



Jan. 29, 2008

## **Researchers Support Community Schools**

Don Reimer, ACEbc

A panel of well known BC university researchers has reinforced the importance of strong communities and community schools. Dr. Clyde Hertzman from UBC is internationally recognized for his research on early child development. Dr Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, also from UBC, has recently completed significant research on children in the “middle years,” ages 6-12. The third panel member was Dr. Bruce Alexander, Professor Emeritus from Simon Fraser University, a specialist in addiction research. The panel was moderated by Michael Clague, highly respected for his leadership in community development and coincidentally, a new member of the Order of Canada.

The panel, titled “Community Schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” was held at Britannia Community Services Centre in Vancouver on Jan. 25, 2008. The event was set up by ACEbc - The Association for Community Education in BC. On hand was a diverse audience of about 50 that included community school personnel from several lower mainland and Vancouver Island districts, school trustees, an MLA, community volunteers and members of the ACEbc Board of Directors.

**Panel members were asked by ACEbc to connect their research experience to three themes:**

- **Why are strong, supportive communities important in dealing with educational, social and health issues at all age levels?**
- **How are community schools effective in building strong communities and developing community capacity?**
- **What strategies are needed to create multi-ministry funding to develop strong communities and to invest in community schools?**

**The panel agreed that the importance of strong communities to children, youth and adults is fundamental.**

- Dr. Hertzman noted that children as young as 5 or 6 have remarkably clear perceptions of their communities. He refers to this understanding as “Communities getting under the skin.”
- Dr. Alexander stated unequivocally that strong communities are the number one determinant of success in his field of addiction research.
- Dr. Schonert-Reichl described her early PhD research in rural Iowa that found only one dropout among hundreds of secondary students, along with an 80% attendance rate at post secondary schools. Interviews with the students revealed why: 1) “We were raised by the community,” and 2) “We all participated in school activities.” Dr. Schonert-Reichl reiterated the classic African proverb, “It takes a community to raise a child.”

**The second theme - how community schools are effective in developing strong communities - was again widely supported by the research and experience of the panel.**

- Community schools bridge school and preschool by bringing parents and young children into the schools much earlier than usual. Community schools have typically supported preschool programs for years, and Dr. Hertzman’s current research on the StrongStart programs now provides new data.
- Community schools provide alternate sets of supports and role models for kids. A key finding of Dr. Schonert-Reichl’s middle years study is the importance of adults other than parents in the success of children aged 6-12.
- Community schools offer better use of taxpayer funded community resources.
- Community schools provide local access to resources and programs, thereby reducing barriers, such as transportation, cost and safety. Dr. Schonert-Reichl noted that:
  - about 80% of mothers are now working, leaving almost half of the elementary age children out of after school programs. Society has not caught up with this change over the past two decades.

- Youth criminal activity and emergency room visits peak in the hours from 3-6 p.m. Dr. Schonert-Reichl noted that local community schools greatly alleviate these issues, and spoke of her own children’s opportunities for after school programming at Hastings Community School in Vancouver.
- Academic achievement goes way up as a result of after school activities, along with a range of other benefits to children.
- Prevention is far less expensive than the alternatives - we must pay now or pay more later.
- Dr. Alexander noted the critical importance of culture and belonging in the treatment of addictions. He noted that addictions are widespread, far beyond a simple view of drugs and alcohol - for example, video game addictions are a rising concern. Community schools are able to help create cultures of inclusion and belonging, which are critical to mental health at all age levels.
- Community schools are a focus for community governance for children, an important factor in child development in Dr. Hertzman’s research.

**The third theme - strategies to create multi-ministry funding and investment in community schools - included these points:**

- Community school supporters must build on existing programs and directions of government - e.g. StrongStart.
- We should introduce mandatory training in community development for principals - they are the key educational leaders who determine the success or withering away of programs.
- The “New Mandate” for BC Boards of Education set out in 2007 is significant and school trustees are working hard to figure out implementation. Take advantage of the community school “outposts” all over the province that can assist.
- The province should develop protocols for potential school closures in order to “harvest the demographic shift.” For example, enable communities to investigate alternate uses, sharing of facilities, etc. rather than permit school districts to close facilities.
- Keep informed of Surrey’s Community-Schools Partnership Initiative - they have recently added a new position of District Vice Principal responsible for Inter-Agency Liaison.

**Some other key points by the panel and audience:**

- School staffs are overworked already: we need separate staff to provide a range of after school programs. We need a “paradigm shift” regarding programs and activities for children and youth out of regular school hours.
- Partnerships are integral to community schools. Surrey has set up several new community schools based on “hubs,” and the coordinators are called “Community-Schools Partnership Coordinators.”
- Community schools are ideally positioned to assist with the new Mandate for Boards of Education.
- Ensure that community schools maintain connections with post-secondary institutions. For example, Langara College offers many programs that connect students with communities and children/youth. The mutual benefits to the colleges and to community schools and other community organizations are evident.

For more information about community schools and community education, please visit [www.acebc.org](http://www.acebc.org)



The Panel (Left-Right)  
Dr. Bruce Alexander,  
Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl,  
Dr. Clyde Hertzman



Moderator  
Michael Clague