

Preschool system key to Iceland's high literacy level [CA-NL] ^[1]

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EXCERPT

Newfoundland businesspeople head to Ireland for innovative ideas. Some of our educators are turning to Iceland for the same.

Iceland has many striking similarities to this province -- small rural schools and towns, isolation, a strong cultural background and an attachment to ocean resources.

But Iceland has a near 100 per cent literacy rate, much higher than the 66 per cent literacy rate here.

This has been achieved with a school year of 170 days -- about 20 days shorter than in this province. Iceland, which has beaten illiteracy, also boasts an unemployment rate of less than five per cent. It appears preschool and a society that supports a strong education, particularly reading, are major components in enhancing literacy there.

COMPULSORY SWIMMING

In Iceland, swimming is even compulsory, a tradition in Europe. There's strong dedication to the arts and music. School children can be exempt from class to attend private music school, which works in conjunction with compulsory schooling.

Iceland has a state government and local municipalities. There are no provinces. Icelandic municipalities are responsible for delivering education in different regions, offering free education right up to the post-secondary level.

Jean Brown, a Memorial University faculty of education professor, has conducted a comparative study of rural schooling in Iceland and along the Northern Peninsula and southeastern Labrador, school district 2.

Brown, who visited Iceland in December 1998 and April and May 1999 with various stakeholders from this province as part of an educational study tour, believes Newfoundland could do well by following Iceland's lead in establishing preschools for all children.

In Iceland, preschool is the first level of schooling for children ages 2-6. Children between the ages of 6-16 attend what's known as compulsory education.

Iceland's Ministry of Education is responsible for the preschool program and curriculum. Preschool is cost-shared one-third each by parents, municipalities and the state. Parents, however, can avail of subsidies to send their children to preschool.

Brown said the preschool system is a major factor in the enhancement of literacy in Iceland. The preschools offer the resources necessary in a child's learning, such as certified teachers. Preschools have existed in Iceland since 1938. According to 1996 statistics, a large segment of youngsters attend preschool: two-year-olds (60 per cent); three-year-olds (84 per cent); four-year-olds (87 per cent); and five-year-olds (86 per cent).

Brown said there's also a strong connection between preschools and compulsory schools. Children make an easy transition from preschool to the next level, she said.

In Holar, Iceland, for example, a complex houses 16 preschool and 21 compulsory students in a community of 210 people. While both have their own wings within the complex, they share the same kitchen and eating area.

The serving of hot meals is also compulsory there.

Brown takes interest in the concept of preschool and compulsory school being housed in one complex because it promotes the notion of a community centre. "That's my vision of where we should be going in this province," she said, "especially in smaller areas."

Newfoundland doesn't have what's known as preschool, but rather child care, a program administered through the Department of Health. While there's co-operation with the Education Department to provide programming through child care, Newfoundland does not have certified preschools.

"The model we have is not seen as the first level of education," Brown said.

Many children entering kindergarten in this province do not have exposure to books or the pre-kinder-garten experience that "one would want to see in order to be able to successfully begin the reading program," Brown said.

-Reprinted from The Telegram (St. John's)

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