Every Kid Counts: A history of Vancouver’s inner-city schools

by Noel Herron

The writing of the history of inner-city schools in Vancouver took much longer than I expected. Working closely with Vancouver Elementary School Teachers’ Association’s Inner-city Teachers’ Sector, chaired by an enthusiastic Sam Fillipoff, the varied materials and controversial issues we dealt with seemed to expand exponentially.

We started with the historic 1974 North East Sector Project (NESP) (an area of Vancouver stretching from Main to Boundary, bordered on the south by Broadway and on the north by Burrard Inlet), through the issuing in 1988 of the principals’ position paper, and on to the more recent efforts to establish more precise inner-city selection criteria, the history endeavours to chart the ups and downs of a reform movement that had a very significant impact on city schools and on many schools across the province.

It took courage and conviction by Sam Fillipoff and his NESP colleagues in the early 1970s to protest, in a widely distributed open letter, the blatant inequities of inner-city schools. These ranged from hungry kids, bleak playgrounds, inadequate resources, and grinding poverty, to disenfranchised parents. Their call for immediate action, while it caused considerable dissension among the ranks of teacher organizations, certainly did not merit the quiet campaign that smeared NESP supporters as radical socialist ideologues.

Given the conservative temper of the times and despite strong BCTF support, the negative response from both the Vancouver School Board and the Department of Education was hardly surprising. Although NESP’s much-needed reforms, many addressing the dramatically changing demographics of city schools, were roundly rejected, they ultimately had a far-reaching impact on such areas as race relations, class size, curriculum relevancy, and parental participation.

However, it was not until the late 1980s that Vancouver’s inner-city principals, by pointing to the unequal opportunities and outcomes (see Equity of education outcomes) between east- and west-side schools, that the Vancouver Inner-city Project came into being. At the same time as inner-city principals were calling for "a new framework" for their schools, the explosive issue of hungry kids burst on the public scene. Accounts by teachers, support staff, and principals of malnourished kids put great pressure on the
intransigent Social Credit government of the day. Outrageous remarks by Premier Bill Van der Zalm and a mean-spirited directive by his Minister of Social Services and Housing, Claude Richmond (currently Speaker of the Legislative Assembly), ordering teachers to name "delinquent" parents, added to the uproar. It would take a change of government two years later to bring relief through the setting up of a provincial food program. A history of inner-city schools in Vancouver would not be complete without an account of the struggles of two schools—Macdonald and Hastings. Although both schools used different approaches to obtain support, they shared a steely determination to improve the lot of kids at risk. Macdonald School, with a 50% First Nations population, adopted high-profile strategies over a two-year period. These involved a walkathon by parent Lana Wright from Prince Rupert to Vancouver and a 40-day camp out on school board grounds to draw attention to their difficulties. Hastings parents, over a six-year period, opted for a more traditional but equally determined approach using board presentations, letter and brief writing, freedom of information requests, and ultimately the setting up of a new organization called Vancouver Inner-city Parents (VICP). Parent groups in both schools felt disenfranchised by an unresponsive board.

Many good news stories emerged from the history of these schools with innovative board, school, and community-based initiatives garnering widespread recognition. Community support in many areas was outstanding, and the untold story of the feeding of hungry kids by the former custodian and his wife at Carleton School for two years is a good example. Other issues we looked at were: the revolving door of inner-city school staffs; the need for specific pre-service and in-service for inner-city teachers and administrators; and the disproportionate and corrosive effect of 10 years of cutbacks on instructional programs. The history concludes with a chapter entitled "Envisioning the Future," based in part on a one-day inner-city forum convened by VESTA on January 31, 2001.

As the writing of this book drew to a close, the 16 months seemed at times like an eternity. However, time was irrelevant as this was a story that needed to be told. I hope that I have told it well.

*Every Kid Counts* is described by Joyce Preston (Child, Youth and Family Advocate, 1995-2001) as "a systemic advocacy case study," which "provides a road map of where we have been and where we need to go." The book will be released at a book launch at the Central Branch of the Vancouver Public Library, 7:30 p.m. on September 24, 2001. It will be sold through the BCTF Lesson Aid Service–LA SR 210, for $17 (including postage.)

**Equity of educational outcomes**

**Goal**

The goal of the Inner-City School Project is to improve equity of educational outcomes for children living in poverty who are confronted with a critical mass of issues that challenge their learning.
Objectives

1. Increase reading, writing, and math scores as measured by authentic assessment instruments, so that every child is at or above grade level.
2. Increase access to material and human resources so that each child’s learning needs are met.
3. Ensure that a safe, nurturing, caring, and respectful learning environment exists for every child.
4. Increase social, emotional, educational, and psychological support for inner-city students and families, particularly for those most at risk.
5. Provide quality recreational, fine arts, sports, cultural, and leadership activities for all inner-city children.

— Vancouver Elementary School Teachers’ Association