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## ***communities and schools***

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### ***Engaging Students and Communities: Voices from Nova Scotia***

Located in the southwest tip of Nova Scotia, the Southwest Regional School Board (SWRSB) serves 19,000 students and covers an area of 7,621 square kilometres. This article presents two avenues developed by staff in the southwest district for increasing public involvement and support for publicly funded education. The first operates from the premise that curriculum is adopted and accepted when it reflects cultural values and shared history. Administrative support and encouragement have given teachers in the district greater confidence to explore programs which make use of local histories and living memories.

*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.*

The second avenue is an example of programming which has been developed to reflect local concerns. Members of three one-industry communities were invited to help design programs which would encourage young people to investigate a range of career options. They are building future prosperity by working to develop three community-based educational programs.

Superintendent Ann Jones relocated to Nova Scotia in 1996 from Ontario where she had worked as Assistant Director of Education, a post she had held since 1993. Her fresh perspective and interest in local customs, history and geography have been important ingredients in supporting curriculum development initiatives and ensuring a healthy, vibrant educational community in her adopted corner of Nova Scotia.

#### ***Oral history brings the past to life***

Jessie Haché teaches upper elementary students in a small rural school in Petite Rivière, along the south shore of Nova Scotia. Each year, her students select a research topic and gather data from a variety of sources. For example, they have conducted research at the provincial archives, cre-

ated a community classroom museum which encouraged community members to bring in artifacts and information, and interviewed older citizens to gather their memories and impressions of the area in its earlier days.

Over the years, their work has resulted in a series of history books and companion storybooks about their communities. The books, which are sold locally, are also a part of the National Library of Canada's Canadiana Collection and the Provincial Archives Collection.

Jessie's first local history project began when she read her students a diary given to her by a retiring teacher. It told the children about life in their community in 1916 through the eyes of a 10-year-old girl named Inga. Some of the students' relatives remembered details about Inga's family, and upon further research, they discovered that Inga was still alive and living in the United States. Though she was not well, her son told Jessie's students that they could communicate with Inga by mail. She was so enthused by the project that her health improved and she returned to Canada briefly to receive copies of the children's books. She also was inducted into Acadia University's Sports Hall of Fame.

Not only has Jessie helped her students to uncover the richness of their local history, but she has witnessed many times the transformative power of involvement and creativity. Says Jessie: "One of my classes informed me that I would have a difficult time with them because they were the bad class. By the end of the year, they had discovered the richness of their culture, their community and their experiences through their writing. They developed goals and aspirations and they saw themselves as special."

### ***Teaching good citizenship***

Another example of innovative teaching addressed a community concern that Canada's

youth were forgetting the lessons of war and becoming increasingly disengaged from their elders.

At a Remembrance Day celebration in November 1984, Joe Bishara, a junior high school teacher at Maple Grove Education Centre, witnessed a teenager taking off his poppy and stomping it into the ground in front of several veterans. In response, Joe started up the Maple Grove Memorial Club to allow youth volunteers to learn the importance of being Canadian and to appreciate the contributions of Canada's veterans. In its first year, Joe's club had 12 members. In recent years, the club has expanded into the local high school and membership has risen to nearly 200.

Joe stresses that the Memorial Club is successful because the students make the decisions about what kinds of activities and organizations they will support. Their activities have included performing in marching parades, playing 'The Last Post' at veterans' funerals, fundraising for a local hospital and health organizations, and entertaining veterans and seniors.

The community response to the teenaged club members has been enthusiastic, warm and appreciative. Joe's creative response to an act of disrespect has resulted in students' learning the values of respect, compassion, responsibility and a willingness to help one another.

### ***Engaging students in active learning***

Albert d'Entremont teaches science to Sainte-Anne-du-Ruisseau High School students. His understanding of how students learn, coupled with his concern for environmental stewardship and sustainability, led him to organize a comprehensive ecological study of a nearby lake.

Students were engaged in scientific research to determine whether Eel Lake was a

saltwater lake or a brackish estuary. They compiled an inventory of fish species and performed a salinity survey to help make the determination. Local resource people assisted the students' efforts, and Albert made sure the activities appealed to a wide variety of student abilities and interests. Students fished, set capture nets and pots, sampled for salinity and water temperature, videotaped events, interviewed local people about fish species and sketched the scenery, activity and people involved in the project.

