

GEORGE PEARSON

Seven Oaks Met School Builds Curriculum Around Each Student

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SEVEN OAKS SCHOOL DIVISION.

SEVEN OAKS SCHOOL DIVISION IN WINNIPEG stepped into new but not totally unfamiliar territory for the opening of a new school this fall. The Seven Oaks School Division Met School, a high school that limits class size to 15, tailors its curriculum to the needs and interests of its individual students, places students in community-based internships two days a week, and keeps the teacher – called an advisor – with the same group of students from Grade 9 through graduation.

It's a new approach to learning that officials hope will pay dividends for students.

Seven Oaks Met has enrolled 45 students in Grades 9 and 10, will add Grade 11 and expand to 90 students next year, and will reach a maximum enrollment of 120 in the third year when it adds Grade 12. By year three, with Grade 12 added, enrollment is expected to rise to a maximum of 120 students. The alternative school lives inside Garden City Collegiate, a north-end Winnipeg high school of 1,100 students of whom 20 percent are Aboriginal and about 30 percent visible minority, according to Brian O'Leary, Seven Oaks Superintendent.

Seven Oaks Met is part of a network of alternative schools known as Big Picture Learning, which has its origins in Providence, Rhode Island. It was there that the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (the "Met"), a public school, opened in 1996 with a Grade 9 class of 50 mostly "at-risk" African American and Latino students. Four years later, 96 percent of that first class graduated and 98 percent of the graduates were accepted by postsecondary institutions. Many of those graduates were the first in their family to earn a high school diploma and 80 percent were the first in their family to enroll in college, according to Big Picture co-founders Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor.

The Big Picture network has grown to include more than 60 schools across the U.S., as well as others in Australia, Netherlands, Israel, and now Canada. All share the view that students should take responsibility for their own education. "We reduced the class in the school to the lowest common denominator: the student," says Mr. Washor. "It used to be teachers looked at a class and couldn't see each and every student; we've managed to not just make class sizes smaller but develop a system where teachers can look at each and every student and know them very well."

A MORE PERSONAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION

That philosophy fits well with Mr. O'Leary's vision of the students that Seven Oaks Met is designed to serve: "Kids who want a more personal approach to

EN BREF « Beaucoup de ce que nous faisons à l'école secondaire était contraire à ce que nous savions, dans nos cœurs et dans nos têtes, de ce qui est bon pour les jeunes », déclare Brian O'Leary, directeur général de la Division scolaire Seven Oaks à Winnipeg. Sa division a lancé des changements pour améliorer le climat d'apprentissage, accroissant le pourcentage d'élèves diplômés. La division a maintenant ouvert l'école Seven Oaks School Division Met School, inspirée par l'école Met School à Providence, Rhode Island. Ouverte en 1996, l'école de Providence s'est agrandie pour créer le réseau Big Picture Learning qui s'étend aux États-Unis, en Australie, aux Pays-Bas, en Israël et, maintenant, au Canada. Les écoles Big Picture sont organisées en « conseils » de 15 élèves, accompagnés par un enseignant-conseiller qui reste avec le même groupe pendant les quatre années du secondaire. Les élèves poursuivent leurs aspirations professionnelles en faisant des stages de deux jours par semaine dans la collectivité.

education, who want a rich relationship with a teacher that extends over time, who want real-world learning opportunities, a chance to build a curriculum and program around them rather than for them to fit a high school structure with 28 or 30 diverse courses and sets of classmates and teachers.”

At Seven Oaks Met, one of the three 15-student “advisories” has Grade 9 students only and the other two groupings have Grade 9 and Grade 10 students, says principal Adair Warren, a vice-principal at Garden City Collegiate before being named to head the new school. Ms. Warren has been in education for 20 years, 15 of those years in elementary and middle school settings “where you have your students all day, all year, and that’s where the teacher-student relationship begins in terms of the classroom dynamics and then building a strong community around that.” She underscores the Big Picture philosophy that an inclusive learning environment is built around the individual, not the grade level. This approach, she says, offers “tremendous opportunities for students to work across grades with one another and to mentor one another.” Having two multi-age classes enables the advisors to regroup at times to address some same-age learning units, such as math for Grade 10. Easy access between classrooms facilitates flexible groupings of students.

