

Fall 2020

# Inspired

The official journal of the  
British Columbia School  
Superintendents Association

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Land-Based Learning

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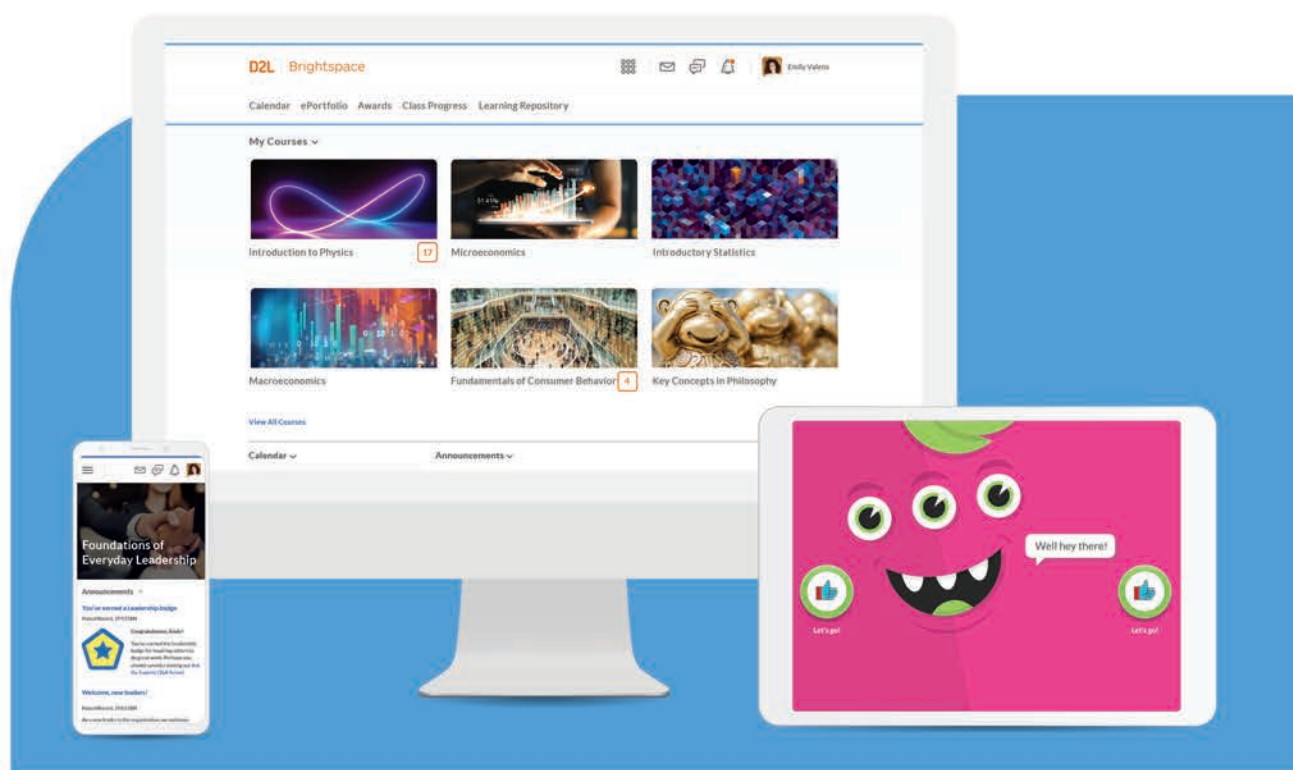
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## A Message from the BCSSA President



**Chris van der Mark**  
President  
British Columbia School  
Superintendents Association

You and your teams  
have not stopped since  
March. Our secondary  
administration and  
counsellors have stepped  
up and found new  
solutions. It has been  
remarkable.

What a summer this has been. As I near the end of my term as President of the British Columbia School Superintendents Association (BCSSA), I want to take this opportunity to thank you all on behalf of the BCSSA Board of Directors. Our BCSSA Pro-D Committee and Member Services continue their amazing efforts pulling together events and supporting members under some remarkable circumstances. It has been quite the year, and amidst their other duties, they have found the time and teamwork to create opportunities for us to share, learn, and laugh. Thank you!

It is hard to sum up the year we have all had. But we can all be uplifted by the teamwork and collaborative efforts across all of our organizations. You and your teams have not stopped since March. Our secondary administration and counsellors have stepped up and found new solutions. It has been remarkable.

This year has had it all. COVID-19, the Australian wildfires, an epic return of locusts in Africa, murder hornets, and I'm pretty sure I saw four dudes on horseback yesterday at the top of the hill. Now, I am in Williams Lake, so that also could have been anybody.

Joking aside, I do see significant reason for optimism. We are going to chart a path through this, and we will be stronger for it. I've had the opportunity to refer to our critical role as a constant guide for the education sector, and while other special interest groups pursue unique interests, we keep our eye on improving outcomes for students. It is not always easy, but we chart the path.

I'd like to briefly reference the re-visioning of our strategic plan, built upon the pillars of leadership, voice, equity, and support. Our leadership will be essential to building public confidence as we continue to move through this pandemic. Our voice, though not always the loudest, must resonate clearly to be heard distinctly from the constant noise to ensure we continue to build a more equitable society through education. Critically, we will need to support each other as we work toward the same goals across vastly different regions and districts. We are stronger together.

It is not easy, but if it were easy, our role would not be as critical. With that, I would just like to add one key ingredient for you to take with you into the new school year, that I am confident will help us find the path. That ingredient is YOU. All of you are the key. You have worked tirelessly in April to create something different, you did it again in June, and you will continue to do the work that gives the system calm in the midst of chaos. You don't always get thanked enough...so THANK YOU! Your efforts are critical and appreciated. On that note, I'd also like to extend a special thank you to our Executive Director, Claire Guy, whose work and service to the organization has been invaluable. Her work makes this role doable.

On behalf of the BCSSA Board, I wish you a happy and healthy return to the work you all love.

