

BC Teachers' Federation

Sept/Oct 2025

Teacher

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BCTF
Kids Matter
Teachers Care

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ON THE COVER: See pages 32–33 to read about teacher Thais Pimentel Cabral's anti-oppression work.

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THIS IS YOUR MAGAZINE



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Do you enjoy writing? Have a story to tell? Know of a project at your school or in your local you want to share with colleagues? Then consider writing for *Teacher*, the flagship publication of the BCTF! Submission guidelines are available at teachermag.ca.

We also welcome letters to the editor. Send your letter to teachermag@bctf.ca.

Teacher reserves the right to edit or condense any contribution considered for publication. We are unable to publish all submissions we receive.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Carole Gordon,
BCTF President
Rich Overgaard photo

“From advocating for fair wages and safe working conditions to standing alongside our communities in the fight for affordable housing and equitable public services, economic justice is union work. It is the work of all of us in public education. It is justice for students.”

DEAR COLLEAGUES,

As we welcome the start of a new school year, I want to extend gratitude to each of you for the passion, care, and resilience you bring into our classrooms and schools every single day. I also want to thank you for giving me the opportunity and privilege to advocate on your behalf.

Back to school is a time of fresh opportunities and fresh challenges. But it's also a time to reaffirm why we do this work: because every student deserves the chance to learn, to grow, and to thrive.

This edition of *Teacher* focuses not only on celebrating and supporting teachers, but also on lifting up the broader fight for economic justice. We know the issues we face inside our classrooms are inseparable from the realities students and families experience outside of them. Inequities like stagnating wages and unaffordable housing show up at our school doors every day. With chronic underfunding of public education, and our profession being undervalued, underpaid, and undersupported, it makes it harder for us to give our students the education they deserve.

From advocating for fair wages and safe working conditions to standing alongside our communities in the fight for affordable housing and equitable public services, economic justice is union work. It is the work of all of us in public education. It is justice for students.

As we continue bargaining this school year, I encourage you to stay informed by visiting the bargaining webpage of bctf.ca and monitoring your inbox for email updates.

I look forward to working alongside Robin Toscza, First Vice-President, and Winona Waldron, Second Vice-President, this school year to represent teachers at the provincial level and work toward meaningful progress for our members and for public education.

Wishing you a strong start to the year ahead and thank you for everything you do.

In solidarity,

Carole Gordon,
BCTF President

BCTF Full-Time Table Officers (L to R): Robin Tosczak, First Vice-President; Carole Gordon, President; Winona Waldron, Second Vice-President. Mattigan Waldron photo.

MESSAGE DE LA PRÉSIDENTE

CHERÈRES COLLÈGUES,

Alors que nous célébrons la rentrée scolaire, je tiens à exprimer ma gratitude à chacun d'entre vous pour la passion, l'attention et la résilience dont vous faites preuve chaque jour dans nos classes et nos écoles. J'aimerais aussi vous remercier de m'avoir donné l'occasion et le privilège de défendre vos intérêts.

La rentrée des classes est une période de nouvelles opportunités et de nouveaux défis. Mais c'est aussi l'occasion de réaffirmer la raison d'être de notre action : chaque élève mérite d'apprendre, de grandir et de s'épanouir.

Ce numéro de *Teacher* met l'accent non seulement sur la célébration et le soutien des enseignant-es, mais aussi sur la lutte plus large pour la justice économique. Nous savons que les problèmes auxquels nous faisons face en classe sont indissociables des réalités que vivent les élèves et leurs familles en dehors de leurs classes. Des inégalités telles que la stagnation des salaires et le logement inabordable se manifestent chaque jour à la porte de nos écoles. Le sous-financement chronique de l'éducation publique et la sous-valorisation, la sous-rémunération et le manque de soutien de notre profession rendent plus difficile l'éducation que nos élèves méritent.

De la défense de salaires équitables et de conditions de travail sécuritaires à la mobilisation de nos communautés pour un

logement abordable et des services publics équitables, la justice économique est un travail syndical. C'est l'œuvre de chacun de nous dans l'éducation publique. C'est la justice pour nos élèves.

Alors que nous poursuivons les négociations cette année scolaire, je vous encourage à vous tenir au courant en visitant la page Web des négociations de bctf.ca et en surveillant votre boîte de réception pour recevoir les mises à jour par courriel.

J'ai hâte de travailler aux côtés de Robin Tosczak, première Vice-Présidente, et de Winona Waldron, deuxième Vice-présidente, cette année scolaire pour représenter les enseignant-es à l'échelle provinciale et œuvrer à des progrès significatifs pour nos membres et l'éducation publique.

Je vous souhaite un excellent début d'année et vous remercie pour tout ce que vous faites.

En toute solidarité,



Carole Gordon,
Présidente de la BCTF

NEW BCTF PRESIDENT WAS BORN TO TEACH



Riley Gordon photo

By Nancy Knickerbocker, BCTF staff

CAROLE GORDON'S political journey from classroom teacher to President of the BC Teachers' Federation began with the collective fight against the BC Liberals' contract-stripping and an individual battle against Premier Christy Clark.

But her personal journey started in childhood. Growing up in Kelowna with her big brother and their mom, little Carole often played teacher. Her bedroom closet doubled as a classroom, her dolls were the students, and she wrote lessons on a little green chalkboard with the alphabet painted along the bottom.

Carole loved school and excelled because she was smart and conscientious. "I was a good student in the traditional sense," she said. "I was good at math, I could memorize things really well, and I was one of the quiet ones."

Carole developed strong attachments to some of her teachers and often hung out after school. Her favourite teacher was Mr. Saunders for high school geography and social studies. "He knew I wanted to be a teacher, so in Grade 12 one of my blocks was as a teacher assistant in his class."

After completing her Bachelor of Education, she began as a teacher teaching on call in 1991 and then got her first position as a K-7 prep teacher at Peachland Elementary in 1993. She moved on to Westbank and Springvalley Elementary schools

before spending her last 14 years teaching at Bankhead Elementary, the very same school where she went to Grade 1.

Coming from a small family, Carole found the support of an extended family within her school community. "The attraction was in the teaching and learning, but I also wanted to be part of that family of teachers. I consider the union to be family in the same way."

Her career, and that of every other BC teacher, took a tremendous blow in May 2001, after Premier Gordon Campbell won a huge electoral majority, having campaigned on promises not to cut health care and education. Scant weeks later, he announced a 25% across-the-board tax cut, which necessitated deep cuts to public services and mass layoffs of government workers.

In January 2002, Education Minister Christy Clark tabled legislation that gutted all the hard-won contract provisions that protected teaching and learning conditions throughout BC. Carole's local, the Central Okanagan Teachers' Association (COTA), called a meeting at the Elks' Lodge in Kelowna. The venue was so packed that she had to sit in the stairwell. Two highly respected local leaders described the devastating and inevitable impacts of the contract-stripping on classrooms, students, and teachers.

"I believe this work has to be done with empathy, curiosity, and humility because no one does this alone. I'll be centring teachers and bringing everybody's stories with me, walking the halls with 50,000 teachers—that's really important to me."

— Carole Gordon

The next spring, Carole attended her first BCTF Annual General Meeting with her first son Eric in tow, and she hasn't missed one since. She's also been a participant at Summer Leadership Conference, zone meetings, and every BCFED Convention since affiliation. In 2007, she was elected second vice-president of COTA and began working in the local office, this time with her second son Riley in tow.

Carole started a "Moms on Maternity" group to support new moms and to keep members on leave connected with the union. She learned that her local was one of only eight in BC that required teachers to return to work at a natural break in the school year, regardless of whether they had used up all their eligible weeks of maternity leave. "Members felt it was just so wrong; I had to do something about it," she said. With help from BCTF staff, COTA made the district respect teachers' access to their full maternity leaves.

Carole's union advocacy for women carried over into the community, as she had begun serving on the board of the Kelowna Child Care Society and became United Way director. She was also elected president of the North Okanagan Labour Council.

In 2011, at the Canadian Labour Congress Convention in Vancouver, Carole heard federal NDP Leader Jack Layton give such a rousing speech that she was inspired to consider electoral politics. "His speech was a strong call to action, saying if you want to make

"I'll never forget it. We left the hall and marched to the board office. My husband Ian, who is a CUPE member in the school district, joined us with our two-year-old son Eric on his shoulders," Carole said. "It was such a strong call to action to defend our rights in the face of this injustice."

change, you have to be on the inside. And I remember thinking, 'I can do this!'"

Soon after, Carole won the NDP nomination in Westside Kelowna—a long-time Liberal riding. In the provincial election of May 2013, she and her team gave it a valiant try, but they knew it was a long shot. To everyone's surprise, David Eby defeated Christy Clark in Vancouver-Point Grey, and the Premier went looking for a safe place to win back a seat in the Legislature. She chose Westside Kelowna, thus thrusting Carole into a high-stakes by-election.

She took a leave from school and plunged into a whirlwind month of campaigning. Teachers and union activists from around the province sent their support in messages and in person. Colleagues and family volunteered on the campaign trail.

As predicted, the Premier took the riding with 60% of the votes, but Carole had held her own, garnering almost the same number of votes as she had in the general election. "At the BCTF Summer Leadership Conference six weeks later, the president acknowledged my efforts and I got a standing ovation. It made me realize that even though I lost, my candidacy mattered to teachers."

Then the question for Carole was: What next? "Going in, I had leadership and communications skills that the union provided me, but when you run for MLA twice, you gain additional skills fast. I knew I needed to give back to the union that gave me so much. And so, I ran for the Executive Committee and was elected."

Over a decade later, with her family fully behind her, Carole is ready to take on the top job representing BC teachers. "I believe this work has to be done with empathy, curiosity, and humility because no one does this alone. I'll be centring teachers and bringing everybody's stories with me, walking the halls with 50,000 teachers—that's really important to me."

What has always guided her work is the famous quotation from J.S. Woodsworth: "What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all."

"It's really just that simple," Carole says. "It's why union work matters to everyone." ●



BEYOND RECALL

Forging future-ready learners with concept-based teaching and AI as our ally

By **Sean Smith** (he/him), teacher, Vancouver

AFTER THREE DECADES as a middle-school teacher in British Columbia, primarily supporting students with diverse learning needs, I've experienced many educational changes and reforms. Yet, I've seen our system—and sometimes our own classroom practices—struggle to keep pace with the escalating complexities faced by students and educators. Teaching today is undeniably more demanding. We navigate diversity in student backgrounds, languages, and learning profiles, alongside evolving societal expectations and pressures. The old model of “teaching to the middle,” if it ever truly served us, is now definitively obsolete.

This is not criticism, but an observation as we reach a crucial crossroads. The world students are inheriting demands not just what they know, but fundamentally whether they know how to learn. It's imperative our teaching practices embrace this shift. Many of us were trained when “covering the content” was paramount. But in an age of instant information access, clinging to a content-first model leaves students disadvantaged in the modern world. Students need robust intellectual frameworks to understand, critique, and apply knowledge in novel situations.

THE SHIFT: MY JOURNEY FROM CONTENT COVERAGE TO CONCEPT CRAFTING

My own pedagogical evolution gained momentum nearly 20 years ago through exploring universal design for learning and project-based learning. My work with students facing learning difficulties, disabilities, and significant emotional support needs pushed me to create bespoke materials. I delved into the science of reading, writing, and appropriately scaffolded mathematics, deepening my understanding of student diversity. This coalesced into a teaching philosophy starkly different from my training: seeing students as individuals, each requiring a unique approach. For almost two decades, I haven't relied on standard textbooks, instead crafting and adapting materials. I began telling students my primary role was to help them

learn how to learn. While foundational knowledge remains vital, my approach extends further. I teach multiplication and division, but also the concept of what these operations represent. I teach students to read, but also how and why they read, connecting literacy to critical thinking, organization, and planning. This focus on the “what, why, and how” is the heart of concept-based teaching.

