



Intergenerational Classroom

A Partnership between Sherbrooke Community Centre and
Saskatoon Public Schools

PREMIER'S BOARD OF EDUCATION AWARD FOR INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION
SEPTEMBER 2016



School Division: Saskatoon Public Schools

Partner: Sherbrooke Community Centre

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Introduction

iGen is an intergenerational classroom that is a life-changing learning adventure for the 25 students selected annually to attend. Educators are often searching for unique and authentic strategies to supplement the conventional school model. The iGen program challenges both the traditional education and healthcare systems, while providing a holistic learning environment for everyone involved. iGen takes inquiry-based learning to a whole new level. Grade 6 students learn in diverse settings, enjoy hands-on experiences, build trusting relationships with Elders at the Sherbrooke Community Centre, and receive an educational experience that transcends classroom walls. Grade 6 is an ideal time for students to experience this unique alternative approach to learning, as students are forming identities as independent learners, developing personal interests, and are able to work one-on-one with a variety of engaged adults.

Intergenerational classrooms are places where the young, old, and in between can pursue life-long learning in mutually beneficial ways. Providing a classroom in a shared space that invites daily opportunities for people of all ages to participate fosters relationships between the learners and maximizes the learning. The iGen classroom has had a transformative effect on the lives of the elderly and disabled (known as Elders) who make Sherbrooke Community Centre their home, and for Grade 6 students. As Larson (2006) wrote, when reflecting on intergenerational learning at Temple University Centre for Intergenerational Education in Philadelphia:

Older participants, for example, experience enhanced life satisfaction, decreased isolation, fulfillment and a sense of meaning, new and meaningful relationships, and new skills and insights. Younger participants experience increased self-esteem and self-worth, improved behaviour, increased involvement in school work, and a sense of historical and personal continuity. (p.39)

While there are examples of small-scale Canadian intergenerational projects, before iGen there have been no documented shared site intergenerational programs that establish formal partnership between a school division and a care home facility.

The belief behind the iGen intergenerational classroom is that the most important piece of a student's learning is built through human relationships. In 2014, the Saskatoon Board of Education recognized that Sherbrooke Community Centre was an ideal collaborative environment for this type of learning. For students, the iGen intergenerational classroom delivered in partnership with Sherbrooke Community Centre provides a unique opportunity to create authentic learning relationships with Elders that support the achievement of all Grade 6 curricular outcomes while having a transformative effect on students' socio-emotional development.

Our elders and older citizens rarely live in family homes. They often reside in long-term care or seniors complexes. This results in minimal daily contact between children and elders. Children are in schools or daycare, enrolled in activities in the evenings and on weekends, and only see elders when a family visit is planned. In our urban centre, elders and children rarely make spontaneous or natural contact in their daily lives. Intergenerational interactions hold the promise for mutually satisfying relationships among older and younger populations (Whiteland, 2009).



iGen teacher, students, and Elder engaged in musical inquiry at Sherbrooke Community Centre

The iGen intergenerational classroom fosters learning and socio-emotional development for students. It also provides an opportunity for powerful relationships that enrich the lives of young people and Elders. These relationships are built on the Domains of Well-Being for Elders (Eden Philosophy adopted by Sherbrooke) and Saskatoon Public Schools (SPS) own guiding principles around social and cultural development:

EDEN PHILOSOPHY	SPS GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND BELIEFS
1) Identity 2) Growth 3) Autonomy 4) Security 5) Connectedness 6) Meaning 7) Joy	Social and Cultural Development Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Growing with Change - Students will develop knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to both influence and accept change. ○ Democratic and Responsible Decision-Making - Students will develop the knowledge and respect for democratic institutions and the process of government, as well as the desire to participate in the democratic decision-making process. ○ Respect for Others - Students will demonstrate a respect for cultures, values, political and religious beliefs of others. ○ World Citizenship - Students will participate actively in the local community, realize the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and demonstrate a commitment to social justice.

Role of the Saskatoon Board of Education

The Saskatoon Board of Education has played an active role in providing leadership and support to the iGen intergenerational classroom partnership with Sherbrooke Community Centre. In 2013, lead teacher Keri Albert worked with Sherbrooke staff, members of SPS senior administration, community members, and board members to develop the Sherbrooke – SPS partnership and lay out a plan for the iGen program. Darrell Utley, Ward 8 trustee in Saskatoon, has continued to work closely with the iGen program since the first class began in 2014 in order to ensure a strong start to the partnership.



iGen students work on an inquiry project with lead teacher, Keri Albert

In addition to serving on the Board of Education, I have been employed in long-term care for 22 years. I have seen first-hand the learning relationship between students and elders in the iGen program. iGen teacher Keri Albert takes the students on a year-long education journey that will impact their life forever as they forge friendships with elders and discover how staff support their physical and intellectual needs. I had the opportunity to attend a multi-media intergenerational writing group presentation called "Then and Now" that saw students and elders share their life experiences through a read-a-loud writing event for Sherbrooke residents, staff and iGen students. The iGen program is an example of how Saskatoon Public Schools responds to the needs of 21st-century learners.