### **Chris van der Mark**

President, British Columbia School Superintendents Association  
Superintendent, Cariboo-Chilcotin  
School District 27

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## A Message from the Assistant Deputy Minister, Governance and Analytics Division



**Keith Godin**  
Assistant Deputy Minister  
Governance and Analytics Division

Data have the power to drive enhancements, insights, and even corrections to support student learning and equity. Trends in demography, technology, and socio-economic factors, along with reconciliation with Indigenous peoples – and, more recently, global pandemics – effect what and how students need to learn. In an information-driven world, evidence is an increasingly important element of decision making and essential to improving student outcomes.

The B.C. Ministry of Education has a wealth of data about students that date back to the early 1990s. The scope for applying evidence in education settings is broad. For example, the Ministry has expanded its capacity to use newly developed evidence, analytics tools, and

data visualization to have a better understanding of students, to inform policies, and to solve problems.

Ministry analyses help to articulate the factors that support and hinder student success to enable efficient action on improving outcomes and accountability. To understand the students' "whole world," the Ministry has started to link student characteristics and development information with data in other Ministries as well as major national data systems that enable understanding of labour market outcomes, post-secondary entry and performance, and detailed census characteristics.

At a practical level, when data are working for us, students understand their strengths and opportunities for development. Parents and caregivers know how to best support their child with their learning journey. Teachers are continuously responding to each child's needs. And you, as education leaders, understand the successes in classrooms across your district and are engaging in a manner that provides the greatest impact for your community.

It is essential to supplement empirical observation on student characteristics and achievement with qualitative observations coming from students, teachers, parents and administrators. The Ministry collects these data through mechanisms including the annual Student Learning Survey, data sessions with district and school teams, and COVID-19 related surveys.

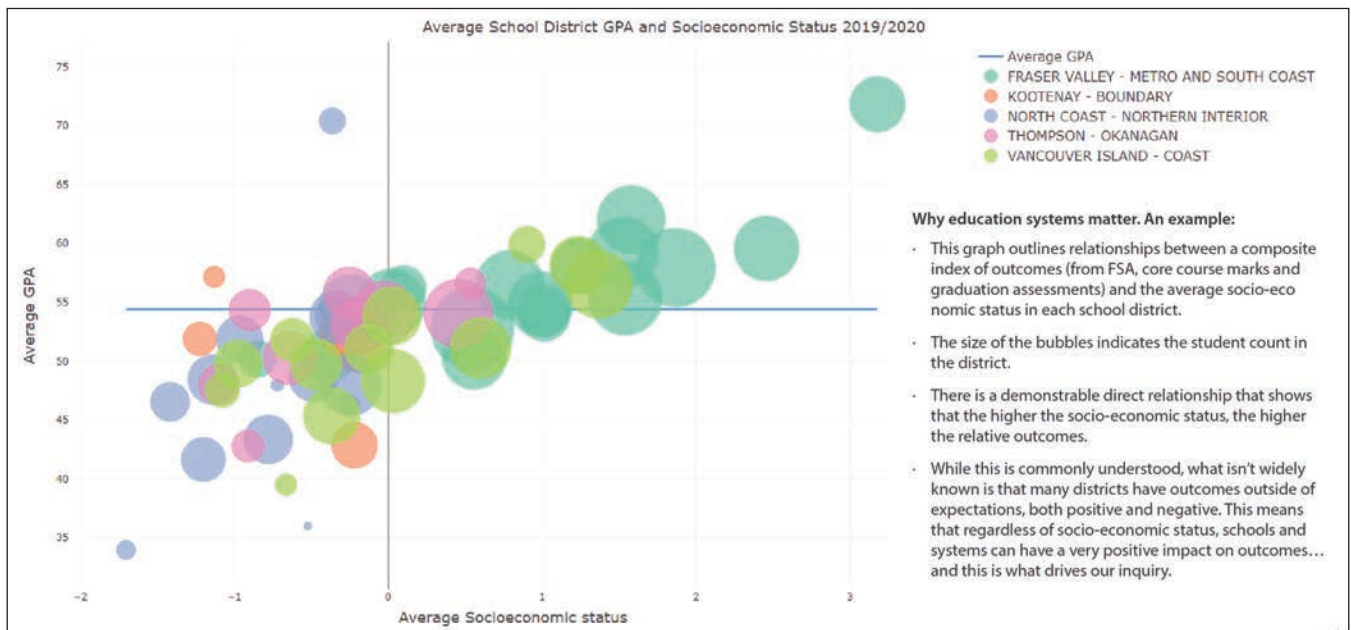
Many school districts are increasing the use of data analyses, dashboards, and detailed research provided by the Education Analytics Office (EAO). Districts access ministry generated dashboards with current trends in their respective enrolment, assessment results, achievement and student mental health. Working in conjunction with the MyEDBC platform, and classroom level analyses such as the Foundation Skills Assessment Item Level Analysis, teachers have greater capability to use data to improve student outcomes.

The EAO offers Ministry facilitated data room sessions. During a session, you and your team can explore a range of indicators to build insights to support student success and develop evidence-based strategies for continuous improvement. To set up a data room, please contact Jeremy Higgs, Executive Director, Education Analytics Office (Jeremy.Higgs@gov.bc.ca).

Data and analytics are one of the most powerful tools in education. Making use of available information enhances relationships and understanding across the education system to achieve the common goal of providing the best education to B.C. students.

### Keith Godin

Assistant Deputy Minister  
Governance and Analytics Division



## A Message from the BCSSA Executive Director



**Claire Guy**  
Executive Director  
British Columbia School  
Superintendents Association

By the time you read this, we will be well into our “new normal” school year, settling into the daily work of running British Columbia’s public-school districts and supporting all learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. As I reflect on the past several months, I am impressed at how our education sector has collaborated to pivot at a moment’s notice to address the constantly changing landscape while always keeping students at the center of our efforts. Further to this, it is also impressive that we are still able to maintain some degree of normalcy, as we continue to support our members and work as a professional association.

While we are now putting the final pieces in place for our Fall Conference, I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the outstanding teamwork that allowed our BCSSA Summer Leadership Academy to happen. It was our first ever largescale virtual conference, and while we were disappointed to not be together in Whistler as originally planned, we managed to

carve out opportunity for connection and professional learning, all while focusing on how we would show up as leaders this fall to welcome our students back to school with a sense of purpose and calm.