CONCEPT-BASED TEACHING: WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL NOW

Instead of marching students through isolated facts, concept-based teaching focuses on big, transferable ideas. Consider World War 1:

Traditional model: Students memorize names, dates, treaties.

Concept-based model: Students explore the concept of “conflict” or “escalation” using WW1 as a lens. They analyze patterns, compare it to other conflicts, and develop a deeper, transferable understanding of how conflicts arise and evolve.

This conceptual grasp is critical because the availability of information at our fingertips makes comprehensive content mastery less necessary. Understanding core concepts like “systems,” “change,” “perspective,” or “interdependence” empowers students to make sense of new information, connect disparate ideas, and engage in the critical thinking desperately needed. This approach naturally cultivates metacognition—thinking about one's own thinking—as students learn to:

- ask meaningful questions.
- seek out, evaluate, and synthesize resources.
- organize information effectively.
- collaborate and communicate understanding.
- adapt and persevere through challenges.

These are not just academic skills; they are essential life skills for an unpredictable future.

“... in an age of instant information access, clinging to a content-first model leaves students disadvantaged in the modern world. Students need robust intellectual frameworks to understand, critique, and apply knowledge in novel situations.”

ENTER TECHNOLOGY: AI AS OUR ALLY—THE IMPERATIVE TO TEACH, NOT BAN

Recently, the conversation around digital tools in schools, including artificial intelligence (AI), often veers toward restriction or prohibition. I firmly believe our approach must be proactive education, not reactive avoidance. Our responsibility is to teach students to navigate the digital world wisely and ethically, using tools like AI for learning and critical inquiry—not as replacements for their own thinking. Failing to do so leaves them unprepared.

AI is not *the* answer; it's a powerful instrument. The anxieties are understandable: will it make students lazy or replace critical thinking? Only if we abdicate our role in teaching discernment.

For teachers: AI as an indispensable assistant

AI can significantly enhance our pedagogical expertise. In my own BC classroom, it has become an invaluable partner in creating bespoke, engaging learning materials at scale.

The core challenge: Effectively differentiating for a wide range of reading and comprehension levels.

My AI-powered solution—Narrative “textbooks”: For the first time in my career, AI enables me to develop entire units built around specific concepts, meticulously adapted to four distinct reading and comprehension levels (roughly Grades 7, 5, 3, and 1).

Engaging diverse learners: To foster engagement and provide a safe distance for exploring potentially sensitive topics (e.g., complex social issues, human biology), I weave these concepts into immersive narratives using themes like fantasy, sci-fi, or adventure. For instance, a unit on government types unfolds as a post-apocalyptic journey where a survivor encounters various settlements, exposing students to democracies, monarchies, and theocracies in action. The goal is for students to grasp the core concepts, even if all vocabulary isn't retained.

Tangible impact: I've developed over 15 such units spanning science, social studies, math, and social-emotional learning. Crucially, for students with significant learning disabilities, these tailored materials make content accessible, allowing them to focus on reading and comprehension within an engaging context and participate in discussions about the topic.

Delivery and interaction: These resources, complete with bespoke study guides and sometimes audio/video interactive elements, are delivered through versatile platforms like OneNote, PDFs, interactive flipbooks, and even custom chatbots for their digital workbooks. This level of differentiation and creative content generation was simply unimaginable before AI.

For students: AI as a learning partner, not a crutch

We must explicitly teach students to leverage AI to augment their intellectual efforts:

Brainstorming: “AI, give me five potential arguments for this historical decision.” (Then they analyze, select, and build.)

Understanding complexities: “AI, explain photosynthesis as if I'm in Grade 5.” (Then they verify and deepen understanding.)

Generating practice: “AI, create five multiple-choice questions about the legislative branch.” (For them to test their own recall.)

Draft feedback: Seeking clarity or grammar suggestions after their initial thinking and writing.

The key is that AI assists the learning process; it doesn't short-circuit it. This necessitates fostering comprehensive digital and AI literacy—understanding how these tools work, their biases, evaluating output, and integrating them into their learning workflow as an aid, not a substitute. Our assessments must also evolve, shifting focus toward process, application of concepts, and articulation of thinking.

THE FUTURE IS NOW: MAKING THE SHIFT IN YOUR CLASSROOM

This transformation doesn't require a seismic overhaul. It can begin with small, intentional steps:

- 1. Identify one core concept:** In your next unit, design activities that encourage deep exploration of it, moving beyond surface-level coverage.
- 2. Introduce one AI tool:** Provide clear guidelines for ethical and effective use as a learning aid, emphasizing its role in supporting, not replacing, student effort.
- 3. Explicitly discuss “learning how to learn”:** Ask students how they are approaching a task, not just what the answer is. Include how to manage and utilize digital tools responsibly.

Many dedicated BC teachers are eager to adapt but may feel uncertain or unsupported. My hope is that by sharing these ideas, born from decades on the front lines, we can empower each other. Students' futures depend on our ability to teach them how to think, adapt, and, most importantly, how to learn—skills that include the discerning use of all available tools. By embracing concept-based teaching and thoughtfully integrating AI, we can equip them not just for the next test, but for the complexities and opportunities of a lifetime. •

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION IS SAFETY EDUCATION

Teaching comprehensive sexual health education is everyone's responsibility

By Jannika Nyberg (she/her),
teacher, Burnaby

WHAT DO THE BENCHMARKS ADDRESS?

The benchmarks use a foundational, building-block approach to addressing 11 comprehensive sexual health education topics:

AUTONOMY AND CONSENT

VALUES AND RIGHTS

INTERPERSONAL
RELATIONSHIPS

GENDER NORMS, ROLES,
AND STEREOTYPES

GENDER AND
SEXUAL ORIENTATION

BODIES AND DEVELOPMENT

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED
INFECTION PREVENTION AND
SUPPORT

SEXUAL HEALTH
ENHANCEMENT
AND WELL-BEING

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY
AND TECHNOLOGY

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
AWARENESS AND PREVENTION

YOU'VE LIKELY SEEN the infamous scene of Coach Carr delivering the sexual health lesson from the film *Mean Girls*. The coach says, "Don't have sex; you will get chlamydia and die." I am sharing this pop culture reference with you not to scare you, but to (rather dramatically) highlight how limited our cultural view of sexual health education can be.

When I tell people that I work in sexual health education promotion, it is often met with raised eyebrows, giggles, and questions like, "You spend your days putting condoms on bananas?" Demonstrating barrier methods to prevent sexually transmitted infections/sexually transmitted blood-borne infections and conception is an aspect of sexual health education, but the vast majority of work is grounded in safety education. I use "safety" here to refer to gender-based violence prevention, exploitation prevention, and sexual violence prevention—both online and offline.

Comprehensive sexual health education (CSHE), widely considered the gold-standard of sexual health education, does include these safety aspects as well as the socio-cultural and political intersections. Unfortunately, in BC, we only subscribe to half of the required benchmarks to meet the CSHE standards (see left; please refer to www.sieccan.org/shebenchmarks for detailed information on the benchmarks). As you can see in the benchmarks, the CSHE curriculum is not limited to a physical health class. It is inherently multidisciplinary because human sexuality is multidisciplinary (see *Circles of Sexuality*, right, by Dennis Dailey).

I want to propose something bold, potentially contentious: all teachers can and should teach aspects of the CSHE curriculum. For if we are to truly prepare our students for healthy, fulfilling relationships both on and offline, then it behooves us to empower them with the social-emotional learning and critical-thinking skills to navigate the complexity of being a sexual being in our digitized world.

Why then, is the CSHE curriculum not widely delivered? It is a multipronged answer. Sexual health is couched under physical health education (PHE) only; PHE teachers are mandated to teach this curriculum. Ironically, preservice PHE teachers are not trained in the CSHE curriculum specifically, and in-service training is uncommon and never mandatory. There are no clear lines of accountability. The problem is that we've decided (the Ministry of Education and Child Care that is) that the entirety of human sexuality should be taught through the lens of physical health only. Human sexuality cannot be disentangled from emotional/mental health and the social systems governing bodies. PHE teachers deserve adequate training and resource access. More pressing is that students deserve an evidence-based, comprehensive curriculum that enables them to understand all bodies, orientations, and expressions so that they can co-create healthy, respectful relationships.

We can achieve this by championing non-PHE classroom teachers to teach aspects of this robust curriculum. The BC curriculum already incorporates many of the safety aspects of CSHE. Social studies, English, career education, social-emotional learning, and science all hold tenets of safety education. Big ideas also lend themselves

beautifully to teaching key components of CSHE, such as consent via personal and social competencies.

BC PHE teachers are not Coach Carr. The majority I've worked with are willing and curious to teach this curriculum. When we know better, we do better. We can begin to know better when teachers, education assistants, and support staff are given proper training and support. The good news is that excellent training is on its way this fall!

This January, PHE Canada is launching its first online, self-paced course for teachers to learn both the theory and practical tools of CSHE. The course provides lesson plans, activity ideas, strategies and assessment tips. The second resource, available in October, is Fraser Health Authority's Sexual Health Toolkit. This huge set of resources was assembled by public health nurses and will be available at bctf.ca/classroom-resources.

Lastly, starting October 1, the BCTF will offer an introductory workshop for districts/schools on the fundamentals of teaching this curriculum, previously titled Sexual Health Education: It's Fun, now called Comprehensive Sexual Health Education 101

(see bctf.ca). A follow-up workshop focusing on teaching sexual health to students with complex needs and disabilities is in the works. Both courses/workshops are inclusive of 2SLGBTQIA+ people because one cannot accurately teach human sexuality without speaking to all genders, orientations, and sexes. You read that right—teaching only heterosexual sexual health is scientifically and culturally inaccurate!

