

May 11, 2008

## Coping with the realities of life

### Sir Sandford Fleming school is bouncing back with teachers who aren't blinded by privilege

By KEVIN CONNOR, SUN MEDIA

Inner-city Toronto students are being failed by the educational system because too often teachers don't understand the reality of at-risk urban youth, educators say.

That's because, on the whole, teachers come from more privileged households and attend university and they have no experience of life in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

"The world is spinning and moving so quickly it is hard for the curriculum to keep up," said Jean Augustine, a former elementary principal with the Toronto District Catholic School Boards and currently Ontario's Fairness Commissioner.

"The traditional way of teaching, educating is seen not to be the answer for the problems of the inner-city," Augustine told the Sunday Sun.

"Students bring the incidents of their home environment with them," she said. "Teachers need to deal with kids from single parent homes with socioeconomic issues like child poverty."

#### POOR SUFFER

The worst 50 schools in Toronto are in the poorest inner-city areas and Ontario test scoring results show that many of those public and Catholic schools are below the provincial standard and are declining.

"We have to understand that most teachers come from traditional or middle class backgrounds and the experience of these children are very different than their own," Augustine said. "A child could be showing all kinds of behavioural issues and the root of the problem may not be understood."

Ontario's school system needs to teach teachers to face new environments and look at ways of changing the curriculum so they are ready for the complex challenges, she said.

Arnold Witt is a principal at Sir Sandford Fleming Academy near Bathurst St. and Wilson Ave., which had the dubious distinction last year of finishing at the bottom of school test scores in this city as compiled by the Fraser Institute.

Fleming is an inner city school but is in the midst of a dramatic turnaround and test scores there have jumped 50% since last year.

Hiring teachers who are prepared to teach kids coping with poverty, violence and a host of other problems is a key consideration when he's interviewing to fill a teacher position.

Witt said he's very careful that the applicant understands the students have a lot of baggage.

"Most live in a household with an average income of \$15,000. It's not an easy life to go home to and teachers need to acknowledge where they come from," he said. "It's a tough gig."

Sir Sandford Fleming has implemented new methods that Witt suggests should be adopted by others, where the school works on its strengths before its problems.

"We look at the good students, they are the leaders, and we congratulated them for their ability and put them out there to lead other students in sports and arts," Witt said, adding his staff happily gets involved.



Sir Sandford Fleming students enjoy a nice day outside the school. Andrew Jackson (arms outstretched) stands in front of laughing vice principal Reiko Fuentes. (Stan Behal/Sun Media)

"Now students aren't doing horrible things. All the inappropriate activities -- after school fights, drug deals -- they don't do that, they work out, dance, go to football or do art.

"Once the ball gets rolling it's amazing. The kids are proud to be a part of the school, which is so important for a school like this."

Annie Kidder with People for Education says the province needs to look at innovative programs like those at Witt's school and to make sure teachers are trained to deal with at-risk students' needs.

"We need to prepare teachers for the reality of the urban worlds and who is in them and all the different kinds of communities," Kidder said.

"Teachers are suddenly put in a situation far from their own reality and we know many of their students don't speak English," she said. "All teachers should have some ESL training."

Ontario NDP leader Howard Hampton rejects the idea that teachers don't understand the communities where they work.

"Half of the teachers at my son's school grew up in the Toronto neighbourhood where they went to school and now teach," said Hampton, who started his teaching career in 1975 in a downtown school where half the students were new Canadians and needed English Second Language courses.

He says back then students were thriving because every school had a dedicated music and French teacher, a male and female gym instructor, a guidance counsellor, special education teachers and a home economic and industrial arts teacher.

"My son is in Grade 4 at a school half a block from the Legislature and those resources aren't there," Hampton said.

"My wife volunteers at the school and she carries a major share of the special education. Half the students need ESL, but it is hit and miss," he said.

"The resources just aren't there any more," Hampton added.

"There is no guidance counsellor to help out kids having trouble and meet with their parents -- who for economic reasons are parents who are barely able to be parents."

Jim Strachan, the program co-ordinator for the Beginning Teachers' Program at the Toronto District School Board says he is quite proud of the work his board started two years ago to help new teachers address the performance problems of at-risk inner-city students.

"We have programs to mentor new teachers, who work with experienced teachers who know the schools and the kids best. The new programs will have effects in the long run and the hope is it will bring up the standards," Strachan said.

Some of the programs include hiring retired teachers to mentor the new teacher in their class to teach inclusion and to meet the diverse learning needs in the class.

"We also have extensive online support where new teachers can ask questions on what to do to other teachers," Strachan said.

Principal Michael Furguson, at Eastern Commerce Collegiate Institute in Danforth East, says he sees the recent teacher college graduates that apply to his school, and adds he thinks they are well trained.

"It's not my perception they don't understand urban issues. I think they are well versed but there has to be elements (at the College) to deal with urban issues. Things take time to implement," Furguson said.

Although there are programs for teachers to help deal with academics and violence in the inner city, only about 120 of the 1,200 new teachers each year take the voluntary courses, said Jeff Kugler, with the Ontario Institute for Studies at the University of Toronto.

Training for secondary schools started last September and it has been in effect for the past two years for elementary school teachers.

"We need to teach in a way to engage the kids based on their own experiences and make it more culturally relevant. The kids will connect to the school and that will raise academic achievement," Kugler said.

#### LESS VIOLENCE

"Programs have shown that when kids are connected to schools there are fewer problems and less violence."

However, Lois Brown with the Ontario College of Teachers says her organization offers teachers extra training on topics such as urban issues and says she doesn't believe there is a problem with teachers being out-of-touch with those poor inner city communities.

"That suggests that teachers are a very homogeneous group and that's not true. We have 215,000 teachers so I don't think you can paint them as a homogenous group," Brown said.

"We license people from outside Canada from different cultures, which we think is important."

One course that a teacher can sign-up for is the Inclusive Classroom, "where no matter how diverse a classroom is a teacher can learn strategies so everyone's needs are addressed," Brown said.

"We respond to what people are seeing among teachers."