

Rocky View Schools: A 21st Century School Division

How do you build a 21st Century school division? Greg Bass, Superintendent of Rocky View Schools (RVS), has a lot of experience doing just that. “Perhaps the biggest challenge we faced was how to retool teachers for 21st Century Learning; to align teaching practice with the new philosophy,” he says. “How do you tell teachers who have had a high degree of success that they need to change?”

He found an answer from one of RVS’ principals. Here is how she explained it:

I ask my teachers: are you a cook or a chef? If you’re a cook, you’ve got a recipe and it’s step one, two, three, four. If you miss step four, you can’t get to five, six and you can’t get the end product. If you’re a chef, you don’t even have a recipe. It’s creative, it’s organic, a pinch of this, a pinch of that. If you’re missing an ingredient, you can substitute and create a beautiful, flavourful and unique dish. Now you know you are a chef if you are creative.

And it’s just a reminder to all of them that a cook is what they used to be, and now they’re striving to be a chef.

* * * *

Rocky View Schools is shaped like a horseshoe around the west, north, and east boundaries of Calgary. It manages 40 schools and is home to 18,000 Kindergarten to Grade 12 students, making it the fifth largest school division in the province.

However, when Greg Bass arrived there in 2007, he saw a group of schools, rather than a learning community. Schools had their own visions, but the division, as a whole, lacked cohesion.

Following a tour of the 40 schools, Bass spent a year consulting with a wide range of stakeholders – trustees, teachers, principals, students, parents, supporters, and critics – to create a three-year plan for the division. The central question was: what would a quality education for every student look like by 2011? And how would we get there?

The Rocky View Board of Trustees were involved every step of the way, joining Bass on his tour of schools throughout the district (including and beyond their own wards), participating in consultations to develop the three-year plan, and championing the vision in their communities.

Throughout the plan consultations, Bass had one overarching thought, “We need to close the gap between what we are teaching and what is needed.”

Stakeholders were telling him that RVS needed to engage learners in other ways, to address the learning styles of today’s digital students. Using the input of stakeholders and the work of the Metiri Group, RVS’ portrait of the 21st Century Learner emerged: a critical thinker, a problem solver, an innovator, a communicator, a collaborator, globally aware, civically engaged; a self-directed learner, literate in information, media, finance and economics.

*This transformation wasn’t by fluke,
it was carefully designed.*

Superintendent Greg Bass

This portrait has been visually captured and is proudly mounted on the walls of every building and school within RVS. (Looking back, Bass wishes they had included literacy and numeracy in the portrait, as some people have expressed concern that RVS is missing fundamental elements of a well-rounded education in its description).

In 2008 RVS launched its new vision along with the three-year plan – a roadmap to move to 21st Century Learning. Its theme “Engaging 21st Century Learners” included new foundation statements, six goals, and related outcomes and strategies.

To support the division’s new approach, Bass restructured the corporate office. Previously, associate superintendents each had an area of responsibility related to either elementary, junior or senior high school. Associates spent 30 to 60 per cent of their time dealing with school issues. And still, principals would say they didn’t know who to contact or they couldn’t connect with their associate because he or she would be in meetings.

To meet the demands of transforming the division, Bass combined the associate positions of curriculum and instruction into an associate superintendent of learning. That freed up an associate superintendent to become associate superintendent of schools, providing a direct line in the division for principals, assistant principals, and parents to call when faced with school-based issues. Bass also added a director of human resources, a director of schools and a director of communications to enhance the division’s responsiveness

“I have decentralized so much of the authority out of my office. Associates can make a decision, and I support them and hold them accountable for results,” says Bass.

To champion a mental model of “system thinking,” school education plans and school annual results reports were aligned to RVS’ goals, outcomes and performance measures. “The vision, goals, and outcomes of the three-year plan are non-negotiable. But schools, locally, can

develop strategies that work for them.” School councils also are aligning with the three-year plan, as are student learning plans and assessments.

“We moved from being in constant crisis mode to being a more efficient system,” says Bass. “People now know what the division’s goals are and what to expect, and that has diminished the number of issues we deal with.”

Accountability is key to the success of the three-year plan. All school principals review their school education plans with senior executive every year. As well, in the fall they meet to review their results – where they were strong; where they need to improve. Plans can be adjusted along the way.

RVS implements annual evidence-based evaluations of principal practice, one of the only divisions to do so. Bass has staff sit down with principals every spring, and they go through the Principal Quality Standards and review evidence of each standard being met.

“The evaluation process started with the executive, who mirrored the process with their directors. The next step was to engage principals in the process by employing the evaluation process at the school level with assistant principals, teachers and eventually support staff. Now more than ever, we have teachers knowing and living the Teaching Quality Standards.” RVS also has embraced the ISTE NETS Standards for administrators, teachers and students, as they are a more recent reflection of 21st Century teaching and learning.

To ensure staff gained the necessary skills to support 21st Century Learning, one of the first steps was to change the school calendar to incorporate more time for professional learning. The division increased it from five to 10 days, three of which were designated for communities of practice. To garner parental acceptance for more professional learning days – days when students are home from school – RVS promoted the impact that quality of instruction has on learning. RVS also created a mantra across the division that everyone is a learner. To accommodate the calendar adjustments, RVS extended the school day to ensure the time teachers were in front of students did not change.

Pilot projects, like those supported by Alberta Education’s Emerge One-to-One Laptop Learning, helped to model ways of advancing 21st Century Learning. As well, coaching teams, comprised of a technology specialist, a curriculum specialist, and a student services specialist, were introduced to schools. These teams spent 12 to 18 weeks in schools, working with groups of teachers to build their knowledge of Understanding By Design, Universal Design for Learning, and Balanced Assessment, and to develop units that incorporated learning outcomes from

multiple subject areas and strongly emphasized inquiry and project-based learning. This coaching model has been restructured and now includes a system principal of learning and seven 21st Century Learning coaches, working alongside 21st Century school leads to explore, build, track, and promote 21st Century instructional practices.

Recognizing the vision would require the reallocation of resources, the board of trustees adopted a set of principles to guide budget deliberations. The first principle stated consideration must be given to the learning needs of all students. The second principle stated RVS' three-year plan would drive resource allocation.

"Prior to 2007 the budget drove the plan. Now the plan drives the budget," Bass says. In fact, prior to 2007, the plan was seen mostly as a compliance document, drafted by a consultant with little or no consultation beyond senior RVS staff.

