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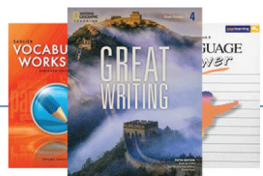
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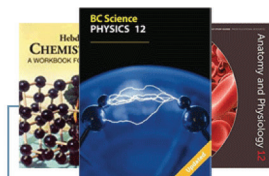
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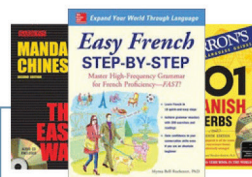
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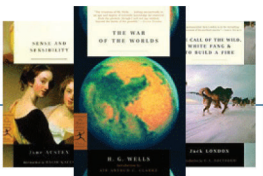
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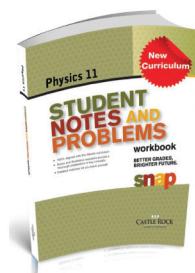
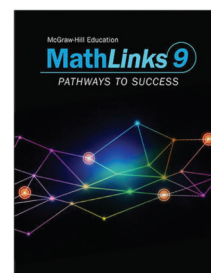
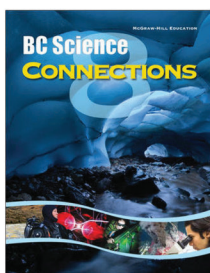
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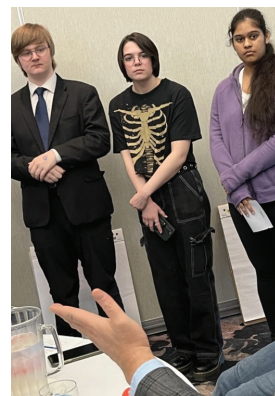
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Celebrating Student Voice and Agency

I am honoured by the opportunity to serve as the President of the British Columbia School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) and provide a message for the *InspirED* magazine. The role of the President, along with the position of the Vice-President and Chief Executive Officer supported by the BCSSA Board of Directors, is to represent the voice of the members of the Association as we work in close partnership with the team at the Ministry of Education and Child Care and various other education partners across the landscape to support learning spaces where students and adults thrive. Thank you to past president Teresa Downs for her work leading BCSSA with heart and courage and know that your caring and compassion had an impact on the association during your tenure as president.

First, I want to thank the members of the Board of Directors for their commitment and dedication to taking on this role, which is in addition to their leadership responsibilities in their respective districts. Your leadership in building on the work of the previous boards is appreciated, and I look forward to working with you and the members of the association as we continue to co-create a world-class education system.

All of us live and work in rapidly growing communities of learners across the province of British Columbia that values and celebrates every student and staff member for who they are through the lens of superdiversity. In simple terms, superdiversity acknowledges that there are multiple ways of being in a school community that coexist simultaneously. It's more than just acknowledging diversity - it's recognizing that it's a multidimensional experience and that we all share the responsibility to create a safe and caring school community where everyone can see themselves as champions for the human spirit and human rights.

We continue to live in challenging times where a segment of the population persists in creating unsafe spaces within and around our school communities. These challenges manifest in various ways, from contesting the presence of certain books in our learning commons to resisting the implementation of barrier-free menstrual products in all in all variations of washrooms. Additionally, there are objections raised against displaying inclusive flags, advocating for inclusive education practices, and disruptions occurring during board meetings, among other concerning occurrences.

Given the challenges we face, it is important that we remain steadfast in our efforts to create a safe and inclusive environment where all students and staff can feel a sense of belonging and are empowered to thrive. Creating such an environment means ensuring that everyone's voice is heard, that diversity is celebrated, and that respect and understanding are prioritized.

At our recent All Partners meeting it was inspirational to hear from a speaker from Harris and Company regarding the legal framework around parents' rights and gender identity. It was a powerful presentation that all parents in our community need to hear and process which articulates the legal framework that supports the important work of championing inclusion and human rights in our school system. As stated in the presentation, we, as leaders in public education continue to celebrate and champion "a school system that promotes values expressed in the *Constitution Act*, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Official Languages Act*, the *Multiculturalism Act*, the *British Columbia Human Rights Code*, the *Employment Equity Act*, and the *School Act*, respecting the rights of all individuals in accordance with the law."

Finally, in closing, this issue of *InspirED* magazine will feature and celebrate stories of student voice and agency, which will continue to be the center of the work in our school system. In a world where identity and well-being are critical to enhancing academic achievement, it is critical that we create safe spaces to nurture and develop student voice – from expression to participation, where students take responsibility for responsive action to build a better tomorrow.



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

In a world where identity and well-being are critical to enhancing academic achievement, it is critical that we create safe spaces to nurture and develop student voice – from expression to participation, where students take responsibility for responsive action to build a better tomorrow.

Rohan Arul-pragasam

President, British Columbia School Superintendents Association



Rachna Singh
Minister of Education and Child Care

Adapting to System Transformation

Embracing change is integral to building generations of students who are adaptable, resilient, and prepared for what the future has in store for them. Your role as stewards of this process ensures a stronger, equitable future for all British Columbians.

I know this year brings challenges and opportunities. British Columbia is experiencing record population growth. More

than 350,000 more people chose British Columbia as their home in the past two and a half years. As a result, many school districts are experiencing rapid growth and face pressures with more student enrollment.

While we need more people in British Columbia to help meet current and future demand for educators and other key roles in British Columbia's labour market, we also need to make sure population growth is well-supported and that school districts have the resources they need to deliver quality public education.

Our government is taking action to address enrolment growth in schools to support kids so they can succeed in their education and beyond. We are delivering more spaces, faster. In addition to \$4 billion in funding since September 2017 to deliver 25,000 new student spaces, school replacements, and seismic mitigation projects, we are working closely with high growth school districts on their capital priorities to reduce timelines, support capital project offices and fund prefabricated additions to get students into new, modern classrooms as early as the upcoming school year. We are also continuing to build childcare spaces on school grounds to support children and families in their early learning years.

A \$12.5 million boost from the province will continue to help recruit, train, hire, and retain more K-12 teachers as we work to address labour gaps with our partners. Since the start of this school year, we supported rural and remote school districts in recruiting more than 50 new teachers who are now working.

Supporting the recruitment and retention of more Indigenous teachers will continue to be a priority. We'll keep working with school districts, education partners, and First Nation rights-holders and other Indigenous organizations throughout British Columbia so all students can receive the support they need to succeed and thrive in school.

Big issues like affordability are still top of mind this year for your school communities and families – especially those who were already finding it hard to make ends meet. We're stepping up to help families with programs like Feeding Futures, the largest investment in school food programs in the province's history. Through some of first ever childcare affordability programs, families with children in kindergarten and younger at participating licensed childcare programs save up to \$900 a month – a significant cost savings for households. Last September we also put in more measures so families with school-aged children are also saving up to an additional \$145 per month for before and after-school care because we know that childcare costs don't stop when kids start school.

As we live in a digital age, I know bringing up children with technology is a reality for parents. Cell phones, the internet, and social media help us connect with each other, but we also need to build awareness of the potential risks can pose to children. Having healthy habits around their use is a critical skill for students to develop.

We will work with you and your school districts to raise awareness of this issue and address cell phone usage in classrooms, by the time school starts again next September. I know that many teachers, principals, and school districts are already doing excellent work to provide students digital literacy skills inside the classroom. I also encourage schools to utilize the erase website as a tool for students and their families, as well as staff, on important issues like online safety.

As I've traveled to more districts, I've been inspired by students throughout the province. Many student leaders have talked about their challenges from mental health to students' lived experiences of racism and discrimination in our annual Youth Dialogue Series. Their input, suggestions, and vision for building more equitable school communities, and for our province, should continue to guide and inspire all of us to make sure every child feels safe, accepted and respected. I know that student leaders continue to be strong advocates in building more inclusive and positive school environments in British Columbia

I want to thank you for your exceptional leadership in transforming our school system. I know that your stewardship during times of change will have many benefits for your students, your educators, and your communities.

