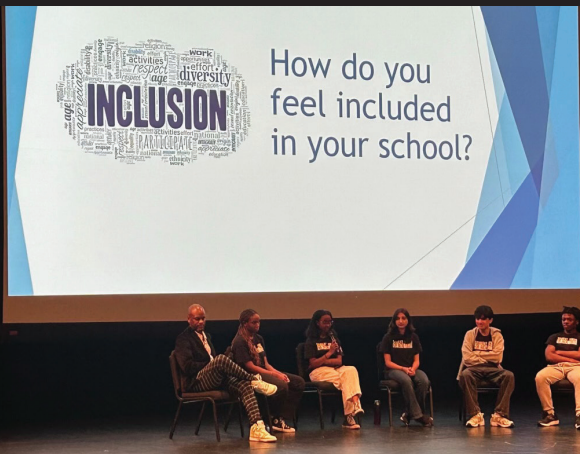


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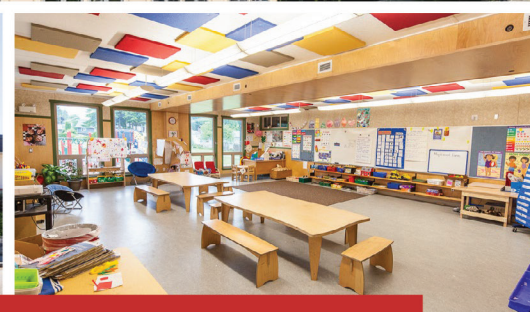
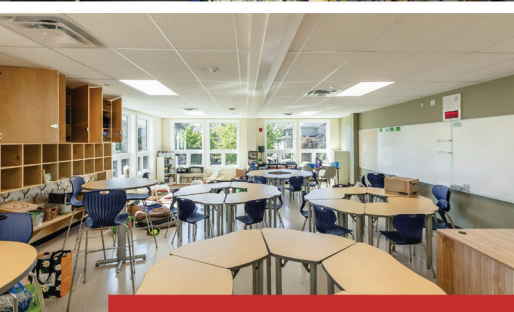
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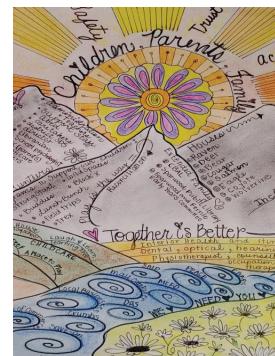
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On the cover:

The concept of equity and inclusion in education is what inspired this issue's line-up of authors. Thank you to each contributor for sharing ideas, actions, and outcomes from your districts.





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Continuously Improving Educational Outcomes for All Students

Often when I get an opportunity to share a few words in my role as the steward of the position of superintendent, I find myself weaving this beautiful quote from the late Richard Wagamese, one of Canada's foremost First Nations authors and storytellers:

"... We are story. All of us. What comes to matter then is the creation of the best possible story we can while we're here; you, me, us, together. When we can do that and we take the time to share those stories with each other, we get bigger inside, we see each other, we recognize our kinship – we change the world, one story at a time..."

Richard Wagamese's quote signifies the importance of creating safe spaces, so we can be our authentic selves, feel included, and share our stories of our lived experiences while interpreting and experiencing the world, which is central to the notion of inclusion and belonging.

This past summer, we had the opportunity to read excerpts from the most current draft of the High Performing Systems of Tomorrow (HPST) Conceptual Framework. It clearly articulates why it is necessary and important to think in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), three distinctive dimensions that support the vision of humans flourishing. Celebrating diversity and practicing inclusivity while embracing differences – including neurodiversity – is fundamental to championing the human spirit.

I spent my early childhood years growing up in Ceylon (a former British colony now known as Sri Lanka) before I became a settler in Canada. I had the opportunity to attend a large boys' school of 9,000 students. The school was founded in the British public-school tradition, and the college's motto is *Disce aut Discede*, meaning "learn or depart" in Latin. The motto is associated with the high academic standard maintained at the school for over 180 years.

The school then (and still) subscribes to the "Human Capital Theory," which is focused on education for employment and preparing students for jobs that their parents and grandparents did, with a strong orientation to helping all students perform well irrespective of background. Those who could not meet the standards departed silently, and the school had a very limited and narrow view of success, inclusion, and equity, where the objective was to help everyone achieve the same thing.

The school and the education system in Sri Lanka are the antithesis of the education system in British Columbia, which is seen as a high-performing system that focuses on equity, celebrates diversity, and practices inclusion, resulting in belonging, which is respected globally, as per Dr. Michael Stevenson, Senior Advisor at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Although we are a world class system there is still work to be done to truly celebrate a system where every person can be their authentic selves, and all students supported to find their purpose through learning, combining aspirations and human competencies to thrive. This work continues with the adults in the system and is centred on the work around system awareness, a combination of systems thinking and systems sensing, and the desire for the adults to focus on their blind spots, as eloquently articulated by Dr. Otto Scharmer, in his book *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*.

Dr. Scharmer states that there is a blind spot in leadership, and social change, and it is also a blind spot that also applies to our everyday social experience. He goes on to articulate that we can see what we do (results), we can see how we do it (process), but we usually are not aware of the who – the inner place or source from which we operate. This deeper dimension, or the source from which our actions, communications, and perceptions arise, is crucial to our ability to tap into a whole new set of future possibilities.

As a system, we continuously improve educational outcomes for all students. Moving from increasing incremental improvements to truly celebrating a system where all students are supported to find their purpose through learning, combining aspirations and human competencies to thrive will require all adults to shift the inner place from which they operate. As we continue this work, it is important to celebrate the giant strides we have taken to celebrate and honour the human spirit.

Rohan Arul-pragasam

President British Columbia School Superintendents Association



Rohan Arul-pragasam
President, British Columbia School
Superintendents Association
Superintendent of Schools, Chilliwack
School District

Although we are a world class system there is still work to be done to truly celebrate a system where every person can be their authentic selves, and all students supported to find their purpose through learning, combining aspirations and human competencies to thrive.



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Gino Bondi
CEO
British Columbia School
Superintendents Association

A Collective Responsibility to Ensure All Students Thrive

In our ever-evolving educational landscape, the commitment to equity and inclusion remains paramount. Together, the seven articles featured in the Fall 2024 edition of *InspirED* create a multi-layered message that reinforces our collective responsibility as system leaders to ensure that every student, regardless of their background, can thrive. This begins with the implementation of compassionate systems leadership – a framework that not only guides our decision-making but also embeds empathy, understanding, and a deep respect for all voices in our schools.

Central to our responsibility is the development and adoption of an anti-oppression curriculum. Such a curriculum goes beyond simply acknowledging diversity; it actively challenges the structures and narratives that have historically marginalized racialized learners. By providing our students with the tools to critically engage with these systems, we empower them to become agents of change within their communities and beyond.

Meaningful change for racialized learners requires more than just policy adjustments – it demands a concerted effort to address the root causes of inequity. It calls for the creation of environments where students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, where their histories are honoured, and where their potential is nurtured. This is not just an educational imperative but a moral one.

Equally important, as Kerri Steel makes clear in her article, is ensuring that parents and guardians feel seen, heard, and valued. They are essential partners in our work, and their insights and experiences, their hopes and fears for their own children, are crucial in shaping a school environment where a) all students can succeed and b) all families can confidently navigate what may sometimes seem like the labyrinth of public education. We help them by striving to create open lines of communication, building trust, leading from the margins, and both acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges that they face.

What this edition of *InspirED* makes clear is that our journey towards equity and inclusion will forever be ongoing. It will require unwavering commitment, reflection, and action as we continue to build an education system where every student, educator, and family member feels valued and empowered to contribute to a brighter, more inclusive future.

Thank you for your continued dedication to this vital work.

Gino Bondi
CEO
British Columbia School Superintendents Association

Meaningful change for racialized learners requires more than just policy adjustments – it demands a concerted effort to address the root causes of inequity.



Join BCSSA in 2025!

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Details are shared when available at <https://bcssa.org>. BCSSA Fall Conference and AGM (Vancouver) – November 2025

Traditional Learning Opportunities Create Connections:

Linking Land-Based Learning to Educational Success



By James Messenger and Dave Maher, Pacific Rim (School District No. 70)

In the spring of 2024, a unique educational initiative in the Pacific Rim School District demonstrated the profound impact of integrating traditional Indigenous practices into modern learning environments. Through a collaborative partnership between the Pacific Rim School District and Usma Nuu-chah-nulth Family and Child Services, students at the Eighth Avenue Learning Centre engaged with traditional Nuu-chah-nulth culture in a meaningful and transformative way.

The centrepiece of this initiative was the use of two traditionally designed chaputs (Nuu-Chah-Nulth canoes), which became more than just vessels on water – they

served as conduits for cultural education, personal growth, and community building. This program is part of a broader district strategy focused on land-based learning, which seeks to link cultural practices with educational success.

The genesis of the program

The traditional canoe program was born out of a need to address persistent gaps in student achievement, particularly among Indigenous students and children and youth in care (CYIC). Within the Pacific Rim School District, 80 per cent of CYIC are Indigenous, and approximately 17 per cent of Indigenous students have been in care at some point.

Recognizing these challenges, the district sought to create an educational experience that would not only support academic success but also foster cultural pride and emotional well-being. This led to the collaboration with Usma Nuu-chah-nulth Family and Child Services to develop a program that would immerse students in the traditional art of canoe paddling, a practice that holds significant cultural importance for the Nuu-chah-nulth people, as well as paddle carving, and the protocols surrounding the use of the chaputs.