These changes allowed RVS to immediately equip all teachers with a Macbook and to move all sites to wireless environments over a two-year period. It also advanced RVS' vision to have projectors, smartboards, mimeos, or promithions mounted in every classroom and to increase bandwidth. This was a shift in expenditures, not an add-on, as RVS began decommissioning computer labs.

Bass says the strategic approach RVS has taken allows it to run a lean organization – corporate office costs are only three per cent of the total budget. Staff knows what the organization's priorities are and can plan accordingly. Bass thinks the division may have had greater financial challenges had it not transformed its operations.

Bass is quick to point out that technology does not define 21st Century Learning, rather it is an accelerator of learning. He gives the following example:

Peek into a social studies class where the students are studying totalitarianism. In the past you might have seen a teacher using overheads, while students took notes. At the end, the teacher would tell them what pages of the text book they should read and have them answer six questions in preparation for the next class. By now, the kids are pretty bored, one-third of them are either asleep or daydreaming.

In today's classroom, a teacher encourages students to work together to outline everything they know about totalitarianism, making use of Google docs. Once they've done that, the teacher might ask them to imagine Canada as a

totalitarian state. They can pull their information together any way they want and then present it to the class. Which practice sounds more interesting?

The introduction of one-on-one technology in some schools has resulted in students becoming more engaged. “Learning is more authentic, more meaningful; there are fewer disciplinary problems.” Bass gives Springbank Community High School as an example. In 2009-2010, there were 48 discipline referrals; in 2010-2011, there was one.

So what is happening now?

- RVS recently approved its 2011-2014 Plan, which takes transformation to the next level. It focuses on four main drivers: ensuring universal accessibility; a focus on personalized, authentic learning; building 21st Century competencies; and accelerating research and innovation.
- Guided by *Policy HK: Assessment and Communication of Student Learning*, students and teachers are drilling deep into learning through the RVS Learning Model, which includes a shift toward more balanced assessment.
- RVS is building individual learner profiles which will be housed in a comprehensive database that will capture student achievements, abilities, aptitudes and attitudes over a 13-year period.
- High school students wanting greater access, choice, flexibility and authentic learning can do so through weConnect, technology that allows students to connect with learners and teachers at other school sites. This lets them enroll in a variety of courses, either not available at their home school or not within their regular timetables.

With change comes challenge. RVS has experienced a number of challenges throughout its transition, the primary one being how to help teachers modify their instructional practices to support 21st Century learners. Another was how to bring parents into the fold. “We worked so hard on building our new system and preparing our teachers and learners. The one group that did not have the same attention was parents as learners,” says Bass. “We did not have a concrete plan for getting their buy-in. Trustees were often asked by parents: how will RVS’ new approach be better than my own education?”

In response, RVS has placed much more emphasis on developing parental understanding and support through the development of its new three-year plan. Parents are kept abreast of changes through consultations, school council meetings, social media, their children’s work, and the websites of RVS and the Board of Trustees.

The division also has its detractors within the Alberta Teachers' Association, which has raised concerns about the hard work involved in transforming education.

But Bass offers no apologies, because all the work of RVS is centered on the learner. "What we are doing is in the best interests of our students. We need to unlock ourselves from old models and give learners an opportunity to learn deeply and authentically so they can flourish. Today's Kindergarten students will tell much different stories in 13 years than those of today's graduates."

The stories that follow further describe the steps RVS has taken to transform its school division, and the challenges that accompany change.

Community Engagement

(summarized from RVS website)

Without the support and engagement of its communities, it is doubtful transformation to a 21st Century Learning organization would have come about so quickly. Over the past five years, RVS has engaged in two extensive, community engagement processes to build its 2008-2011 and 2011-2014 Three Year Plans. The consultations helped RVS paint a picture for the future of the division, while building relationships and support within the community.

The 2008-2011 Plan

On April 2, 2007, the RVS Board of Trustees approved a comprehensive and collaborative process to develop a “made-in-Rocky View” 2008-2011 Three Year Plan. The process saw 200 stakeholders – students, parents, teachers, trustees, administrators, politicians, and business leaders – meet for four full days over a 13-month period. They considered two questions: “What would a quality education for every student look like by the year 2011?” and “Based on RVS’ current results, what would we need to do to ensure we arrive there?” Stakeholders replied:

- Schools need to engage students by making what and how they learn relevant to their world.
- Students need to be taught how to think critically and become self-directed learners.
- Students need to learn how to understand, connect, and contribute to a global community.

In May 2008 the collaborative process concluded with a 2008-2011 Three Year Plan that featured a new mission, vision, and motto, six goals, 21 outcomes, and 79 strategies. Its theme, “Engaging 21st Century Learners,” solidified a shared vision, whereby all members of RVS’ school communities were considered “learners.” The six goals were:

- Learners have their basic and diverse needs met.
- Learners are competent, qualified, and dedicated.
- Learners are civic, social, and environmental stewards.
- Learning opportunities are distinct, continuous, and systematic.
- Instruction challenges and engages the learner.
- Learners work in 21st century learning environments.

The division then communicated a commitment to maintain the plan for a full three-year

period. It published a “Portrait of a 21st Century Learner” and placed it in every building in RVS.

The 2011-2014 Plan

Between February and April, 2011, RVS launched an extensive, multi-faceted consultation to develop its 2011-2014 Three Year Plan, increasing the level and variety of engagement from that of the 2008-2011 Three Year Plan.

The board of trustees directed the superintendent to bring both large and small stakeholder groups together in face-to-face settings to refine the 2008-2011 Plan and to provide input into strategies to build a 21st Century Learning organization. The use of social media was approved to help build awareness of the initiative. Provided below is an overview of the process used in building RVS’ 2011-2014 Three Year Plan.

Goal, Outcome and Performance Measure Review – In November 2010, RVS’ leadership team, comprised of the board of trustees, senior executive, directors, principals and assistant principals, gathered for one day to review the 2008-2011 Plan. It was refined from six goals, 23 measures, to four goals, 16 outcomes. In December, new performance measures were developed by RVS’ directors and circulated to school administrators for feedback.

Community Engagement Meeting – RVS launched its community engagement on Valentine’s Day 2011. The purpose of the meeting was to explore how parents, businesses and the broader community could play a more sustainable role in public education. Through the efforts of schools, RVS was able to secure the attendance of 70 participants. A zoomerang survey distributed to participants generated 51 responses. Of the 51 responses, 94 per cent said they would attend the next community engagement meeting and 93 per cent expressed satisfaction with the overall experience.

