

Honoured Aurora educator puts relationships before curriculum

By Brock Weir

Experts agree that 90 per cent of the jobs today's students will ultimately do haven't been invented yet, such is the rapid change that is a hallmark of the world.

So, how do teachers equip their students for this reality?

For Aurora educator David Young, a good first step is putting relationships before curriculum.

Mr. Young, Head of Richmond Hill's TMS School, recently returned from taking this idea to the world, as the only Canadian recipient of the prestigious Kingenstein Center for Independent School Leadership fellowship at Columbia University.

Representing TMS and its philosophy in New York, the two-week fellowship, which began on January 25, gave Mr. Young the opportunity to share these ideas with Heads of School from countries as diverse as Germany, Brazil, Italy, Guatemala, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar.

'This fellowship was certainly humbling because it is not straightforward to get,' says Mr. Young. 'The opportunity to go and have that experience in the middle of a school year was quite a privilege that the community allowed me to do. My overriding sensation was to make sure we use this as well as we can for the school.'

'With 20 Heads of School picked from around the world, you're challenged to think about your leadership. You look at major new research in the science of learning, philosophy of education, issues of social justice, equity, and then you're challenged to bring your school and its context and your own philosophy to bear and see how authentic you've managed to be in that work. It was a real opportunity to reflect, and a reminder that it was done on behalf of our school community who invest their resources in our school. It was a humbling, but exciting opportunity.'

It was a timely opportunity as well as TMS is nearing the end of its current five-year strategic plan.

Four years ago, TMS made a 'bold move' to put relationships first and curriculum second. It was a tough nut to crack, says Mr. Young, but they're well on their way.

'I am really attracted to this moment that happens between a teacher and a student, the relationship that allows a student to be inspired, interested, challenged and supportive,' says Mr. Young, who made his own bold move into teaching in England, Trinidad and the Czech Republic following a career as a professional football player in Scotland. 'That is something we have always looked at in hindsight. We're really interested in, what would it look like to be intentional? Are there gestures, traits and a culture and tone in which every kid we know will get those relational gestures? That's where we believe the most powerful learning happens.'

'Columbia University is involved in a lot of the research around the science of learning,' he adds on how these topics were discussed during the fellowship opportunity. 'Our school's tagline is 'I am known' and the premise of it is the more you know about a child, the fullness of a child, the more likely you are to understand the levers, motivation and tactics through which that child will learn best and believe that every child is completely different from every other child.'

'It was really interesting to have that concept validated with current research that until a child feels like they belong, every other curricular strategy?will never be fully realised. This idea of belonging and what does that mean for a community? Once you start with that premise, you have to understand that teachers won't do their best until they feel they belong.'

Now, back from Columbia, Mr. Young's task is to develop a game plan to see how the takeaways from the fellowship can be translated onto the driving philosophies of TMS.

'Some of the pragmatic and fascinating things going on around the world is the use of neuroscience in developing kids' ability to learn,' he says. 'A couple of schools have taken work that is being done with elite athletes where you look at a screen and have to follow multiple moving objects and, over time, that focuses your concentration. They are involved in a longitudinal study to see how that impacts learning, math and language. It looks like we're going to have the opportunity to join in that study, so that is going to be fascinating.'

'The understanding that the traditional classroom with teachers at the front and kids at desks is getting close to being useless for what the world is looking like and there are students who are going to be working in. How can we reinvigorate that to make the education we provide relevant? 90 per cent of the jobs our students will do haven't been invented yet, so how do you prepare a child for that?'

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