

The Road to Leadership

Improving school safety and developing student leadership are two of the significant benefits of participating in BCAA's School Safety Patrol Program. Jessica Werb travels to Burnaby and reports on the program at two elementary schools.

When Raffi Mahseredjian joined Burnaby's Gilpin Elementary School two years ago to teach Grades 4 and 5, he inherited more than just his retired predecessor's classes; he also took over the School Safety Patrol Program, a BC Automobile Association (BCAA) program which trains students in Grades 5 to 7 to ensure that their peers cross the street safely on their way to and from school. And while the previous program coordinators went out of their way to encourage students to participate, Mahseredjian realized that they had underestimated the participants' willingness to take part.

"The teachers running it before me would throw a pizza party every year, give a candy to each kid for every shift, and have a swimming party at the end of the year as well. They would even give out hot chocolate on cold days," he recalls, in a phone conversation. This year, Mahseredjian decided to see what would happen if he removed all the perks – and to his surprise, students still signed up in significant numbers.

With 30 kids out of a school population of 200 participating in the program, it is the most popular leadership opportunity at the school, notes Mahseredjian. "There's office

monitors, library monitors, kindergarten monitors, but this is the one with the most kids involved," he observes. "It's them in a position of authority. They get to wear the uniform – a neon vest – and they get to carry whistles and stop signs. They like being outside, and they like being with their friends."

More than fun, the program, which is free to schools, requires a serious level of responsibility. Students work in teams of three, doing shifts that last a half-hour before or after school. Statistics indicate that patrolers are an important part of school safety; a recent poll conducted by BCAA found that 78 percent of British Columbians have seen drivers speeding in a school zone, and almost 20 percent have seen a near-miss in a school zone.

For 11-year-old Joanne Lee, a Grade 6 student at South Burnaby Clinton School who signed up last year to be a school safety patroller, it wasn't cold statistics that convinced her to don the recognizable neon vest and keep her peers safe – rather, it was the immeasurable impacts of the role.

"I wanted to be a good role model and a leader," she explains. "I wanted to have the responsibility to take care of our school."

Lee first learned about being a

safety patroller through her older cousins, who themselves were involved in the program.

"I would wait for them after school and watch them, and it seemed like a good responsibility to have."

Today, Lee says she really does feel like a leader – and is recognized as such by other students. "Younger kids, if they have a problem, they come to me," she notes, proudly. "Like, kindergarteners will come to me and say, 'Somebody pushed me,' and things like that. And I try to help them."

In the grand scope of things, getting to school a half-hour early and staying late may not, on the surface, seem like an enormous responsibility. But three-time Olympic Women's Ice Hockey Gold Medalist – and former school safety patroller – Jennifer Botterill says the skills she gained in the program set her up for her later successes.


"I learned that you were a leader in the school, and that's what they reinforced in the program," Botterill, who was a safety patroller in Grade 5 and 6 in her home town of Winnipeg, reflects. "You had a chance to be a leader within that school and within your community ... in hindsight, it helped me in terms of lessons I could use with school down the road, with my athletic career and with business opportunities. All those things are lessons that you can learn at a really young age, and then you have them with you for the rest of your life."

Mahseredjian is convinced that offering students leadership opportunities such as the School Safety Patrol Program not only empowers them, but also creates a more inclusive and caring school environment.

"I definitely think that having more ownership of the school culture and the school community

helps with sticking up for each other, and decreases the amount of incidents [of bullying],” he notes. “Because they’re investing themselves in the community. They’re saying good morning to the parents as they

come across the street, and they’re working together for common goals. They take that seriously, and I think that’s really important. Learning about what it is like to take charge of other kids, being empathetic, I

think that all plays into being a safety patroller.” Plus, he adds: “They love it! They love that sense of importance, of putting on the vest.” And no Tootsie Rolls required. 

Build tomorrow's leaders

The School Safety Patrol Program is available free of charge to all BC elementary schools. Register, or renew, by May 30 for the 2014-2015 school year – qualified schools will be entered into a draw for a chance to have a Youth Leadership assembly at their school. For information and registration visit www.bcaa.com/roadsafety or email schoolsafetypatrol@bcaa.com.

Immersed in nature and French

Two Kindergarten teachers help their students learn about nature in the most natural setting possible. The learning team reports on the school’s success in tapping into the magic of outdoor space.

The French Immersion Kindergarten teachers at École des Deux Mondes, Campbell River, know that nature plays an important role in the development of children and they are putting that belief into practice.

“We are fortunate to have a forested location on our school property and we take full advantage of it to give our children a unique and authentic educational experience,” said teachers Madame Barb Vachon and Madame Desiree Dallaire. They say they value the time their students play in the school’s forest and see the experience as beneficial in numerous ways.

Vachon said the children have been visiting the forest since October and have had the opportunity to observe seasonal changes. To illustrate this Madame Vachon said that in the fall the students explored the fallen leaves and found many Western Maple seeds and now the students are finding the same seeds with tiny green sprouts growing out of them.

This has been a cause for much excitement and a perfect way to teach French vocabulary for words to do with the forest, seeds, compost, seasonal changes and the weather.

Currently Vachon and Dallaire bring their students to play and learn in the forest a couple of times a week. Having witnessed first hand the learning opportunities the forest offers their students both teachers intend to spend an hour a day in the forest, rain or shine come September 2014.

Both Vachon and Dallaire gathered further inspiration for this idea from fellow teachers in SD#72 as well as from established Nature Kindergarten programs.

There are many developmental benefits from spending time in nature which are backed up by numerous research studies, they say.

They said that children are spending too much time in front of screens and it seems like their childhoods are being hijacked by technology. Rich-

ard Louv who is the author of the best selling book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2005), writes, “If getting our kids out into nature is a search for perfection, or is one more chore, then the belief in perfection and the chore defeats the joy,” he wrote. “It’s a good thing to learn more about nature in order to share this knowledge with children; it’s even better if the adult and child learn about nature together. And it’s a lot more fun.”

École des Deux Mondes Principal Joanne Crawford agrees, “Children who play in the forest are more likely to become adults who are environmentally aware and environmentally responsible.” Crawford also pointed out that “deep learning takes place when children are touching trees, building forts, listening to animal calls, and leaving their toys behind to play imaginatively with sticks and stones.”

While playing in nature the children are exposed to many areas of the Kindergarten curriculum including science, social responsibility, physical education, dramatic play and oral language.

Young children learn best from direct experience and they understand the world through play, they all say.

“At École des Deux Mondes we are reserving time every day for our students to play outdoors in nature where they can run, explore, climb, find secret hiding places, dream up stories and just be children.” 