



Gadzoosdaa Student Residence Review Report January 2015

Gadzoosdaa Student Residence Review
January 2015

Housemaster: Shereen Hill

Dates of Review: January 12-14, 2015
Phone interviews: January 29, 2015

Residence Review Team:

George Bahm	First Nations Experiential Education Consultant, First Nations Programs and Partnerships Unit, Yukon Education
Simon Blakesley	Director, Student Achievement, Systems Accountability, Yukon Education
Debbie Gohl	Senior High School Consultant, Yukon Education
Sam Johnston	Elder in Residence, Teslin School
Larry Kiesling	Principal, Ghuch Tla Community School, Yukon Education
Robin Smarch	Senior Education Support Worker, Teslin Tlingit Council and First Nations Education Commission member

(The members below were invited to take part as review team members and intended to participate, though operational requirements and/or individual circumstances precluded their involvement)

Greg Storey, Superintendent, Area 3, Yukon Education
Jessie Dawson, F.H. Collins School Council Member
Fran Etsel, Principal, Ross River School, Yukon Education
Sr. Edith Elder, Chair, Vanier Catholic Secondary School Council

Meetings with the Team included:

- GSR students Grades 10-12
- GSR former student
- GSR staff
- GSR House master
- FHC and VCSS principals and counsellors
- Education support workers and CELCs
- First Nations leaders
- Parents/guardians

Residence History

The Gadzoosdaa Student Residence (GSR) was opened officially by the Honourable Piers McDonald, Minister of Education, October 4, 1990. The Gadzoosdaa Student Residence is named in recognition of the many contributions made by Mrs. Virginia Smarch. Mrs. Smarch, who in Tlingit was affectionately known as Gadzoosdaa, was a distinguished elder of the Teslin Tlingit Council (Wolf Clan) and was the first teacher of the Tlingit language in the Teslin School. Over the years, she gave generously of herself to act as interpreter at meetings and to speak at gatherings of young people. Above all, Mrs. Smarch was a superb teller of legends, complementing her stories with appropriate lessons and insights for present-day conditions and the younger generation.

Residence Context

Gadzoosdaa Student Residence (GSR) is located in the Riverdale neighbourhood of Whitehorse, Yukon. GSR endeavours to provide a “home away from home” for community students who live in Whitehorse to attend high school at F.H. Collins Secondary School or Vanier Catholic Secondary School.

At the time this report was written, 19 boys and 14 girls attended GSR. Students from a number of rural communities (including Atlin, B.C.) live at the residence. Students whose communities are in proximity of Whitehorse return home on weekends while those living farther afield remain at GSR.

GSR was led by one housemaster for over 20 years, and has in the past 2 years undergone a change of housemasters. GSR has many long-serving staff with over 10 years of experience, with some who have worked there for over 20 years. New kitchen staff have brought fresh ideas to the list of meal options and express a keen willingness to prepare healthy meals that include wild game from communities when available.

The GSR Review Process

This review is the first conducted in the 25-year history of Gadzoosdaa Student Residence. In the absence of a review model specifically designed for a student residence, the School Review process currently used in all Yukon schools on a three-year cycle was modified and employed for this first review.

Prior to the review taking place, a flyer was sent home with students in order to let parents know of the review, its aim of helping GSR grow, and to invite input.

With a focus on strengths and growth being the focus of this review, the Team employed two overarching questions to begin conversations:

1. From your perspective, in the interest of improving outcomes for all students, what are the strengths of GSR?
2. From your perspective, in the interest of improving outcomes for all students where does the GSR need to grow?

The Review Team met at GSR on Monday, January 12, 2015. The Team reviewed the schedule and process, and then received a tour of GSR. The Team proceeded to interview three residence staff and the housemaster in the morning and then stayed to enjoy lunch with students in the dining area. Monday afternoon the Team visited Vanier Catholic Secondary School (VCSS) and met with four students, followed by a meeting with the VCSS principal and counsellor.

On Tuesday, January 13, the Review Team spent the day at F.H. Collins Secondary School. The morning was spent dialoguing around the two main review questions with students, followed by lunch and then continuing to meet with students. The Team met with 11 students in grades 10 to 12, and also received short written submissions from other students who did not meet with the Team but nonetheless wished to provide input.

