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Contextual Literacy in Action: Location, Location, Location!





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On the cover:

Following amalgamation, Rocky Mountain's Steve Wyer inherited three separate collective agreements, three unique organizational cultures, and three different coffee mug designs. Starting on page 12, Steve discusses how this unique situation (not to mention the District's 300 kilometre expanse) required him to take a crash course in contextual literacy.



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A Message from the BCSSA President, Teresa Downs

It is an ongoing honour to serve as the President of BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) alongside our Board of Directors. This issue of *InspireED* is focussed on *The Spirit of Leadership* in action. Thank you to those BCSSA members who have taken the time to share their story within this edition.

What an incredibly complex time we are leading in and through.

On the one hand, we are leading in a time of immense responsibility and opportunity: leading learning and systems for equity, inclusion, diversity, and belonging; and seeking to

This requires us to be active supporters and allies of each other – to email, call, message, and encourage each other to ensure that we get through this time stronger together as an Association and a system.

reconsider, reconfigure, and realign individual and collective priorities from those that have been centered around whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and colonial epistemology to thinking and systems centered on the voices, experiences, and needs of the richly diverse students, families, and communities we serve, especially those who have not been heard or valued in the past.

On the other hand, we are seeing a persistent portion of the population that sees this change as a threat to what they know, understand, and

believe. Each day, we read headlines on the experiences of our colleagues who are facing immense pressure, scrutiny, ridicule, and threats regarding books in classrooms, flags flown, shirts worn, guests in schools, the curriculum, and the list goes on and on.

The *Stewardship for the Future of All Children* competency within *The Spirit of Leadership* demonstrates our role as leaders as we navigate this responsibility with this pressure, noting:

System leaders have a responsibility for a quality education for all children and for the future that education empowers. A quality education, and educational systems that nurture powerful learning, must foster a future in which children feel confident and secure not only in their identity, but in their relationships with others and with the environment. The district should, in other words, both teach about and help enact a more just and sustainable society.

As self, teams, and organizations, we are being called upon to amplify the voices, stories, and experiences of those for whom this system has marginalized or excluded with the intention to disrupt the status quo. This requires us to be active supporters and allies of each other – to email, call, message, and encourage each other to ensure that we get through this time stronger together as an Association and a system.

Public education is the foundation future of society. While most people equate school with literacy, numeracy, and graduation, those of us proud to represent public education know that the unseen and under-appreciated gift of public education is that children have the opportunity to be immersed in communities where they meet others who are different than they are, and where they learn about and how to appreciate difference(s).

I would also like to take this opportunity to offer congratulations to our BCSSA colleagues who recently launched the BC Black Educational Leaders Association (BCBELA) and to their President, Beth Applewhite.

Teresa Downs

President, British Columbia School Superintendents Association
Superintendent, SD74 (Gold Trail)

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A Message from the Ministry of Education and Child Care



Cloë Nicholls
Assistant Deputy Minister
Ministry of Education and Child
Care

I am a proud graduate of both the British Columbia public Kindergarten to Grade 12 and post-secondary system. I have a dual Dogwood from Earl Marriott Secondary in SD36 and still use my French language skills to this day! I also have a BA (Honours) in Political Science from the University of British Columbia (UBC). I have worked for the provincial government for almost 20 years in a range of portfolios: treaty negotiations, income and disability

assistance, labour market policy, immigration supports, and now education. Although I am not an educator by training, I am now a parent in the public system and I love juxtaposing the higher-level work of the Ministry and the sector with the on-the-ground reality I see daily in my son's classroom.

What are a few observations you have had since becoming Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM)?

Throughout my career, every time I have been promoted I have been reminded of the concept from "Good to Great" that "what got you here isn't what will get you there" – basically, that each transition into a new leadership role requires learning a new skill set and maybe unlearning some previous habits! I also continue to be in awe of how complex our sector is, how dedicated everyone is to supporting students, and how challenging it is to be working in public education at this point in history.

What kind of leader do you strive to be as the new ADM?

Someone who makes people feel safe at work so they can do their best, tells truth to power, and acts with integrity. A leader who promotes curiosity, empowers action, and celebrates sustainable innovation, and someone who understands government's commitments to reconciliation and is doing the work to unpack my own power and privilege.

How do you empower your staff to make decisions around their work and suggest new ways to do things?

I consider myself fortunate to have worked in a variety of included and excluded positions in a range of Ministries over my career, and I try to always remember what it was like to be a policy analyst, or a junior manager. It is important to provide effective training and create space for people to become the experts of their own work, to experience both accolades when they are successful, and accountability for making

mistakes. As I have moved into more senior leadership I have tried to listen a lot more than I talk – in my experience staff know what needs to be done to solve problems but just need to know that they are trusted to proactively do the work.

How do you work to create an environment where differences are valued, encouraged, and supported?

I am grateful to have started my career in Treaty negotiations, where we received training and support on Crown-Indigenous relations, cultural and community protocols, and the legal and policy history of discrimination towards Indigenous peoples. I have always tried to create spaces where people feel trusted and safe, and where we actively tackle racism and discrimination, not from a space of shame but from a place of collective responsibility. I try to build leadership teams with diverse lived experiences and career strengths, and teams that reflect the diversity of the citizens and students who we serve. I also try to chair meetings fairly, give everyone equal time to weigh in, and celebrate people who are asking tough questions, which fosters conversations of change.

How do you see yourself, your division, and the Ministry working together with BCSSA to move forward joint commitments?

There are several priority areas for our division where I see BCSSA and superintendents playing a key role. The first is workforce development and supports – we are in the midst of a supply shortage due to increasing enrolment and retirements, and the tightness of the overall labour market. We need to work across multiple channels to support districts on this.

The second is the work we are doing with the First Nations Education Steering Committee to align with the *Declaration Act* and take concrete steps to improve outcomes for Indigenous learners. I believe that reconciliation in public education is the most important topic we need to be collectively tackling and superintendents, as systems leaders and advisors to the Board, play a crucial role.

The third area of connection I see is around shared accountability to enhancing student learning, using data and evidence to take action to improve outcomes. As we enter Year 3 of the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning, I am excited to work with BCSSA and superintendents to refine the existing process and continue to learn from each other.

Thank you for the work you do individually and through your Board of Directors to support the Ministry, our division, and the students who show up in our schools every day.

