

December 8, 2006

Making the Ideal – Real

Last week, I had the pleasure of speaking at the BCSSA Fall Conference which was held in Victoria. The conference focused on the theme *Society and Education: The Canada We Want*.

I was asked to share my perspectives on the essence of being Canadian, what it will take to become better citizens of the world, and how education can help shape the Canada that we want.

We like to think of Canada as a multicultural mosaic instead of a melting pot and that we celebrate the richness and distinctiveness of our multicultural diversity. As our society becomes increasingly diverse we need to continue to develop new understandings and explore new ways of learning.

We say we want the same opportunities for everyone, but how well do we as a society ensure equity for all Canadians? For example, 16% of the Canadian population lives below the poverty line. That means 1 in 6 children nation-wide; it's 1 in 4 in BC. Is this acceptable to us?

Do we honour our Aboriginal people for their language and rich cultural heritage? Are we ensuring that our Aboriginal students are achieving at the highest level possible? The achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners is still too wide. Currently BC is the only province that disaggregates data for this group of learners. We are working closely with our Aboriginal communities to keep the focus on better meeting the needs of the students through our Accountability Framework and Enhancement Agreements.

Education is the key to a just and educated society. In BC we have a definition of an educated citizen that came out of the Sullivan Royal Commission in 1988. It is a comprehensive definition that talks about educated citizens being:

- thoughtful, able to learn, think critically, communicate from a broad knowledge base
- creative, flexible, self motivated, possessing a positive self image
- capable of independent decision-making
- skilled and able to contribute to society
- productive, able to gain satisfaction through achievement and to strive for physical well being
- co-operative, principled and respectful of individual differences
- aware of the rights and responsibilities of an individual within the family, the community, Canada and the world.

If the Ideal Canada we want is just, literate, well –educated, safe and caring, attractive to immigration and has a sustainable economy – we, as educators, and as British Columbians, have a major role to play in making our Ideal Canada – Real. Whatever we do, we have to do it within our own context. We have to pay attention to our changing demographics and changing student population. We have to address our health and literacy needs. Our government goals of “making British Columbia the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent” and “leading the way in North America in healthy living and fitness” will help us keep our focus on what we need to do as educators.

We know that we are doing well. We have excellent teachers and great principals and district leaders. Our international results prove this to be true, but we can do better. Our challenge is to increase the overall performance of our students and reduce the variation in achievement among districts, schools and specific groups of students. We can do this by focusing on the kids, their learning and their achievements.

Making the Ideal - Real also requires great leadership at the provincial, district, school and community levels. I'm optimistic that by collectively harnessing our passion, commitment, creative talents and energies – Canada will stand out as a world leader and as an ideal nation for others to aspire to. And British Columbia will stand out as the best of the best!

Think about using this in your next newsletter to parents

Seasonal Literacy Activities

At this busy time of year it can be hard to get your son or daughter to focus on such things as homework and the three R's. But development of their literacy skills does not have to wait until school re-opens in January. You can keep minds and vocabularies growing by:

- Holding a family reading night where every family member gets to hear and/or share their favourite seasonal story or poem. Your school or community librarian can help find age-appropriate seasonal materials so that all (including your teens!) can share and hear their favourites.
- Being creative with seasonal chores; those pesky items with "Some Assembly Required" can be the start of a great problem-solving challenge, with lots of opportunities for reading, listening, and speaking.
- Shopping trips can create great opportunities to alphabetize (lists), strategize (routes), and categorize (foods, gift items).
- Using travel time wisely: books, puzzles, and word games can turn those car trips and airport waits into valuable learning time.

While these incidental learning activities are easy "to build in" and "to build on", the most important learning for your child will be that their learning is worth the investment of your time.

And that, of course, in this season of giving, will be the best gift of all!