Focus Groups – As demonstrated by the government through its *Inspiring Education, Setting the Direction* and *Speak Out* forums, RVS believed it important to engage groups of stakeholders where they could best provide feedback. For example, classroom teachers would be best involved in discussions to develop strategies focussed on assessment and learning, while service providers could offer advice on developing strategies for wrap-around child supports. To this end, 17 focus groups, involving over 200 staff, service providers, parents and students, were held in February and March. The focus groups were hosted by trustees and directors from the communications, human resources, learning and schools departments. All feedback formed the basis for the strategies which appear in the plan.

Speak Out Forums – RVS asked its high school and middle school student leaders to organize and participate in *Speak Out* forums at their individual school/home community. Over the course of six weeks, seven out of nine high schools held *Speak Out* Forums. A middle school *Speak Out* Forum also was held. Feedback gathered from these forums was shared with all schools and used to develop strategies in the plan.

Social Media—Through the use of a Twitter account, RVS shared its planning initiative and encouraged community participation on its Facebook page and blog site. Over the course of six weeks, RVS’ Twitter account attracted 237 followers, generated a “klout” of 40 (45 being an indicator of “influential” on the web) and tweeted 142 messages relating to RVS’ 21st Century pursuit. The use of Twitter at the jurisdictional level also led to over 30 staff members signing up to help Tweet about 21st Century learning. RVS’ blog site, which currently features 46 blogs covering 21st Century teaching and learning, was visited over 13,500 times and its Facebook page, which had minimal traffic, attracted 117 “friends of/like RVS,” with 232 monthly active users.

School Education Plans – To bring all school communities into alignment, RVS’ 2011-2012 School Education Plan (SEP) Manual was revised to reflect the new goal structure and released to administrators in March, 2011.

Feedback from the community engagement process has been incorporated into the 2011-2014 Three Year Plan.

Branding RVS as a 21st Century Organization ... leadership and teaching ...

Staff of Rocky View Schools (RVS) recently attended a job fair in Nova Scotia. They were barely able to set up before the prospects formed a line in front of their booth. What were they looking for? Jobs? Not really, every booth had them. They were looking for careers, good ones.

Obviously the prospects had heard something about Rocky View Schools. So how do you build an organization that is noticed clear across the nation? One way is from the bottom up.

In RVS it has a lot to do with *alignment*. “We use the same messages wherever we go,” says Susan Williams, associate superintendent of human resources. “We make very clear what we are looking for from applicants and staff. We aren’t looking for “stand and deliver” people. We want people who can work in teams, who understand and can deliver inquiry-based learning.”

“All applicants and staff – whether teachers, administrators or support staff – must be passionate about students. They must demonstrate character, passion and collaboration. They must facilitate learning and be open to technology.”

The messages articulated by Williams are shared inside and outside of the organization. It all started with the division’s rebirth in 2008: mission, vision, motto, belief statements, logo, and colours. Everything changed with the launch of a new made-in-RVS three-year plan focused on transforming RVS’s learning environments to meet the needs of today’s digital learners.

Because staff helped develop the vision and plan, as did the school community, all have ownership. This ownership makes everyone a spokesperson for the plan. The RVS approach to 21st Century Learning is reinforced in publications, meetings with educational institutions, and other organizations. Those messages are carried through in its recruitment process and in discussions with applicants to RVS.

Applicants are asked to answer two key questions when they apply online:

- What do you believe about 21st Century Learning?
- Why do you want to work for Rocky View Schools?

RVS wants to know that applicants have done their research and understand and embrace the approach RVS is taking. Teacher applicants must be familiar with ISTE Net and Teaching Quality Standards. They also must be willing to work “really hard” according to Williams. RVS looks for

these qualities when it conducts reference checks. “RVS is more than a job; it’s a passion. Our goal is to help people excel,” says Williams.

Human resources also works closely with educational institutions to ensure student teachers placed in RVS are the right fit. Once student teachers complete their placements, they automatically get an interview with the division as an acknowledgement of their time spent with them.

When RVS launched its three-year plan for a transformed school division, it worked to ensure the best fit for existing staff. Williams notes that it can be difficult moving people from traditional roles of teaching to new ones, and this requires a huge investment of time.

“Sometimes you need to make tough decisions to ensure people are in the right spot. We do help people prepare as they apply for transfers. We look at the needs of our division and determine the right fit, recognizing this can be unbelievably time-consuming. *But the rewards are immense.* In order to successfully place people in the right positions, HR staff need to be trusted and skilled conversationalists.”

Once RVS felt it had the right people on the bus it turned its attention to offering professional learning opportunities that support the evolution of a 21st Century Learning organization. All teachers and support staff develop annual growth plans or annual individual learning plans, which must align with the three-year plan.

Communities of Practice – Three out of 10 professional learning days are devoted to communities of practice (COP). RVS has 130 communities of practice that have been initiated by both teachers and support staff. On those days, groups of teachers share promising practices and develop capacity. They examine curriculum and share pedagogy. A COP working group is currently developing an electronic space for RVS that will act as a community registry, a workspace in real time, and a repository for research-based projects and best practices. Initially communities of practice were supported by central office – invites, meeting setups, tracking of members. That level of support has diminished over time with staff taking more responsibility for their setup and ongoing operation.

Evidence of Success

This year, 11 of 15 first-year teachers have been nominated for the ASBA Edwin Parr Teacher Award for outstanding new teacher.

And the 2010-11 staff survey shows that among all employee groups, 89 per cent of RVS staff believes they have the opportunity to lead. Schools, too, are nurturing the value of leadership by offering a plethora of student leadership programs.

Through an e-portal dedicated to the promotion of professional learning opportunities, all staff are kept abreast of the current offerings provided by regional and provincial partners, such as the Calgary Regional Consortium. A partnership with Bow Valley College gives support staff access to online courses covering topics such as child development, working exceptionalities and editing in the workplace.

Another way to build a school division is getting good people at the top – developing leadership within the organization. Candidates applying for the position of principal are subject to a rigorous hiring process, which asks them to present their philosophy on 21st Century Learning. Once hired, principals must demonstrate their school’s alignment with RVS’ three-year plan in meetings with senior executive. As well, every year, senior executive, principals and assistant principals create evidence-based portfolios for their performance evaluations.