Cloë Nicholls

Assistant Deputy Minister
Ministry of Education and Child Care

A Message from the BCSSA Executive Director



Claire Guy
Executive Director
British Columbia School
Superintendents Association

It may not always be comfortable, but we recognize that to see change in our school districts, we need to try it out ourselves, model it, and feel a different type of learning experience.

As leaders, we know that context matters and can be a game changer for how we approach our roles in the service of learners. In this issue, we focus on the importance of contextual literacy and considerations for leadership. Our contributors were asked to reflect on how contextual literacy impacts their work on the ground, and we thank them for sharing their stories of practice in this Spring 2023 edition.

We continue to explore and dive deeper into our new BCSSA leadership competencies, *The Spirit of Leadership*. We appreciate that we are all in different places in this journey. Some of us are at the beginning stages, just dipping our toes in the water to learn how these aspirational competencies can assist in guiding our leadership work. Others have dived in and are already finding creative ways to apply them to their own context. There is much collective interest from our membership to explore the competencies, and our BCSSA committees and working groups are coming together to bring alignment, coherence, and collective efficacy to this joint work.

The Professional Learning Committee recently met and committed to capitalizing on the lens of *The Spirit of Leadership* to guide our BCSSA professional learning opportunities on a go-forward basis. To truly enact the “spirit” of these competencies will require courage and risk-taking on behalf of us all. “Walking the talk” towards true change for Truth and Reconciliation will require us to reflect

and break down our colonial structures and do things differently, including our BCSSA professional learning.

As learners, we will try to model the practice we want to see in our schools, providing voice and agency to our adult learners to support engagement. It may not always be comfortable, but we recognize that to see change in our school districts, we need to try it out ourselves, model it, and feel a different type of learning experience. I recall that Dr. Simon Breakspear used to say, if we are going to fail, we should fail well. But we won’t move forward with our learning if we don’t try.

All this to say, that as I write this, we are already putting plans in place for our time together in Whistler on August 16 to 18, 2023, and you may likely see the structures looking somewhat different. We have much work to do to support equity, diversity, inclusion, and Indigenous education, but our collective desire to effect positive change on these vital tenants in public education is what drives our moral purpose and keeps us excited about serving our school district communities every day.

Please continue to share your stories – it is how we learn! Our sincere thanks to all our contributors for modeling that courage and risk-taking for this edition. Until next time!

Claire Guy
Executive Director
British Columbia School Superintendents Association

BCSSA RETIREES

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

- SD34 – Superintendent, Kevin Godden
- SD38 – Superintendent, Scott Robinson
- SD39 – Associate Superintendent, Rob Schindel
- SD39 – Director of Instruction, School Services, Richard Zerbe
- SD41 – Assistant Superintendent, Wanda Mitchell
- SD93 – Superintendent, Michel St-Amant



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Exploring Contextual Literacy in the Rural Setting

By Steve Wyer, SD6 (Rocky Mountain)

Rocky Mountain School District is comprised of three distinct rural communities: Golden, Kimberley, and Invermere. Prior to amalgamation in 1997, each community included an autonomous school district. Following amalgamation, Rocky Mountain inherited three separate collective agreements, three unique organizational cultures, and three different coffee mug designs.

After nearly 25 years, the legacy of amalgamation contributes to the complexity of the organizational culture in Rocky Mountain. Throw in the geographical expanse of 300 kilometres tip to tip, and it's no wonder why growing contextual literacy competency in our district is a very real leadership challenge. In the spirit of leading from where one stands, I will use the backdrop of the effects of amalgamation, the impact of geography, and my role in human resources (HR) to offer up some considerations respecting the cultivation of contextual literacy for system leaders in rural settings.

Among being able to assess the context of internal and external systems, the competency of contextual literacy requires leaders to be able to, "speak the language of the systems with which they interact, understand how those systems work and change, and ensure the district's priorities are supported through these complex interactions" (BCSSA's *Spirit of Leadership*, 2022¹). Additionally, one must consider the

development of this competency from the internal locus of self to the highest construct of organizational leadership. So, how does the leader achieve proficiency despite the challenges outlined earlier?

Consider your role

In small rural districts, system leaders wear many different hats. I provide oversight for human resources, curriculum and assessment, principal and vice-principal support across 16 schools and three communities, and, of course let's not forget, "other duties as assigned."

System leaders in rural settings navigate leadership through a diverse set of systems and contexts. In addition to the varied roles of system leaders in rural settings, we need to consider the complexity multipliers of rural geography and amalgamation – the melding of distinctly different organizational cultures into one. While some aspects of culture meld well, others remain distinctly unique and resist melding. From the HR perspective, it is critical to consider the values and culture of three distinct communities, each with their own local union.

Considering the depths of contextual complexity, this work can seem overwhelming when swallowed in gargantuan gulps! I find guidance, however, by taking a page from the Compassionate Systems Leadership² playbook. It is helpful to reflect on my role in relation to desired outcomes and in relation to context.

For me, the significant aspects of context, related to human resources, are the values, assumptions, attitudes, and underlying

norms of the various systems. I ask myself, *in what role am I acting, and what style of leadership best suits the system within which I am interacting?* Posing this question prior to system interaction allows me to determine the ways I need to adjust my leadership style to suit the context. It further causes me to clarify my understanding of the context *before* I act. Hilary Pearl refers to this practice as Style Flexing.³

In her 2015 article *Intricacies of Style Flexing*, Pearl describes the concept of adjusting one's personality, communication style, or leadership approach to meet the needs of coworkers with differing generational dynamics. Interestingly, the concept of Style Flexing translates nicely to what I suspect I do as I move between different system contexts – determine the workings, culture, and needs of the system and flex to them to achieve strategic outcomes.

For example, when I move between distinct geographical communities, I must consider flexing to unique cultural differences (values, norms), unique social pressures (housing availability), and the distinct personalities in each system (union leaders, parent community).

At the same time, however, leaders in rural settings also need to flex according to the *role* in which they are acting. To navigate different role contexts, it is important to first clarify the role in which one is acting and then to set the objectives of different roles apart from each other. Essentially, how I flex my style in a certain role to achieve an objective may not be the same way I need

to flex my style in a different role to achieve different objectives within the same context.

To illustrate this point, if I am not careful to flex between an HR lens and relational leadership within the employee relationship context, I may not be as effective as a leader. In facilitating learning for educators, it is important to style flex to relational leadership in order to be supportive and empathetic to the needs of learners. In contrast, the style flexing required in difficult HR conversations requires a more formal style and approach to ensure objectives are met when I act in this role. While the context is the same, the expectation and objectives of the role differ. The leader needs to be aware of this difference and adjust accordingly.

