

November 17, 2006

Success in Early Learning

I mentioned last week that, during the zone meeting with district staff from the Fraser Valley, I heard of success in early learning in some Fraser Valley districts. I know there are districts in the province that have made significant progress on this initiative. Several districts were working with their communities before Early Learning became part of the mandate of the Ministry of Education. I know that School District No. 69 (Qualicum), School District No. 41 (Burnaby), and School District No. 70 (Alberni) have made much progress in this area. I asked my staff to learn more about success in the Fraser Valley and turned to School District 42 (Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows) for its story – an impressive story. What are the keys to success in this district?

School District 42 (Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows) has a number of programs layered to deliver rich opportunities to children not yet of Kindergarten age. A program “School’s Cool” caught my attention. Why – because it is targeted for children who have not been involved in other pre-school programs. The program has been offered in different schools over the past number of years but is generally made available in two or three schools for each year. Qualified Early Childhood Educators work in the programs after additional training in the program content and goals. A consortium of community agencies, including the school district, working under the umbrella of the Early Childhood Education Committee, fund training for the Early Childhood Educators and provide the resources necessary to operate the program. The School District provides space with schools at no charge. Space is provided where possible in schools and Kindergarten rooms where the children will eventually enter school.

What is the impact? Each year these programs provide learning experiences for 4 days per week for 6 to 8 weeks to children who otherwise would enter school without that experience. These children learn through play. They learn how to be part of a group, sit in a circle for a story or game, learn about personal hygiene and how to take care of personal property. They learn social responsibility and sharing and engage in development of language through oral literacy. The Early Childhood Education Committee was clear in the design of this program that this was not a “Junior Kindergarten” but an opportunity for children to become more Kindergarten-ready in an appropriate environment with appropriate activities.

Kindergarten teachers report that these children enter Kindergarten more familiar with their physical surrounding, able to be part of groups and more oriented to books. Parents are welcome to participate, but their participation is not required.

Many have asked, “How do you identify these children in your community?” No problem for SD 42, say staff. Children are identified as siblings of students already in school, through the cooperation of community agencies and, most recently, through Ready, Set, Learn programs offered in the district. As a result, each year over 20 children are developing in this rich environment to provide them a better chance to be ready for school.

But we do not stop there, says SD 42. Schools in Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows make available classroom space for the Family Place program. This year, two schools offer the program every Monday through Friday morning.

Parents and their pre-school children drop in for stories and games in a rich learning environment. Staff is provided for these programs by Community Services and the Family Education and Support Centre. This year, 32 pre-school children and 24 parents are accessing these centres that improve school readiness.

Had enough? SD 42, in cooperation with the community, also makes available Mother Goose Programs and PALS – programs many of you will be familiar with. As this school district has some rural areas, it has even gone as far as renovating a van to provide outreach literacy materials throughout the school district. This, too, was a joint commitment among community partners. In fact this initiative is supported by the School Community Connections grants jointly administered by the British Columbia School Trustees Association (BCSTA) and Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM). These grants arise from a \$10M provincial grant given to the BCSTA and UBCM to promote joint use of facilities.

What are the underlying keys to these active programs supporting young learners?

- Community Development – Community agencies have come together at a common table to share the responsibility for young children throughout the school district. The School District has been a central player in community development for the purpose of meeting the public interest in having children well prepared for life and school.
- Shared Funding and Resourcing – All the community agencies have come to one table with the resources available to them and put their minds collectively to finding the most effective way to utilize those resources for the community's children.

- Provision of Facilities – Arguably, none of these programs could occur without the SD 42's commitment to make space available at no charge. This, of course, has been a critical element in the success of all these programs.

I think if we look at the success of other districts, Qualicum, Burnaby and Alberni, to name a few, we will find at least these three elements to their success. Tell us your story of success with Early Learning.