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Ryerson Community School – Where You Belong

In the heart of downtown Toronto lies an elementary school with a difference. Ryerson Community School is not so much a collection of bricks and books as a group of devoted, resilient professionals whose aim is to nurture and support the development of every person who enters the school's doors. The word 'community' was added to Ryerson's name in 1994 to reflect a process of transformation and community inclusion that began in the early 1980s. At that time, principal Les Birmingham began to partner with some local social agencies and community groups in an attempt to provide an umbrella of protection and guidance for students attending his school. Following this lead, principal

David Gladstone developed a network of social service agency connections which became known as the Sparrow Lake Alliance.

For many years, the children at Ryerson have been considered students 'at risk.' Many live in poverty, two-thirds of their parents know little or no English, their family structures can be unstable and their neighbourhood is considered by some to be one of the least desirable in the city. During the 1980s, the then Toronto Board of Education agreed to fund international language programs to help Ryerson students and their families make the transition into Canadian society. That one decision helped lay the foundation for the development of the Ryerson School community.

In the early 1990s, Ryerson's existing partnership structure underwent an important transformation. Rather than presuming that people required assistance, Ryerson staff and its 40-plus partner organizations began encouraging community residents to speak for themselves. Ryerson changed from being an institution that cared for people, and became a community that cared with them. Ryerson's 725 students are still considered 'at risk' by conventional standards, but that assessment is only part of the picture.

*The **communities and schools** series was launched by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The case for education as a public good in Canada is compelling. Strong public schools and healthy communities that share responsibility for the well-being of youth are crucial to our country's future. Through stories and commentaries that link theory and practice, we hope to help inform citizens' understanding of education issues and engage them more deeply in their communities and schools.*

Physical boundaries

Ryerson Community School is located near the intersection of Bathurst and Dundas Street West in central Toronto. It is bounded on the east by the Alexandra Park Housing Development, one of the largest housing projects in Canada. To the north is Kensington Market, an historical reception and gathering point for poorer immigrants and refugees. Groups of Jewish, Caribbean, Spanish, Portuguese and Asian immigrants have moved through Kensington since the end of the Second World War. As members of one group have moved out, members of another have moved in. Vestige members of each group remain, making the area a truly blended community.

Psychological barriers

New arrivals to the neighbourhood are often reluctant to venture too far outside the area. When the Public Health Department recently decided to consolidate neighbourhood health clinics, it closed one that was half a block from the school and opened a congregated clinic three blocks away from Queen and Bathurst streets. To health department planners, this seemed a logical decision, but it posed a huge problem for people in the neighbourhood. They stopped going to the clinic.

“Situations like these have a direct impact on a child’s ability to focus on school,” says Ryerson’s current principal Chris Bolton. “If families are worried about basic issues like health care and they lack the skills to get what they need, they can’t provide an environment for their children that encourages learning.”

International Language Program

Language programming has been central to the school’s success. Ryerson has the largest integrated International Languages Program in Ontario. The school day is extended for 30 minutes every day so that children can study Mandarin, Cantonese, Arabic, Portuguese, Swahili, Vietnamese or Spanish. If English is their first language, children attend an

environmental studies program during that particular time block.

International Language Program facilitator Elisa Oliveira says: “This program supports each child’s language development and fosters pride in their cultural and personal history. First language instruction also helps pinpoint emerging learning difficulties so we can get an early start on remediation programs. I would say that our English as a Second Language programming is the most comprehensive anywhere. We offer support to new immigrant and refugee students from the moment they arrive until they are able to handle the regular English program independently.”

Most important from the staff perspective is that this kind of equity programming reflects the inclusive, respectful approach which defines Ryerson’s personality.

Grade 8 teacher Pat Vassos says: “In the 12 years I’ve worked here, each principal has demonstrated the same calm optimism to staff and children. It is such a warm, supportive environment to work in that people build attachments that last. Two former principals and one former superintendent have created awards for our graduates and they come back to our graduation ceremonies every year. Teachers have come out of retirement to work here!”

