

Inner-city schools: Canaries for the public school system

by *Sam Fillipoff*

Inner-city schools can be compared to the canaries that were taken into coal mines to signal a deteriorating environment with their demise. If the signal was noticed quickly enough, the miners could exit the shaft before tragedy struck. Inner-city schools are like those canaries because the schools are in danger of collapse as result of neglect, misunderstanding, and underfunding. Will we notice quickly enough to avoid the demise of inner-city schools?

Inner-city schools are special places. They are the places where the most vulnerable children in our society receive their education. There is little doubt that poverty is the most telling indicator of need for the children who attend these schools. In addition to poverty are factors such as crime, hunger, transience, prostitution, homelessness, emotional neglect, single-parent families, physical and sexual abuse, English as a second language, delayed language development, social and cultural barriers, violence in the home and community, refugee/immigrant status, drug and/or alcohol dependency, fetal alcohol or drug syndrome, and other special needs. These factors reach a “critical mass” when compounded and have a debilitating effect on individual children and their school.

Every school has children who live in such unfortunate circumstances. What makes an inner-city school different is that it seeks to provide a quality education in an environment in which a substantial number of children have a critical mass of such factors affecting their lives.

The majority of inner-city school children commence school delayed in language and social development. Inner-city school children possess intelligence comparable to any other child in the public-school system. They need proven programs that develop literacy, numeracy, and social skills. Their need for continuity, consistency, and compassion from teachers and other adults in their lives is crucial. The children particularly need prolonged periods of time to develop trusting relationships with adults in order to learn and develop to their potential.

Equality of educational opportunity is available to every child in our province. What is not available to inner-city school children is equity of educational outcomes. For example, equity of educational outcomes would occur when distribution of reading, writing, and

math outcomes showed that every child was achieving at or above grade level. Public schools differ from other institutions in that they have a mandate to serve all children and to enroll and retain every child within the system. While equality of results and excellence for all are clearly desirable goals, there are many barriers to overcome before equity can be achieved.

Public schools have long provided excellent services to their varied school communities by adapting to meet the needs of students and families. Funding cutbacks to education over the past decade have had a cumulative effect of reducing services in all schools; however, inner-city schools have been disproportionately affected. The canaries in these schools are chirping, signalling that their demise may be imminent.

The following are the demographics for a typical inner-city school in Vancouver:

- over 80% of the students and their families live in poverty; most live in single-parent families with the mother.
- 52% of the children are of Aboriginal ancestry; within this group are numerous nations and tribal groups representing a diversity of cultures and languages but lacking any organized political representation.
- 40% of the children are recent immigrants or refugees to Canada, bringing memories of war, atrocities against their families, and deep emotional wounds that need healing and understanding. English is not their first language.
- 40% of the children have significant special needs; most of the needs are social, emotional, and behavioural. According to Ministry of Education criteria for behavioural needs, there are at least two severe and several moderately severe students in every classroom.
- 30% of the children live in foster care.
- Children with fetal alcohol or narcotic syndrome make up 8% of the population.
- The school has a high absentee and transience rate, with a stable population of only 30%.

Many of the children come to school hungry. Healthcare, proper diet, and physical fitness are often at minimal levels. The result for many children is poor health and lack of sustained energy. The children do not choose poverty.

Poverty is not just having too little money to live comfortably. Poverty creates loss of self-respect, loss of personal freedom, and poor physical and mental health. It makes access to everything and every place in the larger community difficult. It can often be a humiliating experience. Parents attempting to secure services their children need feel frustrated and powerless. Many families with children attending inner-city schools live in crowded, noisy, substandard housing. Some students live in abusive relationships with no means to escape. Alcohol and drug abuse often leads to family violence. Children are exposed to prostitution

and frequently witness events from which they should be shielded. The cumulative effect of all these stresses on children attending inner-city schools cannot be overstated.

Many inner-city children carry their burdens with resiliency and grim determination. There is much to admire in their courage and endurance. Students generally enjoy coming to school. It provides a safe, caring, and respectful environment. It can also provide them with the skills and knowledge that will enable the student to construct a hopeful future.

Inner-city schools may need a special “bubble zone” of procedures that will encourage and allow innovation and alternative practices.

If we agree that society has an obligation to provide equitable educational outcomes for all children, carrying out that obligation is even more imperative for children living in poverty.

A truly democratic society with an effective public school system would provide all children with the teaching and learning experiences that prepare them to become fully participating citizens in their community, their city, and their country.

The child is the same child even if his or her label changes from student, patient, ward, or offender. Our tax dollars would be better spent if they went into prevention rather than intervention. We have an opportunity to ensure a healthy environment for the canaries of the public school system. By ensuring not only the survival but also the enhancement of inner-city schools, we will be able to achieve equity of educational outcomes. In doing so, we will improve learning and working conditions for everyone.

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