Rachna Singh
Minister of Education and Child Care



Gino Bondi
CEO
British Columbia School
Superintendents Association

Ultimately, by centering student voice at the forefront of our endeavors, we not only cultivate a more responsive and inclusive learning environment but also lay the groundwork for transformative change that extends far beyond the immediacy of the classroom.

Students as the Catalysts for Change

It goes without saying that all of us understand the profound impact that student agency can wield in reshaping the educational experience and fostering a dynamic, inclusive learning environment.

In recent years, there has been a burgeoning acknowledgement of the invaluable insights and perspectives that students bring to the table. No longer should education be a one-sided conversation, dictated solely by the directives of adults. Instead, we must embrace a collaborative ethos, wherein students are regarded as active participants and co-creators for their educational journey.

At the heart of this paradigm shift lies the recognition that students possess a wealth of knowledge, experiences, and aspirations that are integral to shaping the educational landscape. By empowering students to voice their concerns, articulate their needs and contribute to decision-making processes, we not only validate their agency but also cultivate a sense of ownership and investment in their learning environment.

So, what does it look like in practice? First and foremost, it entails creating avenues for meaningful student engagement at every level of school governance. Whether in the form of student councils, advisory boards, or student trustees, we must establish platforms that enable students to articulate their perspectives, advocate for change, and collaborate with stakeholders in shaping policies and practices.

Moreover, it necessitates a commitment to fostering a culture of inclusivity and equity, wherein every student's voice is valued and heard. It means actively seeking out and amplifying the voices of those in the margins, ensuring that their realities are not only acknowledged but also incorporated into decision-making processes.

Additionally, it involves reimagining the traditional teacher-student dynamic as one of co-learning and mutual respect. As educational leaders we embrace their role as partners in the learning journey by fostering open dialogue, soliciting feedback, and creating spaces that will meet the diverse needs and interests of all students.

Above all else, it requires a willingness and the courage to challenge the status quo and embrace innovative approaches to education that prioritize student-centered learning and holistic adolescent development. With our revised curriculum, competency-based assessment practices, and the integration of new technologies, we are empowering students to take ownership of their learning and pursue their passions.

Ultimately, by centering student voice at the forefront of our endeavors, we not only cultivate a more responsive and inclusive learning environment but also lay the groundwork for transformative change that extends far beyond the immediacy of the classroom. As we commit ourselves to amplifying student voice, we lay the groundwork for our students to become architects of their own futures and champions for positive change within society.

Gino Bondi
CEO
British Columbia School Superintendents Association

Students as Change Agents

By Kristi Blakeway, Surrey Schools

Michael Fullan notes that children, even very young ones, can be our greatest change agents.¹ In Surrey Schools, we have expanded our student voice framework so that our educators can continually find ways to lean in and listen to our learners. We believe that one of the most powerful ways to strengthen the connection between students and our schools, is to learn from our students' experiences. When we amplify student voice, especially marginalized voices, we are able to gain new perspectives and create compassionate classrooms where all students feel they belong.

In the Surrey school district, we have partnered with Peter Senge and Mette Boell, from the Center for Systems Awareness, to expand our understanding of compassionate systems leadership. This aligns with the British Columbia Mental Health in Schools Strategy that supports the use of compassionate systems within British Columbian classrooms. Compassionate Systems Awareness provides a repertoire of tools to guide transformative change. The mandala for system

change involves four steps: research, capacity building, practice, and community building (Figure 1, page 13). In Surrey, we have adapted the compassionate systems mandala to amplify student voice and get to know our learners. In the outer wheel, you can see how this model also aligns with Indigenous perspectives. Styres notes that the pathway for remembering and recognizing Indigenous thought in education includes vision, relationship, knowledge, and wisdom.²

Our Student Voice Mandala begins in the east with our vision for change. We are guided by our grounding question of 'How might we amplify student voice?' Not only do we want every child to feel seen and heard – we also want to create an environment where educators can continually learn from our students' experiences. While we were all students at one time, we did not grow up in today's context. The only way to really understand what it is like to be a student today is to get curious and ask our students to share their first-hand knowledge.

Surrey Schools serve over 80,000 students across 103 elementary schools, 21 secondary schools, and five learning centers. While student voice has historically been a secondary based initiative, we have expanded it to include elementary schools so that we can learn from students of all ages. Expanding to elementary schools creates opportunities for our schools to work together, supporting transitions and strengthened relationships within families of schools.

The southern quadrant of our Student Voice Mandala focusses on relationships and community building. To guide our process, we formed a steering committee of students. Our steering committee includes 45 student leaders representing all our secondary schools. This team meets together monthly, in person or remotely, to discuss our vision, share ideas, discuss hot topics, build connections, and plan student voice events including student meetings, student forums, and workshops on issues that matter. For the 2023/2024 school year, students identified mental health and racial equity as their top

two priorities. These themes are intentionally woven into all student voice events and forums.

In the 2023/2024 school year, to build community and hear from students across our district, we are hosting 18 student forums. This includes elementary forums, secondary forums, learning center forums, and a sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) student forum. Our Indigenous Education department also hosted a forum where Indigenous students spoke to principals and vice principals to share their stories, experiences, and ideas for supporting Indigenous student success.

Our student forums are designed with the guiding words from the southern quadrant of our mandala: 'Lean in and listen with curiosity.' As educators, our role is to listen, relate to what we are hearing, and understand what matters to our students. With each forum, schools are asked to select a range of students that reflect their learning community. Principals are encouraged to invite students with diverse voices and opinions, and to pay particular attention to those whose voices may not always be heard. With each student forum, leaders from the student voice steering committee facilitate three activities using compassionate systems tools.

In the first activity, leaders build connections by checking in with students and listening to their stories. Through a series of play-based activities, students use appreciative inquiry to recall their favorite moments and share memories of times when they felt a strong sense of belonging at school. They reflect on their richest learning experiences and share the conditions that helped them thrive.

In the second activity, the 'creative tension' tool is used to help students articulate the difference between their current reality and their aspirations. Students share any areas of school life that cause them stress. Using the guiding question of 'What keeps you up at night?' students brainstorm factors that negatively impact



Students think to the future and provide their input for transformative change. Photos courtesy of Kristi Blakeway.



With each student forum, leaders from the student voice steering committee facilitate three activities using compassionate systems tools, including this creative tension tool, pictured.

their sense of wellbeing. Some responses are academic in nature, while others relate to peer issues, safety, or basic needs such as food and shelter. With the help of student voice steering committee facilitators, students describe what the perfect school day would look like and provide ideas as to how the school or district could reduce the 'creative tension' between their current reality and their aspirations.

Students think to the future and provide their input for transformative change. Our

youngest learners write their ideas on paper airplanes and launch their ideas into the future, while our secondary students take time to write letters to their principal or the superintendent with their ideas for change.

While leaning in and listening guides our inquiry, we also hold a responsibility of representation. If we are going to ask our students to share, we must also be intentional about how we will use the data collected to inform our system and infuse

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STUDENTS AS CHANGE AGENTS

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change. Our students can serve as change agents when we create space for their voices to be heard.

The western quadrant of our change model is where we gather the stories of our students and find ways to share our learning with our educators. After each student forum, participating schools receive photos, video clips, student quotes and summarized data to share with their staff. Themes are also shared with trustees, principals and vice-principals, and our educational leadership team. In the spring, student representatives from each of our student forums will come together as a student panel and share their key ideas, stories, and insights with trustees and school leaders. Our hope is that the stories of our students, will guide our work continually shifting our practice, and transforming education to meet the needs of our students.

