

RRDSB partners with author to promote writing skills

By Ken Kellar

Staff writer

kkellar@fortfrances.com

Students at the Rainy River District School Board (RRDSB) will be getting a rather unique learning experience this year.

Following a visit from author Sigmund Brouwer during the last school year, the board announced at its last monthly meeting that Brouwer would serve as the writer-in-residence for the school board for the 2019-2020 school year.

Brouwer, a prolific author of stories for children, teens and adults, brought his Story Ninja program to students at schools in the district at the end of the last school year, as well as the Fort Frances Library over the summer. The program aims to get students excited about writing, thus improving their skills, by teaching them how to write effective stories.

"It's a pretty simple theory: every story starts with a problem that gets worse then gets solved," Brouwer explained.

"And whether you're in kindergarten or in Grade 12, we're all capable for that at our own levels. Writing is a delivery system for story, so we want to be good writers so we can better deliver our stories"

This year, as writer-in-residence, Brouwer will be using aspects of the Story Ninja program in order to help students across the board with their writing and literacy skills.

"I feel a lot of what I'm doing is just trying to engage kids and motivate them with the story aspects," he said.

"The teachers are doing all of the hard work in the classroom, and I'm just sharing a few Story



Author Sigmund Brouwer worked through an exercise with Mrs. Moxham's Grade 5 class at Robert Moore School last Wednesday. Brouwer is serving as the writer-in-residence for the Rainy River District School Board this year, bringing some of the techniques from his Story Ninja program to students to help promote writing and reading skills.

—Ken Kellar photo

Ninja tricks and all of us are trying to get them to have a great attitude about who they are as young authors."

Brouwer's previous visit to the district is what led to his current appointment as writer-in-residence, something Crossroads principal Sharla MacKinnon said was beneficial to both students and staff members.

"When we had him here for the two days [last year] I realized his engagement with the students and staff were ex-

remely powerful," MacKinnon noted.

"And then so it kind of sprung from a chance meeting of having him here and realizing his connection and powerful words engaging the students and staff at that time . . . I talked to the staff, they all had said at that time that because of his style, it was the best PD they had had for themselves to try to learn how to move student writing forward and it was an area that we were kind of struggling with

here."

MacKinnon noted the author's enthusiastic presentation of his material helped students connect with the lessons he was giving them about writing, and that he in turn cared about helping the students learn.

"He's incredibly engaging, and the students really feel valued," she said.

"He would definitely be engaged himself in helping them and wanting to make their writing better. I know even last

week we were talking and he said 'Okay, what are our next steps? I want to make sure this isn't just a one-off. We want to have an impact, we want to make sure that your kids are going to become better at writing.' We're fortunate enough that he'll be able to visit us twice throughout the year for individual visits.

"It went well for all of us, we seemed to connect," Brouwer said of the workshops he had with students last year.

"My focus, as you know, is 'If you give us a reason to write'—and story is one of the best reasons to write—then we will write more because we're enjoying sharing stories." And the school board here is really focused on literacy, so I think we're all looking at it as one more arrow in a quiver of helping our kids be better readers and writers."

Part of being writer-in-residence for the school board is checking in with the students as the school year continues, to keep them inspired and share elements of his own process with students.

"I'll be able to do drop in classroom visits with live video," Brouwer elaborated.

"We're setting up a website with free downloads, they can read my books, and I'll also have video instructions so the kids will get reinforcement of the Story Ninja approach. And I want to emphasize, the teachers are doing a great job, this is just one more tool for them to use in the classroom."

MacKinnon said it's valuable to have a person outside of students' day-to-day school life be a part of the learning process.

"I think the students know,

in our building or in any school building, that the adults that are in the building care about them and want them to do well," she said.

"But as soon as an outsider shows such an ambitious feel towards really wanting to make a difference . . . I think that they can pick up on his energy and they feel like, 'Oh yeah, I want to be like him!' It's important to have role models that are positive in order to look up to, especially male authors—they seem to be probably more few and far between than female role models in our buildings."

While it's too early to say whether this program will continue past the current school year, MacKinnon said she sees value in having Brouwer share his lessons and enthusiasm with the students.

"I do think it's important, like in teaching we do talk about using mentor texts in order to teach concepts with students," she said.

"This is kind of like the next level, where we have mentor humans, it adds that extra level of engagement to student learning and understanding."

"Also, I really am a strong believer in helping kids tag a memory to their learning, and I think that they will remember when Sigmund Brouwer came to their school, and what Sigmund Brouwer had taught them," MacKinnon continued.

"They won't necessarily always remember what every teacher has taught them—I mean, we hope so—but I do think that it helps us solidify some concepts that have been tried for years."