- Darrell Utley, Saskatoon Public Schools Trustee

Innovation

The iGen program is not a new idea at all. Rather, it taps into some of our most ancient learning traditions that rely on the human connection between Elders and youth. These traditions are found in many cultures, and in the Saskatchewan context, can be seen as an authentic path towards reconciliation through innovation in education. Young people and Elders often exist in different places and spaces especially in urban settings. This means that we have two groups of human beings who may not naturally interact throughout their daily lives. In a healthy community, children and Elders and every age in between have contributions to make while living and learning together. iGen is a program where these two groups are brought together and given the time and space to form natural relationships based on trust and mutual respect. With the Eden Alternative approach as a guiding philosophy, children and Elders learn that there are three plagues – loneliness, boredom and

helplessness – that are a detriment to our Elders. With friendship, fun, spontaneity and variety at the heart, the iGen students and the Elders at Sherbrooke work together to combat these plagues and begin to appreciate the abundance of every day.

iGen is innovative because it gives Grade 6 students the opportunity to develop learning relationships between the young and the elderly in an ongoing, authentic way. Smiling at an Elder, engaging in conversation, asking questions and listening to another human being can turn a regular day into a meaningful one. Through interacting with people of all ages, abilities, and physical descriptions, the iGen students begin to see that everyone has a human spirit beneath their exterior. iGen students learn to communicate in different ways as they get to know the people who live and spend time at Sherbrooke. They learn to use body language, eye contact, gestures and active listening strategies so that the Elders they are talking with can be heard and understood. Many iGen students grow in their comfort and confidence as they build friendships with people at Sherbrooke. Wheelchairs and walkers become ways of getting around rather than defining the person who uses them. iGen is innovative because students and Elders build a circle of caring where each gives to the other, thus enhancing everyday life. School work and studies become a point of reference that the students can access as a way of inviting Elders into conversation and inquiry learning. Students describe the iGen year as life changing. Students leave the iGen program as empathetic, community-minded individuals who reflect both the values of Saskatoon Public Schools (respect, excellence, joy, and responsibility) and the Eden philosophy.

Sustainability

As a designated unique program within Saskatoon Public Schools, the Board of Education has committed to ongoing funding of staff and program infrastructure for the iGen classroom. Staffing for the intergenerational classroom program is an integrated part of the overall staffing at École College Park School. Keri Albert does an excellent job mentoring other staff and partners associated with the iGen program.

Ongoing support from Sherbrooke Community Centre and its staff is achieved via regular partnership meetings between Sherbrooke and SPS administrators, and iGen program staff. The Board has reported on the iGen program's progress each year, and has announced its intent to continue investing in the program in each public Report to the Community since iGen's inception in 2014.

Cost of the Innovation Related to Benefits Achieved

The iGen intergenerational classroom is a strong example of how community partnerships can transform student learning with minimal cost. The iGen program is staffed using a traditional staffing model, and curriculum outcomes are addressed in a unique way with minimal additional investment by the Board of Education. The transformative gains made by students point towards the power of community partnerships to elevate learning. The intergenerational classroom is a lighthouse program for Saskatoon Public Schools and a great model for all classrooms in the division.

Impact of Innovation on Elders and Sherbrooke Community Centre



Elder Jodi Grant instructs reading with a small group of iGen students

Dr. Jodi Grant, Sherbrooke Elder:

The iGen program has had a profound effect on my life. I had a catharsis in that I went from a daily dread that I was still alive and breathing for one more supremely boring, painful day (all my days are painful!) to an anticipation of another day which would be as awesome as the previous day and the one before that.

I have a doctorate in Literacy and many long years ago had been on faculty at the U of S and the University of the West Indies. All of that education and experience was doing nothing for me or anyone else. So when Keri invited me to teach, really teach once again, I was exhilarated! My days were then influenced by iGen - by the smiles, the hellos, the assistance, the care that was immediately forthcoming.

I had a classroom that welcomed me again. When I was part of the read-aloud that Keri held each day, I was eager to get out of bed. What a thrill and what fun to do limerick lessons and to be part of that exciting iGen learning environment.

The idea of innovation in learning is important. The opportunity for these 6th grade kids to learn leadership skills, to promote compassion and to adapt in a challenging environment will be with them for the rest of their lives. The point of my comments is to explain that iGen is about learning, it's about fun, it's about elders discovering that we are still of use, that we are valued, our skills and abilities are an essential part of iGen. As we interact with an iGener, they grow and so do we.

