

Maynooth language clubs help students excel



By Nate Smelle

Students, teachers and other learning partners have been working together during the last school year to improve the reading levels of the children studying at Maynooth Public School (MPS) in Hastings Highlands. MPS principal Lisa Southern-Resmer said that during the 2012-2013 school year staff at the school recognized that too many students were not reading at their grade level. In light of this realization teachers and staff began considering ways to improve the students' reading abilities. After the team of educators began carefully gauging the reading ability of each individual student in September of 2013 they came up with an approach that would address the diversity of needs within the student population of the school.

“Students are also seen individually by the teacher for continuous assessment and one-on-one instruction in the strategies each child needs to become a better reader,” she said.

“Data was collected in January to evaluate the students' progress, and we were amazed at the improvement students had made in reading accuracy. We recognized then the need to shift our focus to address how well students understand what they read [comprehension]. In May, we conducted further assessments, and the results are very exciting. We decided that a celebration was needed to recognize the terrific growth in the students' reading levels.”

The program, entitled Maynooth Public School's Language Clubs: An Experiment in Teaching Reading, organized students into groups based on the level at which they were reading instead of by the grade they were in. Southern-Resmer explained that at the beginning of the school year the school was reading at a combined level of 1,500. She said the students impressed everyone when their last assessment revealed they had improved their reading level two-fold, with the school now reading at level of 3,000.

To celebrate the students' exceptional achievements in the reading program the entire school along with parents and other partners from the community gathered on Thursday, June 26 in the field behind the school for a day full of summer excitement. Keeping the activities moving throughout the day was learning partner for the five elementary schools in the area, Sarah Vance. She said she has seen first-hand how the students have improved through the program, and sees it as a huge success.

“They are able to do it really well at a school like this because it is a smaller school and all of the teachers are on board,” said Vance.

“Everybody is working together to meet the needs of the students in a really targeted and strategic way. This is something the teachers are doing themselves. They haven't bought a program, they are creating it, and it is definitely meeting the needs of their students.”

According to Vance, one of the strategies of the program is to engage with the First Nations community in and around Maynooth. With 28 per cent of the students in Maynooth coming from the Algonquin or Metis community this approach really seems to speak to the children.

Kicking off the activities for the day, the students formed a large drumming circle more than 300 feet in circumference in the field behind the school. Before the orchestra got underway guests of honour, Beth Douglas and Scott Tinney from the Baptiste area Algonquins explained to the eager crowd of drummers what the significance of the drum represents to First Nations people.

“Through our ceremony we learn to give back,” said Tinney.

“When we are drumming we allow the earth's heart beat to join with our own. When we dance we bring energy of the earth and sky together in our bodies and then give it out. When we sing we give energy to the earth. When we pray we give energy to our heart. When we put all of these activities together we have one of the most powerful forms of gift giving we can possess.”

Tinney and Douglas first began drumming softly showing the children how to keep a beat together. Encouraging the students to begin beating their drums he explained to them that, “in the drumming circle there is no wrong way to drum. Everyone is both a leader and a follower. Permission is given to everyone present to participate in any way they choose to drum, or, just be with the healing vibrations of their own energy and beat.”

When the drumming finished, everyone formed a line leading to fire chief Pat Hoover and his father Ed Hoover who were busy on barbecue detail. With everyone's belly full in the afternoon, the students were treated to story time by special guest celebrity Bancroft OPP Staff Sgt. Mark Wolfe, and school board trustee Lucille Kyle who came out to recognize the children's extraordinary success.