

School immersion project connects the generations

By JOAN DELANEY
Epoch Times Staff

VICTORIA—“Back to school” means something completely different for students who participate in the Meadows School Project, an intergenerational immersion initiative.

For seven years at Kidston Elementary in Vernon, British Columbia, kids aged 9 to 14 moved into a makeshift classroom at a chapel in nearby Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community.

There, in addition to their regular classes, for eight weeks during the school year the students interacted with the seniors, joining in games, going for walks, painting nails, running errands, massaging hands—all the while learning and forging relationships.

The kids also had required hours of community service in the residence, which involves chores such as setting the dining room tables and replenishing bird feeders, and one-on-one sessions provide an opportunity for both generations to “buddy up.”

“Kids and seniors have so much in common—it just blew me away,” says Sharon MacKenzie, the Kidston teacher who started the project in 2000.

While Kidston discontinued the project last year, the new Meadows School Project will start at Godson Elementary at Mennoplace in Abbotsford in September.

Unhappy with the impact of occasional visits to care homes with her students—“it just seemed to me that everybody was on their best behavior or

else really nervous”—MacKenzie hit on the idea for the project after her neighbours bought Coldstream Meadows.

With her neighbours in agreement, MacKenzie set about getting the school administrator, the parents, and the kids onside. Six months later, everything was in place.

“I went there thinking that I wanted to build respect for the seniors of the children, and the children of the seniors, and break down the stereotypes—that was sort of my first goal,” she says.

“But what happened was, we hadn’t even made it through our full time there when I began to realize that I had just started a ball rolling that was unbelievable.”

Everybody blossomed as socialization and learning opportunities abounded, says MacKenzie. The seniors’ attitudes and emotional health improved, and the students learned tolerance and empathy. The students also developed a sense of responsibility through caring for the seniors.

“What I saw was magic, and I’m not the only one who is affected that way. The parents, the staff—there’s hardly a person involved in that project in one way or another who doesn’t become very emotional over the whole thing.”

The Meadows School Project has garnered acclaim across the country. It has been chronicled in the documentary “Whose Grandma Are You,” been fea-



STORY TIME: A student listens attentively to a senior at Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community. MEADOWS SCHOOL PROJECT



BLOWING BUBBLES: A student demonstrates how to make big bubbles. MEADOWS SCHOOL PROJECT

tured by the CBC, and showcased in the B.C. government’s report on active aging.

MacKenzie’s approach to learning encompasses a number

of other aspects, many of which include getting out of the classroom and into the community.

“I do a lot of community-based work with my kids in school. I

believe in that.”

This year, MacKenzie formed the i2i Intergenerational Society and started the Meadows School Intergenerational Literacy Project. She just finished writing a book on intergenerational learning.

Also this year, she developed a toolkit to help educators start their own programs, and has been travelling the country promoting intergenerational learning, talking to government officials, teachers of all stripes, community groups, healthcare workers, and religious institutions.

“I’ve just been a Fuller Brush salesman of intergenerational awareness,” she jokes.

MacKenzie’s work has been nominated for the Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prizes, an award for outstanding achievement in the fields of the arts, the humanities or the social sciences.

She was the 2009 winner of

the B.C. Premier’s Award for Teaching Excellence. This has helped boost things along, she says.

“One of the groups that’s been the hardest to convince has been the educators themselves, and when I received the Premier’s Award—that was a real stamp of approval, from both the Ministry of Education and the Provincial Government, towards this kind of learning—that it is valid. I was very thankful for that.”

MacKenzie says come September, she’s going to need help with the “several project starts” being initiated across the country.

“I have a kind of plan of attack, it has seven aspects to it, and I’m looking to find more help. So I’m really going to be looking at the retired teachers and retired care workers and anyone who is interested and able-bodied who could assist us in getting the word out there and supporting this initiative.”

