

# The Best School?

Celebrating Diverse Pathways to School Success...



As schools are increasingly pressured to educate the most diverse student body in our history to higher and higher academic standards—often while being asked to do more with less—many concerned parents wrestle with the question: what is the best school for their child?

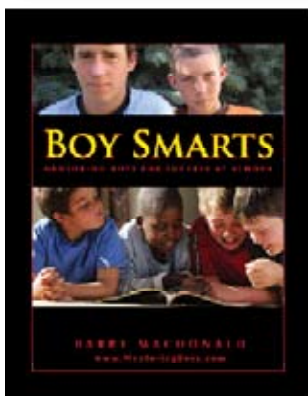
Many wonder whether private schools have the advantage over public schools. In British Columbia parents may cite the *Fraser Institute's* annual report that claims independent schools lead the academic pack.

While I appreciate how tempting it may be to seize upon data from an official-sounding report to help make crucial educational decisions, I believe that school rankings in such a single provincial assessment can be misleading. On April 19, 2012 a new study published in the *International Journal of Science Education* contradicts the notion that private schools give students an academic head start while those in public schools fall behind.

The authors considered the academic performance of more than 4,500 students in a first-year physics class at the *University of British Columbia* and concluded: "Our study shows that, with respect to physics and mathematics, B.C. public schools are more effective than B.C. independent schools in preparing students for success at university. ... We question the *Fraser Institute* ranking methodology and we contend that success at the next educational level should be a better criterion for assessing high-school effectiveness."

Of course we should not then leap to the conclusion that public schools are necessarily superior to private ones. Instead, we must keep in mind the many factors that influence student outcomes at a particular school. Not the least of these factors, as the following letters demonstrate, is the human one.

This month's newsletter features parent emails about four BC schools that demonstrate unique and diverse pathways to success.



## Outstanding Graduation Rates



“Ever since your boy talk at our school, I have been reading the newsletters and learning so much about my son. As you have not yet written about school attendance or graduation rates, I thought you would like to know that *Byrne Creek High School* has the daily average attendance rate of 95% AND 95% of our Grade 12 students graduate! When I first came to Canada, I was thinking that Canadian boys would skip out of school and get into trouble too much, maybe even do drugs. Instead my son loves school and goes everyday, even when I think he should stay home to mend his cold.

We are like the *United Nations* and have many different types of families. Here we have 44 different languages spoken and 60% of our students were born outside Canada. As some of us are not able to work the type of job we did in our birth country, so many people like my family live with very little money. Some of our families are from war-torn countries. We teach our kids to work hard and the school helps us a lot.

When I ask my son why he goes to school every day when TV shows boys fooling around skipping school, he says, “Why would I do that? School is great!” He says his teachers are amazing and give many interesting projects and activities. He especially likes using the internet at school, and also likes the science superlab and the video-conferencing lab. In my country we just had to memorize facts and write tests. That was not very interesting. At

*Byrne Creek* my son gets to learn in very interesting ways that motivate him. My son told me that *Byrne Creek* just won an award called *Vision in Action* that was given by the *International Educational Leadership Association* [The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, or more commonly called ASCD].

I went onto the website and here is what they say about the award: “This award acknowledges schools that have changed the conversation about education from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the development of the whole child: a child who is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.” I like that about our school. I also learned that “95 percent of eligible grade 12 students graduate, and the pass-rate for provincial exams is exceptionally high”. This is a very good thing and I am proud that my son loves school and is building his future here in Canada.”

*Irena, Burnaby, BC*

**BOY  
SMARTS  
ACTION  
TALK**

*Because it's  
better to  
build boys  
than to  
mend men...*

<b>St. John's, NL</b>	September 15
<b>TBA</b>	September 29
<b>Calgary, AB</b>	October 13
<b>Vancouver, BC</b>	October 27
<b>Toronto, ON</b>	November 3



## Rambunctious Five-Year Olds Play Hockey



“Several years ago Barry MacDonald visited Ecole Herbert Spencer Elementary in New Westminster to consult with staff and parents. I recall at the time that he was so impressed with our primary Hockey Box program that he wrote about it in his book *Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion*. A few years have passed since his visit and I thought readers might be interested to know that we continue to grow our Hockey Box to now include kindergarten students as well.

