

BRIAN O'LEARY

## Seven Oaks Met School

# New School Answers the Question: What Do We Value?



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SEVEN OAKS SCHOOL DIVISION.

THIS SEPTEMBER SEVEN OAKS SCHOOL DIVISION opened the first Big Picture-inspired Met School in Canada. For me, as superintendent of Seven Oaks, this was an important step in our continuing journey to align what we know and believe about learning with what we do about learning.

So much of what we have traditionally done in high schools is counter to what we know in our hearts and in our heads is good for kids. Our high schools were large and impersonal. Kids got lost. Too much of our instruction lacked both relevance and rigour. We said that relationships were important, but we left them to chance. Students shouldn't have to make the basketball team in order to find a caring adult to mentor them.

For me personally as a teacher planning for my students, as a principal leading a school, and as a superintendent responsible for a system, I have always tried to work with the end in mind. What do we value? What results are we after? How do we get there? Only by focusing on what should be can we get past the way it is and on to the way we want it to be.

I have always found that when you ask these questions of teachers, students, and parents, they are quite willing to get engaged in looking critically at what is and quite willing to be a part of creating what might be. Throughout my career as a principal and superintendent, I have begun a new assignment by talking with every individual on staff for at least an hour. I always asked them to tell me about the best time in their career. Invariably they recalled a time when they were on the core staff of a new school or part of a school change process. They always recalled it as a time of real excitement and personal fulfillment.

In Seven Oaks we've had an ongoing conversation within our learning community about getting our high schools to be responsive to the needs of our adolescent learners. We listened to our students. We consulted research and we looked at examples of innovative practice. As we looked for schools that were getting it right for adolescent learners we discovered the Met School in Providence and the work of co-founders Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor. Their work resonated with our principals and teachers. All of our high school administrators and teachers read and discussed Dennis Littky's book, "The Big Picture."

Independent of their work, we had been establishing teacher advisor programs, implementing more real world and experiential learning and adopting a more authentic approach to assessment. We had worked to break our large high schools into smaller units. But the Met School design seemed to put all of these pieces together in a coherent, holistic framework and their results in terms of graduation, attendance, and post-secondary entrance were beyond what we thought possible.

Guided by the example at the Met School, we made significant strides in making high school education more personal and more relevant for our students. Teacher Advisor programs became universal. Every student is matched with an advisor, a caring adult who works with them and their family, knows them personally, mentors and guides them, and is a constant in their school life from the moment they register as a Grade 8 student to the moment they graduate. This is not a chance relationship. It is part of our teacher's workload and part of every student's high school program.

High Schools have increased internship opportunities and found ways to support more project-based learning. We have fundamentally changed our graduation ceremonies, spending less time on political speeches and awards in order to read a citation that celebrates the achievement and post-high-school plan of every graduate. We recently opened a new high school that houses four learning clusters of two hundred students each.

We've seen our graduation rate, attendance rate, and post-secondary entrance rates rise as we've improved our high schools. Why then are we starting a Met School?

In simple terms, we've learned an incredible amount from the Met in Providence simply by reading about it and knowing that high school could be both fundamentally different and much better. By having a Met School right here in Seven Oaks, in Winnipeg's North End, we can learn even more.

We also believe that our Met School can teach and inspire others. We believe that we can influence approaches to adolescent learners in our city, province, and country. Conventional approaches to education for "at-risk" learners segregate them from healthy peers, lower expectations, and dumb down curriculum. That approach leads to kids leaving school and blaming themselves for their failure. The Met connects discouraged learners with their passions and with one-to-one mentoring in a real-world setting. Met co-founder Elliot Washor relates that when they first opened the Met they were regarded as a school for "at-risk" students. Four years later when a hundred percent of their students graduated and were accepted into college, they were regarded as a school for the "gifted and talented."

I want that kind of educational example here in Winnipeg. As a superintendent, I can harness the staff talent and the resources to make it happen. I can articulate a vision. I can support a committed principal and her teaching staff in making a real difference "one kid at a time." |



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