

Seeds of Promise: Grandview/?Uuqinak'uuh* School in Vancouver

Visitors to Vancouver tend to avoid the city's east end. Over the last few decades, the area has become synonymous with crime, poverty and despair. In one corner of the district, however, a determined group of educators, children, parents and volunteers has created a garden oasis for play and learning in what was recently a gathering place for people in the drug and sex trades. The children of Grandview/?Uuqinak'uuh Elementary School now have access to a playground complete with food, flower and butterfly gardens, stands of maple trees and a Coast Salish longhouse.

The gardens and longhouse are one piece of a larger effort to create a rich living and learning environment for the children at Grandview/?Uuqinak'uuh. In the last few years, student literacy rates in Grade 1 have climbed from 10 percent to 60 percent, and a neglected computer lab has been brought up to Internet-ready standards. School-planned events have injected opportunities for fun and community building. All of these changes have resulted in a sharp decline in negative student behaviours and an increased sense of pride and ownership.

Inner City Project teacher Sam Fillipoff and school principal Jock McLauchlan were key figures in the school's ambitious revitalization efforts which began in 1996. Both men have now moved on from Grandview/?Uuqinak'uuh, and they are concerned that the school and others like it continue to develop programs which will lift residents out of poverty and into a brighter future. They express the view that without serious commitment by governments and Canadians in general, children in our poorer neighbourhoods will never achieve the academic outcomes necessary to improve their lives.

School history

During the 1970s, a municipal decision to move the Native Friendship Centre to a building near Grandview/?Uuqinak'uuh was the first in a series of planning decisions which had the effect of creating an urban reservation for the city's growing Native population. Over the next decade, a dozen Urban Native Housing complexes were built to meet the demand for low-income housing. Poorly constructed, these buildings began to deteriorate rapidly.

**?Uuqinak'uuh (pronounced 'oo-keen-a-coo') is the phonetic English spelling of the school's name in Nuu-Chul-Nulth.*

Busy roadways run along three sides of the Grandview/ʔUuqinak'uuḥ schoolyard. The city's light rail transit line runs along the southern property edge and a transit station makes it easy for drug buyers to get in and out of the neighbourhood quickly. Plans are on the municipal table to situate another transit station at the property's west end. Until 1997, the gravel-covered schoolyard at the property's southern end was a bleak spot in a bleak industrial landscape.

"This is an area of the city which has little political clout," says Inner City Project teacher Sam Phillipoff. "Our members can't organize the type of opposition wealthier neighbourhoods can, so the 'not in my backyard' projects end up here."

The school's student profile is similar to the other ten Vancouver schools that have been designated 'inner city.' About half of the 190 students are Aboriginal Canadians, a third are recent immigrants or refugees and the remaining 20 percent are non-Aboriginal Canadians. Roughly 40 percent have special social and behavioural needs, 80 percent are English as a Second Language students, 70 percent live in poverty and 70 percent live in single-parent families, headed usually by a mother or grandmother.

In spite of its challenges, Grandview/ʔUuqinak'uuḥ has built a reputation as a school which welcomes the contributions of its families. A number of community projects have been undertaken over the years to celebrate both Native and multicultural contributions to the life of the school.

The impetus for change

Every school year brings its challenges, but one in particular had a profound impact on students, staff and programs. In 1996, an ugly family quarrel erupted and school officials

became involved. Teachers and administrators did their best to lend the family support, but the individual involved came to believe that they were siding with his girlfriend and he threatened to blow up the building. Throughout that difficult year, the school's activities were restricted to the 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. instructional day. The daily police presence and continuing media interest were constant reminders of the threat. At the end of the year, despite the individual's arrest and incarceration, 60 percent of the school staff and 20 percent of the students transferred out.

"The situation brought all of the school's problems to a crisis level," says Sam Phillipoff. "Staff and family turnover rates had been an issue for a number of years. High turnover creates a climate of instability, both in terms of learning and in the development of healthy relationships."

Sam joined the staff in 1996. Jock McLauchlan was assigned as the school's vice-principal in 1996 and was promoted to principal in 1997. Both men had had extensive experience with inner-city schools, but they never had worked together. Sam was assigned the task of encouraging community growth and involvement and, from the start, the two men's approaches and philosophies meshed well. "Being able to trust one another made all the difference," says Sam. "Jock's capable handling of all of the administrative duties created an atmosphere of calm efficiency, and that made my job easier."

Planning the work and working the plan

After the 1996 incident, teachers and administrators began planning for a better future for the school and its community. They reviewed the work they had begun in 1995 on a national research project entitled *Student Engagement in Learning and School Life*.¹ The critical understanding now shared by staff was that the com-

munity as a whole must be dynamically involved in bettering itself. Turning that understanding into a practical reality was made easier by the BC Ministry of Education's newly updated school accreditation process.² Ultimately, three goals assumed top priority: improving literacy and numeracy, developing an integrated computer assisted program, and rebuilding community by involving parents and interested Vancouver residents within and outside of the neighbourhood.