“Our strength is really in our principals, and building their capacity has been a focus,” states Superintendent Greg Bass. “We give them opportunities to co-construct the vision, and we hold them to high standards, having them demonstrate their abilities for other positions and movement within the system.”

Leadership development

RVS has a number of leadership initiatives. The programs not only help people develop the skills and confidence they need to make a difference in the organization, but are an important part of succession planning at RVS.

Administrative Leadership Program – this program has five leadership streams and is targeted at aspiring leaders, candidates in RVS’ administrative pool, newly appointed principals and assistant-principals, existing school-based administrative teams and veteran administrators. Candidates need to have a reference from a principal to participate in the program. When the division hires externally, RVS expects new hires to go through the leadership development process as well. Graduates from this program are positioned to eventually become principals and assistant principals.

Covey Leadership Programs – all principals and leaders within the division are required to take Covey’s Seven Habits of Effective People and Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results training.

University of Lethbridge Master’s Degree (Leadership) – the University of Lethbridge has developed a special cohort for RVS staff interested in earning a master’s degree with a focus on leadership. Right now 25 field staff are enrolled in the program. While RVS does not pay for the program, it supports staff to take it, as well as supporting other staff who take master and doctorate programs.

Regular leadership meetings – every two months, RVS holds a full-day Leadership Team Meeting.

Recognition of potential leaders – Principals are asked to recognize and encourage leadership, asking staff to take the next step “take roadblocks out of the way so they can continue along their career path,” says Williams.

For example, with five new schools scheduled to open by 2015, the division is taking a team approach to succession planning by establishing an assistant principal pool. As part of this development process, all administrators are being asked to help identify and recommend in writing individuals who they believe would be well-suited to play a leadership role in RVS’ future. Also, teachers interested in the role are encouraged to discuss career aspirations with their school administrators. To ensure there are a good number of people in the pool for coming years, there will be another posting for the assistant principal pool in the near future.

Leadership is also developed less formally:

Superintendent Working Committees – there are eight superintendent working committees made up of principals, assistant principals, 21st Century learning facilitators, and leads from the Education Centre. The superintendent provides a mandate letter based on the three-year plan to the chair of the committee and the committee develops actions plans related to the strategies embedded in the plan. Every spring, RVS sends out an invitation to volunteer for a committee. It is designed to be rotational; some members stay a couple years, and some move on earlier.

Superintendent Greg Bass states: “I need their help to develop procedures and to align processes that support 21st C teaching and learning. Empowering these teams has brought greater focus and engagement across the division.”

Each committee reports progress to the superintendent, verbally at Leadership Team Meetings and in writing at the end of the year.

Challenges that have arisen. While much of the transformation has occurred in a relatively short period of time – four years – Williams says that looking back, she wanted change to happen faster. She points to the tremendous amount of time and energy needed from staff. Williams doesn't have a simple answer to this challenge, other than to say "we need to ensure balance – many of our employees are in or are approaching the sandwich generation. They need to balance life at work and life at home."

And what about the role of government? Williams is positive about the role of Alberta Education in the transformation process. But she has some suggestions. She thinks the province could help identify exemplary teachers who could serve as learning coaches in the classroom; who are able to work side-by-side with other teachers. Not just new teachers, but teachers at any age or stage of their career.

She also says teachers need to be supported to be risk-takers. They must be allowed to be more vulnerable in their roles, and risk-taking needs to be modelled from the top. They must know they won't be reprimanded for trying something different.

Superintendent Greg Bass agrees, "As long as I know that staff members are taking risks in the best interests of students, and they can demonstrate that data-driven decision, I'm okay. If you fall flat, that's fine – let's learn from it to get stronger."

Personalized Learning

. . . RVS Learning Model, learning facilitators, technology and more . . .

“Collaboration is the new competition,” according to David Morris, associate superintendent of learning for RVS. In an age when so much information is free for all, competitive advantage is gained by those who learn to collaborate. In the best collaborations, everyone brings their own talents to the table.

It follows that in school students are recognized to have different talents, different ways of learning. Some are visual, some are auditory, some learn by doing, and still others prefer to learn by reading and writing. At RVS, the key to learning and teaching is the “RVS Learning Model.” The intent of the model is to help students get to know themselves as learners and to personalize their learning in a variety of ways.

The RVS Learning Model: How Learning is Personalized



RVS is creating “constructivist” classrooms. This means students are active participants in the development (co-construction) of their learning. Guided by the tenants of RVS’ Learning Model, which encourages lesson design that is inquiry and project-based, students are asked to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways. Both formative and summative assessments are used to ensure students are metacognitive about their learning.

At the centre of the model is the **learner**. This can be any member of the school community – students, teachers, principals, support staff, parents. All stakeholders can be considered learners.

Around the learner are three educational approaches that interact with one another:

- **Understanding by Design (UbD)** guides teachers in the instructional planning process. More specifically, UbD focuses on "teaching for understanding." Teachers are encouraged to design inquiry-based lessons that involve students in the construction of learning. UbD helps teachers to clarify learning goals, develop assessment tools, and craft engaging, authentic learning activities.
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. It provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone – not a single, one-size-fits-all solution, rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs. Ultimately it increases access to learning by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, and organizational barriers to learning. It allows for:
 - Multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge,
 - Multiple means of expression and expression give learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know, and
 - Multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

It also supports inclusion in the classroom. "With Universal Design for Learning, learning must be accessible to all," says Morris. "For example, we look at adaptive technologies that help students with learning challenges. A text-to-speech device can help students with writing processing problems."

- **Balanced Assessment** allows teachers to check that understanding is in place and that learning is enhanced through continuous feedback.

Following a year-long process of school-based consultation, the RVS Board approved a more holistic approach to assessment which is ongoing, meaningful, and consistent. It employs three core strategies:

- Pre-assessment – assessing where students are at from the beginning. Teachers can then differentiate instruction to address individual learner needs.
- Assessment *for* learning – ongoing day-to-day assessment which guides instruction and next steps.
- Assessment *of* learning – occurs at the end of the learning cycle; it determines where students are in relation to the curriculum.

It is hoped that balanced assessment will serve to guide students as they learn. “As we develop more inquiry-based learning and provide balanced assessment, students will take more ownership and become more self-directed. We need to assess those types of problem-solving skills,” says Morris. “Right now we have a superintendent working committee building new forms of assessment. In the future there may be no report cards; just access to ongoing reporting through our student information system, PowerSchool.”