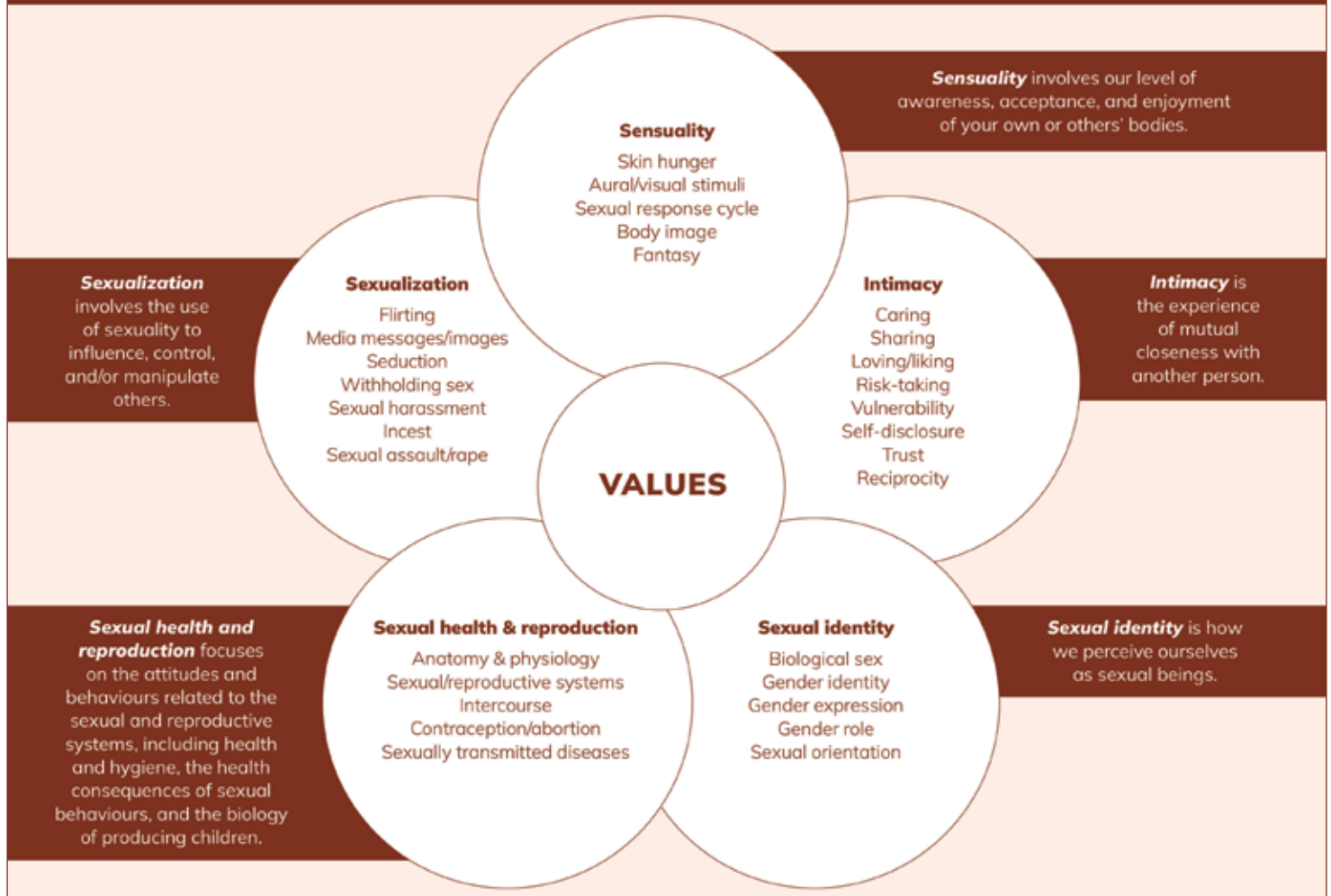
Reports of sextortion have skyrocketed, social media usage has worsened cyberbullying, and rates of sexual assault have not gone down. Equipped with the proper tools, we can reverse these trends. This work is messy, hilarious, humbling, and wholly worth it. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jannika Nyberg (she/her) is an English and social studies teacher in Burnaby. She is also a trained sexual health educator who supports teacher training both through her role as a BCTF facilitator and as an independent educator. She co-wrote the PHE Canada course on comprehensive sexual health education and the BCTF's workshops on sexual health education.

THE CIRCLES OF SEXUALITY

Sexuality encompasses nearly every aspect of our being, from attitudes and values to feelings and experiences. It is influenced by the individual, family, culture, religion/spirituality, laws, professions, institutions, science, and politics.





FROM BARRIERS TO BELONGING

By Tiffany Drew, teacher, North Vancouver

TWENTY-ONE STUDENTS sit in rows at xylophones and glockenspiels, mallets in hand, waiting to strike. While I teach them to wait for the conductor, they anticipate a count in and ready themselves to strike the bar with relative accuracy. I begin to count, yet one eager child cannot wait, hits the bars repeatedly, twists the head of the mallet, and then tosses it across the room. The rest of the classmates cannot help but be distracted. They laugh, or play along, or get angry; I have seen all the scenarios. I continue the count while trying to figure out how to include the student that cannot yet control their movements. It is at this moment that a hero walks in, in the form of an education assistant (EA). I am both relieved and flustered. I cannot repeat the entire lesson to get the staff up to speed, yet I know I cannot do it without them. Teachers know this feeling all too well. How do we move past this to build the cohesiveness we need for students?

Throughout my career in the education system, I have advocated for students with learning differences who use additional support in the classroom. I am a parent of students with learning needs, and I have worked as both an EA and a teacher. Now that I am a learning support teacher in particular, I have become the point-person for staff, students, and parents to address their concerns that come with including students in a modern educational system.

In many countries, education support staff, also called paraprofessionals and teacher assistants, are a key support to including diverse students. However, many opposing factors make it difficult to maximize the intended outcomes of this particular support.

This led me to investigate the following question for my Master's degree capstone project: What are the barriers to effective collaboration with EAs in schools? How can we effectively address these barriers in schools?

It is also through these experiences that I realize it is in building stronger collaborative networks as educators, that we will best serve learners. After all, to paraphrase H.E. Luccock (as cited in Pike & Krumm), no one can whistle a symphony on their own; it takes the entire orchestra to play it.¹

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

ROLE AMBIGUITY

While it is commonly known that it is the teacher's role to teach and prepare for classes, and the EA's role is to support and carry out tasks designed by the teacher for individual or group learning, there are areas of the job descriptions that can be less clear. Reinforcing rules and discipline, altering curriculum priorities, and work titles that switch from "job coach," to "EA," to "lunch supervisor" can all create work-related ambiguity.

COMMUNICATION CONSTRAINTS

Teachers and support staff are bound to different working timetables. They often have to trade off supervision of students that require the largest time investments. In some cases, support staff hours do not cover the same working hours as the teachers, and this makes meeting or communicating with each other difficult. Sharing information while students are present can also be difficult as there are often concerns that cannot be addressed openly.

Building effective collaboration between teachers and education assistants

Technology platforms for sharing information, while well intentioned, are not timely or accessible. Emails take time. Platforms such as Microsoft Teams require technology in the classroom that not all schools have or not all staff have access to.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT INEQUITY

Given that most schools have a larger population of teachers than support staff, professional development is often directed toward the teachers, with add-on learning opportunities for all staff members. This means EAs are sometimes left to learn new strategies, systems, and routines while in the classroom.

DISCONNECTED SENSE OF BELONGING

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs places high value on a sense of belonging. In the workplace, people also strive to fit into social groups to feel psychologically safe and meet our personal attachment needs. This could be our individual needs, or our collective needs. For instance, working in a job that aligns with our values, or working with others that share our values, helps us feel safe at work. In the school setting, with complexities of the structural systems we may feel aligned and safe with a group or individuals, but not with systems or policies. This can cause disconnection.

Some positions in our work provide a natural sense of belonging, such as shared experiences, while others are pre-stigmatized because of structural inequalities. Other themes that arise when discussing belonging include feeling valued in your ideas and trusted with the work you produce.

BREAKING BARRIERS

Now that we have discovered there is a barrier, how do we go about making change?

CREATE A VISION

The first step to create change is constructing your change vision. Creating a vision can help focus your goal. An example of my vision is, "I strive to build a learning community that is committed to effectively teaching students while maintaining workplace well-being and modelling core competencies for all members." In short, teachers, EAs, and students should all feel part of the learning community.

BUILD BRIDGES

Consider your position within the school system and the school structure. Are you in a position to present professional development opportunities or invite someone working with you to come with you to an opportunity? Can you be a part of a social committee that builds relationships through fun activities?

ANALYZE POWER AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS

What collaborations in your school or program create power dynamics? Does your school have a soup club or a book club that is only offered during non-shared lunch hours? Does your district only hold professional learning opportunities that require travelling by personal vehicles? Consider any "artifacts" that your school has that may be driving wedges in your vision. For example, is there a long service award reserved for one union member or the other?

How is essential technology accessed? In my experience, teachers have access to school technology yet support staff don't always have the same access. Could you get support for setting up an accessible workstation for itinerant staff that come through your classroom?

COMMUNICATE YOUR DESIRED INTENTIONS

Making your vision known is as important as creating a vision. Find allies that share your vision. Consider stakeholders in your desire to build better collaboration. Ask if you can attend an EA team meeting to discuss your classroom structure or discuss your thoughts with the person that does the EA timetabling. Maybe knowing who and when support is coming can help you shift your instructional time. Communicate your intentions to administrators, asking for planning time when appropriate. Create a communication plan with support staff you work with directly.

KEEP THE MOMENTUM

Continue to assess the situation to see if the changes you have implemented have worked. For example, if you flipped your lesson structure in order to give instructions while support staff were available, did it work, or do you need to revisit this idea? Did you make an inviting desk space for someone you share a classroom with? Does it need refreshing for a new season?

If you are trying to build better roles and distinctions between your positions, continually work together to build evolving definitions.

Find ways to measure your progress and celebrate! Share with others the progress and failures that you have come across to bring about trends beyond your classroom or school. Collaboration requires identified progress, shared success, and vulnerability.

Through collaboration, we can break down barriers and effectively implement learning communities that include everyone. •

1 A. J. Pike & J.M. Krumm, *Roadblocks to Faith*, Morehouse-Gorham Co, 1954.

MIRRORS, WINDOWS, AND VOICES

Building inclusive libraries through inquiry



By April Hilland, Sara Stone, Laura Jacobs, Kimberly Birkland, Stephen Walsh, teacher-librarians, and **Jennifer Pattern,** learning co-ordinator; members of the Nanaimo District Teachers' Association and grateful to work and learn on the unceded territory of the Stz'uminus, Snuneymuxw, and Snaw Naw As peoples

LAST SCHOOL YEAR, six teacher-librarians from School District 68 Nanaimo Ladysmith came together to form a Teacher Inquiry Program project focused on making our libraries more welcoming, inclusive spaces for all students. At the heart of our exploration was a simple but powerful question: How can we create library spaces that foster a greater sense of belonging for every student? That question guided our conversations, shaped our learning, and ultimately brought new energy and purpose to the work we do in our libraries every day.

Grounded in inquiry theory, we used the BCTF Points of Inquiry to guide our collaboration and learning. We developed and conducted surveys to ask students what they enjoy about the library and what they feel could be different. We asked students about their preferences, comfort levels in the learning space, and quality of relationships with their teacher-librarian.

“[The librarian] will listen.”

– Student,
Grade 5

STUDENT VOICE

Libraries are for students. They should have a say, shouldn't they? We know that students feel a sense of ownership and agency when they are invited to share their opinions, interests, and ideas—whether

through book recommendations, advisory roles, displays, or programming suggestions. What we weren't expecting was the sheer variety of suggestions. Responses ranged from the predictable (more books, more games, more clubs), to the practical (more technology, more comfortable seating, quieter space), to the pleasantly preposterous (a bigger space, a sensory room, cool steampunk mechanical doors).

Sometimes students have ideas for their library that are incompatible or contradictory. In high school, for example, many wanted a quiet place to study while others wanted a place where they could relax with friends in a not-so-quiet way. Knowing this, however, was the impetus for creating a “Study Hall” period so that there was a dedicated quiet time for those that required it.

Student input allows the library to better reflect the diverse needs and identities of its users, from the types of books on the shelves to the kinds of events and activities offered. Student-led initiatives, such as book clubs, author visits, or themed displays, not only make the space more vibrant and relevant but also build readership and strengthen community ties. By centring student voices, the library transforms into a dynamic and collaborative environment where young people perceive themselves not only as readers or visitors but also as active contributors and co-creators of the learning space.

BC TEACHERS' FEDERATION TEACHER INQUIRY PROGRAM

This program supports teacher-led professional development through collaborative, classroom-based inquiry. Participants engage in cycles of questioning, reflection, and action research guided by BC Teachers' Federation facilitators over six sessions, fostering growth, critical discourse, and meaningful change in practice.

