

FEEL BAD EDUCATION?

An Alberta school's decision to do away with academic ceremonies raises eyebrows across the nation.

BY JILLIAN MITCHELL



In a bold move, St. Basil Elementary and Junior High School in Calgary did the "un-thinkable" – axing the honour roll. Their reasoning? To better foster student self-esteem.

For many, the above scenario brings about the question, how far is too far?

St. Basil officials stand firm that the new policy was instated in "the students' best interest," though it was met with outrage from many students and parents. In the initial letter to parents, school officials outlined the anti-award policy: "Awards eventually lose their lustre to students who get them, while of-

ten hurting the self-esteem and pride of those who do not receive a certificate."

It was a decision reportedly influenced by the work of education guru Dr. Alfie Kohn, a contrarian author known for his public critique of the current "feel-bad education" system. Kohn's argument: rewards produce temporary compliance (and a lack of joy).

Dr. Lia Daniels, through her association with the Alberta Consortium for Motivation and Emotion (ACME), is quite familiar with the work of Dr. Kohn, which she cites as "very compelling." However, when presented with the St. Basil devel-

opment, the ACME co-director stressed that a shift in discussion is required for better understanding of its effectiveness.

"Removing rewards to protect self-esteem isn't a great argument. I would say the issue here is not about self-esteem or pride but about the motivation behind learning," Daniels says. "Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall emotional assessment of his or her worth, and although many people believe that high self-esteem will lead to good academic performance there is no research that convincingly shows this to be true. In fact, self-esteem is in many



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ways a product of good school performance.”

To further clarify this idea, Daniels offers the following scenario – A school has a contest to encourage reading. The child who reads the most books wins a trophy. Subsequently, some kids will read a lot of books during that time because they want the trophy even if they really dislike reading (extrinsic motivation). The contest works. But some kids who genuinely enjoy reading may read lots of books during that time, even enough books to win, but their intrinsic enjoyment of reading will actually be reduced by participating in this contest (intrinsic motivation). It should also be noted, students extrinsically motivated by rewards are significantly more likely to cheat and less likely to ask for help.

Indeed, the topic of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is well-debated within the education sector, as is the idea of contingent motivation (rewards explicitly tied to achievement). To this latter idea, Daniels sees the potential for success so long as valuable rewards remain in place and the student does not experience failure (a subjective term that for one student could mean not making the honour roll and for another could mean a literal 'F'). The problem, she concludes, is that rewards do lose their appeal and,

at some point, most students have to manage failure.

“Some argue that when rewards are tied to achievement it allows students to feel in control of their learning,” she notes. “However, I would argue, as would other researchers, that this isn’t really control of learning but control of the reward.”

The relationship between rewards and education is a complicated one, agrees Donna Jamieson, a certified Child and Youth Care counsellor and the chair of Bachelor of Child and Youth Care Program at Grant MacEwan University. According to Jamieson, the overuse of material rewards and even of excessive praise does become “somewhat meaningless” and, in fact, “may take away from the joy of learning for the sake of learning,” however, for her, honour roll does



Dr. Lia Daniels, co-director, Alberta Consortium for Motivation and Emotion (ACME).

not fit into this category.

“Typically students are awarded (honour roll) status only once a year – hardly often enough for them to become jaded,” Jamieson says. “Doing away with the honour roll does not really get rid of it no matter how you choose to approach it. As long as students receive grades, honour students still know that they are honour students whether there is a public award ceremony, a private ceremony, a notification on their report card or nothing to mark this. Similarly, less aca-

demically students still know that they are not honour students.”

To that, Jamieson adds that the most pertinent solution lies in the fostering of student potential and their unique strengths, much like the educational system in Finland whereby standardized academic tests have been eliminated for approximately 40 years.

Instead, teachers who are well-educated and highly esteemed are given the freedom to develop creative and individualized means to teach materials and to assess student learning (i.e. developing a detailed description of the student’s progress and an individualized learning plan to meet each student’s unique needs) with a focus on mental and physical well-being at all grade levels. As a result, students become well-rounded and self-determined.

Interestingly, on internationally administered measures of academic achievement, Finnish students have consistently performed better than students from many other developed countries.

“The Finnish model certainly provides food for thought as Alberta educational systems consider the best ways to help students succeed, feel good about their learning experiences and themselves,” she adds.

In a perfect world, there would be a perfect answer. But alas, there are two sides to this (and every) coin. Of one thing both Daniels and Jamieson concur – central to the discussion is a pertinent shift from the collective to the individual.

“I believe that sometimes we worry too much about being ‘fair’ and making sure that everyone is treated exactly equally. Rather, we need to consider individual needs and respond to these in ways that fit each child,” Jamieson concludes. “What is rewarding for one child may actually be meaningless or even aversive to another. If students are recognized for their efforts and improvements, as well as for their other strengths and positive qualities, self-esteem usually is not an issue.” ♦