If you find yourself acting on multiple stages, try first mapping out the contextual differences between your roles, the culture, and the geographical location. Then, in leading self, consider the ways you might be able to Style Flex to lead across the varying dynamics of relationship, geography, and culture.

Consider the interface

Leaders in rural settings often synthesize the work of multiple teams, cultures, and priorities across the boundaries of varied systems and contexts. As leaders, acting in multiple roles, moving between systems, they interact with different groups of people within the context of that system. I will call this intersection at the liminal spaces between people, interfaces. Liminal spaces are comprised of the respective values, norms, and assumptions at the intersection of each group's role in the system. Unlike the earlier discussion, this discussion is about the people within the system and not the systems exclusively.

In the governance system, leaders interface with trustees, legal representatives, lobby interests, and the general public. In the labour relations system, leaders interface with union executives, teachers, and legal representatives. At the intersections of all interactions within these systems,

is the meeting of unique sets of values, assumptions, and norms. Capacity for contextual literacy is improved when fully aware of the shifting interfaces within a system, such as governance or labour relations.

Responding to dynamic interface shifts is key to a better understanding of contextual interactions. Stephen Zaccaro (2016)⁴ writes about *The Interface of Leadership* and describes leaders enhancing coordination, efficiency, and communication by improving their understanding of different interfaces within a system and, again, flexing to the need at any particular interface. He goes on to further explain that system leaders are able to anticipate changes in the interface and adjust their approach accordingly.

At each interface, there are different core values – different underlying beliefs. As the leader moves between interfaces and value systems, one must consider the ways in which their own values fit within those at each particular interface.

Which of my personal values align with the values represented at each interface in the system?

If one is able to align their values to those at different interfaces, and then lead from a similar value position, one is more likely to be contextually literate across shifting landscapes.

Of course, in the rural setting and within smaller districts, where one takes on several roles in multiple systems, the

interface is always shifting across expansive geography and different leadership roles. Yet, understanding the inner workings of the value frameworks and synchronizing to the interface will contribute to leadership effectiveness.

In the labour relations system, leaders are frequently tasked with engaging in critical conversations. These difficult conversations may be about conduct, grievances, or

performance. In this system, there are often two different



interfaces in the room. One interface is with the employee. At this interface, there is a person, or group of people, usually worried, uncomfortable, fearful, and uncertain. The labour relations processes are not common routine for this group.

At the other interface are the values and interests of the union: fairness, procedure, and accuracy. While there are only two groups of people in this simple example, each represents a different interface within the system, and therefore, requires a

different approach. In flexing to the values of the employee, the goal is to return them to work with confidence and personally strengthened.

On the other hand, the interaction should establish consistency, fairness of process, and maintain the boundaries of labour relations with the union. In this example, the leader must be sensitive to the values in the context of the employee interface, while also accurately following procedural requirements with clarity. To suit the context, the leader

acts as two people: one who shares the values of deep concern and care for the employee's wellbeing, and the other who represents a difficult employer process with procedural accuracy and fairness.

Systems leadership requires us to think strategically of the "whole" – the whole governance system, the whole HR system, or the whole student support system. In small and rural districts, leaders find themselves crossing over several systems in several different roles. Further, within each of these systems are different actors, with different values and objectives. A deeper exploration of contextual literacy guides us to see the importance of knowing our position in the system, both with respect to our role and the objectives of the system, as well as with respect to the values of other actors in the system. 🌀

Steve Wyer is the Assistant Superintendent in Rocky Mountain School District and he is also a Chartered Professional in Human Resources. He has worked in urban and rural districts over his 25-year career in education. Steve enjoys a strong connection to the traditional territory – skiing, biking, and hiking whenever he can.



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Educational Leadership: Adaptation and Kuwegānh

By Tracey MacMillan and Brian Manning, SD87 (Stikine)

One day, some 20 years ago, in conversation with a respected Elder from a remote northern community, we posed the question: “What do we have to do to be successful educators in this community and culture?” He paused for a moment and answered: “If I visited you at your home in your community, I would not change the channel on your TV; I would not rearrange the furniture; I would not put different food on your table; I would adapt. If you want to be successful, you need to adapt.”

In essence, he was a forerunner of what we now refer to as contextual literacy. Contextual literacy is known as finding within yourself the ability to adapt, read the land,

and respect the local customs, traditions, and practices.¹

This Elder provided us with sound advice that has grounded our approach to leadership in First Nations communities and in schools that are predominantly populated by First Nations learners. We have worked to have schools reflect the communities in which their students live. We are not here to “fix” communities, but rather to embrace them and adopt an educational approach that benefits all. This approach must honour the history, value the culture, build on existing strengths, celebrate the positives, and continuously advocate for equity.

Presently, we both work for School District 87 Stikine (SD87). We would like to acknowledge that the lands on which we live, work, and learn are the unceded traditional

territories of the Tāltān, Kaska and Taku River Tlingit First Nations. It is a rich, vibrant, and diverse setting. It is the smallest district in British Columbia but encompasses 188,034 square kilometres. SD87, with its’ stunning landscapes, boreal climate, and isolated communities – separated by large distances – is, geographically, one of the largest school districts in British Columbia and spans two time zones.

Our rationale reflects a learner centered and inclusive approach to education; a commitment to improve teaching methods and a collaborative approach that encourages involvement from the school community. We believe that culturally sensitive leadership, education, communication, participation, community outreach, and mutual respect are the keys to successful and positive school



Older students learn how to harvest a wolf according to local traditions and customs.



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Knowledge Keeper Curtis Rattray with Superintendent Tracey MacMillan during an on-the-land outing.



A Tahltan Knowledge Keeper teaches kindergarten students land survival skills.

experiences for our learners and staff. These elements aid us in the promotion of the “whole child” concept and the movement towards self-actualized personnel.

The Three Nations (Tāltān, Kaska, and Taku River Tlingit First Nations) and SD87 have established an Education Partnership Agreement (3-N Agreement). It is a wholistic and community-based approach that requires full commitment and accountability by all partners for all children to realize their potential and have the success they deserve. It supports the wellness of the whole child by providing a learning environment that is culturally relevant; values First Nations' ways of knowing; incorporates ancestral languages; is respectful; and integrates the three Nations' values and knowledge into all curricular areas.