Albert's students acquired knowledge of marine habitats, and they gained a new appreciation for the uniqueness and importance of a local lake. They also began to share their teacher's excitement and eagerness for the subject. Their enthusiastic participation proved to Albert that the project had achieved its goals.

This project is a model for other schools in the board and for the development of the Gulf of Maine Institute Without Walls (GMIWW). This initiative connects similar projects in schools and communities that border the Gulf of Maine. The GMIWW is now an international program for students with sites in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

### ***Community support for public education***

One of Superintendent Ann Jones' responsibilities for the Southwest Regional School Board is to build opportunities for community involvement in educational issues. The board serves students in five counties. Ann's experiences in program design in Ottawa had followed predictable patterns, but her new home community required a completely different set of rules.

Says Ann: "Because of the distances involved in serving this area, anything that happens in our board has to take place in a particular community. In Ottawa, the same pool of inter-

ested players would come forward to work on projects. Here, there are no 'experts' upon which to call. Instead, we approached people in the community and asked them to contribute. People who ordinarily might not feel they had anything to say worked with us, and we all benefited. I have changed my notions of what it means to really listen to, and appreciate, people. Were I to return to Ottawa, my approach to committee work would honour the type of grassroots input I have received here in Nova Scotia."

In the spring of 1998, board members began working with the principals and staff of the schools in Barrington, Barrington Passage and Clark's Harbour, three communities that form a triangle at the southernmost tip of the province. The school board had gone from 54 board members before the 1996 amalgamation to 18. That reduction meant that a lot of community leaders were no longer serving on the board. One of those leaders was living in Barrington, and she wanted to find a way to continue her involvement in education. She approached the board and expressed her interest in a project which would address the employment future in an area that was dependent on a single industry – lobster fishing.

Says Ann: "We recognized that we had enough people with the interest and the ideas to make a go of this type of project. We also knew that if we made the proper invitation we could engage a lot of proud, creative people in a process that, previously, they would not have felt they had a right to enter. We looked for a 'soft' entry in the area, and decided that the first thing we should do was invite everyone to dinner."

That was the beginning of the Learning Community Pilot Project. Everyone involved in the early discussions recognized the importance of involving stakeholders from every possible local, provincial and federal organization in the task of promoting education and alternative employment pathways. They established three

committees – one to address the needs of students making the transition from school to work, another to offer literacy and life skills training and support programming, and a third to encourage students to stay in school.

Each committee is achieving its goals using a variety of avenues. The school-to-work committee has established a self-referral counselling service for students several days per month. It has organized activities to address diversity issues in such areas as gender, socioeconomic status and beliefs. Students can now access a database of credentials required for certain professions that helps them select appropriate courses. The committee also has provided students the opportunity to share with elected politicians their views on community needs. Plans are in the works to mount a theatrical production around issues raised by the Supreme Court's Marshall decision on treaty rights to fishing and forestry resources.

The community literacy and support services committee has worked to create stronger links between the education system and community agencies that deal with children. In cooperation with the school board, Human Resources Development Canada, the Western Regional Mental Health Board, the Children's Aid Society and the Nova Scotia Housing Authority have established a Family Community Support Centre to serve the area. The programs offered at the centre include parenting support classes, pre-school parent-child learning centres, homework clubs, anger management programs, subsidized day care, family literacy programs and a location for a Community Access Project.

The stay-in-school committee has implemented career programs, co-operative education and work experience programs, and offered courses jointly with the local high school and the Nova Scotia Community College. It has established links with a local entrepreneurial support centre, and there are plans to locate over the next

year a Human Resources Development Canada job terminal in the school. Discussions are under way to allow students who must work the winter lobster season to credit these hours through co-operative education.

“The Learning Community Pilot Project provided a model for local involvement for other parts of our district,” says Ann. “The amount of community input has proven just how concerned everyone is about successful schooling. It can be difficult for neighborhoods to organize educational efforts on their own, particularly when they're spread over a large geographical area. School boards can act as organizing and facilitating agencies to encourage local initiatives. Together, we can attract the private and public partners necessary for really effective programming.”

Teaching children about their local customs and values, and involving concerned community members in stay-in-school and employment diversification projects demonstrate a commitment to community health and prosperity. Continued efforts in these areas in future will strengthen the partnerships Ann has forged as well as help residents move towards higher levels of learning and economic prosperity.

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