



Improving Our Inner City Schools

by Tonia Jurbin

How can our inner city schools be improved? We must first recognize and appreciate that schools, the difficulties teenagers face, and the demographics have changed drastically. What worked in high schools in the 1970s and 1980s cannot work effectively in today's schools.

Hard drugs are prevalent in some districts, and violence can be so rampant that the Vancouver School Board has set up a Child Abuse and Violence Preven-

tion Team. While teenage sex and pregnancy may not be a new problem, AIDS is a threat to today's teenagers who, in spite of all the literature and counselling,

are in many ways fearless children in adult bodies who are not vigilantly practicing safe sex.

In Vancouver's inner city schools the demographics have changed dramatically. Earlier this year, it was reported that only 43% of Vancouverites had English as a first language. At a typical East Vancouver school, up to 70% of the population may have been enrolled in ESL classes (English as a Second Language) at one point, with an additional 10% entering the system every year. One school I visited has identified 63 languages. This has had an enormous impact on administration.

Another prevalent problem is the fact that many children are simply not spending enough time with adults. As a result, teenagers are being socialized by other teenagers. Many schools are using mentoring programs to give students the contact with adults that is sadly missing. Finding volunteers who have the time to offer can be difficult, but luckily, former graduates who are attending post-secondary institutions are often returning to help out.

Many Vancouver schools are using a "zero tolerance" policy regarding substance abuse. This doesn't necessarily mean that students aren't using drugs or alcohol, but that they aren't doing it while at school because they understand the consequences: immediate removal from their schools.

There has been some success in using an approach that attempts to meet individual students' needs through school counselling programs. All high school students are put through a guidance counselling program for a minimum of 18 hours/year. Additional help is available on an as-needed basis.

Another important element in a successful school experience is parent involvement. Be sure to attend your child's

Parent-Teacher interview night. There are typically two per year, though some schools, such as Gladstone Secondary, have additional Parent-Teacher interview nights just for parents of ESL students, complete with interpreters to help facilitate communication.

Many educators also agree that there's a great need to foster an attachment to the community, whether it's by bringing in guest speakers or by sending kids out to the community to perform real tasks. Without an attachment to the community, everything else loses relevance. Look for real life relevance in the classroom and programs that demonstrate connection to the real world and your community.

What I have learned from my quest for the "good" school is this: Parents, get involved. By this I don't mean taking days off work to hover over your children's teachers, but at least make a point of meeting them and touring the school. There are many good things going on in our schools but it's up to us as parents to visit our children's schools and evaluate whether the school is able to meet our children's needs.

For parents who are concerned about their children's progress in schools from both an academic and social point of view, check out the book *Questions Every Parent Should be Asking their Children's Teacher: A Guide to Helping your Child Succeed in School*, by Peter Katsionis. It's a wonderful guide for making sure that you as a busy parent get the most out of the time you do have with your child's teacher. ❖

To order this book directly, phone David Matthew Publishing at (604) 294-3941. The cost is \$12.99 including shipping and handling.

Are You Expecting?



You are invited to our

**FREE
"BABY STEPS"**

• SEMINAR •

Join us for an hour of excellent information on Infant Nutrition:

- Breast Feeding • How to prepare and store formula
- How to make weaning your baby easier
- When to introduce solid foods • How to minimize food allergies

Attend and receive
FREE Gifts valued at
\$25.00



**ALSO... A chance to win an
EVENLO Car Seat at every class!**

For Information on attending a session in your neighbourhood, please call toll-free at:
1-800-883-6042

Compliments of
Mead Johnson
CANADA

World Leaders In Nutrition