The outer ring of the Learning Model supports the three key approaches of the inner ring and reflects current, research-based instructional approaches: multiple literacies; critical, creative and complex thinking; mindtools (technologies that engage critical thinking); metacognitive instruction (individual knowledge of one’s own learning processes); and cooperative/collaborative learning.

The RVS Learning Model: How it is implemented

Over the last three years, RVS’ Learning Department has continuously reorganized itself to build teachers’ competencies to support the Learning Model and 21st Century Learning. In 2008, it established **21st Century Learning facilitators** and embedded coaching teams. These teams, comprised of a technology specialist, a curriculum specialist, and a student services specialist, spent 12 – 18 weeks in schools, working with groups of teachers to build their knowledge of Understanding by Design, Universal Design for Learning, and Balanced Assessment. They also helped teachers develop units that establish learning outcomes from multiple subject areas and emphasize inquiry and project-based learning.

This coaching model has now evolved to include a principal of learning and seven 21st Century Learning coaches, who work alongside 21st Century school leads to explore, build, track, and promote 21st Century instructional practices. RVS also has collapsed all student and health-related services into one branch to better enable RVS to coordinate wrap-around services and set the stage for a more inclusive learning environment.

“One of the challenges in this process has been getting the right structure of coaching support, so that schools feel they are getting the benefits of change,” says Morris. To address this, RVS has brought in learning coaches, who have skills in emerging technology and inquiry-based learning.

Morris also recognizes that there is a need to make sure parents understand the changes in the division as well, particularly as they relate to competency-based learning, technology, and assessment. With the development of RVS’ second three-year plan (2011-14) more emphasis is placed on parental education.

A superintendent working committee is currently building a template for an individual learner profile and an electronic means of recording and transferring the profiles between classrooms and schools. The actual profiles will be completed by students and teachers, and will allow for better learning transitions, better understanding of students by teachers, and better tracking of student projects and performance. RVS will pilot the individual learner profile with a few schools in September 2012, with full implementation in 2013.

Innovative Technology Fund

RVS set up a fund to encourage schools to explore new technologies and how technology can improve learning.

So far, \$160,000 has been awarded to 12 schools for 13 projects. Projects must connect to 21st Century Learning, the RVS three-year plan and the school’s education plan. Schools must share their project findings by podcast or video.

The RVS Learning Model: Using Technology

At RVS, technology is not the end in itself, but an accelerator in the transformation to a 21st Century Learning environment. It plays a growing role in assisting teachers to fully engage students, and it supports learning that is personalized, collaborative and self-assessed.

Software extends learning: Reflecting RVS’ “any time, any place, any path, any pace” mantra, Google apps, which provides for student email, have been launched along with Desire to Learn, Moodle, Apple Wiki, Bridget, ePearl, Podcast Producer, Mahara, RVS Tube, students blogs and videoconferencing.

Technology changes relationships: The use of interactive white board technologies, iPads, iPods, digital cameras and laptops continue to engage students and teachers in collaborative, project-based learning, where self assessment is the norm. With the implementation of RVS’ content management system Plone and RVS’ learning management system Moodle, over 90 per cent of teachers are now publishing learning content online, and 10 to 15 per cent are ready to create more inclusive learning environments.

Technology infrastructure is put in place: All of this comes on top of an earlier decision to equip all teachers with a Macbook and move all school sites to a wireless environment.

Already three high schools are fully one-to-one schools with students bringing their own devices. Two other high schools and two middle schools are contemplating moving to this model. RVS anticipates it will be able to move all its schools to personally owned devices over the next few years.

RVS has also developed two resource collections for the division. They are a starting point for teachers to find interdisciplinary/cross-curricular collections of materials. Teachers can access the database on the RVS homepage and search by subject, level, type of activity, and other categories. The RVS' Resource Server houses various forms of content including support materials, software training, templates, IMS materials, and teacher created lessons and units.

Other initiatives to advance personalized learning are:

- We Connect uses technology like video conferencing, Elluminate, D2L, Moodle, email and wikis to allow students to pick up courses not in their timeslots or not offered in their schools – 1200 students take advantage of courses like art and languages. For example, at Springbank High School, an art teacher provides instruction to 110 students onsite, and to students at two other schools through Moodle. Students can listen and watch the teacher while she demonstrates different art techniques like stretching a canvas.
- Many high school teachers use podcasting to record their lessons. This gives absent students an opportunity to view what they missed and for all students to revisit the lesson at any time.
- A new TeacherPlus series explores a number of topics for teachers and administrators: differentiation; creating optimal learning environments; student engagement; designing instruction and curriculum; and others. The series is available for after-hours review.

The role of the province

RVS is looking forward to the province's curriculum redesign. "We need to focus on the big concepts and reduce the number of specific outcomes in the curriculum documents," says Morris. "This will allow teachers to get at the competencies and still ensure the intent of the

curriculum is taught. I recently attended the curriculum re-design update in Edmonton. Some of the presentations on assessment really seem on track.”

Morris also has praise for the province’s *Framework for Student Learning* (model and document). “We have used our Learning Model combined with our portrait of the 21st century learner to . . . support the framework.”

On *Action on Inclusion*, he suggests the province use change agents to further roll out the initiative. “If we can communicate the learning from these groups in an easy and searchable web environment we can accelerate this initiative throughout the province. There is already lots of good work being done.”

Morris would like to see more sharing of resources across the province – possibly an electronic platform that shares research and digital resource collections. Right now RVS is working with four other school divisions to develop an object repository. “Perhaps the province could support this initiative more broadly.”

Inclusive Education

At Glenbow Elementary School in Cochrane, four classes of Grade 3 students are being supported in an environment which fosters and encourages independent learning in reading and writing. However, they have varying levels of literacy – between Kindergarten and Grade 5. How does inclusive education work for them?

They are placed in flexible, levelled literacy groups based on assessment and evaluations, and they are supported by a learning support team of educators that includes classroom teachers, support staff and a learning coach. The team works together to determine the level and intensity of support a student needs to be successful. It meets often to review data, share best practices, explore supportive technology, and form and reform groups of students to ensure they get the right level of support.

Glenbow’s approach is seeded in the RVS change agent initiative which focuses on building Universal Learning Environments. By definition, a Universal Learning Environment ensures the personalization of learning by providing the physical environment and the pedagogical practices that respond to the identified needs of each learner.