Elder Geraldine Tom, co-developer of the chaputs program says, “We teach with love. When we are in the chaputs we learn together, we work together, and children



see that when there is a challenge and we work as a team, we succeed. Learning in the chaputs helps us learn to respect each other, to know ourselves, and to work with anyone who is with us.”

Linking to land-based learning

This chaputs program is closely aligned with the district’s broader strategy of implementing land-based learning programs at Alberni District Secondary School (ADSS) and Ucluelet Secondary School (USS). These programs are designed to address specific gaps in student achievement, particularly for at-risk students who show decreasing engagement. The focus is on Indigenous CYIC and students with disabilities and

diverse abilities, with an emphasis on revitalizing cultural traditions as outlined in the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA).

By engaging students in land-based learning, the district aims to improve student attendance, support successful grade-to-grade transitions, and ultimately increase graduation rates. Senior student Devin Johnson began the chaputs program as a learner and has grown into a skipper in training and a mentor to the elementary chaputs program. Devin believes that, “The chaputs helped me stay in school. I love being on the water. At first, I thought it was a good way to get out of school and do something different. Then I learned that I was earning credits towards my graduation with the chaputs program, which I liked. I



Student and adult participants of the traditional canoe program say it was transformative and impactful, illustrating the importance of lifelong learning. Photos courtesy of Pacific Rim School District.

learned so many of the skills that were lost to my family and now I want to pass them on to others in my community, and the young ones in elementary school. This is important. We are water people.”

The chaputs program offers students a tangible connection to their culture and the land, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging and engagement that is crucial for their academic and personal success.

Learning on the water

In the initial phase of the canoe program, three high school students, an Indigenous support worker, a district principal, and partners from Usma Family and Child Services underwent rigorous training in the dynamics of paddling traditional canoes. This training was not just about mastering physical techniques; it involved learning about the cultural significance of the canoes, understanding the responsibilities of being on the water, and developing leadership skills to pass on this knowledge to younger students.

“The land offers powerful tools for learning,” says District Principal Dave Maher. “When the students embarked on their chaputs learning journey they were catapulted into a world of communication, teamwork, leadership, and connection to skills, processes, and family learning that many hadn’t experienced before. It created a profound opportunity to develop a connection to the other people in the chaputs, which enabled a sense of community and family to develop in the chaputs. The students unreservedly expressed how much they wanted to continue to work with the chaputs and have it be a part of their future learning. Also, every student who took part in the initial training volunteered to be a mentor for younger children in the school district.”

For the students involved, the experience was transformative. It provided them with a sense of accomplishment and a deeper connection to their culture. The district principal, who also participated in the program, noted that the experience was

equally impactful for the adults involved, highlighting the importance of lifelong learning and cultural humility.

The broader impact

The success of this program has had ripple effects throughout the district. The positive feedback from students and staff has been overwhelming, with many noting the increased engagement and sense of pride among participants. The program has helped bridge the achievement gap for Indigenous students and strengthened relationships between the school district and local First Nations communities.

Moreover, the program aligns with the principles outlined in DRIPA, emphasizing the right of Indigenous peoples to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and practices. By incorporating these traditional practices into the educational framework, the district supports the academic success of Indigenous students while affirming their cultural identity and rights.

Strategic alignment and future directions


As the traditional canoe program enters its second year, the district plans to expand it to more schools, making this opportunity available to a larger number of students. This expansion is part of the district’s strategic plan to enhance land-based learning opportunities, focusing on Indigenous learner success, mental health, and social-emotional well-being.

The district has engaged rightsholders, the Indigenous Education Council (IEC), and the Culture Council in the development of these programs, ensuring that they are culturally responsive and effective. Staffing and resources have been allocated to start these programs in September 2024, with success indicators including improved student attendance, grade-to-grade transitions, and graduation rates.

The effectiveness of these programs will be measured using a combination of quantitative data, such as participation rates

and achievement gaps, and qualitative data, including student voice and feedback. The district is committed to making adjustments and adaptations as needed to ensure the continued success of these land-based learning initiatives.

Conclusion

The traditional canoe program is a powerful example of how education can be enriched through the integration of cultural practices. By providing students with opportunities to connect with their heritage, learn valuable life skills, and build stronger relationships with their community, the program fosters a sense of belonging and pride essential for their overall well-being and success. As this initiative continues to grow, it serves as a model for how schools can work in partnership with Indigenous communities to create meaningful and impactful learning experiences. 

James Messenger is the Director of Instruction Learning and Innovation for the Pacific Rim School District. He is a graduate of the school district and has been an educator for over 20 years. James is passionate about finding innovative and creative ways to connect students and educators with their passions.

David Maher has been an educator in public and First Nations schools for 25 years. He has been a teacher as well as principal and vice principal in First Nations schools, elementary schools, secondary schools, and alternative education programs, which has shaped his belief that student voice needs to lead all learning. Dave is a strong advocate for experiential education and walking alongside knowledge keepers and elders while learning on and from the land.

Geraldine Tom is an Elder from the Ditidaht First Nation. Her cultural knowledge and desire to connect youth with a positive sense of cultural identity enabled the creation of the chaputs program with the Pacific Rim School District.

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Sustainability Through an International Lens

New Virtual Field Trip to France & Vancouver



Looking for a way to keep Grade 6 classes engaged in Social Studies or Science? Take them to France! Sort of...

A new international partnership between the **Museum of Vancouver to Museum of Vancouver (MOV)** and the **Château d'If** in France has resulted in a joint virtual program called *D'un continent à l'autre : l'humain et la nature* (*From one continent to another: humans and nature*). Touching on multiple elements of the BC grade 6 social studies curriculum, this program includes:

- urbanization—in particular land usage, water access and pollution
- resource management, especially deforestation and its effects on the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations
- comparing and contrasting how environmental issues are managed in both Canada and France.

The program is split into two parts and is much more manageable than an actual field trip to France—although still bound to be of extra interest to students. The Château d'If portion of the program is conducted virtually (in either French or English) while the MOV portion can be done in-person or online.

Located offshore from Marseille in southeastern France, the Château d'If is a fortress

famous for being one of the settings of Alexandre Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. But it's also home to protected flora and fauna, including the European phyllodactyl, a small nocturnal gecko.

Managed by the Centre des Monuments Nationaux under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture in France, the Château d'If portion of the program includes a virtual tour of the castle and its exhibition on the Frioul archipelago and its rare, sometimes endemic plants and animals such as the gabbian, a yellow-legged gull.

"The guided tour of the Château d'If addresses environmental issues through concrete examples from the city of Marseille in the context of urbanization and pollution, global warming and rising waters, protected species, etc." says Grégory Gerberon, Deputy to the Cultural, Pedagogical and Communication Officer at Château d'If.

Teachers can select an in-person field trip or a virtual option for the MOV portion of the program, which is offered in French and uses an exhibition that reflects the Museum's ongoing commitment to the environment and sustainability: *That Which Sustains Us*.

Located on the ancestral village of Seḥákw in Vancouver's Kitsilano, the MOV program explores

the deforestation and urbanization of Vancouver as well as First Nations (Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh) knowledge of resource management.

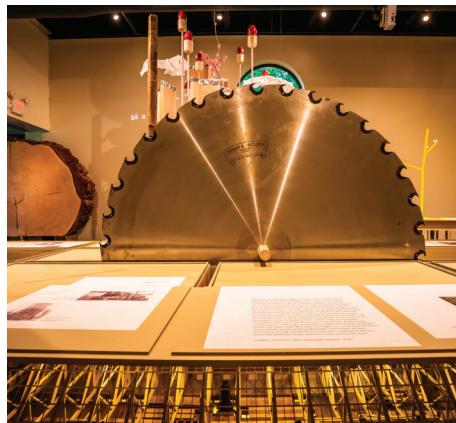
Students will explore the forest ecosystem; how the Douglas Fir, Birch and colonies of fungi called mycelium communicate; how salmon contribute to feeding trees; and what green infrastructure is. The program also shows how Indigenous people use the resources, from using mushrooms and lichens as dyes, to the foods they eat and much more.

"*That Which Sustains Us* explores our interactions with the forest and our natural environment. The main themes offer different perspectives on nature and the consequences of colonization related to deforestation," says Charlotte Chang, the MOV's Education Program Manager. "It's also interesting to explore how we, or the kids in the classes, can be stewards and advocates for our planet."

By exploring the topics of biodiversity, climate change and water pollution from human activities at both sites, students will be asked to compare how geographical locations and culture have influenced human choices in both ecosystems and discover solutions towards a more sustainable future.

The teams at the MOV and Château d'If agree that by examining both Marseille, France and Vancouver, Canada, students will see that not only do the locations share many common elements, but the questions around the environment and preserving our planet is a concern for all of us.

Learn more about the *D'un continent à l'autre : l'humain et la nature* program on offer through the Museum of Vancouver and their other programs at museumofvancouver.ca/school-and-youth-groups.



If you have any questions or would like to learn more, contact the MOV's Education Department at register@museumofvancouver.ca.



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Empowering Marginalized Students: Giving Voice, Breaking Down Barriers

By JB Mahli, Surrey Schools (School District No. 36)

In a virtual workshop this past April with Racial Equity leads in Surrey Schools, Dr. Ghoddy Muhammad noted, “Understanding the perspectives of marginalized communities and their ways of knowing and being are central to criticality [critical thinking] in schools and advancing culturally responsive learning environments.”