My gratitude goes to our Professional Development Committee, Membership Committee, Membership Consultant, Bev Rundell, and small staff who pulled this all together for a meaningful experience. We especially wanted to connect with all of our new members and newly appointed superintendents, and we look forward to ongoing and inspiring group sessions throughout the year.

Part of our Summer Leadership Academy included the announcement of our newly revised 2020-24 BCSSA Strategic Plan through a video created by some well-respected BCSSA colleagues and friends. We have selected to focus upon four key goal areas: leadership, voice, equity, and support. These four themes will guide us and serve to ground us in our work as a professional educational association, as well as individual leaders within our districts. Our hope is that through each issue of *InspirED*, you will see one or more of these themes reflected in each article contributed.

It is serendipitous that this year’s professional learning (planned over 18 months ago!) focuses on compassionate system leadership. It is a very fitting topic and if there was ever a time or need for this, it is now. We look forward to continuing our exploration with Peter Senge and Mette Boell, both experts on compassionate systems, as we dive deeper into this work and focus on the well-being of our entire system. I hope that as you read through the inspiring and innovative stories shared by our colleagues for this issue, you will reflect on your own district successes as to how you are attending to the needs of your learning community, while also taking care of your own well-being. As we have heard many times, it appears that we ARE in this for the long term. So, perhaps, this will be the spark to ignite our collective creativity, while we are given permission and opportunity to do things differently in transforming the first-class education system in our province.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Chris van der Mark and the entire Board of Directors for their tremendous dedication and support of our association in such challenging times. To those who have now finished their terms as Directors, a heartfelt thank you on behalf of all of us. To those who will continue or have joined to serve in a new role – thank you and welcome. Your commitment to serve us all is appreciated. Until our next issue in April, stay safe!

### **Claire Guy**

Executive Director  
British Columbia School Superintendents Association

### **BCSSA Retirees**

*Please join us in recognizing the retirements of these esteemed colleagues.*

SD6 – Superintendent Paul Carriere  
SD23 – Assistant Superintendent Vianne Kitzinger  
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SD92 – Superintendent Joe Rhodes



# Equity Through Land-Based Learning in 2020

By Kevin Kaiser, School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan)



Elder Maureen Ziprick making a traditional medicine wheel.



A George Elliot student making an arrow from Rosehips.



Students harvesting medicine in Gallagher's Canyon.

After the landscape of learning changed in the spring of 2020, members of the Central Okanagan Public Schools' Indigenous Education Department began to reimagine how to re-engage small cohorts of Indigenous Grade 12 students through land-based learning. Traditionally, Indigenous people across British Columbia have gathered and worked in groups that represent the community with Elders, youth, knowledge keepers, and skilled teachers. The focus is on the community before individuals. These sessions were purposefully set up this way with an Elder, a knowledge keeper, and a teacher who worked with small groups of five students. A real community was created, and several small families were the result of these gatherings.

The purpose of this work was to create equitable opportunities for Grade 12 learners. Students who had been experiencing challenges in a traditional classroom environment and those struggling with online learning during the initial stages of COVID-19 were invited to participate in learning from the *tmx'ulax'* (land-based learning). Lessons were created and embedded with Indigenous worldviews and perspectives, each having a specific focus on both skills and story. You can think of it as the original cross curricular classroom, where students were able to receive credits while representing their learning in multiple ways.

Collaboration between classroom teachers and principals/vice-principals at George Elliot Secondary, Rutland Secondary, and Central Schools enhanced the learning environment and the outdoors became the classroom. All activities during the land-based learning were designed to provide students with skills specific to their course (science, social studies, English). Within each three-hour block of time, we could see how strong relationships were being built and a sense of community was developing between students, families, and staff.

Indigenous cultures have long passed down knowledge from generation to generation through oral traditions. Storytelling is a traditional method used to teach about cultural beliefs, values, customs, rituals, history, practices, relationships and ways of life. It is a foundation for holistic learning, relationship building and experiential learning. In the Okanagan, *sen'k'lip* (Coyote) travels are a record of the natural laws necessary for survival, and we learn from *sen'k'lip* in every aspect of *capitkwł* (story). We found ourselves wrapped up in stories that were shared not only by fellow educators, but by the students themselves. Learning alongside students provided the time and space needed for authentic connection and conversation to unfold. Each conversation was

meant to give students a better understanding of their rich and storied past, while boosting their identity and self-esteem.

In our time together, we made arrows made from rose hip stems, and students were taught where and when to harvest and care for the rosehips as well as care for the land on Okanagan territory. The staff and students went on ethnowalks and learned about traditional medicines: sage, juniper, soap berries, birch bark and conks, flint, Dogbane, antler, obsidian and buck brush. As with most gatherings, staff and students came together while eating moose meat chili and bannock on our breaks. Of course, recipes were shared and compared to grandmother's and grandfather's recipes while we

laughed about all the wonderful things that happen when we gather around food.

One of the largest projects was the creation of a sweat lodge. Many students had never taken part in a sweat, and we did not during our time together. Instead, we took the time to really understand the power of why people would take part in sweat lodges both in traditional times and today. The students learned everything from gathering the red willow, to the importance of having a clear mind when constructing the sweat. They quickly understood the power they have in providing positive thoughts for the people that would later use the sweat lodge. Every connection within the sweat must be purposeful and powerful, and this is something the students could use in every aspect of their life.

Assessment for this type of learning is easy when we see quiet and cautious students laughing, highly engaged, curious and courageous with taking on new learning coupled with 100 per cent attendance for each session. Formal assessment came with the culminating project of making an arrow from artifacts we found on the *tmx'ulax'* (the land) which we called *na'ʔk'ulamən* or, "the things that we do." We used plant technology to guide our learning on and off the land. The students had to learn to manipulate obsidian to create the arrowhead, straighten the arrow made from rosehip using heat, gather and affix the owl feathers and learn to tie everything together using both *sinew* and *sp'its'n* (hemp dogbane). This was the best way to both learn about the important technologies that have existed long before contact, and the usefulness of said technologies in the modern world. The resulting arrow was the authentic proof of learning during our time together, and the understanding of *tmix'* (which includes everything alive: land, water, animals, people and plants) will be something the students can take with them forever.