The final northern quadrant of our Student Voice Mandala speaks to the capacity building in educators that comes from leaning in and listening. In a recent meeting on Indigenous student success, our secondary principals came together to listen to the lyrics of a song written by one of our Indigenous students. After being invited to sit with our superintendent and assistant superintendent at a student forum, he returned to his school and let his principal know "it was the first time in his life he had sat with important people and was made to feel like their equal." While Javantay was moved by his experience, our school leaders were equally moved by his words, his courage, and his creativity. The student forums have provided space for teachers, principals, and our educational leadership team to get to know students on a deeper level and shift their practice to meet the needs of our learners.

While participating in a secondary student forum, I was particularly moved by a Grade 11 student with autism who took time to educate me about British



Students participating in a creative tension tool to describe what keeps them up at night.

Columbia's history of mistreatment towards people living with disabilities. While students in British Columbia are no longer segregated, she provided a series of examples where she felt excluded in elementary and secondary school. Despite our efforts towards inclusion, the social aspects of school are still quite difficult for some students. Her words linger with me, as she posed the question "Why do we have accessibility ramps for students

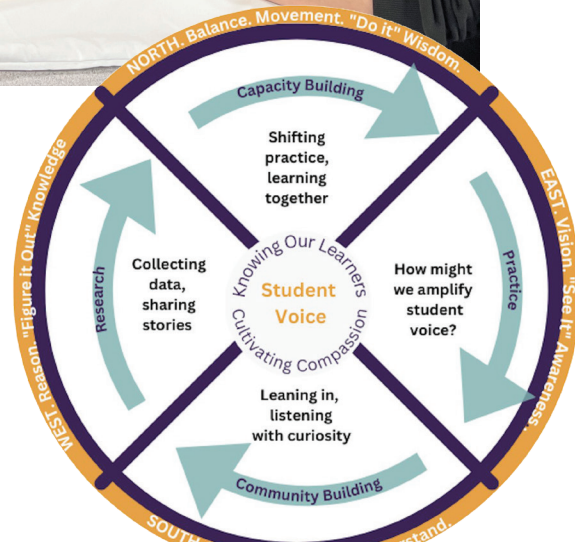


Figure 1: The Student Voice Mandala.

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STUDENTS AS CHANGE AGENTS

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in wheelchairs, but we don't have social ramps for all neurodiverse children?" Despite the heartfelt work of the educators at her school, she has yet to conquer the social anxiety that prevents her from forming friendships. She wants to help shift

our system to support others with similar struggles to her own. I think of her words often and am grateful she had the courage to share her experience. Our students serve as our greatest teachers helping us to continually improve the student experience.

Our mandala is intentionally designed as a circular change model, indicating that our work will never be done. The mandala is aspirational by design, to remind us that every child has a story worth hearing. When we lean in with curiosity, rather than judgment, we can cultivate compassion within our schools and our districts. Our students have the potential to be our greatest agents of change. 

Kristi Blakeway is a Director of Instruction-Building Professional Capacity in Surrey Schools. She

has worked as an educator for 25 years in Coquitlam, Maple Ridge, and Surrey School Districts. She recently graduated from Western University where her Ed.D. focuses on cultivating compassion. Kristi is also a proud member of the Métis Nation of BC.



Students participating in a creative tension tool to describe what keeps them up at night.

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Cultivating Student Agency through Dialogical Approaches

By Dr. Nathan Ngieng, Aristotle-Maximus Zwinge, & Harshan Oberoi, Abbotsford School District

Stepping into the student voice work

The Abbotsford School District has been involved in holding students as important partners in their learning for the last 20 years. We have instituted structures such as the Youth Council of Abbotsford School District (YC34), which brought together leadership students from multiple secondary schools to engage in student leadership activities and to promote topics of interest that supported the direction of schools. These activities included annual conferences, surveys, and joint activities with students across all our secondary schools.

However, unknowingly, these student voice activities in the school district reinforced what historically has been done in schools to marginalize the voices of students and tokenized the involvement of students in issues of importance when it comes to key strategic decisions about their learning in the classroom. This led to an increasing disconnect between students and teachers as evidenced by our data collected through the Youth Development Instrument (YDI) and empathy interviews with students.

In 2018, senior leadership of the school district made a conscious effort to shift the ways in which we viewed student voice, through our involvement with Shane Safir and John Watkins in the Deeper Learning



Communities of Practice invite students into a systematic and structured approach to gather information. Photos courtesy of Nathan Ngieng.



Students participating in a Community of Practice, engaging in a social learning practice.

Dozen Project¹ through Harvard University. It began with a significant re-tool of our student engagement strategy, where we began reaching out to students “at the margins” to authentically engage with them about their school experiences,

both positive and negative. In particular, the partnership with Shane Safir led to the uncovering of inequities in the system through supporting the adults to gather and listen to students through the collection

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of “street data.” This was in part to directly counter the hegemonic and tokenistic practices of the past and ensure authentic steps were taken to include students as a part of the change process to improve student success in the school district.

Today, the student voice actions in the Abbotsford School District could be described as collaborative, co-constructed, inclusive, and transgressive. It pushes the boundaries of what it means to learn and considers what a safe school environment looks like for everyone. This supports what is found in the literature around evoking change in our educational system by confronting traditional power relations and promoting liberatory and collaborative approaches to student voice through dialogue and discomfort.² Our partnership with Shane Safir has evolved as well, supporting us to have students seen as partners where strategic inquiry and student experiences are central to the transformation of our secondary schools.

From a student perspective, this student-led environment is necessary as it not only invokes confidence within a student but teaches them the skill of mastering their learning and actions, which translates into real-life applications. This makes the ongoing student voice work in the Abbotsford School District critical in changing a system that has remained relatively unchanged since the industrial revolution.

Our theory of change

Over the course of the last five years, the Abbotsford School District has been engaged in transformative deeper learning practices,¹ where the co-construction of deeper learning experiences has been central to transformation of teaching and learning in our schools. This has been based on the three principles of (in)equity, symmetry, and emergence, which have been central to a theory of change that holds student voice and dialogical approaches as central tenets to system transformation (see Figure 1, page 19).

The “messy middle” of this theory of change can be thought of as our Communities of Practice (CoP) approach or social learning spaces. With our secondary students, and with the support of Shane Safir and Dr. Jamila Dugan, we have been engaged in CoPs for the last two years. Here, students have been invited into a systematic and structured approach to gather information (street data) that has helped to inform the experiences of students in our secondary schools in a way that is responsive, authentic, and representative of our entire student population. There has been incredible learning because of this process. Structures, such as our deeper learning blocks, continue to improve as students are given opportunities to share the failings or lack of engagement during these instructional blocks and the successes, where teachers and students co-construct with the principles of mastery, creativity, and identity to promote student learning



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and success. Paying careful attention to our theory of change allows for us to attend to and be responsive to the voices of the system and adjust our actions and intentions to improve student success.

A framework for supporting meaningful student participation

To transform the ways in which students were engaged in the strategic decision-making process of the school district, a framework was needed to guide the ways in which we structured student voice actions. Figure 2 (see page 19) shows the continuum of transformative student voice action that we have been engaged in and the challenges associated with them.

In our efforts to support student agency and to engage in meaningful dialogue with students, the adults needed to be prepared to listen to students and to engage in practices, such as Kiva Panels and empathy interviews, that at times would feel



The student voice is extremely pertinent in understanding the best practices for going forward.

uncomfortable. From a system perspective, we needed to be prepared for increased resistance to change as approaches became more transgressive and as we held students as authentic partners in reshaping the learning experiences in classrooms in our schools. In essence, we were engaged in what Margaret Wheatley described as connecting the system to more of itself.

While creating disturbance in the system is important to catalyze change, having a system that is singularly focused on student agency can hinder progress. There needs to be a state of equilibrium with the previous system to support both students and teachers in their efforts to gain familiarity and adapt to the new system. While having

continued on page 19







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a system that embraces the resistance that comes with change is important, authentic partnership with students and listening in a meaningful way to students takes time and commitment to establish.