It is, therefore, imperative that we strive to create an environment that promotes the safety and emotional needs of the learners and the school personnel. As educational leaders, we must be sensitive to the tone that we establish. We can be either the sunshine or the rain in any setting. We must be cognizant and practitioners of Trauma Informed Practice. This will be beneficial for our learners.

However, as Curtis Rattray (Indigenous Curriculum Advisor / SD87) regularly reminds us, “We must be aware of teacher trauma that often migrates to the classroom.” In other words, we must be willing to look past the face to the point of pain in all those involved

in the education milieu. We must model the positive behaviours we seek in learners and staff.

A development of a sense of belonging is essential in our district. We want all to build competence and capability so that learners and personnel feel that they are empowered and have control over themselves. Through meaningful relationships, self-esteem will grow. This sense of community can only take root through genuine engagement with learners, parents / guardians, and stakeholders.

For example, before the school year begins, we hold a Cultural Orientation in each of our school communities for all staff, including teachers, school support staff, board office staff, etc. and members of the local Nation. The orientation takes place on-the-land, or at a place chosen by the Knowledge Keepers. It is a time to renew, rebuild, and strengthen relationships. This sets a positive tone where local Elders and Knowledge Keepers collaborate with staff in the drafting of their annual and long-range plans. The importance of ensuring Tāltān, Tlingit, and Kaska ways of knowing, being, and doing are emphasized and staff learn more about how to include the seasonal rounds in their plans, daily practices, classrooms, and on-the-land initiatives.

Everyone wants to feel respected and valued and to feel important. Therefore, we

must be willing to be vulnerable and in doing so, “make people of the persons we meet.”

We can do this by being truly invested in capacity building and shared leadership within our communities. We participate in cultural initiatives and community events. It is important that staff and learners see their senior leaders at local fundraisers, engaging in on-the-land initiatives, or learning a new skill.

We have been told by Elders that working outside of our comfort zones and showing our vulnerabilities goes a long way in demonstrating a genuine investment in the place that we are. Sharing a meal with parents and Elders at a community event builds trust and strengthens relationships. Trust leads to partnerships that help us provide more of a responsive educational environment that is culturally relevant to all children in our schools.

The strengthening of relationships with local Nations has led to benefits for our learners. For example, the creation of a partnership with the Tāltān Guardians resulted in students accompanying the Guardians in a helicopter for the purpose of spotting and counting wildlife as well as to set trap lines for wolves. Partnering with Tlingit Elders has resulted in an enhanced on-the-land program for students and the creation of a new outdoor cultural space. Through these partnerships, staff are learning how to supplement and enhance curricular content with local First Nations knowledge and

perspectives. In School District 87 Stikine, we appreciate staff and are proud of their efforts to embrace new ways of decolonizing educational practices.

Recently, David Rattray (Tāltān Elder / Educator/ Counsellor) presented a workshop on the Four Goals of Tāltān Education and Kuwegānh. David shared, “The first goal is acknowledging emotional pain / safety (many Aboriginal youth come to school with trauma and ‘mixed-up’ worldviews they need help sorting out). The second goal is creating belonging environments (students need to feel they belong, and relational teachers help (since the 1970s research says the highest correlation for success in school is a good relationship with the teacher, i.e., the teacher likes me). The third goal is the infusion of cultural programming (we live in a multicultural society, and there is a need to understand similarities and differences, as well as give Aboriginal students a sense of pride in who they are). The fourth goal is academics. Once the first three goals are operational, the fourth goal excels.”

One of the approaches we use to engender empathy in the school setting is Kuwegānh. This is the Tāltān’s traditional way of restoring damaged relationships in a culturally appropriate way. As David Rattray says, “It’s about healing damaged relationships; using community to help; conflicts are seen as growth opportunities; it’s not about finding blame, or consequences. It’s a major paradigm shift to how schools deal with discipline.”

In essence, it is about developing and maintaining a respectful environment where all feel they have a voice, both inside the building and outside from the communities. Kuwegānh is a process used to deal with conflict between learners, between learner and teacher, and between colleagues. It can include administrators, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, counsellors, etc. Its focus is to rebuild and renew. At the end of the process all participants are meant to leave with their dignity intact.

In School District 87 Stikine, we have worked hard to develop positive and mutually beneficial partnerships with our stakeholders. This has resulted in the generation of projects that have enhanced and enriched the school environment for learners and staff. It has also established an atmosphere where different groups are willing to take risks because a misstep is not going to be career defining. This low-risk environment allows people to take ownership and grow as learners, professionals, and partners.

As a result, strong bonds have been established with the Tāltān Central Government (TCG); Taku River Tlingit First Nation (TRTFN) in Atlin; Daylu Dena Council (DDC) in Lower Post; Tahltan Band in Telegraph Creek; Iskut Band in Iskut; and The People’s Haven in Dease Lake. This outreach has produced a welcoming environment and allowed the school system to open the doors and windows to our communities and agencies. By prioritizing collaboration and communication with our stakeholders, we were able to generate trust and, thereby, safety, risk-taking and equity.

School District 87 Stikine is reflective of a welcoming school community which acknowledges the uniqueness of the individual. Learners, parents, Elders,

Guardians, and professional and support staff seek to create a climate where all can experience success. We must always promote the positives and celebrate successes. We believe that a school or system should never be satisfied with the status quo. We must grow. We must continually strive to develop the “whole person” as a productive member to serve our communities. Our quest for excellence encompasses all aspects of the principles of Tāltān, Kaska, and Taku River Tlingit First Nations culture and academic life. We build on strengths in a caring and inclusive nature as we adapt to our surroundings. 🌈

Tracey MacMillan is Superintendent of Schools, and Brian Manning is Director of Instruction in School District 87 Stikine.

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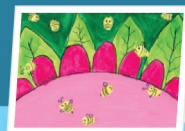
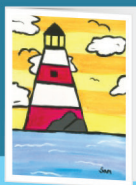
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Respecting the Importance of Contextual Literacy While Leading in a Culture of Change

By Dr. Rhonda Nixon, SD73 (Kamloops-Thompson)

In April 2021, I drove from Edmonton, Alberta to Kamloops, British Columbia, at a time when unnecessary travel was not permitted between the provinces due to pandemic restrictions. Change surrounding the global health crisis had punctuated our lives so seeing road signs warning against “unnecessary travel” and requesting that travellers “stay home” were considered “normal.”