Ottawa resists pressing U.S. on Khadr release

OTTAWA (Reuters)—The government will try to appeal court decisions that ordered it to press the Obama administration to release Canadian Guantanamo inmate Omar Khadr, spokeswoman Catherine Loubier has said.

“Our position regarding Mr. Khadr remains unchanged. In fact, it is the same policy held by two previous governments,” she said in a statement.

“Omar Khadr has been accused of serious crimes (including murder, attempted murder, conspiracy, material support for terrorism and spying, all in violation of the laws of war).”

The Federal Court of Canada told the Conservative government in April it had to press for Khadr’s release from the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The Fed-

eral Court of Appeal upheld that decision on August 14.

Ottawa has now decided to ask the Supreme Court of Canada for permission to make one last appeal.

The United States accuses Khadr of throwing a grenade that killed a U.S. soldier and wounding another during a firefight in 2002 at an al Qaeda compound in Afghanistan.

He was 15 at the time, and seriously wounded in the fight. He is now a burly, bearded 22-year-old, the only Westerner left in the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Loubier said President Barack Obama had not communicated any decision to Canada regarding Khadr.

“As you know, the Obama administration has recently taken decisions to proceed with the closure of Guantanamo, halt the judiciary

process and also to evaluate each of the cases,” Loubier said.

“It is in our interest to wait for the outcome of these decisions just put forward by President Obama. The government of Canada has taken its responsibilities with regards to Mr. Khadr, and we will also take our responsibilities when the U.S. government shares its decision on this case.”

The three opposition parties have, like the Federal Court, demanded that Prime Minister Stephen Harper actively seek Khadr’s return, emphasizing that Khadr was only a teenager when he was apprehended.

The Supreme Court can take weeks or months to decide whether to hear a case. For now, the government has asked for a stay of this month’s decision by the Federal Court of Appeal.

NDP not backing Conservatives

OTTAWA (Reuters)—Prime Minister Stephen Harper failed on Tuesday to win support for his minority government from the New Democratic Party as political leaders mull whether to force a new federal election.

In what was always a long shot, the Conservative prime minister met with the NDP leader to discuss ways to avoid what would be Canada’s second election in 13 months. But NDP leader Jack Layton offered the government no support.

“As I’ve said before, the NDP would be the least likely of the political parties to support the Conservatives in office, because we have very fundamental differences with the direction that they’re taking, and as of today’s meeting I can’t say that I feel any optimism that they’re going to change direction,” Layton told reporters after meeting Harper.

An election call could come as early as late September or early October if the main opposition Liberal Party decides to propose a motion of non-confidence. The Conservatives need

support from at least one other party to stay in power.

Most recent polls give neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives a clear chance winning a new election, although a survey issued on Monday put the Conservatives 11 points ahead.

The Conservatives, who won a strengthened minority in an election last October, argue that Canada’s economic recovery is too fragile to risk another election now.

“We’re hearing the Canadian public telling us this is a very dangerous time to have an election,” Harper spokesman Dimitri Soudas said before the meeting with Layton.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, told the Montreal newspaper Le Devoir in an interview published on Monday that an election would not create instability.

“We could have an election without endangering anything at all. You could even say it would be good for the country, but that’s another story,” Ignatieff said.

He said he had made no decision yet on whether the Liberals could

keep working with the Conservatives.

The Liberal caucus meets in Sudbury, Ontario, next week, with support for the government bound to top the agenda.

Layton has asked for more accessible employment insurance, consumer credit card protection, help for seniors and a more effective infrastructure program, and said he would need to see movement there before he could support the government. He said he had seen no movement on these.

He refused to pledge to vote against the government, saying he preferred to continue to apply pressure, but told reporters to look at the record of how his party had opposed the Conservatives on key votes.


The Bloc Quebecois has tended to vote against the government, but spokeswoman Karine Sauve said its decision on a non-confidence vote would depend on what the Liberals did.

“We’ll see the Liberal motion and judge whether it’s in Quebec’s interests,” she said.

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