

The Meadows School Project

Community/Region: Vernon/Coldstream BC

- Population is approximately 44,000 people

Overview of Project

The Meadows School Project at Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community in Coldstream, B.C., started in 2001, and is an intergenerational bridging initiative by Vernon School District, Kidston Elementary School. The project focuses on developing a mutual respect between sixty seniors and thirty youth from 10 to 14 years. Students move into the assisted living community for two full months of immersion, with regular visitations for the balance of the year. They participate in Ministry mandated curriculum that is uniquely adapted, and includes activities with a strong focus on personal and social responsibility. Participation by the residents is voluntary, with choice of days, times, and opting out anytime. Students and seniors meld their day through sharing fitness, special events, celebrations, crafts, sing-a-longs, teatime, lunch, and the daily one or two 60 minute visitations by one or two children. At all levels, participation by both seniors and children has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic with over 95% of the seniors at the residence participating

The program is divided into three focus areas: intergenerational partnerships, core government mandated curriculum and public service.

The project goals include:

- Breaking down of stereotypical thinking of both generations
- Improving mental, physical, and social health of all parties, including staff and families
- Building understanding of the “modern culture” through students sharing with seniors
- Giving opportunities for young people to develop interest in pursuing careers that involve working with seniors
- Giving students authentic opportunities to develop personal and social responsibility through daily involvement with the seniors, and public service at the seniors’ residence
- Sharing of knowledge by seniors to students

Rationale for Project

The project is a response to a growing alienation which seems to be developing between generations in our society. It appears that various age groups are growing farther apart, physically, socially, and emotionally; particularly the young and the aged. This physical and social alienation is limiting the change for youth to experience caring for elders and contemplating that as a career choice. The project grew out of previous instructional units where seniors and youth were “buddied” or interacted for short periods of time (weekly

visits, special events). Although this did allow for one group to be immersed within the other, it did not provide enough time develop a “comfort zone” nor allow the groups to truly come to know each other. As a result of these concerns, the Meadows School Project was launched.

Project Delivery

The project takes place at the seniors’ residence for five weeks in the fall semester and three weeks in the spring semester (8:30a.m-2:30 p.m. daily), with bi-weekly cross-over visits for the balance of the school year. The Retirement Community is about ten minutes away and the students travel by school or city bus to get there.

Resource Requirements

The lead organization for the project is Kidston Elementary School. Project partners include:

- Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community
- Kidston Elementary School, School District #22

There are lessons and training sessions prior to the students’ arrival, for seniors, and for staff at the Retirement Community. The students are also trained in how to talk with and make connections to the residents. The project is led by a local elementary school teacher who develops and delivers the curriculum.

Funding (Sources, Costs and In-Kind Support)

- Direct costs are approximately \$200/year for supplies such as craft materials, special foods, cards and curriculum materials
- In-kind support includes the use of the facility and the bus, volunteer hours from parents, older students and guest speakers, and donations of materials and refreshments.

The residence and the school district share the direct cost of events. There are no major costs outside of the regular operation of the residence or the school. The minimal costs that do arise are funded by donations and fundraising efforts.

There is one paid activity director at the residence who works with the teacher to plan the events for the year. The rest of the staff at the residence do not have a specific role within the project, however they tend to look out for the students and they come to know each other by name. There are no added costs to students or residents.

Evaluation

There has been no formal evaluation to date due to lack of resources. There is an application pending with the University of Victoria, Centre for the Study of Aging, to

conduct a formal evaluation of the project. For the past six years, participants have been polled regarding attitudes towards each other and the activities, and this serves as an informal assessment of the project. Numerous testimonials and comments from seniors, students, families, the owner and staff at the residence, teachers, school board and administration, and visitors have given tremendous support to the project and its intent. Even the residents who do not participate directly in the program enjoy watching and having the students around.

Students are highly involved in self-assessment regarding their interaction with the seniors and the project goals, and all participants are given the opportunity to reflect in writing or orally on the subjective assessment of their involvement in the project on an on-going and summative basis. Records of interest and other positive outcomes of the students, residents and staff are kept.

There are several contributing factors to the success of the project:

- There is time (i.e. things are not rushed and each group can adapt to the other's timeframe on a daily and hourly basis)
- Having the children on-site makes them more like family and less like visitors
- Both seniors and youth create a rhythm together where regular patterns begin to arise, and this leads to trust, respect and caring

There is a noticeable improvement in attitudes, level of physical activity, and general demeanors of the senior participants. The project is also finding that the partnering with the seniors leads some youth to consider careers in health care, particularly in the field of geriatrics.

Sustainability

These are some of the ways that the project could be strengthened:

- Develop a procedures manual including the rationale for the intergenerational concept, administrative information, sample meeting agendas, lessons for teachers, suggestions and starting points for teachers and residences
- Create a formal curriculum package with materials (text booklets, photo charts, artifacts, novels, etc.)
- Recruit teachers and seniors' residences through either a written or audio visual format with a follow-up personal presentation
- There is a need for a broad based informational, recruiting and training plan if the project is to move ahead throughout the country

Some of the conditions necessary to ensure success include:

- A ministry, agency or other credible champion to commit long-term to promotion and support of the initiative.

- Sufficient funding for on-going project development (e.g. funding to formally publish curriculum materials, development of supportive software to assist in scheduling participants as this is currently done by paper and pen. One example of this type of project development is Mary Gordon's 'Roots of Empathy' program binders.)
- Communication, collaboration and information-sharing between participating projects to ensure utilization of best practices
- Ensuring that materials and curriculum stay up-to-date and current in a changing society (i.e. the aging population)
- Continued involvement from past students, residents, families and staff to gain input for new ideas and directions for the expansion of the project

There is currently a pilot project being developed that is affiliated with the Meadows School Project in New Westminster. A seniors' community recreation centre is planning to pair with a nearby high school through a course which may be potentially accredited. This is one step towards the growth of a philosophy of teaching that has the potential to break down age barriers and help both youth and older adults realize what the other has to offer.

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