

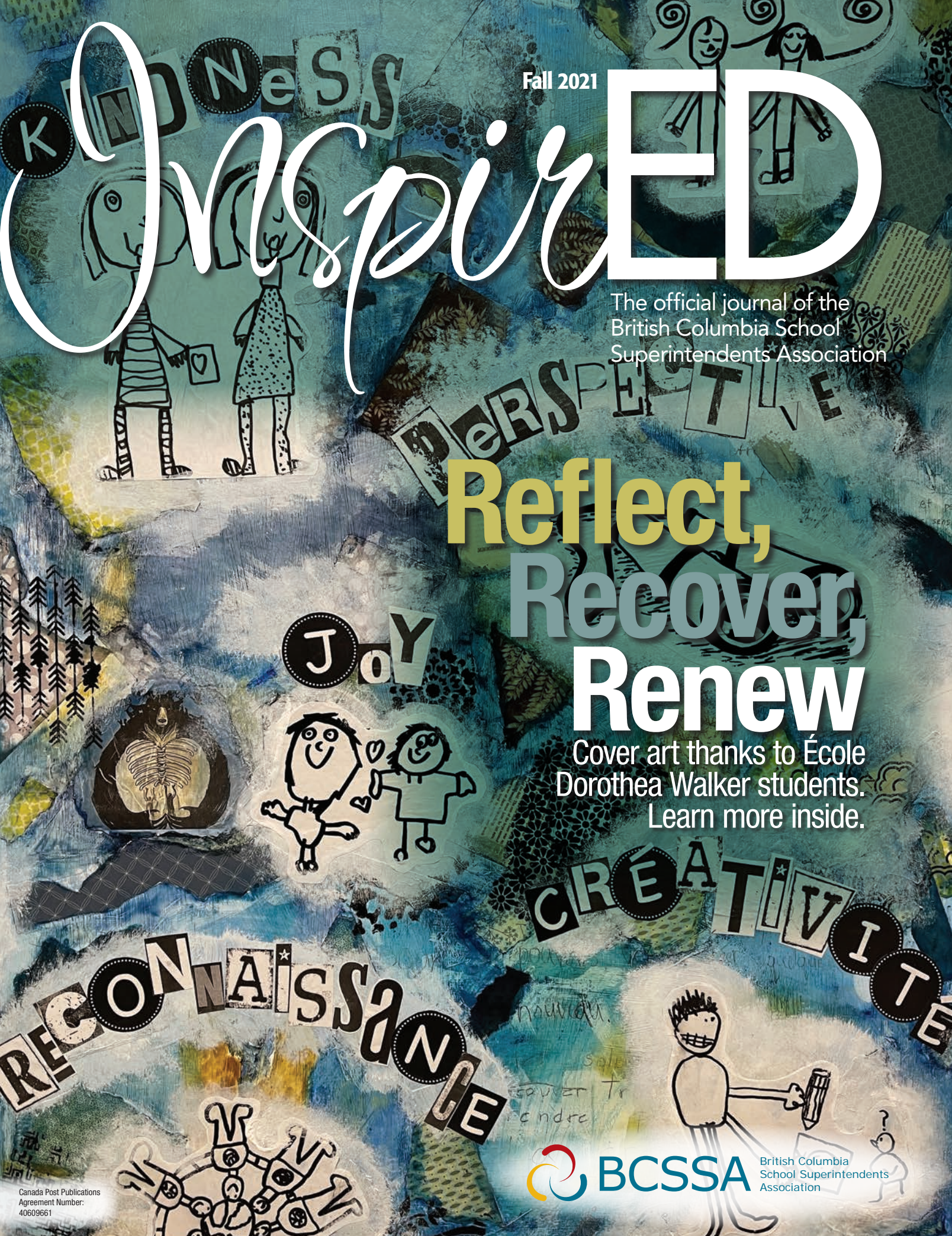
Fall 2021

Inspired

The official journal of the
British Columbia School
Superintendents Association

Reflect, Recover, Renew

Cover art thanks to École
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Write for Inspired

Do you have an inspiring story to share? If yes, we'd love to know more. Email Executive Director Claire Guy (cguy@bcssa.org) with a short abstract and author information. Note, article topics are subject to approval and we will be in touch if your abstract is chosen.

Spring 2022 Deadlines

January 7, 2022 - Abstracts to Claire Guy at BCSSA

By January 14, 2022 the line-up will be finalized and authors notified.

February 14, 2022 - Final articles due

Please reach out for more details!

On the cover:

While staff and students at École Dorothea Walker (SD 23) pondered the possibilities of life after COVID-19, they wondered if the school community could use art to record their experiences and shift focus to the future. Learn more about the art installation students created to help document their journey and create hope for what's to come. Turn to page 29.

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A Message from the BCSSA President



Kevin Kaardal
President, British Columbia School
Superintendents Association

Together we will get
through this pandemic.
Together we will act
toward reconciliation.
Together we can deliver a
world class education to
our students. Together we
can inspire our learners
and our communities.

As I reflect on the past year and a half, I am reminded that we all had to pivot and reimagine how we delivered education several times. Districts across this province were required to innovate to deliver a world class education to our students. We shifted from in-class instruction to online learning as needed to support students or classes asked to isolate. We added new programs that supported our collective journey towards truth and reconciliation, including land-based learning programs. Many districts increased their food supports to families working with community to coordinate their efforts in new ways.

Digital learning resources were developed that are now accessed throughout the province, country, and globally. Flexible schedules were implemented to better meet students' learning needs. Increasing access to technology was another theme that emerged across the province.

In the spring and summer, we collectively experienced the hurt that was caused when Indigenous children's unmarked graves were confirmed at residential school sites. District leaders responded by working with their Indigenous communities to prepare respectful actions that honoured the truth and reinvigorated their continuing work towards reconciliation. Flags were flown at half-mast. Elders led healing ceremonies on school sites. District staff supported rallies and marches. Long term projects like land-based learning that incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing throughout the learning experiences were highlighted and teaching the truth of Canada's colonial history and its harmful impacts on Indigenous Peoples occurred across the province in preparation for the first ever National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Our commitment to truth and reconciliation has never been stronger as system leaders and that inspires hope.

Many districts experienced the disruption caused by wildfires and had to plan how to start a school year when a town was lost, and many families had also lost their homes. As leaders, we have demonstrated resilience. Our year started with hope and now requires perseverance and strength as we lead through this latest wave of the pandemic.

In this issue of *InspirED*, your colleagues share their experiences, their learnings, and the ways they innovated during this past year and a half to deliver a world class education to the students in their care. I encourage you to connect with your colleagues, those who have shared in this magazine, and those in neighbouring schools or districts those practices that you found helpful.

Together we will get through this pandemic. Together we will act toward reconciliation. Together we can deliver a world class education to our students. Together we can inspire our learners and our communities. I have hope because of the collective wisdom we possess that is shared in *InspirED*.

Kevin Kaardal

President, British Columbia School Superintendents Association
Superintendent, School District 23, Central Okanagan

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A Message from the Ministry of Education



Melanie Stewart, ADM
Assistant Deputy Minister
Education Programs Division

There is nothing more meaningful or with more potential to positively impact our world than education – whether in a pandemic or not. Thank you for giving me such a warm welcome and for your ongoing guidance and support.

