

Learning to a different beat

A recent study that looks beyond high school dropout rates shows aboriginal youth are actually exceeding non-aboriginal youth in learning outside the classroom.

The report by the Canadian Council on Learning looked at schools, but also other areas where people learn, including volunteer work, community groups, cultural activities and spending time with elders.

In 2006, about one in three aboriginal youth were involved in after-school clubs while 37 per cent took part in arts and music activities, compared to 21 per cent and 27 per cent of Canadian youth overall, respectively.

About a third of aboriginal youth also volunteer, while more than half of them do when grown up. On reserve, the numbers jump to 70 per cent.

The findings come as no surprise to Bev Benson, programming co-ordinator at the Bernice Sayese Community Centre, who said they are constantly teaching youth and volunteers even when they don't realize it.

"We involve our volunteers in the actual planning and processes, and we try to incorporate much of the teachings that go with those processes," she said.

She pointed to the "Honouring Our Youth" fashion show on Nov. 21 as an example. While most viewers would have only seen the glamorous outfits, the youth also got to be involved in preparing the show and learning about addictions for addictions awareness week.

Benson said the point is to give people hands-on experiences in everything they do, from cooking classes to just helping out around the centre.

"(I think) the western European school system fails because it doesn't give enough of that hands-on experience," she said. "I'm not sure why it is First Nations people learn better that way, but we do."

Hands-on learning is something that school divisions are trying to include more and more in the classroom, though not only for aboriginal students.

"The whole swing for education right now is having a project for people to do and how are they going to answer those questions. It's more hands-on and making them have ownership over their own education," said Karen Sinoski, a teacher at Westview Community School.

Close to 90 per cent of students at the school are aboriginal, and an elder and group of parents worked with teachers to develop a hands-on social studies unit last June for students in grades 6-8.

The program was developed in consultation with parents and an elder, who also helped teach the class.

It's a program the school's principal Mona Markwart hopes to continue and then measure to see its success.

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