“[Everyone is welcome] because it should be that way.”

– Student, Grade 4

“It’s a place where no one is judged.”

– Student, Grade 7

“I like how it is different than classes and the fact it has a large range of freedom.”

– Student, Grade 5

“I can play in peace, read in peace, and talk in peace.”

– Student, Grade 7

CONNECTION

Connection between students in a school library often forms through a combination of safe environments, meaningful relationships, and the power of storytelling. The library is in the unique position as a shared space within the school environment that welcomes all members of the school community.

Teacher-librarians act as informal mentors, fostering confidence, curiosity, and empathy through storytelling and shared experiences. By offering personalized book recommendations, leading discussions, and encouraging students to share their own stories, they create a sense of belonging. The library becomes more than a place to read—it becomes a nurturing space where connection, identity, and learning flourish.

DIVERSITY

Reading the responses to the surveys helped us to understand what connected students to the library. It became clear that true belonging cannot exist without diversity—both in the stories we share and in the voices we uplift. As a result, we talked a lot about having books that every student could see themselves in, whether that is their culture, language, unique ability, or family structure.

We can think of it as mirrors and windows. A diligent librarian will curate materials that both reflect students’ own lives (mirrors) and introduce them to experiences different from their own (windows). This helps students feel seen and validated while also building empathy, awareness, and curiosity about others.

STUDENT CHOICE

Student choice plays a vital role in shaping a learning commons and school library program by fostering engagement, autonomy, and deeper learning. When students are given the freedom to choose what they read, how they learn, or how they participate in library activities, they are more motivated and invested in their experience. This autonomy encourages creativity, critical thinking, and a stronger sense of responsibility for their own education. In the library context, choice in reading materials or participation in clubs and events ensures the program stays relevant to students’ evolving interests and identities.

CONCLUSION

The Teacher Inquiry Program (TIP) provided us with the time, BCTF TIP facilitators, resources, and collaborative space to engage in deep, student-centred inquiry. As a professional learning community, we challenged each other’s thinking, strengthened our practice, and implemented meaningful changes in library spaces across the district—from flexible seating and desirable books to displays that reflect student diversity and identity.

While there were moments of uncertainty, our facilitators helped us navigate these challenges and embrace the evolving nature of inquiry. What began as a question about fostering belonging in library spaces grew into a powerful exploration of what happens when students are invited to share their voices. We saw first-hand how inquiry can transform not just spaces but relationships and pedagogy. For any group of educators with a student-focused question, we highly recommend the TIP model as a supportive, impactful path for professional growth and meaningful change. •

A student works on a creative project in the library. Opposite: A themed display. Photos provided by April Hilland.





DISCOVERING PALDI

A journey of history, culture, and connections

By Sarbdeep Kaur Johal (she/her), teacher, Surrey

AS A HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, one of my core missions is to provide students with opportunities to learn both inside and outside of the classroom. The best lessons often happen when students are immersed in the richness of history, culture, and the connections we share with the past. During my maternity leave, I took the opportunity to research into an incredible part of Canadian history: the early Sikh Canadians who resided in Paldi, a small but historically significant community, near Duncan, British Columbia, in the Cowichan Valley.

THE HISTORY OF PALDI AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Paldi, once a thriving community in the Cowichan Valley, holds a unique place in the history of multicultural Canada. In the early 20th century, Paldi became home to one of Canada's first multicultural communities. A melting pot of different cultures, the village was established by a blend of people from various backgrounds, including Sikhs, Japanese, Chinese, and Europeans. These communities came together and created a town that was not only diverse but also prosperous, forging relationships that transcended race and culture.

The history of Paldi is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of immigrant communities. The Sikh Canadian community played a particularly significant role in Paldi's growth. Sikh men, many of whom had arrived in Canada as early as the late 19th century, worked tirelessly in the logging industry, agriculture, and construction. Over time, they built lives for themselves, contributing immensely to the development of the region. The early Sikh Canadians in Paldi forged a bond with their neighbors, resulting in a uniquely harmonious multicultural settlement.

AN UNFORGETTABLE TRIP TO PALDI WITH STUDENTS

In 2023, I had the incredible opportunity to take a group of 26 Grade 12 students from my Punjabi 12 class on a trip to explore the history of Paldi. This was the first of three planned trips, and it became an unforgettable learning experience for both my students and me. We were welcomed by the extended family members of Mayo Singh, a prominent figure in Paldi's history, and had the chance to learn first-hand about his life and legacy.

Mayo Singh, one of the early Sikh settlers in Paldi, was deeply involved in the community and worked to maintain its integrity. His family's contributions to the community are still remembered today, and during our visit, we were able to connect with his descendants. It was an emotional and enriching experience to meet Mayo Singh's family, hear their stories, and see the impact they continue to have on the region.

The temple in Paldi, known as the Gurdwara Sahib Paldi, is a historical and spiritual landmark that has stood for nearly a century. Built in the early 1900s by the Sikh community, the temple has served as a place of worship, gathering, and community support for generations of Sikhs who settled in Paldi. The Gurdwara is a symbol of the resilience and deep faith of the Sikh settlers who established themselves in this multicultural town. During our visit, we had the privilege of experiencing a beautiful prayer session led by the Granthi Ji. The students were honoured in the traditional way, with *parshaad* (a sweet offering) and snacks, symbolizing the sharing of blessings and community. Many elders from the community also gathered to connect with the students, sharing



Opposite and above:

Students from Sarbdeep's 2024 class visiting Paldi.

Left: Materials worked with to learn Indigenous weaving.

Right: Search for "Paldi Heritage Minute" on YouTube.



stories of their childhood experiences at the temple in Paldi. They spoke about their memories of growing up in the area, the challenges they faced, and the strong sense of community that thrived in Paldi. This exchange of stories created a deep bond between the generations, allowing the students to understand the lasting significance of the temple and its role in shaping the lives of those who had lived there.

The trip to Paldi took an unexpected turn for me personally. While researching, I was stunned to learn that my father's side of the family had links to Mayo Singh's relatives, a revelation that made the entire experience feel even more profound. It was a reminder that history is not something that exists in isolation—it's alive, interconnected, and relevant to every one of us.

While in Cowichan Valley, our group also visited the Cowichan Valley Museum, which holds a wealth of knowledge about the region's Indigenous culture. One of the highlights of our visit was learning about the local totem poles of Duncan, a city famous for its totem pole collection. These totem poles are significant symbols of the Coast Salish peoples, representing their myths, spiritual beliefs, and the deep connections they have to the land.

The totem poles in Duncan are a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the Indigenous people in Cowichan Valley. As my students and I stood in awe before these towering figures, we discussed the importance of preserving Indigenous traditions and understanding the cultural significance behind each totem pole. It was a moment of reflection for all of us, reinforcing the interconnectedness of cultures in Canada.

One of the most impactful aspects of our trip was the opportunity to meet with an elder from the Cowichan community to learn about the Indigenous art of weaving. The elder taught us the techniques behind weaving, and my students had the chance to create bracelets and keychains using traditional methods. This hands-on activity gave students a deep appreciation for the art and the cultural practices that have been passed down through generations.

The experience also provided an insight into the Indigenous ways of being and doing. Indigenous communities in Canada have a unique worldview that emphasizes interconnectedness with the natural world, respect for the land, and a deep understanding of sustainability. These values were shared with my students, and many left with a renewed sense of respect for Indigenous cultures and traditions.

DOCUMENTING PALDI'S MULTICULTURAL LEGACY

The following year, our trip grew even more special. We were able to bring along a radio production company to help document our experiences. The students from Queen Elizabeth Junior Secondary, alongside the Grade 12 students, worked with the radio team to create a documentary about the multicultural history of Paldi. The documentary captured the stories of the various communities that had come together to build Paldi, including the Japanese, Chinese, European, and Sikh Canadians.¹

Through interviews and discussions, students reflected on what it meant to live in a multicultural society. They talked about how Paldi served as an early example of how people from diverse backgrounds could co-exist and thrive together, laying the foundation for the multicultural mosaic that Canada is known for today.

TEACHING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The trips to Paldi and Cowichan Valley were not just educational field trips; they were transformative experiences for both the students and me. Through the exploration of local history, Indigenous culture, and personal connections, students gained a deeper understanding of Canada's multicultural past and the importance of embracing diversity. They also learned that history is not just a series of events—it is something we are all part of, shaping the future with every step we take. The experience reinforced my belief that education is not just about textbooks and tests—it's about making meaningful connections and fostering a sense of belonging in the world. •

1 www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DZ4bgNEIDw

SPARKING DIALOGUE ACROSS DISTRICTS

A sustainability conference for teachers and students

By **Nichelle Penney** (she/they), teacher, Kamloops

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT is not just a catchphrase or a current fad in our world; it is a way of living that helps advance policy development to create long-lasting change for future generations. As a teacher, I am continually examining new ways to bring sustainable development goal (SDG) conversations into my classroom in an organic way—a way that engages students beyond our lesson and into their personal and social lives as well.

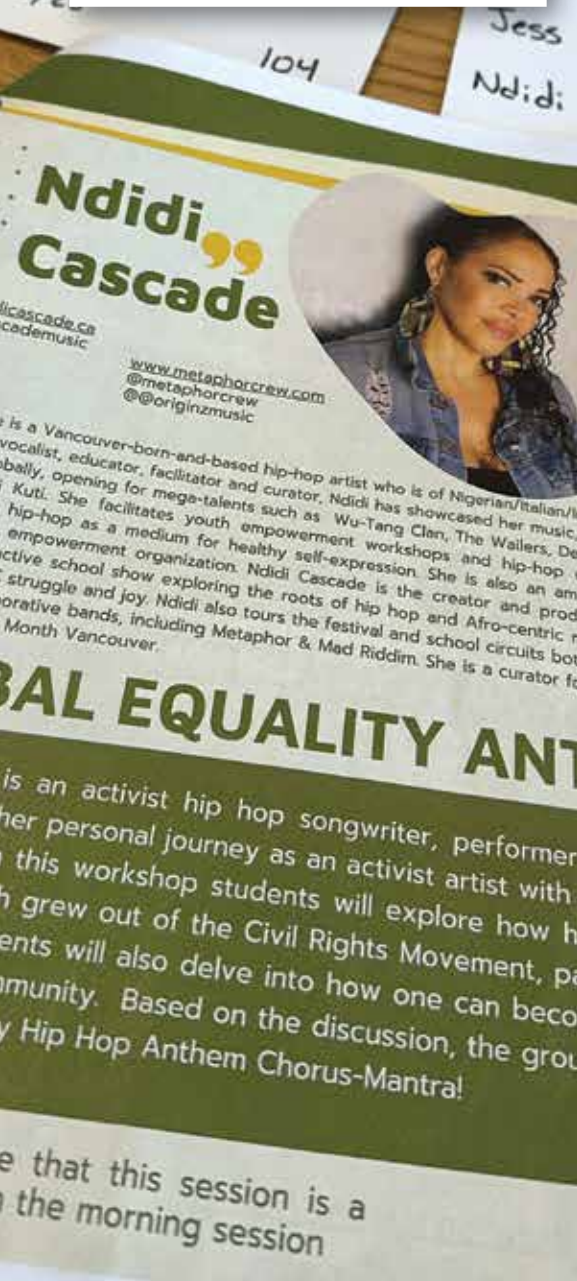
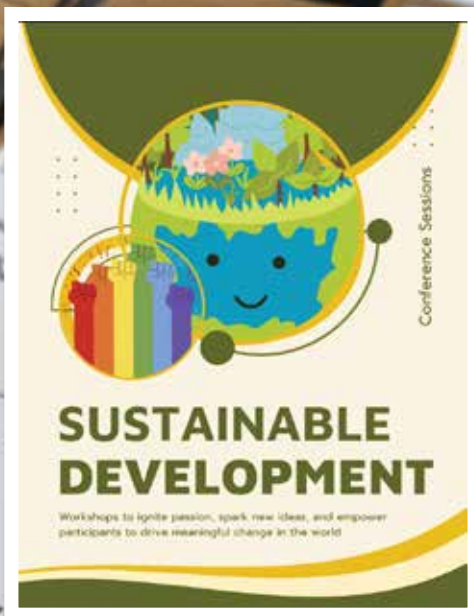
SDGs are a global call to action for all countries to end poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequality, and promote economic growth all while protecting the environment. The goals are intertwined, interrelated, and multifaceted. Personal recycling is a good process to help protect the environment, but we also have to look beyond ourselves and determine how major companies and government bodies can be held to task on creating a better, sustainable future for all. Teachers and students can bring awareness to actions that can be taken on the personal, social, and policy levels of our society.