The unexpected shift to land-based learning was a success, as evident when these students graduated with pride and dignity, completing course credits in science, English and technology through land-based learning. The Indigenous Education Department cannot thank Indigenous Advocates, secondary teachers and administrators in the Central Okanagan Public School District enough, for collaborating with their amazing students, to reimagine the delivery of educational opportunities through culturally responsive interventions during the current pandemic. 🌈

*Consultant and educator in the Central Okanagan Public School District, Kevin Kaiser is a proud member of the Stellat'en First Nation in BC's Central Interior. Kevin graduated from the University of British Columbia with a Bachelor of Education in 2002 and Masters of Educational Technology in 2009. He earned the Premier's Award for Teaching Excellence for developing First Nations English 9, and continues to provide opportunity for Indigenous youth to this day, including the creation of land-based learning opportunities in 2020 to fulfill secondary course credits during the COVID-19 Pandemic.*

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# Leading in a Pandemic: One District's Story

By Terry Taylor, School District No. 10 (Arrow Lakes)

Adaptive and responsive leadership are needed at the best of times in the complex world of Kindergarten to Grade 12 education (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Kershner & Mcquillan, 2016; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). In the midst of a pandemic, the importance of visionary, flexible and nimble leadership is more critical than ever, as are culturally responsive leadership and pedagogy (Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Mahuika et al., n.d.; Nortvedt et al., 2020). In School District No. 10 (SD 10), we have navigated the complexities of COVID-19 with collaborative partnerships, kept learning at the centre and seized opportunities for educational transformation.

Informed at every step by science about the virus and evidence-based teaching and learning in April and May, almost all staff and 40 to 50 per cent of our learners were in schools. In June, all staff and over 70 per cent of students attended, while in September 2020, 96 per cent of learners return to full time learning at school.

Carol Campbell's recent policy discussion paper notes 10 things to consider when sending kids back to school (Campbell, 2020). Her recommendations align with our leadership approach in SD 10 and BC's Ministry of Education policies. For example, Campbell

advises working collaboratively with partners to inform and co-develop plans. In SD 10, those consultations have proved essential to informing restart planning, and cultivated trust and support from our educational partners for a safe and positive school restart.

Campbell recommends quality teaching, learning and respect for educators by providing professional learning and opportunities for collaboration. Keeping the focus on students through strategically aligned professional learning, nurturing relationships and fostering positive, respectful cultures are core to how we lead learning in School District 10. To this end, as the pandemic began in the spring and we planned for the 2020-21 school year, our district continued to invest in professional learning and inquiry networks as key structures for student success and the diverse needs of all learners (Bryk, 2010; Crossley, 2015; Donohoo et al., 2018; Katz, et al., 2018; Timperley et al., 2014, 2017). Our teachers thrive when engaging in collaborative Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIE), learning rounds and collaboration time with Leyton Schellert, learning about literacy with Adrienne Gear, deepening diversity with Shelley Moore and strengthening assessment practices with Katie White.

Even in the midst of the pandemic, feedback from the 82 per cent of teachers who participated in one or more learning

teams shows they continue to crave collaborative professional learning spaces. Teachers reported in June 2020, that working together with kids at the centre fuels them and reduces professional isolation. They urged district leaders to maintain our investment in their professional learning and collaborative inquiries, as it makes a difference for their kids and teaching.

Dr. Campbell also advises addressing the equity gap as many children have fallen farther behind as a result of the pandemic. Equity was at the core of our March 2020 district decision to purchase additional ChromeBooks and loan them out to over 50 per cent of our learners who had no devices at home. In the spring, we provided Internet access to 10 per cent of families who had bandwidth, financial and/or remote challenges. Meal programs continued for almost half of our families who depend on school breakfasts and lunches, with school principals, vice-principals, teachers and support staff delivering meals to needy families over hundreds of rural miles. Now, school is back full time in September. We remain committed to meeting learners where they are, building on their strengths and providing additional staffing and support.

The district signature pedagogy is place-conscious learning (Gruenewald, 2003; Simpson, 2014; Somerville, 2010). During the pandemic, teachers found new ways to

*Continued on page 14*





Find out more at [ReturnItSchool.ca](https://ReturnItSchool.ca)

## RETURN-IT SCHOOL PROGRAM 2020/2021!



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**\$5,000 Grand Prize Story Contest** - Share your school's interesting, creative and impactful recycling story with us and you could win big!



**Tools & Tips** - Get support for your school's recycling program, including fundraising tips for a successful bottle drive!



**Return-It Man Presentation** - Register now for free at [ReturnItSchool.ca](https://ReturnItSchool.ca) and receive access to our **NEW** School Presentation video. Our recycling Scientist and Return-It Man will teach kids the basics of recycling in a fun and entertaining video. Open to all registered Elementary schools in BC.



**Share Your Express Account** - Return-It Express makes it easy for people to contribute to your school's program. Share your Express account number within your community. Learn more at [Return-It.ca/Express](https://Return-It.ca/Express)

## STORY CONTEST WINNERS FOR 2019/2020!

### Elementary School Story Contest Winner \$5,000: Palsson Elementary

Students at Palsson Elementary set an ambitious goal to use their bottle drive money to fund a 5-month drum lesson program for 3rd grade students. By advertising the bottle drive across Lake Cowichan, the students collected beverage containers from residents of their entire community. They were also responsible for collecting the recycling from classroom recycling stations each day. The program didn't just encourage recycling awareness in Lake Cowichan – it promoted leadership and responsibility among the students. Their efforts resulted in their drumming program being fully funded by deposit refunds! This year, they collected over 9,000 beverage containers. Read the full story at [ReturnItSchool.ca/schoolnews/](https://ReturnItSchool.ca/schoolnews/)





## STORY CONTEST FOR 2020/2021!

We know that our Return-It Certified Schools are doing an amazing job with their beverage container recycling programs every year and we want to hear all the great stories from around BC. Schools are getting their students involved and engaging with the community, and we want to give you the opportunity to tell your story and have a chance to win a cash prize for your school. The winning story will win \$5,000 and second place will win \$2,500. You need to be a registered Certified Return-It 101 School to enter. You can submit your story in PDF format any time before May 31, 2021. See full contest details at [ReturnItSchool.ca](https://ReturnItSchool.ca).