As educational leaders, we had come to understand that guidelines for educating were fused with guidelines for safety (e.g., learning online and at home, increasing spacing between desks and people) in a close nexus that we hadn’t navigated previously. What complicated that fusion was the unpredictability and rate of change – safety guidelines changed with each new variant and media release.

Given that we were living and leading in a world as dynamic as this, I knew that as I drove, the sign that cautioned Albertans not to enter B.C. could just as easily have prohibited entry if COVID-19 cases had increased.

Rapid changes in messages and media releases were the global “new normal.”

Leading in a culture of change and depending on contextual literacy

During the pandemic, the way that we engaged with students, parents, and each other was suddenly disrupted. Classrooms were relocating from face-to-face to online education in our homes. Staff and students engaged in one zoom meeting at a time, and many will recall the problem of not leaving enough time between meetings, experiencing “zoom fatigue,” and feeling a strange disconnect from others once “leave meeting” was clicked.

What grounded me as a district leader was knowing the school leaders well and trusting that, together, we could work through anything. I still recall our first COVID cases, during which time I worked closely by text and phone calls with school principals to record meticulous notes on what had happened – who the cases were, where they were, and which cohorts of students had to isolate. We not only worked well as school and district leaders, we also depended on Alberta Health designates who became trusted to tell us when we could contact cohorts. Eventually, we became so synergistically streamlined at recording cases, isolating cohorts, and communicating that between principals and district staff, and Alberta Health, we managed COVID, and education carried on relatively normally.

During the start of the pandemic, I recognized that organizing information, sharing it, and

While I drove from Alberta to British Columbia, I reflected on my decision to leave my role as deputy superintendent in a school district that I knew well, and I realized that I was not only changing jobs but doing so in a different province and in a district with people I didn't know.



codeveloping a shared vision of safety guidelines had charted a course of certainty in a time of uncertainty. In a strange way, the pandemic had brought us closer as leaders because we navigated the unknown together, and my role at that time was to lead by listening, learning, collaborating, and communicating to clarify guidelines and responsibilities to streamline our ways of working as school and district leaders.

At that time, “culture,” which is defined by Drucker (2015)¹ as “the way we do things around here” was entangled with “expecting the unexpected” or “living in a culture of change” in which what grounded school and district leaders was knowing the context – who we each were and how we typically worked together to problem solve everyday challenges (for example, schedules, budgets, staffing, discipline, programming, parent questions).

While I drove from Alberta to British Columbia, I reflected on my decision to leave my role as deputy superintendent in a school district that I knew well, and I realized that I was not only changing jobs but doing so in a different province and in a district with people I didn’t know. I had left the stability of knowing the school and district leaders, ministry staff, provincial legislation, and professional associations. While looking ahead at signs that were warning everyone to stay home, I also realized that leading as I had known it was disappearing in the rear-view mirror.

Learning in a culture of change and growing in contextual literacy

Fullan (2019)² explained that any time a leader takes on a job in a new place, the individual automatically becomes “deskilled” and positioned as a learner who cannot know the context. I had come to Kamloops six weeks before my start date as superintendent. At that time, I had asked the superintendent (who was highly regarded and who had returned after being retired for several years) if I could learn alongside him. I realize now how hard that would have been to have someone to mentor at the end of the school year, but he did so graciously.

I arrived the same week that Kamloops became international news due to the tragic discovery of Le Estcwicwéy (the missing) children in the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The trauma the community was experiencing was palpable.

The following morning, I worked with the superintendent to review communication to go out to the community and the key messages for media. Taking on a functional task enabled us to get to know what the Secwepemc Nations were sharing by meeting with the Aboriginal Education Council to determine what needed to be shared with the community. The superintendent and I met with the superintendent’s council (district leaders who report to the superintendent and assistant superintendents), and they had shared their plans to come together with the

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seven First Nations and Métis communities in ceremony. I was fortunate to be invited to an In Camera Board meeting in which an Elder had led a ceremony by drumming, singing, and storytelling while on the grounds with Le Estcwicwéy.

Beginning in SD73 Kamloops-Thompson as an observer de-centred me out of the role of leader and into the role of learner. This de-centering took on many forms – I chose to work in the coffee room where people came in and out and chatted between tasks. I met each direct report to the superintendent and learned from them what they did and had relaxed conversations unrelated to their work. Being outside of the superintendent's office and not yet the superintendent enabled me to ask questions, to listen, and to do my best to make some tasks easier. Fullan (2019) described this aspect of contextual literacy as embracing being deskilled by not knowing the people or the culture and deeply engaging with both.

Continuing as lead learner with a deep respect for contextual literacy

As I continue in my role as superintendent, I have immense respect for the context, which is comprised of who I work with and what they know and share every day. I am grateful to leaders at all levels (provincial associations, ministry, district, school, community partners) for supporting me to learn perspectives, practices, and histories that shape who we are now and who we will become as we live – together – our district mission and vision, values, and priorities.

Changing contexts was also about moving from Alberta to B.C., and changing roles from deputy superintendent to superintendent. As I drove into the community of Blue River, B.C., changing contexts also meant that I travelled as a guest on the beautiful, unceded territory of the Secwepemc Nations. This time of being de-skilled and de-centred afforded me the gift of being re-positioned as a lead learner. Growing in contextual literacy, with all of its complexity, has reminded me of its

importance in any leadership journey and this is something that I continue to reflect on with deep respect. 

Dr. Rhonda Nixon is the Superintendent of School District No. 73 (Kamloops-Thompson). She has been an educator for 30 years in diverse roles, including deputy superintendent, assistant superintendent, manager, consultant, principal, vice principal, literacy coach, reading recovery teacher

leader, and Kindergarten through post-secondary teacher, in both Alberta and British Columbia.

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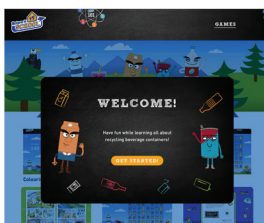
Over the past few years, donations and the school's capacity to collect, sort and transport recyclable containers have increased. From July 2021 to February 2022, the recycling program collected a total of 173,540 beverage containers. Recently, their program has switched to using canvas mega-bags for their three main beverage container sorting bins, each holding 1,650-2,880 containers, thereby reducing plastic bag use. The school also invested in reusable totes and recycled cardboard for transporting glass. The students' inspiring hard work has earned them first place for the second time in a row and a cash prize of \$5,000.

