

FEEDING CHILDREN, CHANGING BRAINS

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While our school district has been feeding children in our schools for years, I am still occasionally surprised by the magnitude of the endeavor. Sadly, the number of children who regularly come to school hungry has been steadily growing over the last few years.

Hungry children are distressed children. Research in the field of neuroscience (and common sense) tell us that depriving the body of nutrients has a significant impact on brain development, and consequently one's ability to learn. We should not be surprised that children who come to school chronically hungry demonstrate more inappropriate behaviours, are more inattentive, and are more likely to exhibit negative interactions with peers and their teachers. If you have ever been hungry for an extended period of time you will know what I am talking about.

If there is a silver lining to these challenging circumstances, it is the fact that our community has risen to the challenge by helping to feed the scores of hungry children in our schools. Our School Meals Program provides over 450 student lunches every day. It is augmented by donations from many generous contributors, both individual and corporate. Most notable of our benefactors is (the late) Dennis Carter. Some of you may remember Dennis. He drove around the district in a wheelchair with his dog Muffy and collected pop cans. I was humbled a few years ago, by the fact that he created a \$10,000 endowment fund ("Dennis Carter & Muffy Fund") to augment the Meals Program! Donations come in from multiple places within the community. More recently, the school district was given \$17,000 by Sevenoaks Shopping Centre to feed our kids. Some of you may also know about the district's Breakfast Program, which is a partnership with a number of churches that have 'adopted' several of our schools. It is a simple but effective approach. Volunteers from a given church select a day of the week, purchase and prepare all the breakfast goods, arrive early in the morning at their adopted school, and serve it for children as they arrive at school. Many school PACs also organize a breakfast club to cover the rest of

the days. This has been underway for a number of years, and has helped countless children. It is a great way for our kids to start the day.

The most notable of our community's endeavours has been the Starfish Backpack Program. It is a significant and far reaching partnership which has been organized by the Rotary Club of Abbotsford. The program extends the support for our needy children into their homes by equipping them with a backpack full of food to take home on weekends. It has grown as a consequence of need, but also because of leadership and teamwork in our community. I was thoroughly impressed by an elementary student who recently raised over \$8,000 for the program. Over 260 students are regularly supported through the Starfish program, and it continues to grow, in Abbotsford and in other communities.

One cannot overestimate the significance of these initiatives on the lives of our students. Students who are well fed will engage more consistently in school. They will learn more deeply. Brain research also tells us (and this is not-so commonsense) that the brain is much more plastic than we previously believed. In other words, if you "change the experience, you change the brain." A well-nourished brain thinks more clearly, and facilitates more connections, learns more deeply. One of the interesting offshoots of these initiatives, as you can well imagine, comes from the fact that eating a meal is also a very social endeavor. These meals programs also change the conversations around the tables (and desks). You talk, tell stories and laugh with friends and family over a meal. You learn how to interact, communicate and connect with others.

I am grateful to all our community members along with district staff who have stepped forward to help feed our children. It makes a big difference in their lives. It is a reminder to not underestimate the power of a full stomach, or the commitment of a community to its children.

Written by Kevin Godden, Superintendent of Schools/CEO, Abbotsford School District

ELL CONSORTIUM AIMS TO BRIDGE REFUGEE LANGUAGE GAP

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An incredible feat took place in the final months of last year and early 2016, when 25,000 people – mostly families – made their way from the surrounding countries of Syria to start new lives in Canada.

In BC, some 3,000 refugees from Syria have since arrived, and while many communities have welcomed these newcomers with open arms, school districts are beginning to recognize the very real pressure of an influx of students who speak little to no English.

“Think of someone born in a refugee camp, a child who fled cities being bombed who ended up in a foreign country. The issues arising from some of those very traumatic experiences are starting to emerge in school districts all across the province, and that gets exacerbated when many of these students don’t speak English or have learning difficulties,” said Val Windsor, Vice Chair of the Delta Board of Education.