This past June, Elders handed each student a graduation scroll. It was an amazing event and was the first of what I hope will be many more years of iGen students learning at Sherbrooke. The world is aging and an alliance between the young and old is essential for a future that gives elders opportunities to stay viable as they give back and for students to learn from the life experiences of those that have, or think they have, seen it all.

iGen saved me, and that, in fact, is the truth. I was on a downward spiral. As great as Sherbrooke is as a residence, no matter how innovative and noble the intent of the Eden Philosophy, it took those 6th grade kids to bring life back into focus for me. Instead of spending my days searching for ways to end my life, I'm now so excited by these boys and girls. I wanted, and still want, to live.

iGen Graduation Speech by Matt Proctor, Sherbrooke Elder:

It is very possible that the lessons you have learned here at Sherbrooke may go on to change our world one day. You have learned how to listen and communicate with compassion and empathy; you have brought your artistic and academic gifts to life here: instrumentals, dancing, singing, science, gymnastics and community service. Through these expressions, I believe you enriched our Elder's lives, and I hope you continue to let that light in you shine on. You have been a great blessing to us all. By taking the time to help our Elders when needed and by being friendly conversationalists and knowing that the little things we do each day greatly affects our lives and also for caring enough to do them.

Thank you to our iGen graduating class.

Partnerships in Support of the Innovation

Kim Schmidt, Leader of Resident Care Services at Sherbrooke Community Centre:

The success stories as a result of iGen are many. For elders, the idea that they are important to these children cannot be underestimated. Whether the contact with students is one-on-one or in a group, elders have responded with real excitement. Often you will hear Dennis saying, "Wonderful, wonderful" as he breaks into song. William, who cannot communicate verbally, somehow communicates easily with the students he loves. They accept him and love him regardless of his physical limitations. The students have taken the time to interpret for him and make him feel that he is important in their lives. William throws them a kiss. Jodi, a former teacher, and university professor who found herself at Sherbrooke after an accident, didn't feel she had a reason to get out of bed. She now teaches weekly in the classroom. Her involvement with iGen has changed her second life. She is

needed and her presence at school is a great asset. Her specialty is limericks. She is a great support to the teachers and shares her experience and wisdom willingly. Her role in the classroom has given her other opportunities to speak and to champion the program. Matt talks to the kids about his life story and teaches them about resilience and survival. He shares his story in order to show others that life's challenges make you strong and his experiences have given a perspective on life that he shares freely with students. He is a teacher with purpose. Many other elders have taken roles in the classroom, have taught science lessons, shared their hobbies, given advice and been a support to kids who need a helping hand. The elders will say we are important enough that kids want to be with us, we still can be useful, and have a purpose. Elders still have the ability to mold and change young lives.

Colleen Pylypow, Manager of Volunteers & Community Events at Sherbrooke Community Centre:
The iGen classroom has been an amazing intergenerational opportunity for students and Elders to connect, mentor, care for, grow, create, explore, and become world makers. Being the ones who create change both locally and globally has been the most rewarding and "we can" moments in the lives of these youth and Elders. Together we have formed a We Day/Free the Children committee that has through fundraising efforts raised over \$10,688.89 since the beginning of iGen (2014) for Magburaka, our adopted village in Sierra Leone Africa. This money has helped support the village in obtaining clean drinking water and has also been used to build a school. On a local level, iGen and Elders have been involved in fundraising to support the Saskatoon Telemiracle and a family at Sherbrooke who was dealing with a health crisis. The two generations have supported the local Saskatoon Food Bank through the "We Scare Hunger" drive and have donated 1,047.2 lbs. of food and \$111.00 cash over the past two years. Six of the iGen students continue to visit with Elders at Sherbrooke and have come through the youth volunteer program. It has been wonderful for the Elders and students to foster their friendship throughout the summer months. iGen has opened our eyes to new youth leadership opportunities at Sherbrooke Community Centre and we will continue to build on the foundations formed through the intergenerational successes and build on more unique mentoring and learning opportunities for the "world changers" of tomorrow.

Evidence of Improved Student Achievement

Exit data using the Fountas & Pinnell and reading assessment tool and Math Diagnostic tools show that iGen students achieve math and literacy targets at similar levels to other Grade 6 students. However, the most significant student gains by those who participate in the iGen program come in the domains of social and cultural development. These gains are tracked each year during a series of interviews with students and parents, and compared to teacher observations. The following is a typical sampling of student and parent comments about student socio, emotional, and cultural development over the course of a year in the program:

Carlee Desmarais, iGen student, 2014-2015 class:
iGen is one of the best decisions I've ever made. I don't regret one little bit of this experience. It has truly changed me, so thank you to Keri, Lynda, the Elders, and this class for making this the best year ever. iGen helped me to follow my dreams and to step out of my comfort zone. You don't know what's ahead of you and iGen helped me be ready for that.