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I don't think any of us imagined that we would be starting a second school year monitoring case counts and talking about mask mandates. But we also didn't know that the pandemic would teach us so much about the resilience of our education system, the strength of leaders like you, and what really matters when the world turns upside down.

For me, it's been quite the time to join the Ministry and have the honour of leading the division responsible for the very heart of provincial education: curriculum, assessment, graduation, and student transitions after Grade 12. Beyond the regular challenges of a new job – learning a new subject area, building relationships, and navigating different ways of doing things – there has been the ever-present need to resist being entirely distracted by public health issues and maintain a clear focus on continuously improving the quality of education in our province. Our kids deserve nothing less.

To this end, I've been very excited about the work the division has been engaged in with our partners across the sector to enhance our assessments by adding a Literacy 12 Assessment that will be administered for the first time this fall. Aligned with the re-designed curriculum, the assessment will further allow students to demonstrate the full range of their literacy competencies prior to exiting the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system and transitioning into either the post-secondary system or employment. It will also provide an important indicator for educators, sector partners, and government to monitor quality, equity, and success.

In addition, the division has been working on developing new Kindergarten to Grade 12 literacy and numeracy performance standards to support teachers, students, parents, and caregivers in clarifying expectations and achieving learning goals. Over 70 teachers and educators from 30 districts have been engaged in this project through the development process and many more have been involved in district trialing conducted over the spring and summer and continuing this fall. The project has been characterized by a high level of sector engagement and the enthusiasm demonstrated by teachers and administrators in this work has been truly inspiring. While we anticipate this project to be iterative over the long term, the goal is to have a complete set of performance standards (Version 1!) ready for use by Fall 2023.

Another important initiative is the implementation of a new Kindergarten to Grade 12 Reporting Policy designed

to enhance consistency and modernize our approach to classroom reporting across the province. An online public review process is currently underway¹ to inform this new policy and extensive consultation with stakeholders and partners has been occurring over the last two years. Long anticipated by the sector, we hope to have this new policy in place for formal implementation in the 2022/2023 school year.

Finally, the division continues to support government-wide priorities to address racism, advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and support students in the context of economic recovery. This means supporting the Ministry's draft Anti-Racism Action Plan by working with community partners and Focused Education Resources to create an inventory of quality learning resources highlighting diverse cultural histories and experiences and supporting diversity and inclusion in the classroom. It also means exploring options for implementing a First Nations mandatory course or bundle of credits as a graduation requirement. Lastly, it means expanding dual credit to include an early childhood education pilot program and developing a more robust approach to career development within our system.

As the daughter of a former BC public school teacher and principal, the parent of two children who have graduated from the same system, and an enthusiastic lifelong learner, I couldn't be more honoured to have the opportunity to work with all of you in education. There is nothing more meaningful or with more potential to positively impact our world than education – whether in a pandemic or not. Thank you for giving me such a warm welcome and for your ongoing guidance and support. I look forward to working closely with you in the coming years as we continue to focus on what really matters: the educational success and well-being of the next generation.

Melanie Stewart, ADM

Assistant Deputy Minister
Education Programs Division

Reference:

1. British Columbia govTogetherBC. "Reporting on Student Learning in the Classroom." <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc/consultation/studentreporting>.

A Message from the BCSSA Executive Director



Claire Guy
Executive Director
British Columbia School
Superintendents Association

While our system has been pushed to the brink this past year, it is affirming to see that challenge and adversity can ultimately motivate us to think outside the box and do better.

As I think of the theme for this *InspirED* journal – *Reflect, Recover, Renew* – I can't help but pause to consider the incredible past several months in British Columbia, and the optimism and strength of our British Columbia School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) senior leaders, collaborating with Rightsholders, partners, and community to collectively guide our education system through unprecedented times. I am inspired by your unwavering and determined commitment to supporting the students in your care, as you navigated the legacy of residential schools, the trauma of forest fires, and the ongoing challenges of well-being that the pandemic continues to create for us all.

This year forced us to think about things differently and to push our thinking and actions out of our comfort zone to new levels of innovation, trying things that we may not have had the courage or urgency to explore previously. As I read the articles generously contributed by our colleagues, it is uplifting to see we can indeed recover, and, ultimately renew and reimagine our education system to be even better for the students we serve. The stories in this journal exemplify turning challenges into opportunities, and reflect how flexibility, creativity, and innovation resulting from need can drive us to higher outcomes for student learning and engagement.

One of our strengths in BC is our diversity. Each district responded, finding meaningful ways to meet the unique needs of their distinct student communities. These

examples demonstrate how there really is not a "one size fits all" solution for the challenges, or should I say, opportunities that arise, when our system looks to address issues of equity and well-being. And for all the stories published in this edition, there are countless more examples of equally inspiring and innovative work happening in all corners of our province. I urge you to continue to share your stories, not just successes, but difficulties too, because as trying as it can be, we tend to learn more in times of challenge.

As a learning organization, the goals in the BCSSA Strategic Plan for 2020-2024 focus on leadership, voice, equity, and support. The articles in this journal clearly highlight living examples of how we can address each of these goal areas through our compelling moral purpose of improving student learning. While our system has been pushed to the brink this past year, it is affirming to see that challenge and adversity can ultimately motivate us to think outside the box and do better. On behalf of the entire membership of the British Columbia School Superintendents Association, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our contributors and sponsors and encourage you as you read this magazine to REFLECT, RECOVER, and RENEW.

Claire Guy
Executive Director
British Columbia School Superintendents
Association

BCSSA RETIREES

Please join us in recognizing the retirement of these esteemed colleagues:

SD28 – Sue-Ellen Miller, Superintendent

SD34 – Angus MacKay, Assistant Superintendent

SD35 – Gord Stewart, Superintendent

SD36 – Catherine Sereda, Assistant Superintendent

SD38 – Wendy Lim, Assistant Superintendent

SD39 – Suzanne Hoffman, Superintendent

SD39 – Carmen Batista, Associate Superintendent of Employee Services

SD68 – Ted Cadwallader, District Principal of Aboriginal Education

SD71 – Esther Shatz, Director of Instruction, Student Services

SD72 – Tracy Kennedy, Director of Instruction



There is No Such Thing as BAD WEATHER

By Matt Kieller,
School District
No. 19 (Revelstoke)

Rain, sleet, or shine, this Grade 4/5 class spent every school day outside and benefited mind, body, and spirit.

During the 2020/2021 school year, I decided to make an effort to get my class outside for at least one third of every day for the entire school year. I believed that some of the mental and physical benefits I get from the outdoors would benefit my students as well, and if there ever was a year to try it, last year certainly was it. My primary goals were to develop an appreciation of the interconnectedness of natural environments, develop my student's curiosities about the natural world, refine their senses, and positively impact their mental and physical health.

Every morning we began our day by checking the weather, including maximum, minimum, and current temperatures, barometric pressure, humidity, wind direction and speed, and rainfall/snowfall. The weather conditions gave us context to build our understanding of what was occurring outside and also monitor short and long-term trends and patterns in our weather.

After our class checked the weather, we headed out to our morning sit-spot situated on the Columbia River, a five-minute walk from our school. We began every morning by saying a land acknowledgement recognizing the First Nations whose territory we are fortunate to be

living and learning on. Every morning after an acknowledgement and announcements, we completed a sharing circle where each student was given an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas on a given topic. Topics ranged from serious ethical discussions to fun and silly ones. Our sharing circles helped to develop nearly all of our core-competencies from creative thinking to communication and also gives me, their teacher, a gauge as to how students are.