Windsor is part of the English Language Learners (ELL) Consortium, a group of district trustees and staff from West Vancouver to Abbotsford. The Consortium meets four times a year to share district best practices on the government-mandated ELL program, the province-wide curriculum for students whose primary language (or languages) at home is not English.

The Ministry of Education has developed ELL toolkits and resources to assist in the planning process and determine the instructional support needs of ELL students. But with the unprecedented increase in refugee students needing access to ELL support, advocates like Windsor say the province needs to step up and collaborate more effectively.

“We have been advocating for some time for a designated staff person at the Ministry who has knowledge of ELL students and curriculum to work with us to provide effective learning and support,”

Windsor said. “We’re trying to impress upon the government that we welcome these students, but we need more support. And that support often comes in the form of hiring people who have the capacity to deal with them.”

Windsor is quick to point out the ELL program doesn’t cater exclusively to students from refugee families. The five-year curriculum covers “the gamut of ELL students, everyone from international students paying a premium price to enhance their language skills, to immigrant families who choose to come here, to students of refugee families, some of whom have never been to school before,” Windsor says.

With such a wide set of backgrounds, immigrant and refugee students can be vulnerable because they’re unable to express their frustration or ask for what they need, Windsor said.

“The other thing we’re finding is that many students come with learning difficulties, compounded by a lack of language skills,” she added.

The ELL Consortium recently took a motion to the BCSTA AGM, which recommended the BCSTA encourages the province to hire a dedicated ELL staff person.

“We’d also like the province to release the standards for ELL education. They’ve been sitting on those for three years. Surrey was asked to work on the standards for ELL students, which went to the province, and we’ve been urging that release so we can all benefit,” Windsor said.

In the meantime, the Consortium will continue to share best practices amongst Metro-area school districts, and it welcomes any trustees from elsewhere in the province who are interested in joining the meetings via video conference or call-in. The Consortium also includes representatives from the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University, which provides a vital link for post-secondary best practices on ELL curriculum.

“It’s great to see an exchange of ideas,” Windsor said. “At all levels of education, we’re doing the best we can, and doing some pretty incredible things, all things considered. Kids are well-served, but they could be better-served. They need champions.”

Written by Daniel Palmer, Writer, BC School Trustees Association

MEMBERS OF THE OKANAGAN NATION CELEBRATE NATIONAL ABORIGINAL DAY IN KELOWNA

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First Nations' school-children, along with members of the B.C. Aboriginal Policing Services and the Okanagan Nation Alliance took part in a ceremonial canoe trip on Tuesday, paddling from the Westbank First Nation to City Park, kicking off a day of celebration in downtown Kelowna as part of National Aboriginal Day.

A canoe full of First Nations' members pulled into City Park, rowing backwards onto the beach, to signify a peaceful approach as elder George Pierce held the feather of a Spotted Eagle high in the air as a sign of peace.

Surrounded by school-children who worked paddles, Pierce said it was a special moment.

"I love being with the children and seeing them happy and dancing," he said. "It brings out the child in me. We all gather today. We are all from different nations, but we gather as one."

As Pierce set foot on the beach, he handed the Eagle feather to Randy Jim, echoing how tribes would have approached each other in aboriginal history.

"They came and asked permission to land and we welcome them," said Jim. "We honour this feather above all else. It's a symbol of what it means to be a First Nations' person. It represents honour, freedom, honesty, strength and wisdom."

The symbolic canoe trip opened up an afternoon of celebration on National Aboriginal Day as the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Centre hosted dignitaries including B.C. Premier Christy Clark, Kelowna-Lake Country MLA Norm Letnick, Kelowna Mayor Colin Basran and West Kelowna Mayor Doug Findlater among others.

“Aboriginal Day is not just for us it’s for everyone to come and share our song and dance and culture,” said drummer and dancer Darwin Asapace, who played traditional drums as the canoe approached. “This is our day so we celebrate our lives and what Mother Earth provides everyone. We worship the sun and the water because without that, nothing would survive.”

