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## EDUCATION

### Dutch look to Met model for kid-centered schools

By William Hamilton  
 PBN Staff Writer

Although Dennis Littky has spent his career as an educator, these days he's finding more and more that he's playing the role of exporter, too.

The product he's shipping around the world: an innovative and highly successful method of educating inner-city children.

The co-founder of the Providence-based Met Center has had visitors from Australia, South Korea and Israel who have gone on to set up versions of his school in their own countries.

And the international interest continued last week when a group of high-level Dutch officials toured the four-school campus on Public Street in Providence, talked with state and local officials and visited students at their internships.

"We're all proud that they're taking something we've done and they are picking it up not only all over the country, but now other countries are taking this model," Littky said last week.

It's not the first time that a group from the Netherlands has been here. In fact, Littky said 50 to 100 Dutch school principals have visited for each of the last three years to learn the intricacies of the Met Center model.

But the latest trip marks a stepped-up effort by education officials in that country to use Littky's creation. There are about five schools using a model based on the Met Center in the Netherlands, Littky said, but the Dutch want to boost that number to 100 schools soon.

Why is the Met Center garnering all this attention? Its success in getting inner-city students to graduate and go to college.

About 75 percent of the Met students are black or Hispanic and 68 percent of them come from low-income families. At the same time, attendance rates have averaged 94 percent and graduation rates have averaged 95 percent over 10 years. Other Providence high schools averaged an attendance rate of 80 percent and a graduation rate of 55 percent over the same period.

Met Center administrators credit the personalized education each student receives for keeping them in school.

When they enter the school, children get an individualized learning plan based on their interests. They then learn from mentors who work in the fields they want to pursue.

The students spend two days each week at their internships. The rest of the week is spent working on projects based on those internships. Teachers – they follow the same students throughout their four years at the Met – integrate lessons in math, science, reading and social studies along the way.

"We're using their interests as a way to get them to learn the skills of life," said Littky.

In contrast, Dutch officials last week described a system in that country that lacks flexibility in which students are placed in one of two educational tracks when they're as young as 13.



PBN PHOTO / MATTHEW HEALEY

**JOE BATTAGLIA**, director of school network support for the Big Picture Company, takes Dutch education officials Renata Voss, center, and Barbara Siregar on a campus tour.

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Based in part on testing, about 60 percent of Dutch students are steered into vocational training while the other 40 percent head into a track with a scholarly focus.

During a break from the tour of the Met Center last week, several Dutch officials said they believed their educational system is flawed, forcing students into certain areas of study too early in life.

There are other problems, too, and the team of Dutch educators turned to the Met Center for some answers, said Paul Delhaas of KPC Groep, a professional development organization for Dutch educators.

Dirk van der Spoel, chairman of an advisory board to the Dutch education minister, said school lessons in the Netherlands often neglect to show students how they can be applied outside the classroom, leaving many bored and without a sense of purpose. And that leads to a high dropout rate, van der Spoel said.

"This is a great mixture of general education and how the real world works," van der Spoel said of the Met Center. "What they do here wonderfully is connect those two things."

The size of Dutch schools – some enroll as many as 2,500 students – also poses a problem. Because students aren't able to easily forge relationships with their teachers, many fall in the cracks, Dutch officials said. In the vocational track, up to 50 percent of the students drop out.

"How is the Met able to create that relationship that not only retains children in school but also makes them really learn?" Delhaas said. "That's something we're really interested in."

The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center has come a long way since Littky and Elliot Washor started it in 1996 with 50 students in the Shepard Building in Providence.

There are now seven schools in Rhode Island, each with about 150 students, funded and overseen by the state. The schools are at full capacity, and the students are selected for enrollment by lottery.

In recent years, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has awarded more than \$10 million to Littky's nonprofit Big Picture Company, which oversees the Met Center. The money has been used to open about 50 similar schools around the country, mostly recently in Nashville and St. Louis.

The Big Picture Company has established an affiliate in Australia and has just formalized an agreement with KPG Groep to do the same in the Netherlands.

Last week, the Dutch officials marveled at the Met Center's success and at the enthusiasm of the students and the educators, something they don't always find in the Netherlands. "What we see here is a child-centered organization," said van der Spoel. "The Met is looking at what their passion is."

"And the passion of the teachers is just incredible," added Frank Lambriks, another Dutch education official. •

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