

A dramatic move to make students KEEN on learning

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Students huddled in groups of five one recent Wednesday morning while icy snow swirled outside their classroom window. As the clock ticked, they talked strategy, casting occasional glances at the chalk board. When the teacher gave a 30-second warning, the groups scrambled into tightly knit formations, including a human pyramid.

This is exactly the kind of acrobatics banned in most schools, but in Peter Pendli's Grade 7 classroom at Franklin Street Public School in Markham, Ont., it's part of science class, a student demonstration of what the liquid molecules in a soda can do when left in the freezer.

Franklin Street Public School is one of more than 150 in the Greater Toronto Area that have begun implementing KEEN learning methods. (The letters stand for kinesthetic, endorphins, experiential and narrative). The method is a new approach to teaching developed by Edmond Dixon, a former principal turned educational crusader.

He touts the KEEN method as a way to tackle the grim statistics that quantify all the ways Canadian schools are failing: Nearly a quarter of students don't finish high school, earn less, have increased rates of imprisonment and, on average, shorter life spans than their better educated peers.

His theory is that these students aren't slipping through the cracks because they're less capable learners, they're slipping because they learn differently. In the right conditions, these students could thrive.

"Context often defines ability," Dr. Dixon is fond of saying.

In the book he's written as a guide to his method, *KEEN For Learning*, Dr. Dixon compares the current approach to teaching to leeching. For hundreds of years, doctors used leeches to drain blood from the sick and dying and were unaware they were exposing their patients to new diseases. New brain research, he argues, shows that many methods employed in our current education system are well-intentioned but leave some students behind.

There is evidence that emotions have a profound effect on cognition. Fear can inhibit learning, and Dr. Dixon believes that many students are in a mild state of anxiety in the classroom. They're nervous of being called on, worried about looking stupid or afraid of failing grades, and this makes it really hard to pick up what's being taught.

The KEEN method aims at providing tools for nullifying fear.

The resulting strategies look a lot like a drama class. One example involves students pairing off to tell a story one word at a time. They take turns saying a word, and have to work together to craft a cohesive plot. This

technique can be used to talk about the characters in a novel the students are reading, or a civilization they're learning about. The theory is that it reinforces learning and can take the place of a lecture or a class discussion.

There are reasons for skepticism. The idea of multiple intelligences and kinetic learners is not new, and there is a growing chorus of doubt around some of the brain science KEEN is built upon.

"We are all seeking ways to challenge, motivate and engage students, but this model recycles rather dated progressivist ideas in a newly labelled, suspicious looking bottle," said Paul Bennett, a veteran educator and director of Schoolhouse Consulting, who reviewed Dr. Dixon's website. "... The KEEN program raises red flags."

Mr. Bennett said the program seems to emphasize fun over meaningful learning.

For anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000, depending on the depth of the training, Dr. Dixon and his team of retired teachers and principals visit schools and teach teachers the KEEN method.

"The goal is to make this more widely available to teachers because it is really simple to use," Dr. Dixon said.

Another KEEN example involves the students forming still lifes, or frozen pictures that portray concepts they're learning in class, as when Mr. Pendli's students pretended to be molecules.

The classroom was like a beehive as they discussed the imagined pop can in the freezer. Every student in the class had ideas about how to arrange themselves, and every last one was a vocal participant in the exercise. As they critiqued each other's formations, they identified bonds as the culprits that keep the molecules locked together and made accurate contrasts with gas and liquids, all with only a few questions and interjections of Mr. Pendli.

"It's amazing what [KEEN] has done for student engagement," said Catarina Burisch, the principal at Franklin Street Public School. "We're hearing their ideas, they're contributing to the lesson and they're learning."

It isn't clear yet whether Mr. Bennett's concerns can be dismissed, whether that engagement translates into improved student outcomes. Franklin Street was one of the first to introduce the KEEN program last school year, and it wasn't until teachers underwent more intensive in-class training with Dr. Dixon this fall that they started regularly implementing his methods.

Zack Roche, 12, an outspoken member of Mr. Pendli's class, had a very simple take on the program.

"I think it's a lot better than just pencils and paper and listening to the teacher," he said.