



Career coming to a Close; Retiring assistant superintendent leaves legacy of learning

The Record (New Westminster)

Saturday, December 8, 2007

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Section: Community

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Source: The Record

For Susan Close, it was a single, depressing headline that said it all: "New Westminster bottom again!"

"We all remember that day," Close said, describing a Record newspaper article about the district's disastrous standing in the province. "It was demoralizing."

Provincial assessment results put New Westminster students at the bottom of the reading and writing barrel in 1999 when Close came on board with the school district.

Seven years later, those same Grade 4 students jumped from the 17th percentile in writing and 33rd percentile in reading to the 96th percentile by the time they reached Grade 10.

The reason for New Westminster students' dramatic improvement came, in part, as a result of a reading and writing program that Close spearheaded in response to the district's dismal status.

With the encouragement of administration, Close and a team of teachers created SmartReading and its offshoot, SmartLearning.

The programs are a way of learning that goes beyond teaching a child to read and regurgitate information.

SmartLearning encourages children to ponder, discuss, draw and question what they are reading and writing.

"You're not reading unless you're thinking," said Close, who started teaching at age 20 and won praise for innovative teaching just seven years later.

She worked with the Langley School District before she came to New Westminster.

Close will be ending this exciting chapter of her 45-year career when she retires from her post as assistant superintendent this month.

She is leaving the district with a legacy of learning that has garnered the attention of educators around the world, including in the United Kingdom, Africa and the Middle East.

A number of school districts in Canada have also implemented SmartLearning into their curriculum.

Though Close has been integral to the creation of SmartLearning, she is quick to point out that the program has been supported by a number of teachers and facilitators, including Ann Nottingham, Erika Warkentin, Nadya Rickard, Robin Speed, Patricia Pain and Jill Doyle.

"I don't want it to be about the Susan story. Yes, I brought some methodology with me and that's why I was brought in, but it's been about teamwork."

It is the teachers, who helped develop SmartLearning and embraced the ideas, that have made the program so successful, she said.

"I'm so proud of the teachers and administrators," said Close.

And they are proud of her.

At a recent school board meeting, when chairperson Michael Ewen raised the subject of Close's retirement, he said, "Your service to the district has been immeasurable.

"You have had a profound personal impact on my teaching," added Ewen, who teaches at an elementary school in Surrey.

Close received a standing ovation from the board and district staff.

"It's not about me, it's about we," said a teary-eyed Close. "I feel very bonded to this district. We will have a relationship for a long time."

Illustration:

- Photo: Larry Wright, The Record / ERA ENDS: Susan Close, here in a classroom at Lord Kelvin Elementary School, is retiring from her position as district assistant superintendent. During her tenure with the New Westminster school district, Close helped developed the SmartReading and SmartLearning programs, which have improved the way local students learn.

Idnumber: 200712080017

Edition: Final

Story Type: Business; Profile

Note: Profile of Susan Close. nhope@royalcityrecord.com

Length: 473 words

Illustration Type: Black & White Photo