



SEVEN OAKS  
SCHOOL DIVISION  
*community begins here*

# Community

B E G I N S H E R E

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## Big Picture Learning

When 17-year-old Marie first walked into the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Centre in Providence, RI, the then school freshman didn't quite know what to make of it.

She had never been all that invested in her education. She didn't care much for learning new things. And she certainly had never seen anything like the school before.

"I had no idea who I was, where I was, what I was getting myself into or what I wanted to do with my life," says Marie, who is now rounding out her fourth and final year at what is best known only as The Met – an extraordinary educational setting that boasts Rhode Island's highest attendance, graduation and college acceptance rates.

### Meet the Met

Since educators Elliot Washor and Dennis Littky founded the Met in 1995, it has become famous for quality and innovative education.

At the Met, students are part of advisories – not classrooms – and they remain under the tutelage of one advisor for the entirety of their high school tenure. Instead of studying traditional lessons, each student works with his or her advisor to develop learning plans that best suit their skill and interest sets and then applies that knowledge to a Learning Through Internship program in the "real world."

In the last seven years – with help from Bill and Melinda Gates and under its new banner of Big Picture Learning – the Met has spawned more than 60 Big Picture, Met-inspired schools across the world.

This fall, that number will total one more with the opening of the first Canadian Big Picture school – right within the walls of Garden City Collegiate.

"This is about the power of unlocking passion and motivation," says Seven Oaks School Division Superintendent Brian O'Leary, the driving force behind bringing Big Picture Learning to Winnipeg.

### The Big Picture Comes into Focus

On March 3, select SOSD administration and staff along with other Winnipeg educators gathered to hear Elliot Washor explain the values of Big Picture Learning and educate themselves on what is about to come to SOSD.

"We have changed what school is, structurally, in some very significant ways," says Washor, who – with Littky – developed the Met (and later, Big Picture Learning) in an attempt to have students take responsibility for their own education and put their learning into practice.

Students still graduate with the academic requirements to attend post-secondary education and also to comply with legislative requirements. They just accomplish their credits



in ways which differ from traditional learning. In addition to participating in internships – which, by the way, students set up themselves – each student must also complete a project in senior year that best demonstrates strengths and improves weaknesses.

Washor says this encourages students to discover themselves and their individuality – an approach SOSD strongly agrees with.

"We've always been a very progressive division and a division that truly puts children first," says



students and advisors. Parents, mentors and community members at large are all part of the learning process.

“Our advisors don’t just teach,” Washor says. “We aren’t just students or one student, it’s a whole community but it’s one student at a time. We let the outside in and the inside out of the school.”

create work he believes in while meeting and exceeding expectations of everyone involved in learning. (As is mandated at each Met school, his mother is also incredibly involved in lesson planning and is considered part of the school community.)

“It’s a whole new world in comparison to other schools,” Randy says. “In most schools teachers don’t know you, don’t know who you are. I was lacking a lot. But the Met really pushed me. I look at myself and think, Wow I’m really successful at life.”

O’Leary. “The notion behind the Met school of one kid at a time and finding out what is the magic ingredient to be successful with every student is a quest that we’ve always been on. We now just see this as a model that puts that in place and has a proven success record.”

So what is that proof?

When Big Picture opened its school in Camden, NJ, the city-wide dropout rate sat at 87 per cent. The first class of the Camden Met earned a 96 per cent graduation rate. Many Met students study college-level courses in high school. And more than 90 per cent of the graduates move on to graduate college.

That, Washor says, is due in part to the fact that capacity at most Met schools tops out at 120 – the size educators view as ideal for facilitating and targeting learning.

The founders, he says, have designed Big Picture Learning to be less about teaching and more about facilitating development that can – unlike a more traditional educational curriculum – be applied to real-world settings.

The philosophy is carried out with great cooperation – and not only between

## Helping Students Find Their Spark

Greg Young, a four-year veteran advisor at the Met in Providence, also spoke at the SOSD session and brought with him two success story students who will graduate this fall. Those two – Marie and Randy, another 17-year-old student – are glowing examples of what the Met is all about: students and advisors working together

“With each kid, at some point something will spark, something will catch and something changes,” Young says. “Part of that comes from us getting to know the kids so they’re more than just a face in the class. We know their families, we know their lives and we know their learning experiences.”

Both Marie and Randy will be the first in their respective families to graduate high school and both have already been accepted to post-secondary programs – Marie will work towards a career in neuropsychology at the University of Southern New Hampshire on a full scholarship and Randy will attend a nuclear medicine program offered through the Rhode Island Hospital.

Randy attributes his success to the freedom he received to explore and

According to O’Leary, SOSD can only wish its students will have as much success as those coming out of the other Met schools across the world.

Some 45 students are expected to register at Garden City’s Met for September, with another 45 in 2010 and 30 more in 2011. O’Leary says the SOSD approach to Big Picture Learning will offer students the best of both worlds and set them on a path to self-discovery and success.

“Our kids can sing in a choir or play on a football team and also pursue their own passion,” he says. “We think there’s tremendous promise in that model and look forward to learning as we go.”

As far as Marie and Randy are concerned – and they, admittedly, share a common mindset with most Met kids – that approach to learning may be the best thing going.

“It’s a whole new world,” Randy says.

And that world is coming to SOSD.

***If you are interested in finding out more about the Met School at Garden City Collegiate contact Adair Warren at 339-2058 or [adair.warren@7oaks.org](mailto:adair.warren@7oaks.org)***

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