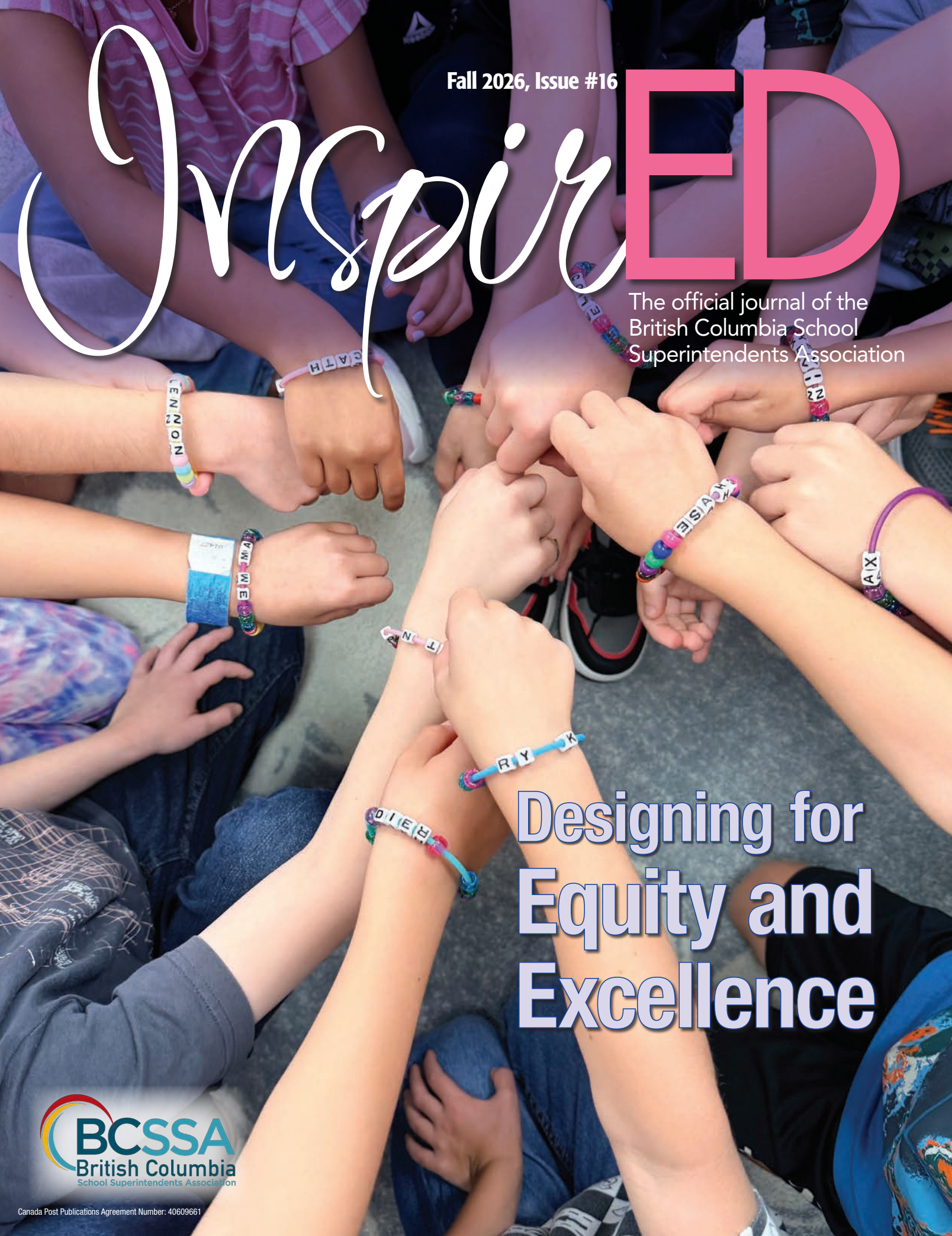


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Designing for Equity and Excellence

BCSSA British Columbia School Superintendents Association

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On the cover:

In Southeast Kootenay, the Indigenous Education Council is showing how trust, relationships, and honest conversation can reshape the way educational systems approach governance and reconciliation. Learn more starting on page 33. Photo courtesy of Carla Bohan.



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A Message from the BCSSA President



Mark Pearmain

Entering a new school year, we acknowledge we are living in a time of great change. There are new headlines every day, in a news cycle that feels exhausting. Throughout all of this, our leaders show up every day to cultivate and support their teams, inspiring and preparing the next generation of learners.

I encourage you to take a moment to acknowledge and appreciate your impact on all those in your school communities looking to you for leadership.

This is why the concept of impact was the focus of my remarks earlier this year at the BC Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA) conference. What you may see as a single action, as you strive to create an impact, is rarely a disconnected event. Through *relentless incrementalism*, these small actions we take can build toward something extraordinary.

I was fortunate to visit southern Africa in 2018, where I observed one of the best physical demonstrations of *relentless incrementalism*. Victoria Falls straddles the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. Before the falls come into view, you can feel them. The air shifts, mist settles on your skin, and a distant roar grows louder. When you finally take in its true size and scale – spanning a width of 1,708 metres, with a drop of 355 feet – you cannot help but feel small and insignificant. It is an overwhelming wonder inside a continent that is, itself, overwhelming in its grandeur, beauty, and scale.

The story of Victoria Falls begins with tiny droplets of rain that gradually build into the mighty Zambezi River and, ultimately, one of the world's most spectacular waterfalls. With the realization that these majestic falls are the cumulative product of raindrops that fell a thousand miles away many months before, you can appreciate how one small act can expand into something far greater.

Victoria Falls demonstrates that huge, seemingly permanent structures are the product of tiny, repeated actions applied over time. Similarly, the change you make today in your school or community may feel minor. It could be steering a student toward an unexplored career or passion, recognizing their potential, finding them an after-school program, or truly "seeing" a student and offering a kind word or encouragement. A single step may not seem decisive or transformative, but the accumulation of many such steps may produce a significant result.

As we consider what these actions look like in an education system, I am reminded of a theme explored at the BCPSEA conference by Dr. Yong Zhao, author of *Fix the Past or Invent the Future: Moving Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Education*. Rather than looking backward to set direction, Dr. Zhao emphasized the importance of looking ahead. He suggests shifting toward a more personalized, student-centred approach that prioritizes connection over competition and empowers students to identify problems, not just solve them. He challenges educators to begin this work at the school level rather than waiting for system-wide change. It is a timely reminder that the small actions we take today, and the impact they create, are shaping the future of education in real time.

As you embark on this work, shaping the future for our school communities, the story of Victoria Falls is a reminder of persistence. Each incremental step builds on the last, and over time that accumulation can become something permanent.

That is the core of *relentless incrementalism* as a general pattern, whether we look at Victoria Falls or the institutions and people that form the foundation of our education system in British Columbia. The mechanism may seem repetitive, and the effects might be invisible, but the compounding effect of many small actions can result in transformative change.

As you embark on this work, shaping the future for our school communities, the story of Victoria Falls is a reminder of persistence. Each incremental step builds on the last, and over time that accumulation can become something permanent.

One large event did not create the majestic Victoria Falls. It is the result of one relentless drop after another. One large event does not have to make the change you want to see in our systems – it is the act of showing up every day to deliver excellent learning and care that can create a powerful change.

Mark Pearmain
President
British Columbia School Superintendents Association

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A Message from the BCSSA CEO



Gino Bondi

There is a particular responsibility that comes with leading a public education system. The decisions we make today reach far beyond the immediate circumstances in which they are made. They shape the conditions in which students learn, educators work, communities participate, and future generations experience public education.

That is why the theme of this edition of *InspirEd*, Designing for Equity and Excellence, feels both timely and deeply connected to the work of educational leadership.

Design is an intentional act. It asks us to look beyond individual initiatives and consider the systems, structures, relationships, and conditions that make meaningful and lasting improvement possible. It asks us to consider not only what we are doing, but how the pieces fit together and, ultimately, who benefits from the way we have designed the system.

The articles in this edition offer compelling perspectives on that work.

Nancy Gordon and Dianne Turner remind us that improvement becomes more powerful when districts move from a collection of initiatives toward greater alignment and shared responsibility. Brooke Douglas and Christel Brautigam similarly explore how leaders can work through existing structures, using inquiry and intentionality to build coherence rather than continually adding something new.

Together, these perspectives challenge us to think differently about system change. In a landscape of competing priorities and finite capacity, excellence is not necessarily found in doing more – it may be found in creating greater coherence around the things that matter most.

Other contributions remind us that systems are ultimately human.

Tom Aerts and Shelly Wilton demonstrate how sustained teacher collaboration and dialogue can contribute to culturally safe classrooms and system-wide impact. Heather Androsoff invites us to reconsider inquiry, wonder, belonging, and relationship as foundations for learning and leadership. Viveka Johnson, Stan Chung and Bonnie Harvey's exploration of decolonial leadership in Southeast Kootenay brings another essential dimension to this conversation: systems change is inseparable from relationships, reciprocity, shared decision-making, and relational accountability.

Annelies Tjebbes offers an important reminder that strategic planning is not simply about producing a document; it is about engaging people in meaningful conversations about the future of their communities and creating a shared understanding of what matters most.

Across these six articles, a common thread emerges: Equity and excellence are not achieved through isolated actions; they are designed through coherence, relationship, inquiry, collaboration, and intentional leadership.

This is also an important part of the direction we are taking as an Association.

The BCSSA's role is evolving alongside the complexity of the work our members lead. Our responsibility is not simply to provide professional learning or create opportunities for connection – it is to help build the conditions in which educational leaders can learn from one another, challenge their thinking, share what they are discovering, and act collectively on the issues that matter most for learners.

This matters because none of us can design an education system alone.

The challenges facing public education are too complex, and the aspirations we hold for learners are too important, to be addressed in isolation. The work calls for leadership that is relational, curious, courageous, and grounded in a commitment to equity and excellence for every learner.

As you read this edition of *InspirEd*, I invite you to consider not only the practices described within these pages, but the questions they raise for your own leadership.