We realize that this school year may look different than other years and that's okay. No matter how big or small your recycling efforts are, we just want to hear about them. Here are some basic criteria and guidelines to keep in mind when submitting your story:

### Objectives/Goals & Measurements of Success

- Include the total # of refundable beverage containers collected and the total deposit refund collected
- Include the Return-It Depot location used for your recycling project/program
- Tell us how you measured the success of your efforts?
- Include the objectives and goals of the project/program

### Creativity & Interesting Details

- Explain how your school collection program was structured (can include in-class and remote learning)
- Let us know how successful your school collection program was
- Explain what your school did with the money collected
- Include any additional creative and unique aspects of your school's program
- REMEMBER TO INCLUDE PHOTOS AND/OR VIDEO LINKS

### Impact

- Highlight the educational component of your program
- Explain how you got your students involved. Did they participate at home or at school or both?
- How did you promote your program in the community? Was there any community outreach and involvement?
- Include any further details on how your program had an impact with your students and community

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### High School Story Contest Winner \$5,000: Holy Cross Regional High School

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*Continued from page 11*

integrate diverse curricular competencies and foster student and adult well-being while taking learning outside. Culturally responsive teaching through land-based learning has increased. Cultivating place-conscious learning, reimagining schooling, and building more outdoor classrooms dovetails with Dr. Campbell's recommendation to invest in high quality learning environments, follow safety measures, and provide supports for student and adult mental health.

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Like all districts across British Columbia and around the globe, School District No. 10 works hard to ensure health and safety prevent risk of transmission of the virus. Yet, we also face the virus of anxiety and fear as we create school learning environments in new paradigms. Ensuring student and staff well-being and fostering collective resilience to meet the ever-changing challenges is critical.

Our Indigenous Elders and parents urge us to make certain that schools are welcoming to all learners: emotional as well as physical safety are required. As a result, we underpin leadership with well-being. Principals/vice-principals and district staff on our Educational Leadership team take learning walks during meetings, share wellness strategies, and engage in grounding and mindfulness practice. The team is attending Compassionate Systems Awareness leadership sessions with Peter Senge and Mette Boell. Creating a culture of well-being for school leaders supports them and builds capacity for leading their schools. Likewise, our teachers use social and emotional learning, mindfulness, mental health literacy and other Tier 1 supports for student well-being. Well-being for all is pivotal.

Finally, leveraging this global crisis to strengthen teaching and learning practices and transform our educational system is paramount, as Yong Zhao and colleagues note in *An Educational Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste* (Zhao et al., 2019). Viewing challenges as opportunities for transformation with students at the pedagogical core is critical. The pandemic allows us to further break down curricular silos, design more relevant and engaging learning environments, support teachers to co-plan and co-teach using their collaborative expertise, redress inequities that have amplified during COVID-19 and strengthen digital tools for learning. Ironically, the pandemic crisis presents space for system change through adaptive and responsive leadership.

In her paper's summary, Carol Campbell states, "The emerging evidence is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the future of schooling in the COVID-19 era and no one person, group, or organization has all of the answers" (Campbell, p. 16). Viewed through the lens of a small rural district, leading through crisis to opportunity is an ongoing journey. Keeping learning at the core, maintaining collaborative relationships and flexibly adjusting course are key ingredients in our learning. 🌈

*Terry Taylor is Superintendent of Schools for School District 10, an innovative rural district in southeastern British Columbia, which claims place-conscious learning as its signature pedagogy. She thanks her Indigenous Elders, community, and entire team of leaders, teachers, support staff, parent, union reps and Board for their amazing collaboration navigating learning amidst the pandemic.*

## References

For the full list of references that accompany this article, please email [ssavory@matrixgroupinc.net](mailto:ssavory@matrixgroupinc.net).



# Health and Wellness: Could COVID-19 be the Disruption we Need?

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

It is an interesting task to be writing about well-being during a pandemic to a group of leaders who have been working tirelessly for months to make things work in our system. This is not a *thank you for all your hard work but please take care of yourself* message because although that is true, it is not enough.

Even before the pandemic, the education system was starting to recognize the importance of workplace well-being. We know that in healthy workplaces, people stay in the profession longer, we come to work more, and we are more successful and engaged when we are there. This, of course, impacts the financial bottom line but also the success of the organization which, in this case, is student outcomes and success. All of these potential benefits have made us think about well-being already but the recent health pandemic has created a unique opportunity to address well-being in a more intentional and impactful way.

This article will explore three interconnected parts, as shown in Figure 1, that work together to either enhance or undermine workplace well-being. An understanding of these components can help us embed well-being into our practices so that it is not another “thing to do” but just part of the way we are.

## Self

This is the part of workplace well-being that we are the most familiar with. This is often promoted by human resources departments and has traditionally been mostly about self-care activities like fitness, nutrition, and sleep. These are, of course, very important parts of health and ultimately, we are all responsible for our own self-care.

What we do know is that most of us actually do have an understanding of what we should be doing for health, but that does not always translate into us actually doing these things. This is not to say that human resources programs are not beneficial, but they are just not sufficient. One recent and impactful development is that self-care is becoming more holistic and now includes social and emotional skills like self-awareness, self-compassion, and relationship development.

These, of course, are the messages and practices that we have been teaching students for years but many of us were never taught ourselves.

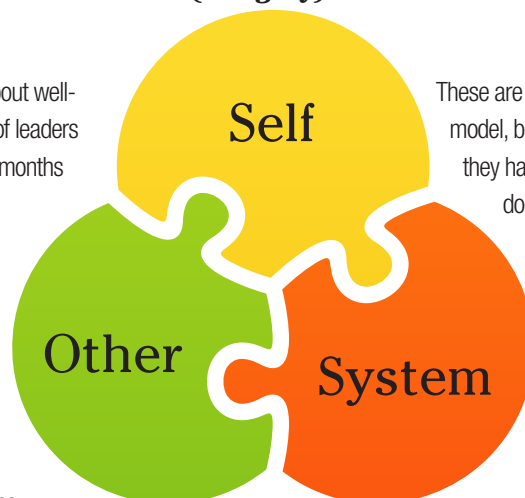


Figure 1.