RVS already had taken steps to implement an inclusive education system as part of its 2008-2011 Three Year Plan. It spent three years recalibrating its student support services to give all students access to a continuum of supports and services: universal, targeted and specialized, dependent on individual needs.

In 2011 RVS reframed this inclusive model under the umbrella of a Universal Learning Environment and dedicated an entire goal in its 2011-2014 Three Year Plan to identifying and meeting the individual learning interests, preferences, and needs of learners. As outlined in “Goal One: Learners have their individual needs met,” a variety of strategies are being employed to provide schools with the tools they need to ensure learning environments are universally accessible: the RVS Learning Model, IPPS, technology and

In July 2011, RVS and 12 other school divisions were designated “change agents” for Alberta Education’s Action on Inclusion initiative. RVS received \$429,000 in funding to support the development of prototypes that would assist both RVS and the province to implement and share inclusive education best practices.

Six RVS schools are participating in the change agent project. The schools are engaged in action-based research projects that explore the personalization of learning, learner profiles, student portfolios and emerging technologies. “We are creating learning environments that are responsive to the needs of the individual learner,” according to Joan Kolleywyn, 21st Century Learning Specialist – Technology, and Oonagh Graham. Learnina Specialist.

provincial programs like *Success in Schools for Children and Youth in Care* and *Children and Youth with Complex Needs*.

RVS Learning Model

According to Oonagh Graham, learning specialist, “Our focus is to create an inclusive learning environment, where the child is at the centre of a continuum of wrap-around services and supports.” RVS has created an online course, *Universal Design for Learning*, available for all staff. The course helps participants gain a better understanding of UDL and how to create accessible learning for all students. RVS is also building a data-base of learning tools to support teachers.

IPPS

RVS has its own system to create individualized program plans (IPPS) for RV students with identified specific learning needs. This system is online and accessible at all school sites. However, the goal is to create individual learning plans for *all* learners in RVS, not just those with identified learning needs. This reinforces the RVS belief that all learners are unique and require different supports to reach their full potential. This, in turn, assists RVS to support success for all learners.

Learner Profiles

The Superintendent Working Committee –Learning has recently created a template for an individual learner profile and an electronic means of recording and transferring these profiles between classrooms and schools. The actual profiles will be populated by teachers and potentially by students in upper grades, and the profiles will allow for a deeper understanding of the uniqueness, literacy levels, interests, preferences and needs of each learner. RVS will pilot the individual learner profile with schools in September 2012, with full implementation in 2013.

Technology

RVS employs a number of devices, software and emerging technologies to create universally accessible classrooms. Technology extends learning, enhances collaboration, and engages learners. It supports learners who may require scaffolding or support in their learning, and also gives learners choice in their day-to-day learning activities both inside and outside of the school environment.

Province

RVS supports the province's *Success in Schools for Children and Youth in Care* and the *Children and Youth with Complex Needs* cross-ministry initiatives. These initiatives call on the support of multiple support systems, ministries, agencies and learning team members to meet the complex learning needs of some students. Like the RVS Learning Model, the student is at the centre, the focus of attention for any and all supports required for the student to be successful. This work, like that described in the change agent projects, requires high levels of collaboration, commitment and sharing of best practices. RVS is committed to this collaborative wraparound support for its learners.

With change comes challenge. Kollwyn and Graham identify two primary challenges to creating an inclusive learning environment for RVS students:

- 1) Space – RVS is one of the fastest growing divisions in the province. It is continually pressured to find adequate space to meet the needs of its growing student population.
- 2) Complexity of learning needs – An increasing complexity of learning needs requires a highly flexible and responsive system of support.

Research: New Riches for RVS

John Burger, director of schools at RVS, says research will “shift RVS from a data-rich/information-poor organization to one that is both data and information rich.” In fact, RVS has taken steps to become a research organization, ensuring its projects include research as a stimulant for innovation and further development.

All this data and research might be unwanted riches to some at RVS, and Burger is aware of the concern. “Because data creates a high degree of transparency, some may not be comfortable using it. That’s why we need conversations about how we deal with data, its value to the organization, and we need to identify and work with those supporting its use.”

To ensure research is relevant and done well, the organization has a small three-member Research Review Committee. Other individuals attend when the committee needs more information on research methodology, ethical issues, and/or content expertise. The committee reviews proposals for individual research, often at the master’s and PhD levels, RVS-related research, course-based assignments and collaborative research.

The committee also has a strong commitment to **sharing research** and **building internal research capacity** within the organization. The division recently added web links to completed research and high interest websites. Research-related news is included in newsletter updates and leadership teams are notified of research developments. To build internal research capacity, RVS recently purchased a statistical/analytical tool called SPSS (originally Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for head office and plans to introduce it to schools in the future. It is also holding sessions with new assistant principals on how the Principal Quality Standards can be supported through research.

The RVS Learning Model is strongly based on research, as is PLAI Screening and other tools used by RVS to facilitate student success.

In its shift to a more research-based organization, RVS must manage the data that facilitates research. The committee is identifying staff with skills in understanding and managing data and providing them training. RVS is:

- building capacity in data analysis with school-based administrators and leaders
- putting data into a context where it is perceived as useful and empowering
- helping staff to understand ways data can be used

- identifying how much organizational time and effort should go into data collection and analysis

Role of the province

Many of RVS research-related initiatives build on work being done in Alberta Education:

- Eight schools participated in the **Tell Them From Me** survey – currently the findings are being used to define student needs.
- Three schools have completed value-added school reviews according to the guidelines set out by Alberta Education. The information is used to identify strengths and weaknesses of schools. Burger is hoping to eventually develop the internal capacity to review all the schools in the division.
- RVS was recently awarded a \$10,000 grant from the Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund (funded by Alberta Education and AHW) for its Rocky View Wellness Project. The grant will support RVS’ action research on innovative ways to measure students’ affective school experience and connectivity to school using the new Student Orientation to Schools Questionnaire (SOS-Q).

Burger represents the College of School Superintendents on the province’s Education Research Partnership Committee, further linking the work of RVS to the provincial mandate.

Is there anything Alberta Education could do to further support RVS and other school divisions? Burger considers the Alberta Education decision to eliminate submission of Grade Level of Achievement (GLA) data to Alberta Education a “huge setback.” In doing so, he feels the province lost an opportunity to provide leadership and support for holistic assessment. He believes both Alberta Advanced Education and Education could do more to build assessment skills and practices, at both the pre-service and graduate levels, particularly those related to holistic assessment. Alberta Education should clearly identify multiple ways to support research, such as generate rich data, in addition to the work done by *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)*.

