

Blacks Harbour: Education clicks one block at a time with after-school clubs



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Logan Armstrong, a Grade 4 student at Blacks Harbour School, plays with Lego pieces during the weekly after school Lego club offered by the school through the PALS initiative.

Photo: Colin McPhail/Telegraph-Journal

Blacks Harbour • Do you know the trio of main characters in the *Lego Dimensions* video game? Logan Armstrong does.

The fourth grader's eyes light up when the conversation turns to Lego. He rattles off a scene-by-scene breakdown of the game's introduction from memory and explains how new Lego sets have expanded his creative universe.

But even the worlds of *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Batman* – the rights of which were bought by Lego – have their limits. As the old adage goes, there's nothing more powerful than a child's imagination.

And it's clear Wednesday afternoons in a small class at Blacks Harbour School. There, a group of 10 youngsters build their own worlds with Lego blocks. They connect them through story, or physically with the pieces. They build them up, tear them down and build them back up again, all the while chatting about their respective projects.

Instructions are checked at the door.

Lego club is one of many weekly after-school clubs the school holds as part of the Partners Assisting Local Schools initiative, known as PALS, as well as its community school designation. The clubs see staff and community members lead a small group of kids in a variety of areas in four six-week stints throughout the school year.

Lego – the most popular – is sponsored by Cooke Aquaculture, a global salmon farming company headquartered in Blacks Harbour. The IT department has been volunteering an hour of their time on Wednesdays to survey and play with the kids.

Suffice it to say, Logan Armstrong is quite pleased. "I feel very, very happy because Lego is practically my life," Armstrong said, fresh off building a spaceship piloted by a little yellow man whose arms were missing and presumably under a nearby cabinet.

"You can do whatever, build whatever you want, as long as you have the right pieces."

It's a delight to see Armstrong take such a keen interest, said Amanda Corning, the community schools co-ordinator at the K-6, 160-student school.

"It's really great to see kids latch onto something they love and then have an adult that is not from our school, per se, that isn't a teacher but is somebody that's coming to also share a bit of love for the same thing," Corning said.

Though an hour of toying with Lego blocks seems minor in the run of a week, Corning said it means a lot to staff and students alike in a region where there's a dearth of after-school activities.

Extracurricular programming has always been a challenge for the eastern Charlotte County village halfway between Saint John and St. Stephen, Corning said.

"There isn't any," she said. "We don't have a Boys and Girls Club or a YMCA or something that would be similar to that, so we kind of have to create our own opportunities."

That's where PALS came in, she said.

PALS is an initiative that partners the local business community and service agencies to give schools in the Saint John region educational opportunities. Through it, the school has received tremendous support, mainly in volunteer hours, from local business, the community and parents, Corning said.

Now in their fourth year with PALS, Blacks Harbour offers a breakfast program throughout the week for 80-90 students and a host of after-school clubs, including a cooking club, art club, sewing club and a "be active" club among many others. The students rotate after each six-week stint and try something new.

The clubs are offered to grades 3-6, Corning said, as the school does not have enough funding for kindergarten up to Grade 2.

Stephen Agnew joined Cooke Aquaculture as a support technician six months ago, and he didn't hesitate to join the Lego fun. "It's just a chance for the kids to do something after school, be involved with an extracurricular activity together," Agnew said.

"Not everybody wants to play sports after school. It's something that lets them socialize with the other kids without having to be necessarily into basketball, football, those kinds of things."

Corning said it's essential to create those connections with the community, be it through racing around a gym, learning to cook, or hearing the trials and tribulations of an armless space pilot.

"To know that we're supported, to know that together as a school and a community we care about our kids and are working for them ... that's what it really all comes down to – the kids," she said.

And for those curious few, the Blacks Harbour resident Lego expert would tell you Gandalf the Grey, Batman and Wildstyle from *The Lego Movie* make up the three main characters in *Lego Dimensions*.