These are particularly important practices for leaders to model, but there is often a feeling among leaders that they have to take care of everyone else first – this doesn't leave a lot of time to care for themselves.

It is important to remember the simple truth that we have learned from air travel, which is that it's not only important, but essential, to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.

These practices do not need to take up a lot of time to be powerful; just a couple of minutes of intention setting in

the morning or a practice of gratitude can lower our stress response, retrain the neural pathways in our brains, and make a significant difference. The Compassionate Systems Leadership work that members of your organization and other provincial leaders have been learning and practicing is a great example of the small practices that can have significant impact. You can learn more here: <https://bcscmhcoalition57942.wildapricot.org>.

## Other

As a leader, this is one of the simplest and most powerful tools you have to create and support well-being. You can learn about some of the fascinating research here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nfzf3oQSw&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nfzf3oQSw&t=1s). It is important to remember that we all

There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream & find out why they're falling in.  
Desmond Tutu



want to be seen, heard, and valued and that we are biologically wired to seek this connection. This is true at all levels of our system. In fact, one of the most frequently mentioned concerns reported by superintendents is the loneliness of the position.<sup>1</sup> Relationships matter and the power of a relationship knows no hierarchy.

Perhaps this pandemic can help us disrupt this narrative of the lone leader. The interesting thing is that leaders can and do care deeply

about the people who they serve and vice versa. This means that making the change is not a huge undertaking, it just needs to be okay to talk about. This will also help the other concern of superintendents, which is the difficulty of asking for help for fear of looking incapable.<sup>1</sup> Here is the good news though; we don't need you to be perfect, in fact, we really would rather if you weren't because perfect is not possible and trying to be puts a whole lot of pressure on all of us.

## Systems

It is often tempting to avoid this one as change in a system that is as complex and traditional as ours can seem overwhelming. However, rules, policies, and structures can have a huge impact on well-being. Anyone who has introduced or worked with a new computer system can attest to that. If the new system works it has an impact on our wellness and productivity, but if it doesn't, well you know how much the opposite is also true.

We have watched COVID-19 wreak havoc with our systems and structures, and we are having to re-think so many things, so let's take a look at what is and isn't working in our system. We have to be careful not to see this as blaming or criticism of our leaders or policy makers, or see it as some big outside entity that controls us either. It is not about being critical, it is about being critical thinkers.

In a pre-pandemic video about the role of district leadership in supporting well-being, David Strange, a colleague of yours from School District No. 62 (Sooke), summed it up well when he said that it is the role of district leadership to create the pathway to move this work forward. The pandemic has blasted the pathway open, so we are ready for the next part of David's advice: be clear about your commitment to this work and then encourage and support collective action to make it happen.

We can do this together; the path is open.

*Gail Markin is a teacher, counsellor, and educational consultant who is spreading the word about the importance of health and well-being in K-12 education. She works in the Langley School District supporting social emotional learning. You can find more about Gail's work here: [www.edcan.ca/experts/gail-markin](http://www.edcan.ca/experts/gail-markin). You can also connect with her on Twitter @markingail.*



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## Reference

1. Walter S. Polka and Peter R. Litchka. *The Dark Side of Educational Leadership*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education Publishers, Inc., 2008).





*"Living salad" planters were delivered to students in need of food security. Each planter included everything a family would need to grow their own salads.*

# Supporting Student Health and Wellness in Uncertain Times

By Al Lalonde and Kevin Kaardal, School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan)

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced Central Okanagan Public Schools to transition to remote learning in early April 2020, we were understandably concerned about continuing to support the health and wellbeing of our students, many of whom rely on their school communities for basic needs, including food and social interaction.

Our first step as a team was to have every teacher and counsellor reach out to individual families. Certified education assistants, with the support of resource teachers, reached out to students with diversabilities.<sup>1</sup> The first check-in was an empathy interview to understand coping, needs, and how we could help. These personal contacts informed food distribution, counselling supports, family supports, community supports, and the lending of nearly 3,000 electronic devices.

To support our most vulnerable learners' nutrition, we worked closely with community partners and food providers on plans to provide meals on a weekly basis. In total, we were able to get approximately 7,500 meals per week to 1,500 students, thanks to our contracted lunch providers and community partner Food for Thought.

To ensure the safe delivery of these meals, our providers organized once a week single-

point pick-up for a week's worth of lunches and breakfasts. School teams coordinated in their communities, providing both pick-up and, in some cases, home delivery options for families. We are grateful that several other community members and partners within the Central Okanagan made financial donations to our breakfast program provider, to support their phenomenal efforts. Fresh food from the BC School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program also supplemented breakfast packages.

At the district level, we focused on mental health and wellness for both families and staff to tackle the uncertainty of the pandemic. Our district created multiple resources for parents and teachers, addressing topics such as coping in uncertain times, conversing with a child who is struggling, referring children for additional supports, and helping children with the emotional demands of remote learning. We also created a Wellness for Families website that included connections to community resources.

At the school level, counsellors communicated regularly with vulnerable students and they made sure all parents were aware of available support services. This was especially valuable to students who never accessed supports before the pandemic. Counsellors creatively used all available communication methods, including video conference and

physically distanced visits, to help parents navigate school and community supports.

Ramona Sousa, a counsellor at our alternative education program (Central Programs & Services), explains why the innovation and adaptation of staff garnered positive feedback from families: "We delivered weekly groceries, lessons, and laptops right to their homes. In some ways, we are even more connected to many of our students and their families than before, as we had tours of their homes and met their pets over Zoom calls. Our staff supported our students, and they know we care."

At the community level, the school district received updates from many of our community services partners (e.g. The Foundry Kelowna, Child and Youth Mental Health, and ARC Programs) and shared this information with schools and parents through multiple channels. The pandemic also birthed a community group we currently call Virtual Rounds, to ensure healthy communication between all service providers to ensure that students in our community are getting the help they need. This weekly Zoom meeting comprises representatives from the School District Social Emotional Learning Team, Child and Youth Mental Health, ARC Programs, Interior Health, and the Foundry Kelowna. Each week, counsellors from our district could bring

anonymous student situations to the group when unsure of the best fit for community support. The increased communication, understanding, and relationships between these groups brought unanimous agreement to continue this dialogue to foster student mental health and well-being, even when schools are back in regular sessions.