Community outreach, community development

The twin concepts of outreach and development are the central tenets of the school’s organizational framework. Three committees bring these concepts to life and are the nucleus of the community. The first is the Parent Advisory Council, whose role and structure are mandated by the Ministry of Education.¹ The Council discusses all issues that affect education at the school and maintains a broad focus. Ryerson’s Community Advisory Committee is the ‘umbrella’ committee of the framework – it acts as the collection point for ideas, and the dissemination point for implementation and project/program design to the other committees. Like the Advisory Council, members include administrators, staff and parents.

Ryerson Community Connections Committee has the task of maintaining and enriching the community nature of the school. Its members include Ryerson's community outreach worker, the school's community development worker, the middle school vice-principal, a teacher and the International Language Program facilitator.

From a child's point of view, the school's organizational framework is made visible in the school's motto – "Where You Belong." The school provides many attachment opportunities for children because planners have learned that when children feel they belong somewhere, they develop a sense of responsibility to their community and a recognition of their place in it. This kind of secure base has acted as a springboard to risk and growth.

"Our working motto seems to be 'whatever it takes,'" reflects Grade 2 teacher Alison Lam. "If a child comes to school late and hungry, I can call down to the cafeteria and get the child a sandwich. If their family has a problem, big or small, we get them the help they need so they can get on with their lives. We treat the whole child, and by extension, the whole family."

A telling tale

To appreciate how well integrated the programs at Ryerson are, consider the following story. In April 1999, the Board of Health sent the school a list of students whose immunizations were not up to date. The Ryerson Community Advisory Group met to discuss the issue. They asked the Ryerson Community Connections Committee to contact the Public Health Department and the Family Medicine Unit at the nearby Western Hospital.

The Advisory Group decided to hold a week-long immunization clinic for students and their families at the school. The Board of Health provided a list of their needs. Immunization information was published in English only, so the Ryerson Community School International Language instructors contacted the families by telephone (70 percent of Ryerson's families are non-English speaking). West-

ern Hospital's Family Medicine Unit obtained serums from Public Health, a nearby McDonald's restaurant provided drinks and a Shoppers Drug Mart contributed bandaids. The clinic took place in the school library with school interpreters present. Board of Health officials were satisfied with the arrangement, and no one was suspended from school for failing to meet the Board's immunization requirements. Few schools could match the organizational cooperation that made this project successful.

Building attachments

Children at Ryerson might start their day by coming in early for the breakfast program. They enter the basement-turned-cafeteria and sit at a table with family members and friends. Anyone from the community is welcome for breakfast; a 25 cent fee is asked, but no one is turned away. After breakfast school begins, but everyone stops at 9:30 a.m. for a snack. "We found that most of our middle- and upper-grade children were coming to school with empty stomachs," says Chris. "They can't work if they are hungry."

At lunch hour, a second meal is ready in the basement. Children are served at their table by senior students who are paid \$5 per week for their efforts. The service model allows each table to eat together and promotes meal time as a shared time. The meal charge is \$1.50, but again, those who cannot pay are fed just the same. The school day is extended 30 minutes to allow all students access to international language training. After-school programs are available, and once those are finished, the school gym reopens Monday through Thursday until 6:00 p.m. so that children up to 16 years of age can have a safe place to play basketball and work on assignments.

For a portion of their school year, Grade 6, 7 and 8 students are provided the opportunity to 'give back' to their community by volunteering a half day a week for ten weeks in food banks, seniors' residences and hospitals. Summer programs are offered to allow students access to computer and gym facilities. Children who are 'school phobic' are given support and remedial help in an off-site program at

Scadding Court Community Centre until they are ready to be reintegrated into a school setting.

What appears as a seamless approach from a child's perspective is, in reality, a complex web of programs and funding orchestrated by the various school committees and by the principal.

Teaching staff are aware of funding cuts and fundraising has become a shared responsibility. Teacher Pat Vassos says: "We all have an understanding that we never turn a child away for lack of money. Everyone is included in everything, and if that means running a raffle or a community dinner to cover costs, we get the work done."

Offering family support

At the entrance to the school, a family space has been created in what used to be a classroom. Families from all cultures congregate in the kitchen, so the parenting centre has been furnished with tables, chairs, couches, rugs, and a fridge and stove. Early in the morning, someone puts on a pot of coffee, and the family centre is now a place where staff and community members meet and talk. Pregnant mothers are sent an invitation to attend prenatal support classes at the family centre.

