

The New School @ Surrey

National Youth Literacy Demonstration Project

New School Addresses Old Problem

Literacy BC and the Surrey School District are working together to develop a new and effective educational alternative for high school students who have great difficulty reading and writing. The research and development project is co-funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Crime Prevention Centre. It is intended to not only establish an alternative program in Surrey but to foster improved literacy services for youth in British Columbia and throughout Canada.

Youth Literacy: A National Concern

Approximately twenty-five percent of eighth-grade students in British Columbia do not obtain their Dogwood Certificate within the following six years. Many fail to graduate at all. This is not just a problem in BC. As stated by the Minister of Human Resources Development in *Knowledge Matters, Skills and Learning for Canadians*, "A significant minority of Canadian children are not developing the skills and ability to learn that will help them live and work to their full potential."

A common reason for the academic difficulties that adolescents encounter is that many children, for a variety of reasons, do not learn to read by the time they complete the third grade. This is the demarcation point where their education shifts from "learning to read," to "reading to learn." Any child whose reading skills are significantly lagging at that time faces an uphill challenge.

Lack of adequate literacy skills often inhibits academic progress across the board since students must acquire most knowledge through textbooks. This is true not just for English, but science, social studies, and math as well. Once students enter the higher grades, little is offered in terms of scaffolding, hands-on learning, individualized assistance, or technology-mediated instruction. As a result, the strengths of these students – the ability to learn in ways that are not dependent on print – do not come into play. Often, competence and confidence decrease in equal measure, leading to re-

duced self-esteem, increased frustration, and anger. Demoralized and disengaged, these students tend to tune out, act out, or drop out.

Few resources are available for students who are not diagnosed as having learning disabilities. Alternative programs, designed for students who learn independently through the use of print modules do not work for these students, since they require the very reading skills they lack. Without assistance that speaks directly to their needs and capabilities, the future for these students is far from bright.

"For young people, many routes to exclusion still exist in Canadian society. Despite declines in the high school drop-out rate, a full 20 percent of young people fail to graduate. In the past, those with low levels of education could find employment, but those who now fail to complete high school face the very real prospect of being unemployed or finding poor paying jobs and insecure work. They are therefore more likely to live in poverty, without the economic independence considered key to achieving full citizenship. This problem particularly affects Aboriginal youth and those from disadvantaged families, perpetuating inequality across generations."

Caroline Beauvais, Lindsey McKay and Adam Seddon, "A Literature Review on Youth and Citizenship," (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Network Discussion Paper CPRN-02, 2001).

Building an Effective High School Literacy Education Model

More than Just a Classroom

Beginning with the 2001/02 school year, Surrey School District began operating a demonstration classroom to address the multiple challenges of youth who have either dropped out of school or were identified as being at risk of doing so. Built after the model of a “lab school,” a program that brings together research and teaching, the school offers two sessions daily for approximately twenty students each. The class reflects “promising practices” identified by researchers and other schools and literacy programs as being effective in helping youth develop critical literacy skills.

The New School is an active research site with a full-time onsite researcher and two other researchers who develop curriculum materials and work with staff to assess effective approaches to instruction and learning. Curriculum materials will be posted to the Web and available to literacy providers throughout Canada.



New School students during silent reading period

The project and its students face significant challenges. Although the students are nominally enrolled in the tenth grade, their average reading level on entering the program was below grade six. Having been absent from school – in mind, if not in body – for a number of years, most lacked the background knowledge required to understand basic 10th grade subjects. They had few, if any, study skills. And a number of young people demonstrated disruptive behaviour that not only prevented them from learning, but also negatively affected learning for all students in the class.

Focus on Engaged Learning

The educational program builds on the concept of Multiple Intelligences. Each individual has multiple ways of learning and interacting with the world. Traditional education emphasizes learning through listening, reading, and rote memorization. Many students do not learn easily in this manner. They are much stronger in their artistic or physical skills, or perhaps in their ability to understand themselves or others. The demonstration program offers multiple methods for engaging course content, with a strong emphasis on visual content and the completion of projects that bridge or reinforce subject matter.

The program combines group lectures, small group discussions, pair work, and individual tutoring to assist students to understand subject matter and improve their basic skills. It also emphasizes the use of technology, engagement with the arts, and hands-on experience as ways to expand learning experiences. There is a computer connected to the Internet for each student to facilitate inquiry, exploration, and completing task assignments. Students use digital still and video cameras to create images used in projects, and one day each week is spent in an art class that focuses on themes that bridge other course content.

Assisting the Whole Person

Young people face many challenges that inhibit their ability to learn and succeed. Problems related to low-income, social dysfunction, or psychological stress are common. The program employs a full-time counsellor who assists the students and their families to obtain needed social services and cope with emotional stress. Although students have yet to complete the first school year, preliminary results are highly promising. Student attendance is on par with or superior to regular classes and students, on average, have raised their reading scores by over two grades.

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