In the afternoon, the Team met with three F.H. Collins school administrators, two counsellors, and two Education Support Workers (a third participated in a subsequent meeting). This was followed by three evening staff from GSR.

In summary, the Team met with 32 participants in this initial evidence-gathering phase.

The morning of Wednesday, January 14 was used by the Team to share ideas, compile notes and reflect on the review process. It was the view of the Team that the process had gone smoothly for this first phase and was well-suited to the GSR context.

The second phase of evidence-gathering was conducted using telephone interviews with a random sample of parents on January 29, 2015. Nine parents from various communities contributed. These interviews were conducted by two Team members. Email invitations to an interview were extended to four First Nations Leaders on January 21, January 27, and February 4. There was one response, but subsequent follow-up to secure an interview was not successful.

Once these interviews were completed, a draft report was written. This draft was shared back with the review Team for further input and edits prior to submission to the Superintendent of Schools responsible for GSR.

At the end of the data gathering phase, 41 participants contributed to this report. The next section of this report presents observations and recommendations from the Review Team, followed by conclusions and the strengths and limitations of this report.

Observations and Recommendations

Norms and Culture:

Characteristics:

Continuously improving schools¹ are socially and culturally inclusive with high expectations for each learner. A focus on continuous improvement is evident.

Observations of the Team:

- There exists a strong staff Team at GSR. They appear very proud of what they do as they strive to make GSR a “home away from home” with a friendly atmosphere for their students. Most of the staff endeavour to make connections with students and form relationships with them
- Many of the staff care deeply for the students in ways that go beyond their job requirements, and will ensure their safety even if this means staying after hours. For example, staff members will take students to doctor’s or counselling appointments and work to ensure their personal privacy and confidentiality is respected
- With regards to the physical plant GSR is well-maintained, bright, and very clean. The staff take pride in the building, and its spacious physical design promotes a calm, welcoming atmosphere for visitors and residents alike without projecting an institutional feel
- The predominant view of parents was that GSR is open and welcoming to them. The staff are friendly. When they visited they were invited in for coffee or a meal, and used this time to get an update on how their child was doing
- The Team heard from students that there are some residence staff who treat them respectfully as adults, and are genuine, understanding, and open with them. As a result the students respect and appreciate these staff members
- The above notwithstanding , students expressed that there appears inconsistency in regards to how some staff relate to them: not all students feel that all staff are as respectful and helpful as others, and that this inconsistency can be stressful for them

¹ The term “schools” is utilized here given that the process and template utilized for this review is based upon the school review model

- When the Team asked students whether they could connect with one or more staff members if they had a problem or needed help, the majority responded that they could. This said, there are students who do not feel they have a connection or that some staff are as consistent in their caring as other staff are
- There appears to be consistency with rules and expectations, though judgment is also used when dealing with individual students or when special circumstances require individualized responses. Education Support Workers (ESWs) expressed that they generally felt the rules and curfew times were reasonable and appropriate for GSR students
- There appears on the part of the staff a willingness to improve and to be open to suggestions and new ideas. As evidence of this growth orientation, the Team noted that evening staff were very well-prepared for their interview with written notes containing their ideas and suggestions on improving GSR
- The Team heard from students that they feel comfortable at GSR and that they feel it is a safe place to live. Students shared that night staff are always on duty and available in the main eating area at any time in the middle of the night. Similarly, parents also felt that GSR was a safe housing option for their children
- Some students expressed that they would like to have more hands-on, cultural activities to engage in on evenings and weekends, and would like more stick gambling and hand games
- An experienced staff member commented that the atmosphere of GSR changes during the school year: at the start of the year small student cliques or groups form, but then as the year progresses these diminish and student become more inclusive of each other

Recommendations for moving forward:

Short-term (6 months to 1 year)

- Be aware of and take steps to ensure consistency of practice with regard to interactions and relating to students in order to eliminate the view that some staff are less helpful and respectful than others
- Not all students feel that they can connect with a staff member. The Team recommends that more work be done to identify students who may feel less connected and strive to ensure that all students, to the extent possible, have a

“go-to” adult. One idea suggested was to group students with a staff member, similar to what is done with a home room in school

Longer-term (1-3 years)

- Identify relevant cultural activities that all First Nations students could take part in and be reflective of their community culture in order to ensure that the maximum participation is possible
- Related to the above, consider a structure whereby each First Nation could have a culture week/month to help showcase the distinctive nature of Yukon First Nations
- Related to the above points, consider ways to include more First Nations art, symbols, and ‘presence’ at GSR

School and Community

Characteristics: In continuously improving schools build a shared commitment to success for each learner. The school collaborates with parents, students, school council, First Nations and community to support student learning. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture and the school communicates about progress and challenges in multiple ways.