In Surrey Schools, understanding histories, perspectives, identities, and the ways of knowing and being of our marginalized students, especially our Indigenous, Black, and racialized students, is central to our racial equity and anti-

racism framework. We believe there is no substitute to knowing our learners – their stories, experiences, strengths, goals, and curiosities. To understand their perspectives, we lean in and listen to students with curiosity so we can think critically about our positionality, systems, and bias, and interrogate our mental models to work towards developing a culture of affirming voices and agency of marginalized groups.

When leaning in and listening to their perspectives and hopes, we have heard clearly and loudly the importance of acting on their voices and including them in the

change process. Having an active role in their learning is paramount for breaking down barriers, assumptions, and tokenism, and cultivating students as changemakers in anti-racism work. Students as changemakers is a transformative approach that breaks down power structures and narratives and creates new approaches to learning through the experiences and perspectives of marginalized peoples.

As educational consultant Michael Fullan notes, “If we are interested in the future – short- and long-term – it is impossible to have any chance of success without inviting the kids – all kids – to help lead the way.”



The Queen Elizabeth BIPOC Liberation Collective (BLC) presenting to elementary students at one of the family of schools. They are pictured with their school Racial Equity Lead Thais Pimental Cabral and Manager Racial Equity Department Nick Brown. Photos courtesy of Surrey Schools.



Students from the Semiahmoo Anti-Racism Club presenting on racial literacy and fluency to department heads and administration.

In Surrey Schools, we are forging ahead with transformative system change by uplifting and empowering racialized and marginalized students in the learning process and giving support to student agency through a new district racial equity policy, structures, tools, and resources. The following are six abbreviated examples, from many in our schools, of empowerment

from marginalized students, with guidance from staff, in pursuit of student voice and agency.

The agency to teach and lead

At Semiahmoo Secondary, the Anti-Racist Club, or ARC Club, is a student-run club made up of learners from different backgrounds and ethnicities. Led by their

teacher sponsor and Racial Equity Lead, Adriana Ramirez, they begin the year with anti-racism foundations learning. They learn about systemic racism and how it manifests itself in our daily lives and experiences. Then, when they feel they have built a strong bond and are comfortable and knowledgeable in racial literacy, they begin to design learning opportunities for staff and students.

Last year, after getting to know the different terms related to anti-racist work, each student chose the one they identified with the most and from there created a presentation that allowed them to share their knowledge and lived experiences related to that term. They had an opportunity to practice their presentation before presenting to all department heads at the school with support from their school principal, Alyssa Malkoske. Their presentations were so well received they were encouraged by the feedback and went on to present to all grade 8 students during Grade 8 Day in each class with engaging and deep conversation.

The BIPOC Liberation Collective (BLC) is a student-led anti-racism group at Queen

Elizabeth Secondary (QE). The students are sponsored by Thais Pimentel Cabral, a Surrey teacher and Racial Equity Lead who was awarded the 2024 BC Anti-Racism and Multiculturalism Award, under the category of “Intercultural Trust.”

The group started by being an affinity group for the school’s most vulnerable students: those who come from marginalized communities such as refugees, English language learners, and Black and Indigenous students, who make up a minority of the school’s student population. Thais suggested a book club with students using the book *This Book is Anti-Racist*, by Tiffany Jewell, to help them develop a better understanding on how to name and dismantle racism at school and build racial literacy and fluency.

Students as changemakers is a transformative approach that breaks down power structures and narratives and creates new approaches to learning through the experiences and perspectives of marginalized peoples.

This initiative helped students to heal and empowered them to use education as the main instrument to combat racism and discrimination in all levels and intersectionalities. Seeing the benefits of this student-led work at the school, principals of neighbouring elementary schools contacted Jodie Perry, a QE vice-principal at the time, who supported the BLC, asking if QE students could help their schools with anti-racism learning.

Under the mentorship of Thais, students created and delivered effective and interactive workshops about different anti-oppression and anti-bullying topics to students at three elementary schools, which are family of schools to QE. Through

this work, different opportunities for students to engage in activism and youth empowerment that promotes anti-racism initiatives were developed not only for Queen Elizabeth Secondary, but for other neighbouring schools as well.

In the spring of last year, after a Surrey School District Student Anti-Racism symposium, a group of students felt empowered and approached Shilpa Khan, the Racial Equity Lead teacher at *Sullivan*

Heights Secondary, about wanting to continue to further develop anti-racism initiatives in the school community. After spending time working together, the group of students established themselves as the *Anti-Racism Alliance* and decided they wanted to begin by working with the staff in the building and sharing their experiences in their school.

Together, and with support from their principal David Baldasso and administration

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Indigenous students from Georges Vanier Elementary and Frank Hurt students, along with sḥólməxʷ (Rain Pierre – Katzie First Nation), who said to the students, "The legacy of empowerment continues to grow – one student, one dream, and one brushstroke at a time."



A student panel discussion with Sullivan Heights Anti-Racism Alliance.

team, and Nick Brown, Manager – Racial Equity Department, the Anti-Racism Alliance had the idea of hosting a panel discussion for staff during a lunch hour. The students had approximately 50 staff attend this voluntary session during their lunch last December, where students answered the following questions: 1) How do I feel included in my school?; 2) What has my

experience at this school been like?; and 3) How can our school be more inclusive?

Shilpa mentioned how discussions about racism with staff can feel surface level without the voices of our students being shared. Through this panel discussion, the adults in the building were finally able to hear firsthand the instances of racism students have experienced in the same

hallways and classrooms that they teach in every day. It was an eye-opening experience for everyone.

Following this session, the Anti-Racism Alliance was asked to host a session for 400 grade 8 students on Grade 8 Day, as well as help lead a discussion focused on bullying at one of the elementary family of schools.

Indigenous student mentoring and belonging

Last spring, Alannah Valdez (Indigenous Lead), Zelda Johnson (Indigenous Tutor and Education Assistant), Leanne Macdonald (Indigenous Child and Youth Worker), and Amanda Anderson (Racial Equity District Helping Teacher) worked together to empower Indigenous student voice and agency and create mentorship opportunities between *Georges Vanier Elementary* and *Frank Hurt Secondary* Indigenous students. The goal was to develop positive role models and relationships between the two schools, emphasizing the significance of creating a supportive environment that nurtures a sense of belonging, acknowledges cultural identity, and leverages the role of education in shaping their future.


Additionally, the mentorship addressed the critical transition phase from elementary to high school, ensuring continuity and support throughout this pivotal educational shift. Students gathered three times during the year, strengthening the connection and building community within these schools. Being able to witness the students take pride in their Indigenous identity, and supporting one another all while being true to their own selves in this community, was very heartfelt.

As stated by Amanda Anderson, “The Indigenous girl in me was standing proud seeing what the future held.”

Connecting and uplifting the voices and experiences of racialized students with their principal through compassionate systems awareness

A key part of the work though the Surrey School District is to help create structures, tools, and learning to support student voice and racial equity at every school. To begin this work, I partnered with Marti Player, principal at *Guildford Park Secondary*, to create a structure in a school where the principal could meet with a group of racialized students to grow a social generative field and together learn common tools connected to Compassionate Systems Awareness.

The goal was to further relationships and use tools, such as the ladder of inference, to breakdown mental models and assumptions and to learn insights (system thinking and sensing) where marginalized students feel empowered to improve their learning environment. By regularly meeting and presenting inside and outside their school, students are shifting the narratives and consciousness across Surrey.

These are a few examples of empowering students for change which will continue to be a key part of the vision and work across the Surrey School District. 

JB (Jagbir) Mahli is a Director of Instruction – Racial Equity Department in Surrey Schools. He has worked as an educator for over 20 years in the Surrey School District in a variety of roles, such as teacher, helping teacher, vice principal, and principal. JB recently completed the Compassionate Systems Awareness Master Practitioner Program with the Center for Systems Awareness.

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The Sam Waller Museum is the hidden jewel of Northern Manitoba. Located in The Pas, Manitoba, the museum is open every day, year-round, allowing visitors to come learn and enjoy the history of the Tri-Community Area and that of its founder, Sam Waller. Sam Waller was a man who collected anything and everything that caught his eye. He was built in the mold of a Renaissance man as he moved from place to place and came into contact with a diverse number of people who helped him build this massive collection with which he used to found the original Little Northern Museum.

In 1991, the museum would be renamed The Sam Waller Museum and it was moved into the now vacant old courthouse, which itself has since been designated as a provincial historic site. The museum features three galleries, one dedicated to Sam Waller and his founding collection, another dedicated to the history of the Tri-Community Area and a third ever changing exhibition space that hosts anything from traveling exhibits to local art shows. The museum features a community space downstairs as well as a discovery centre. Finally, the museum also features an exhibit that uses the original jail cells from when the building operated as the regional courthouse. We also have a gift shop filled with artisanal works from local artists who we partner with in the community. At The Sam Waller Museum, there is something for everyone and we encourage you to visit when you get the opportunity.



The Sam Waller Museum
306 Fischer Avenue, The Pas
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Together We Thrive: A New K-4 Curriculum Works to End Oppression

By Peter Bailey,
Free Rein Associates

Teaching young children about diversity and inclusion is no easy task. Many educators steer clear of engaging in such a responsibility because it comes with a host of concerns, including reliable sources of information, activities, and age-appropriate material. However, as a group of community partners in Hope, British Columbia, we saw this challenge as something we could tackle.