Says Donna Harrow: "Our program delivery model used to be very structured; we taught and people received our information. Now community residents are taking on leadership roles, and they come together to forge relationships and share information. That sense of ownership and belonging are very important."

Kindergarten is where children and parents have their first contacts with the educational system. Ryerson now combines its Junior and Senior Kindergarten program to give children the maximum time possible to make a good adjustment to school life. Teacher assistant April Hum says: "Our classroom has become one big family room. If parents are upset about something, they come in to see us. We make them a cup of tea, we help them get to the bottom of

the problem, and then we help them get the information and assistance they need. If the parents are unhappy, the children are unhappy."

Flexible programming

Every Friday, the parent centre is used for a community cooking activity. Parents take turns organizing the food purchases and equipment setup, and everyone learns how to make someone else's favourite dish. Local food customs are given a Canadian twist, and a large batch is made so that everyone takes home enough for a family meal.

Ryerson takes part in a program called the 'Good Food Box' which allows parents to purchase a hamper of foodstuffs for \$10. Each hamper provides enough fresh produce to feed a family for several days. This and other food distribution programs contribute to Ryerson's nutrition programs.

Says Chris Bolton: "We have to help our families get the basic needs covered before they feel they can trust us with their other concerns."

Preschool children can attend a daycare/nursery school program in the nearby fashion district. This program is run as a collaborative venture between Ryerson and George Brown College. It originally was designed to allow parents who worked in the garment trade the chance to bring their children downtown to attend programs near their parents' workplaces, but now half of the spaces are taken by children in the Ryerson neighbourhood. Children, their teacher and their teacher's assistant move from the George Brown space to Ryerson when they're ready for Senior Kindergarten.

Says administrator Carol Thorpe: "This program has built up our parents' comfort level with preschool programs. Many families used to keep their children out of the school system until as late as possible. If they weren't speaking English at home, the children were at a real disadvantage when they started school. This kind of program offers parents a safe, attractive alternative."

Programs come and go as the need arises. Says principal Chris Bolton: "A few years ago, we had a situation develop among a group of our Asian children that needed to be addressed. Families arrived from mainland China and put their children into school. At first everything was fine, but the children became rapidly assimilated into our consumer culture and began making demands on their parents for expensive toys and clothes. Parents reacted angrily, and children would slip away to friends' houses to avoid conflict. The parents would come looking for their children at the school, and the Children's Aid Society (CAS) would have to get involved. We sat down with our CAS contacts to organize community homes for children who were on the verge of running away. The situation has improved as the group adapted to Canadian norms, and that program has lain dormant for the last couple of years."

Measuring success

Over the past ten years, the enrollment at Ryerson has gone from 463 to 725 students. There is virtually no vandalism to school property today; ten years ago, property destruction was a serious problem. The school is open six days a week, usually

from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. Computer training and interest courses are offered to adults in the evenings and on weekends. An estimated 65 percent of the neighbourhood population uses the school some time during the week (only 45 percent of Ontario's population has direct contact with the school system). The atmosphere in the school is calm and orderly.

Success has many measures. Staff members say that the school's warm atmosphere is what first attracted them to Ryerson and it's what keeps them coming back year after year. Grade 8 students and Student Council co-premiers Linda Tran and Amber Winn both say they will miss their teachers more than anything else when they move onto high school next September. Says Amber: "My teachers have all told me to come and see them if I have any difficulties at all with my high school work, and I know they mean it. Even though many of my friends will go to different schools, we all have our neighbourhood to come back to."

Pat Vassos gets to keep her students for both Grades 7 and 8. Says Pat: "In those two years, it's amazing to see the growth in these children. Underneath the bravado of early adolescence is a lot of tumult. They have so many difficult situations in their



Musical "How Does Your Garden Grow" performed in 1998 by students at Ryerson Community School.



Grades 1 and 2 Primary Band introduces children to the fundamentals of music and the joy of entertaining.

lives and we travel with them so closely that by the end of Grade 8, we're like family. This school is where their lives take form, and there's so much going on every day that everyone is excited about coming here."