Observations of the Team:

- The Team sensed that there is ambiguity with regards to communication channels, and that this could be confusing at times for school staff, ESWs and GSR staff
- Education Support Workers (ESWs) shared that they felt they have a good working relationship with GSR staff, and GSR staff similarly expressed that they rely on the ESWs to help them to be aware of specific student needs. This said, there can be times where there is ambiguity regarding what can be shared and how their roles “fit” together
- The Team heard that while it was past practice to do so, there currently is not a consistent monthly newsletter sent home and into the communities as a means of communicating GSR activities and fostering and improving connections. Some parents expressed they did not hear very often from GSR and were thus unsure of recent or upcoming activities

- Staff are aware and supportive of the importance of the connection to home and family, and will strive to get a student home to spend a few days if they feel that this will be helpful to the student
- The Team heard that it can be lonely for those students left behind when their peers get to go home on weekend. To help address this, staff support students with their sports pursuits in the broader Whitehorse community. For example, students can stay at GSR on weekends to attend tournaments and will be driven to events and picked up by staff. Parents shared that when they ask that their child stay at GSR for the weekend to attend an event, their request is accommodated
- One parent expressed appreciation for the frequency that fly-in students were provided flights home to their families, and felt there was an adequate number of trips throughout the year
- GSR students have formed their own community within the residence, and there is a positive atmosphere amongst the students. There are weekly meetings of the students and staff each Tuesday to problem solve, share positive news, and plan ahead
- Where there have been interpersonal problems between students, parents shared that GSR staff have been responsive to these problems and have offered single rooms to students to address differences in personalities
- Some staff expressed that they do not see the presence of Elders as much as they would like at GSR and that there could be more done in the way of cultural activities for students to engage in. Some parents suggested that having Elders in both the boys and girls wings at GSR would be helpful for providing guidance to students
- Similarly, students shared that they would like to engage in more hands-on, cultural activities and teachings, and feel that these are not promoted enough. Some students shared with the Team that they would go downtown due, at times, feeling bored at GSR

Recommendations for moving forward:

Short-term (6 months to a year)

- Ensure that a consistent, monthly newsletter is shared with home and other educational/community stakeholders as a means of communicating events, celebrating student successes, and to seek support for GSR activities from communities and First Nations
- Regularly survey students in a safe, non-judgmental way to find out what their interests are regarding activities that GSR could offer to them. This could be particularly helpful to those students who cannot return home on weekends and who may experience loneliness or boredom

Longer-term (1-3 years)

- Continue to work to strengthen relationships between all stakeholders in order to ensure that GSR is well-connected with all who have a stake and interest in the success of GSR students
- Work to include more hands-on, applied activities for students that are supported and/or by community resources as a means of both bringing the community more into GSR and providing learning opportunities for students
- Request support from the experiential and cultural resource staff at the Department of Education's First Nations Programs and Partnerships (FNPP) unit as a means of developing applied experiential activities for students

Organization

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools organize structures, actions, and interventions to ensure success for each learner. Work in the school is coherent and aligned to focus on improvement. Actions and interventions include effectively differentiating resources, time and professional development to get results. The Department supports the school and makes connections across the Territory to build capacity.