The Hope Inclusion Project (HIP) has been working in anti-oppression work at a grass-roots level since 2010. Our group includes community workers, business representatives, educators, trustees, and local government. The work focuses on community engagement through arts, culture and awareness-building. In 2020, we decided to write an anti-oppression curriculum for local elementary schools. Four years later, we published the curriculum, entitled Together We Thrive, designed for K-4 classrooms province-wide.

The curriculum centres on literature recommended through I Dream Library, which “connects students, caregivers, educators and organizations with intersectional 2SQT/BIPoC literary selections, anti-oppression / DEI training and teaching resources.” Stories showcase characters in intersecting representations

Above image: Books like these have been purchased to support students and staff with diversity and inclusion teaching. From left to right: *Africville*, by Shauntay Grant, illustrated by Eva Campbell; *Last stop on Market Street*, by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson; *Nibi's Water Song*, by Sunshine Tenasco, illustrated by Chief Lady Bird; and *The Proudest Blue*, by Ibtihaj Muhammad, illustrated by Hatem Aly and S. K. Ali. Photos courtesy of Kemone Moodley - Hope Standard.



Writer and University of the Fraser Valley Assistant Professor, Nicola I. Campbell shares a reading from her book *A Day With Yayah*.



From left to right: Indigenous Support Worker Susan Johnny joins Indigenous Language Teacher Tanya Zilinski, student Zander John and Chawathil Elder Shane John in a territorial welcome.

reflecting diverse populations. Together We Thrive is the first curriculum of its kind offering educators, students, and communities a resource to approach the issues of oppression in a way that effectively engages young children.

School District No. 78 (Fraser Cascade School District) (SD78) is an active partner in the project, allowing us to pilot lessons in classrooms at Coquihalla Elementary, purchasing books for students, and providing funds to support the work of our curriculum writer, Aisha Kiani, and the HIP Curriculum Committee.

Fraser-Cascade Superintendent, Balan Moorthy explains that the school district sees the value in supporting the development of the curriculum. He says, "Fraser Cascade School District has a core goal of fostering a culture of inclusivity for all learners. Part of this goal includes broadening the understanding of Truth and Reconciliation and promoting racial equity. The Anti- Oppression curriculum naturally aligns with these objectives and complements our focus on early literacy and social responsibility.

The work very much parallels the values of the school district. Moorthy explains, "Forty per cent of our community identifies as being of Indigenous ancestry, and we aim for our students to become global citizens. Despite the lack of diversity within our district compared to areas just 40 minutes west, this curriculum exposes our children to diverse perspectives, which we have a responsibility to teach."

This work continues to be championed by Moorthy, who sees it in a very personal way. He views the curriculum both as an educator but also as a man of colour. He notes, "This curriculum resonates deeply with me as an educator. As an immigrant who grew up in Canada during the early 1970s, I experienced considerable racism in schools and society. This personal history led to my passion project – a PhD in Education, focused on how to capture authentic strategies for advancing Truth and Reconciliation in our schools."

This research identified several key themes, including the importance of storytelling, embracing Indigenous Principles of Learning, and decolonizing educational practices. The study highlights the need for language revitalization, cultural celebration, and anti-racism structures in schools.

Moorthy believes that this curriculum can serve both in his school district and the districts of the province. He explains, "The curriculum has multiple applications. Primarily, it celebrates the power of storytelling, which resonates with children and aligns with Indigenous perspectives. Storytelling is essential in transforming and educating our students. Additionally, the curriculum intersects well with our early literacy initiative, creating excellent synergy for classroom use. This curriculum is thoughtful, timely, and relatable for educators. It aligns well with the Ministry of Education's Anti-Racism Action Plan. When educators see this curriculum in action, it will resonate deeply with them."



The Hope Inclusion Project unveiled its anti-oppression curriculum, Together We Thrive at Coquihalla Elementary School in Hope BC together with community members, school district leaders and members of the committee. School District #78 Fraser-Cascade Superintendent of Schools Dr. Balan Moorthy shares a life story of coming to Canada with Grade 2 students at Coquihalla Elementary School in Hope, BC.

As the curriculum is available online at no cost, Moorthy expects that school districts will likely access the material. "This curriculum is a 'no-brainer,' he says. "Teachers appreciate accessible curriculum, and they understand the power of

storytelling. Primary teachers are incredibly resourceful. They will be thrilled to have a targeted curriculum that teaches anti-racism in such a thoughtful and seamless way. Once they see it in action, they will love it."

Continued on page 26



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Teachers can request a free Presentation Kit via mail with a fun & educational video about recycling, lesson tips, and special goodies for their students.



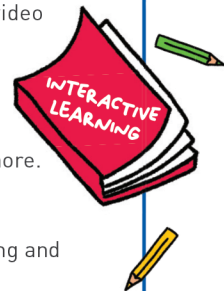
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Elementary \$5,000 Grand Prize Winner: Mountview Elementary

Mountview Elementary School in Williams Lake has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to environmental preservation. For nearly a decade, the school has maintained an active beverage container recycling program aimed at reducing the amount of beverage containers entering landfills. In the 2023/2024 school year, this dedication continued, and their grade 5/6 class created the "Litter Busters" group. The group, under the supervision of an Education Assistant, installed classroom recycling bins and worked on collecting and sorting materials found in the bins.



High School \$5,000 Grand Prize Winner: Kyuquot Elementary Secondary School

Kyuquot Elementary Secondary School, located in the treaty territory of the Ka:yu:'k't'h'/Che:k'tles7et'h' First Nations (KCFN) on the west coast of Vancouver Island has no road access and the only way to access their community is by boat or plane.

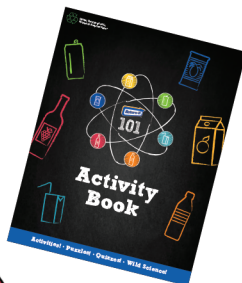


Since the community doesn't have a recycling center yet, the school developed their own collection program and organized their first bottle drive where they collected beverage containers to divert them from landfill and to clean up the community. This bottle drive was met with huge success with 5,832 beverage containers collected.

Read the full stories at
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Log in at the Express label stand at the depot using your school's account number. Anyone with the account number can contribute to your bottle drive.



Print off the number of labels you need, stick one on each bag, and leave them at the depot.



The depot will sort and count the containers for you and credit your Express account.

* Some depots may have per-visit bag limits. Contact your local Express location directly for more information.

A journey of learning and self-discovery

Educator Linda Bailey helped development Together We Thrive. What follows are her thoughts on the creation of this pioneering curriculum.

Working with members of the Hope Inclusion Project to develop this anti-oppression curriculum has been a personal journey of learning and self-discovery, while utilizing my talents as an elementary school teacher. My deep interest in social justice has been a driving force.

As a primary educator my focus of instruction was thematic with a strong focus on social justice. My students explored the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and they championed his message. I became aware of my students bringing these teachings to class discussions and learning projects in the intermediate grades and so it became evident to me that an anti-oppression curriculum would reinforce my students' innate value for right and wrong, for equity.

Our curriculum focuses on early learners, Kindergarten through grade 4. It invests in our students' learning for deeper understanding to value all in our growing diverse society. New paths need to be forged

for young learners to enhance their innate sense of social justice. Young children look to make connections with others. They have an innate sense of social justice, sharing with others that have less, including others who appear to be on the outskirts, and they approach new situations with gentle hearts expressing care and concern for friends.

"Teachers appreciate accessible curriculum, and they understand the power of storytelling. Primary teachers are incredibly resourceful. They will be thrilled to have a targeted curriculum that teaches anti-racism in such a thoughtful and seamless way. Once they see it in action, they will love it."

Children have preferences and may not enjoy baseball, but they clearly listen with heavy hearts when they hear that a child is excluded because of their skin colour. The act of not shaking the black child's hand after the baseball game provokes pain in their estimations. This type of humiliation is felt by all witnessing such an action.

Young children who witness this look to those who are older, seeking acknowledgement that it is wrong, rude, and unjust. When those in a position of power do not respond as the youngster knows to be just, society begins to reinforce systemic attitudes of oppression. The stronger the knowledge and truth of social justice is in the hearts of children, the better equipped they will be to evaluate and respond well in difficult situations like this.

The literature in the curriculum is rich and highlights concepts of acceptance, consent, equity, and unconditional love of others, which young learners easily champion. Exploring these necessary topics are essential to give every child the opportunity to be successful and learn with their hearts, which are the guide for an equitable future.

Together We Thrive allows every child to be bold and express their authentic selves with acceptance, appreciation, and in celebration. Celebration is key to valuing diversity and seeing each person's uniqueness and differences.

The books are captivating and artistically relevant in beauty of word and image. Some of the literature has simple text but the concepts and historical references are significant. The curriculum should inspire educators to research and embark on a journey of self-discovery. Educators need to better understand the concepts, historical implications, and colonial structures that exist in society. As educators, we need to commit to teaching in an area that requires self-discovery, learning, and skill development. The concepts and historical relevance go well past the primary grades. Intermediate teachers are strongly encouraged to use these rich pieces of literature as a starting point to enhance their curricular instruction.

Africville, a book by Shauntay Grant, was the most impactful book in my own learning. The book is a treasure. It has a poetic text with rich vibrant images. The story is simple. The context has significant historical relevance. Educators need to recognize the book is the catalyst. It provides the nucleus

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where learning and teaching will grow, develop, and live in their students' hearts.