Our school-based teams were also invaluable in making certain no student was left unattended. School-based teams and staff worked diligently to connect with students multiple times per week in some capacity. Students not initially connected with the school were carefully tracked, assessed, and triaged by risk, and a case manager was strategically appointed to offer individualized outreach and support.

As we moved into Stage 3 of British Columbia's K-12 Education Restart Plan in June of 2020, families continued to receive food from our District breakfast and lunch programs once a week. With just over 42 per cent of our students (9,500+) returning to in-class instruction, we knew we would need just-in-time food supplies.


In order to ensure the options provided for students meet the BC Healthy Food Guidelines, we collaborated with an Interior Health Dietitian who assisted in the recommendation of healthy options.

When we arrived at Stage 3, due to the leadership of District Consultants and Resource Teachers with the support of school-based teams, the District was already supporting over 1,220 students with diversabilities and 570 students with complex needs onsite. Each student required different supports and plans. It was a massive, but worthwhile effort. One highly anxious student, after reviewing the site safety protocols, shared with their teacher that they felt a tremendous amount of relief and looked forward to coming to school every day during the month of June.

### What we learned

The challenging four months between spring break and the end of June turned around the notion of education as a traditional institution that is slow to adapt. We saw a huge, multifaceted

system stop in its tracks, pivot, and re-invent itself to keep our students learning, growing, and well.

Despite the extraordinary efforts of staff to foster authentic connections remotely, we know now, more than ever, that learning is a social endeavour; and caring, personal connections in safe places are still critical to effective learning. Moving forward, we will take many of our innovations with us and make them a part of our common practice; however, we will value the power of our in-person learning communities, understanding that "Together We Learn." 

*Al Lalonde is Assistant Superintendent, and Kevin Kaardal is Superintendent of Schools/CEO, for Central Okanagan Public Schools.*

### Reference

1. Diversabilities refer to physical, cognitive, developmental, learning, and/or neurological differences, or diversity, in ability levels, and the recognition that students with diversabilities may need additional educational support.

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# Empowering Connections: Silver Linings During COVID-19

By Javier Gonzalez and Scott Rothermel,  
School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake)

**L**ike essential service workers, school personnel have been at the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finding ways to lead in this unprecedented time has created many “silver linings,” including discovering new modes of making connections and supporting our staff and the families whom we serve.

School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake) (SD8) covers a wide geographical area that serves six distinct communities within the West Kootenay region of British Columbia, including rural and remote locations. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic last spring provided the perfect opportunity for SD8 to put our communication strategies to the test. Amidst the barrage of international, national and provincial flow of information SD8 created an organizational system for disseminating accurate information to our staff, families and communities.

Students look to adults in their lives for guidance, safety and help in understanding the world around them. Knowing this, one of our priorities during COVID-19 has been supporting students, parents and staff simultaneously. As part of our strategy, SD8 created a dedicated COVID-19 tab on our District website that hosted resources for students, parents, teachers and support staff. For example, digital parenting resources included child-friendly COVID-19 teaching tools as well as strategies for talking to children about COVID-19. It also incorporated ways to manage stress and anxiety, diffuse family tension and co-parent. During the month of April alone, the SD8 COVID-19 tab received thousands of visits, thus

signifying the importance of developing this tool as a resource for families and staff.

We recognize the importance of creating healthy environments where students' and staff members' mental fitness and wellness are at the core. Our principals, teachers and support staff have continued to practice and model health and wellness strategies for all of our students. This combination of healthy, supportive, trauma-informed practice has provided the pathway for our learners to move from what Dr. Bruce Perry calls “*survival brain*” to “*learning brain*.”<sup>1</sup> By providing positive experiences for students and staff, we work to minimize the impacts that stress causes on brain development and daily function. Strategies, such as calming activities in the classroom and focusing on positive mental health, and self-care strategies, such as daily check-ins, grounding techniques, deep breathing exercises and continued physical activity, are just some of the tactics modelled by staff for students and their families.

COVID-19 has also given our staff the opportunity to practice being learners. Last spring, as teachers turned their face-to-face classrooms into hybrid learning environments, it gave each one of us an opportunity to learn new digital platforms and find innovative ways to provide direct support and instruction. Furthermore, teachers were each provided with their own webpage on their school website. This created a platform for posting virtual lessons and chats as well as online resources such as YouTube videos and webinars. And, of course, we have all become very familiar with Zoom and Google Classroom!

During the pandemic, SD8 also had the opportunity to directly support our Essential Service Worker (ESW) families by offering instruction and support for children within our schools. Supports included providing 12-hour, five days a week face-to-face instruction for children of Tier 1 and Tier 2 ESW's, as well as providing food on site for students and staff. SD8 was also able to offer on-site learning for ESW children from our local independent schools and our local First Nations School, Yaqan Nukiy. District staff and colleague principals supported ESW site principals, taking shifts on a rotating basis.

In addition, weekly virtual check-in meetings with SD8 staff, including District-wide meetings with school counsellors, case managers, LSTs and grade-level meetings also occurred. These meetings were effective in creating an environment of support and collaboration. This practice of sharing and collaboration continues today and has demonstrated the importance of regular personal connections.

Digital connectedness came about in different ways. For example, our SD8 Mental Health and Addictions Coordinator facilitated a Zoom professional development event that covered topics such as self-care, compassionate systems and workplace collaboration. Approximately 240 staff members attended. In addition, during the month of



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April SD8 hosted over 15 virtual professional development workshops for staff, averaging approximately 45 participants at each session. Most of the workshops were recorded and the District housed them on our website which helped staff access these digital resources at any time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as in pre-pandemic times, we are reminded that maintaining positive connections and social-emotional learning are at the core. COVID-19 has created opportunities for School District 8 (Kootenay Lake) to develop district-wide wellness initiatives that focus on building capacity in our students, staff and parents, demonstrating an ability to adapt to change and to turn challenges into learning opportunities.