Observations of the Team:

- Food is very important at GSR: the staff endeavour to make healthy meals for students and avoid providing processed and deep-fried food. While not all students appreciate the healthy focus, there are many who do. The kitchen staff appear very dedicated and highly motivated to do the best job that they can for GSR students

- Kitchen staff also enjoy and appreciate having students, who are willing to learn more about culinary arts, visit them in the kitchen
- The kitchen staff shared with the Team that are exploring the idea of GSR having its own community garden to grow and harvest their own produce. In order to further expand home-made options for students, one chef operates a smoker behind the Residence. (A parent commented specifically that she appreciated the salmon and thought that it was very well done).
- The Team heard from students with special diets that the kitchen staff will do their utmost to meet their dietary needs in ways that are tasty and healthy. The Team also noted that Grade 10 students enjoy the healthier food offered while older students are more likely to miss deep-fried and processed foods and are finding this shift somewhat difficult
- It was felt by some parents that greater inclusion of wild game would help students to balance their diet given the shift to more southern or urban diets, and that this change of diet had a negative effect on student behaviour
- Kitchen staff were clear in their desire to cook using more wild game but indicated that they find it difficult to maintain a regular supply of moose and salmon. Staff put out calls for wild meat but it is constantly in short supply and gets used up quickly.
- Some parents with whom the Team spoke expressed that they feel welcomed to eat at GSR by staff who are friendly, though some participants expressed to the Team that there is inconsistency with regards to having family come over to share in a meal. The Team heard that food budget constraints were shared with students as a reason, and that having family visit for a meal puts further pressure on this budget
- The timetable is organized to once again include a mandatory study block from 4:15 to 5:15pm Monday-Thursday. Students felt that this was a good time of day to have this block and appreciated having study teams to work with. Some parents also commented that they felt the structure was good for their child and that having a set study block each day was very important to learning
- Students expressed that they feel the GSR evening staff work very hard to help them understand their homework, will proofread their essays, and help them finish their homework. If the staff can't help, they will arrange for tutoring support

- There appear to be numerous games and activities in the TV rooms, though the Team heard from some male students that they would like weight equipment, a small collection of tools to work with their hands, and a place to repair things
- Some students expressed the need for more quiet places to hang out as the TV lounges can get quite loud. While there is a “Zen” room that attempts to be a quiet lounge space, students shared that it gets mistreated or abused: as a result it does not provide the quiet space it is intended to be
- The staff works to organize outdoor recreation, ski trips, field trips, and experiential learning for students. Despite their efforts, some staff expressed to the Team that while students are keen to take part at first, few will actually commit to the activity and take part due to peer pressure or other reasons. Staff suggested that a regularly scheduled, consistent, recreational program may help in this regard
- Some female students shared with the Team that they would appreciate having more female staff available in order to avoid situations where male staff are inadvertently the ones checking in on the girls’ wing
- The Team noted that the GSR handbook was originally developed in 2004, though wondered when it was last updated and what the process was for revisions to be made and communicated
- The Team heard that there appears to be ambiguity with regards to roles, responsibilities, and communication processes when there are problems. As a result, staff and ESWs may not be working in synch to the extent possible, and that this can, at times, cause tensions

Recommendations for moving forward:

Short-term (6 months to a year)

- Be consistent with expectations regarding where students can take food and eat meals, and with respect to guidelines/expectations on having guests attend for a meal
- Explore with the counselling staff at F.H. Collins Secondary School the potential of earning Work Experience credits for students who would like to work in the kitchen

- Work with the Department of Education to ensure that the composition of staffing is such that there is adequate an adequate number of female staff on shift for female supervision of the girls' wing

Longer-term (1 to 3 years)

- Consider sending kitchen staff to Yukon First Nations community events where food is prepared and served as a means to support their learning as they strive to provide culturally relevant meals
- Re-visit and communicate a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities, and communication steps to ensure that all are working together in support of students when there problems arise. Explore the restorative practice approach employed at F.H. Collins Secondary School as a potential model

Processes and Progress

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools take responsibility for improving outcomes for students. They use evidence to guide decisions and actions and have processes in place to collectively monitor progress and make adjustments in key areas of their work. They demonstrate improvement over time – for individual students, groups of students, and the school.

Observations of the Team:

- Staff do their best to support students with homework, to the extent that they are able to, and most students feel that staff monitor their progress. When students need tutoring assistance, staff make arrangements with Skookum Jim's and will transport the students to and from tutoring
- When staff have concerns about student achievement, they call home. Staff monitor students' marks: if students maintain over a 75% average and are not failing any courses, students can study independently of study hall. This said, a staff member shared that when a student is falling behind, GSR may only find out there is a "problem" once it is already a problem. Some parents expressed a similar view.
- Education Support Workers (ESWs) form the "bridge" between GSR students, staff, school, and home. They are committed and work diligently in their efforts to support students and monitor their progress and well-being. ESWs shared with

the Team that they felt the GSR staff members are a strong asset to the residence