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

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

Building on Community and Supporting Students:

A look at SD35's Approach to the Affordability Fund

By Marcello Moino, SD35 (Langley)

All one has to do is walk down the aisles of the local grocery store to understand the growing concern of food security.

As caring educators, we know how challenging this time has been for some of our most vulnerable families, but there is hope and in Langley we've seen it in the strength of our community.

When the Ministry of Education and Child Care first announced at the end of August 2022 that a new special purpose fund was coming to school districts around the province, it was clear that districts would have the opportunity to develop community-specific plans that allowed districts to meet the unique and individual needs of their students and families. While the Student and Family Affordability Fund (the Fund) had some specific parameters, namely that the fund was primarily for food security, and could also be used for school fees and supplies, the accompanying plan would need to be a local one. The Fund allocated more than \$60 million to districts across the province; the Langley School District's share was \$2.163 million.

So, what would Langley's plan be? What existing strengths

and structures could Langley leverage to maximize the impact of what looked like one-time funds? It turns out that Langley has a history and an infrastructure connected to food and financial insecurity that the district was able to connect to in attempting to create an effective and multi-faceted plan.

First, Langley has been working on the challenge of food insecurity for more than a decade. The Langley School District Foundation (LSDF) is an arms-length charitable organization associated with Langley Schools; while its mandate is a wide-reaching one, food security has been a primary focus for well over a decade. The LSDF has assisted most schools in the district in starting a breakfast, lunch, snack, and/or weekend grocery program, and is a main source of funds for each of these food programs through the generous support of local and regional donors.

Second, Langley staff have a long history of being connected to Langley institutions that support families. For example, besides having several former staff members on the Board of Directors of the Foundation, Langley staff have worked very closely with the LSDF. One notable example was during COVID-19, when the LSDF's support of Langley families was put to the test, and another bit of infrastructure was created that proved to be very helpful in Langley's plan for the Affordability Fund.

From March 2020 to June 2020, with students in the province not in schools but continuing learning online from home, the district and the LSDF recognized that students no longer had access to all of the food programs that existed in schools. The result is that each school created a team of staff volunteers – administrators, teachers, and support staff – who were connected to their local families, and who were able to identify students and families who required support.

The LSDF then purchased thousands of grocery gift cards per month, and the school teams distributed the grocery gift cards to families to ensure continuity of support. These school teams continued on, beyond September 2020, and became known as each school's Enhanced Support Team (EST). Over the past two and a half years, these teams became the eyes and ears of the district and the LSDF in identifying students and families who might need additional financial and food support.

Besides the LSDF, Langley district staff are well-connected to other community agencies.

Building on existing knowledge

Langley's plan leveraged these connections by bringing many of these experienced and well-connected staff members together early on in the process. Within the first week of September, a guiding coalition was created,



with staff members representing different groups of students and various skillsets.

The Langley guiding coalition consisted of the Director of Learning Support Services, the District Principal of Aboriginal Education, the District Principal of Modern Languages and English Language Learners (ELL) – including Settlement Workers In Schools (SWIS) – the District Vice Principal of Children and Youth in Care, the Assistant Secretary-Treasurer, the Manager of Communications, an Executive Assistant, and an Assistant Superintendent.

By October, the guiding coalition created supporting materials that included narrated PowerPoints and surveys, and had organized a consultation schedule that included, but was not limited to: District Parent Advisory Councils and every Parent Advisory Council in the district, each of the four land-based Nations, our Aboriginal advisory group, Inclusion Langley, the LSDF, our SWIS Workers, and each school's Enhanced Support Team (EST). By the end of October, the guiding coalition had a treasure trove of data from the consultation.

By the second week of November, the guiding coalition used all of this data, especially focussing on the local school and family information from each EST, and also using the Social Services Index (SSI) to tell us the school locations of some of our more vulnerable

students and families. The resulting plan was a mix of community and school-based supports that put food security first, but still allowed for a significant impact on school fees and supplies.

The guiding coalition was able to determine where most Langley students and their families received food support in the community. The coalition allocated \$365,000 to local neighbourhood, community, and Aboriginal societies and agencies. These funds would impact more than 400 Langley families by enhancing the food supports they received on a weekly basis for the remainder of the school year; this equaled just over \$900 per family. Another \$40,000 was allocated to community agencies to supply snacks at the various after school programs for Langley students. For example, one program provides an industrial kitchen to families and provides training and support for families in preparing healthy meals.

The LSDF received just over \$100,000 both to enhance existing breakfast, lunch, and snack programs, as well as to start new programs in schools that had identified new needs and financial strains in families who had not traditionally experienced food insecurity. To support these

expanded and new programs, another \$141,000 was allocated to capital purchases, so that small and large appliances, preparation tables, and other similar items could be purchased. These funds were kept centrally at the board office, to maximize the district's purchasing power and stretch the impact of the funds.

Of the remaining funds, \$1.46 million was directed to schools using a combination of data: the SSI, the number of families who lack food and income security as identified by the ESTs, and the size of each school. While the first measures were based on known students and families with food and financial insecurity, by including the size of each school in the disbursement, we allowed for the likelihood that there would be more students and families who might have become recently food or financially vulnerable; the larger the school, the more likelihood of more families being newly impacted.



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Based on the feedback in the consultation, principles and guidelines were provided to each school along with the funds. The two key principles were:

1. That the best decisions as to how the specific funds were to be distributed were made in schools, closest to the ground; and
2. That families needed to be able to have some level of choice and dignity with how the funds were distributed.

In short, the EST of each school would be responsible for reaching out to families, gauging their needs based on the family's feedback, and ensuring that families were able to receive supports while respecting their dignity. The feedback told us that we needed to share the following guidelines with schools:

- Food security is the first priority of the funding, as identified by the provincial government and by consultation feedback. Gift cards are one way that funds can be distributed to families;
- Any existing school fees for identified students and families should be forgiven;
- Public transit passes, an "Uber" or "taxi" fund, and/or gas gift cards should support students who face barriers in getting to and from school;
- Students identified by the ESTs should be able to attend all school and extra-curricular events that they choose, such as camps, graduation ceremonies, and banquets, etc.;
- Students identified by the ESTs should be able to have all school band and school athletic fees paid for;
- Students identified by the ESTs should be able to have all supplies related to these events, including graduation gowns/suits, etc. paid for.

