

Palliser’s outreach programs all about student choice

BY CRAIG ALBRECHT
PALLISER REGIONAL SCHOOLS
SOUTHERN ALBERTA

Their reasons for enrolling may vary, but students in Palliser Regional Schools’ outreach programs have something in common. They’ve found a learning environment that works for them.

Cheryl Garratt was beaming as daughter Celeste received certificates for top marks in three different courses she completed in a home-based, online approach at a recent recognition luncheon at the Picture Butte Outreach School. The 17-year-old had tried both home schooling and then traditional classroom learning with mixed results.

“I’m glad for all the options we have here in the province; that we can find something to fit the kid rather than cramming the kids into moulds,” said Garratt. “This is the best of both worlds – between home schooling and high school – in that she is in charge of her studies.”

Alison Hancox, Principal of Palliser Beyond Borders, dismisses notions of the outreach programs as a last resort for those unable to find a fit elsewhere. She prefers to think of those students as “early adopters” of the flexible learning or high school redesign models just now gaining popularity across Alberta.

This is the second year the outreach program falls under the umbrella of Palliser Beyond Borders, which offers enhanced opportunities with increased course selection. Previous to that arrangement the outreach programs were each associated with the local high school.

The 380 students registered in 670 courses through Palliser Beyond Borders fall into one of three categories. Some take all their high-school education via the off-campus option for a variety of options including work commitments, while others attend a Palliser high school but take courses through outreach otherwise unavailable to them. The final category is adult learners, who pay a fee to either complete their high school diploma or to upgrade their marks so they can pursue further training.

The outreach student recognition events, which were also held at the Vulcan and PASS+ campuses in Coaldale, were a means to both celebrate success and create greater awareness of the opportunities available for Palliser students.

It’s really about choice, said Hancox, with staff able to set up an education plan to suit any individual’s need.

“The student can become that self-directed learner, take ownership for their learning and assert what they need and we’re going to help them figure that out,” she said.

Unlike some distance learning options out there, the outreach program is not an online marking program. It is a teaching and learning program for online courses, with teachers available to offer their help in person at one of the campuses – Coaldale, Picture Butte and Vulcan – online.



Photos by Palliser Regional Schools

Outreach student Annie Martens works on course material at the Picture Butte school.

Students have access to course materials 24-7 with set, weekly instruction time so teachers can focus on key skills students require. Students can also drop in during open office times if it better fits their schedules.

“I was homeschooled from Grades 1 to 9 so I am very used to teaching myself; just getting the textbook and reading it and doing everything on my own,” said Celeste Garratt, who did her Grade 10 studies in a regular high school environment.

“When I was put in a class situation, it just didn’t work out as well because I found myself being very bored. Some stuff I would understand very, very quickly and other stuff it would take me a little bit longer to understand – not at the same rate as the other students.”

Celeste finds it sufficient to drop in to the Picture Butte storefront school a couple of times a week. She finds the support the outreach teachers provide helpful, something unavailable through parent-directed home schooling.

If a student fails to check in on a regular basis, they are contacted to find out if they’re having computer or other problems, or their situation has changed and their education plan requires modification.

Karly Groenenboom is enrolled in Early Learning and Child Care through Picture Butte Outreach, a Career Technology Studies option she couldn’t fit in at the local high school she attends.

“If this wasn’t available, I probably would have found something at the high school that maybe I wasn’t as interested in; maybe something else that happened to be offered at that same time,” said the Grade 12 student, who is considering a career working with children.

David Martens chose the outreach program because it offers him



Picture Butte Outreach School teacher Steven Wornell with Celeste Garratt at the recent recognition lunch.

more flexibility to help out on the family farm outside of Picture Butte.

He was home schooled up until two years ago, but found he sometimes needed more support.

“Here these teachers have time to help you,” said Martens, who is working on Grade 11 courses right now. “And there’s other people to talk to (at the outreach school), you’re not all by yourself all day long. It makes the day better.”

His younger sister, Annie, enrolled in the outreach program for the first time this year after good reviews from David.

Like the students, the outreach program is also a school of choice for staff.

Jennifer Giles splits her time between the Picture Butte, Coaldale and Vulcan campuses. All of her 19 years of teaching have involved outreach students and she keeps in contact with some of her former students. One updates her each time he reaches an educational milestone, most recently after finishing law school.

“It is very much rewarding to see the challenges that some of these kids face and where they arrive,” said Giles. “I love that we have the ability to change negative education experiences some of them may have had in the past.”

For more information on Palliser’s outreach program go to <http://goo.gl/OVv0qb>.



Picture Butte Outreach School teacher Jennifer Giles presents student Shaelon DeKok with a certificate.