- The Team learned that monthly progress/status reports are no longer sent home to parents, and wondered why this might be the case. Some parents suggested that a short weekly email to “check-in” with parents and provide an update (even if that was to report that all was well) could be helpful and appreciated
- Some staff felt that changes instituted over the past few years were made for the sake of making changes to existing practices, rather than being based on evidence or specific need for change to improve the GSR program. This has caused some disruption, though it was expressed to the Team that this has diminished with time
- High school administrative staff, counselling staff identified that, while they are invited to attend larger events at GSR, there appears to have been a decrease in regular, direct contact with GSR over the past 2-3 years than previously existed. Past practice was that the Housemaster and the school counselling staff met on a regular basis to discuss matters of shared importance, such as attendance and marks (often over a lunch visitation) with the Housemaster as they key point of contact. The Team heard from high school staff that now this was less frequently the case. As a result, high school staff were not sure how well students were tracked with regards to attendance and achievement
- Related to the above point, the Team heard that there appears to be a decreased level of networking between stakeholders in general, and that while relationships are in place they do not appear to be as strong as they were in previous years
- Some of the older students did feel that they were asked for their input into residence operations, but this was not expressed consistently by all students who met with the Team
- Staff and students both commented on the benefits to having more exposure to career plan opportunities in the trades/applied skills area. Students expressed interest in more hands-on activities and would appreciate a small yet well-equipped tool box for them to work on projects

Recommendations for moving forward:

Short-term (6 months to a year)

- Review current practice and consider sending home monthly GSR reports to help communicate to parents how their children are doing both academically and personally. These reports would not need to be extensive, but regular reporting

could be proactive and be part of good, open communication between GSR and home

- Develop a system whereby students can give feedback on GSR practices, policies, and foods in a safe, secure way. An anonymous suggestion box was one idea presented though there may be other channels that work
- Regularly scheduled monthly meetings between the GSR Headmistress, staff, and ESWs would help to ensure consistent communication, allow for planning, and signalling students who may be in need of ongoing support with academics and attendance
- Work to reinstitute regular visitations by both counselling staff to GSR and housemaster visitations to the high schools in order to strengthen the clear lines of communication that were previously in place. A more formalized, regular, and clear system of contact (with the Housemaster position as the key point of contact) would be mutually beneficial for high schools and GSR

Longer-term (1-3 years)

- Related to the above, and to address the concern that GSR staff may only find out a student is falling behind, having a key contact person at each school would be helpful for tracking student progress. The Team recognizes the dedicated work that ESWs already do in this regard, but more contact in support of academics may be needed
- Consider inviting guest speakers from the community who work in the trades or other professions to give presentations to students. (Finding former GSR residents now working in the trades would be of added value)

In conclusion

The Team sincerely enjoyed taking part in this first-ever review of Gadzoosdaa Student Residence and learning from all participants. The complexity of offering a place where up to 38 students can come together, live safely, and learn together- recognizing that they come from 38 settings where the concept of “home” may have multiple and, at times, opposing interpretations and expectations- was clearly evident to the Team by the end of this review.

The role played by GSR is unique and special, requiring the efforts of many dedicated, caring people to make it all work. In the words of one evening staff member “We don’t try and be the parents but we always try and include the parents”.

It appears that everyone has an interest and compassionate desire to make GSR as much a “home away from home” where trust, friendship, loyalty, and kindness are as abundant as possible for students who live there.

For the Review Team, the following two dominant themes emerged with regards to “grow-to” areas and are mentioned here.

- 1) Communication processes need to be rethought and articulated in order that all stakeholders are clear on their roles and responsibilities. This will ensure that all staff can work more effectively together in support of students, keep community informed, and invite assistance that will help GSR be a “home away from home”
- 2) The need for consistency of practice on the part of all staff in regards to working with GSR students. While many staff are highly compassionate, caring, nurturing, genuine, and respectful, not all are perceived by students to be consistent in this regard. As a result, some students feel less comfortable with some staff than they may with others, and this can cause stress or tension.

Recommendations for the Department of Education

- 1) Consider the development of an advisory or oversight body for GSR. One potential model suggested during the review was the “four corners” approach employed for the Teen Parent Centre (comprised of high school staff, the Teen Parent Centre advisory board, Yukon Education, and Health and Social Services). A similar structure with different members may be helpful.