The fall/early winter is a great opportunity to spend time at our beautiful golf course and surrounding areas. Fresh snow provided excellent opportunities to track wildlife such as bears preparing for hibernation, or deer searching for food sources. Inquires such as, "Why were the animals travelling in this particular area? What were they doing? How big were they? Were they alone?" All came with natural clues and potential answers written in the snow. "What are these animals eating and why?" was a common question answered after dissecting scat and pellets left behind by coyotes, bears, and owls.

When the temperatures dropped mid-winter, and the snow was soft and suitable for building, we often made snow sculptures. An example was building snow solar systems and moon cycles to assist our ongoing science units. If it was sunny and relatively warm, we

Cold high pressure for two weeks combined with low snowfall provided the rare opportunity to clear the ice and experience a classic Canadian pastime.

would often complete a sit-spot journal entry. When it was cold or rainy would search for dry materials and utilize them to light fires using flint and steel. I often used the weather and conditions to direct my practice as to what we were going to be doing each day.

Learning takes patience and time, which is a First People's principle I often refer to throughout my practice as an educator.

By starting this process early in September our outside first-thing-in-the-morning routine became just that – a routine! When fall arrives in Revelstoke, the weather can become challenging if not appropriately dressed and appropriately motivated. I was impressed with my students' ability to adapt and respond to fall conditions, though it did take some time. Learning takes patience and time. I continued to emphasize and model to my students that it is possible, if dressed appropriately, to be comfortable and ready to learn in any conditions. Students gradually began to arrive prepared and ready to go.

The winter provided many opportunities and challenges for our class. We had the opportunity to snowshoe, build snow shelters,



A Cedar smudge ceremony on the banks of the Columbia River with the class completed by SD 19 Indigenous Education Coordinator Marlene Krug. A powerful experience made even more so as it was shared with Marlene's young son.

The view from our daily sit-spot on the Columbia River.



The class at the weather station on the coldest day of the school year -19°C!



learn about snow science, build fires, skate on frozen ponds, and learn how to layer properly to stay warm in sub-zero conditions. My planning once again had to adapt to involve more dynamic lessons involving movement and activity. By January, my class was heading out in the morning without complaint even when it was nearly -20°C. For a change in routine, I started Fire Fridays. In the morning our class heads to our outdoor classroom where we do our acknowledgement, sharing circle, and weekly core competency reflections around a fire, which the students take turns building and lighting.

As spring arrived in Revelstoke, our class was fortunate to work closely with Thaltan/ Tlingit sound artist Edzi'u to record and create a soundscape based around the land acknowledgement we say every day and the natural sounds that represent Revelstoke. I want to thank our Indigenous Education Coordinator Marlene Krug for involving us in this project and many other projects this year, all of which facilitated my students learning and appreciation of the outdoors and indigenous principles of learning.

Our outdoor mornings provided a soft start for students to wake up and begin their day in a calm, natural environment. Students have expressed how they enjoyed starting their day off by the river. I believe the fresh air and natural surroundings set a strong foundation for a day of learning. Sharing the same outdoor spot throughout the year, every day, gave my students an opportunity to see in detail the dramatic changes our seasons have on our physical landscapes and the organisms that live there.

I have also learned that daily routines based around familiar outdoor locations are important

to deepen a student's appreciation of place. Subtle changes within natural environments throughout the seasons are more evident to students when they are outside daily. These observations are natural conduits for inquiry and are often visual reminders to us and our students of the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Spending time outside each day was not always easy. At times, I struggled to maintain motivation and enthusiasm; however, on those days once we arrived back to our classroom, I felt better that we had started our day outside. I felt calmer, in tune with my students, and more focused. I knew my students felt the same. In the words of the great Richard Wagamese, "When you open yourself to everything, everything opens itself to you."

As I begin a new year in an uncertain world, I am comforted and excited knowing that my class will again have the opportunity to be outside every day in one of the most beautiful places on earth, living and learning, because there really is no such thing as bad weather. 🌈

Matt Kieller is a teacher at Columbia Park Elementary School, located in the Revelstoke School District.

STUDENTS' RESPONSES WHEN ASKED, "WHAT DID YOU ENJOY, LEARN, OR APPRECIATE ABOUT OUR TIME LEARNING OUTDOORS THIS YEAR?"



"I really think my favourite memory was when I lit my first fire. I learned a lot of stuff this year but the thing I learned about the most was Indigenous Culture." — JS

"A cool memory that I remember is finding bear tracks and deer tracks. Learning outside is something I'll remember for a long time and the fresh air helps me learn better." — LS



"I like learning outside because it is very calm and peaceful, and the outdoors challenges me to try my hardest at the things I do." — KW

"I remember finding a dead fish at our sit spot and we tried to figure out what kind of fish it was and how it got onto land." — AC





A Kindergarten to
Grade 3 literacy
analysis provides
a path forward.

Invoking Systemic Change

By Naomi Ross, Deanna Holitzki, and
Dr. Donna Kozak, School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake)

Despite our concentrated efforts over time, our district data continued to show that a significant number of our learners, identified in Kindergarten and Grade 1, were lagging behind in their literacy skill development and continued to fall even further behind in reading and writing at the end of Grade 3. Guided by a North Star goal of ensuring that every child will finish Grade 3 as a confident and competent literacy learner, we began a deep dive into mapping out what was at the root of the problem and then created a new path forward. Our exploration resulted in the creation of a new “Literacy Coherence Model” for Kindergarten through Grade 3 across our district.

Our commitment to being solution-focused on our literacy “Problem of Practice” at the Kindergarten to Grade 3 level gave an opportunity for all district portfolios to collaborate, including curriculum and instruction, inclusive education, human

resources, and finance. Together, we explored all data points, district programs, inclusion support practices, and resource allocation in the primary grades. It became apparent that many of our traditional models and practices were outdated and ineffective resulting in more of a waiting to fail approach for our learners, rather than a proactive model for “catching readers before they fall.”¹ This gave us the evidence we needed to invoke a district-wide change.

The journey toward change began with a collaborative “Think Tank.” When asked, “What’s working, what’s not working, and what’s next,” principals, teachers, education assistants, and district staff gave us valuable insights about our Kindergarten to Grade 3 literacy program. For example, we learned that equity in literacy resources across schools was lacking. Some schools were relying on outdated and culturally inappropriate resources, including photocopied beginner books. This led to a district-wide inventory of literacy resources and resulted in equitable funding of resources in the district.

We also examined how schools were working with vulnerable learners in the primary grades. Our pull-out model lacked an evidence-based approach and was systematically segregating students.² In addition, our literacy support program for ongoing emergent learners relied on education assistants to provide targeted literacy instruction to learners, thus putting our most vulnerable learners in the hands of our well-intentioned, but least credentialed staff. Furthermore, by removing these learners from the classroom, they were not only receiving limited access to quality literacy instruction from their classroom teacher but were also feeling the stigma and long-term effects associated with exclusion and deficit-model thinking.^{3,4}

“Inclusive education is about providing opportunities with supports for all students to have access to, and contribute to, an education rich in content and experience with their peers.”⁴ Guided by the belief that our inclusion support teachers (ISTs) are integral in

supporting literacy instruction in the classroom both universally and specifically, we shifted the district's inclusion model to one of integrated co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing in primary classrooms during literacy time. Furthermore, following Allington's model of catching readers early, we allocated IST support in elementary schools to a 2/3 of time dedicated to primary classrooms and 1/3 of time in intermediate classrooms.