What are we designing? Whose voices are shaping that design? What conditions are we creating? And how will we know that the system we are building is creating better possibilities for every learner?

Those questions sit at the heart of our work and at the heart of what it means to lead systems for equity and excellence.

Gino Bondi
CEO
British Columbia School Superintendents Association



Artwork from students at Hellings Elementary School illustrates how students believe they should feel. Photo courtesy of Delta School Board.



The Port Guichon Library. Photo courtesy of Delta School Board.

From Initiatives to Impact:

Creating District Alignment for Powerful Improvement

By Nancy Gordon and Dianne Turner, Retired BCSSA Members

Across British Columbia, district leaders are working harder than ever – juggling multiple initiatives, responding to evolving priorities, and striving to improve outcomes for all learners. Yet despite these efforts, many systems face a persistent challenge: too many good ideas, moving in too many different directions.

The issue is not a lack of innovation; it is a lack of alignment.

Sustainable improvement does not emerge from isolated initiatives or short-term priorities. It develops when classrooms, schools, and districts move in a coherent direction. Without this coherence, even well-intentioned efforts compete for attention, fragmenting energy and limiting impact.

Research reinforces the need for coherence. Fullan (2016) identifies coherence as a central driver of system improvement, while Timperley (2011) and Halbert and Kaser (2013) emphasize the critical role of inquiry and evidence in improving outcomes for learners. Leithwood (2013) and Kools and Stoll (2016) similarly point to the structures and conditions required for effective, learning-oriented systems. Alignment is not accidental – it must be intentionally designed.

Three practices consistently emerge in many successful districts. First, districts co-create a shared vision, resulting in a shared purpose. Second, they establish common frameworks that guide improvement through shared practice. Third, they align goals through collaborative inquiry, with a focus on shared improvement.

ALIGNMENT IS CREATED IN THREE LAYERS

1. Begin with a co-created, shared vision (Figure 1).

A compelling district vision is foundational, creating shared purpose, but *how* that vision is developed matters as much as the vision itself.

Vision statements are often created by a small group, then shared outwardly to those who had no input. While this approach is efficient, it rarely builds the deep understanding or commitment required for meaningful change. In contrast, a co-created vision engages educators, support staff, students, families, and community partners in shaping the future direction of the district. An example comes from a mid-sized British Columbia district, where leaders launched their strategic planning process through a series of community forums, including



Photo courtesy of Delta School Board.

dedicated sessions with Indigenous Elders, students, and families. To ensure authentic engagement, the sessions were facilitated by an independent facilitator, while a graphic recorder visually captured emerging ideas. Participants were asked three questions:

1. Mission: Why does our district exist?
2. Vision: In 10 years, what will the headlines say about the district?
3. Values: What core values should guide our work?

The resulting one-page visual was widely shared across classrooms, schools, and the central office. (Figure 2). Themes of equity, belonging, Indigenous ways of knowing, student voice, real-world learning, and well-being became embedded in school and classroom goals. More importantly, staff reported a stronger sense of connection to the work because they had helped shape it.

This process does more than generate ideas – it builds collective ownership. A co-created vision also ensures that diverse perspectives and lived experiences meaningfully inform district priorities, which are an essential consideration within British Columbia's context.

The next challenge is ensuring everyone understands what effective improvement looks like.

Figure 1. A co-created vision engages educators, support staff, students, families, and community partners in shaping the future direction of the district.



Figure 2. This one-page visual captures a strategic planning process from a B.C. district.

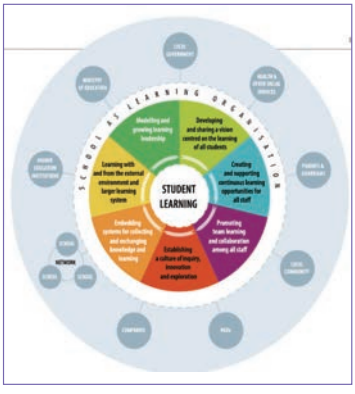
2. Leverage research at all levels through common frameworks

Shared purpose alone is not enough – alignment depends on a shared understanding of effective practice. Districts that achieve coherence tend to ground their work in research and evidence-informed approaches. Hattie (2012) emphasizes the importance of using evidence of impact to guide decisions, while Timperley (2011) underscores that professional learning must be directly connected to student outcomes.

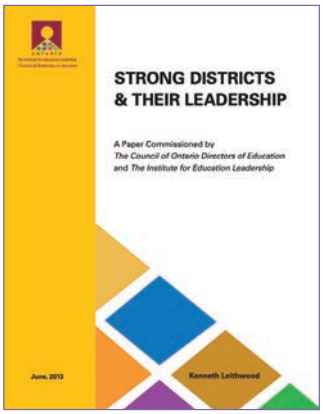
This does not require rigidly prescribing practice. Instead, effective systems establish common frameworks that provide direction while allowing flexibility for schools and classrooms to respond to their unique contexts.

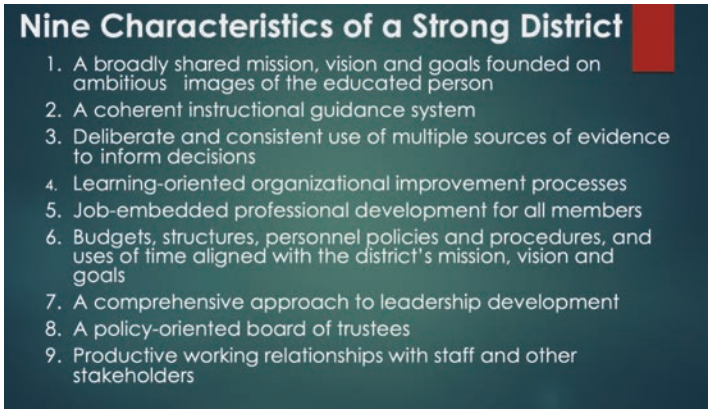
An example comes from a Lower Mainland district that adopted the Spiral of Inquiry (Halbert & Kaser, 2013) as a common framework. The power of the





*Figures 3 and 4. *Kools, M., & Stoll, L. (2016). What makes a school a learning organisation? OECD Education Working Papers, No. 137. OECD Publishing.*





Figures 5 and 6. Leithwood's Strong Districts framework and nine critical characteristics of strong school districts.



Nancy Gordon (left), and Dianne Turner (right).

Spiral lies in its clarity: focus on what matters most, engage in new learning, take action, and check impact. While all schools used the same framework, each determined its own focus. One secondary school concentrated on student self-assessment in writing, while an elementary school emphasized descriptive feedback in early literacy. Over time, cross-school collaboration revealed shared successes and challenges, strengthening both consistency and innovation across the district.

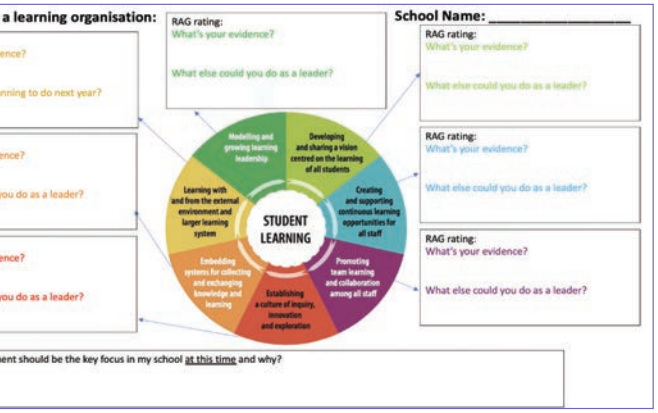
At the school level, frameworks such as Kools and Stoll's (2016) learning organization model help build cultures of continuous improvement, emphasizing shared vision, collaboration, inquiry, and ongoing learning. (Figures 3 and 4).

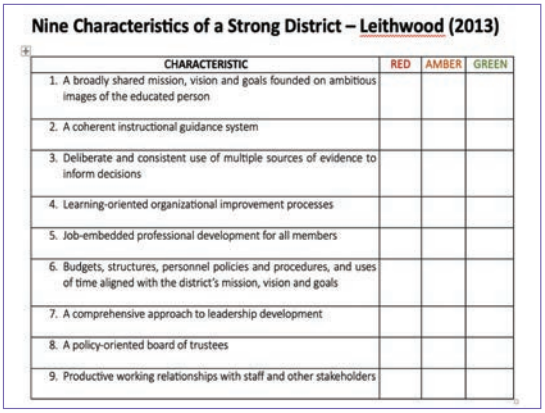
Stoll identifies seven characteristics of learning organizations, including:

1. Developing and sharing a vision centred on the learning of all students.
2. Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff.
3. Promoting team learning and collaboration.
4. Establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation, and exploration.
5. Establishing embedded systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and
6. learning.
7. Learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system.
8. Modeling and growing learning leadership.

At the district level, Leithwood's Strong Districts framework highlights the importance of coherent instructional guidance, evidence-informed decision-making, aligned structures,







Nine Characteristics of a Strong District – Leithwood (2013)

CHARACTERISTIC	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1. A broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person			
2. A coherent instructional guidance system			
3. Deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions			
4. Learning-oriented organizational improvement processes			
5. Job-embedded professional development for all members			
6. Budgets, structures, personnel policies and procedures, and uses of time aligned with the district's mission, vision and goals			
7. A comprehensive approach to leadership development			
8. A policy-oriented board of trustees			
9. Productive working relationships with staff and other stakeholders			

Figures 7 and 8. The results from this assessment tool can be collated to determine the common needs and goals from across schools that the district should support.

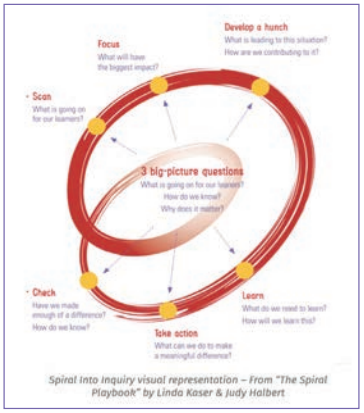


Figure 9. The Spiral Playbook, by Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert.

and leadership development. Leithwood outlines nine critical characteristics of strong school districts. (Figures 5 and 6).