School children who paddled came from different schools across the Central Okanagan, taking part in the traditional ceremony and learning about their past.

Amara Waldram of the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Centre said having children taking part in the events is an important part of bridging the gap between generations.

“It’s important that they learn how we used to do things,” said Waldram. “It’s good for them to learn the traditions. That’s why the canoe came into the beach backwards, as a show of respect and that we come in peace.”

National Aboriginal Day was created in 1996 by then Governor General of Canada, Roméo LeBlanc. In cooperation with Indigenous organizations, the Government of Canada chose June 21, the summer solstice, for National Aboriginal Day. For generations, many indigenous peoples and communities have celebrated their culture and heritage on or near this day due to the significance of the summer solstice as the longest day of the year.

Written by Kevin Parnell, Kelowna Capital News

9 TIPS FOR PREVENTING THE SUMMER SLIDE

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When the school year ends, teachers are happy to have a break from the drudgery of the school year, but they also want students to avoid the summer slide. The summer slide occurs when children lose some of the academic skills and dispositions that they gained during the school year due to the absence and scarcity of quality learning activities during summer vacation. As the old saying goes, if you don't use it, you lose it.

To succeed academically, children need continuous opportunities to acquire new skills and practice existing ones. This need is especially heightened during the summer months, because children do not have the privilege of being educated by certified teachers. When we think of the summer months, we think of a happy carefree time when children can have fun and unwind. But we forget about the potential learning opportunities that we can engage our children in. To make sure that your students do not experience the summer slide, here are some suggestions that you can give to their parents:

1. Summer Programs

Many public and private schools run summer programs for their students. Take advantage of them. They are usually for only half a day and allow flexibility for summer vacations. Contact your child's school to find out if they offer summer programs.

2. Family Reading Program

Set up a summer reading program with your child in which they choose an agreed upon number of grade-level books to read per month. Make sure that you consult the child's teacher or a librarian for advice. To show solidarity, the entire family should participate.

3. Specialised Summer Camps

Enrol your child in a specialised summer camp. These camps are fun and incorporate hands-on activities into their curriculum as well. Some of the more popular ones include computer, science, and math camps.

4. Pick the Teacher's Brain

Consult your child's current or next teacher, and ask for suggestions for summer workbooks, science activities, essay topics, and interesting summer activities for your child. You may even be able to elicit their help in assessing your child's performance.

5. Summer Enrichment

Summer is also a good time to fill in learning gaps. If you know that your child is weak in a particular subject, you may want to set up an enrichment program. Of course, as always, consult with your child's teacher.

6. Learning While Vacationing

If you are planning on taking a vacation this summer, you can turn it into a social studies activity. Ask your child to research the destination's history, cuisine, popular attractions, and so on. Also, once you reach your vacation destination, you can schedule tours of famous landmarks and locations, which will increase their social studies knowledge.

7. Summer Journaling

Ask your children to write a daily journal of all of the things that they learn each day. Remember, you will need to orchestrate learning activities for your children, because you can't trust that they will be able to do it on their own.

8. Turn Daily Activities into Learning Opportunities

If you're at the grocery store with your kids, challenge them to add up the total cost of your purchase. Driving to grandmother's house? Ask them to find certain colours, shapes, or patterns along the way. For older kids, think of appropriate variations.

9. Learning Locally

Don't forget about the local park, museum, zoo, aquarium, and other interesting places. Your local community is full of learning opportunities that you've probably never thought of.

Preventing summer slide can seem like a daunting task, but thankfully it doesn't take a rocket scientist to pull it off. All parents need is to be organised and have the right plan. With this list, you can provide them with some simple strategies that they can use to prevent summer learning loss, without taking the fun out of summer.

Written by Matthew Lynch for Education Week. Matthew Lynch is an educational consultant and owner of Lynch Consulting Group, LLC. He currently resides in Richmond, Va. He is a former K-12 social studies and special education teacher who now researches policy and education reform.