In keeping with our goal for coherence across our district, we also realized the need for a universal literacy assessment which we acquired from School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan), who have been using their Early Literacy Essential Skills Profile for over 20 years. We engaged educators Dr. Donna Kozak, Early Literacy Consultant, and one of the original

co-plan and co-teach with the classroom teacher, using the class profile developed by the classroom teacher to target specific challenges that a student, or group of students are having, and address it within the context of small group instruction during literacy learning time. This, in turn, benefits all students.

"Ongoing professional learning communities are the bedrock of the work that creates a whole school of effective teachers."⁶ Our targeted literacy focus also included a "Community of Practice"⁷ for our Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers, SLPs, ISTs and elementary PVP. These workshops, all delivered virtually, were mainly after-school sessions lasting approximately 45 minutes. These informal community of practice sessions created the space for teaching staff from across the district to dialogue with one

Equity is being addressed through differentiation and allows us to scoop groups of students to address learning needs as they arise."

Alignment of staff and district resources, including ongoing "just in time" professional development in a community of practice model, and a collaborative inclusive approach to working with all our learners in the classroom, has resulted in a system-wide shift in philosophy, pedagogy, and practice. We are energized, inspired, and optimistic that we are now on track to achieve our goal of ensuring that every student will complete Grade 3 with the skills and confidence of being a proficient reader and writer.

As we enter our second year expanding the professional learning initiative among Grade 2 and 3 teachers, we now believe that this "North Star" is achievable. 

Naomi Ross is a District Principal in Early Learning and Elementary and Deanna Holitzki is a Director of Instruction in Inclusive Education for Kootenay Lake. Dr. Donna Kozak is an adjunct professor in literacy and curriculum at UBCO and UBC, and an Early Literacy Consultant.

m Change

authors of the Early Literacy Essential Skills Profile, along with Lisa Wilson, district literacy helping teacher from School District No. 23 to support an ongoing series of professional learning opportunities for Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers. Their formative assessment tool focuses on the early predictive essential literacy skills that both inform teaching and help inform allocation of resources to support the needs of all learners in the classroom. This universal assessment tool is foundational to enacting a school-wide collaborative approach of using class profiles⁵ to locate and track learner's literacy development over time.

District Speech and Language Pathologists (SLPs) were also invited to reveal more of their expertise in the area of language learning in the classroom, moving beyond speech sound development to a greater focus on incorporating phonological and phonemic literacy. Foundational to our new Literacy Coherence model is SLPs and ISTs working directly with students in the classroom. As part of the collaborative team, ISTs and SLPs

another, sharing their ideas, inspirations, and challenges.

One of our Kindergarten teachers, endorsing the new model, states that, "Consistent assessment among our classroom teachers has given us a better opportunity to collaborate with each other and to problem solve how to attack the gaps we are noticing within the class profiles. My grade level colleague and I have aligned our resources and some of the literacy tools we use, which is great."

Evidence of success after our first year with our new Literacy Coherence Model is already apparent. One of our teachers shared, "I like how we can see how everyone is doing on a one-page colour-coded chart. It takes the guesswork out of what I need to focus on to support my students. I can't wait to see how this follows my Kindergarten students throughout their entire time in elementary school."

From a principal's perspective, "This Early Literacy Profile that we have implemented in our primary grades is the best example of coherence that I have seen in our district.

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Elementary \$5,000 Grand Prize Winner: Forest Grove Elementary

In the past few years, volunteers for Forest Grove Elementary's recycling program have been able to extend its capacity by bringing on new volunteers from the community and creating a new system for fundraising that has significantly increased the number of beverage containers they've been able to collect. This school year alone, they have collected over 200,000 beverage containers for their school! The program is the main source of funding for Forest Grove's CPAC program, which ensures no student goes hungry throughout the day by providing breakfast and lunch to students who need it. Their inspiring hard work has earned them a first-place cash prize of \$5,000 from Return-It to contribute to their school's fund.



High School \$5,000 Grand Prize Winner: Lake City Secondary

The 9 students in Lake City Secondary's Life Skills class have been tasked with a very important job: once every week, they are responsible for collecting refundable containers from each classroom in the school. While collecting containers allows the students to fundraise and contribute to their school, it also emphasizes movement and inclusion within their school community. Lake City's Life Skills class' recycling efforts have been a huge success – the school raised over \$800 this year alone, and they have been running their program for more than 8 years! They hope to use the funds they've raised, and the 1st place \$5,000 cash prize rewarded by Return-It to go on a school outing.

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humanrights.ca

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mint.ca

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pc.gc.ca

Manitoba Museum

The history of the prairies comes alive at the Manitoba Museum, where students embark on a journey that spans giant predators who stalked Cretaceous-era seas, to a time when Indigenous hunters pursued bison on the open plains. With 17 virtual field trips to choose from covering K-12, students can visit the Manitoba Museum live online, or participate in an interactive presentation with expert learning facilitators and science communicators. Each downloadable field trip comes with a lesson plan while wide-ranging themes include Inuit: People of the North, First Farmers, Black History in Canada, Climate Change in Manitoba, and The Nonsuch Virtual Tour.

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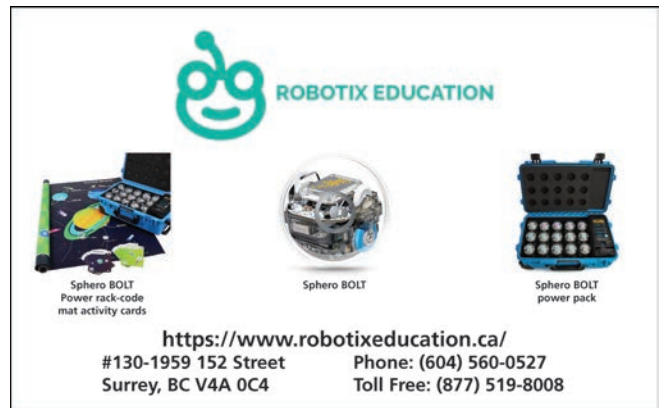
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Six Plus Two: What We Learned and What We're Changing

By Lindsay Vogan,
School District No. 62 (Sooke)

Just when you think the systems in place are strong, something comes along (like a pandemic!) to shake everything up. From last-minute schedule changes in secondary schools, to supporting both students and staff with mental health options, to completely changing how schools were run, everything changed last year. But it's not all for the worst! Our school district, like other school districts, learned many lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic, and continues to adjust and adapt to the 'new normal' the school year brings.

Six things we learned

1. *Be flexible and adaptable:* With the onset of introducing new learning options two weeks before school started and constantly revising health and safety procedures, one major action that COVID-19 has taught us is the ability to shift, morph, and change instantly. From the IT department providing equipment and support to learners at home, to OH&S continuously revising the staff and student health and safety handbooks, to human resources hiring teachers to provide online education to those staying home, everything needed to happen. . . and quickly. Looking back, it's a blur and filled with countless letters to both staff and parents.
2. *Wash those hands:* Who would have thought that one day you would see sink handwashing units at the entrance to every school? Sanitize, spray, cough into your arm, all these terms have become as common as saying "how are you today." Students and staff alike have taken handwashing and sanitizing hands to a new level – one that is making noticeable impacts. Cold and flu season last year wasn't even an issue. Absences due to colds and illness among students and staff dropped drastically and hand washing is a big reason why.