Most importantly, these well researched frameworks provide a foundation for self-assessment, helping schools and districts identify strengths and determine next steps. (Figures 7 and 8).

It is important to build system-wide capacity to engage with research in meaningful ways. The "new learning" phase of the collaborative inquiry process is critical – without it, systems tend to reproduce existing results. Research that actively informs changes in practice will lead to improved learning outcomes.

This balance – common frameworks with contextual flexibility – is essential for meaningful impact to occur. Without a shared approach, efforts become fragmented. Without flexibility, they lose relevance to learners and communities.

Common frameworks create consistency, but coherence is only realized when goals throughout the system are intentionally aligned.

3. Align goals through an inquiry-based approach

Although a vision and frameworks provide direction, alignment in the system happens through focused, connected goals and collaborative inquiry.

Effective districts create clear relationships between classroom, school, and district priorities through an inquiry-based approach.

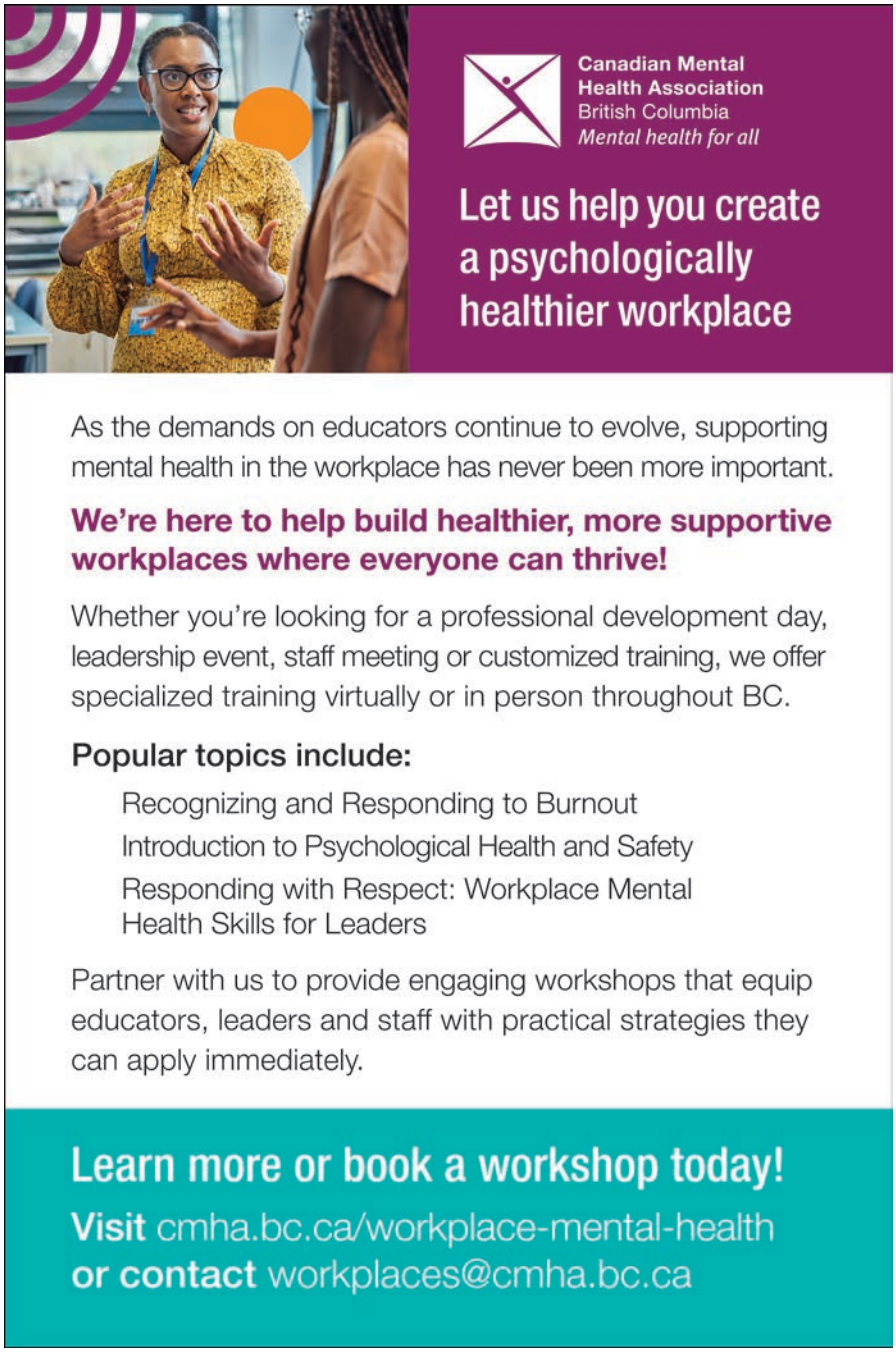


The Spiral of Inquiry supports this process by guiding educators to scan for evidence, focus on key needs, develop informed hunches, engage in new learning, take action, and assess impact.

Collecting and sorting school goals helps a district identify common areas of need and shape district goals that are grounded in the work of schools. At the same time, the district draws on large-scale data to ensure that broader system priorities and trends are not missed. This creates a meaningful connection between school and district goals, resulting in fewer goals, greater alignment, and a stronger collective focus for improvement. (Figure 9).

An example of this can be found in a district where several elementary schools identified a common concern: some students of Indigenous heritage were experiencing challenges with reading, particularly in decoding and comprehension. Through collaborative inquiry, teachers gathered evidence about student learning, explored new instructional approaches grounded in the First Peoples Principles of Learning, and worked together to test and refine effective strategies. The district aligned its supports by providing targeted professional learning opportunities and reading resources that reflected Indigenous perspectives and content. This coordinated effort created greater coherence across schools and led to significant improvements in reading outcomes for Indigenous learners.

Alignment reduces fragmentation, focuses professional learning, and strengthens the impact of resource allocation. It also requires disciplined decision-making. As Breakspear notes, systems must "prune" initiatives, and as Timperley suggests, leaders must be willing to "put down the ducky." Not everything can be a priority. Coherent systems make deliberate choices about what to stop doing to focus on what matters most.



SUSTAINING THE WORK: STAYING THE COURSE

One of the greatest challenges in system improvement is sustaining focus over time. Fullan (2016) cautions against initiative overload, while Hattie (2012) reminds us that impact becomes visible only when sufficient time and attention are given to implementation.

An example comes from a district that was engaged in multi-year literacy improvement while facing pressure to shift to new priorities. Instead, leaders chose to stay the course, using annual evidence to refine, rather than replace their approach. Over time, they saw measurable gains in reading and writing – results that may not have emerged had they shifted direction prematurely.

Staying the course means maintaining clarity of purpose while continuously learning and refining practice within that focus.

CONCLUSION: FROM ALIGNMENT TO IMPACT

Creating district alignment for powerful improvement is complex, long-term work. It

requires intentional leadership, collaborative structures, and a deep commitment to evidence-informed practice.

When systems are aligned, the work becomes more focused, coherent, and impactful. Educators understand how their efforts contribute to a larger purpose. Leaders make decisions that reinforce, rather than compete with one another. Most importantly, students experience more consistent, responsive, and effective learning environments.

The districts making the greatest progress are not doing more – they are doing less, better, and together.

Over a decade of sustained focus in one British Columbia district, Indigenous completion rates increased from approximately 60 to 90 per cent. While many factors contributed to this success, coherence, sustained inquiry, and disciplined implementation created the conditions for lasting improvement.

We welcome opportunities to connect with district leaders who are interested in strengthening coherence, improving alignment, deepening inquiry, and building the conditions for sustained, system-wide improvement.

Nancy Gordon and Dianne Turner are former senior education leaders with more than 80 years of combined experience in public education. Throughout their careers, they have served in a range of leadership roles at the school, district, provincial, and ministry levels. Together, they bring deep experience in educational leadership, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, organizational improvement, and system-wide change. Through Collective Edge, Nancy and Dianne work with organizations to create a shared vision, strengthen alignment, and move from competing priorities toward a clear sense of collective purpose and action.

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A principal welcomes students to school.



Brooke Douglas.



Christel Brautigam.

Leveraging Existing Structures and Resources:

Creating and Sustaining System Coherence Through an Inquiry Approach

By Christel Brautigam, Assistant Superintendent, and Brooke Douglas, Director of Instruction, Richmond School District

The room is quiet as we lean over chart paper, mapping out our current work in literacy. One pauses, saying, "we're all doing good things," another responds, "but I'm not sure they're connected," as another states, "maybe we are not implementing consistently." Around the table, heads nod. Another reflects, "and I don't know if what we're doing is making enough of a difference for the students we're most concerned about."

This moment captures a common tension across many school systems. Educators are deeply committed and engaged in meaningful work, yet often find themselves navigating multiple priorities, initiatives, and expectations that can feel fragmented.

The Richmond School District approaches this work through inquiry, alignment of strategic priorities, and the intentional use of existing structures. Rather than adding new initiatives, we seek to strengthen connections between what already exists and what matters most for learners. The Spirals of Inquiry framework (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, 2022) has become a shared language that supports this work across schools and the district. As our system has evolved, we have increasingly come to view coherence as an ongoing improvement process that connects planning, implementation, monitoring, reflection, and adjustment. This understanding aligns closely with the district's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan, which describes a coherent continuous improvement system designed to translate priorities into focused action and evidence-informed decision making.

System context and the need for coherence

Richmond is a dynamic and diverse district. Its schools serve learners with varied identities, experiences, strengths, and needs. This diversity is a significant asset, but it also reinforces

the importance of ensuring that the structures consistently support responsive, inclusive, and equitable learning environments.

We have learned that strong plans and good intentions do not automatically translate into improved classroom practice. Strategic priorities can become disconnected from daily learning experiences unless they are intentionally aligned across the system. Coherence involves aligning district priorities, school improvement efforts, departmental supports, and classroom practice in ways that are clear, purposeful, and meaningful for learners.

