

Tale of one school, two ratings

Fraser's FSA-based result counters international view

BY DOUG WARD, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 7, 2009



Maywood elementary principal Susan Montabello watches several of her pupils practise their circus moves. 'It's a gift' to come to her school every day, Montabello says of the facility in the tough Metrotown area.

Photograph by: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

Maywood community school in Burnaby was described a month ago by a group of visiting international educators as a model for urban schools challenged by ethnic diversity and poverty.

This week, Maywood -- an elementary school in the shadow of the Metrotown towers -- was handed a more dubious distinction: a next-to-last position in the Fraser Institute's annual ranking of B.C.'s schools.

Maywood scored 1.1 of 10 in the 2008 province-wide Foundation Skills Assessment tests, down from a 6.1 average over the last five years. Only Fleetwood elementary had a worse rating.

The incongruity between the plaudits from the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement and the dismal showing on the Fraser Institute list isn't lost on Maywood principal Sue Montabello.

"It is ironic and yet, I know and trust the work that happens in this school," Montabello said. "And the parents know and trust what happens in the school."

The key reason behind Maywood's dismal score, Montabello said, is the low participation rate of its pupils.

Only 39 of 57 Grade 4 pupils (68 per cent) and seven of 72 Grade 7 pupils (10 per cent) wrote the FSA tests in February.

Many Maywood pupils were excluded, as permitted by the ministry of education, because they were beginner English as a second language pupils or had severe special needs. (The school's ESL rate is 60 per cent.)

The participation rate was also affected by a B.C. Teachers' Federation leaflet sent to pupils's homes by teachers, explaining the union's concerns about the test, Montabello said.

The Burnaby school board follows ministry guidelines, telling parents their children must take the FSAs unless there is a family illness, emergency or extenuating circumstances.

Most Maywood parents who excluded their children cited the vague category of extenuating circumstances, Montabello said.

"Many parents felt the test would create undue high anxiety and stress."

Montabello said Maywood's FSA scores were much higher in previous years (9.9 in 2005 and 8.2 in 2007) when participation rates were higher.

She said the next-to-last ranking doesn't affect her own view of the school's performance.

"The FSA is just one tiny little piece of assessment that happens at school. It's just one very small snapshot of what children are able to do."

Maywood serves the dense, low-income and largely immigrant community around Metrotown. More than 40 languages are spoken in the school. The student body of 500 has an ESL population of 390.

As a community school, Maywood has become the heart of a neighborhood struggling with social isolation and low-incomes.

"A lot of our families live in poverty, many do not speak English as first language," Montabello said. "Our parents are working very hard, often at two or three jobs to achieve their basic needs."

Maywood is open most evenings for ESL classes. It provides a pre-school and before-and-after-school programs for pupils, outreach programs partly aimed at preventing children from turning to crime. Maywood provides donated food to its students and their parents.

"We do a lot. It really is the hub of the community. Families are here for many types of support, not only learning support but family support."

Montabello is confident that the school is succeeding in teaching basic skills despite the school's

next-to-last FSA score.

"The children are writing, they are reading and many of our ESL children are quite successful in math," she said.

"The kids feel very confident about learning. They are excited about learning and feel successful."

Danielle Vogt, an 11-year-old Grade 6 pupil, said Maywood's "teachers are really nice, which makes it easy to learn."

Vogt said the school does more than teach. "There's ESL here and like everybody is welcome.

"Some people don't have a lot of money and sometimes the office gives them food and stuff. It's really helpful."

Montabello said low FSA scores can undermine morale at some schools, but Maywood's rating doesn't affect her perspective.

"For me it's a gift to be able to come to this school every day," she said.

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