Burger also says government should ensure that the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) and Principal Quality Standards are grounded in a good understanding of data use. He believes CASS should be recognized as a professional body that can support the growth and development of research.

RVS is also actively engaged in research-related projects:

- *With the Covey Institute, it is participating in the evaluation of the Leader in Me program based on the Seven Habits of Successful People.*
- *RVS staff is successfully engaging the national and international research communities through conferences like the Hawaii International Conference on Education and the American Educational Research Association annual conference.*
- *Burger demonstrates a personal commitment to research. In 2011 he co-authored chapters in two books related to leadership: the International Handbook For Leadership For Learning, and Leading Student Assessment.*
- *This summer, RVS, in partnership with Thompson Rivers University and the University of Calgary, will host a two-day conference about data-informed leadership. It will invite 100 people, including a dozen researchers from across North America. They will define current research supporting data-informed leadership.*

FNMI Student Success

Of the 18,000 students attending Rocky View Schools there are 547 who self-identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit (FNMI) and an additional 75 students who attend from the Morley Reserve near Cochrane. Yet there are FNMI students who don't identify themselves as FNMI when completing their school registration forms. Why don't they?

It could be that students are concerned about being labelled. In Alberta, FNMI students as a whole receive lower marks and are less likely to complete high school. It is unfortunate, as they might not be aware that self-identification brings more support for the student and the school.

Teresa Cardinal, FNMI program specialist at RVS, sees her job as helping schools to better engage and support FNMI students so that they can achieve success. Relatively new to her position, Cardinal knows her job is not an easy one. RVS faces the same challenges other divisions face to make education more meaningful to FNMI students.

An FNMI Advisory Committee meets every five to six weeks to provide guidance and recommendations on serving this population of students. It has recently been retooled to focus less on sharing of resources and more on increasing parental engagement and success for

Aboriginal students. In fact, the committee's upcoming May meeting will have both parental and student involvement, with invites coming from the schools.

"Why aren't we teaching powwow dancing instead of line dancing and square dancing in our schools?"

Teresa Cardinal

Some other RVS initiatives:

- This fall, with the support of Big Brothers and Big Sisters, RVS will introduce a Big-Middle-Little mentoring program in Airdrie schools. Using a four generation model, an Elder will assist with the programming and work with three generations of students to provide cultural knowledge, healing, and language exposure. The "big" will be an Aboriginal post-secondary student, the "middle" will be an Aboriginal high school student and the "little" will be an Aboriginal elementary student.
- RVS is participating in a Me to We program, a Sacred Circle Aboriginal Leadership program designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal youth. A facilitator from BC will visit the division from August 28 – September 1, 2012 to hold workshops with 25 high school students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The workshops will follow the Circle of Courage model – belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. The central theme of this model is that a set of shared values must exist in any community to create environments that ultimately benefit all. Students will then be connected to Elders and /or leaders in the community.

Each student will come up with a community action plan, which can be anything from volunteering at a community centre or coaching a team, to becoming a better sister. At the end the community is invited to come in and celebrate the students' successes. This will be the first time the Me to We program will be delivered in Southern Alberta.

- Students (and families) who attend Bert Church and George McDougall High Schools in Airdrie and Chestermere High School have opportunities to improve mental health through the Stepping Stones to Mental Health for Youth project (by Alberta Health and Wellness under the auspices of Alberta Mental Health Board in collaboration with Alberta Learning). Strategies to address the needs of students and families are implemented by a project coordinator, student success coaches, a cultural diversity specialist and a youth addictions specialist. Aboriginal high school students serve as advisors for Aboriginal youth. Part of the program encourages students to undertake projects related to their culture – build drums, teepees, participate in outdoor education and smudging ceremonies. While the program is Aboriginal focused, it is open to all students. According to Cardinal, Aboriginal youth, particularly those in foster care, benefit enormously for this type of program.
- Through committee work, Cardinal participates in the United Way's Full Circle Implementation Team, Youth Centre Feasibility Study, and the Aboriginal Youth Education Priority Team.

Challenges and role of the province

“As a division-manager, it's about visiting schools to show them where I can add value,” says Cardinal. “Individual schools have pockets of good programming. However, students and programs are quite spread out over the division. My goal is to connect those pockets, and enhance and support the programming already there.”

Cardinal also notes that FNMI learning initiatives can lose momentum due to a lack of teacher engagement. In example, an FNMI Community of Practice (COP) was created but then disbanded. However, in the Fall 2012 teachers in six schools will be able to participate in a community of practice that is a partnership between the University of Calgary and the Calgary Regional Consortium. The COP will focus on achieving a better understanding of Aboriginal cultural differences and perspectives. It also will serve as an action research project to increase student engagement through enhanced teaching practice.

Cardinal praises Alberta Education for its work in advancing FNMI learning opportunities. In particular, she notes that ministry Goal 3: Success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students has helped focus attention on FNMI needs, including more parental engagement. She adds that RVS has included a similar goal in its three-year plan.

Cardinal also acknowledges Alberta Education’s work to introduce more Aboriginal content into the curriculum. But she says there remains a disconnect between curriculum and the classroom. She says educators need to be supported to engage in personal learning that inspires self-reflection, challenges perspectives and supports them to use authentic FNMI learning in the classroom.

Another challenge is ensuring Aboriginal culture is recognized in all areas of the curriculum, not just social studies. Curriculum needs to be designed to allow for greater authentic learning experiences and real-life examples, not forced outcomes that often are not relevant. Cardinal asks, “Why can’t we use teepees to teach children about angles?” In this case, the example is cross-curricular, not random. And, in fact, RVS has started to post its own authentic science examples on the Moodle website.

She has a couple more suggestions. “There is so much department information out there – for people in the field it’s hard to distill, to determine what would be useful, what is not. Sometimes I get overwhelmed with information.” Cardinal says it would be helpful if the province could vet and streamline information, and prioritize programs and initiatives.

Cardinal also suggests that school registration forms should better outline the intent behind self-identification. She suggests reframing the explanation so respondents clearly understand that with self-identification comes more support for the student/school.