How iGen made an impact in my life?

iGen was so much more than I imagined. I was left with so many gifts....I can publicly speak now with no fear! I have learned everyone has a story, and to take time to listen and learn from them. I have learned to not take things for granted, and every day is a chance to help others. I was given an opportunity to meet amazing people. I now know I want to work in the health-care world when I get older. Keri taught me learning can be fun. She believes we are all world changers, that we all have strengths, and to step out of our comfort zones - you never know what will happen. This was the most amazing year of my life and nothing can top it.



Elders and iGen students develop computer literacy skills together



iGen students perform a musical number for a Sherbrooke Elder in the cafeteria

Natasha Salaash, iGen parent, 2014-2015 class:

Mateyo's year in iGen literally changed his life and, while there are numerous stories that I could use as examples of this, I'm going to pick one that speaks to me the most.

When I visited Mateyo in iGen, I quickly noticed his ease and comfort with being around Elders and people with mental and physical disabilities. There was one man whom he had a particularly close relationship with and they had developed a unique kind of sign language. Watching them interact, I marveled at Mateyo's ability to follow instructions without words and at the obvious bond they shared. I realized that at the age of 36, I was slightly uncomfortable in this setting and yet my son, who was only 11, felt totally at home.

Mateyo's comfort with people from all walks of life was perfectly demonstrated when one year after he finished at iGen, I took him and his siblings to work at The Friendship Inn – a place that provides meals for homeless and people living in poverty. I have five children and as we worked I watched them all and noticed their ease or discomfort at being there. Some of the clients were under the influence of drugs or alcohol, some yelled or cried, and many didn't fit into the societal norms that my kids were used to. I saw Mateyo move with confidence and compassion helping people at each table. Seemingly feeling no discomfort at all, he went with the flow and easily adapted to each person or situation. He treated all of the people with respect and dignity and quickly made friends. At the end of our shift while the rest of us stood waiting, Mateyo was reluctant to leave a conversation he was having with a group of elderly men. He hung on every word they spoke as they told him stories of their youth and gave him advice on how to be a good person and successful in life. Before we left the elders called me over to tell me what a wonderful son I have and how proud I must be. I was and am proud of him and wished that my other children had had the experience he had in iGen so that they too would feel just as comfortable in situations like this. iGen encouraged Mateyo to be adaptable, to look beyond the exterior of a person and to know that no matter what a person's current situation is, there is always a wealth of gifts and knowledge inside them.

Sherry Van Hesteren and Tim Nickel, iGen parents 2014-2015 class

Our son was in the first iGen class. We were so excited for him to have the opportunity to learn among children and Elders, as he experienced the regular classroom setting with only same-age peers to be competitive and impersonal. In iGen, not only did he feel the care and support of Elders as he learned; Keri designed learning experiences that allowed him to see that his community also needed him and his gifts. Jonah made powerful discoveries about people from the first day. He reported, with a combination of wonder and confidence, "You can't really tell much about a person just by looking at their bodies." He began to assume that each person has a complex, largely hidden identity. Over time, this has made Jonah a more attentive, caring, and open-minded person. Jonah has never found school easy. In the iGen environment, he recognized that others have challenges too, and he was supported to develop a positive self-image even through hard times. Keri Albert is a teacher, healer, and builder who believed in Jonah every step of the way and helped him to start to believe in himself and his worth. iGen made Jonah's Grade 6 year exceptional and produced a fundamental change in his character, making him more able to love himself and others.

Recognition of Achievement in the Community

The iGen intergenerational classroom has been recognized in the wider community as having greatly impacted student learning and development:

- Lieutenant-Governor's Award Nomination – Learning and the Arts Category
- Canadian Living Me to We Award – Keri Albert, Winner, 2016

Conclusion – Looking Ahead

iGen is a marvelous example of a skilled teacher with vision and expertise developing a partnership and presenting an innovative idea to our school division. Our trustees saw the possibilities with this program and strongly supported iGen from the beginning. Through the program, Keri Albert has created an educational experience that nurtures students' confidence, emotional well-being and community mindedness. Connecting youth with Elders fosters authentic learning opportunities, supportive relationships and the development of a student's whole self. This program will pay dividends, not only for these students' future opportunities and contributions, but for our entire community.

– Director Barry MacDougall

The partnership between Saskatoon Public Schools and Sherbrooke Community Centre is continually evolving and growing as we work together to ensure student success, and foster healthy relationships with Elders in our community. This innovative approach to sharing responsibility for education is an excellent example of the kind of life-changing learning that can occur when publicly funded health care and school systems work together for the benefit of Elders and students. This model of education service delivery is the first of its kind in Canada, and can help lead to an even brighter future for our Elders and youth.