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Supporting students, staff, and communities through a pandemic has led to several lessons learned and two new paths forward.



TOP: Students at École John Stubbs Memorial School at grand opening of their outdoor learning space. Photos courtesy of Lindsay Vogan.

INSET: SD62 Custodian Ryan, cleaning one of many sanitization stations located inside the entrances of schools.

SIX PLUS TWO...

3. *Follow the arrows:* Funny thing, putting in traffic flow measures is a good thing when it comes to 1,500 students housed in a school built for 1,100. Walk into any school and you'll find arrow floor and wall decals instructing students to keep moving and stick to the right. Cohorts were separated into designated entrances, exits, and stairwells. Up until the beginning of September, some secondary school students had never been to a different floor in their school. Confining and controlling? Yes, but all of it mandated, helpful, and adhered too.
4. *Buy shares in outdoor learning spaces:* As a school district that began one of the very first outdoor learning programs (Nature Kindergarten) in the country, we thought we were on pulse when it came to outdoor education. The work orders for outdoor learning spaces at schools piled in and we reacted, quickly. Funding was reallocated and shifted into developing outdoor classrooms. From a simple covered space to a few wooden stumps, outdoor learning spaces now sprawl throughout SD62 schools.
5. *Utilize tech to increase collaboration:* Microsoft Teams? What's that and why do we suddenly have five hours of online meetings per day? Faced with seeing your face and what was in your background on a screen became very

important. Adjusting to online meetings took a little bit of time, but we noticed right away that collaboration across many departments could be easily achieved, perhaps easier than in-person meetings. With the ability to speak, write comments and questions on the side, and review a recording after the fact, online meetings create a sense of efficiency. The largest use of technology came when we moved all board meetings online. Teams made this very easy for us to do and we will continue to use this feature for families.

6. *1/8 model:* With three overflowing secondary schools, some with more than 1,500 students, we needed to get creative in order to reduce congestion. With many districts shifting to a one-quarter model, we decided to try out the one-eighth model, or 'octamester' as we called it. One class, either in the a.m. or p.m., for five weeks. Not only did our schools contain half the number of students at one time, but so too did their classrooms, often with only 15 students in them. Although this model didn't allow for school pep rallies and assemblies, it did allow for students to complete a course in five weeks. Most of the feedback we received was that parents and students loved this model. It reduced a lot of anxiety for students, helped students to focus and

stay engaged in one subject, and allowed for students to pick up outside employment easier.

Two things so great, we're keeping them!

1. *Single Grade Orientations:* During the 2020/2021 school year, we were very cautious about entering schools. This became prevalent during the late spring when student orientations took place, specifically for Grade 5 students into middle school and Grade 8 students into secondary school. While our school teams did amazing jobs of hosting their open houses virtually, nothing can replace physically stepping into your new school for the first time. Because these students missed their meet and greets, we decided to begin the school year by hosting those grades only on the first day of school. The impacts far exceeded our expectations. New Grade 6 and Grade 9 students toured their schools without other grades, and hundreds of other students. This reduced anxieties and increased face-to-face time both with each other and with staff.
2. *District Emergency Response Team:* In the early days of COVID-19, we formed a district emergency response team and met daily. Made up of district directors, managers, and principal and vice principal representatives, the team met daily to go over ever-changing information and direction. The flow of communication from the ground up was so strong that we just couldn't give it up. The result is a cohesion and alignment between school emergency teams and the overall district emergency team. Changes happen quickly and it's due to the great flow of communication back and forth between schools and district office.

While we look ahead at what this pandemic might bring, it's amazing to look back and see how much change and development can take place in a single year. Sometimes the most difficult times bring out the most creative solutions. 🌈

Lindsay Vogan is the Communications Manager for the Sooke School District.


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A large, moss-covered tree trunk dominates the left side of the page. The moss is a vibrant green, contrasting with the darker, textured bark. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with more trees and foliage.

A Path to Peace

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transitions, and
mindful moments
– everything is
possible when the
right pieces come
together.

**By Carolynn Schmor,
School District No. 75 (Mission Public Schools)**

Mission Public Schools (MPSD) is a mid-sized district within the traditional, ancestral, unceded, and shared territories of the Leq'á:mel, Matheqwi, Qwó:lti'el and Sq'ewlets peoples. Our path purposefully endeavours to reflect Indigenous ways of seeing, understanding, and knowing the world.

What will we take into the future? This question has been asked often as we reflect and try to make sense of our experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic. We've had to adapt to a new reality and halt the idea of 'business as usual.' With the lessening of restrictions tangled with lingering fear, anticipation, and hope, we came back together this fall in a good way. COVID-19 is a big problem that required a big reaction, but with time, training, optimism, and partnerships, new paths in new environments are being formed. This article will highlight trauma informed practice (TIP), mindfulness, and *Ensouling our Schools* from the MPSD Mental Health in Schools plan that was developed in partnership with Siwal Si'wes Indigenous Education Department, using grant funding provided by the Ministry of Education.

Trauma informed practice

Our district began implementing TIP more than 10 years ago when we first partnered with Mission Child and Youth Mental Health and the Fraser Valley Child Development Center to provide training to school staff. Recently, MPSD partnered with Complex Trauma Resources (CTR) led by Dr. Chuck Geddes, Dr. Kirk Austin, and school psychologist Angela Murphy to continue our commitment to TIP.

CTR has a specialized complex care and intervention team (CCI) that is grounded in the understanding that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma can interfere with children's behaviour and learning. They equip school staff and families to educate and empower children and youth who have experienced accumulated stress and trauma. Their PEACEful Schools model provides educators with general trauma-related interventions for every classroom.

They have also developed a Heal ACEs Rating Tool (HeART), which is an assessment that helps the care team gather information about the child's strengths and areas to support across the following developmental domains: neurological and biological maturity, over-reactive stress response, emotional regulation, attachment style and relationships identity, development behavioural regulation, and cognitive and language development.

Lila's story

(Lila's name and age have been changed to protect her identity.)

I first started in this role as Director of Student Services five years ago. Before that time, Lila had been moved to a school that was not her neighbourhood school with the promise of extra supports bringing success. She experienced significant challenges there, and she longed to go back to her home school. Supports at the district level had changed and a decision was made for her to return to her neighbourhood school. Staff at the school expressed worry that it would be challenging given the history of events that had occurred in the past.

At the same time as the transition back to her home school, the CCI team began to work with the school team and family. After many months of slow and careful planning and implementation, the change was ground-breaking. Not only was the transition successful, but staff who had been reluctant about their skills now felt empowered and confident. Lila shone and the need for supervision and intensive support lessened continuously. She continued to progress, learn skills, and overcome difficulties.

Then the pandemic hit. Despite the challenges and uncertainty, and all the potential for distress and new stressors, the progress endured the toughest of tests – COVID-19. Despite the pandemic,

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we have been continuing to work with students, staff, and the CCI team to foster growth and skill so that students are meeting with more success and improved learning environments.