Teachers need to be prepared to learn the historical significance of each of the books in *Together We Thrive*, for it is their new knowledge that will guide their instruction of each book's significance.

Africville was a rich Black community near Halifax, Nova Scotia for over 120 years. The City of Halifax razed and relocated the community in the 1960s with unmet promises for improved living situations. For years, Africville remained strong despite the City of Halifax developments of a slaughterhouse, hospital for contagious illnesses, and garbage dump near the vibrant community. Residents of Africville paid municipal taxes without receiving any municipal services. The blatant acts of racism against the residents of Africville demonstrate the structures of oppression, racism, and injustice to the Black community. Grant's *Africville* is a gift to teachers and learners alike. It is a

beautifully crafted book to commemorate a vibrant community that withstood decades of racism. Grant provides an excellent summary of the history of Africville and a simple harsh truth that students will easily resonate with.

I am proud of this curriculum and honoured to share space within this rural, grassroots organization, the Hope Inclusion Project. My appreciation and gratitude goes out to Aisha Kiani, for her expertise, skill and guidance to the project. 🌈

Peter Bailey is co-owner of Free Rein Associates, an employability agency in Hope, British Columbia. In the last few years, Peter has worked on addressing rural service delivery issues and developing programs that address diversity and inclusion. In 2023, Peter was recognized as the Champion of Diversity from the Fraser Valley Diversity Awards. Peter strives to build inclusion in employment programming that better serves the community.

Balan Moorthy is an educational leader with a Ph.D. in education, specializing in Truth and Reconciliation, anti-racism, and equity. With 35 years of experience, including 20 as a kindergarten to grade 12 principal, Balan is in his fifth year as Superintendent of the Fraser Cascade School District. He has served with the Fraser Valley and Langley Human Dignity Coalitions, focusing on intersectional approaches to inclusive education. Drawing from his research, personal experiences with racism as an immigrant, and insights into Indigenous women's voices in education, Balan provides practical strategies to help system leaders foster equity and inclusion in their schools.

Linda Bailey is a founding member of the Hope Inclusion Project. She holds a Master's in Early Childhood Education from the University of British Columbia. Linda grounded her instruction in themes of social justice. She enjoyed teaching and learning for 33 years with students and colleagues of School District #78, Fraser Cascade.



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A group of Indigenous BEd students from across Turtle Island attending the 2023 National Gathering that was in Montréal, QC. Photos courtesy of Indspire.

Challenging EDI Perceptions and Perspectives:

Discussing the Quiet Part Out Loud

By Mike Hager, Indspire

his opinion piece addresses a complex issue that is often mistakenly confined to just two perspectives.

It's not about decency, effort, or individualism, but about a different set of concepts. For reasons beyond this article, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have stirred debates in the education system and across society as a whole. Personally, I find DEI and its initiatives confusing at times. Let's explore why it is for me. Maybe we'll find some common positives and concerns so that we can arrive in a better place of understanding and empathy.

During my time playing rugby in Paris – oui, that Paris, en France – I heard a

phrase: “Mon portefeuille est toujours en droit, mais mon coeur est vraiment à la gauche.” Basically, it means that my conservative side is predominately financial, but my heart or values are liberal. I believe my main concern is that questioning DEI logic or seeking clarity can sometimes feel as controversial as the issues these initiatives aim to address. While diversity, equity, and inclusion are noble ideals, even questioning whether these concepts have perhaps recently shifted into metaphors for something else can be unsettling for some. Do DEI initiatives truly create space for everyone's growth in schools, workplaces, or life?

Obviously, things change; whether for better or worse will be up to future societies to determine. Debates or discussions that move towards a deeper understanding of things are important and were instrumental for the formation of many great and admirable things. However, in the current climate, debate is polarizing. We can't seem to agree about what is objectively true. So, how can we establish policies and initiatives around DEI if we can't agree upon: a) what those principles are; b) why they're important in an educational setting; and c) how we can successfully implement them in a way that still leaves room for a rigorous questioning process?

Maybe my concern is from my limited understanding of how difficult changing people's minds about their strongly held beliefs and opinions – including my own. Aspects of thinking are constrained by our cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias,



Indspire is an Indigenous national charity that invests in the education of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada.

emotional investment, the backfire effect, the need for cognitive closure, and the cultural and societal norms associated with one's own individual and group identity. Changing someone's mind is challenging because beliefs are deeply intertwined with identity, emotions, and social connections. While it's not impossible, it's a massive mountain to climb. Dr. Niigaan Sinclair and many other similar thinkers want us to be climbing the mountain, though.

If DEI initiatives are meant to make me be more sensitive and have more empathy for fear of being offensive, or be more aware of how I should be offended on behalf of someone else, I'm not so sure that's a concern, mostly because I believe that my right to be offended should not supersede your right to be offensive. To me, this is the basis of the innate individuality of us all. Our ability to then express these thoughts orally or in writing could, of course, cause problems. But what offends me might not even be on your radar. Then



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add the nuances and difficulties most have at being good communicators, let alone excellent communicators, about intricate multifaceted topics – so much so that discussing these pervasive thoughts and testing anyone's ideas becomes even more contentious for some.

Understanding the misunderstandings

Let's try clearing a bit of fog on how we see things; let's talk about perception and perspective. Perception and perspective remind me of the classic mix-ups of assessment vs. evaluation or correlation vs. causation. Perception is how we interpret the world – our personal remix of beliefs, senses, and past experiences. It's the mental filter we bring to life every day. Perspective is the unique angle we choose, the lens that colours our views, drives our choices, and shapes our journey. This subtle yet powerful difference often gets twisted. And like DEI initiatives, it can also be

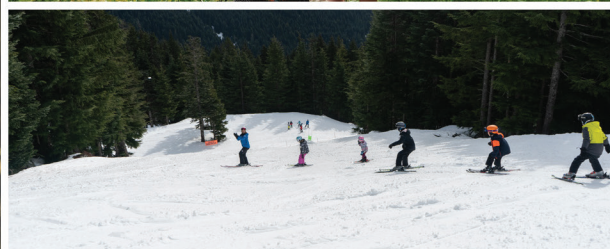
misunderstood or even misused if applied haphazardly.

Teachers and parents could struggle with navigating the DEI concepts, which could lead to issues in implementing DEI effectively because of the duality of perception versus perspective. As someone smarter than I once wrote, "It was the best of times and the worst of times..." As a cynical optimist, I'm working towards recognizing that it IS important to at least attempt the mountain, to collectively try to discuss these things with good grace from a good place with integrity, honouring the roots of DEI initiatives in the social-change movements of the past, such as school integration and recognition of 2SLGBTQ+ human rights, while realizing that we need to be especially mindful of polarizing discourse – keeping students at the heart of things.

It's possible that I struggle with the 'how' as we're attempting to implement aspects of DEI. Upon first glance, if we are

attempting to move towards having better expertise for finding talent and nurturing that talent in underserved places, where we don't already have talent from, then that's something positive. But if the 'how' of implementation means that we can't seek clarity for fear of being painted into the corner of being anti-something or other, then that could be concerning to some. It also changes the discussion from one of seeking clarification to one about defending the anti or phobic label.

I am an Indian, according to my Certificate of Indian Status card. The leader of the Wampanoag Confederacy, Massasoit Sachem, is reputed to have asked: "What is this you call property? It cannot be the earth, for the land is our mother, nourishing all her children, beasts, birds, fish, and all men. The woods, the streams, everything on it belongs to everybody and is for the use of all." This perspective resonates with me in terms of Land Acknowledgement Statements. While not universal among all



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As a cynical optimist, I'm working towards recognizing that it IS important to at least attempt the mountain, to collectively try to discuss these things with good grace from a good place with integrity, honouring the roots of DEI initiatives in the social-change movements of the past, such as school integration and recognition of 2SLGBTQ+ human rights, while realizing that we need to be especially mindful of polarizing discourse – keeping students at the heart of things.

First Nations, it reflects a view that many consider a more harmonious relationship with the land compared to current ideas of property ownership.

Land Acknowledgement Statements recognize First Nations' historical claims to land, but could they paradoxically undermine the principles they aim to honour? By framing First Nations' traditional views within modern concepts of property

and ownership, these statements risk misrepresenting and diminishing the complex relationships First Nations have with the land. This imposition can be seen as a form of cultural violence that perpetuates colonial attitudes. Moreover, the broad acknowledgment of various Nations may stem from a desire to avoid offense, but it can feel patronizing, implying that First Nations lacked awareness of the land's value, despite their historical presence and conflicts over resources.

The Land Acknowledgement isn't the problem per se. Can I express the earlier view? By thinking this and saying the quiet part out loud, am I not being insensitive towards the ancestors of my Indigenous cousins, who also paddled the same river since time immemorial? Imagine asking this if I wasn't Indigenous. What does it mean to think like this but not know how to share it? Or worse, if fear is in the equation: that I might be afraid to share it? Recently there has been a call for acknowledgments to be rethought. Instead of reciting a script, some Indigenous Knowledge Keepers encourage people to speak frankly about their own connection to the communities and places they intend to honour to build actual relationships.