When we think about coherence through this lens, the focus shifts from managing initiatives to strengthening a system. We begin by asking if our efforts are connected, mutually reinforcing, and contributing to improved outcomes for learners. Who in the system is receiving the supports they need and who is not? This is the visible coherence we are working toward: a shared direction in which people can see how their individual and collective efforts connect to the district's priorities and to improved outcomes for learners (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Inquiry as the driver of system learning

The Spirals of Inquiry framework plays a central role in how we approach system improvement. The spiral encourages us to scan, focus, develop hunches, engage in new learning, take action, and check for impact. What makes this framework powerful is its starting point: learners.

The inquiry begins by asking what is happening for learners and what they need. Increasingly, however, we are also asking where inequities exist, and which learners require us to change our practices. Recent professional learning for leaders in Richmond with The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC^2), challenged us to move beyond surface-level data analysis toward identifying patterns, disproportionalities, and inequities that require action. School leaders are encouraged to determine where inequity lives within their schools, identify practices that contribute to those inequities, and select strategies most likely to improve outcomes.

This has strengthened our understanding of evidence. Rather than relying solely on achievement data, we also examine attendance, belonging, well-being, engagement, student voice, family perspectives, and professional practice. Assistant superintendents and directors of instruction lead and support schools to use a manageable combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence to understand what is changing, for whom, and what should happen next.

Similarly, our recent learning with TC^2 challenged us to ask these critical questions:

- What data sources are we using?
- Whose voices are represented?
- Which voices are absent?
- How can evidence help move learning, instruction, and leadership forward?

These questions keep inquiry focused on learners.



Students learning in the library. Photos courtesy of Richmond School District.

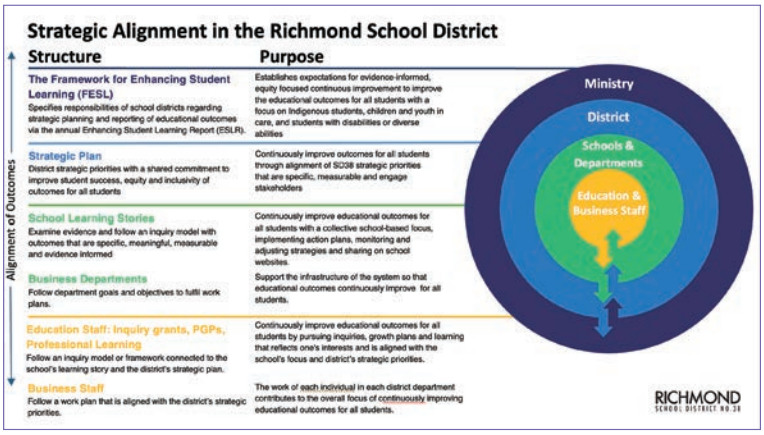


Figure 1. The Strategic Plan identifies district priorities; School Learning Stories translate those priorities into a school-based inquiry focus; and professional growth plans, collaborative learning, and inquiry grants connect group and individual learning to that focus.

Values as anchors in times of change

Richmond's Strategic Plan identifies collaboration, creativity, curiosity, resilience, respect, and equity as the values that guide our work. These provide stability amidst change and shape how we interpret evidence, allocate resources, and make decisions.

Equity remains central. Our commitment extends beyond academic achievement and includes belonging, dignity, identity, reconciliation, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and equitable access. This commitment influences which questions we ask, which voices we prioritize, and how we define success.

We challenge each other as leaders to examine how our own experiences, assumptions, and identities influence how we interpret evidence and select actions. System improvement requires both inner work and outer work: reflecting on beliefs and assumptions while simultaneously addressing policies, practices, and structures that contribute to inequitable outcomes.

Building a healthy learning ecosystem

Schools as learning ecosystems has been a recurring theme throughout our district conversations. TC^2 describes education systems as complex adaptive ecosystems that require more than linear solutions. Healthy ecosystems depend on relationships, shared commitments, collaborative structures, and the thoughtful use of evidence.



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Students learning in an outdoor class setting.

Viewing schools through this lens shifts our questions:

- How healthy is our learning ecosystem?
- What conditions support growth?
- What structures foster trust, curiosity, and collaboration?
- How might our leadership strengthen the overall health of the system?

This aligns naturally with the Spirals of Inquiry. Continuous improvement becomes less about fixing isolated problems and more about strengthening the conditions that enable learning to flourish.

Aligning structures to support learning

Over time, Richmond has intentionally brought coherence to structures. This alignment can be understood as a set of connected layers (see diagram): provincial expectations establish the broad mandate; the Strategic Plan identifies district priorities; School Learning Stories translate those priorities into a school-based inquiry focus; and professional growth plans, collaborative learning, and inquiry grants connect group and individual learning to that focus. Each structure has a distinct purpose, but together they create through-lines from system direction to professional learning and classroom practice. (Figure 1)

School Learning Stories act as demonstrations of the continuous improvement cycle. A school's learning focus, actions, evidence, and reflection processes are interconnected components of ongoing inquiry. This alignment helps ensure that schools are not simply completing planning documents, but are actively engaging in cycles of learning, implementation, evidence gathering, and adjustment.

Effective frameworks provide clarity and direction while remaining flexible enough to adapt to changing contexts. Good structures reduce cognitive overload, support consistency, and allow educators to focus energy on what matters most: improving learner outcomes.

Working within tensions

Financial pressures, evolving student needs, changing enrolment patterns, shifts in educator engagement and experience, and educational priorities require us to make difficult choices. We also navigate the tension between providing greater system direction in areas such as literacy and preserving the professional agency that sustains inquiry and innovation. Rather than viewing these tensions as barriers, we increasingly see them as opportunities for reflection and refinement.

A practical framework from TC^2 that is proving useful is affirm, adjust, adopt, and abandon. It encourages us to identify practices that should continue, those that require refinement, promising ideas that should be adopted, and practices that no longer serve learners.

Learning with TC^2 strengthens this approach by challenging us to move carefully from data to interpretation and then to action. We are learning to ask not only whether a strategy was implemented, but whether it changed outcomes, for whom, and under what conditions.

Through the Ministry's Framework for Enhancing Student Learning, the Strategic Plan's Reflect and Adjust approach reinforces this thinking, emphasizing that evidence use is an ongoing process of gathering information, identifying patterns, interpreting findings, and adapting actions.

Conclusion

The experience in Richmond suggests that meaningful system improvement does not necessarily require new initiatives. More often, it requires clearer alignment, deeper inquiry, and a stronger connection between structures, values, and learner needs.

By grounding our work in inquiry, using evidence thoughtfully, elevating learner voice, and strengthening connections across the system, we are building a coherent continuous improvement process that supports both responsiveness and consistency.

Ultimately, we continue to return to three simple questions:

1. What is happening for our learners?
2. What do they need?

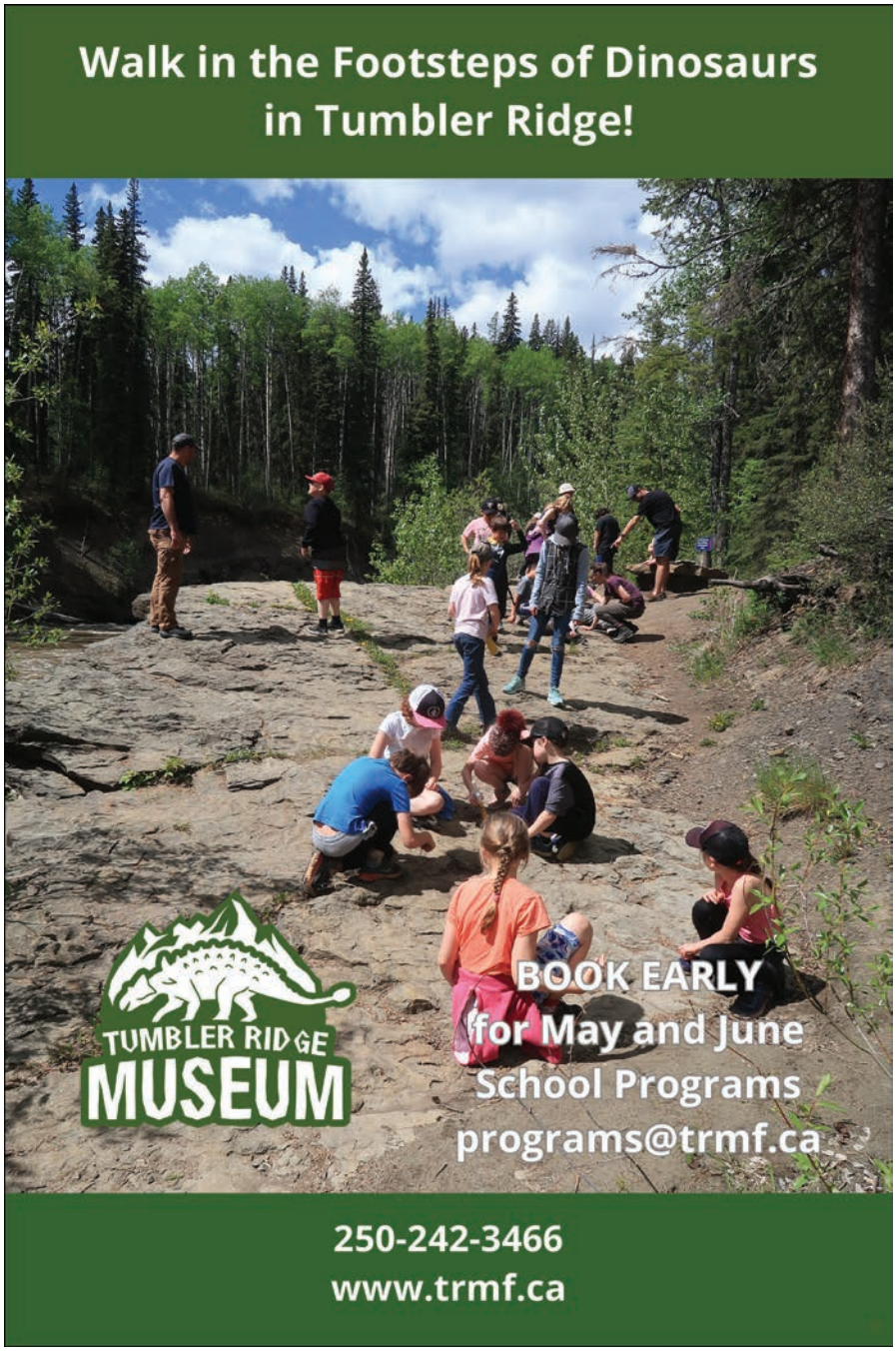


3. How can we align our collective efforts to ensure their success?

These questions keep our work focused on what matters most: creating the conditions in which every learner can experience success, belonging, and the opportunity to thrive.