When Jock McLauchlan took over as principal, there were as many as 10 serious incidents involving students each day. The first step in breaking this pattern of misbehaviour was to take all 90 of the school's Grades 4 to 7 students to an outdoor education facility where they could experience nature, take part in cooperative learning activities and get to know one another in a relaxed setting. Performing arts groups, always popular, continued to visit the school, tickets for sporting events were donated so students could see live games, and school pride and a cooperative spirit gradually took hold.



Volunteers Illène Pevec and Tracy Penner.

Experience had taught school staff that attendance at parent functions increased when food was offered, so more attention was focussed on organizing pow-wows, multicultural pot-lucks, talent nights and potlatches – events that combined food, fun and community. Furniture for the foyer, used clothing exchanges, toy and book donations, and food hamper programs were school responses to demonstrated need, and residents appreciated the efforts.

Says Sam: “While we were improving the atmosphere inside the school, we were also looking for ways to develop a caring community. We wanted to build up our families and include them in our efforts. We needed an entry point for involvement. People have had enough of having programs being handed to them; they need opportunities to make things happen for themselves.”

Asking for input

Jock and Sam asked the wider Vancouver community to consider its role in improving the life of the school's catchment area. Between 1997 and 2000, they found many who were willing to help purchase the literacy materials and computer hardware and services the school needed. In all, they raised more than \$700,000 in cash and in-kind contributions.

Within the Grandview/?Uuqinak' uuh community, another entry point for involvement presented itself when two dedicated volunteers saw the potential in developing green spaces and gardens on the school's bare yard. In late 1998, Illène Pevec had visited the school during a presentation done by a local arts outreach group which she was then managing. The contrast between Grandview/?Uuqinak' uuh and a wealthier school the group had visited the previous day convinced Illène that her future as an educator lay with inner-city schools. At the time, she was

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taking a Master's degree in Education at the University of British Columbia, and as part of an action research project, she decided that a gardening project at Grandview might be a way to help develop the community's interest in education.

Illène soon realized that the project could grow much larger than the few garden plots she had envisioned, so she sent an e-mail to UBC's landscape architecture department looking for another student who would be willing to volunteer his or her design talents. Tracy Penner was finishing a four-year program in landscape architecture at UBC, and she had an avid interest in integrating sustainable ecologies within an urban setting. The two women met for coffee and, within half an hour, they were committed to the project.

In early 1999, Illène and Tracy conducted the first in a year-long series of planning meetings with school staff, students and community residents. Early on, the idea of being able to

grow their own produce caught many residents' imaginations. "We hadn't really considered the community gardens idea when we originally began talking about garden plots," says Tracy. "In fact, this part of the plan has been vital to drawing the community together and making it a safer place to live. The summer months when school staff were away used to be the time when the grounds became littered with needles and condoms. Now we have neighbours watering the gardens and doing the little tasks that keep a garden healthy, and the atmosphere has completely changed."

Once the gardens were planted in the summer and fall of 2000, Illène and Big Sisters volunteer and microbiologist, Cristina Tognon, helped residents to found a community garden association which they now have operated without outside assistance for more than a year. Jock and Sam raised funds to keep Illène on staff on a part-time basis to continue implementing community development projects.



Elders celebrate the dedication of the Coast Salish longhouse.



Students planted everything but the large trees.

The Coast Salish longhouse, designed by local architect Bruce Carscadden, provides a focal point for the schoolyard. Illène carpoled to the university with Bruce's wife who shared Illène's excitement so enthusiastically that Bruce volunteered to design the longhouse. It is a structure which now serves as an outdoor classroom and celebration space capable of sheltering 60 people. The building recognizes Coast Salish architectural traditions and the First Nations community members have adopted it as their own. They were active in choosing the site and blessed the gardens as a whole and the building site before construction. A City of Vancouver Arts Grant allowed local Elder Ramona Gus to design two totem poles which were painted by children, staff and parents and later raised during a potlatch celebration to mark the event.

Initial planning for the outdoor work began in early 1999, but it took until December of that year for everything to be approved by city and school board officials. "Jock and Sam are a persistent, creative pair of people," says Tracy.

"Whenever we would hit a bureaucratic roadblock that said this project couldn't be done, they would ask 'What next?' and find another way around whatever was in the way." Illène and Tracy were not idle during this process. They spent some of their time raising \$160,000 in grant money for the project.

Now that the building phase is over, however, the key to longevity will lie in securing ongoing funding, and in finding people to pick up the leadership torch. Says Sam: "Tracy and Illène both have finished their degrees. They have given us a lot of their time and talent, and it's time for them to move into their careers and move on with their lives. Phase one is complete; now the less attractive, but important maintenance work begins."

Tracy still drops in to lend a hand whenever a new planting idea is proposed. Her planning work continues to provide a structure for alterations and improvements. Since 2000, these have included the April 2001 dedication of the

approximately one acre ‘Spirit of Nature’ community schoolyard that features an ethnobotanical garden which grows native species used in traditional foods, medicines and materials; a raised mound for visual interest; a jogging path; wild bird and butterfly habitats; school vegetable gardens; and the establishment of a miniature maple forest with nine tree varieties. Other than the large trees which were put in by school board staff, the children, Illène and Tracy planted every single flower, shrub and plant.