Barriers to opportunity and success – such as disease, physical or mental abilities, geography, and the era of birth – have always existed. While some barriers are being removed, progress is slow. Not all identities carry equal weight (e.g., age vs. wealth), and questions arise about who determines identity beyond self-claim. The rise of "Pretendians" highlights the challenges of accepting identity claims at face value. Who decides identity, and must everyone agree on this process? Can a group identity truly capture an individual's unique experiences? As life changes (e.g., disability or job status), identity may shift... but who adjusts it, and when? For some, having government authorities enforce identity policies conjures up the era of the Indian Agent.

At the end of the day, things will continue to get better by accepting the premise that solutions involve trade-offs. So, let's hope we're permitted to question the trade-offs and the solutions being offered by a cornucopia of DEI recommendations. We also need to listen to what's being said – and go forward with the best interests of students as the agreed-upon common goal. 🌈

Mike Hager is from the Bear Clan of the Mohawk Nation. Growing up, he spent time living on the family farm on Six Nations of the Grand River riding horses and doing chores. A student athlete, he graduated with an honours BA from the University of Guelph where he played football, rugby, and wrestled. His BEd is from Brock University. It was this love for rugby combined with the joy of teaching that landed him playing and working stints in Paris France, Manchester England, Brisbane, Australia, and 10 years in New Zealand. He has taught in his home community as well for 11 years in a Cree community in northern Quebec along the James Bay. Mike has been at Indspire for six years as both the project lead for the Teach for Tomorrow initiative and the current Community Outreach Coordinator.

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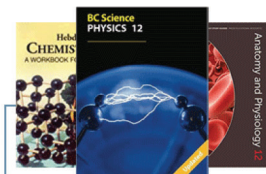
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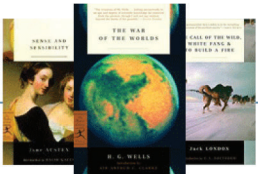
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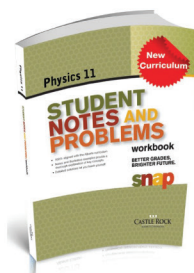
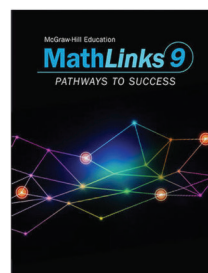
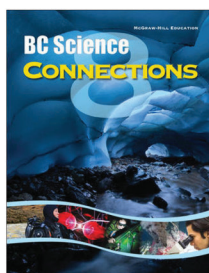
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Hopes for A Child: A Collaborative Inquiry

By Kerri Steel, Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (School District No. 68)

In this post-pandemic environment, relationships with our communities have shifted. It feels they are more often strained, and staff are expressing frustration or are disheartened by a perceived lack of engagement and trust with families. We all need both a connection to one another and a source of optimism to reenergize our

work. Stoll states that “the most successful schools in challenging circumstances are highly engaged with and trusted by parents and the larger community.”¹ Authentic relationships and a shared focus are our pathway toward recovery and resilience in these complex times.

As part of our learning in the Transformative Educational Leadership

Program (TELP) in the 2022-2023 school year, a team from our school district engaged in a PATH process to help us define our “North Star.”² PATH is an acronym meaning, “Preparing for Alternative Tomorrows with Hope.”³ It is a backwards design process most often used to plan for transitions to adulthood for individuals with complex developmental needs. It begins

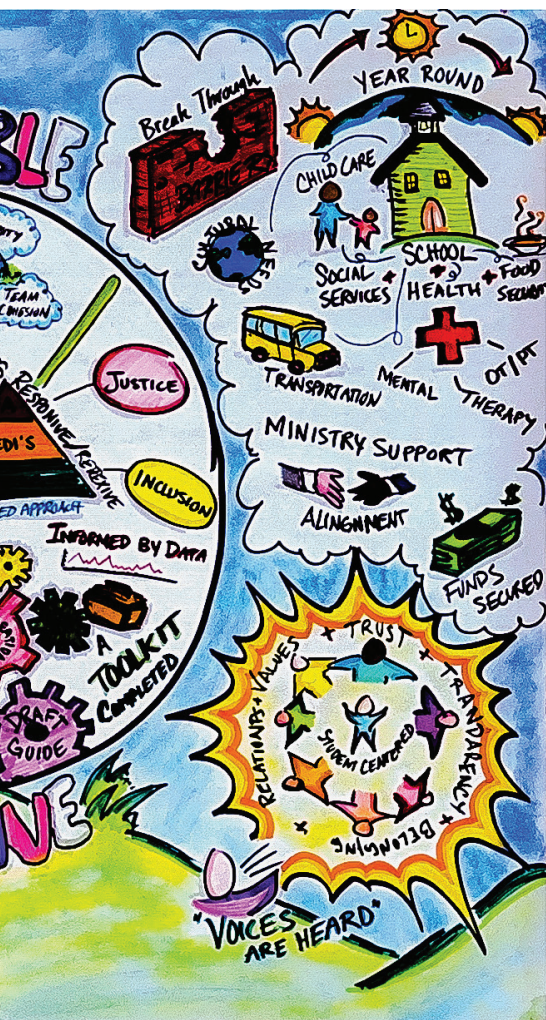


This graphic, hand-drawn by Callum Lynch, who is in an Inclusion Outreach Coordinator in the district, was part of a visioning process that Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public Schools undertook early in the project. Photo courtesy of Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public Schools.

with a dream – the North Star – where you imagine the most successful outcome possible. From there, you craft a possible and positive goal, then begin to map out the process.

One of our action steps from this PATH was to develop an interview toolkit⁴ to help us collectively explore the question: “Can every **parent** identify two educators who are listening with curiosity and empathy, and who really believe in their child’s success?” This toolkit has three sections:

1. Interview guides for parents focused on both individual and school-wide events;
2. Reflection sheets for individual interviewers based on their conversations; and
3. A reflection guide for school teams.



The toolkit is structured around a “JEDI Stance” – an active exploration of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. It is helping us to understand barriers to participation, to consider who needs to be at the table in support of both the children and their caregivers, how to help everyone feel valued and cared for in their interactions with school teams, and finally, how to ensure that parent and caregiver hopes and dreams for their children are front of mind as plans are made.

From idea to action

In the fall of 2023, a group of educators from five elementary schools engaged in an inquiry where we used this interview toolkit to speak with parents of children with diverse abilities and disabilities. Over the course of the school year, seven of us interviewed a total of 28 parents. Our team consisted of a Director of Instruction, a Principal, two Vice-Principals, a school counsellor, and three Inclusion Support Teachers.

Some participants began with trepidation, initially calling parents they already had comfortable connections with, to get a sense of how interviewees would respond to our questions. Struck by the generosity and openness with which the parents interacted with us, the team became emboldened, contacting families where we had more challenging relationships. Interviewees embraced the opportunity to share their stories, and the educators embraced the learning that came through deep listening.

Parents described the complexities they faced in collaborating with the schools. It was especially challenging for those who are beginning to realize their child has differences in their learning or development that may affect their success in the school setting. This is even more difficult for our new Canadian or kindergarten parents, who may be unfamiliar with our system. They often

do not know who to reach out to, or even which questions it is appropriate to ask.

We learned that parents struggle with being invited to meetings that are rushed, particularly when the staff spend most of the time talking about their questions and ideas, rather than listening. It sometimes felt to parents that decisions were made before they even came to the table.

Compounding this frustration is the fact that meetings are typically scheduled within a limited window of time, and at a time chosen by staff. One parent commented that, “I took an afternoon off work for this meeting, and after 28 minutes of the people who see each other, every day sharing, the teacher turned to me and said, ‘We have two minutes left. Do you have anything to add?’” Conversely, another parent noted that they appreciate the flexibility that has come through “Zoom,” as they are better able to participate now that they are not having to leave work to attend.

Several parents commented that it felt really good to be heard. In speaking with one family with which the school had shared a difficult relationship for several years, one interviewer learned that something had been stated by a staff member in the child’s kindergarten year that had deeply hurt their feelings. Her son was now in grade two, and this was the first time anyone had asked her to share her experiences. The teacher who interviewed the family noted, “It was a very healing conversation. I have learned a lot this year.” The parent was so moved by the opportunity that she emailed the Director of Instruction, saying that “our experiences have been stacking up over the last three years so it felt important to have the opportunity to share.” In asking a few questions, and listening deeply to the responses during the interview, the relationship between this family and the school team has shifted profoundly.

The educators who participated in this project share similar thoughts: giving parents a voice is key, and doing it face-

We learned that parents struggle with being invited to meetings that are rushed, particularly when the staff spend most of the time talking about their questions and ideas, rather than listening. It sometimes felt to parents that decisions were made before they even came to the table.

to-face, whenever possible, is important. This allows us to read body language and other cues; it creates connection and leads to fewer misunderstandings. Parents feel meaningfully included when they are given input into the scheduling of conversations; feel the others who support their children outside of school are seen as integral members of their child's team (e.g., behavioural interventionists or outside counsellors); and when they engage in conversations that do not feel rushed or focused on pre-determined plans. The best opportunities are open invitations for ongoing dialogue and are not simply a checking-of-the-box that a meeting occurred.

Taking what was learned and moving that forward

Participants are now preparing more detailed agendas for conversations with families to ensure parent voice is included and perspectives considered before

judgements or decisions are made. They are slowing down their processes to ensure they have really understood what families are sharing and are not just making assumptions based on personal narratives. They resolutely recognize that it's important not only to listen, but to really hear what is being shared.

As Gitanjali Mitchell, an Inclusion Support Teacher who participated in the project put it, she is now "adopting a more empathetic approach with families, approaching them with humility and an open heart."

