

October 25, 2013

Human Ecology Forum:

Message from Arlene Skull, PHEc
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Having reviewed the Academic Structure presented by the U of M, as a Principal, many questions and concerns about the future of Human Ecology in schools arise:

-what would be the qualifications required to be able to teach Foods and Nutrition, Family Studies and Textiles in the schools?

-who will provide the courses and training for our teachers?

-as a Principal will I be looking for a Human Ecologist able to teach all areas, which is the case in most schools, or will I be pursuing a teacher with a major or minor teachable such as we do in math etc. ?

-how will the children in my school have the opportunity to have the instruction and hands-on learning they need for their future lives?

In an age when businesses and banks and other universities feel the need to step up to provide the information and skills about Nutrition, Family Studies and Infant Care to students, it is a red flag for us in the schools.

Does the university itself understand the course content and/or the need for this training at the university level and therefore the courses in the in schools that our children need?

At the present time, Home Economics or Human Ecology is a viable, very busy section of our schools. In most cases, teachers are educated to, and do teach across the curricular areas. Student enrollment in Senior High is above the numbers required to establish classes and is a very popular option. We offer many courses: Business Ed., Accounting, Entrepreneurship, Computer, Digital Photography etc. and Human Ecology courses, despite the competition, are always full.

This is due to a high level of student interest in the Human Ecology courses and is fully supported by several school divisions. There has been construction and renovations to up-date the Food and Nutrition room at Gordon Bell and similar construction and up-dates in West Kildonan Collegiate, Steinbach High School and Leila North School.

In Winnipeg there are increased numbers of families using food banks, increased teen births, immigrant families unused to the foodways and culture of Canada, northern students living on their own, single parent families that either are on assistance or work at more than one job and shift work and therefore unable to spend much time with children, students with physical and mental disabilities that require specialized knowledge, and an increase in obesity and diabetes in children and youth.

More than ever, we need students to be educated in Nutrition, Child Development, and Parenting. For this we need highly skilled and qualified teachers. The faculty that provides this is has been the Faculty of Human Ecology.

2.

I realize that there is amongst some, a philosophy that if you can teach, you can teach anything so why should we worry. This is a myth. Expectations today are such, that a high school teacher must be an expert in their field if we are to prepare students for future life, education and a career. To put a Math teacher in a Phys. Ed. class or a Phys. Ed. teacher in a Pre-Cal math class is a disservice to our students and no Principal would consider doing this. To ask a teacher who has majored in Sociology or Phys. Ed. to teach the Food and Nutrition part of the Human Ecology courses would be as much of a disservice.

I, personally have witnessed substitutes who believe they are qualified to teach Family Studies or Food and Nutrition and they teach what they “know” and or have heard about or read on the internet or watched on Oprah. As Principals we have all dealt with such subs, who feel insulted when asked about their qualifications, but have informed students that if they eat honey instead of sugar, they will not get diabetes, if they increase zinc in their diets, they will decrease the risk of cancer, if children are breast-fed, they will not need inoculations. In our Division we now, do not permit untrained teachers to be in a Practical Arts area. This was established due to both safety concerns and to misinformation passed on by uneducated subs. Now, to avoid these situations of false information, the teachers have prepared lessons for non-qualified sub and qualified subs.

Our children and youth need to learn accurate information on nutrition, care of homes, community responsibilities, normal stages of life and expectations at each stage from infancy to the aged, foodways of different cultures and consumerism etc. This information needs to be skillfully taught by highly qualified teachers. These specialists need to be able to provide accurate information, a variety of learning opportunities and hands-on experiences so that our youth leave the schools able and ready for life.

At Gordon Bell, students in the Foods courses are taught all of the usual nutritional information, adaptations for cultural and religious requirements, specialty diet requirements, needs for different ages and stages of life and sanitary food preparation as well as consumer decisions in shopping for families food and nutritional requirements.

In the Fabrics and Textiles courses, student are similarly taught and in addition contribute to the school or societal need such as making Alzheimer Quilts, volunteering in the Infant lab to learn about child development and their needs and the healthy food requirements in our cafeteria.

In the Family Studies course students learn about child development, effective parenting, selection of appropriate age level reading and toys, prenatal and infant care, babysitting.

None of these are Sociology courses or Phys Ed. courses or Recreation courses, which have their place in the school curriculum, but are not substitutes for, what is taught in the Human Ecology courses.

3.

It has astounded me that the crisis in youth health and physical fitness, and the increased use of food banks has been addressed by businesses such as Royal Bank, Sun Life and the University of Winnipeg. I applaud their sense of social responsibility and their willingness to provide qualified assistance, instruction, hands-on activities and the financial backing for these after school programs.

On the other hand I am deeply concerned that there appears to be little understanding of the need for these life preparation courses at the post-secondary institutions plus the need for qualified teachers to instruct young people in these life courses.

When we are considering changing or blending the Faculty of Human Ecology into a common faculty with Recreation, Kinesiology and/or the College of Medicine, it is a scary scenario.

Will there be teachers equipped to instruct the subjects that have been identified as needs in the schools that have been, to date, addressed in Human Ecology courses?

Will university students be able to enrol or specialize in the required areas of study?

Are we considering our moral and ethical responsibilities to the youth of today and tomorrow?

In the pictures of the students you have seen, students are actively engaged in learning and hands-on experiences in parenting, food preparation, nutrition, different cultures, textiles, clothing requirements and contributing to the school culture or society. These topics, taught through the Human Ecology curriculum, address basic human needs and skills that, as a society, we all need to take a role in assuring they are provided to our youth.

If the courses that provide the children in our schools with these skills are not available at the university level for our future teachers, will these necessary skills be lost?

Can we, as a society, afford to lose these courses?

If we, as Human Ecologists have concerns that the needs of our teachers and students are not going to be met by the changes in the Restructuring Initiative at the University of Manitoba. We need to make absolutely sure that our reasons for concern are clearly articulated and known to all. We must ensure that our children are taught by informed highly qualified teachers and that they leave our schools provided with the knowledge and skills that they require to be resilient and contributing citizens.

We, all of us, in education, business and government have a moral responsibility to see that every child and young person is taught essential courses by qualified teachers and they leave school, well prepared for a fulfilling and meaningful future life.