Christel Brautigam is an educational leader dedicated to equity, inclusion, and student success. As an Assistant Superintendent for the Richmond School District, Christel has led initiatives in diversity, Indigenous education, and inclusive learning. Christel is a Director on the BCSSA Board and is pursuing her doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Western Ontario University.

Brooke Douglas is Director of Instruction with the Richmond School District in British Columbia, where she leads system-wide initiatives focused on literacy, equity, strategic planning, and organizational improvement. Her work centres on translating research into practice through collaborative leadership, data-informed decision-making, and sustainable system change. She is particularly interested in the conditions that enable innovation, collective efficacy, and meaningful improvement across complex educational organizations. This article draws on her experience leading district-wide change efforts and supporting transformational learning cultures.



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Students organized the"Para los Bebés / For the Babies" bottle drive to support the Paediatric Centre at Chilliwack Hospital. What started as a classroom competition grew into a community-wide campaign, with students promoting recycling through posters, flyers and outreach. Their creativity, leadership and commitment earned them both 1st Place and the Best Video Award.

2nd Place: Noel Booth Elementary School (Langley Township)

Noel Booth Elementary turned a simple bottle collection initiative into a school-wide recycling program. Students and staff collected 9,820 containers and raised $939 to help transform the school's courtyards into inviting outdoor learning spaces, while teaching students the value of teamwork and environmental responsibility.

3rd Place: Westsyde Secondary School (Kamloops)

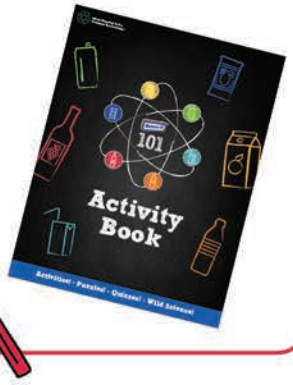
Leadership students at Westsyde Secondary recycled approximately 22,035 beverage containers throughout the school year, raising $1,662.86. The funds helped support student participation in the BC Secondary School Leadership Conference, while encouraging lasting recycling habits across the school community.

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From Classroom to Boardroom, and Back Again:

Reflections on Strategic Planning with School Districts



By Annelies Tjebbes, Founder and CEO, Roots & Rivers Consulting



Annelies Tjebbes.

Creating a strategic plan that acts as a living, breathing guide for a school district is a complex undertaking. Through partnerships with districts across British Columbia, Roots & Rivers Consulting has had the privilege of stewarding these processes from engagement to implementation, working alongside thousands of people who care deeply about education. Along the way, we've seen how much is riding on these plans for the people they affect.

What has been learned along the way is that the plans that work best move strategic input and intentions from the classroom to the boardroom, and back again in a continuous feedback loop. This involves meaningful engagement with interest holders to bring the collective wisdom of the district into the boardroom, using community input to inform a focused plan and ultimately bringing the plan back into the classroom as tangible, observable change.

Classroom to boardroom: Engagement and sensemaking

Most districts already recognize they need to bring insights from the classroom into the boardroom. Engaging a range of interest holders, including students, caregivers, educators, and school and community leaders, has become foundational to strategic planning in districts across British Columbia.

Some districts begin with developing preliminary themes with their board or senior leadership, bringing them to the community for feedback. Others begin with broader community engagement. Either approach can work; what matters is that the community's input has the power to influence strategic direction.

Selecting methods for an engagement process, whether using surveys, focus groups, or town halls, might seem simple. The harder and more important work is designing a process people will engage with. That requires creating conditions



Moving a strategic plan from idea to implementation in the classroom is a project of its own. Stock photo.



Annelies Tjebbes (right) and a strategic planning session facilitator (left) connect during a group discussion. Photo courtesy of Amanda Hillis.

where people feel comfortable sharing, the expectations on their time and energy are right-sized, and they trust that their feedback will be heard and integrated. Showing up in the spaces people already gather, offering more than one way to participate, and being clear about what the engagement is intended to accomplish are deliberate actions a district can take towards building trust.

A meaningful engagement process can generate plenty of input. District leadership then must work through a process of making sense of what was shared. Key questions to ask include:

- What themes keep coming up?
- What are people excited or concerned about?
- Where do different groups disagree, and what does that tell us?
- Was this a representative sample, or is further targeted engagement required?
- What surprised us, or ran counter to initial assumptions?

It's important to note that if a strategic planning process is the only opportunity people feel they have to be heard by the district, more than feedback on the plan itself should be expected. Personal stories and specific requests for action will often show up alongside big-picture themes. That is a signal that a district needs more consistent opportunities for people to engage, not just every three to five years during strategic planning.

Following a sensemaking process is a good moment to put together a "What We Heard" report, sharing it with the community for validation or refinement.

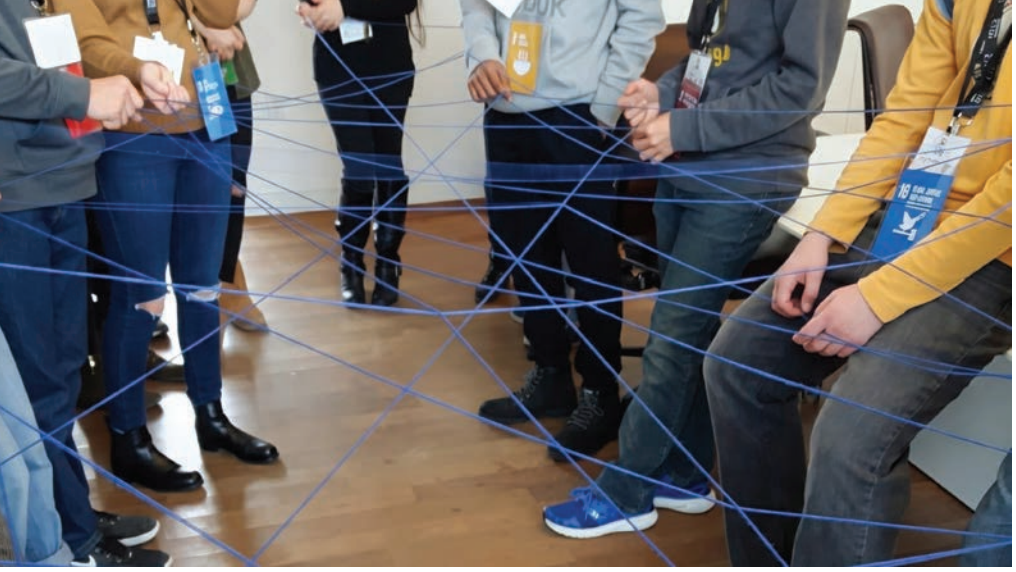
From there, the board – sometimes alongside senior leadership – must work collaboratively to shape a plan that bridges what was learned along with Ministry priorities and the board and leadership's own insights into district needs. We recommend drafting the strategic plan through facilitated discussion with the board and finalizing it with a smaller subcommittee. Concise plans that describe success in clear, accessible language are more inspiring and effective. Staying high-level rather than overly prescriptive gives a plan enough flexibility to respond to the district's capacity, rather than becoming one of the first casualties of a busy school year.

Boardroom to classroom: Collective ownership and impact

No matter how strong the engagement or how thoughtful the final document is, a strategic plan that stops at a board approval process will tend to sit on a shelf. It can become a plan the district produced, rather than one that gets brought to life.

Getting a plan off the shelf and into the classroom is a project of its own, distinct from drafting the plan itself. Implementation is where strategic decisions become resourced actions: staff time is allocated, priorities are named in workplans, and progress is measured. The role of the board and of leadership here consists of high-level buy-in and direction, ensuring the plan is well communicated and resourced. From there, district staff and school teams carry the strategy into operational plans, school plans, and daily practice.

District and school teams are best placed to see whether a strategic priority builds on an existing initiative or requires new effort, whether it fits inside current workloads and timelines or needs new resources, and whether it needs different approaches in different communities. Implementation also doesn't need to happen all at once. Right sizing the plan means sequencing priorities, for example, deciding what gets tackled in year one versus year two or three and what is feasible within the district's capacity.



High school students weave a yarn web to show connections between strategic ideas. Photo courtesy of Hayley Rutherford.

And back again: The implementation feedback loop

Closing the implementation feedback loops requires a commitment to regular review that will bring classroom insights to the boardroom, and a boardroom or leadership team willing to adjust priorities and provide the guidance and support to translate them back to the classroom. When the feedback loop is functioning effectively, a strategic plan stops being merely a document produced at a point in time. It becomes an ongoing commitment between a district and the people it serves.

Delivered well, this isn't the end of the loop. It's what makes the next strategic planning engagement more effective, as interest holders can see how their input was actioned and what progress was made.

Questions for your district's next strategic plan

A strategic plan is never truly finished. It is ongoing, collaborative work that connects the classroom to the boardroom, and back again. The districts that gain the most out of their plans are the ones that treat the implementation feedback loop as seriously as the development of the plan.

It is important that superintendents and trustees reflect on these questions as they look at their district's current strategic plan:

- How did community input inform what leadership prioritized?
- Once the plan was approved, how was it resourced to reach the classroom?
- Once it reached the classroom, what did we learn, and where did that learning go?

If the answers to these questions feel more like descriptions of separate moments than a connected loop, that is useful information. It points to where the focus should be, whether that's building more consistent ways for community members to be heard, being more deliberate about how a plan gets resourced once approved, or building the structures that enable classroom experience to reach the boardroom table.

