

Overschooled, Undereducated Experts say school system is not designed with children's interest in mind

By Angela Ferguson
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District 14 will take a giant step this September by implementing a new method of educating students which will alter the role of teachers, parents and the community.

Community members, concerned parents and District 14 officials met in Woodstock on Thursday to discuss why today's society may be "overschooled and undereducated." With the support of New Brunswick's Department of Education, Superintendent Lisa Gallagher said District 14 will act as a guinea pig for the 21st Century Learning Initiative, and the goal is to develop a strategy to help make a difference in students' lives.

"We recognize there are kids in the system whose needs we are not meeting," the superintendent explained. "Teachers need to go from a sage on the stage to a guide on the side."

Gallagher said if educational leaders and community officials help change how students are being taught it may minimize the rise in depression and violence.

Gallagher pointed out that families have more money and more personal possessions than ever before, but "kids need our time." Teens are "disconnected" from parents and society, she added, and the community can play a valuable role in changing the way students learn and think.

World-renowned educator John Abbott, and his Canadian counterpart Heather MacTaggart, shared the initiative's concept during their week-long stay in Carleton County.

During a three-hour session on Thursday, April 26, Abbott – a former teacher, who became one of the youngest headmasters in Britain – presented scientific fact and historical information explaining why education needs to be applied in a manner which follows the "grain of the brain." As he learned about neurobiology, sociology and anthropology, Abbot said, he came to the realization the school system is out of sync with the way kids learn, grow and develop.

"Knowing what we know now about how children learn and the world around us, we no longer have the moral authority to carry on doing what we are doing," said Abbott, a father of three.

During the interactive session, Abbott asked everyone to share their best learning experience. Through the exercise he proved people learn at school, home and in the community. He calls this the three-legged stool – home represents emotions, community represents inspiration and school represents intelligence. The importance is this three-legged stool, unlike a four-legged chair, always adjusts to the most uneven surface. All three aspects, or legs, are needed to help children learn to be stable in every environment.

Abbott said if the average level of stress we see in our children today was noticed in the 1950s, most children and young adults would have been sent to a clinic. He explained people are suffering from affluenza, a contagious, middle-class virus causing depression, anxiety and addiction.

Abbott's Canadian counterpart MacTaggart will come back to Carleton County in June to further discuss a new way of teaching, which may help cure affluenza.

“I will be working with the district to actually implement the ideas of the 21st Century Learning Initiative to create a whole new vision for the community and for schools,” said MacTaggart.

Offering background information, she explained how the high school institution came into existence. High schools weren’t necessarily created in the best interest of children, but, instead, to help President Roosevelt with his unemployment problem. By forcing every person to go to school until the age of 18, said MacTaggart, he opened up the workforce for adults. The problem with a high-school setting, she explained, is students are awarded for doing the same level of thinking and by earning good grades through standardized testing. They are also awarded for not talking during class time, which, according to MacTaggart, essentially eliminates their natural ability to solve problems.

Abbott explained that, for generations, students who enter a classroom setting are told to sit down and be quiet. In quoting St. Augustine, the English educator said, “I learned most not from those who taught me, but from those who talked to me.” He added that if students had the opportunity to speak openly and share ideas then maybe problems – including society’s collapse in mental health, no fish in the ocean by the 2040s, global warming and resource depletion – would already be solved.

“We need to make kids feel like these are their problems, so they can be engaged in fixing the problems,” he added. “Then they will be passionate and say, ‘if the world is in this mess, I won’t stop until it’s fixed.’”

MacTaggart explained, when implementing a new way of learning, the 21st Century Learning Initiative will look at the natural pre-dispositions of children and use what has been learned through modern science neurobiology. She said humans are the only species whose brains are only 40 per cent developed when they are born. A calf, she noted as an example, is born with the ability to walk. Humans have an unbelievable ability to learn, she added, and learning is natural. But without love and nurturing from family, a person’s brain won’t develop properly.

“Reading and writing and math are basics, but what about parenting,” MacTaggart pointed out. “We need to make sure, as a society, we value and teach mothers to be more nurturing and loving.”

The first part of the newly implemented program will focus on making sure young women are taught to be more nurturing. The second part will deal with learning how a child’s brain works. Children develop a great deal before the age of five, but, MacTaggart explained, adolescence is the second most important time for development – the brain actually changes. Before adolescence, children learn by imitating their parents. During adolescence, they need proper support to learn on their own and be challenged emotionally, physically and mentally.

The current model used in schools is upside-down and inside out, said MacTaggart. It’s upside-down because more money is being spent on university than high school and more on high school than elementary. Inside out, she explained, refers to a classroom setting being artificial – it’s not natural to sit down and be quiet. MacTaggart said children need to be learning by doing, and this is where the community comes into play. Students need to enter the community at a young age through volunteer work or co-operative education. Some parents would prefer to see their kids come home with a mark on a report card instead of being told their child was learning at a business, but, MacTaggart explained, being out of the classroom setting will help a child more than writing a test.

Among the small group of people who attended the presentation on Thursday were Debbie Thomas of Centreville - a mother of three; Woodstock Middle School vice-principal John Irvine; and Jon Tait, manager of LP Fisher Public Library and a Rotarian. All three agreed the school system needs an adjustment.

“There may be better ways to work with young people especially if we could involve the community, said Irvine.

Thomas said the school system needs to teach more trades, so students have an option of whether or not they want to spend copious amounts of money on university or go straight into the work force.

“When I entered the high-school level I was able to choose between academic, commercial, shop and home ec, and I took commercial,” she said. “When I graduated I was ready to go into an office and work, which I did. But we don’t give kids that option today.”

Tait said, “our teachers are being asked to do so much now with so little.”

“What John Abbott was saying was teachers don’t have time to raise your children for you,” he explained. “Teachers are just too busy with planning curriculums for five or six grade levels. It (the presentation) just taught me that we all have to reinforce the notion that we all have to help educate our children along the way.”