The three advisors at Seven Oaks Met represent a variety of disciplines and have experience inside and outside the classroom. Cindy Blicq has taught math, social studies, family studies, environmental science, and native studies in Seven Oaks School Division since graduating from the University of Manitoba in 1997. Prior to that she was an outdoor educator at Oak Hammock Marsh and Fort Whyte Centre. David Zynoberg, a Garden City Collegiate graduate and lifelong resident of Winnipeg, is new to teaching. He has a degree in business computing from the University of Winnipeg and broad experience in information technology, including computer programming, technical support, and software training, as well as a more recent degree in education, with coursework in alternative education. His teaching strengths include math, technology (media related), business, and economics. Nancy Janelle, a Manitoba native, has lived in Korea, Sydney (Australia), Nepal, and Guatemala. She has been an ESL instructor and has had jobs in finance and insurance, as well as radio advertising. She is equipped to teach English, history, world issues, geography, and social studies.

Since the advisors were hired last spring, they have been planning and working together. They have visited other Big Picture schools and taken part in a professional development conference. (Also, during this school year, a veteran teacher from the Met school in Providence will visit the school to work with staff.) They have built an academic framework that brings the Seven Oaks Met program in line with Manitoba curriculum requirements.

ADVISORIES: SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING NOT SO NEW

The concept of having one advisor essentially responsible for conducting or arranging for units of study across all required disciplines is new to Seven Oaks School Division. In most instances, the combined expertise of the three Met advisors will enable them to provide instruction and guidance directly. For other needs, such as pre-calculus math, band and choir, students will attend Garden City classes and activities. The concept of advisory groups, however, is familiar to all high school students who, in the Seven Oaks system, spend an hour a week in an advisory group. “We guarantee that every kid in our high schools is known

personally,” says Mr. O’Leary. “We actually establish the connection while the student is in Grade 8, and our teacher-advisors are the people who hand the student the diploma when they cross the stage in Grade 12.”

The Seven Oaks Met schedule is highly flexible. Daily and weekly touch points bring the class – or all three classes – together for social events, advocacy activities, organizing, or whatever needs attention. Time is set aside for individual study and research, writing journals, picking up computer technology skills, flexible groupings for studies or projects, or attending a course or activity at Garden City Collegiate. A workshop might target certain math, science, or communication skills.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays Seven Oaks Met students are out in the community, working with mentors in businesses and institutions related to the students’ interests. The LTI (Learning Through Internships) is a pillar of the Big Picture approach. It immerses students in the adult world where they are exposed to expertise in fields that may spark their interest in a career. During the internship, they must develop skills to help them navigate day-to-day. At least three times a year students must put on exhibitions to explain and demonstrate what they have learned in their LTI. They will have to marshal a variety of skills for a presentation in front of their advisory group, their mentor and – their parents!

That exhibition is guaranteed to open the eyes of parents, says Ralph Tagg, principal of Nashville (Tennessee) Big Picture High School. “They will be amazed,” he predicts. “I will hear stories about [their] never having considered the child would be able to stand up for the half hour and go through the highlights of their learning and in effect teaching the other kids what they have learned through their experience.”

Parents are an integral part of the Big Picture experience. “Our motto is: we enroll families,” says Mr. Tagg, whose Nashville Big Picture High School is now in its third year. In Mr. O’Leary’s view, this is long overdue. “There’s a huge divide between a typical high school and families. We want to talk to families about how their son or daughter is doing in physics, and we miss out on the grand conversation that’s occurring in their living room or around their dining room table about who are you, what are you becoming, what does the future hold for you,” he says. “And that’s the more important conversation, the one that will drive motivation and interest and make the physics course or the English course really mean something.”

MET REQUIRES PARENTS, AS WELL AS STUDENTS, TO APPLY

The Seven Oaks Met application process required a letter from the student reflecting the student's education goals and ambitions and a letter from the parents or guardians reflecting their hopes and expectations for their child. Through the letters and half-hour interviews conducted with the families, Ms. Warren and her staff have gained invaluable insights. She says parents "were struck at how this process of having to sit down with their child, consider their school options, make an informed choice and then have to reflect that choice in a letter was very powerful."

She adds that students and parents are attracted by the potential for a strong educational relationship between the student and the advisor. By staying with the same students throughout their high school years, the advisor gets to know them and their families well and guides their progress toward goals laid out in the individual learning plans. Each student must follow, defend, and update the plan on a regular basis.