What it means to listen authentically

The question of what it means to listen with authenticity to students is something that we have carefully considered over the course of our journey the last four years. Students have repeatedly told us that they are tired of telling their stories and not having adults respond or do anything with that information. We continue to carefully consider how we approach this, and along with our structures for student voice, continue to reshape own “ways of being” with respect to unconscious bias and privilege. We continue to get better at understanding whose voice is not being heard and holding ourselves accountable to our work toward equitable and inclusive environments as we seek a world-class education for each student in our school district. This means that we work to engage with what each student is saying, expand on their ideas to see how they connect with the strategic direction of the school district, and create pathways for dialogical approaches that brings thought processes together for new innovative thinking, rather than tokenize to replicate the patterns of old.

What have we learned?

Student agency plays a critical part in the transformation of our education system and student voice holds promise in supporting the kinds of change that promotes and supports student agency and our vision of a world-class education in the Abbotsford School District. Our journey with student voice has shown that it can impact the school system in multiple ways and that taking a student-centered approach will be essential in the reshaping of our education system. While resistance is to be expected,

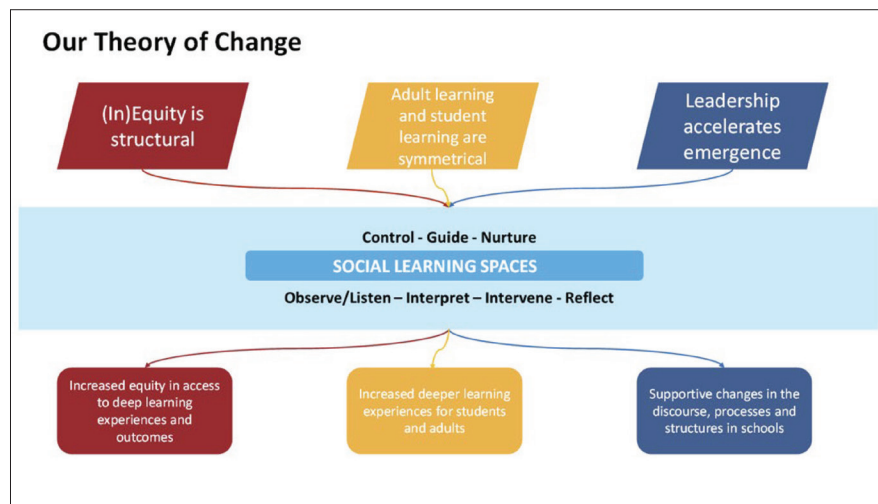


Figure 1: Adapted from *The Deeper Learning Dozen: Transforming School Districts to Support Deeper Learning for All*.¹

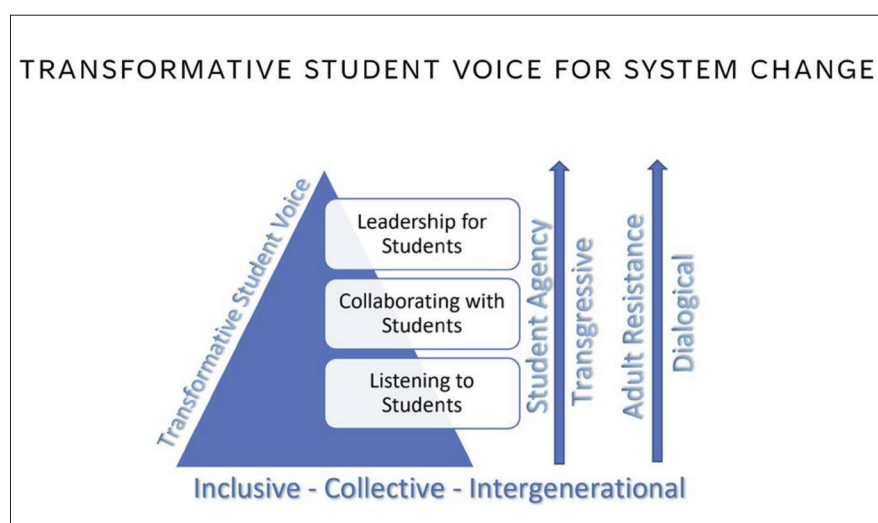



Figure 2: This model outlines a continuum of actions to be taken with students in our transformational efforts to improve schools.³

taking a collaborative and authentic listening approach with students hold great promise in achieving our collective goal of improved student success. 

Nathan is the currently the Deputy Superintendent of the Abbotsford School District. Student voice has been area of passion for him with a particular focus on cultivating student agency to promote transformation in our BC school system. Ari and Harshan are Grade 12 students in the Abbotsford School District. Both have been actively involved in student voice initiatives in the school district and have been supported by Shane Safir in growing their agency to effect change in our schools.

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Student Voice in District Planning

By Viveka Johnson, School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay)

School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay) (the District) is amplifying student voice. As educators, we have always known the importance of including student voice in how we shape and structure our classrooms, offering choice in assignments, and demonstrating assessment for learning. However, this has not always been the case when it comes to the broader educational landscape, including student voice in a district's strategic planning, school codes of conduct, administrative procedures, and school growth planning priorities.

The District was fortunate to be one of nine districts chosen to participate in the Ministry of Education and Child Care's community of practice for *Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation* with authors Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan. This work solidified the importance of acknowledging students as active stakeholders in their education. Educators and administrators are increasingly embracing the idea that involving students

in decision-making processes can lead to more effective and student-centered learning environments. This paradigm shift aligns with the principles emphasized in *Street Data*, advocating for a deeper understanding of the real experiences and perspectives of students.

With the District's Framework for Enhancing Student Learning focused on narrowing the gap for our priority populations (Indigenous students, children and youth in care, and students with diverse abilities), the broad provincial data that is collected does not capture the stories of our marginalized populations. The concept of collecting street-level data, information gathered directly from the experiences and observations of those not captured by data sets, was the catalyst for district-wide change. In the context of education, this means tapping into the lived

experiences of students to inform decision-making processes. The argument is that street-level data provides a more authentic and nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities within education systems.

For years, the District has formally engaged students in the District Student Advisory Council (DSAC), Student Voice, through school leadership classes, and by having students facilitate community engagement nights. However, the population of students that volunteer to engage in these existing processes has typically not been from marginalized populations and are more often than not mainstream, high-achieving students. The challenge became shifting this narrative and inviting

"Leadership provided great opportunities to volunteer and work with the community. It improved my confidence in school because I knew I had the support of my vice principal. Overall, Leadership was a really great experience for me."

— Hanna (student).

"Leadership has provided me with so much including presentation skills – practicing public speaking in front of large audiences, which increased my confidence and communication skills. Learning about project management enabled me to understand the process of planning and executing a project. I was able to make extremely important connections both in the school and community such as my schoothere are four I administrator and the Cranbrook Mayor. I have a better understanding of what I am passionate about. Leadership allowed me to work on a variety of projects which showed me what I like and do not like. The most important was having a voice. Leadership provided me with references that help promote my ideas and passions."

— Sonya (student).





Peace Pole project at Idlewild Park – Mount Baker Secondary School Leadership students.



Mae, a student, holding the Student Voice graphic detailing why student voice is important.

students from the margins to share their lived experiences with the decision-makers.

The District hosted two strategic planning workshops where hand-selected students were invited to have an authentic conversation with the trustees about their lived school experiences. The students came early, were provided lunch, were briefed on what the process was about, and they had been given the question in advance. The goal was for the students to be comfortable engaging with the trustees and not shy away from sharing their truths.