Pattie Metheral, school counsellor, described it this way: "A parent or guardians' most prized 'possession' is their child. Keeping that thought in the forefront of my mind when I work alongside parents is key to collaborating and communicating clearly with home. This inquiry project highlighted the time it takes to build a relationship with home: phone calls, meetings, emails and the like that

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included a variety of staff members and a flexible time frame. For me, taking away the barriers around time and allowing space for active listening, perspective-taking, and empathy are paramount in building relationships with home.”

We now know that when we are experiencing tension with a family, our next step is to slow things down, really listen, and ask how we can help. Having a strategy such as the interview toolkit makes us less anxious when engaging in these difficult conversations. With this approach, the discussions are often less difficult than we anticipate they will be.

Educators do not need to have all the answers. We do need to grow the community we engage with in our decision making. It is energizing and supportive not only for our learners, but also for educators, to feel more connected to the community around us.

To borrow a phrase from respected colleague Ted Cadewallader, who is a

Kwakwaka'wakw education leader from northern Vancouver Island, educators will be most successful where we exemplify *ci'cuwatul*, walking alongside our *shxwa'la'qwa*,⁵ humbly and with gratitude. Success for our learners, and wellness for us all, will come when we grow a powerful and impactful connection between ourselves and our families. 

Many educators collaborated in the development of the toolkit and participated in the inquiry project. Along with the author, Jacquie Poulin (Assistant Superintendent); Diane McGonigle (District Principal – Teaching and Learning); and Lindsey Watford (Principal, Seaview Elementary), developed the Collecting Story Toolkit. The Graphic Facilitator for the PATH was Callum Lynch (Vice-Principal, Cedar Elementary School). Participating in the inquiry were: Lindsey Watford, Shannon Apland (Principal, Ecole Hammond Bay), Deb Rundel (Vice-Principal, Ecole Quarterway),

Gitanjali Mitchell, Sue Koziellecki and Melanie Dugas (Inclusion Support Teachers), and Pattie Metheral (School Counsellor).

Kerri Steel is a Director of Instruction for Learning and Inclusion in Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public Schools on Vancouver Island. She is a passionate advocate for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion.

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1. Kools, M. & Stoll, L. (2018). *Developing schools as learning organizations in Wales. Implementing Education Policies*. OECD Publishing. Survey. p.10.
2. View our TELP video describing this project: <https://tinyurl.com/2ebxmuhb>
3. Learn more about the PATH process here: <https://tinyurl.com/ycxuv4ea>
4. Collecting Story Toolkit: <https://tinyurl.com/4yht3cvh>
5. Contributing to the success of all, by walking alongside friends, relatives, colleagues, in a way that holds one another up.

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Compassionate Systems Leadership and Staff Wellness: Transforming Education in School

By Dr. Jaslene Atwal, Southeast Kootenay (School District No. 5)

In the heart of every thriving kindergarten to grade 12 school lies a fundamental truth: the wellbeing of educators is deeply intertwined with the success of their students. As schools across the nation grapple with the challenges of modern education, the spotlight is increasingly shining on the importance of staff wellness, not just as a benefit, but as a cornerstone of a thriving learning environment.

Healthy and contented educators are at the forefront of fostering positive, engaging classrooms where students can flourish. When staff are supported in their physical and mental wellbeing, their ability to manage classrooms effectively and deliver and support inspiring instruction is significantly enhanced.

This, in turn, creates a ripple effect of positive outcomes for students.

Staff wellness also plays a critical role in addressing the issue of burnout – a serious concern that affects many educators. Schools that invest in wellness programs, mental health resources, and initiatives that promote work-life balance help to alleviate stress and prevent burnout, leading to increased job satisfaction and retention.

Furthermore, prioritizing staff wellness sets a powerful example for students. Educators who practice and model healthy coping strategies not only care for themselves but also teach invaluable life skills to their students, promoting resilience and wellbeing throughout the school community.

In essence, the commitment to staff wellness is more than an investment

in educators; it is a pledge to create a supportive, nurturing environment where both teachers and students can thrive. By fostering a culture of care and understanding, schools can build a foundation for lasting success and positive change.

Compassionate Systems Leadership at SD#5

In this ever-evolving landscape of education, the significance of leadership that is both compassionate and systemic is critical to fostering the wellbeing of staff members. In School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay) (SD#5), Compassionate Systems Leadership (CSL) is not merely a Ministry of Education-supported concept but a practical framework that guides every facet of its

operation. This system is built off the teachings of Dr. Peter Senge and Dr. Mette Miriam Boell, both from the Center for Systems Awareness. This approach is pivotal in shaping equitable policies and practices by fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and collective responsibility. SD#5 is leveraging CSL to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, emphasizing the role of compassionate leadership in staff wellness and systemic change.

CSL is an approach that emphasizes empathy, holistic thinking, and systemic change within organizations, particularly in educational settings. This leadership style is rooted in the understanding that challenges and solutions are interconnected, requiring a comprehensive perspective that considers the diverse experiences of all stakeholders.

At its core, CSL encourages leaders to view problems through a lens of compassion and universal understanding. Instead of addressing issues in isolation,

leaders are urged to recognize how various elements within the system – such as policies, practices, and individual experiences – interact and influence one another. This approach promotes a culture of empathy, where the needs and perspectives of all individuals are considered and valued.

Key aspects of CSL include fostering inclusivity, addressing systemic barriers, and promoting equity. Leaders are encouraged to implement practices that support diversity in curriculum and pedagogy, create inclusive environments, and empower marginalized communities. It ultimately strives to build an educational system that reflects compassion, inclusivity, and systemic integrity, leading to more effective and humane outcomes.

Additionally, this leadership style focuses on mental wellbeing and staff support, understanding that the health of educators and staff directly impacts their effectiveness and the overall learning environment.

CSL in action

CSL is a framework that encourages leaders to view challenges through a holistic lens, recognizing the interconnectedness of various systems and the diverse experiences of individuals within them. At its core, this approach fosters a culture of empathy, aiming to address systemic issues with an inclusive and understanding mindset. In SD#5, this leadership style is integral to promoting equity and addressing the myriad challenges faced by students and staff alike.

SD#5 has implemented several initiatives and events designed to embed CSL into its fabric. These efforts include the annual CSL Conference and numerous training sessions, the Strengthening Early Years Transition to Kindergarten (SEY2KT) committee, the implementation of the Corporate Calm Premium app membership, and various mental health and wellness programs.



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Goals to strive for

One of the fundamental goals of CSL is to promote diversity and representation within curriculum and pedagogy. In SD#5, this involves integrating diverse perspectives and voices into educational materials and teaching practices. By doing so, the district ensures that all students see themselves reflected in their learning experiences, which is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. A sense of belonging and engagement is not only important for students but equally important for staff. If leaders can model a welcoming workplace that fosters inclusion and belonging for staff members, it becomes easier for staff to model this for students.


Empowering marginalized students and communities is a key aspect of CSL. SD#5 is committed to providing targeted support and resources to these groups, recognizing the unique challenges they

may face and working to address them effectively.

A supportive environment is one where individuals feel valued, understood, and empowered. The integration of CSL into the practices of SD#5 has had a profound impact on the educational environment. By fostering a culture of empathy and understanding, the district has been able to address systemic challenges and create a more inclusive and supportive setting for students and staff alike. Through its various initiatives and practices, SD#5 has worked to create such an environment, ensuring that all members of the educational community have the tools and resources they need to thrive.

Ultimately, the goal of CSL is to ensure that policies and practices reflect the core values of compassion, inclusivity, and fairness. By embedding these values into every aspect of its operation, SD#5 is not only addressing current challenges but also setting a precedent for future

practices in education. For SD#5, CSL represents a forward-thinking approach to education that prioritizes empathy, understanding, and systemic change.

Through its various initiatives and practices, SD#5 is creating a more equitable and supportive environment for all members of its community. By focusing on diversity, representation, and inclusivity, the district is not only addressing immediate challenges, but also laying the groundwork for a more compassionate and just educational system. As SD#5 continues to champion these principles, it serves as a model for other institutions striving to make a meaningful impact through compassionate leadership. 

Dr. Jaslene Atwal is a dedicated educator and advocate for student and staff wellness, known for her innovative approaches in fostering compassionate and supportive learning and working environments.



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Achieving Equitable Learning Experiences: Affecting Structural and Systemic Change

By Jameel Aziz, with support from Lynda Minnabarriet,
Prince George (School District No. 57)

As education leaders, our foremost responsibility is to steward the resources allocated to our districts with a focus on efficiency and equity, ensuring that every dollar contributes to student learning outcomes. This responsibility involves a nuanced balancing act, influenced by factors such as geographic location, existing resources, infrastructure, and relationships with partner groups.

In my context of transitioning to a new district, there is a unique opportunity to assess and potentially reshape existing structures and practices. For myself and Lynda Minnabarriet, Secretary Treasurer, as newcomers to the district's leadership team, this transition represents a chance to apply a fresh perspective, focusing on how we can better support learners and drive systemic change within the district.

Reassessing existing structures

The process of initiating systemic change involves more than merely identifying areas that need

improvement; it requires a comprehensive strategy for implementing changes effectively. This often starts with engaging external experts to conduct objective reviews of our work. In School District No. 57 (SD57), we have engaged in reviews of the human resources and purchasing departments, custodial services, technology, and long-range facility planning. These reviews are crucial for identifying best practices and areas for enhancement.