"I feel that it is a part of the strength of the program to come together as a supportive group for the students – the advisor, the parent, the mentor," says Ms. Warren. "Each person holds a particular piece of [the student's learning experience] and there's a part the parent contributes that nobody else could contribute in that process, the piece that the parent holds as that person who has nurtured and guided that student through nine years of school already." Ms. Janelle reports that she has already received calls from parents "who tell me this is the first time their child seems interested in school," adding that "even those students with past poor attendance records have been at school almost every day"

Academic rigour is built into each student's program (see Big Picture Learning Goals), but not based on rote learning found in traditional approaches to teaching subject disciplines. Instead, academic accountability is built into the project through an inquiry approach to learning that follows the student's interests and passions. Students are pushed to apply precision and polish to achieve personal goals beyond earning a passing grade.

The LTI exhibition represents a kind of self-appraisal, and the mentor and advisor assess students' growth and progress as well as academic growth. Students must keep weekly journals, with weekly check-ins with advisors, and compile yearly presentation portfolios. Major checkpoints, called Gateways, occur between grades 10 and 11 and at graduation, to ensure students have completed all necessary work. This includes meeting required provincial testing and achieving the goals laid out in individual learning plans. Seven Oaks students will receive grades for some of their work, in line with provincial requirements. Big Picture assessments are translated into transcripts acceptable to colleges and universities.

COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY THE ULTIMATE GOAL IN BIG PICTURE SCHOOLS

Big Picture schools are usually set up to serve disaffected and disengaged students who might otherwise leave school before graduation. With their intensive focus on the individual, Big Picture schools stoke student ambitions to go on to college or university and realize their career ambi-

tions. They are usually required to apply to at least two colleges as part of their high school graduation requirements. Many Big Picture schools have college transition coordinators who help students apply for college or university and make sure they actually get there. One such school is Indianapolis (Indiana) Metropolitan High School, operated by Goodwill Education Initiatives with both public and private funding, where 100 percent of last spring's graduates were accepted to college.

"That's one small part of it," says Robert Moses, chief of school operations, of the use of co-ordinators. "The trick is getting the students on the college campus... physically there, helping with living arrangements, helping them with monthly personal expense costs," he says. "Those things are foreign to parents who have not been to college themselves. So our job here, through our college transition coordinators, is to get them onto the campus and make sure they have everything they need as they start school."

For Mr. O'Leary, all this adds up to what schools and learning should be about. In the most recent four-year period the graduation rate for Seven Oaks School Division averaged 79 percent, compared to the previous four-year average of 71.25 percent. "Our goal as a system is to get to 90 percent," he says. "The Met School and what we learn and generalize from it will help us attain that goal."

Ralph Tagg in Nashville thinks his Big Picture school is "the greatest school in the world. I absolutely love what I do. When you run a school that is different like this, the students react differently. When I was in a middle school we'd have four or five fights every week, but in two and a half years I've only had one that could even be considered a fight. That radically changes the behaviour of students. You start treating them like adults, and giving them some responsibility and freedom, and lo and behold they grow up right in front of your eyes." |

GEORGE PEARSON is guest editor for this issue of *Education Canada*.

Link to Seven Oaks Met School website: www.7oaks.org/site/metschool

BIG PICTURE LEARNING GOALS

The five school-wide goals listed below, together with the student's personal goals, form the basis for the student's individual learning plan, which the student is accountable for and updates each semester or trimester.

Communication: "How do I take in and express ideas?" This goal is to be a great communicator: to understand your audience, to write, to read, to speak and listen well, to use technology and artistic expression to communicate, and to be exposed to another language.

Empirical Reasoning: "How do I prove it?" This goal is to think like a scientist: to use empirical evidence and a logical process to make decisions and to evaluate hypotheses. It does not reflect specific science content material, but instead can incorporate ideas from physics to sociology to art theory.

Personal Qualities: "What do I bring to this process?" This goal is to be the best you can be: to demonstrate respect, responsibility, organization, leadership, and to reflect on **your abilities and strive for improvement**.

Quantitative Reasoning: "How do I measure, compare or represent it?" This goal is to think like a mathematician: to understand numbers, to analyze uncertainty, to comprehend the properties of shapes, and to study how things change over time.

Social Reasoning: "What are other people's perspectives on this?" This goal is to think like an historian or anthropologist: to see diverse perspectives, to understand social issues, to explore ethics, and to look at issues historically.

Adapted from www.bigpicture.org