The work of closing that implementation loop belongs to all the people who live it: trustees, superintendents, school and district staff, and the communities they serve. The hope in sharing these reflections is that it gives a clearer way to ask where a district's feedback loop is strong, and where it may need support.

Annelies Tjebbes is the Founder and CEO of Roots & Rivers Consulting. With over 15 years in the social purpose sector, she brings a systems change lens to strategic planning, helping leaders and communities build plans that move from vision into action and stay accountable to the people they serve. Roots & Rivers Consulting is a consultancy specializing in strategic planning, evaluation, and facilitation for social purpose and public service organizations, with deep experience partnering with B.C. school districts. Their team specializes in engagement, facilitation, and sensemaking processes that turn community input into focused, actionable plans, and help those plans take root in daily practice.







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Learning Alongside:
Leading for Equity and Excellence

By Heather Androsoff, District Vice Principal – Early Learning and Child Care, Sea to Sky School District

What can early learning pedagogies teach us about learning across grades? *Learning Alongside* emerged from this question. The work is a reimagining of Changing Results for Young Children, an inquiry-based approach that invites educators to focus closely on one "wonder child" – observing, listening, documenting, and engaging in conversation with the child and family to develop a deeper understanding of who the child is and how best to support their social-emotional learning.

Learning, growth, and excellence are rooted in well-being. What becomes possible when we carry the relational practices of early learning – observation, documentation, story, and deep listening – beyond the primary years into a kindergarten to grade 7 context?

As a Métis woman and educational leader, I am continually learning to navigate between worlds and ways of knowing. I have come to see this in-between space as one from which I can build bridges and ask questions, creating conditions for different perspectives to meet. Rather than bringing Indigenous knowledge to educators, my role is to learn alongside them, in relationship with children, families, and local Indigenous communities.

In collaboration with a kindergarten to grade 7 principal in Whistler, British Columbia, we are reimagining the wonder-child process as a whole-school professional inquiry. We begin staff meetings in circle and draw on local relationships and teachings to create space for educators to listen, wonder, reflect, and learn differently. The principal, who also has a wonder child, positions herself as a learner and a listener. At the heart of the work is one question: What is this child teaching us about the kind of school we need to become?

The four perspectives that follow – Self; Family; Community; and Land, Culture, Broader Perspectives – are inspired by Monique Gray Smith's (2012) four blankets of resilience. They invite us to consider what is possible when we see children as teachers and are open to understanding how their experiences can support us in decolonizing learning, relationships, and leadership.

Self

What if we understood every child as a living story? Re-Storying Education invites educators to examine and disrupt the colonial narratives that have shaped education (Roberts, 2024). Rather than seeing a child as a collection of data points, behaviours, needs, strengths, or learning outcomes, we might begin to encounter them as a story that is continually unfolding through relationships, experiences, places, memories, questions, identities, gifts, and possibilities.

This idea resonates deeply with early learning pedagogies that use observation, documentation, and learning stories to make children's thinking and learning visible. Documentation is not simply a record of what happened; it's an invitation to look again – to notice what we may have missed, to listen for the child's meaning, and to consider what the story might be telling us. It allows the child to author their own story as it is unfolding. Re-storying is not simply replacing a negative story with a positive one; it's becoming more careful, relational, and responsible listeners.



Heather Androsoff.

Family

What if our goal is not to prepare children to stand on their own, but to help them understand that they are part of a web of relationships? Interdependence, rather than independence, and co-regulation, rather than self-regulation, are the goals. When we understand children as relational beings, we universally design our environments, routines, and learning experiences accordingly, where asking for help, offering help, relying on others, and being relied upon are understood as strengths rather than deficits.

The Early Learning Framework describes families as children's first teachers, primary caregivers, and knowledge keepers, and calls on educators and families to work alongside one another to create rich learning environments (Government of British Columbia, 2019). Learning alongside a wonder child therefore means learning alongside their family as well.



Wonder Lives in Story. Photo courtesy of Heather Androsoff.

Four Blankets of Resilience. Photo courtesy of Sea to Sky School District.

As we listen and observe, we begin to see not only the child, but the network of relationships – the blankets – that surround them. It also means asking families what we might otherwise miss. When we can see ourselves and one another in our fullness – as people with strengths, responsibilities, contributions, and gifts – we create conditions in which every person is understood as sacred and worthy of belonging.

For educational leaders, fostering interdependence means designing cultures where relationships are foundational rather than incidental: making space for circle, collective responsibility, reciprocal learning, collaboration across ages, cooperation rather than competition, meaningful family participation, diverse perspectives, and multiple ways for children and adults to contribute. This grounding in relationship, connection, and shared humanity supports us in keeping children at the centre.

Community

Learning Alongside also asks us to consider our own positionality. Teaching Where You Are reminds us that teaching is always situated – in our identities, experiences, relationships, histories, and connections to place (Leddy & Miller, 2023). These same principles can shape how we understand leadership. Leading from where we are means recognizing that leadership is not a neutral position from which we observe a system and determine what others need to do.

In Learning Alongside, this means that I can't position myself as the person bringing the learning to educators. I must participate in the inquiry with them – listening, wondering, reflecting, and being willing to have my own thinking changed. Leading from where we are is not about having all the answers; it's about locating ourselves within the learning and accepting the challenge to continue learning alongside others.

This stance also brings awareness to whose voices are being heard, valued, and included.

Who are the children we notice first, and who are those left unseen? Safir (2017) argues that listening is central to equitable school transformation, positioning student, family, and community perspectives as essential sources of knowledge for educational leaders.

In *Street Data*, Safir and Dugan (2021) take this further by inviting educators to choose the margins – to centre the experiences of students who have been least well served by existing systems and use their experiences as guides for reimagining schools.

Equity By Design ensures that every child gets what they need to thrive (Chardin & Novak, 2021) and involves intentionally choosing a wonder child who is experiencing disconnection, exclusion, difficulty, or invisibility. It calls us to use our positional power to open doors, remove barriers, and ensure a child's voice is heard without speaking over them or becoming the author of their story.

Land, culture, broader perspectives

Gaining a better understanding of one learner provides insight into how we might design differently for everyone. Learning Alongside therefore moves from noticing to

designing forward, asking us to consider the broader contexts that shape who they are, how they learn, and where they experience belonging. This has powerful implications for educational strategies and structures, such as classroom and school organization.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) 3.0 places learner agency at the centre, inviting educators to create environments where learners find purpose, make meaningful choices, build understanding, and exercise agency (CAST, 2024). In British Columbia, we work in partnership with local First Nations and Elders, knowledge keepers, Indigenous support workers, and community members. Local teachings, such as the Lil'wat Principles of Learning and the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw seasonal calendar, offer ways of understanding learning that are deeply connected to place, language, culture, and community.

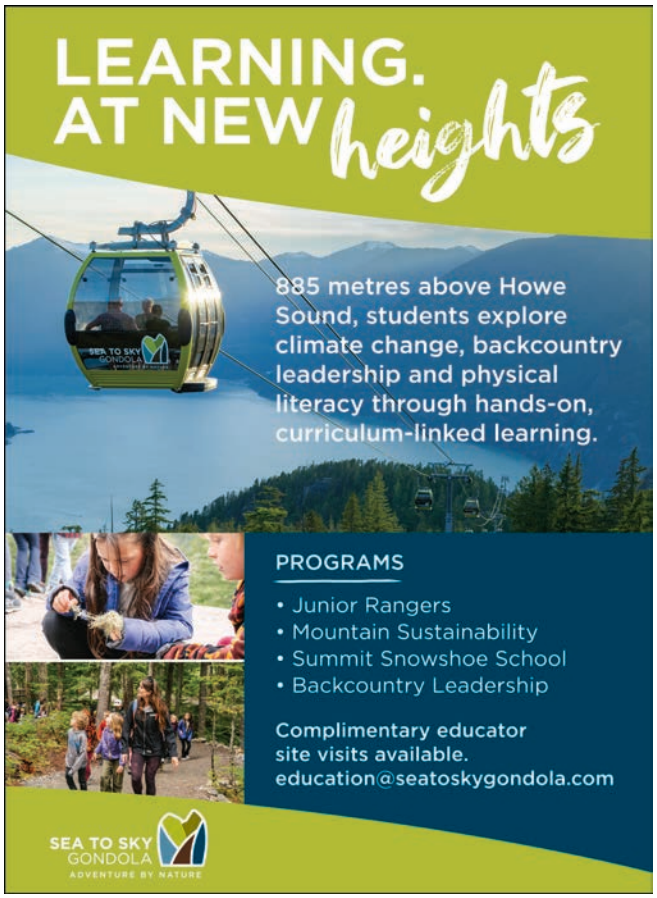
This is not about adding Indigenous knowledge to an existing design; it's about learning through relationship and allowing local knowledge to shape what respectful, relevant, and relational learning can look like. For educational leaders, this means recognizing that the land, culture, community, and histories surrounding a school are not peripheral to learning, rather, they ground the learning.

Improving outcomes for learners is made possible through inquiry networks, spaces where professional learning can catalyze changes in practice and system transformation (Kaser and Halbert, 2014). Learning Alongside is more than an inquiry about one child – it's a leadership practice for continually redesigning schools around what we learn from children, families, educators, Indigenous perspectives, and the places and communities in which we learn.

New learning generates new questions and new possibilities (Halbert & Kaser, 2022). The role of the educational leader is not to have all the answers, but to create the conditions in which adults can engage in deep learning together to see differently, ask better questions, and design schools that honour children, family, community, land, culture, and broader perspectives.

This article was written in loving memory of Maureen Dockendorf.

Heather Androsoff is a proud Métis citizen, educator, leader, and scholar. Her work brings together Indigenous perspectives, early learning pedagogies, and transformative leadership, with a particular interest in how Métis values guide teaching, learning, and leading.



