

FLEMINGTON ROAD- ONTARIO'S ORIGINAL "HUB SCHOOL"

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Abstract

The 20th Century saw the beginning of the evolution of the public school from an institution, devoted primarily to academic skills, to a multi-functional service facility. Such American visionaries as John Dewey (1915) and Edward Olsen (1945) saw the role of the school as reflecting the social, economic and political realities of life experience or "the school as an extension of the community it serves". This theory of community education and development spawned the concept of the "community school".

One of the first Canadian examples of community education and development in action was the Flemington Road Community School project serving the Lawrence Heights Ontario Housing Community in the Toronto suburb of North York. Beginning in 1966, this junior kindergarten to grade six facility extended the school day to serve the educational, recreational, health and social development needs of this impoverished community of 5,000. As a result, a full range of services and activities was established both during the day and in the evening for area children, youth and adults. Governance for the project was the responsibility of the Community School Advisory Council consisting of area residents and service providers. The Flemington Road experience has much to inform the current discourse on the potential of the school as a "Multiservice Hub".

The 20th Century saw the beginning of a transformation of the role of the publicly-supported school from a simple purveyor of literacy and numeracy skills to a multi-functional facility. In 1915, the American educational philosopher, John Dewey, condemned the traditional institutional school of the nineteenth century for its sense of isolation from the social, economic and political realities of life experience. **1**

In 1945, Edward Olsen incorporated Dewey's life-centred philosophy in proposing the concept of the "community school". This was an organizational structure that would focus on community needs, identify and mobilize resources in school and community to satisfy these

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needs and serve as a learning centre for people of all ages to acquire the necessary information and skills for community problem solving. **2**

It is gratifying to see the current discourse on the "Hub School" model as a vehicle for local multi-service delivery for community education and development. In the late 1960s, I was privileged to be employed by the North York Board of Education as its first Social Services Consultant assigned to the Lawrence Heights Ontario Housing Community.

But what is community education and development? For the purposes of the Lawrence Heights experience it may be defined as "a cooperative outreach approach to better utilize community and public education resources to produce more relevant and vital learning opportunities and services for people of all ages". **3** The "*Hub School*" should not simply involve the community use of space where services, while occupying the same building, continue to pursue separate professional pathways in isolation from each other and the interests of the people they serve. One case study in community education and development may be found in the Flemington Road Community School program established in Lawrence Heights in 1966.

In 1957, Lawrence Heights was Canada's first low-income public housing area to be built in a suburban setting. It was a discretely concealed enclave at the crossroads of Lawrence Avenue and the proposed Spadina Expressway separated from the surrounding middle income single-family dwellings by institutional fencing. Those inhabiting the neighbouring residential areas and those service and trades people visiting the community often referred to it as "the jungle" – a stigma which hurt personal pride and gave the 5,000 Lawrence Heights residents feelings of inferiority and alienation.

Serving the Lawrence Heights exclusively, Flemington Road Public School grew with the community reaching an enrolment of almost 1,300 students from junior kindergarten to grade six by 1967. Throughout this crucial developmental period, the school was fortunate to have a most outstanding principal in W. K. "Whit" Morris who had participated in a Ford Foundation study group which toured inner city areas in the United States to learn about schooling in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Beginning in 1966 with the creation of the Social Service Project, the Community School philosophy was adopted at Flemington Road Public School as part of a *holistic* program of community education for children and parents in a disadvantaged area. In the belief that the school and the educational opportunity which it represented could not be separated from the community it served, the school endeavoured to extend itself as a partner in community development. Other equal partners included the citizens of the community and the governmental and service agencies devoted to community betterment.

To guide the program and provide a forum for matters of mutual concern, we organized the Community School Advisory Council. Membership included area residents, including youth, and representatives from agencies and groups actively involved or providing organizational support. The chairmanship rotated from meeting to meeting among community residents. Thus,

many resources were brought together under the umbrella of the Community School in a coordinated effort to improve the quality of community life.

In October 1966, the North York Board of Education approved establishment of an after-school program in cooperation with the Parks and Recreation Department. Emphasis was placed upon developing the fullest use of the physical facilities of the school by various community groups through the Principal and myself as Community School Director. In addition to the use of equipment and facilities, groups benefitted from the favourable image the school enjoyed in the community. Some of the highlights were as follows:

- **Extended Day Activities**

After school programs for children included team sports, gymnastics, crafts, quiet games, music lessons, ballet, storytelling, science, judo and social adjustment groups. Leadership was provided by local parents, teachers and community service organizations.

- **Adult Activities**

After a series of community consultations undertaken by the Advisory Council, adult evening programs got underway. Lawrence Heights Family & Child Services developed informal adult get-acquainted sessions. The Parks & Recreation Department began fitness programs for men and women. Rod & Gun and Soccer clubs and a Neighbourhood Association met regularly. The National Council of Jewish Women provided leadership for craft and dramatic groups. Family Night included: a film series, homemakers and weight loss groups, and English improvement classes. Area residents organized coffee parties in private homes where parents and teachers enjoyed a social evening to discuss educational programs and community needs.