Last school year, I used my understanding of SDGs to organize a Sustainable Development Conference that engaged teachers and students in a wider conversation, leading to collaboration and action-planning within schools and between schools. It brought in presenters from Vancouver, Kamloops, Edmonton, and as far away as Nova Scotia, who encouraged students to engage with the topics and challenged them to go beyond the “right here, right now” mentality.

I applied for a BCTF Provincial Social Justice Grant for a zone-wide conference, and here’s how things came together: At the Okanagan Fall 2024 Zone Meeting, we (social justice contacts) discussed the grants available to teachers to promote equity and inclusion on various fronts, including the Regional Social Justice Grant. It brought back memories from previous zone meetings where we would often discuss ways to engage the Okanagan Zone area, but those conversations never took hold beyond those meetings. Because of my classroom and provincial work, I was already thinking about the Local Social Justice Grant as a way to engage students and teachers in my own local, so why not take it a step further and bring it to the zone level?

The first step was the easiest—applying for the grant. I invited the other social justice contacts and Committee for Action on Social Justice representatives to contribute to the application and submitted it by the beginning of December. By mid-January, I was informed that the application was successful and I could begin planning. The next four months were chaotic, exciting, stressful, and rewarding.

My local was able to give me three half-day release times to plan and organize the conference. Kelowna was agreed upon, at the zone meeting, as the city for the conference because of its central location within the zone, allowing for more equitable participation. UBC Okanagan was a natural selection from





Photos provided by author.

“What struck me the most about this amazing event was how the conversations held in sessions spilled out into the spaces between sessions. There was a genuine sense of wonder that fueled a desire for participants to learn more and to share their ideas.” – Susan Hall, conference participant

there: summer session had already begun for the university, accommodations were available for presenters, and all rooms were already equipped with the required technology. The main conference room for the opening session had a maximum capacity of 400 people, which set the tone for the rest of my planning.

Now that the location was selected, I was able to reach out to individuals who may be interested in presenting. Through my work as a UNESCO co-ordinator, I had made many connections: Martha Solomon from the BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, Jess LeBlanc from Finance Engage Sustain, Rebecca Moon from The Centre for Global Education, David Zandvliet, UNESCO Chair in Biocultural Diversity and Education from Simon Fraser University, Laura Myers from Learning for a Sustainable Future, Susan Hall from BC UNESCO Associated Schools Network, among others. It was overwhelming to see how much support there was, as everyone I had reached out to was enthusiastic. While Laura Myers presented via Zoom (it was not cost-effective to fly in from Nova Scotia), all other presenters were in person. This was all the easy planning.

The more challenging planning included advertising, registration, transportation, room designations, catering, accommodations, name tags, and thank-you gifts. Thankfully, Stacey Kemp was able to organize catering from Princess Margaret Secondary School in Penticton, which included vegetarian and gluten-free options. Aurey Harris, from Kelowna, was able to purchase thank-you gifts for presenters and prizes for participants.

I used Canva to create a booklet of information, and Eventbrite for the registration process. There were challenges with both: the booklet had to be emailed out several times, and the registration link did not always work. I was trying to field questions and provide tech support all while teaching three classes a day. My original intention was to create a website where all the information could be found at a click; however,

I just did not have enough time, nor support, to be able to accomplish that.

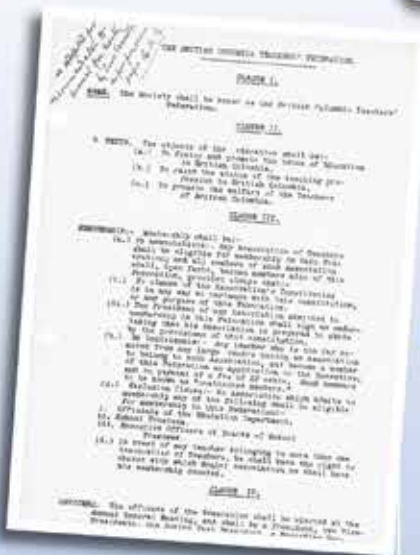
When I proposed the idea of the conference and filled out the application, I did so with the knowledge that teachers in my zone, just like teachers around the province, are overwhelmed with various aspects, and some were new to the union role. I was straightforward in that I would love help from other people but was moving ahead with the understanding that I would be doing most, if not all, of the planning and execution solo.

Although the conference did not have as much participation as I hoped, it was a rewarding process and outcome. Ultimately, there were roughly 150 students and 15 teachers who attended from Revelstoke, Kamloops, Penticton, Kelowna, and the North Okanagan-Shuswap, for a total of eight different sessions: two specifically for teachers, and six specifically for students. The feedback I received was positive from all sides, and students left re-energized with new conversations they wanted to have back in their schools.

Susan Hall remarked, “What struck me the most about this amazing event was how the conversations held in sessions spilled out into the spaces between sessions. There was a genuine sense of wonder that fueled a desire for participants to learn more and to share their ideas. In-person gatherings like this present a unique opportunity for our students to test-drive their ideas.”

I was grateful for the presenters, the students, and the teachers who attended, and to all those who engaged in sustainable conversations afterward. My feedback to anyone interested in applying for the grant in the future: start planning now. The application is only available every second year but start planning before it's released so that you are not trying to do it all in a compressed amount of time. The grant can enable you to inspire students and teachers alike through meaningful dialogue, learning, and connection. •

Bargaining at the table, on t



The BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) was formed, but the union had no bargaining rights.

1917

The first teachers' strike in the British Empire occurred in Victoria. There were 178 teachers who refused work for two days over a salary dispute.



Despite not being allowed to bargain for working and learning conditions through collective bargaining, teachers raised concerns about poor classroom conditions. A breakthrough finally occurred when teachers in Vancouver and Burnaby forced their boards to agree to negotiate working and learning conditions contracts.

1969

BC teachers participated actively in the provincial election due to the government's failure to deal with pension improvements for retirees. The New Democratic Party (NDP) won the provincial election and introduced changes to improve teachers' pensions.

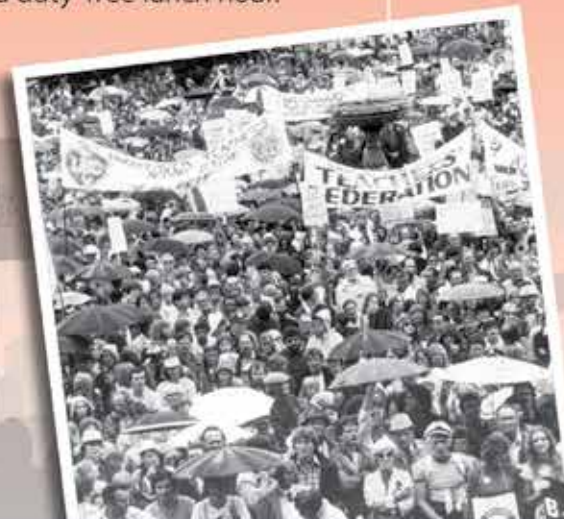
1972

Surrey teachers walked out of their classrooms and travelled to Victoria to protest large class sizes. Subsequently, the BCTF negotiated an agreement with government to hire thousands of additional teachers across the province over several years to dramatically reduce the student-teacher ratio.

1974

Langley teachers protested for a break during the day using the slogan "even teachers deserve a lunch break." They became the first in the province to have a duty-free lunch hour.

1981



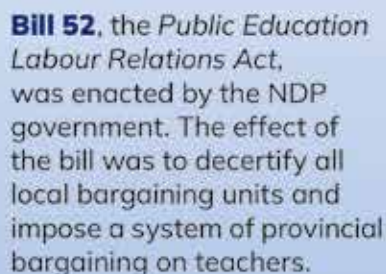
1983

The provincial passed Bills 19 and 20, giving teachers bargaining rights at the local level, the right to strike

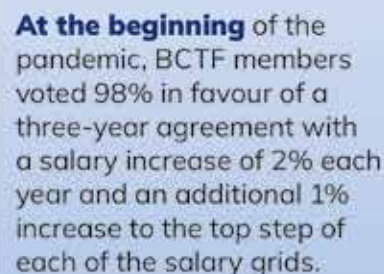
The provincial launched a major legislative assault on services including education, labour and tenants' rights, the clock back of social programs. In protest, even BC—80,000 people to the streets in October. This as Operation S



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At the bargaining table, the employer proposed a 10-year term contract with no class-size limits, no class-composition provisions, and no staffing ratios. Teachers undertook rotating strikes, and in June voted in favour of full withdrawal of services. In the third week of September, an agreement was finally reached with 7.25% over six years, \$11.85 million in extended health and dental benefits, a \$105 million fund to settle retroactive class-size and class-composition grievances, and \$400 million over five years in an education fund to hire additional teachers.



At the beginning of the pandemic, BCTF members voted 98% in favour of a three-year agreement with a salary increase of 2% each year and an additional 1% increase to the top step of each of the salary grids.

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Bills 27 and 28 passed by the provincial Liberal government gutted the collective agreement of class-size, class-composition, and staffing-ratio provisions. Most provisions guaranteeing support for students with special needs were eliminated. Future negotiations of such terms and conditions of employment were made illegal.

The collective bargaining rights that had been stripped in 2002 were reinstated after a huge win at the Supreme Court. It resulted in districts receiving \$50 million the following year to create 1,000 to 1,100 new full-time equivalent teaching positions for the remainder of the school year.

BCTF members voted 94% in favour of a three-year agreement that included a salary increase of more than 13%, maternity/pregnancy leave supplemental employment benefits for all members, and improved extended health benefits, including counselling.

BCTF

R1201 July 2025

Sept/Oct 2025 TEACHER 21



YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY PROJECTS TO ADDRESS YOUTH HEALTH:

BC Adolescent Health Survey lesson plan

By **Melissa Reeves** (she/her), teacher and member of the Economic Justice Action Group, Committee for Action on Social Justice, Vernon

THE BC ADOLESCENT HEALTH SURVEY was first mentioned to me by a colleague at the BCTF. I had no idea what it was but after doing a deeper dive on Google, I was incredibly invested. The survey is administered every five years to BC public school students in Grades 7 to 12. The latest survey, from 2023 (mcs.bc.ca/about_bcahs), was administered to 38,500 students.