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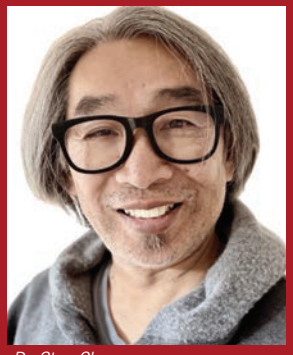
The System Is the Relationship:

What the Indigenous Education Council Taught Us About Governance in Southeast Kootenay

By Bonnie Harvey, Chair, Indigenous Education Council; Stan Chung, PhD, Advisor, Indigenous Education Council; and Viveka Johnson, Superintendent of Schools, Southeast Kootenay School District



Viveka Johnson.



Dr. Stan Chung.



Bonnie Harvey.



The leadership team of (left to right) Faye, Viveka, Stan, Joe, Bonnie, and Eryn, poses at a recent Indigenous Education Council (IEC) meeting." Photo courtesy of Tabatha Capilo.

Every Indigenous Education Council meeting begins with an agenda. Whether we follow it is largely Bonnie Harvey's decision.

As Chair, Harvey has an uncanny ability to sense when a conversation needs structure and when it needs room to breathe. Sometimes she guides us methodically through reports and recommendations. Other times she decides the most important conversation isn't on the printed agenda at all.

One morning she looks at Viveka Johnson's latest pair of heels, glances at Stan Chung's loafers, and smiles. "You two spend too much time in meetings."

Viveka laughs, "This is literally a meeting."

"I know," Bonnie replies. "That's why we're stopping for elk bannock tacos afterward."

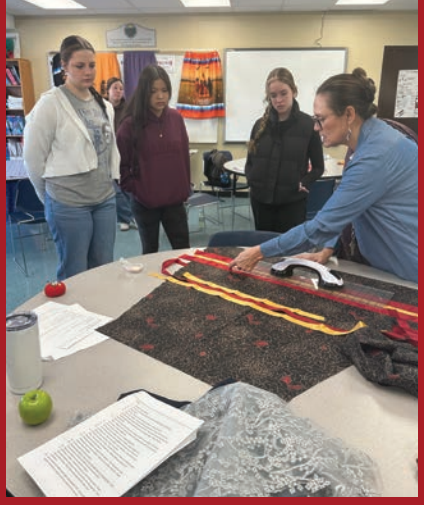
It sounds like a joke, but it is also how Harvey leads. She understands that trust is built before we make difficult decisions. Some of our most important governance conversations have happened while walking across the grounds at ʔaq'am or finishing lunch after everyone thought the meeting had ended. Those conversations rarely appear in the minutes, yet they shape many of the decisions that eventually do.

The three of us occupy very different places within School District No. 5. Bonnie chairs the Indigenous Education Council, bringing decades of leadership within the Ktunaxa Nation and the community of ʔaq'am. Johnson carries responsibility for almost 6,000 students and the daily realities of leading a public school district. Chung serves as an advisor to the Council, usually arriving with another framework or another question that Bonnie has a remarkable ability to simplify.

Around us sit district leaders, Indigenous staff, representatives from ʔaq'am, yaq̓it ʔa·knuq̓i'it, the Métis community, educators, parents, and students. We've also made sure youth voices and services are represented at our table. Formally, we are a governance table, and it has not been easy. Over time, we have



The Southeast Kootenay School District has had a long-standing Elder's in-residence program. Pictured left to right are Dorothy Ratch, Joan O'Neil, and Mel Ratch. Photo courtesy of the Southeast Kootenay INED Department.



Ribbon skirt making with Indigenous Education Coordinator Faye O'Neil. Photo courtesy of the Southeast Kootenay INED Department.



The Kootenay Educational Services (KES) sign. Photo courtesy of the Southeast Kootenay INED Department.

become something more than a table; we have become a place where relationships are strong enough to ask questions that would have been difficult only a few years earlier.

Kootenay Educational Services (KES) context:

Before we go further, let us tell you a bit about our composition.

Students:

- 140 students enrolled.
- 67 students self-identify as Indigenous (48 per cent of enrolment).
- 28 grade 12 students.
- 11 Indigenous graduates in 2026.

Current direction:

- Dedicated Indigenous education support worker.
- Elders in residence and gathering space.
- Expanded partnerships with Foundry, BladeRunners, families, and community organizations.
- Increased student voice.
- Additional teaching, counselling, and learning support.
- Hybrid cross-enrolment opportunities with Mount Baker Secondary School.

One morning the conversation turns to Kootenay Educational Services. The data are straightforward: 140 students attend KES, of which 67 identify as Indigenous. That makes up almost half the school.

The numbers remain on the screen while everyone studies them. Harvey eventually breaks the silence, saying, "I know another statistic."

She smiles gently, "I went there and never graduated."

The spreadsheet hasn't changed, but our understanding has. Those 67 students are no longer simply part of an enrolment report. They are connected to a lived experience sitting across the table.

Over the following months, we examine exclusion data, suspension patterns, graduation pathways, targeted Indigenous education funding, staffing models, and partnerships with communities. The conversations are honest because they are built on trust. No one questions the commitment of teachers, principals, Indigenous Education Support Workers, coordinators, or district staff. The question is not whether people care. The question is whether the system is producing the future we hope to see.

One pattern continues to return.

Kootenay Educational Services has become exceptionally good at helping young people recover after school has stopped working for them. It has become a place of belonging for students carrying many different experiences of marginalization. That work deserves recognition.

At the same time, another question gradually emerges. If almost half the students attending one school identify as Indigenous, what does that tell us about the pathways that brought them there?

We realize we have been discussing two different schools. One is the school inside the building. The other is the educational journey that keeps bringing Indigenous students to its doors.

Around the same time, the district began discussing a thoughtful vision for strengthening Kootenay Educational Services. The proposal included:

- A dedicated Indigenous education support worker.
- A gathering space.
- Elders in residence.
- Stronger partnerships with organizations such as Foundry and BladeRunners.
- Expanded cultural programming.
- Additional counselling and learning support.
- Increased teaching time.
- New opportunities for cross-enrolment, while preserving the culture that makes KES successful.

Everyone agreed these were important steps. They reflected careful listening and a genuine commitment to students.

Then another question quietly entered the conversation, "Who leads KES?" Johnson answered directly, "The principal at Mount Baker also carries responsibility for KES."

No one criticized it. School systems often ask talented leaders to carry multiple responsibilities, and there are understandable reasons this structure evolved.



A ʔaq̓am honouring ceremony. Photo courtesy of Sae Hoon (Stan) Chung.



Students gathered to drum and learn from the Su?kni Singers. Students learned songs and protocols while strengthening their connections to culture while experiencing the power of the drum as the heartbeat of Mother Earth. Photo courtesy of the Southeast Kootenay INED Department.

Harvey looked around the table, asking, "We have 67 Indigenous students attending this school. What kind of leadership do they deserve?"

The conversation shifted. Until then, we had been discussing programs, staffing, and services. We now found ourselves discussing leadership itself. What would it mean for KES to have leadership dedicated entirely to its students, families, staff, and community?

Could leadership itself become part of reconciliation? Could accountability become more deeply shared with the Indigenous Education Council and the communities it represents?

Johnson considered the question before responding, "That's a very interesting idea."

Those words stayed with everyone because they revealed something important about leadership. Sometimes leadership is not providing the answer. Sometimes it is creating enough trust that a new question can remain on the table without anyone feeling the need to defend the past.

Eventually the meeting ended. Bonnie reminded us that the elk bannock tacos were waiting. We gathered our papers and walked outside.

The organizational chart had not changed. Neither had the budget. No motion had been passed. Yet something important had happened. We were no longer asking how to improve one school.

We were asking what kind of school district we hoped to become.

Perhaps that is what the Indigenous Education Council has taught the three of us: systems do not create relationships; relationships determine what a system is capable of seeing.

When those relationships are grounded in honesty, humility, and a willingness to stay in conversation, governance itself begins to change. And when governance changes, new possibilities emerge, not because someone had the right answer, but because together we finally learned to ask a better question.

A champion for the Ktunaxa language, Bonnie Harvey is committed to ensuring our language and culture live on. Serving as ʔaq̓am Governance Manager and Indigenous Education Council Chair, she continues to support community, education, and cultural programming. An advocate within the school system, Bonnie shares her knowledge, allowing others to learn more about the Ktunaxa people through her love for the Ktunaxa language.

Sae Hoon (Stan) Chung, PhD., is a writer, educator, and governance leader based in Cranbrook, British Columbia. His work has focused on Indigenous education, arts, and culture, and the relationships between public institutions and Indigenous communities. He currently serves as an advisor to the Southeast Kootenay Indigenous Education Council and has held senior leadership roles in education, the arts, and public governance. His writing explores how we learn from one another, how institutions change, and what decolonization asks of us in everyday practice.

Viveka Johnson is Superintendent of Schools for Southeast Kootenay School District and she currently oversees the Indigenous Education portfolio. A relational leader with more than 28 years in public education, she has served as a teacher, counsellor, and administrator. Born and raised on Ktunaxa Territory, Viveka returned to the region with her family in 2010. Her leadership is grounded in relationships, curiosity, and the belief that meaningful system change begins with listening and learning together.



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Indigenous Education, Cultural Safety, and the Collective Strength of Relationships in the Greater Victoria School District

By Dr. Shelly Wilton, Director of Indigenous Education, and Tom Aerts, Deputy Superintendent of Schools, Greater Victoria School District

Excellence in education in public education is often measured through outcomes such as literacy, numeracy, attendance, graduation, and transitions after high school.

Those measures matter, but in Indigenous education, a deeper question must also sit alongside them: What conditions does a system create so that Indigenous learners can experience success without having to leave their culture, identity, family, or community connections at the schoolhouse door?

The commitment in the Greater Victoria School District is focused on connecting student achievement with belonging, identity, Indigenous perspectives, culturally responsive practice, and relationships. The Enhancing Student Learning Report reflects this by identifying Indigenous learners as a priority and establishing strategic commitments to:

- Culturally responsive learning environments,
- Strengthened relationships with local nations, Indigenous partners, and the Indigenous Education Council,
- Land-based learning,
- Targeted literacy supports, and
- Culturally responsive career opportunities.

The direction being taken is critically important because it moves Indigenous education from the margins toward the centre of the way the system understands and improves itself.