Initially I anticipated having to intervene, solve problems, and expend a lot of energy setting up our Hockey Box play for 5 year old students. Worried that an over zealous student might cause an injury, I thought I would need to explain all the rules in advance and tightly monitor the play. On the day I had arranged to introduce the rules to our youngest students, however, I was called to another playground situation. Upon returning just minutes later, I discovered that the game was on, without me! As I watched these young children play, I marveled at the way these capable kids had figured it out on their own.

It is amazing to watch young children self-monitor and self-organize their play at our Hockey Box. While young students still need adults nearby to supervise, what they mostly need is the chance to expend energy and to experiment with the nuances of free playtime with minimal intervention. Here they also have a wonderful opportunity to practice what we adults have taught them about regulating their emotions and playing fair. Almost daily now, and with very little adult direction, they gather up the sticks (only 12 in order to keep the play safe) and play hard, really hard. As they start shooting the ball around, they say almost nothing. Running around and keeping active is so critical that it seems there is no goalie—until a shot comes close to landing, and quite spontaneously one of the children jump into the goalie crease to block the goal. Immediately, children return to the play without discussion, arguments, or even mention of the outcome. These students need to maximize all the active play they can during their break. They don't want to use up any of their precious playtime organizing teams, and they prefer that we not micromanage them either.

As I watch this free play, I am reminded of the spontaneity and utter absorption we had, years ago, in those old-time games like *Hide-n-Seek*, *Kick the Can*, or *Catch Me if You Can*. It's been wonderful to watch our young students run, sweat, cheer, and really expend tremendous energy. You should know that despite inviting ALL children to play, the Hockey Box attracts mostly boys. We are however, thrilled that three energetic girls regularly join in to hone their hockey skills too!”

*Tracy Fulton, Principal*



## School Counsellors Matter



“For years school staff thought my son had ADHD. Each time he would get into trouble and land himself in the Headmaster’s office, someone would ask about whether we saw our doctor for help for his attention and misbehaviour problems. Desperate, we finally arranged a visit. Our doctor said that if the school saw an attention problem, it was likely he had one and offered medication.

Still, it didn’t seem right. The doctor hardly knew my son. Frustrated, I complained to the Headmaster who suggested I speak with the school counsellor.

Although I hoped for something more than the ADHD explanation, I did not imagine that the meeting with the school counsellor would be so helpful in uncovering the root of Avery’s problems.

The counsellor started asking me many questions that no one else had considered. How did Avery manage stress? What were his special sensitivities? She wanted a complete and full picture of Avery, including some background on our family history.

The counsellor seemed to think that something other than ADHD was going on. She introduced me to your books and we examined how many Spiderman Senses Avery had. He had 12 of the 15 you identify. She suggested that Avery likely struggles more with anxiety and

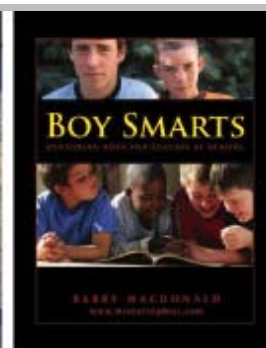
managing stress than impulsivity and attention. After reading me a line from your book about how we adults often misread anxiety in boys, she encouraged me to seek a referral to a pediatrician for a more thorough assessment. Although the doctor was resistant at first, once I showed her how high Avery scored on the school counsellor’s anxiety screening assessment, she agreed to make the referral.

While we waited a couple of months for the appointment, the counsellor observed Avery in the classroom and on the playground to gather more details for the assessment. Impressed with our preparations, the pediatrician conceded that boys’ misbehaviour may be misdiagnosed as ADHD when something else could be the root of the problem. Although he had heard about your website and your work, he was not familiar with the concept of Spiderman Senses. Still, he did agree that Avery more likely had anxiety than ADHD. After he met with Avery alone for an hour, we agreed to try a low level of anti-anxiety medication as long as we continued with the school counselling to help Avery learn strategies to overcome anxiety.

It is now two months later. Words cannot explain how much calmer Avery and everyone around him is. For the first time in years, Avery is happy, and focussed on his learning. He also has friends.

I so much appreciate the school counsellor’s efforts to understand our son and to guide me. By the way, while my son agrees that this email would be okay for other parents and teachers to read, he asked that I change both our names and not mention our school name.”