I love data and think that real-time, or as real-time as it can be, information is one of our most powerful tools. The survey, administered by The McCreary Centre Society, addresses a wide variety of topics that affect youth in BC. They can't get every student to answer the survey but are able to get a large variety of responses across the province and the results were eye-opening. They tackled a number of topics, including economic well-being, eating behaviours and body image, substance use, and recreational activities, to name a few.

Reading through the data, I was floored by the responses:

- 14% of youth with jobs worked because they needed the money, while 4% worked to supplement family income.
- About 26% of youth were responsible for taking care of a relative (younger siblings or relative with a disability).
- 9% of youth cannot afford to participate in physical activity.
- About 75% of youth expect to continue education after high school (the lowest this number has been in the history of the survey).
- Only 54% of youth feel safe using public transit.
- Youth feel less connected to their community than in previous years.

One thing that stands out to me as someone focused on economic justice is that, based on the Youth Deprivation Index, 24% of youth are lacking at least one item they wished they had (including things like personal hygiene products, a quiet place to sleep, and lunch/money for lunch). So many of the other factors in the study are affected by this measure: when a student is lacking food, their brain cannot be ready to learn; when they lack a safe place to rest, their body simply cannot rest. Post-COVID, youth are struggling at a critical rate, just like adults.

With this in mind, I developed a lesson plan for my Grade 11 Composition class. The lesson focuses on practical uses of English studies, data analysis, understanding how different factors affect each other, and implications of data, all aligning with the English curriculum. It also addresses some of the personal competencies, like communication, critical thinking and reflective thinking, and social awareness and responsibility.

Our school was not one that was selected to participate in the survey, so the students hadn't been exposed to it, but many of the red flags that popped up were very true in our community. I wanted to use this lesson to draw attention to these factors. It was important that students had an opportunity to name the things they struggle with and feel a sense of camaraderie with their peers around the province.

The lesson went really well, and the best part was that there was the possibility of a real-world result. The McCreary Centre Society offers a number of Youth Engagement opportunities, including Youth Action Grants and the Trevor Coburn Memorial Grants Program. The grants are for youth-led community projects (supported by at least one adult) that address the findings of the survey. The Trevor Coburn Grant does specify that the grant proposal needs to address one of four key areas that Trevor was passionate about: peer mentorship, youth homelessness, youth substance use, and youth in and from government care.

My students proposed projects based on the survey data but did not get a chance to submit their grant proposals because of timing (I started this lesson/project far too late in the year). Still, they had some really fantastic ideas about expanding substance use education (specifically around vaping) connecting local businesses to schools in a more direct way to support or sponsor food programs, expanding transit and school bus routes to be more accessible, and getting student groups going again to make connections in the school buildings that have been lost since COVID. I was incredibly moved by their ideas and commitment to improving their community. They spent time with this data, asked me lots of questions about how to read it, and wanted to understand what the implications were, why the survey happened, and what they could do or change. They also identified many areas that they knew were issues locally, things they had noticed with their peers, and also things they didn't think were issues here, allowing me to get a better sense of where the youth in my community are at.

What this taught me is how in tune young people are with what they and their peers need, but they often don't think anyone will listen to them. If you give them your ear, they will surprise you with their insight, their realism, and the ideas they have to address problems that you may never have thought of. After the year was over, I returned to this plan and added to it so that I could do it with Grade 10 or 12 students as well, because if more students see an avenue to contribute to their community, the more likely it is that something will get done.



LESSON PLAN

BC ADOLESCENT HEALTH SURVEY FOR GRADE 11 COMPOSITION



Scan the QR for The McCreary Centre Society's overview of the BC Adolescent Health Survey results.



Content warning: This survey includes content that may be triggering. Ensure mental health supports are available.

Overview: The BC Adolescent Health Survey is administered every five years since its inception in 1992. In its latest year, 2023, it was administered to 38,500 students in BC public schools between Grades 7 and 12.

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to research-based data and the conclusions drawn from that information. After looking at the data and the information gathered, students can apply for Youth Action Grants to address findings from the data in a positive way. They must seek to support or improve youth health (*The Big Picture*, p. 69).

To advance more community-based projects, students will disseminate the data and collaborate to propose projects that could advance the work of the survey.

Time: One or more class periods (depending on student engagement).

Curricular connections: See the online version of this article at [teachermag.ca](https://www.teachermag.ca) for a detailed list.

Resource: The McCreary Centre Society's 2023 report, *The Big Picture: An overview of the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey provincial results*, is available at mcs.bc.ca/about_bcahs or by scanning the QR code above.

STEPS

1. Predictions: Introduce the concept and the eleven subcategories of the survey questions. Ask them to predict what types of questions and data resulted from each category. To save time, give each table group (six) two categories to make predictions about and then share out to the group. Record this information on a whiteboard.

2. Descriptions: Choose a handful of pages (p. 7–68) to distribute to table groups. It's unreasonable to expect students to interact with all the data, so choose maybe two pages of data or one section for each group. Book the laptop cart for students to have laptops to look at the full data but have them analyze one section in depth.


3. Interpretations: Discuss with table groups what this data means and suggests about the experience of youth in BC in 2023. Come up with as many takeaways as possible and identify one aspect that could be addressed with a grant to benefit youth in their community. Write this out on a large piece of chart paper and hang it on the wall for other groups to interact with.

4. Implications: Once all groups have posted their ideas, give each student a stack of sticky notes to write on. Direct them around the room, writing notes, tips, or questions on each sticky before leaving it on the appropriate chart. Then have the groups rework their ideas and develop some alternative strategies as a class.

5. Debrief: As an exit ticket, students will answer the following questions:

- What was the most surprising piece of information you learned today?
- Why do you think this survey was created and continues to be administered?
- Which project idea do you think is the most feasible and why?
- What did you learn from this process?

The lesson may take up to four classes depending on the level of engagement with the material and the drive to apply for an action grant. Make sure students understand that this is supposed to benefit them and their peers as a whole and that the data came from people they might know. This makes it seem more real and relevant in their everyday lives. •



“As we reflect on the essence of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17, we’re thinking about a well-fed future for all BC students.”

WELL-FED GENERATION

School food programs offer more than lunch

By **Sacia Burton** (they/she) and **Chantelle Spicer** (she/they), BC Poverty Reduction Coalition

AS EDUCATORS KNOW, a hungry child is not set up for learning. But hunger is not just a classroom issue—it’s a structural one. School food programs are more than meals—they’re a front-line intervention for poverty reduction, a part of reconciliation practice, and a foundation for student success in BC’s public schools. There is child poverty in every school district in BC. That’s why it makes sense for every public school in BC to have a universally accessible school food program.

Recent investments by the BC and federal governments have moved school food programs into the spotlight. In 2023, the BC government committed \$214 million over three years for Feeding Futures, the largest investment in school food programs in the province’s history. For these investments to be meaningfully applied, we must ensure that no one faces barriers to accessing food in schools. The first principle of BC’s Feeding Futures program lays the groundwork for daily school food access in an “equitable, accessible and non-stigmatizing manner” for all students. To make this a reality, school food programs must meet the accessibility needs of students and ensure all students have the same food options and receive food from the same place.

There are many reasons a school lunchbox may be empty or inadequately filled. Whether the issue is chronic, sporadic, or a one-off situation, lack of access to nutritious food affects student well-being. Primary students may not yet understand why their lunch looks different from their classmates, but they feel the effects just the same. Older students, though more aware of their home-life context, may face social pressures that prevent them from flagging their need.

“School food programs are ... a front-line intervention for poverty reduction, a part of reconciliation practice, and a foundation for student success in BC’s public schools.”

Universally available food programs eliminate social and bureaucratic barriers for students at any age.

Beyond filling bellies and putting classmates on an equal social footing at mealtime, school food programs offer space for reconciliation in practice. Ten years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report, calls for better education, health, and closing outcome gaps for Indigenous children remain urgent.

A part of this reconciliation work is the sustainable inclusion of local, Indigenous foods into school lunches, as modelled by School District 50 in Haida Gwaii, which also engages students in growing and harvesting practices. Promoting food literacy and access in tandem would support the well-being of the 90% of Indigenous children and youth in BC attending public schools.

Effective learning is only possible when students are well-fed and free from food insecurity and poverty. These challenges, if left unaddressed, affect future employment opportunities and lead to lower educational outcomes and further marginalization for vulnerable students. As we reflect on the essence of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17, we’re thinking about a well-fed future for all BC students. By supporting unrestricted access to school food programs in BC, we have the opportunity to equalize the school experience for all.

Teachers already go above and beyond—sharing snacks, checking in with hungry students, and stretching limited resources, which often amounts to an over-full plate of responsibility. A universal food program doesn’t replace that care—it supports and strengthens it. •



SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS IN ACTION

Q&A with Fatima Da Silva, founder, executive director, and executive chef of Nourish Cowichan

Interview by Tobias Lemay, teacher, Cowichan Valley

NOURISH COWICHAN has been providing students with accessible food at school for eight years. The founder, Fatima Da Silva, has led the expansion of the program to remove barriers for more students to access food at school without stigma.

TELL ME YOUR STORY; HOW DID NOURISH COWICHAN START?

Nourish was created in 2016 out of a need to support one school with their breakfast program. The issue of students coming to school without a meal was identified by community members involved with our local schools. At the time, the Cowichan Valley had one of the highest rates of child poverty in the province and no sustainable school foods program. The reason we started here was merely because I lived here in the valley.

HOW HAS THE PROGRAM GROWN?

We have come a long way, but our vision continues to grow. Nourish has grown beyond our expectations for our first eight years. Initially we were set up to do a breakfast program in one school, and today we offer breakfast, lunch, snacks, and a weekend program to over 2,700 students in 23 schools in the Cowichan Valley, as well as a lunch program in 10 schools in the Pacific Rim School District. While we are not directly serving the meals at the schools, we ask school district partners to support our vision of an open-door policy free of stigmatization.

WHAT ARE THE LOGISTICS OF THE PROGRAM?

The logistics of running this program are big. That said, we are surrounded by driven, enthusiastic, and compassionate volunteers and staff that prioritize the well-being of the students above all. We have several chefs as part of our crew, as well as drivers, weekend bags packers, gardeners, and social media and special events helpers. We have built a great relationship with suppliers and farmers. In order to maintain the consistency we require for the program, most of our supplies are purchased; we cannot rely on just donations because of our volume.

Each school has the autonomy to figure out how they want their distribution of food to be done based on their infrastructural capacity. The only thing that we consistently advocate for is that the meals be available every school day and that no child should ever be turned down or made to feel unwelcome.

HOW DOES THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT YOUR PROGRAM?

Our program started as a grassroots movement, and it has maintained its focus in being community driven, which encompasses many businesses and community members in general. Our commercial kitchen is a true testament of that strong partnership: its construction was fully funded by our community. Nourish has an average of 70 to 80 volunteers.

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR GREATEST FUNDING SOURCES?

Initially all of our funding came from community partners, grant applications, and fundraisers. We are so relieved to now have the Feeding Futures funding from the province as well. We continue to operate with multiple sources of funding.

ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

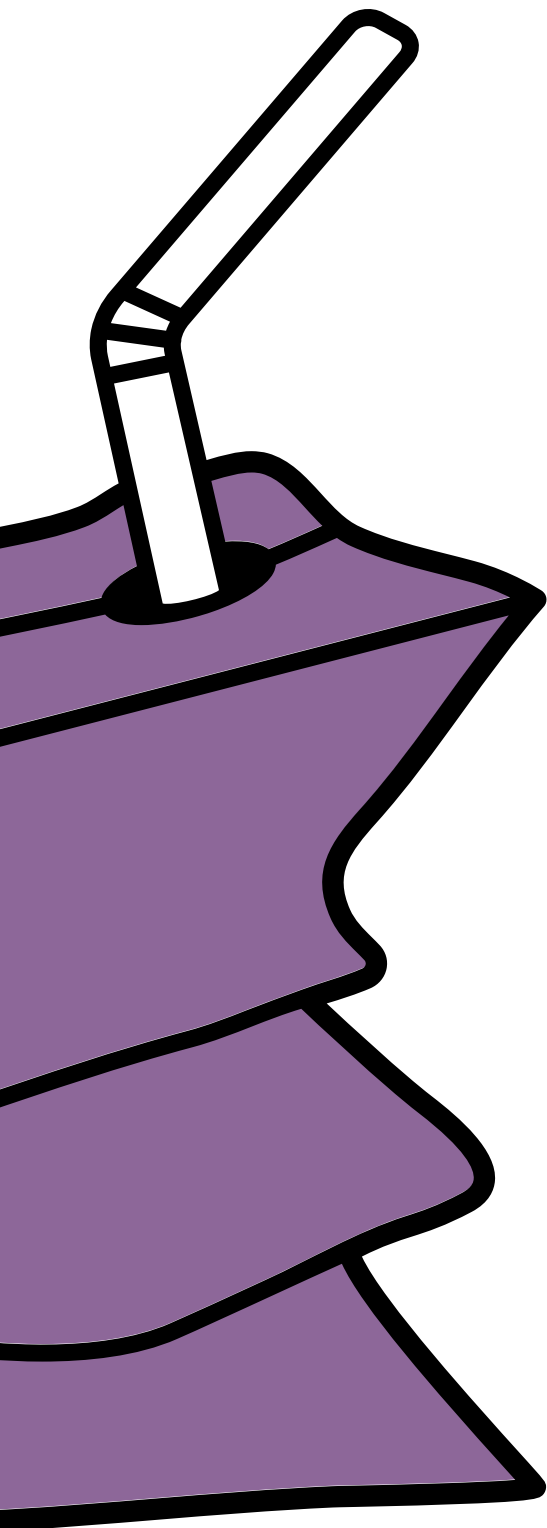
I am extremely grateful for the support that we are getting and for being able to have a seat at the table as we work toward shaping the future of our food programs in schools. I hope that at the provincial level, as well as national level, we continue to diligently work toward a universal school food program, free of any stigmas or barriers, for every student. •



Tobias Lemay (left) and Fatima Da Silva (right). Tobias Lemay photos.

PUBLIC FUNDS SHOULD FUND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By the Economic Justice Action Group, Committee for Action on Social Justice



AS PART OF THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM in beautiful British Columbia, we are proud of the work our colleagues do across the province. Most of us don't choose the profession for the money, nor the ease, as any Kindergarten teacher can tell you, but for the love of learning and children. Education is not something we take lightly, and it takes a special type of person to do it. Many of us feel like this is our calling and that providing an education is one of the best gifts we could ever give another person.

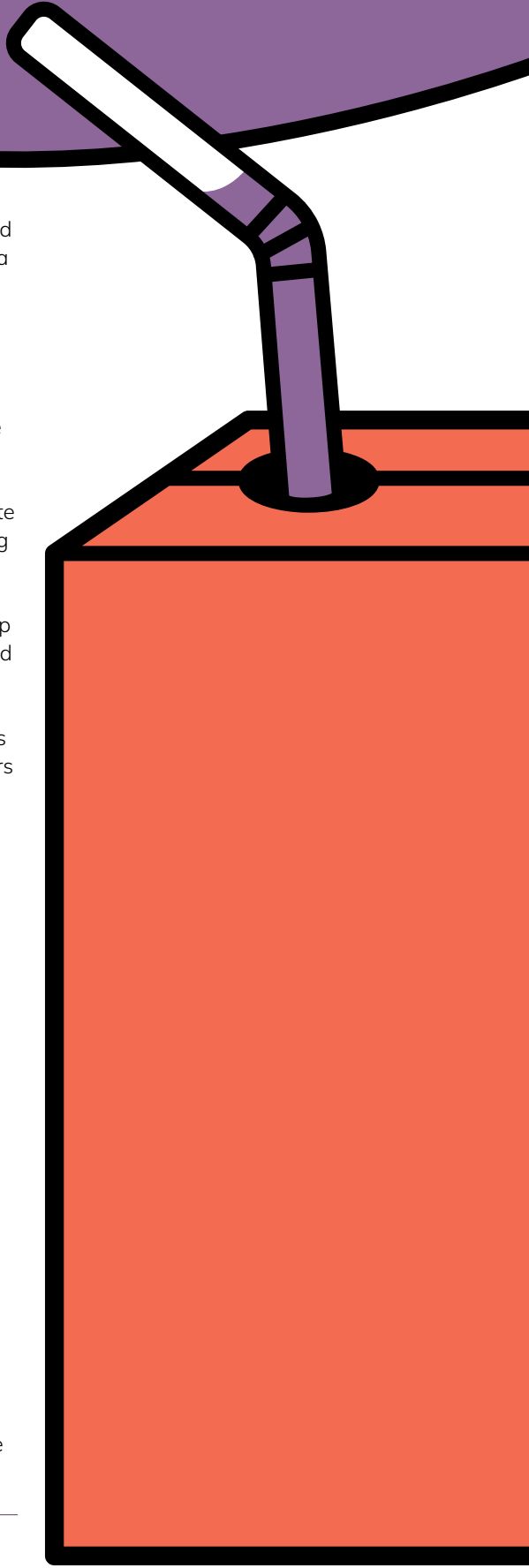
We fill gaps in the system by spending our hard-earned paycheques on supplies, books, food, or other items as needed for our classrooms. Many of us make a habit of having a "snack bin" in our classrooms because we know that kids often come to school with no food in their system and, therefore, cannot learn. Instead, as a result of their hunger students may act out, fall asleep, or skip class to find food. To mediate these situations we provide food as well as basic school supplies.

The problem with our current funding model is that we don't have enough money to create the public education system students deserve—but we could. We could have a system with enough funding for building repairs and upgrades, a system with enough specialist and inclusion teachers, a system where bussing doesn't have to be partially subsidized by struggling families, and a system where no student goes hungry. So why do we continue to divert funding to private schools instead of addressing the gaps and inconsistencies in our current public system?

We feel strongly that everyone deserves the right to a basic, quality education. What the current system in BC has done is set up two tiers: the first is the public system that is available to everyone regardless of income, family status, religion, or background. The second tier, however, is allowed to pick and choose who to let in to their schools, in some cases, requiring they have the ability to pay thousands of dollars in private school fees. These students, through no virtue or fault of their own, are being provided a separate education that isn't available to everyone. This "exclusive" education, despite its limited access, is subsidized by taxpayer dollars.

Currently in BC, private schools receive either 50% or 35% of the per-student annual government funding allocated to public schools. Schools that receive 50% do not exceed the per-student spending of nearby public schools, while those that receive 35% do spend more than public schools. This funding is in addition to the property-tax exemptions and tax credits that private schools receive, including those that charge more than \$40,000 per year in tuition and receive more than a million dollars in donations from families attending the schools.

You will always have the detractors on any topic, and this is no different. Organizations like the Fraser Institute are heavily in favour of private schools, in part because the content being taught can be controlled by special interests. With an anti-SOGI push still moving across the province, special-interest groups are advocating for more parental control over education than ever. What educators and people working toward a more inclusive, kind, community-centred society should be concerned about is the influence of non-educators on education systems, the impact people with harmful views can have on the next generation, and what is not being included at these schools. It should be concerning enough that we are running a fundamental part of



“By continuing to fund private schools, we are ... deepening the inequalities that have been growing in the last decade.”

society as a business, when it is well-established and internationally agreed that an education is a basic right of every child.

We believe that no child is more worthy or deserving than the next. This is true no matter their family history, medical diagnoses,

immigration status, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity. We want to believe that most people have this perspective too; it's a well-known fact that education is the greatest equalizer and the most powerful tool we have to help people rise out of poverty. By continuing to fund private schools, we are actually deepening the inequalities that have been growing in the last decade. The wealth gap between those in low-income brackets and those in upper-middle and high income brackets has widened each year since the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics Canada showed that the gap between Canada's highest and lowest income households reached a record high in the first quarter of 2025.¹

With districts across the province facing extreme levels of budget shortfalls and position cuts, it doesn't feel right to divert hundreds of millions of dollars to families who exited the pandemic better off than ever at the expense of families who are struggling more than ever. Districts such as Maple Ridge, Surrey, and Nicola-Similkameen are cutting band programs, Vancouver is leasing school district land to developers, and North Vancouver, having sold off school sites in the early 2010s, is feeling the pressure now that enrollment is increasing and land prices are astronomically high.

In these expensive times, the best investment we can make is in our future and the children who will build that future. This requires thoughtful and purposeful spending in areas that are available to every child, especially as the wealth gap continues to grow with no sign of slowing down. In a capitalist and individualist world, the most revolutionary thing we could do is focus on building community that welcomes and celebrates the achievements and contributions of everyone who wishes to participate.

Our plea to the NDP and any future government is this: if you are truly on the side of working-class people and want to build a sustainable, strong future in this province, stop giving money to a system that furthers inequality. If we are against private health care because it prioritizes the rich over those who need care most, then being against private education should be the next logical step. Place your faith in the public education system that has worked for decades to further society with some of the most caring, self-sacrificing individuals you will ever meet. Fail to do so at your own peril; the more we support a two-tiered system of citizenship, the closer we come to destruction. •

1 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250716/dq250716a-eng.htm

Daa'ing Gwa'ds
\$26.89

BC Living Wage Rates 2024

Port Hardy
\$24.88

Comox Valley
\$24.36

Clayoquot Sound
\$27.42

Nanaimo
\$23.79

Cowichan Valley
\$25.71

Greater Victoria
\$26.78

Salt Spring Island
\$26.25

Lower Mainland & Sunshine Coast

Powell River
\$26.49

Whistler
\$28.09

Sunshine Coast
\$26.42

Squamish
\$26.76

Metro Vancouver
\$27.05

Fraser Valley
\$23.23

LIVING WAGES MATTER FOR EVERYONE IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

By **Anastasia French**, Managing
Director, Living Wage BC

AS TEACHERS, you witness daily the impact of economic hardship on students. You see the child who comes to class hungry because there was no breakfast, or the teenager anxious about their family's risk of eviction. These are not isolated incidents; they reflect a deeper problem: too many parents and caregivers are not earning enough to provide a stable, secure life for their children.

If we truly want to support student success and foster strong school communities, we must start with a simple but powerful idea: every worker connected to our schools deserves to earn a living wage.

A living wage is the hourly amount someone needs to earn to afford the essentials like housing, food, transportation, childcare, and other basic needs, based on the actual cost of living in their community. It's not about luxuries or saving for the future; it's about dignity and being able to meet fundamental needs.

In British Columbia, the minimum wage is currently \$17.85 per hour, but this falls short of what most people need to survive in many parts of the province. Research shows that the living wage varies widely across BC, from \$20.81 in Grand Forks to \$28.09 in Whistler. In Metro Vancouver, one of the most expensive regions in Canada, the living

wage is \$27.05 per hour—over \$9 more than the minimum wage.