Leading for equity and excellence requires more than adding Indigenous content to existing structures; it requires leaders to examine the structures themselves.



Dr. Shelly Wilton.



Tom Aerts.

Cultural safety is not an initiative – it is a system condition

Inclusion and cultural safety ask different questions. Inclusion focuses on providing individual students with supports, adaptations, and accommodations, while removing barriers so students can be successful in an existing learning environment that may remain fundamentally unchanged. Cultural safety asks whether the environment itself needs to change, is responsive, respectful, and free from racism, bias, marginalization, and stereotyping, and most importantly, whether the people receiving the service experience it as safe.

A culturally safe school system does not rely on Indigenous students and families to repeatedly explain why a practice is harmful or why a relationship matters. It develops the organizational capacity to listen, learn, and respond. It considers cultural safety in curriculum, policy, facilities, professional learning, communications, student support, and leadership decision-making.



During a Teachers Collaboration Day, staff worked with the Indigenous Education Department to support the Focused Indigenous Graduation Required Course 2026. Photos courtesy of School District 61 communication specialist.

The district has strengthened a commitment to Indigenous perspectives, priorities, and rights by embedding Indigenous education within the broader structures of planning, decision-making, and accountability.

This work extends well beyond educational programming. It includes consultation and collaboration related to facilities, land use, local protocols, district planning, student and family supports, and other decisions that affect Indigenous learners and communities. The approach is grounded in culturally responsive practice and informed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, and, most importantly, relationships with the Indigenous communities being served.



Dr. Shelley Wilton (left) moderated the book launch for Re-Storying Education: Decolonizing Your Practice Using a Critical Lens, written by Carolyn Roberts.



Tillicum Elementary School Students help to open up the Indigenous Plant Garden.

This is not simply program delivery – it is organizational infrastructure.

Indigenous education cannot live on the periphery of a school system. It must be woven into how we lead, how we make decisions, how we build relationships, and how we hold ourselves accountable. Cultural safety is not an initiative or a moment in time – it is a responsibility reflected in the everyday actions of the organization.

Relationships as infrastructure

Systems leadership understands physical infrastructure. Equity requires us to understand relational infrastructure with equal seriousness. Relationships with local nations, the Indigenous Education Council, families, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous organizations, students, and staff determine whether a school system can listen well, respond authentically, and remain accountable when circumstances become difficult.

When those relationships influence decisions, relationality becomes more than a value statement. It becomes a way of governing, planning, and evaluating whether the system is doing what it says it will do.

Equity means removing barriers – and redesigning systems

Equity is not simply about responding when a barrier becomes visible. It is about examining the structures, policies, practices, and decisions that created the barrier in the first place – and then having the courage to change them.

This requires leaders to look beyond individual programs or isolated interventions and consider how the entire system either supports or limits student success. Inclusive education, access to rich learning opportunities, culturally responsive practice, student voice, and collaborative decision-making are not separate priorities. Together, they reflect a broader commitment to dignity, belonging, participation, and excellence for every learner.

Equity requires more than good intentions or individualized support. It requires systems to examine how their decisions, structures, and practices create barriers, and to change those conditions so that students are not simply supported to navigate inequity but are no longer constrained by it.

For Indigenous education, this systems approach is particularly important. Removing barriers can include targeted supports, but the work must extend much further upstream. It means examining whether assessment practices are culturally responsive, Indigenous students can see meaningful pathways into post-secondary education and careers, families understand how to access supports, and whether local nations and Indigenous partners are engaged early enough to genuinely influence decisions.

It also means asking if school plans, budgets, facilities decisions, staffing practices, policies, and district priorities are aligned with commitments to Indigenous learners and communities. When equity is embedded at this level, it becomes part of how the organization operates rather than something addressed only when a concern emerges.

Strong systems do not wait for students and families to repeatedly point out where barriers exist. They seek to identify barriers before they become burdens to those they serve, understand the conditions that create them, and take responsibility for changing the structures within their control.

Perhaps one of the most important shifts in equity-oriented leadership is asking if our schools and systems are ready for every student, rather than whether students are ready for school.

That shift, from expecting students to adapt to systems, to expecting systems to continually examine and improve themselves, is at the heart of equity, excellence, and responsive educational leadership.

The leadership task: Weave the system together

The next stage of Indigenous education will not be defined only by the number of successful initiatives a district can name. It will be defined by whether those initiatives change the way the organization thinks, decides, and acts.

Leaders can begin by asking different questions:

- Who helped design this decision?
- Whose voice changed it?
- What did we learn from the various stakeholders?
- Did the decision strengthen or weaken cultural safety?
- Are relationships being treated as enduring responsibilities?
- What evidence tells us that students experience greater belonging and academic success?
- What will we change because of what we have learned?

The district already has many of these pieces in motion:

- Formal relationships with Indigenous partners,
- Local education agreements,
- Indigenous education as a bridge for consultation,

- Land-based programs,
- Cultural learning opportunities,
- Student and family supports,
- Targeted literacy and career initiatives, and
- District-wide Indigenous professional learning.

The leadership challenge now is to weave those pieces together so that Indigenous education is not a parallel stream beside the system, but a source of knowledge that strengthens the system itself.

Excellence is not only how far students travel through the education system. It is also what kind of education system surrounds them on the journey. For Indigenous learners, a truly excellent system is one in which achievement and identity do not compete – where culture is recognized as a strength, relationships are honoured as foundational, and every learner can experience education with dignity, cultural safety, belonging, and possibility.

Dr. Shelly Wilton is an Indigenous educational leader, scholar, researcher, and systems-change practitioner whose work focuses on cultural safety, equity, Indigenous education, and organizational transformation. As Director of Indigenous Education, she has worked to strengthen relationships among schools, Indigenous communities, students, families, and educational leaders while advancing structures that embed Indigenous perspectives and priorities throughout educational systems. Her leadership emphasizes the importance of moving reconciliation beyond intention and into governance, policy, practice, and accountability. Dr. Wilton's work explores how culturally safe environments, authentic relationships, Indigenous voices, and responsive leadership can create the conditions in which students and communities experience genuine belonging. She is particularly interested in ethical space, relational leadership, and the redesign of educational systems to remove barriers and improve outcomes. Her approach centres students and families while challenging organizations to consider not only what they do, but how relationships, decisions, and institutional structures shape the experiences of those they serve.

Tom Aerts is the Deputy Superintendent of Schools with the Greater Victoria School District and an experienced educational leader committed to equity, inclusion, student success, and continuous system improvement. His leadership focuses on creating the organizational conditions that enable educational communities to thrive. Throughout his work, Tom has emphasized the importance of translating values into meaningful action through thoughtful policy, collaborative decision-making, and the ongoing examination of barriers. He brings a systems perspective to leadership, recognizing that meaningful and sustainable change requires alignment between classrooms, schools, district structures, resources, and community relationships. Tom's approach is grounded in collaboration, shared responsibility, and a belief that educational systems must continuously evolve in response to the students and communities they serve.



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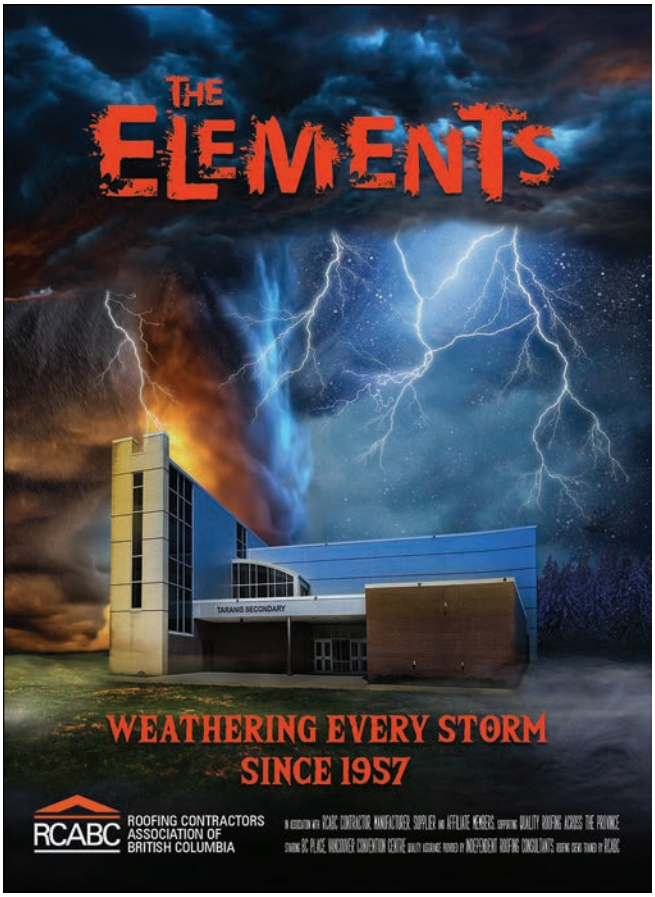
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- **November 05, 2026**
  Meeting – Annual General Meeting
- **January 08, 2027**
  Meeting – Board of Directors meeting (virtual)
- **February 19, 2027**
  Meeting – Board of Directors meeting (virtual)
- **April 14, 2027**
  Meeting – Board of Directors meeting (in-person)
- **May 28, 2027**
  Meeting – Board of Directors meeting (virtual)
- **June 25, 2027**
  Meeting – Board of Directors meeting (virtual)

Featured Events

- **November 4, 2026**
  BCSSA Fall Conference: Leading Systems for Equity and Excellence
- **November 20, 2026**
  Belonging and Inclusion through an Indigenous Lens with Dr. Jennifer Mervyn - Virtual Learning Session #3
- **December 11, 2026**
  From Data to Action: Improving Attendance and Transitions for Vulnerable and Indigenous Learners with Greg Lawley - Virtual Learning Session #4
- **January 15, 2027**
  Advancing Equity: Responding to the Needs of All Learners with Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth - Virtual Learning Session #5
- **February 12, 2027**
  Awareness to Action: Advancing Equity and Anti-Racism in Schools with Beth Applewhite - Virtual Learning Session #6
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