

BC's worst school just may be its best

by Gary Mason

According to the Fraser Institute's most recent rankings of British Columbia elementary schools, the picture doesn't get much grimmer than Roosevelt Park in Prince Rupert. Out of the 1,009 schools rated, Roosevelt Park and two others tied for last.

What a morale booster for parents, students, and teachers at Roosevelt Park. The lousiest school in the province. Roosevelt Park's overall rating out of 10 was 0.0% for 2004–05. That compares with St. George's, an independent boys school in Vancouver, which scored a perfect 10.

Of course, there are a few things that the rankings don't take into account.

You know, just little things the teachers at schools such as St. George's and others never have to worry about. Like the fact that 71% of the children entering Kindergarten this year at Roosevelt Park were deemed "at risk."

What does that mean? It means they did not possess the basic language skills children should possess by the time they're ready to enter the school system.

Many of the kids entering Kindergarten at Roosevelt Park don't know their colours, for instance, don't know the difference between an apple and a banana.

Many of them have the language skills of a three-year-old. Or less.

The Fraser Institute's rankings are based on results from the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), a province-wide test in reading, writing, and numeracy. It is administered each spring to children in Grades 4 and 7.

Oh yeah, that's another thing about Roosevelt Park.

Of the 20 pupils who took the FSA test in Grade 4 last year, only 11 had actually been in the school since Kindergarten. There is usually a 50% turnover of pupils from year to year. So, even though many of the children at Roosevelt taking the assessment test each year have received most of their schooling elsewhere, Roosevelt gets stuck with the results.

Many of Roosevelt's classrooms are filled with children who have "issues," as they say. Many are affected by fetal alcohol syndrome. In some classes there might be eight or nine children with special needs. Many children have witnessed horrible violence at home. Or have had to deal with other traumas.

One girl just finishing Grade 6 at Roosevelt was recently asked by her teacher, as part of a class exercise, what her earliest childhood memory was. She said she remembered one

night when she was seven being left at home alone by her mother who went out for a few drinks.

When she didn't return, the little girl decided to pack up her younger sisters—one was three, the other a newborn—because she feared the people from Children and Family Services would come and apprehend them.

It was the middle of the night and the three had to descend a steep staircase from their house. The seven-year-old was trying to manage a buggy and lost control. It went rattling down the stairs with the baby in it, knocking over the three-year-old at the bottom. Thankfully, everyone was okay.

By the time the girl told this story, she'd been in five foster homes. A couple of years ago, 40 of the school's 200 pupils were in government care. That's another thing the Fraser Institute rankings don't tell you.

Roosevelt Park offers suicide programs. Why? Because once a month or so, a child at the school discloses to someone that she or he is thinking of ending it all. Seems the kids at Roosevelt have things on their minds other than the FSA. Who would have thought?

The "lousiest school in the province" has piloted a wonderful new program called Parents as Literacy Supporters, or PALS. It teaches parents how to help their children read and write. You see, many of the parents weren't taught themselves.

There's another program called Parents and Children Education Services, or PACES. It's also a first in British Columbia. It offers parents advice on basic parenting skills such as how to play with your children and how to stimulate their minds. At Roosevelt Park, as much of the work is about helping the parents as the students.

Roosevelt Park has piloted a number of programs. In fact, it's been so successful that educators from far and wide have arrived at the school to see the programs in action.

The Prince Rupert Daily News did an article on the Fraser Institute's latest rankings and how Roosevelt Park finished dead last. That must have made the kids feel even better about themselves, don't you think?

Steve Riley, the school's principal, just shakes his head. What are you going to do? "We're trying to fix kids here," he said in an interview. "That's a bigger challenge than getting their FSA results up. There are so many factors in the kids' lives here that affect their schooling, it's not even funny."

Factors the Fraser Institute's rankings don't take into account. Which is why the "lousiest school in the province" may just be the best.

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