Mirroring the questions that were asked at our community engagement nights, the students were asked the following four questions:

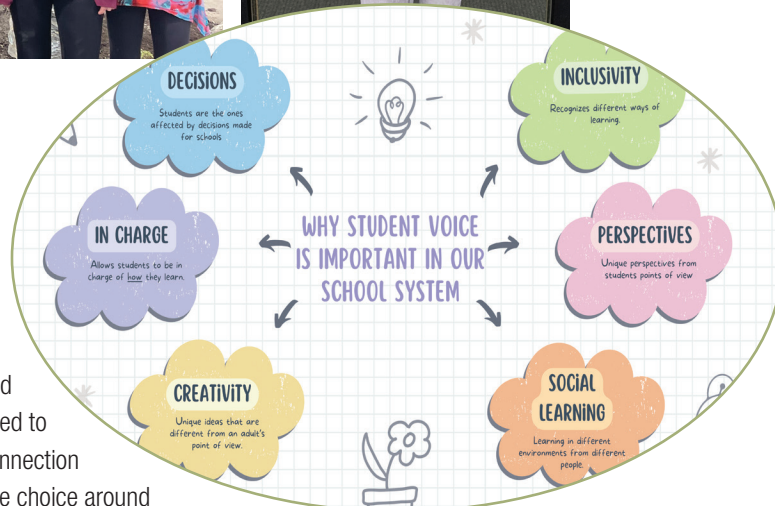
1. How do you see yourself as a learner?
2. What does the school district have that you appreciate the most?
3. What do you think the school district is missing?
4. What does the ideal school district look like?

The first group of students was from our largest

The goal was for the students to be comfortable engaging with the trustees and not shy away from sharing their truths.

community and were in Grades 10 to 12 from both the alternative school and the secondary school. The panel was very candid and shared themes around the need to have a relationship/connection with the adults, to have choice around what programming looks like (electives and delivery models), and the importance of having access to food. The students acknowledged stressors around keeping up with homework, working, and balancing extracurricular activities, that the pace at high school is much more demanding and it doesn't pause if you miss a day (in the traditional brick and mortar classroom).

The alternative school students spoke to the welcoming, non-judgmental environment where they work at their own pace and get individualized support. The students spoke to the desire for more extracurricular types of programs as they perceived a decline in clubs since the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, the group wanted to be able to explore less traditional careers as part of their Career Life Connection course rather than picking from a menu of choices that reflected traditional career options. The panel had career aspirations from tattoo artist to taxidermist. The question then



Student Voice as part of the Board of Education's strategic planning session.

came up around how we connect youth with local mentors to support their career aspirations; all because the District asked students what they needed.

The second group of students were from Grades 6 to 12 from one of our smaller communities that offers a range of programming from French Immersion, blended online learning to traditional classroom options. This spirited group advocated for more water bottle filling stations and to have reset (calming) spaces for students that are anxious or get easily overwhelmed. This group spoke to the importance of school sports but to include house teams (like intramurals) for students that may not be in club sports but want to work on their skill development and remain active. Two students championed on behalf of their siblings with special needs, as they felt the system needed to be more inclusive

continued on page 22

STUDENT VOICE IN DISTRICT PLANNING

continued from page 21

when it came to universal supports in programs and accessibility to services in rural areas, plus ensuring that they had access to support as a sibling of a student with significant needs.

Having students meet with the Board of Education amplified the importance of involving students in strategic planning, as it empowers them to take an active role in their education. When students feel that



Muffins with Mac engages students in kindergarten through Grade 6 in healing discussions.

their opinions matter and are considered, they become more engaged in the learning process. The empowerment fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, creating a positive community culture that extends to individual schools. As the Board of Education is working through the strategic planning process, the impact of hearing from students will resonate in the District's Vision, Mission, Values, and priority setting for 2024/2025. Hearing from diverse perspectives based on the students' unique backgrounds and learning styles is ensuring that these lived experiences are integrated moving forward.

Shifting from a system perspective to school-level engagement, the District has been working with principals and vice principals to engage student voice, as they possess valuable insights into the practical aspects of education and their experiences in the system. Frank J. Mitchell Elementary School's principal is doing Muffins with Mac, where she engages with different classes from Kindergarten to Grade 6 in discussions around the following:

1. What are you proud of?
2. Where are you struggling?
3. What do you think I need to know?
4. Is there anything at all about which you are curious, wondering, anxious, or concerned?
5. What would you like to ask Mrs. Mac?

The principal has commented on how powerful it has been to hear from the

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Mount Baker Secondary School Student Warrior at the elementary schools' Indigenous Fair.

students about their experiences at school. This is giving every student an opportunity to share, creating real-time data, which is essential for prioritizing strategies that align with the evolving needs of youth.

Mount Baker Secondary School has two active leadership classes, including one specifically for Indigenous students (Warriors). Students in leadership are encouraged to use their voice to take on projects to influence change at the school, community, or global level. Projects have ranged from an Indigenous fair hosted for elementary students, creating a peace pole for the community, to organizing Relay for Life to raise money for cancer research.

The journey of School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay) towards amplifying student voice reflects a pivotal shift in education paradigms, emphasizing the active involvement of students in decision-making processes. Through initiatives such as engaging students in the District's strategic planning workshops, marginalized voices have been invited to the forefront, enriching discussions with diverse perspectives. These engagements have empowered students to take ownership of their education but have also fostered a culture of inclusivity and

accountability within the District. As the District moves forward with its strategic planning, the insights gleaned from students' lived experiences will continue to inform decision-making, ensuring a more responsive and student-centered educational environment. From structured dialogues with the Board of Education to school-level engagement, School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay) will continue to nurture student agency. 

Viveka Johnson is the Superintendent of School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay). With over 25 years of experience in education, she has committed her career to advancing diversity and inclusion. With a background in science and counselling, she is both a relational leader and has a passion for data analytics while keeping students at the center. School District No. 5 is on the traditional unceded territory of the Ktunaxa Peoples.



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BY OLIVIA WHEELER

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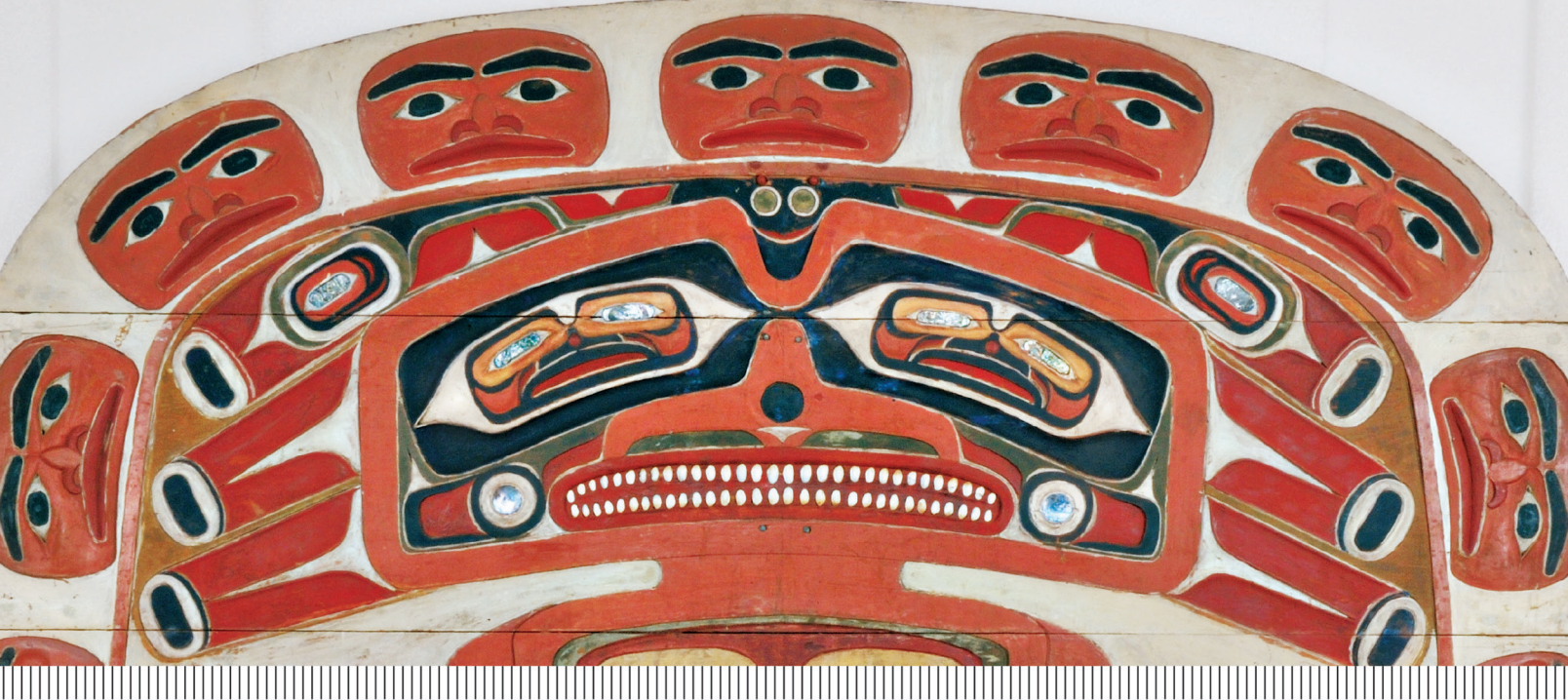
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WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING

Charlie's small arms gesticulate emphatically as she explains what helps her learn. She says her friends help because they keep her happy and she is learning to calm her wiggly hands by using a fidget toy. Her goals are to not need the fidget toy anymore, make lots and lots of friends, and be kind.

"I always use my growth mindset and sometimes when I get frustrated, I just take deep breaths and let it all go and then go play with my friends."

This Grade 2 student is being interviewed and recorded by her teacher, who posts the student's reflection in her digital portfolio on Spaces.

In a principal and vice principal meeting, we're reviewing how the first Learning Update went and this child's principal shares examples from her school, where teachers have piloted digital portfolios for two years. When the principal shares this short video with the K-12 PVP group, they spontaneously clap. One of the secondary administrators shares how powerful it is for students to be self-aware at such a young age.

By Karen Alvarez, Mission Public School District No. 75

It sounds like such a simple thing to implement the Ministry's new assessment policy. It has been in the works for years, with many districts piloting new ways to communicate learning and providing feedback prior to the policy being finalized. And yet, it has not been a straightforward process to implement changes.

Assessment elicits emotional responses from teachers, students, and parents. Perhaps that is because assessment has been seen as a tool for accountability – accountability to ensure both students and teachers have done their work. However, "doing the work" isn't the point. It doesn't move learning forward, and it doesn't instill a sense of meaning and purpose. We are using the

Centering Student Voice in Assessment Practices



opportunity provided by the new reporting policy to re-examine and re-align our planning, instruction, assessment, and communicating learning practices, not for compliance, but in support of meaningful learning.

Although our education system was created to support the preparation of workers for an Industrial Age model, we now expect it to support citizens who can meet unprecedented challenges as they step into adulthood. The curriculum was redesigned with a recognition of the changing world we now inhabit. The curriculum overview states:

Today we live in a state of constant change. It is a technology-rich world, where communication is instant and

information is immediately accessible. The way we interact with each other personally, socially, and at work has changed forever. Knowledge is growing at exponential rates in many domains, creating new information and possibilities. This is the world our students are entering.

We are also living in a world of increasing environmental, economic, and social problems, where most people spend more time on devices than in nature.

The educational needs of children are no longer served by passively digesting information and waiting to be judged at specific times throughout the year. The K-12 Reporting Policy states one of the goals of communicating learning is so that “students take part in meaningful conversations that help them develop responsibility for engaging deeply with their learning.”

What is learning and what learning is needed now? Learning is as much about understanding ourselves and engaging with others and the land, as it is about literacy and numeracy. Assessment is a central act in the process of teaching and learning. It is not a ‘mopping up’ exercise to be done after learning is finished; it is how learning evolves. Assessment is an opportunity for noticing and nurturing, a way of furthering growth and developing self-awareness.

Using digital portfolios to communicate learning shapes what we do in classrooms. Taking a photograph of a spelling test does

not enhance learning. Making space for students to discern and reflect on and share their learning does.

In Mission, we have been working with assessment leads from each school to wrestle with big questions and distill what matters. Our focus has been on supporting student self-awareness and metacognition, but some teachers still feel the pull of accountability, asking how many sentences they need to write in each section of the template. We emphasize planning questions for teachers¹ that focus on student learning:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do?
- How will we know if they’ve learned it?
- How will we respond when some students do not learn?
- How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

And reflection questions for students:²

- What am I learning and why is it important?
- How am I doing with my learning?
- Where do I want to go next with my learning?

continued on page 32

“I’m seeing students being active participants and owners of their own learning. Student voice is valued and respected by adults. The shift of assessment practices has forced change of teaching practices. Instead of teachers marking alone after school, teachers are involved in feedback of the learning process in the moment, in conversation with kids. Students are aware of their learning, and assessing themselves in their reflections. It takes away the mystery of giving someone a grade, to students knowing their own progress. It takes away the ‘shame’ aspect of a bad grade, and instead values progress and growth. This is far from perfect at our school, but the shift is starting.”

— Elementary school principal.

WHAT PRINCIPALS ARE SAYING

WHAT STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ARE SAYING

"Some of the stuff has been a little bit hard for me to process, but as I was doing it I felt like I was getting better at it. If I didn't get them all right that's okay, I can keep practicing. It's okay if you have challenges. Getting a report card at the end didn't make me feel confident about my learning. Getting feedback along the way makes me feel more confident about myself and less anxious about having to get it right. When I got letter grades it felt like more of a comparison."

— Grade 5 student.

When this students' teacher was asked how her assessment practices have changed, she shared, "Instead of prescribing one way for everybody to show me what they learn, students have a voice in being able to say, I really understand this but can I talk with you to show my learning, or can I go outside and create a video, or do an experiment to show my learning."

Structure influences behaviour – Ministry policy, district policy, and reporting templates either frame the space for student voice or stifle it. When we make reporting about teacher accountability, we lose the opportunity to elevate student voice and illuminate student *learning* instead of task completion.

Our district policy for assessing and communicating student learning states:

The Board supports assessment practices that develop student self-awareness and ownership of learning. The Board also supports communication of learning that values and centers student voice and makes learning visible to all stakeholders.

Teachers in elementary are using either digital portfolios or a revised paper template for communicating learning, while middle and secondary teachers are using MyEd, with a digital option for self-reflection of Core Competencies. While portfolios offer more space for student voice and reflection, we continue to work towards increasing student voice regardless of the template being used. It is a process, not a destination we have reached. But by consistently focusing on learning and student voice we are noticing changes in all grades.

I'm noticing more self-awareness in Capstone projects. One student shared how art helps her deal with emotions and another questioned the absurdity of the school system from her experience within it. She surveyed fellow graduates and found students with higher grades tended to get less sleep. "Shouldn't school be structured in a way that supports student health?" she asked.

Assessment isn't about compliance or accountability; it's about elevating voice, increasing self-awareness, and recognizing possibility. It is done for, about, with, and



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to students. Shouldn't their voices be front and center? 

Karen Alvarez is the Assistant Superintendent for Mission Public School District No. 75. She works and lives on the traditional, ancestral, unsundered, and shared lands of the Stó:lō people, of Leq'á:mel, Semá:th, Máthxwi, Sq'éwlets and Qwó:ltl'el First Nations. Karen is also an EdD candidate, exploring leadership and holism in education.