Like Sam, Tracy is concerned with the long-term viability of all these projects. She says: “The school board’s cuts to maintenance budgets is a real cause for concern. As a society, we’ve moved so far from our agrarian past that for many children, the only opportunity to learn about gardening may take place on a schoolyard. Perhaps one answer is to encourage the development of long-term funding policies which recognize the outdoors as being as important a learning space as the classroom.”

Structural changes

Over his 30 years in education, Sam has seen the Vancouver School Board’s interest in inner-city education wax and wane. Funding for projects was frozen at 1992 levels, a time when the board underwent restructuring and eliminated the superintendent position responsible for inner-city education. That task was assigned as a rotating position.

“The inner-city schools portfolio is not the priority it was in the 1980s,” says Sam. “It’s not that the board isn’t interested, it’s a matter of the structure being less responsive and proactive. Funding is fixed, but Vancouver’s low-income population is rising. Without central budgeting, we cannot maintain the gains we have made.”

Vancouver schools have the option of applying for funds from the provincial lottery corporation, up to a maximum of \$40,000 per year. Applications usually are handled by parents who serve on their children’s school councils. “The application process assumed a familiarity with money and formulas which was well beyond the life experiences of our parents,” reflects Sam. “Our application took two years while others required six months. There is little understanding of inner-city culture by the government bureaucrats.”

Despite the difficulties, Sam and Jock remain optimistic that their efforts will be taken up by administrators, teachers and community members. Jock has transferred to another Vancouver school; he plans to retire in the next five years. Sam retired in June 2001. He and a retired principal recently have published a history of Vancouver’s inner-city schools – a project they hope will provide a corporate memory for those who follow.³

In the meantime, staff at Grandview/?Uuqinak’uuh continue to find practical solutions to the problems their children face every day. They use Ministry of Education funds to run breakfast and lunch programs so children will not go hungry. After-school programming and summer day care are offered free of charge so that children have something else to do instead of hanging around on street corners. Anti-bullying and other special programs delivered by caring staff members are helping children develop better social and problem-solving skills.

The school’s parent advisory committee and the school’s on-site parenting and day care centres, in conjunction with The Variety Learning Centre – a nonprofit society that features the work of Israeli educator Dr. Reuven Feuerstein – worked to install a double portable

which now houses a Family Literacy and Parenting Centre. Illène Pevec's involvement at the centre includes working on a community health project for single-parent mothers and computer training programs.

Four years ago, a demoralized community was trying to recover from a bomb scare and deal with a large staff turnover. In the spring of 2001, residents saw the first shoots of the daffodils and tulips, marvelled at the healthy buds on the trees and understood that hope can emerge in the most unlikely places. Problems continue to emerge, too, as evidenced by the city's plans to locate a second light transit line and station at the school's southern boundary.

Equity of outcome

The literacy, technology and community-building goals set by school staff in 1997 are well

on their way to being achieved. Jock and Sam do not see the private donations which made these successes possible as a replacement for adequate public investment. "Sustainability from private sources is always a problem," says Jock. "One needs to spread the net wider to continue to obtain the necessary funding."

Raising extra money for learning materials and programs has recently become a matter of necessity across the country as provincial governments seek ways to reduce the educational tax burden. At Grandview/?Uukinaq'uuh, those extra funds can make a critical difference in a child's life. Says Sam Phillipoff: "The money we raised provided our students with access to the educational, social, recreational and cultural services that parents with money provide for their children as a matter of course. They recognize the benefits such activities reap in their children's development, so they invest in them. Inner-city children have no opportunity to engage in these



Grandview/?Uuqinak'uuh community gardens bring in a satisfying harvest.

activities unless schools like ours are given the necessary financial and administrative support to provide them.”

“Canadians have traditionally supported publicly funded education in order to provide equality of access. We know from standardized test scores that inner-city students do not achieve an equity of outcome. A commitment from school boards and federal and provincial governments to seriously address the needs of inner-city children is required if they are to develop a sense of pride, a belief in the possibility of their academic success and a hope for their future integration into Canadian society as productive, enabled citizens.”

Jock, Sam, Illène, Tracy and the staff at Grandview/?Uuqinak’uuh remain committed advocates for better conditions for children and their families. What remains to be seen, in Sam’s view, is whether Canadians are willing to understand and address the issues of poverty.

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Endnotes

1. *Student Engagement in Learning and School Life: National Project Report* was conducted from the Office of Research on Educational Policy at McGill University and was published in 1998.
2. The BC Ministry of Education’s school accreditation process originated in the 1940s. It now requires all publicly funded schools to undergo a six-year cycle of planning and review in order to ensure the continued development and achievement of school improvement goals.
3. *Every Kid Counts* is available for purchase through the BC Teachers Federation website (www.bctf.bc.ca).

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