Another significant area of focus is how we allocate funds to schools versus what is managed centrally. This aspect has the potential to affect the most profound change, directly influencing the quality of education our learners receive. It is not just about determining what resources are needed, but also about how to allocate these resources in a manner that aligns with our commitment to equity and efficiency.

Evaluating student results

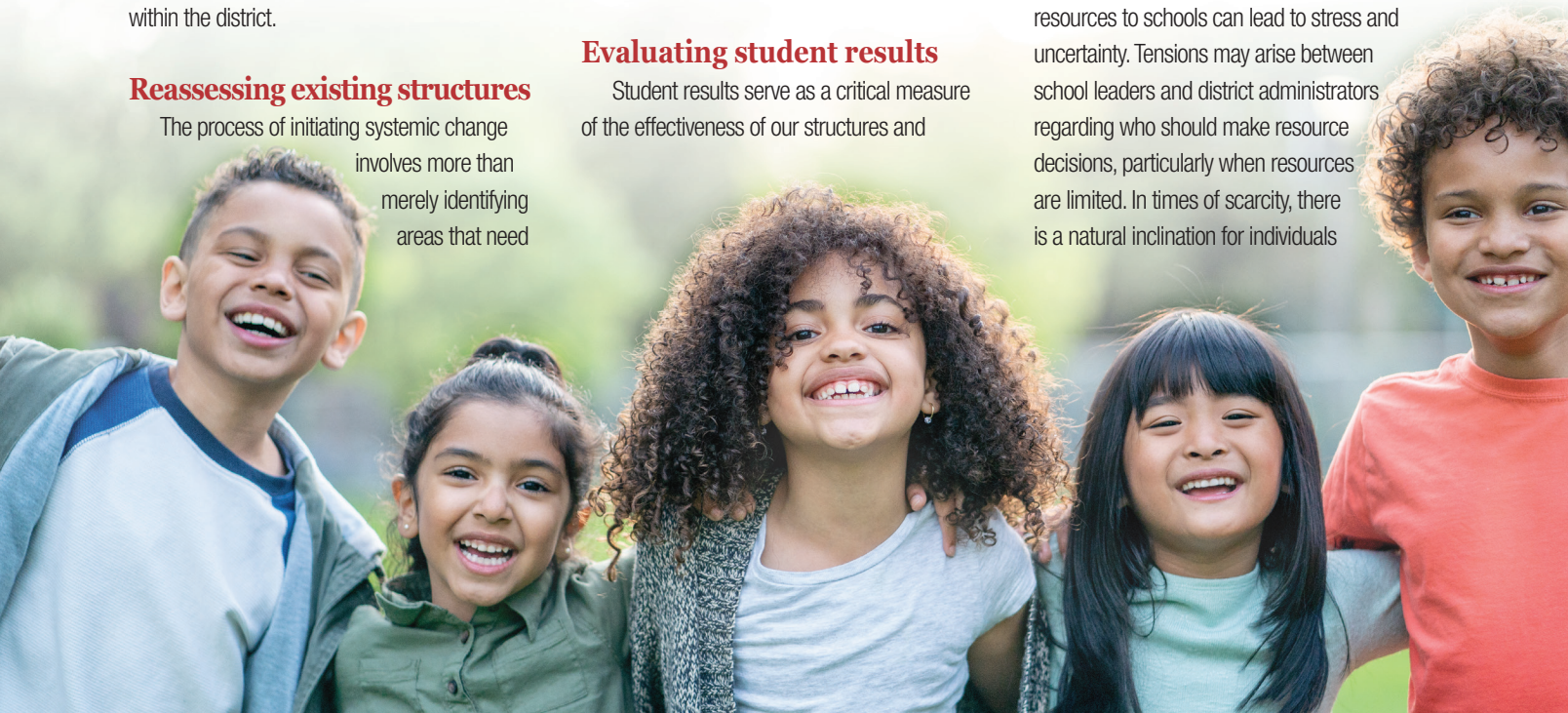
Student results serve as a critical measure of the effectiveness of our structures and

strategies. By analyzing achievement data, we can assess how well our current systems are functioning and identify areas that require adjustment. This ongoing evaluation is essential for informing future initiatives and refining our approach to meet the evolving needs of students. If student performance is at an optimal level, there is not the same urgency for change. In SD57, student data indicates that new or revised strategies are needed to enhance student success in our schools.

The challenge of resource allocation

Our core mandate is to provide an equitable learning experience across the district. When deciding how to allocate resources for classrooms, technology, and other aspects of the educational environment, the real challenge is not solely in identifying needs but in devising effective methods for meeting those needs. Differing opinions often emerge about how best to achieve educational goals. The question is not just about the "what" but about the "how" of implementation.

Changes in the allocations of financial resources to schools can lead to stress and uncertainty. Tensions may arise between school leaders and district administrators regarding who should make resource decisions, particularly when resources are limited. In times of scarcity, there is a natural inclination for individuals





Peter George, Indigenous Knowledge Keeper and carver of the sign he is standing in front of. This year, the sign is being refurbished and hundreds of students will help with the carving, sanding, and painting. Photos on this page courtesy of SD57.



Leaders in SD57 believe that students are the primary stakeholders in the education system, and their voices provide valuable insights.

to prioritize the needs of their own schools over others. This can create friction and hinder a unified approach to resource distribution.

Creating a district culture that values and supports all schools equitably is essential for fostering a collaborative environment. When every school and leader is committed to the well-being of all students, rather than just their own, it becomes easier to implement equitable and effective resource allocation strategies.

Engaging student voices

One of the most valuable resources in our district is the District Student Advisory Council, which plays a critical role in shaping our approach to education. Engaging students to understand their perspectives on their learning experiences, the facilities in which they learn, and the overall environment is essential. Students are the primary stakeholders in the

education system, and their voices provide invaluable insights into how we can improve our practices and facilities.

Although education is not a business, we must adopt a customer-focused mindset. By listening to student feedback, we can ensure we deliver the best possible educational experience with the resources available. This approach helps create learning environments that are functional and inviting, tailored to students and staff's needs.

The importance of supporting people

At the heart of our approach is the belief that the people within our district are our greatest resource. Even with substantial financial resources, if our staff are not supported through professional development and a positive working environment, students

will not receive the quality of education they deserve.

Professional support for staff includes providing opportunities for quality professional development, ensuring a safe and positive work environment, and fostering a culture of collaboration and respect. When educators are well-supported, they are better equipped to deliver high-quality instruction and create a positive learning environment for their students.

The role of the board

The role of the Board of Education is crucial in this process. The Board provides oversight and support for district leadership, ensuring that strategies and policies align with the district's mission and community expectations. Board members play a key role in setting the direction for systemic change and supporting the implementation of new initiatives.

The Board's support is vital for navigating the complexities of systemic change and achieving desired outcomes. They help ensure decisions are made with consideration of the broader implications for the district and its partners. Effective communication between the Board and district leadership is essential for fostering a collaborative approach to educational improvement.

Equity in education

Equity in education does not imply that every learning space is identical. Rather, it means creating environments that are responsive to the needs of students and staff and provide a functional and welcoming atmosphere. Equity involves addressing disparities and ensuring all students have access to the resources and support they need to succeed.

Long-term and short-term planning must prioritize sustainability to ensure that the positive changes we implement today benefit future generations of students. This means investing in infrastructure and resources that can be maintained and adapted over time, ensuring the educational environment remains conducive to learning.

Engaging stakeholders and addressing challenges

Systemic change requires broad engagement and input from students, rightsholders, partner groups, and the community. While district leaders may drive the vision for change, successful implementation depends on clear communication and collaboration with all involved parties.


It is important to recognize that changes aimed at creating greater equity may be met with resistance, especially if they affect groups that benefit from existing inequities. Human nature often leads to resistance to change when it threatens established benefits. Addressing these challenges requires transparency, empathy, and a commitment to fostering a culture of inclusivity and fairness.

Education is a critical element of societal service and operates within a dual governance system, where both provincial governments and boards of education play roles in funding and resource allocation. This political dimension adds complexity to the process of systemic change, as it

involves navigating political support and directives while striving to meet educational goals.

Conclusion

Affecting structural and systemic change in education is a multifaceted and demanding process. It requires a commitment to equity, efficiency, and sustainability. By engaging in objective reviews, incorporating diverse perspectives, and maintaining a focus on student outcomes, we can create an education system that supports all learners and prepares them for future success.

Our approach must be grounded in a commitment to continuous improvement, informed by data, and responsive to the needs of all stakeholders. By working collaboratively and making thoughtful, evidence-based decisions, we can drive meaningful change that enhances the educational experience for students and supports their growth and development. The families and students we serve are relying on us to do exactly that. 

Jameel Aziz is the recently appointed Superintendent/CEO of SD57 Prince George. He is a 30+ year educator with previous roles as President of the Canadian Association of Principals, President and Executive Director of the BC Principals' and Vice Principals' Association, and numerous other school district roles. He is an energetic and passionate educator focused on levelling the playing field for all learners.

Lynda Minnabarriet has served as a Secretary Treasurer in school districts for 20+ years and has been supporting SD57 since April 2023. She has been an executive member of the BC Association of School Business Officials, a trustee on the Public Education Benefits Trust, and a panel member of the K-12 Public Education Funding Model Review. Her core belief is that every child, no matter where they live, should have access to an education system that supports who they are and what they need.



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