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WHAT TEACHERS ARE SAYING

"One of my Grade 6 students taught our Math lesson yesterday. In the fall, he set a goal to practice multiplication, even though we were still working on addition and subtraction. He had struggled last year and didn't find the standard algorithm or the area model to be helpful. He took it upon himself to search online and find a new method the [math mentor teacher] described as a 'lattice model.' We took a photo of him with his work for Spaces to highlight his efforts. Last week, as we were finishing up our Math unit, I asked if he would be willing to share his method with the class. We brought up his photo in Spaces to remind him how the method works. He practiced at home and yesterday he taught the entire class. The class watched and listened as he explained the steps, then they went in groups to white boards around the room and he circulated, as the teacher, checking in with each group. When I went to upload a short video clip from his instructions to Spaces, for the first time I maxed out the number of curricular tags allowed because there were too many to account for. A few of the kids are choosing his method, which we named after him, 'The Ryder Method.'"

— Grade 5/6 teacher.

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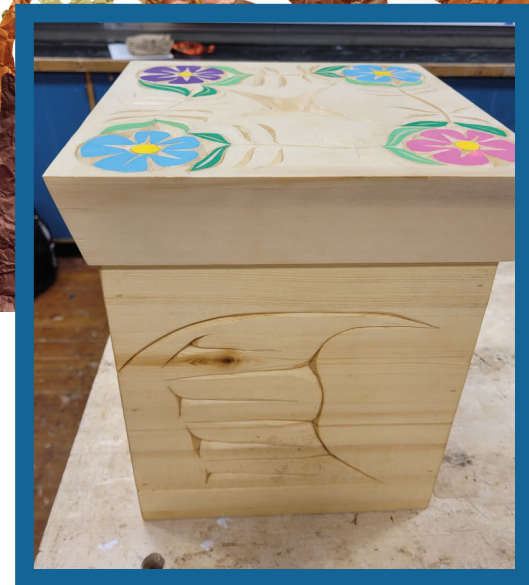
Successfully Connecting to Indigenous Traditions

By Dr. Lyn Daniels, Surrey Schools

Against the backdrop of Truth and Reconciliation, the British Columbia Public school system is challenged to imagine beyond what Indigenous Education departments do to support Indigenous Learners. Although Surrey is home to approximately 13,000 Indigenous people, there are no Indigenous gathering space where cultures, languages, and histories might flourish. Truth and Reconciliation need to involve all Canadians and not just Indigenous peoples. Accordingly, in a large public school system such as the one explored here, Surrey, partnerships between Indigenous education and other departments and institutions can offer a starting point for engaging in this work. By creating meaningful connections to Indigenous learners and their families, we gain a sense of the kinds of responses such partnerships can make to moments of instability for some Indigenous learners navigating public schools. In this article, partnerships that connect Indigenous learners to their cultural traditions, and communities, and that honours their lived experiences, work by engendering trust that is needed for these educational endeavours to have the desired impact.

Beginning in 2018, a course entitled, *Introduction to Northwest Coast Carving*, was offered to a small group of Indigenous learners, who were enrolled in secondary schools in Surrey. The teacher, as part of the Transitions Team in Indigenous Learning, had become aware that a handful of students needed credits for graduation. Subsequently, each year this course was taken up by more Indigenous learners and when it was moved from ad hoc meeting rooms to a woodwork shop in one of the secondary schools after school hours, a partnership between Indigenous Learning and Continuous Education was initiated.

During each school term an Indigenous Teacher from the Transitions team and an Indigenous master carver lead a group of Indigenous youth in Grades 11 to 12, through their self-directed wood carving projects that will earn them credits for graduation. In this creative space, designed for Indigenous youth, students engage with diverse Indigenous artists, who share their motivations for their art; and their lived experiences navigating Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces. Most students begin the course with little acknowledgement of their ties to First Nations, but in time, and with encouragement, their



A carved box created by Ryan Hughes, a student artist part of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. Photo courtesy of Nancy Johnson, Transition Facilitator.

gifts, artistic skills, and stories emerge in their art. It is the first time some have engaged with a cultural community, with Indigenous art and history, and that connects them to their own Indigenous roots.

The families of the Indigenous youth are an important support that begins with the teacher informing them that the course is led by a very experienced carver. Parents and younger siblings are invited to check out the course anytime. Guest speakers end up being related to at least one student or they are from the same First Nation. Sometimes the parents, or other family members are the guest speakers. Art supplies are sent home with parents so they can work along side their youth and encourages younger siblings.

One of the most effective methods of reaching potential students is through current and past students who recommend the

course to their peers. Current students are asked to help with presentations especially at their home school. Occasionally students are enrolled that are slightly too young because they may be struggling in school but willing to learn Northwest Coast carving techniques. Indigenous youth are invited to drop by and are provided with art supplies to practice until they are eligible to enrol. At year end, the art projects are displayed at the venue for National Indigenous Peoples Day, or art shows in schools.

By visualizing the range of people involved: the families, the Indigenous Graduation Advocates (secondary teachers with full-time equivalent to support Indigenous Learners), district counselors, youth workers, principals, and vice principals who encourage students to pursue their creative interests; a depiction of the resources that create trust for Indigenous Learners to connect to public schools emerge.

Another network of support connects the Indigenous Learning Transition team with Inclusive Education for a more unified service to vulnerable students. The aim of this partnership, through weekly meetings with the District Behaviour Specialist team, is for increased awareness and understanding of the unique needs of Indigenous learners and families. This partnership practice also involves a weekly review by the Student Services teams of caseloads in common with the Indigenous Transitions Team. At the school level, an Indigenous Transitions Facilitator collaborates with school-based teams aimed at improving student engagement, relationships with families, and recommending supports for student to either, stay the course, or work towards a more suitable transition plan.

Alongside school-based referrals, there is a system to accommodate community referrals from Indigenous families or outside agencies: a type of advocacy and support that was not previously formalized. One parent reported: "With the help of Indigenous Transitions, (we) finally felt heard and supported... My daughter... will always need adjustments to schedules... to perform at her best."


Through the course of communicating, planning, and supporting students and families; knowledge of Indigenous cultures, history, and inter-generational trauma frequently frames the perspectives needed for educators to orient their thinking toward student strengths and relationship building. Accordingly, each referral serves to build the capacity of educators for walking together with Indigenous families in their moments of instability and lifting the learning experiences of Indigenous learners in Surrey Schools.

Recognizing the significance of Indigenous traditional knowledge and cultural continuity, another partnership that aims to support Indigenous youth is Windspeaker: a conduit for Indigenous youth resilience. By offering experiential learning, urban field study trips, and cultural retreats, the program aims to strengthen positive personal and cultural identity development. This holistic teaching approach invokes Indigenous knowledge, customs, language, history, and spiritual practices, by embedding traditional wisdom into the fabric of the experiences.

With funding from the City of Surrey Youth Resiliency Program and Public Safety for Grade 6 to 9 cohorts and Indigenous Services Canada for Grade 10 to 12 cohorts, the program runs from September to May each school year. Through monthly activities tailored to three cohorts of seventy-five plus students each, spanning Grades 6 to 7, 8 to 9, and 10 to 12, participants engage in cultural activities that connect them to the land, and fosters positive personal and cultural identity while participating in community programs and establishing meaningful community relationships. Eligibility requires that Indigenous students in the Surrey School District, are enrolled in Grades 6 to 12 of the current school year and have completed the application package.

Windspeaker is dedicated to enhancing the resilience of urban Indigenous youth through a multifaceted approach centered on culture, and outdoor learning. Bringing Indigenous youth together to be with other Indigenous peoples in and of itself cannot be

underestimated as in important approach that aligns with youth resilience strategies. A future orientation, instilling cultural pride, promoting learning from the natural world, and interactions with community members, such as developing relationships with Elders and engaging with the community on the land, all serve to build resiliency. This holistic and culturally rich approach aims to empower Indigenous youth on their leadership journey.

