a need for increased coaching was identified to improve literacy-focused instruction and further develop the functionality of the PLC teams. The school staff and leadership were open and receptive to the coaching support and recommendations for improvement. This has led to targeted coaching and instructional focus on oral language and phonological awareness.
- MCS is a Northern Distance Learning school; they offer courses by distance each year that allow high school students to take academic courses that may not be provided at the school.
- MCS set a goal of 300 reading levels for 2020-21 – by May 2021, they had reached 139
- MCS started a radio station to promote language development and learn 21st-century skills; students completed a special project recording Elders.
- Initial conversations with Community Government have begun on two special projects to create a new school camp on the road and improve the sports field.
- MCS hired two part-time Indigenous Health and Wellness Elders to support student's health, wellness, and cultural identity and complement the Child and Youth Care Counsellor program.
- Through Jordan Principle funding MCS has delivered an increase in SLP, behaviour and reading intervention, and one-on-one support assistants for students with complex needs.

Recommendations

1. *Student Achievement* - Place a sustained and enhanced effort on responding to the student achievement data to improve student achievement as identified in the TCSA Strategic and operational plans. Set school improvement goals that reflect the commitment to closing the gap in student achievement.
2. *Program Delivery* - Fully implement regional initiatives supporting the TCSA Strategic and operational plans, including the literacy action plan, math supports, and Culture-Based Integrated Planning using the Tlicho History Project.
3. *Tlicho Language and Culture* - Continue to fully resource and support Tlicho Language and Culture programming by accessing local resources such as cultural experts and Elders, supporting collaboration between the Health and Wellness Elders and the school counsellor, maintaining the newly purchased materials, and expanding land programming offered in 2019-2021.
4. *Community Engagement* - Implement a Student Council and Parent Advisory Committee to support the community feedback to improve the community/school relationship.