However structured, this would help to accomplish (at least) two things. First, this would allow for GSR leadership and staff to present new ideas, procedures, and initiatives, and to receive feedback on its operations. Second, an oversight body would allow for ideas and feedback to be presented to GSR in a consistent, representative, and organized manner, rather than hearing from individual stakeholders in a random or ad hoc manner.

Further, an oversight body would be a step towards closing gaps between the many stakeholders who care for and have an interest in GSR students by providing the opportunity to participate together in the future growth of GSR

- 2) Require and provide support for the development of a GSR growth plan that is developed on a three-year cycle, reviewed and modified annually, and monitored regularly. The School Growth Plan process employed in Yukon schools could serve as a model for this
- 3) Support GSR to locate gym space for students in the evening. The Team heard that GSR has lost out on gym space to community user groups at a nearby school

- 4) Consider renaming the position currently titled “Housemaster” or Housemistress”. This term carries with it colonial overtones and appears outdated in current language. Suggestions include “team leader”, “principal”, or “director of residence” (these are terms used by some university residences)

Recommendations for communities

- Consider ways that GSR could be regularly supplied with traditional foods from communities. Students expressed a keen desire to have wild meat and missed having moose and salmon on a regular basis, and parents were very supportive of this. For students to enjoy more of the foods that they are used to at home would likely contribute to feelings of home at GSR
- When coming to Whitehorse, plan to visit GSR. The presence of family and Elders would further contribute to the “home away from home” atmosphere that GSR aims to create

Further suggestions from students

- Consider having a cement pad poured on the rink to make it a better playing area
- Develop a heated work space where students could work on bikes and other small mechanical projects
- A small collection of hand tools would be helpful for students wishing to work on mechanical things
- Male students would appreciate some workout equipment in their area

Strengths and Limitations of this report

With any inquiry activity, there are strengths and limitations. These are described briefly below.

A strength of this report is that it contributes to a knowledge gap, given that there has not been a review of GSR in its 25 year existence. This report collects in one place the insights of over 40 people and contributes to helping “Gadzoosdaa grow” in a way that has not been done before. As a result, this review contributes for the first time, and in a focused way, the voices and thoughts of many participants.

A further strength of this report relates to an observation shared by some GSR staff members: they expressed that, while many know that GSR exists and is a housing option for community students, not all may not be aware of the dedicated and caring work that is done there in support of students. It is hoped that, in some way, this report

brings to the surface the complexity of their task of making a “home away from home” but with an academic focus and encourages stakeholders to visit whenever they can to learn about GSR first-hand rather through what they hear from others about GSR.

Limitations

A limitation of this report is that its scope is bounded by the two over-arching questions asked that are intended to shed light on strengths and areas of growth. As a result, this report is not all-encompassing and is intended predominantly to inform future growth of GSR.

A further limitation is that there is no previous review with which to compare this report and its observations and recommendations. As a result, this review serves as a starting point for future studies and growth.

The Review Team acknowledges that the comments and ideas in this report are the contributions of a representative sample of participants, and not all stakeholders. To have done otherwise would have been unmanageable in terms of time and organization. This said, the Review Team is optimistic that the contributions in this report are representative and comprehensive in scope to inform the longer-term growth of GSR.

Observations on process

At the end of the initial two-day phase of the review, the Review Team took some time to reflect on the process and share their observations. Team members felt that the process was open, inclusive, flexible, and suited to informing the questions being asked. Participation was optional: for those who did participate, comments made to the Team during the review suggested that this review was timely and welcomed.

Dedication

The Team appreciates the time and dedicated efforts of all who participated in this review. The majority of students told the Team that they like living at GSR and the experiences they have there with each other and the staff as they pursue their education. Given that GSR is ultimately for their well-being and life-long success, this report ends with their words:

“There is help for people, if you’re willing to ask and willing to act, if you want to take charge of your education”

“I like going home, but going home takes me away from my education”

“Well, I’m thankful for the roof over my head and the food that’s there for all of the kids, and the safe place to stay”

“The evening staff are great and (dorm staff) is like an auntie”

“I stay at the residence and its good for me and for my education. I can't speak for others”