It is during times of economic and social instability for Indigenous families, that make learners particularly vulnerable to misunderstandings from school systems. The partnerships described in this article not only offer enhanced and supportive experiences for Indigenous Learners in Surrey; they reveal their moments of instability. Responding to instability with partnerships between Indigenous Learning and other institutions and departments within, to connect Indigenous learners to their cultural identities, is a proven path to truth and reconciliation. How can the notion of partnerships be taken up beginning in the early years of Indigenous learner public school experiences? Especially when there are no dedicated spaces for indigenous peoples to gather in urban centers such as Surrey. Commitments to truth and reconciliation can mean closer partnerships between elementary school teachers and principals; and Indigenous families. Such partnerships will not only build the trust needed for truth and reconciliation to occur, but public school will serve as gathering spaces that connect Indigenous peoples to their traditions. 

Dr. Lyn Daniels (Ed D) is Cree Metis and belongs to the Kawacatoose First Nation, Saskatchewan, and is the Director of Instruction of Indigenous Learning for Surrey Schools. Lyn completed a Doctor of Education degree at UBC in Policy and Educational Leadership in 2016. Lyn believes that we have to listen to Indigenous peoples and vow to live our lives differently in order to have truth and reconciliation.

Better Together:

Transforming our Learning Story Through the Power of Voice

By Paul McKenzie, Melissa Austin, Sheralyn Macrae, Helena Takhar & Henrietta Langan, Saanich School District No. 63

The fabric of a resonant story chronicling transformative change rests in its ability to encapsulate and give tangible amplification to our hopes and beliefs, and by activating collective voice bring others along. By virtue of these qualities, a transformation story should inevitably teach us something about ourselves and about each other, and it should challenge us, change us, and inspire us to think and act anew.

Over the past two years in the Saanich School District, we have collectively committed ourselves to forging a path forward that gives life to the overarching aspirations of our strategic plan, and most directly in the heartbeat of our schools. To that end, we have sought to enculture a process for transformation in our school planning journey that is grounded in:

- Evidence-based goals aligned to our district strategic priorities;
- Robust inquiry questions to inform and animate our work;
- Direct connectivity to First Peoples Principles of learning;
- Strategically precise actions that align with our inquiries;
- A process for tracking in-year progress; and
- Summative learning to guide iterative next steps in subsequent years.

Supporting this ambitious endeavour, we wanted to ensure that our plan would live beyond the words on the page and reside in hearts and minds across our district.



District leaders engaged in a drum making and awakening ceremony together. Photos courtesy of Paul McKenzie.



Radical dreaming at Lochside Elementary: Students sharing their personal Mandala Wheels.

We were fortunate to be supported by the facilitated leadership of Shane Safir, who over the course of 2023, engaged our district administrators, and teacher leaders in a process by which we would bring deliberate intention **to listen** to the voices of our learners, particularly those voices in the margins, **to uncover** themes, and possible barriers, **to re-imagine** possibility and radically dream together, and finally **move to action**, and bring life to these

dreams. This required a willingness to embrace vulnerability, and by listening to the voices of our learners, redefine success and engagement for our learners.

These events served to give witness to our story, while we engaged in the re-construction of our school plans. Equally, and as referenced earlier, we were intentional about ensuring that central to this work must be our commitment to First Peoples Principles of Learning. Working

Building Our Learning Story 'Piece by Piece'



Building our listening and learning story in Saanich with Shane Safir.

needed to not only shift the focus of our school goal, but also empower their voices into our every day at school, inviting immediate change. Our ELL/ESL room became a haven for our students to come and share their dreams, needs, and attributes (DNA) through art, writing, and lunch time crafting sessions – which was then shared to staff and students around the school in various ways. These interviews provided us with confirmation that we need to ground ourselves in building relationships through compassion, deep listening, and ethics.”

alongside Melissa Austin, District Principal of Indigenous Education, and Sheralyn Macrae, Indigenous Education Coordinator, we sought out a way to metaphorically articulate the powerful story we were trying to tell in our district. Reflecting on this process, Ms. Austin writes that “As we moved out of the development phase of the strategic plan and into the implementation phase, we were drawn towards the metaphor of the drum, as tangible symbol to support leaders in their school-based implementation of the work ahead, while staying true to the elements of Indigenous voice and pedagogy. For us, the drum represents the dreaming, the development, and the implementation of the plan through radical dreaming, awakening, student voice, and system transformation. The drum is made with a circular cedar frame that represents the Strategic Plan as the framework and will hold the hide that encompasses the voices of Elders, community members, students, parents, caregivers, and staff.”

As we widened our reach to lean into the voices of our district, our school leaders undertook the work of applying the learning from our facilitated sessions with Shane Safir and apply these learnings in each of our schools. One such school, Lochside

Elementary, engaged deeply into looking closely at their school and the experiences of their students through, as Principal Helena Takhar described, “the lens of equity.” This was an intensely personal introspective consideration for Ms. Takhar, “as not only an educator in our district, but a mother of children in our district, and a human who sees herself in the eyes of our students.” Big questions emerged for Ms. Takhar about how biases show up in our schools, and how street data can provide “information needed to make systemic shift.”

The steps taken next by Ms. Takhar and her team surfaced some deep learning. Ms. Takhar writes “This is where the work we did with Shane Safir came into play for me. How do we find out what our students are feeling? We needed to empower their voice – and that is where the Empathy Interviews were our gift to us. We gathered a small group of classroom teachers, English Language Learners/English as a second Language (ELL/ESL) teachers and admin to conduct these interviews. These interviews provided confirmation for some things that were already happening at school, but most importantly they provided insight in areas that we should grow and how we could do better. The interviews gave us the drive we

Illustrative of the deep involvement across the district was the powerful work of engaging our students in these important conversations, and activating their voices and their dreams at Lochside. Henrietta Langan-Desbrisay, ELL/ESL teacher and Coordinator at Lochside, along with Indigenous Education Coordinator Sheralyn Macrae lead a small group of students through a lesson outlined in the Mandala Wheel (from the Salish Weave Collection). Ms. Macrae writes, “We integrated the Salish Weave Print Collection and student empathy interviews, asking each student to create a Mandala with four quadrants. These quadrants represented aspects of themselves they were proud of and wanted to share. The Salish art and its meaning marked the beginning of our exploration of family and identity from a holistic perspective, considering the whole child. That day was filled with laughter and sharing.”

Reflecting on the power of this moment, Ms. Langan-Desbrisay, and on the sharing session that we conducted with other schools in the district offered this: “with our eyes focused, our ears tuned, and our hearts engaged, we witnessed a small group of students give voice to their dreams

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for themselves, their families, their school, and their community. These students and their families hailed from Asia, Africa, Syria, Ukraine, and Canada. They were members of our Indigenous community and recent refugees and immigrants. They spoke clearly and courageously, in a language that for most was not their first, to a full room of families, teachers, administrators and school board personnel, about what they wanted their schools to look like, and about what was important to them, to their families and their cultures."

What is resonant in all these voices, all these leadership moments, as we begin the work of telling our story in the Saanich School District is the rich commitment to taking the vulnerable and courageous steps necessary to positively transforming a district, a school, and the learning story of every child in our district and doing it TOGETHER. Returning to the metaphor of the drum, Ms. Austin perfectly captures the transformative power of the collective when she writes, "The sinew that is used to tighten and bring the frame, hide and drum together represents each of the schools in our district coming together at the center of the drum to create the handle, and a drum that with every beat will send the good words, intentions and radical dreams for system change into the world around us."

In unlocking the voices of our dreamers, and in ourselves dreaming along with the dreamers, this is where the transformative power of voice rests, and this is how the voices of our district will continue to guide us on our journey to be better together in the Saanich School district. 🌈

Paul McKenzie is the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Melissa Austin, is the District Principal of Indigenous Education, Sheralyn Macrae is the Indigenous Education Coordinator, Helena Takhar is the Principal at Lochside Elementary School, and Henrietta Langan, ELL/ESL Teacher and Coordinator, all for the Saanich School District No. 63.

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