Approach to Early Learning **. . . preschool intervention, Kindergarten . . .**

Preschool Intervention: unable to talk or interact

Lynda Hemsworth, school psychologist and supervisor of early intervention at Rocky View Schools (RVS), tells a story that she has seen many times: A young girl is headed for preschool, but is unable to talk or interact with others. She has severe disabilities.

Alberta Health Services identified the child as a candidate for the Rocky View Schools preschool intervention program. Her parents brought her in to one of the two schools that offer it – R.J. Hawkey in Airdrie or Glenbow Elementary in Cochrane. The program, which provides services for as many as 13 children, runs for two hours and 45 minutes each day, for four days per week.

Unable to talk or interact, how does she cope? Her teacher, possessing a background in special education and early childhood intervention, has her play. Her play emphasizes language enrichment as a key factor in socialization.

During snack time, an occupational therapist might help her open containers, and later she is placed in a group to develop her social skills. There are speech-language pathologists and physical therapists too. This child also might receive support from Alberta Children’s Hospital, medical personnel, outside agencies, and the Calgary Health Authority.

The child’s family is engaged in regularly scheduled parent-child information sessions run by the program’s staff. Sometimes these meetings occur at school, sometimes at home, depending on the child’s needs. Parents also are invited to join their child’s teacher, therapists, and assistants in the development of an Individual Program Plan (IPP) to define learning goals.

“In our program there is tender, loving care. It’s where parents and children can feel safe because they know we care about their child,” says Hemsworth.

“A year later, these children can be leaders in the preschool program – talkative, engaged and developing new skills. When these children go on to Kindergarten, some of them may even be reclassified as having mild to moderate needs.”

RVS’ Preschool Intervention Program supports the following children to prepare for school:

- children aged 2 ½ to five-years old with severe developmental needs
- children aged 3 ½ to five-years old with mild to moderate needs
- children aged 3 ½ to five-years old who are English Language Learners

- children aged 3 ½ to five-years old who are typical learners (if space is available)

RVS will be opening a third strand of the program in Chestermere in September 2012.

In Kindergarten, universal screening and more

At RVS there are 1,400 Kindergarten children and 45 Kindergarten teachers in 65 classrooms.

Hemsworth notes that children come to Kindergarten with a huge range of abilities. Some children can already read, some haven't opened a book. For that reason, RVS has developed its own approach to screening in Kindergarten called PLAI (Programming for Learning and Instruction). It has three steps:

- **Universal screening** – A Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) form is sent home with all students at the beginning of the Kindergarten year. The one-page questionnaire allows parents, regardless of differences in education, socioeconomic status, and child-rearing experience, to raise concerns about the child's development and behaviour. The form is available in a number of languages, which meets the needs of many parents in RVS. Screening can also identify children with strong skills who need enriched programs.
- **Targeted screening** – The results of the PEDs and/or teacher observation may prompt a classroom based screening of some students using the Brigance Screen II. This screen assists the teacher to identify areas of strength and weakness such as a possible language, fine motor or general learning delays. Some teachers in RVS screen all their students using the Brigance in order to get a complete picture of student needs. This helps guide their instruction.
- **Specialized screening** – Some children may benefit from a more specific speech/language and/or occupational therapy screen. A referral will be made to a therapist to determine if further support is needed. The therapist is in frequent contact with Hemsworth, who is responsible for Program Unit Funding (PUF). If the child is identified as having mild/moderate needs, the teacher and therapists develop a plan to support the child. If the child meets criteria for PUF (severe needs), then funding is accessed and the appropriate supports are put in place. These include a classroom learning plan and additional services as applicable.

The RVS Kindergarten program builds on what children have already learned at home and in the community. Programming is based on Alberta Education's Kindergarten Program Statement.

Through play, the program allows children to develop social, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. Children who finish the program are ready for 21st Century learning.

How RVS developed PLAI

In 2006-07, Early Intervention asked for volunteers from its Kindergarten teachers to work on a “screening” committee. A representative from the Grades 1-12 Learning Specialists’ Team also joined. They met four times over the year and evaluated the various screening tools available. They determined they would adopt a three-step process for Kindergarten screening, in keeping with the “Response to Intervention” process that speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists were already working on. The teachers in the working group presented their plan to all the Kindergarten teachers in the spring of 2007.

In the fall, an in-service familiarized the Kindergarten teachers with the two screening tools that had been chosen (PEDS and Brigance Screen II). Early Intervention supplied materials for each school. As well, the two school psychologists visited each Kindergarten teacher in the district to assist them to understand the new process.

Early Intervention then created a survey to get feedback on the new screening process. Early Intervention and five principals met to revise the survey and then again to review the results. The results were shared with the larger administrative group and with Kindergarten teachers. They determined no changes needed to be made. This screening process has been used ever since.

Other Initiatives

- When Hemsworth took on the role of supervisor of early intervention six years ago there were a number of speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists working on contract. To ensure the same therapists were in the classrooms on a regular basis, Hemsworth largely discontinued the contracts and hired full-time division pathologists/therapists. Each speech-language pathologist has an assistant who helps in the classroom. The Early Intervention Team includes speech-language pathologists, speech-language teaching assistants and occupational therapists.
- Through its own budget, RVS provided an additional year of speech/language services to children, who meet the criteria of PUF when they entered Grade 1.

- Kindergarten teachers get specialized training each year to help them to identify children with language and motor skill difficulties. Early identification means pathologists can start working with the children right away; children are not waiting for help.
- Speech-language pathologists run a playtime centre once a month in some Kindergarten classes, so all students can benefit from their expertise. They use fun activities to develop language skills.
- RVS is creating Early Childhood Development Mapping Coalitions which will consider community-based results and ensure service gaps are addressed, so children come to school with stronger skills and less vulnerability.
- RVS is running a community of practice focused on inquiry play-based learning.

Challenges

Hemsworth says her biggest challenge is recruiting qualified staff, particularly therapists, many who are opting to work in private practice. Hemsworth says they've been "lucky" to have attracted talented staff. RVS advertises in publications and websites, through the universities and often through word-of-mouth, leveraging RVS' growing reputation as a good place to work. She thinks the province could help school divisions recruit therapists by promoting the benefits of working in schools to university programs that train therapists.

Another challenge is the growing need for infrastructure – RVS can manage now, but in time they will need more space to operate preschool programming.

"Ensuring each child makes a successful transition from home to school is a goal for all of us – parents, teachers and the entire school division," says Hemsworth.