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Maximum City course has teens planning tomorrow's Toronto

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A UTS teacher hopes his summer course on city building will be a jumping-off point for an urban-studies component in the Ontario high-school curriculum

Mathew Bertin of Metrolinx has just fielded a question about how the Toronto subway is regarded internationally, and is attempting to paint an optimistic portrait.

"People used to come from around the world to see our transit system," he says, pausing to allow his audience to absorb the statement.

A second later, the room explodes in high-pitched giggles as countless knowing eye-rolls are exchanged.

It shouldn't be surprising that the members of this group find Mr. Bertin's comment funny. Most of them are well aware of the TTC's shortcomings as they take it at least twice a day: to and from school.

"Yeah, I heard it was, like, the best ... in the 1970s," laughs one teenage boy.

Mr. Bertin is addressing a classroom of 15- and 16-year-olds, a demographic that is not regularly consulted about urban issues, or asked for its take on how well the streetcar runs or the parks are maintained.

But this week, the 30 teens participated in a five-day course called Maximum City at the University of Toronto School, a week-long primer on city building that cost each student \$125 and one of the last, precious weeks of their summer vacation.

"I thought if I had a better understanding of how things work, I'd be better positioned to try and make a difference in the future," said Isabella Chiu, 15, a Grade 11 student who was one of the successful applicants out of more than 50 who applied for the pilot program.

The class is the creation of Josh Fullan, a French and drama teacher at UTS who would like to see urban issues formally incorporated into the Ontario high-school curriculum.

As the director of the school edition of the popular Jane's Walk program, in which students lead tours of their school neighbourhood, he realized that young Torontonians have a profound interest in how cities work, but are offered little information about municipal issues in their civics curriculum.

"We don't study cities in schools," said Mr. Fullan. "But I've really found that students were ready to have these conversations about urban issues. They had incredible ideas about improving the city. It's just a question of inviting them to the table."

Working with a total of about \$10,000 from a provincial grant and the money raised from student registration fees, Mr. Fullan recruited a group of instructors ranging from architects to cycling experts and Mr. Bertin, the community and stakeholder relations specialist for the provincial transit authority.

During Mr. Bertin's presentation about Metrolinx, the group of teens listened politely while rapidly assembling the cardboard model trains he brought for them.

But when he paused for questions, the young men and women were not shy with their thoughts, or their criticism.

"Why has it taken so long for this technology to be implemented?" Allan Luk, 16, asked about the automated Presto card. "It was invented by a Canadian 30 years ago and is used pretty much everywhere other than here."

Ms. Chiu raised her hand as well, politely inquiring whether Metrolinx is able to pressure the TTC to change its payment system. "Or is that just not in your jurisdiction?" she added sweetly.

Throughout the week, the class participated in 30 hours of instruction, about a third of the usual 110-hour high-school class. They earn no course credit for their work, but receive a primer in architecture and design, cycling and pedestrian issues, civic engagement, municipal government, urban planning and transit.

On Friday, the class was given a design challenge, asked to reimagine the stretch of Dupont Road from Bathurst Street to Spadina Road, adapting Styrofoam models to add transit, cycling paths, green space or whatever other changes they felt might improve the area.

The students - an ethnically diverse, fiercely motivated group - attend UTS and Marc Garneau Collegiate and consist of slightly more girls than boys.

The teens were selected based on their answers to four questions, dealing with the nature of community and the changes they would like to see in their neighbourhoods.

"I hope to get enough knowledge so that I can know specifically what I would want to fix about Toronto. I also hope to learn the best forms of sustainability, design and a healthy city. By the end of this program, I hope to hypothetically be able to design an entire city on my own that would grow and thrive," explained one Grade 11 applicant.

But the instructors seemed to be learning from students as well, through exposure to the teenage perspective of how the city works, or doesn't.

On Tuesday, Dylan Reid, a senior editor of Spacing Magazine, talked to the group about pedestrian infrastructure and had them map and annotate routes they walk on a daily basis.

"What they came up with was fascinating. Some of them just did the walk from Spadina station to UTS, and even in that little space they were pointing out where it's hard to cross, where the homeless people often are, where they hop fences," he said.

These insights can teach adults a lot about safety, accessibility and other urban issues, he said.

"They find the homeless pretty intimidating," he said. "It makes sense, because they're more vulnerable than an adult."

Mr. Reid believes an urban studies course would help young people "learn to read their own environment" and said he hopes it is adopted in the regular curriculum.

The sentiment was echoed by cycling advocate Yvonne Bambrick, who led the class on a downtown bike trip on Tuesday to educate them on the city's biking infrastructure, and fielded questions about the cost difference between separated bike lanes and regular, painted versions.

"High-school students are a lot smarter than a lot of people give them credit for," she said.

Ms. Bambrick would like to see cycling education begin in the elementary-school curriculum, and hopes that the exploration of urban issues is adopted by all city high schools.

"I think he put together a brilliant program, and he did it in such a way that would be replicable," she said of Mr. Fullan.

The schedule and content of the pilot program is posted online, at www.maximumcity.ca, so other teachers "can cannibalize it," according to Mr. Fullan.

He hopes to develop the class into a coherent unit of study that can be parachuted into high-school civics courses during the regular school year.

And he plans to offer another pilot, focusing on similar, but expanded content, during this year's March Break, before submitting it to the provincial ministry for consideration as a full-fledged course.

As it stands, he said there is only one senior-level urban geography course, which is offered at only a handful of Ontario schools.

"The hope is to share the idea broadly with other teachers," he said. "Kids want to learn this stuff. It's not just about doing it one time."