A story of mindful moments

As we reflect on the year and ask ourselves what we relied on most often, mindfulness practice was at the top of the list. Counsellors found that their intensive supports with students was made more successful with this practice. One school, École Christine Morrison Elementary School, took mindfulness practice school wide. Counsellor Meg Kruger and the student's Mindful Leadership Group inspired staff and students to participate in Mindful Moments every day. Led by students, the Mindful Moments featured writing by Métis poet Leah Dorion and music by David Maracle, from the Mohawk Nation. Staff discussed the concept at a staff meeting before starting so everyone understood the 'why' of mindful practice.

They recorded five mindful moments to get the school started with the practice, one for each day to be repeated each week. Meg reports that, "The Mindful Moments are truly special and build such a capacity

for peace and health within the school community. Many people within the school talk about how that morning moment is so powerful for them. The whole school pauses – it's magical."

The students in the leadership group are starting to write their own scripts. They are currently collecting student data (Kindergarten to Grade 6) that asks students if they participate daily, what they like best, and if they notice if this practice is helping them feel calmer and more settled at school.

Ensoulng Our Schools

We believe in forming strong teams with our community partners by learning and practicing together. Over a period of several months, a group of educators and therapists came together to learn with Dr. Jennifer Katz in studying the book *Ensoulng Our Schools* by Dr. Katz and Kevin Lamoureux. Participants included staff from the Trauma-Informed (Alternate) School (Fraserview Learning Centre), the Indigenous Student Success Advocates, the Band Outreach Educator, the Advocate for Children and Youth in Care, district speech and language therapists, the District Principal of Indigenous Education, the Director of Student Services, and therapists from outside agencies

(Fraserhouse Society and the Fraser Valley Child Development Centre).

Gathering for professional development with a virtual platform allowed for a wider audience than was sometimes feasible prior to the pandemic. The value of different perspectives and skill sets working together to better understand how to serve our priority students is a practice to carry into the future. *Ensoulng our schools* ties together Indigenous approaches to mental, emotional, and spiritual health, and teaching in wholistic and practical ways that are strength-based and student centered. These are important elements of classroom level social emotional learning. Environments that nurture a safe, optimistic, and caring return to school are required this fall in all classrooms.

The kitchen story

My daughter's teacher at École Mission Central Elementary prioritized social emotional learning as a part of daily classroom life and routines. The growth I noticed in my daughter included a better understanding of self-awareness, self-regulation, relationships skills, and identifying emotions. Not only did the teachings improve her ability to focus at school and have improved learning, the skills transferred to home. I remember how enthusiastic she was to point out to me that I was having a big reaction to a small problem: the mess in the kitchen.

As we venture into this next year, it's okay to hope for relief and perhaps some smaller more manageable challenges but let us also remember that we are adapting and learning. I believe firmly in the power of education and the important role schools can play in educating the whole child.

Lets'e mot, lets'e thale; lets'e shxweli.

Good heart, good mind, good spirit. 🌈

Carolynn Schmor, mom of three, is the Director of Instruction, Student Services for Mission Public Schools, and was formally the District Principal of Indigenous Education.

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Not All Classrooms Have Four Walls

Cariboo-Chilcotin took learning outdoors by equipping every school with an outdoor learning structure for students, staff, and the community to use.

An outdoor structure to house many activities, such as lunch, chess, and school.

**By Cheryl Lenardon,
School District No. 27
(Cariboo-Chilcotin)**

The Cariboo-Chilcotin School District's Board of Education found an innovative way to use one-time federal funding to address the immediate health concerns of COVID-19 and leave a legacy beyond the pandemic. Twenty beautiful new outdoor learning structures at both elementary and secondary schools are benefitting students, staff, and communities.

The board was out ahead of the current advice in the provincial *K-12 COVID-19 Health Safety Guidelines* to take students outside more often. There were already outdoor learning structures at Likely Elementary-Junior Secondary and Mile 108 Elementary schools. With the news last year of a grant from the federal government for COVID-19 projects, trustees decided to provide all schools with spaces to inspire teachers to take learning outside in all seasons and weather for the many physical and mental health and learning benefits of spending time outdoors.

The spaces support the direction of Cariboo-Chilcotin School District to embed outdoor and place-based learning in the daily experience of students. Place-based learning uses the local community and environment as the starting point for teaching the objectives of the curriculum. Board Chair Ciel Patenaude



Students in their outdoor classroom during a literacy lesson.

sees it as, “an essential component of Indigenous knowing, and a necessary aspect of reconciliation that will benefit all students.”

She explains the philosophy in School District 27 that, “Education should not be something that is believed to occur within the walls of schools only. With our intention to inspire students to maintain a lifelong learning experience we see this shift away from the physical structure of the school and into the larger surrounding environment as encouraging them towards that goal.”

Making it easier to take students into the schoolyard for activities is a first step toward teachers taking learning further afield and connecting it more closely to the surrounding area and cultures. Principal Holly Zurak explains how the structures have provided an easy entry-point for teachers who were not already engaged in this kind of teaching. “Having a go-to space for teaching and learning outdoors

has made for a visible and physical opportunity to invite classes to learn outdoors. While many classrooms were already doing nature lessons in our wild spaces (forest, field, neighbourhood) there is now an attractive, accessible, and sheltered option for moving even traditionally indoor activities outdoors.”

It was important to the board that the work was done by local contractors. OT Timber Frames, Peter Arnold Construction, Sitka Log Homes, and Zirnelt Construction built their own unique log and timber-framed designs. Locally sourced materials, including fir logs intentionally selected for scarring from the 2017 wildfires, are artifacts for learning about the local environment and history. Many of the projects were completed while schools were in session allowing students to watch the process and observe trades careers first-hand.

Several schools have used the outdoor spaces to host presenters during a time when

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NOT ALL CLASSROOMS...

visitors inside the school building are being limited due to COVID-19. Recently, school trustee Mary Forbes, wearing her community educator hat, did a workshop on bicycle safety and repair in the Big Lake Elementary School structure. Forbes has also used the space for recycling workshops. Examples from other schools include presentations by Cariboo Conservation Society on the water cycle and by Ulkatcho First Nation Chief and Counsel about sustainability and protection of the cow moose.


The structures are seeing a great deal of use by staff, students, and the public. Zurak describes how the staff of Nesika Elementary School are responding to using the outdoor learning space. "The encouragement, support, and simple invitation to take classes outside for learning has helped all staff drop their shoulders a bit during this stressful time in pandemic teaching. During our staff planning day we spent the entire afternoon working on our school planning cycle outside. It was hard to end the session after seeing the engagement and relaxation of my staff. I plan to take staff outdoors whenever practical this year!"

Principal Kristina Beaulne describes how the outdoor structure on the Marie Sharpe Elementary playground is being accessed during and beyond the school day. "It is not only used by classes to spend time reading, listening, and learning, it has become a neighbourhood fixture. Often you can drive by our school and find community members enjoying lunch on a rainy day. You can see the students from the nearby alternate school program hanging out with their friends, and neighbourhood families watching their little ones on the playground. Being a downtown school, we have multiple community partners who use our structure for work and play. The after-school programs enjoy the shelter in all kinds of weather to run their programs and allow children to enjoy the fresh air after a full day at school."