- **Youth Activities**

It soon became apparent that one important segment of the community had been overlooked. Lawrence Heights had a large population of young people without recreation facilities. Many were dropouts with nothing to do at night. Alcohol and solvent abuse was rampant among these role models for Flemington school children. When youth became aware that the school was open in the evening, they were soon pounding at the door demanding to participate. As a result, the corridor and adjoining rooms at the front of the school served as a drop-in centre. Music was provided by teen record collections for dancing and listening. The adjoining gymnasium hosted basketball, floor hockey games and table tennis, a TV lounge, crafts and discussion groups were also added. Activities were governed by an elected group of youth monitors. But something was missing. The young people wanted to play snooker and a pool table was not a piece of equipment to be found in an elementary school. Again, the Advisory Council came to the rescue by petitioning the Ontario Housing Corporation for support. Soon a pool table and other recreational equipment were donated.

- **Job Improvement Corps**

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This demonstration project offered unemployed boys who had left school an opportunity to improve their education while gaining skills to aid in their employability. A joint venture, which brought together resources of the Board's Work Study and Adult Education Departments and the facilities of Yorkdale Vocational and Flemington Road Community School. The concept included evening English and mathematics upgrading, an auto shop and a job placement service.

- **Volunteers Unlimited**

This project involved senior students from three North York secondary schools in the Lawrence Heights area. Students volunteered with social service agencies for up to three hours per week and then met once a week with a staff advisor to discuss their placements and share ideas and perceptions. One outcome was the creation of Junior Big Brothers where senior secondary students were matched with boys from the 30% of Lawrence Heights families who were single parent mother-led.

- **Emergency Childcare:**

Parents with pre-school children often had to leave the community for medical or social service appointments or to attend family court several miles from Lawrence Heights. Through the Advisory Council, an emergency childcare program was established – the first of its kind in Metro Toronto. Partners in this program included: the North York departments of Public Health, Welfare & Recreation; Yorkdale Vocational School; and the Mennonite Central Committee who provided volunteer leadership.

- **Hot Lunch Program:**

Catering for the childcare program from Yorkdale Vocational was expanded to provide a hot lunch program for Flemington students. The program included active games and other recreational activities during the lunch period with supervision provided by agency volunteers.

- **Legal Counselling Service:**

A group of students from Osgoode Hall Law School provided volunteer legal aid services for area residents through the Community School.

- **Grocery Cooperative:**

With assistance from St. Phillip's Anglican and the Mennonite Brethren churches, a non-profit cooperative grocery store was opened, sharing space with the Family Service Association's used clothing depot.

- **Interdisciplinary Team:**

The Interdisciplinary Team constituted a unified approach to child and family needs by coordinating services between the school social service staff, public health nurse and the Lawrence Heights Family and Child Services. This combination of the Children's Aid Society

and the Family Service Association chose to locate in the small plaza next door as a result of the community school partnership.

As the best established and most socially accepted resource in the community, Flemington was prepared to assume an active role in community education and development. It was truly “*The Hub*” of its community.

But there is not a happy ending to this story. In the early 1970s, the Ontario Department of Education introduced ceilings on educational spending for school boards, Budgets were restricted and one of the first things to go was funding for community school activities at Flemington and other schools implementing the Flemington model.

What was learned from the Flemington Road experience which might inform current discussions on the “*Hub School*” model? School board policies need to be in place including: the recognition of the role of the school as a focus for community education and development; the provision of school-community development staff; and a commitment to enter into shared funding agreements with community service agencies, citizen groups, and government departments to develop and maintain programming. Most important, however, is the participation of parents, youth and other area residents in determining needs and developing resources to improve the quality of life in their own community.

1 Dewey, J., 1915, *The School & Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

2 Olsen, E. G., 1945, *School & Community*, New York: Prentice Hall

3 Shuttleworth, D. E., 2010, *Schooling for Life, Community Education & Social Enterprise*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Dr. Dale Shuttleworth's professional career as a community educator has included experience as a teacher, school-community worker, consultant, principal, coordinator, school superintendent, university course director and executive director. He has been influential in policy development provincially, nationally and internationally. He has been a speaker and resource leader throughout Canada and the United States and in Europe, Africa and Asia. He has served as an Expert/Consultant to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED) in Paris. He is the author of more than 120 articles in books, journals and periodicals. His publications include “*Enterprise Learning in Action*”, (Routledge, 1993); “*How to Prepare for the GED*”, (Barrons, 1998 & 2001); “*School Management in Transition*”, (Routledge Falmer, 2003); “*GED for Dummies*”, (Wiley, 2003 & 2010); “*Schooling for Life*”, (University of Toronto Press, 2010); “*Playing Fast & Loose*”, (Campaign for Public Education, 2010); and “*GED Cram Plan*”, (Wiley, 2011).

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