*Javier Gonzalez Plasencia, M.A.C. Psych., B.S.W.C.W.S., has been working in the Human Services field for over 22 years. Javier is currently a Mental Health and Addictions Coordinator in School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake) and he is passionate about mental health and well-being.*

*Scott Rothermel, Master of Arts in Conflict Analysis and Management, from Royal Roads University, is a Manager of Safe schools for School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake). Scott's experience includes 12 years working with youth and in specific youth related programs.*

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1. Bruce D. Perry. M.D., Ph.D. 2007. *Stress, Trauma and Post-traumatic Stress Disorders in Children.* [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org).

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# Transformation through Co-Construction:

## Student Voice and an SEL-Informed Educational Experience

By Gino Bondi, Nathan Ngieng, and Perry Smith, Abbotsford School District

In April, as part of our strategic planning process, the Abbotsford School District Trustees asked one question of our Senior Management Team: How will we compassionately recover and reinvent education for the coming years, with a focus on adult and student mental health and well-being?

The question was nuanced in that it asked us to keep one eye on the present in building a school system that could flexibly respond to the pandemic conditions, regardless of how they were manifested, while at the same time casting the other eye forward with the aspiration of transforming the learning experience for all staff and students. In facilitating a district wide ThoughtExchange which prioritized considerations around staffing, structural, and instructional change and equity, our response was the development of a comprehensive system-wide plan entitled “Toti:Itcha,” a word meaning future learning in Halq’eméylem (the language of the Sto:lo people).

In reviewing the feedback, what became clear was that we had to manage our own and our students’ stressors, anxieties, and joy; we needed to grow in our understanding of how the pandemic was influencing learning (often in inequitable ways); and, in providing an educational plan, we had to be clear about the reason why we gather in schools and how we are changed for the better because we do.

Circumstance had given us the opportunity to engage in a very real change agenda and so we purposefully created horizontal alignment between the Curriculum Department, Learning Support Services (LSS) and Secondary Schools’ Operational Plans, and put forward an ambitious goal summarized in one sentence: **A co-constructed inquiry-based learning experience that is equitable and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) informed.**

To realize our goal, we needed to ensure that our structures – our ways of doing – supported our vision. As part of our co-design process, we started working with secondary school staff to systemically integrate SEL practices across classrooms in order to develop and apply the core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making into daily learning experiences. This year we have scheduled weekly 80-minute staff learning opportunities through which all our secondary schools will be engaged in collaborative peer to peer, interschool partnerships. The goal is to help staff deepen their understanding of and planning for SEL while concomitantly affording them the time to connect and heal together during these tumultuous times. We hope to see every teacher in every classroom provide wrap around care by weaving in opportunities throughout the day for students to practice and reflect upon social and emotional competencies.

When we speak of co-construction, we are emphasizing the role of students in having an active voice in the process of co-designing, along with staff, their learning experiences at school. Student voice and engagement efforts are part of a larger districtwide focus on equity in Abbotsford. In our secondary schools, this means providing students with the space to work with teachers on developing culturally inclusive practices, examining biases, and working to ensure their respective identities and cultures are reflected in their school experiences.

However, as we found out when we started this work last year, students initially questioned our sincerity and commitment to this plan. “Why should we work with you?” was the question posed by one of the youths at our first planning session. We took pause at the question and thought, “yeah, why should they trust us when the sharing of their stories and experiences is often met with adult assumptions and disregard?”



Secondary school principals and vice principals participating in an Indigenous Talking Circle.



Toti:Itcha: A Halq’eméylem word that means future learning.



Practicing strategic listening, connecting heart to mind through student voice.

This is not to say that the adults don't care, but as Shane Safir, author of *The Listening Leader* rightfully asserts, "All too often we do not listen to empower the least empowered members of our communities." Our task as leaders is to shift this narrative by helping our staff confront their own discomfort, be curious about the experiences our students are having, and focus on giving voice to our most marginalized youth.


The work around co-constructing an inquiry-based learning experience that is equitable and SEL informed began with our investigation of the principles of deeper learning: 1) Leadership through emergence; 2) Learning is symmetrical; 3) [In]equity is structural. We started by creating learning experiences for our principals and vice-principals that brought attention to their "whys" and shifted their thinking by going "below the green line" and focusing on the social and emotional needs of their staff and students. We intentionally moved to incorporating practices and experiences in our meetings that would model what we were hoping would become routine practices and experiences in classrooms for students.

This includes the use of Indigenous Circles at our meetings, student KIVA panels,<sup>1</sup> and an exploration of identity to better understand the impact of privilege and bias on our interactions with students. Another critical aspect of our work was expanding the boundaries of our discussions by inviting our community partners to support us in our endeavour. Our long-standing partnership with IMPACT Society, which supports many of our youth who struggle with substance use, was key in helping us garner the support of youth to participate in this journey and to facilitate several student-led discussions.

These experiences contributed to preparing our staff in becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable and unpredictable (sometimes raw) conversations that are necessary to shift our system and tackle existing inequities.

Over the last two years, in a focused effort to connect the importance of social and emotional learning with our competency-based curriculum, we have come to appreciate the

fact that, to borrow from Robert Gass, "The heart of transformative social change is the intimate connection between the outer work of strategizing, organizing, and campaigning, and the inner work of who we are as human beings."

So, as we head into another school year, in the midst of a pandemic, with a comprehensive start-up plan in place, Toti:Itcha rings true in that future learning, as informed by student voice and SEL practices, is upon us now. More than ever, we need to help our students understand and master the forces of disruption and innovation that are transforming their lives. 

*Gino Bondi is the Assistant Superintendent, Nathan Ngieng is the Director of Learning Support Services, and Perry Smith is the Director of Curriculum in the Abbotsford School District. Together, with the Senior Management Team, they are facilitating new ways of doing by listening deeply, one conversation at a time.*

## Reference

1. Derived from Indigenous traditions, the KIVA process opens up dialogue on an issue of importance in the community and brings new voices and perspectives into the public domain, capturing the collective wisdom of the group. — Shane Safir, Public Education Expert.

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