Beaulne says having the structure also supports the expansion of the school's outdoor education programming. In addition to classes attending the Nature House at Scout Island they now have a covered space on the school

grounds. The outdoor structure was home to the recess chess club in the spring. Her favourite part of the day is the before-school breakfast program. "Watching students eating their breakfast under our outdoor space, chatting, laughing, and playing in the morning before school starts is a great way to start our day."

Superintendent Chris van der Mark is pleased with "the opportunity to enhance educator and student access to the outdoors by connecting them with our unique geographic location."

The outdoor structures have opened up the classroom to fresh air and to new ways of experiencing learning in Cariboo-Chilcotin School District. 

Cheryl Lenardon is Assistant Superintendent of Cariboo-Chilcotin School District. She is in her second year with the district and inspired by the natural beauty of the area and the work being done by the Board, staff, and community partners to enhance learning for all students.



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The Power of Reflection: The First Step Towards Recovery and Renewal

By Gail Markin,
School District No. 35 (Langley)

Health and safety continue to be a prominent issue with widely polarized views in our schools and communities. District and school leaders are thinking about things like: How are we handling COVID-19 notifications? How do we meet the teacher? What can we do to ease the increased levels of stress that many of our school communities are experiencing? The questions keep coming and the answers are often changing.

The pandemic has created systems change in that sink or swim kind of way and we, as an education system, have responded in an impressive but exhausting way. Now as we move towards recovery and renewal there is an opportunity to build on what we learned worked well, acknowledge the challenges, and create a new system together. Educational leaders play a key role in creating this new system but to do this creatively and intentionally, we need to be grounded in a practice of self-awareness and reflection.

Pre-pandemic, the education system was already recognizing the need to move from “traditional command and control mechanisms and hierarchies” (Crook, 2020) to promote cultures of collaborative, self-directed work where people are encouraged to think, reflect, and adapt. We teach these skills to our students and are moving towards this way of being in our workplaces as well.

Workplace well-being research and the compassionate systems leadership work that the Ministry of Education, your own organization, and other leadership groups have been promoting are also moving the education system towards a more holistic understanding of what it means to lead change. More traditional approaches to change see leaders as the instigators of change and as somehow separate from what is changing. Yet, experience tells us that leaders are an important part of this relational system and are embedded in the change process.

The pandemic has helped reinforce that leadership must be collaborative and that we must take a holistic approach to change. Change has often been seen as a dispassionate, objective thing that happens to teams and organizations that leaders must orchestrate. Leaders are starting to see themselves as within the core of the system instead of apart from it. Peter Senge (2004) tells us that, “the cultivated self is the leader’s greatest tool” (p. 186). Although

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Self-awareness is the meta-skill of the twenty-first century – the qualities most critical for success in today’s world – things like emotional intelligence, empathy, influence, persuasion, communication, and collaboration all stem from self-awareness.”

– Dr. Tasha Eurich

*Move with
intention into
beauty.*

*Photo courtesy of
Gail Markin.*


EMOTIONAL AGILITY HELPS US ACT WITH INTENTION

Dave, an assistant superintendent of a large school district, was leading a meeting of community partners when one of them questioned a decision that was made on a joint project he led. Dave could feel his muscles tensing up and a wave of heat go through his body. What was she doing? Why was she criticizing him in front of everyone? Usually, he would defend himself, change the subject or both. This time he noticed what was going on for him, so he lowered his shoulders, took a deep breath, and reminded himself to listen. She had an interesting perspective, and they came up with a new plan. Most importantly, the relationship was intact, and that anger and embarrassment was not coming home with him.

understanding ourselves – being self-aware and reflective – is essential to positive professional relationships and for thoughtful, intentional systems change, many of us have not had a lot of practice or guidance.

So, where do we start? Self-awareness as a core leadership skill is about slowing things down enough to notice what we are feeling and thinking so we can act with intention and in line with our values. Susan David, a psychologist, and leadership coach, calls this ability to tune into and pay attention to our own thoughts and feelings, *emotional agility*, and she points out that in our complex, fast paced, knowledge-based world, having this skill is essential to success (David, 2019). The steps are simple:

1. *Notice where you are hooked:* Where do you hold feelings in your body? Do you feel a tightness in your chest like me or do you feel it in the pit of your stomach? Start noticing your physical body responses because feelings are good cues as to what is going on for us and they always start in the body. Marc Brackett, Yale professor and Director of the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence, reminds us that feelings are important pieces of data (2019). Feelings are not in charge of how we act, but it is dangerous to ignore them. Ignored feelings don't just vanish on their own but, "pile up like a debt that will eventually come due" (Brackett, 2019, p. 13). The other thing to notice is your thoughts patterns. Are you absolutely sure it is true and that there is no other possibility? Your thoughts are just your thoughts, and they are not always accurate, so be curious about those too.
2. *Label and accept whatever is going on for you:* Once you notice that repetitive thought or that familiar tightness in your chest, label it. Label the feeling but don't try to analyze it, just notice it. You don't have to fix it, but label it and be curious about it without judgement. It just is.
3. *Act on your values:* Once you are unhooked you can see if what's happening fits with how you want to be. Does your reaction fit your values? Emotions come and go constantly, but your values remain consistent, so they are a good thing to align your action with.

Self-awareness is foundational for the health and well-being of leaders, to maintaining the relationships that are essential in our system and for the emergent, creative systems we need. It is a complex system, but the opportunity for change is here. Let's move forward with intention. 

Gail Markin is a counsellor and teacher supporting health and well-being for students and staff in the Langley School District. She would like to thank Pippa Rowcliffe for her help with this article. To check out Pippa's work with the BC Compassionate Systems Leadership community of practice, please visit the website www.compassionatesystemsladership.net.



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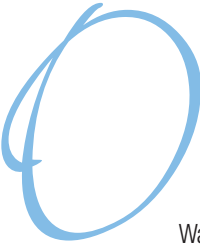
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Leadership Lessons from Indigenous Ways of Knowing

A community comes together to envision and create a playground with everyone's ideas in mind.

**By Tim Van Brummelen, Rose Valley Elementary,
and supported by Jordan Coble, Westbank First Nation/Syilx Nation Member,
School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan)**

ur school community has been working on a plan to build a natural play space based on the Okanagan story, "How Food

Was Given – Four Food Chiefs." The

original idea for the playground started at a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) meeting when the PAC president suggested raising funds to add a climbing structure to our playground. I pitched the idea of adding in natural play elements, suggesting that Dr. Beverlie Dietze present her expertise in creating playgrounds that promote creativity and curiosity. She came to our next PAC meeting and her ideas resonated deeply.

After our meeting, I sat in my office and glanced up at a poster on the wall which told the story "How Food Was Given." Each of the Four Food Chiefs in the story, Bear, Salmon,

Bitter Root, and Saskatoon Berry, represented one quadrant of the circle and the related Indigenous ways of knowing shared through the story. A nearly complete vision for the playground formed in my mind using the circle divided into four quadrants drawn on the poster. Each quadrant of the playground would have play elements related to each of the Food Chiefs. The Bear, who is the Thinker, would have its quadrant designed as an outdoor classroom. Chief Bitter Root, the collaborator, would have a pit house and a place to gather to bring the community together. Salmon, the Learner, would have balance beams, climbing walls, musical instruments, and a creek bed with a dugout canoe. Saskatoon Berry, the Innovator, would incorporate large natural loose parts for building. In the center would be the PAC's climbing apparatus in the form of a teepee.