*Rebecca, Vancouver*



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Amazon.ca



## Maple Ridge Environmental School



“Your talk in Vancouver strongly influenced our decision to enroll our son in a new outdoor environmental school in Maple Ridge. I was so taken by your message about how many boys learn best while engaged in physical activity that I started to really take notice of when our son Jack was highly motivated and most interested in things. It became clear that doing while learning wins his attention and motivation, hands down. At his old school he seemed bored with workbooks and traditional approaches that seemed to separate kids from the world they are meant to be learning about. Since he started at the environmental school, where he is outside every day, he is enthusiastic, excited, and happy about learning. It has been wonderful to watch his blossoming.

In the new school, which accommodates students from kindergarten to Grade 7, there is no traditional school building. Instead there is a 300-square-foot yurt located near the entrance to the demonstration forest where 60 students and the three teachers gather before heading outdoors to participate in learning activities. At times the school uses other public buildings when needed—for example, visiting the Maple Ridge Public Library, or other schools to access computers or equipment. For Jack, the hands-on learning employed at this school goes much deeper than a more passive approach; he also doesn't forget what he learned as easily. He is healthier, happier, and a more confident boy.

Thanks again for the inspiring talk, and for reaffirming that we have made the right decision by sending him to this ‘alternate’ school (I have three boys so I intend to look for alternative approaches to learning for each of their unique personalities).”

*Melanie, Maple Ridge*

In his blog *Science Matters* David Suzuki featured the Maple Ridge Environmental School research project, recalling how he thrived in a similar learning environment as a child:

“My parents were never upset when I returned home soaking wet and covered in mud, carrying jars of insects and salamander eggs. That led me to an interest in science and then studies and a career in genetics, focusing on the fruit fly. My fellow bug-lover Edward O. Wilson, an American biologist who specializes in ants, popularized the term biophilia, meaning “love of nature”, with his 1984 book of the same name. As he explains in the book, ‘To explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development. To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents.’”

You can read more about the environmental school project on the *Maple Ridge School District* website:

[www.es.sd42.ca](http://www.es.sd42.ca)

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## Diversity as Path to Learning Resiliency



Academic growth and success is less about numbers on test scores or awards than it is about students' ability to thrive. When I visit schools or classrooms within a school, I am not surprised to discover that some students are dissecting owl pellets while others are reading about them from a textbook. I note that some teachers require students to write frequently in a variety of different styles, others may focus more on oral communication projects such as debating and creative drama. In any particular classroom a teacher may use a highly interactive, dynamic activity for a while, and then provide opportunity for quiet work and reflection.

Rather than searching nervously for the best school, let us instead support the one we are involved with, considering what we can do to strengthen each unique learning community. How can we address unmet needs, inequities and learning gaps in our school? While the learning community at *Byrne Creek Secondary* has every reason to celebrate their recent *Vision in Action* award, they have sensibly also considered the discrepancy between boys' and girls' literacy achievement. The school's 2009 *Write It Now* data reveal that the combined results of Grades 8 and 10 students have 16% of them not yet meeting expectations. When gender is factored in, it becomes clear that boys are struggling significantly more than girls, with 25% of boys and 6% of girls not yet meeting expectations. Wisely, the school has identified an action plan to support all students' literacy needs.

As we consider the particular responses of schools to the varied educational needs of boys and girls in their communities,

we cannot forget the central mandate of public education: promoting critical inquiry within communities that are both diverse and inclusive. We can open multiple pathways to the learning of literacies—including the civic literacy needed for full citizenry in a democratic society. Hats off to schools—both public and private—that pull together to promote healthy intellectual skepticism, respect for others, and appreciation for our abundant diversity in our communities. According to David Suzuki, lessons from nature teach that diversity is the path to creative adaptation, and help us sustain the planet's continued existence. Let us celebrate the diverse pathways to learning in our schools and communities. Let us also remember that the richest resources we have, as parents, educators, and lifelong learners, are imagination, empathy, and the kind of attention that helps us see a child's strengths, and needs, with clarity. • • •

*Barry MacDonald*  
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Is your learning community interested in hosting a **Boy Smarts Action Talk Saturday workshop?**



We are currently setting up workshops for the 2012 - 2013 school year and welcome invitations from schools willing to provide a venue, AV equipment, day of event operational support, and assistance with promoting a Saturday workshop.

For details please contact Elizabeth at...  
[info@mentoringboys.com](mailto:info@mentoringboys.com)



*"Barry MacDonald is full of ideas to help boys"*

Janet Steffenhagen - Vancouver Sun

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