As the needs of each family would differ, it would be up to the ESTs to ensure that the students and families they had identified had their specific needs met to ensure a greater level of food and income security.

Finally, the guiding coalition held \$45,000 to use for emergencies, or for new initiatives that might not have been identified in October. Before the possibility of rolling these funds to next year was announced, the plan was that if no emergencies or new projects were identified by May 15, 2023, then the funds were to be distributed to schools based on updated feedback from school ESTs and the tracking of their spending accounts.

Because of the existing strengths and structures that already existed in the Langley School District, the guiding coalition was able to develop a multi-faceted plan that attempted to maximize the impact of these funds on students and families, both in the community and within schools. The history within the district in supporting students with food and financial insecurity meant that the guiding coalition was able to leverage existing knowledge and infrastructure to ensure that families that needed support the most were the families who received it. 🌈

Marcello Moino is the Assistant Superintendent of Schools in School District No. 35 (Langley). Marcello has worked as a teacher, vice-principal, and principal in the Langley School District since 1995.



Making Systems Change Work:

Reflection on the Supportive Role of Contextual Literacy

By Dr. Vivian Collyer, SD71 (Comox Valley School District)

Our district has been co-constructing literacy and numeracy frameworks to better support learner development and teacher collective efficacy. As a relatively new leader in the district, drawing from internal knowledge about what works here in addition to drawing from the expertise of external resources, have been essential. Finding ways to make space for Indigenous pedagogy has also been an important consideration. Throughout this complex project, I have deepened my appreciation for the role that contextual literacy plays in effective systems leadership.

I joined the district last year and focussed on building relationships with staff, and approaching conversations from a curious stance to find out how learners were doing and about district strengths and challenges. Literacy and numeracy emerged as areas requiring further attention, and conversations revealed the need for a common approach across the district. With many new teachers hired in recent years and lessened opportunities for in-person collaboration among colleagues during the pandemic, the need to take stock in how we encourage literacy and numeracy development was timely.

Internal leadership knowledge translates into viable processes

Laying the groundwork for the frameworks' development processes began last spring when I brought together district department and school-based leaders to garner their insider knowledge about who needed to be included and what strategies might work. I knew how important it would be to ensure an inclusive process with opportunities for all to engage and provide input so everyone would feel informed.

However, it was the historical knowledge of colleagues about which voices to include and what structures could be leveraged that resulted in a viable plan, including:

- Gathering input from schools and district departments about how the frameworks would be used to meet students' literacy and numeracy needs and what to include.
- An after-school series, open to all educators, including presentations about research and provincial directions, promising practices in our district, and approaches in other districts; and opportunities for participants to share what resonated and questions to explore more deeply.
- Literacy and numeracy working groups, including staff from inclusive and Indigenous education departments, classroom teachers Kindergarten to Grade 12, StrongStart facilitators, principals, and vice principals. The working groups were tasked with active listening and reflection



Primary teachers Celine Gummer, Colleen Reimer, and Dede Willans share success with encouraging learners to see themselves as authors through book making.



From an appreciative lens, educators across the district share and reflect on what's working well and promising practises for their students.

during the after-school sessions, reviewing gathered information, and advising on the content and shape of the frameworks.

- Regular communications and opportunities for feedback via district structures, such as staff meetings and our Curriculum Support Teachers.

In this way, my colleagues' historical understanding of district systems and mechanisms for change informed how to

actualize inclusivity and transparency in feasible ways within our context.

External resources encourage exploration of possibility

To begin the initiative, I oriented our working groups to input gathered from schools and district departments, as well as to expected givens, such as incorporating inclusive practices and cultural responsiveness and alignment with provincial literacy and numeracy assessments. I also encouraged them to suspend any tendency to jump to solutions, while we situated ourselves in a temporary exploratory space, open to current research and ideas from the broader educational landscape.

We invited critical friends and district colleagues to provoke our thinking within the after-school series, targeting key concepts and practices about literacy or numeracy learning to inform our frameworks. Topics included various learning theories and self-assessment tools for school teams. From an appreciative stance, educators within our district were invited to share about their own practice and what was already working for their students.

From each of the after-school sessions, we were able to gather valuable reflections from attendees that helped to focus the working group conversations. These included the importance of identity and sense of community for learners and how Eurocentric views are emphasized in instructional approaches. In this way, we were able to further our understanding of external insights and how it might connect with our district community's strengths and learning priorities.

Participant reflections from the series also indicated that staff felt inspired by many of the invited speakers and were introduced to new possibilities. In addition, I shared feedback collected from the District Student Advisory about what they felt was working with literacy and numeracy learning, what the challenges are for students, and what advice they had for teachers.

Diverse perspectives intersect in compelling ways

In the new year, the working groups began reviewing the input gleaned from external sources, as well as colleagues and students across the district. Our conversations were enriched by this information and further refined by the experiences, perspectives, and passionate opinions of the working group members. Intersections among diverse perspectives have resulted in unexpected insights that will augment our literacy and numeracy frameworks.

For example, *oral language* pedagogy has emerged as a required component via the intersection of participant reflections prompted by our SLP's research presentation, the feedback from students about needing more opportunities to learn oracy skills, and the working groups' discussions about the importance of authentic inclusion of Indigenous oral traditions and how language acts as an important tool in developing student thinking. This insight has led to the inclusion of a locally developed video about learning in circle as one of the recommended *oral language* resources within our literacy framework.

Similarly, a deeper consideration of how to make sense of formative assessment through teacher observation and conversations with students became a theme for our numeracy working group, encouraged by the intersection of student feedback about mathematics assessment and conversations about multiple ways to demonstrate understanding and meaningful use of proficiency scales. Working groups expressed appreciation for time to collaborate and inclusion of multiple voices throughout the process.


Continuing to hold space for Indigenous knowledge and perspectives

As leader of the working groups, I drew on the advice that Chief Wedlidi Speck of the

E'iksan tribe of the Comox Valley provided to our district leadership team: "Decolonize spaces, processes, and discourse" within your spheres of influence. Including the voices of Indigenous education teachers from the beginning of this work has proven beneficial to conversations about authentic ways to include Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

Additionally, I have tried to be mindful of this responsibility throughout the initiative and am grateful to the wealth of resources available to us in British Columbia, including the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), so that I could bring forward meaningful discourse, practices, and examples to enrich our thinking as needed.

