

Charles Howitt Public School

York Region District School Board Richmond Hill, Ontario

CONTACT INFORMATION

Principal: Matthew Biemiller
Phone: 905-889-2522
Email: matthew.biemiller@yrdsb.edu.on.ca
Website:
<http://www.charleshowitt.ps.yrdsb.edu.on.ca/home.htm>

Mailing Address:

Charles Howitt Public School
30 Pearson Avenue
Richmond Hill, ON
L4C 6T7



About the school ...

Charles Howitt Public School serves about 350 students in a suburban neighbourhood of Richmond Hill, one of the fastest-growing communities in Canada. Reflecting the transformation of Richmond Hill itself from monocultural to multicultural, increasing numbers of Charles Howitt students speak a language other than English in their homes. The school population is diverse not just in terms of ethnicity but also socio-economically.

This is a school that has dedicated itself to professional learning and networking. The principal and teacher leaders attend York Region's Literacy Collaborative Continuing Improvement Sessions where they explore strategies for daily literacy instruction and literacy across the curriculum. The school's PLC links to seven other schools, which also focus on literacy. Together they share strategies to help students develop comprehension and written communication skills. Another school network meets to disaggregate EQAO results, a process repeated at the school level to allow school staff an opportunity to directly investigate the data. In each case, the school team introduces their learning to other staff so that together they can work toward school-wide implementation. As collaboration and implementation build, student learning improves, providing the impetus for further professional learning and networking.

Some Snapshots

Students ...

- take part in an online "Me-to-We" survey to share their issues with staff
- write stories for the monthly newsletter, make podcasts for the school website and contribute to daily announcements
- participate in sports and fitness events, the arts and various clubs
- assist in the library, the office and other classrooms

Parents ...

- support School Council, which organizes after-school parent workshops and volunteers for the school
- avidly support using technology to support learning for all children, including those with special needs
- hold appreciation luncheons to thank staff for their commitment and dedication to the students

Ongoing improvement ...

Over the past three years, the efforts of the school have been reflected in the steady and significant improvements in all six EQAO assessment areas. In 2005-06, results in two assessment areas were about 48 per cent of students achieving at or above the provincial standard, two assessment areas in the high fifties and two in the low sixties. On the 2007-08 results, five assessment areas showed achievement levels over 80 per cent. The lowest result was a 74 per cent in Grade 3 writing. These improved results were achieved under challenging circumstances.

Success after struggle ...

The shift of the board's network sessions from Grades 3 and 6 to cross-grade teams helped galvanize a whole-school approach at Charles Howitt, leading to greater collaboration among staff. The emphasis on student data and the identification of learning needs and effective instructional strategies also spurred staff on to learn and plan together. The development of a common school goal and cross-grade strategies has resulted in the development of a common language among teachers and, as a result, deeper professional conversations.

Teachers and principal are candid about the challenges experienced in moving forward to collective action, collaboration and most importantly school-wide implementation. The journey at Charles Howitt has been a series of deliberate steps in a shared direction, supported by hard work and a willingness to step outside the comfort zone and driven forward by the evidence of student success.

Teaching, learning and leading ...

Building professional relationships. For staff, strong professional relationships are the foundation for learning, collaboration and school growth. As one teacher said, "It's easier to take risks in your learning when you know there are people you can count on."

Keeping focused on student learning. Staff members use data both to inform their conversations about students as individuals and to identify common areas of focus for instruction. The data also provide the means to track and monitor student progress and to target resources and supports. Ensuring ease of access to current and complete information across all grades is a key support for collaborative action and continuous improvement.

Focusing on balanced literacy. Over the past few years, the learning priority has been on developing student comprehension skills. Now the focus is on student writing, using mentor texts, being clear about success criteria and providing descriptive feedback. Teachers are engaged in the collaborative assessment and marking of student work.

Doing early identification and intervention. As part of its school improvement plan, Charles Howitt has implemented "Hawks on the Fly" strategies for at-risk learners. While summary charts are on display in every classroom to identify the grade focus, the teaching strategies for improvement and the criteria for assessing student progress, the teacher's copy also includes the names of those students in the class who are at risk of not achieving their potential. Hawks on the Fly is a school-wide initiative that has contributed to a common language and shared process that supports both students and staff.

Using electronic tracking. The school has implemented an electronic data system to track student achievement in reading and writing. The data points include provincial report card grades, EQAO results,



DRA and PM benchmark levels. Colour coding provides quick visual identification of at-risk students, improvement trends and areas needing attention.

Developing leadership. Closely tied to the school's emphasis on collaboration is the commitment to shared or distributed leadership, a direction very much appreciated by staff. One parent observed, "The principal is wonderful. We were very nervous about changing principals but then we met him. He's great!" A teacher commented, "We feel less burdened as people realize they have something to offer and start stepping up." Leadership is evolving and devolving as staff assume responsibility for sharing leadership across the school.

"Teachers came to see that the literacy focus was not just a 'Charles Howitt' thing. It was a focus in every school." *Teacher*

"We focused less on the negatives and started watering the flowers. We nurture the positives." *Teacher*

"It's OK to have a fish swimming the other way. We need to go deeper than just compliance." *Teacher*

"Engagement means you are willing to persevere through the challenges." *Teacher*

Moving into the future

- ◆ learn more about best practices for mathematics and literacy instruction
- ◆ involve students in the development of success criteria to engage them in assessment
- ◆ distribute responsibility for leading and learning so that each person has the opportunity to use his or her strengths and contribute to the whole staff team
- ◆ integrate digital literacy into more areas of the curriculum through the effective use of technological tools (e.g., SMART Boards, Moodle technology, iPods)