I was inspired, grabbed a sketch pad, and put the dream on paper.

The next day, I began sharing this sketch with staff, students, Indigenous advocates, and PAC members. Feedback was strong, and the ideas were affirmed and applauded. However, a few days later, one of our teachers came up to me and asked, "So, is the playground consultation happening? I talked to a PAC member, and she said that the whole playground is already planned. It seems to be done already!"

My heart sank. I wanted this to be a community project, and here it was already being viewed as the project of a few rather than a project owned by everyone. I knew I had to take a step back and invite the voices of all community to be heard and have influence.

At this point, I realized, the bulk of my leadership had been centered in a Western leadership style – independent, quick moving, and efficient. For the vision to be owned collectively, we had to plan an inclusive, robust consultation process which would require slowing down.

I remembered from my studies at the University of British Columbia,

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Our Inquiry:

- How can we create a play space that tells the story of our Okanagan People using the Four Food Chiefs story?
- How can we move forward with a process that honours all stakeholders and is rooted in Okanagan knowledge, people and pedagogy?



An example of the community's design team's planning and inquiry slides.

in the Transformational Educational Leadership Program, that Indigenous leadership focused more on interdependence than independence. I wondered what I could learn from the Indigenous community around me to speak into the plan.

One of my first leadership moves was to find an Indigenous Elder who would guide our process. When Elder Maureen Ziprick née Simpson from the Okanagan territory heard about the dream, she was excited to be a part of our team. She thought the project was more than just a playground. Truth

and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people could happen not only at the playground when complete, but also through our community consultations.

I knew she was the right person to guide us. I realized I had work to do however, as in our first number of conversations, she spoke about "YOUR playground," rather than "OUR playground." I knew the unspoken goal was for the whole community to use the language "OUR playground."

Elder Maureen, our landscape architect, staff, and PAC members met. We spoke about

how to create a process that would involve everyone, so at the end we could all say, "Look what WE created together."


Elder Maureen spoke to the importance of bringing people together in community to share their ideas so that every voice was heard. She stated that everyone, "from those at the top, to those at the bottom who don't feel they have a voice, need to be heard." She continued, "Everybody is going to have a voice. We are going to have meetings. Everybody has input. And that's the exciting part!"

Maureen further described how the community needed to feel safe sharing their ideas at the meetings. "It needs to be a warm and welcoming place. We are a people that gather, and we eat, and we talk, and there's no time frame. . ."

We agreed that we needed to have multiple smaller group consultations with families, students, and staff. We needed to take our time to collaborate and invite children and parents to draw pictures, write down ideas and create stick, rock, leaves, and other loose part models.

This interdependent Indigenous consultation process is taking much more time than I had ever envisioned. However, the excitement in the community, and the ownership of the vision by both children and adults could never be matched using a fast-moving Western independent model of leadership. I have learned valuable leadership lessons that I will use for the rest of my life.

My happiest moment came during a conversation with Maureen where throughout the conversation she referred to the natural play space as "OUR playground." Indigenous leadership principles had been successful: we all owned the vision together!

Shortly after writing this article as Vice Principal at Springvalley Elementary, I became Principal at Rose Valley Elementary. Currently, both communities are working together to see the vision realized at both schools. 

Tim Van Brummelen is principal of Rose Valley Elementary. This article was written with the contributions of Jordan Coble, a Westbank First Nation/Syilx Nation Member.



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La Vie en Turquoise: Reconnecting Through Art

**By Stacey Lea, Leslie Greyell,
and Susan Bergen, School
District No. 23 (Central
Okanagan)**

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

— Margaret J. Wheatley

he lessons of the pandemic will be many, and the recovery will be a journey of its own. Our path at École Dorothea Walker began in early February when our prolonged lack of connection and sense of isolation found us drained and weary. Staff and students felt the imposed physical distancing and the constraints of working in a bubble. In our community, where the norm was comfort and ease in being together, we now worked in a climate of rigidity and anxiety. We did what was necessary to care for each other, yet it left us disconnected and lonely. We would see each other in the parking lot at times, masked and arms full, trying to send friendly messages with our eyebrows and a nod of our heads. Sometimes we would laugh and ask, “You still work here?”

We were at our lowest point with loneliness and fatigue when the first faint hints of hope also appeared. Could vaccines become a reality? Was a return to our old life possible? It seemed the perfect moment to act. We were eager to bridge the divide in our community but also to document in some way this profound experience we had come through together. A classroom-based art project inspired us to wonder, *can we use art as a way to record our experience, to shift our focus, and to help us find our way back together again, with purpose, joy, and hope for the future?*

While we pondered this question together, the idea of a school wide collaborative mural was born. We began a type of art journaling process by asking our learners questions, “What has been an important source of your strength this past year? What do you hold most dear?”

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The final mural included focus words from students, which were accompanied by black and white drawings.



Students working together to create this beautiful work of art.



Everyone had a hand in helping bring these concepts to life, with multimedia elements to explore creativity.

LA VIE EN TURQUOISE...


Each class chose one focus word to capture their thinking and to guide them during the art making process. We decided to create a triptych using mixed media on wood panels, which we planned to display in the heart of our school as a lasting installation.

The three panels of the triptych symbolize our togetherness and the strength of community, even though we might be apart in this moment. We chose shades of blue with highlights of gold for the colour scheme to capture the sense of light at the end of a tunnel. The process of adding seven different layers of mixed media materials represents the complexity of our experiences. The layers allowed for every member of our school community to contribute and add their mark, an important criterion for our intention.

To begin, we recorded our thoughts about our focus words in black pencil crayon directly on the panels. Next, we used collage to add torn paper creating a kind of map, trusting our intuition about what looked and felt right. Ink colour blocks were used to scribble freely over our spaces, creating motion, releasing energy, and building excitement. The next step involved simply adding water with paint brushes to activate the colour, then we added textures with stencils in black acrylic, anchoring our ideas through familiar shapes and patterns. A central image done in ink on paper was the focal point. Finally, the students added their focus word. It took us three full days to complete the panels, each stage carefully and quickly orchestrated.

During the six weeks of preparation and planning before the actual process even began, we encountered numerous setbacks and challenges. Sourcing and delivery of materials during a pandemic was uniquely challenging. The panels, critical to the project, were delayed and finally arrived on the day we had planned to start the project, still requiring five coats of primer. Over 500 students needed to be organized into small groups while maintaining cohorts and physical distancing in order to add their piece to the mural. Each obstacle seemed almost comical as we found ourselves energized and determined to succeed. Our collective sense of purpose sustained us and gave us the sense of control that we needed at that time.

None of us would have wished for the pandemic, yet we found our way through together and there is cause for celebration in that. As with all things that try us, seeking meaning and framing our experience is the starting point of recovery. Connecting as a community to create something beautiful, not just for its own sake, something filled with intention, was both powerful and restorative.

We hope that this path of reflection and renewal will continue into the coming year. There have been moments of anxiety, uncertainty, challenge, and disbelief. There have also been moments of deep gratitude and joy in community. Our mural reminds us, as we pass it every day, of our strength, our resilience, and our belief in the power of community. 

Stacey Lea and Leslie Greyell are both teachers for Central Okanagan Public Schools. Susan Bergen is a principal for Central Okanagan Public Schools.

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