In October 1999, Ryerson Community School won the Ruth Atkinson Hindmarsh Award given by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, in recognition of the school's efforts to improve the lives of needy children. Established in 1998, the \$50,000 award is the largest of its kind in Canada. Ryerson is only the second recipient; more than 150 organizations have applied for the award in the two years of its existence.

New challenges

The money could not have come at a better time. The new Ministry of Education funding formula assumes a standardized approach to curriculum delivery which would see an end to the types of programming so critical to continued community development at Ryerson.

At the same time, cutbacks to social service agencies have meant a return to core services only, so many of Ryerson's partnership activities are fray-

ing around the edges. School fundraising cannot make up for this type of financial shortfall.

Members of the Ryerson community have not sat idly by, watching programs disappear. Community Outreach worker Donna Harrow continues to liaise with partner organizations, so whenever a situation arises, the community can access contacts who are familiar with the school, its people and its programs. Even before receiving the Atkinson award, the Advisory Group had created a nonprofit organization called "Friends of Community Schools" to raise program funds. They also have mastered the art of 'coat-tailing' – which involves the use of one program's funding to offset the costs of another.

The Ryerson Community Advisory Group is planning to use some of the award money to establish before- and after-school programs which can become self-sustaining once the funds run out. Some money also will be devoted to establishing a communications strategy for a new network called the Association of Community Schools. This association offers a forum for schools to communicate and grow together in the community school spirit. Sharing information about successful community models and programs will make more efficient use of everyone's time.

Besides working to secure funding sources, Chris Bolton also is trying to ensure that the students at Ryerson will be able to attain the achievement levels expected by the Ministry of Education's new curriculum. Says Chris: "Our children have so much language and social skills learning to master that the academic requirements implicit in the new standards are, for many of them, unrealistic unless they have access to added supports. However, we have used our partnership with the Hincks Institute (a mental health organization) to initiate a professional support program for our students. A psychiatric resident and a social work fellow from the Institute will consult with our teaching staff to provide support and direction for individual students who are experiencing difficulty."

Community longevity

Unfortunately, the social and political climate that allowed the development of the Ryerson community spirit no longer exists. Changes wrought in the education system by the passage of Bill 160 in 1998 have forced school boards to focus on fiscal management and ignore the needs of individual school populations.² Ryerson's after-school program fees were raised 300 percent in September 1999 and administrators were told that they would have to find other program or funding sources if this fee hike was unsatisfactory to their community.

Chris Bolton is hopeful that Ryerson's language programming can continue to operate under existing educational funding models. "Language is the vehicle of entry into our society and we have to find some way to keep our language programs operating. The Ministry of Education funded 'lighthouse' schools in the recent past which made off-hours programs available to local communities. There also have been situations where individual schools were given a sum to administer their programs as they saw fit. The community decided on salaries and expenditures and submitted receipts to the Ministry of Education. Ryerson could continue to flourish if community members were given this kind of ownership and permitted to be financially flexible."

Fifty-five percent of Ontario voters have no connection to the education system; they are unaffected by tax cuts to school boards. Says Chris Bolton: "We try to point out to that 55 percent that a secure education system turns out capable adult citizens; a poor one encourages early school leaving and contributes to social problems that surface later on. We are living through the manufactured crisis of a shortsighted government, but we're trying to help people recognize that the long-term crises associated with a poorly funded education system will be just as real."

Ryerson Community School is not run as a business. It's about people helping people. Ryerson rules dictate that programs come first and the money gets found later. It's a formula that has worked magic in people's lives.

Teacher assistant April Hum is beginning to feel like a grandmother. Her old students are bringing their children into Ryerson's Kindergarten so that they can get the same love and care April lavished on their parents. Says April: "My own grandmother used to say that learning to keep yourself and others happy is the key to success. Understanding and caring is what everyone is about here, from top to bottom."

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul works on the 'community and schools' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

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Endnotes

1. School Advisory Councils' composition and responsibilities are defined by the Ministry of Education document PPM 122. Membership is a mixture of school staff, community representatives and parents, with parents as the majority of voting executive members.
2. Bill 160 was passed in 1998. Its proposed funding formula seeks to allocate education funds based on the square footage of a facility.

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