From this stance, communications about the story of our literacy and numeracy frameworks development journey includes that it began hundreds of years ago, and so embraces the Indigenous wisdom of story and oral traditions. We also acknowledge that our frameworks will need to hold space for inclusion of further Indigenous wisdom as our district community continues to learn more throughout the work of our Equity Scan project.

Collaborating with colleagues within and beyond our district in this initiative has highlighted the supportive role that contextual literacy can play within change efforts. Thank you to all who have contributed to our district's development work. At the time of writing this reflection, our working groups were still in the midst of exploratory conversations. In the spirit of continued reciprocal partnerships across our district systems, we look forward to sharing where we have landed with our literacy and numeracy frameworks. 

Dr. Vivian Collyer is Director of Instruction in the Comox Valley School District. Dr. Collyer is an experienced facilitator of teacher professional development, and her research areas include educational leadership and curriculum implementation.

BCSSA's Mentorship Learning Partners Program:

Supporting Colleagues as They Learn to Lead

Andrea Geary, *Inspired* Staff Writer, Presents an Interview With Sherry Elwood

Simply walking into a school and observing the students in the hallways, Sherry Elwood can gain an insight into the school's internal culture.

"Do the students make eye contact and smile in welcome or do they look away from a visitor?"

Elwood said this type of insight is part of the context existing inside a school and its surrounding community. Within their *Spirit of Leadership* competency work, members of the BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) are now taking note of the importance of contextual literacy and a leadership skill that recognizes how internal and external relationships and connections work together and how it affects how districts function.

As a retired superintendent with almost four decades of experience in education, Elwood has personally learned that understanding these complex relationships leads to improved learning experiences for students. Now she's passing on her knowledge through the BCSSA's mentorship program.

Retiring from the public education system in 2019, having served as a Superintendent of Schools in Richmond and the Comox Valley, Elwood wanted to give back to the BCSSA in some way.

"Throughout my senior leadership career, I felt connected and supported by being a BCSSA member. I had been a regional Chapter Director for a number of years and then a member of the BCSSA executive for many more. I was the BCSSA President within that time and I had appreciated the opportunities to help support our new members. I had seen firsthand how important the work of mentors could be for new folks joining our association. Leadership is isolating work and it is important for everyone to have someone to reach out to."

Elwood has now been involved with the formal BCSSA mentor program for four years. She explains, "I love the work! It is such a privilege to support leaders as they begin new roles and it is so special to have their trust."

I learn something from each of them and I value the relationships that we build."

Elwood sees her role as that of a facilitator, not simply as a source of information. "It is my responsibility to support the development of strategies and skills that nurture confidence in my learning partner's decision making so that they find a decision-making process that works for them. We spend a great deal of time unpacking the 'politic' of their work and how it affects the context and dynamic of their roles."

She continues, "As a veteran, or old-timer, I have the benefit of having some of the experiences that they are encountering and I can give



them perspective and encouragement to believe that there is always an answer and that there is permission to prioritize all of the issues that are competing for their time. But I hope that my most important support is that they know that I am truly their most steadfast champion and I am there for them, anytime, for any reason, without judgement and with confidentiality. I will always listen and listen and listen some more!"

Contextual literacy is one of the competencies in the BCSSA's *Spirit of Leadership* program. Elwood has learned its importance within the education system. "I feel very strongly that context is everything. Context is critical and one of the most difficult things to get used to. Context is both the story and culture of an organization and it drives the relationships and actions of a system. Context reflects the history and values of the landscape and is the foundation of all relationships. It can explain where we began, where we are today and where we might go together. Reading context, in its many layers, is a critical skill for all leaders because context contains the threads that can hold everything together or that can keep many things apart."

Contextual literacy reflects an Indigenous perspective that aims to balance the needs of internal and external environments. Indigenous ways of knowing encourage us to respect and acknowledge the power of culture and context. Elwood said some components are visible while others are invisible but both impact relationships. "We work with our learning partners to encourage them to look for contextual clues. We all need to be able to 'read the land,'" she said, referring to *The Spirit of Leadership 2022*.


Elwood knows the challenges that leaders face on a daily basis. "The portfolios are complex and huge." Learning to prioritize and realizing that it's impossible to complete every task in a working day is vital. Elwood said she also counsels her learning partners to practice self-care. "We let them know that it is a strength to give yourself permission to develop in the role."

When asked how the mentoring program works, Elwood explained that the formal mentoring program holds an expectation that mentors and Learning Partners (mentees) connect to speak together at least once a month. Mentors use Zoom, phone conversations, texts, and

emails to work with their partners. In some cases, if there is reasonable geographic proximity or opportunities for face-to-face connection, that can happen as well. In addition, most mentors share an open invitation for connection with their learning partners as needed.

"Mentors want to be available and as supportive as possible, particularly when the folks that we are working with have an immediate need or burning question that we might help with. Those types of needs rarely work inside busy calendars so we work hard to be reachable. We also have the ability to connect those new leaders with others who are doing similar work or who are experts in special areas. We do not profess to know everything, but we might know others who do," Elwood said.

The mentorship program is available to all BCSSA members. While the formalized program of onboarding and orientation is designed for members who are new to BCSSA or new to their role, some Learning Partners stay connected to their mentors for several years.

More information about the program is available on the BCSSA website or in the weekly bulletins. 



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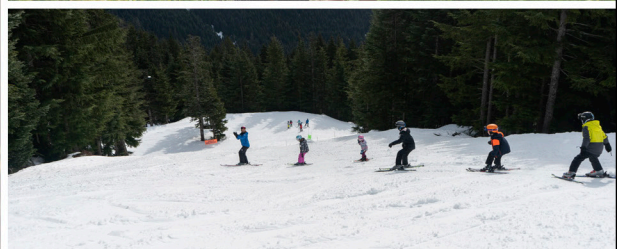
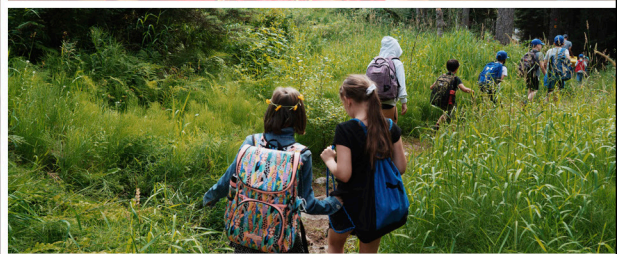
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