This gap means many workers, including those who support our schools in vital ways, don't earn enough to cover basic costs. More than 740,000 people in BC earn less than the living wage. In Metro Vancouver alone, nearly 37% of employees earn less than the living wage. Among them, 57% are women and 66% are racialized workers. Nearly half of all racialized women in the region earn below the living wage threshold. This isn't just an economic issue; it's a matter of gender and racial justice.

“In Metro Vancouver alone, nearly 37% of employees earn less than the living wage. Among them, 57% are women and 66% are racialized workers.”



Image and data from Living Wage BC:
livingwagebc.ca/living_wage_rates

Many of these workers are part of our school communities—custodians who keep classrooms safe and clean, cafeteria workers who provide meals to hungry students, bus drivers who safely transport children, and education assistants who support learning. These roles are sometimes invisible but essential. Schools simply cannot function without these dedicated workers. These are not “low skill” jobs; they require professionalism, reliability, and care.

Public institutions like school boards should be leading the way by setting an example, ensuring that all workers, whether directly employed or contracted, are paid enough to live with dignity. But only two of BC’s 60 school districts, New

Westminster (SD 40) and Qualicum (SD 69), are certified Living Wage Employers. Even more concerning, the Vancouver School Board recently abandoned its commitment to paying a living wage. This decision sends a discouraging message to the very workers who keep our schools functioning and safe. It undermines the values of equity and community that schools should embody and adds financial strain on families already struggling in one of Canada’s most expensive cities.

This has real consequences for students. For example, one Vancouver school bus driver, whose pay was cut by \$4 an hour, shared how he drives children with autism to school who rely on consistency and familiar faces. Staff turnover caused by pay cuts will disrupt those vital relationships, creating additional challenges for students who need stability.

Low wages don’t just affect workers; they also affect students and families.

Many low-wage jobs come with unpredictable hours, often nights or weekends. Parents working these shifts find it hard to attend school meetings, help with homework, or maintain consistent home routines. This disconnect weakens the vital link between families and schools and affects student learning and engagement.

When people are not paid enough to live on, they face impossible choices. They skip meals or medications to pay rent. They stay in unsafe housing or take on multiple jobs just to scrape by. The stress of living paycheck to paycheck takes a toll on mental and physical health, placing additional pressure on our already stretched health care system. For children, poverty can result in reduced concentration, chronic absenteeism, and lower academic performance. The ripple effects are profound and far reaching.

But it doesn’t have to be this way.

BC has the tools to bridge the gap between the minimum wage and a true living wage. A co-ordinated approach that addresses both wages and the cost of living is necessary. The provincial government could lead the way by becoming a certified Living Wage Employer. This would mean ensuring that all public-sector employees, direct staff, as well as those working for contractors or publicly funded organizations like school boards, earn enough to meet their basic needs.

At the same time, we must address the affordability crisis that’s driving up living costs across the province. This means investing in affordable housing, so workers don’t spend half or more of their income on rent. Expanding \$10-a-day childcare across the province would help parents afford to work. Improving public transit, especially in rural and suburban areas, would reduce dependence on costly car ownership. Providing free school meals for all children and supporting local food systems would stabilize food prices and back BC farmers.

These aren’t lofty or distant goals. They are immediate necessities. Every day we delay action, more British Columbians are forced to make heartbreaking choices. More children go to school hungry. More families slide further into poverty. More front-line workers burn out from jobs that leave them exhausted and underpaid.

We can eliminate working poverty in British Columbia. But it will take political courage, a commitment to justice, and solidarity across all sectors.

As teachers, you understand what it means to be underpaid, overworked, and undervalued. You’ve marched for fair wages, fought for smaller class sizes, and demanded respect for your profession. Let’s extend that solidarity to every worker in the school community.

Let’s build a BC where every worker, especially those who support our schools, can afford to live with dignity. •

ECONOMIC JUSTICE Unionization lesson plan

By **Brandon Mulholland** (he/him), teacher, Burnaby

Objective: Learning how unions and collective bargaining help to raise the living standards of all workers and help reduce inequality, discrimination, and exploitation.

Big Ideas BC Curriculum: Social Studies 10–12: Understanding economic systems helps us make informed decisions; Workplace Math 10–11: Apply understanding of gross/net pay, deductions, and workplace benefits; Social Studies 4–7: Economic and technical changes can affect communities and environments.

Curricular Competencies: Assess the significance of political and economic systems and their impact on society; Evaluate different perspectives on historical and contemporary issues.

Key lesson information: Collective bargaining and unionization are a partial solution to reducing wealth inequality and raising the living standards of the working class.

The Labour Heritage Centre has many resources/videos/lesson plans on the history of unions and labour rights in BC:

www.labourheritagecentre.ca

Unit plan: These lessons can be adapted to suit most grade levels and can be combined with other units.

LESSON 1: INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF UNIONS AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Pre-activity: Introduce unions and the idea of collective bargaining. On chart paper, start with a Know, Want to Know, Learned (KWL) chart that can be updated throughout the series of lessons.

Prompt questions: What is a union? What have you heard about them? Why do they matter? What do they do?

Hook: Look at the following short videos and host a classroom discussion:



What Is a Labour Union?
How Do Unions Work?

Why Unions Matter to
You—Robert Reich



Following the videos, update the KWL chart by writing new information students gained in the “Learned” section.

Research as a class

- According to the Canadian Labour Congress, unionized workers in Canada earn, on average, \$7 more per hour than their non-unionized counterparts. This wage premium is even more significant for women and young workers.¹
- Statistics Canada has a tool where students can research the wage discrepancy between unionized and non-unionized workers in Canada by year.²
- Unions raise the wages of non-union workplaces as well. Union negotiated wages are often higher therefore non-union employers need to raise their wages in order to be competitive. This is most evident where union membership is high and employers fear losing their workers to unionized work sites.

Exit slip: What are two things you learned about unions that you didn't know before? What surprised you?

Extension: If you are working on graphing in math, have the class create a bar graph that compares the wage discrepancy (averages) between unions and non-union workers.

LESSON 2: COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Hook: What Is the Collective Bargaining Process? (Scan right for video; review for the relevant sections.)

Pre-activity: Have the students break into small groups and discuss what they think workers would want to prioritize in a collective agreement. Additionally, think about some conditions the employer might want to propose in this agreement.



Have groups share their ideas that they came up with during group discussions. Write down some of the key ideas on the board or chart paper.

Create priorities: In their groups, have them create priorities as students at the school. What would they like to improve if they were collectively organized? They can write ideas down on chart paper, mini-whiteboards, or type them out.

See the extended version of this lesson plan at teachermag.ca for elementary and secondary prompts.

Exit slip: Share out and update KWL class chart.

LESSONS 3–5: FORM A UNION AND HOST A MOCK STRIKE

See the extended version of this lesson plan at teachermag.ca for suggested activities.

Closing: Debrief with what they learned, their thoughts on collective organizing, and if their view of unions changed. Update the KWL chart. •

¹ www.canadianlabour.ca/get-into-a-union/union-edge/

² www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/env.action?pid=1410006601&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.1&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.2&pickMembers%5B2%5D=5.1&pickMembers%5B3%5D=6.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2024&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2024&referencePeriods=20240101%2C20240101



TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES FOR SCHOOL START UP

By the *Teacher Magazine* Advisory Board

MANY OF US have our go-to activities for the beginning of the school year that help us get to know the new students in our classrooms and start building community. Being mindful of the way we introduce these activities to students can make a big difference in making them feel welcome and accepted. The following strategies for common school start-up activities help make sure your practice is trauma-informed; they recognize that summer break can be a difficult time for some students, and not all students have the same opportunities to explore or play over the summer.

WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING YOU DID THIS SUMMER

When introducing this activity to your students, you as the teacher can share a local activity you did over the summer, instead of something extravagant. For example:

This summer, I took a trip to the community pool. I started by carefully packing everything I would need: my bathing suit, goggles, towel, flip-flops, and a snack. Then I walked with my family all the way to the pool. At the pool, I swam in the deep end, splashed in the shallow end, and sat in the hot tub until it got too hot to handle. After a while, I even worked up the courage to jump off the high dive.

By sharing a local, accessible activity as your story, the activity becomes less intimidating for students who might initially think they don't have anything to share.

Other writing prompts about summer could include the following:

- What didn't happen this summer that you wished had happened?
- Should summer break be extended or shortened?
- Write a summer advice column.

MAKE FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS

Students can make friendship bracelets with one bead for every member of the classroom community. If members join the class later in the school year, students can add a bead to their bracelet to make sure everyone is represented. Instead of encouraging students to swap bracelets, encourage them to wear their own bracelet or keep it somewhere safe.

WRITE OR SHARE ABOUT SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO YOU

With this writing prompt, students can choose to focus on their family if they'd like to, or instead, they can also choose a friend, a pet, another safe adult in their life, a favourite toy, or an artifact they treasure. Family can be a sensitive topic for some students. Teachers may not have a thorough understanding of students' family dynamics or home life, especially early in the school year, so giving students an opportunity to opt out of talking specifically about family can make some students more comfortable.

IDENTITY HEXAGON

Students can create a hexagon with sections representing different parts of their identity or different things they enjoy. Then, in small groups (and eventually as a class), they can match sides of their hexagons with others' ideas. This builds class community by giving students an opportunity to learn about their classmates and see what they have in common. Focusing on identity in a way that invites students to think about how they define themselves gives students more agency and control over what they share.

This activity can be used instead of activities that focus on the history of students' names or activities that ask for information about specific aspects of identity. Not all students have access to their family history or cultural history. As such, not all students will know the story of their name or what it means. And not all students are comfortable sharing all aspects of their identity. •



Thais with a Paulo Freire portrait at the IPF in Brazil.

TEACHER PROFILE

THAIS PIMENTEL CABRAL

Centring relationships in anti-oppression work

ANTI-OPPRESSION WORK has been the focus of Thais Pimentel Cabral's pedagogy for her entire career. Last year, she was awarded the Intercultural Trust Award at the BC Multicultural and Anti-Racism Awards, which aim to honour advocates who combat racism and create a more inclusive province.

Thais's anti-oppression work is rooted in relationality and reciprocity. She introduces herself to students only as Thais to help disrupt classroom power dynamics. She finds dropping the formal title of Ms. helps with relationship-building because it sets a tone of everyone being equal.

At the start of the school year, Thais focuses on getting to know students so she can tailor her lessons and curriculum to the individuals in her class.

An important part of anti-oppressive pedagogy for Thais is giving students agency in the classroom. Students have a say in everything from content to assessment, and they always have an opportunity to make connections between the curriculum and their identity.

"I want to celebrate their identities; I want them to investigate their own stories and see how those stories intersect with history," said Thais.

When student reports of racism began to increase in Thais's school, she became the teacher sponsor for a student-led anti-racism group called the BIPOC Liberation Collective (BLC). The group welcomed students from marginalized communities to create a support network.

The value of a support network for folks experiencing racism is immeasurable. Thais draws on her personal experiences with racism to support students in finding action-based solutions to addressing the racism they experience.

Thais first suggested a book club with the BLC using *This Book Is Anti-Racist* by Tiffany Jewell so students could develop a better understanding of how to name and dismantle racism. From there, students felt empowered to take action. With Thais's support, students created and delivered interactive workshops about different anti-oppression and anti-bullying topics to elementary students at three feeder schools surrounding their secondary school.

"Students from the BIPOC Liberation Collective deeply engaged my Grade 3 students on topics like racism and allyship via meaningful conversations and scenarios that reached students at all levels," said Krystal Ng, Surrey teacher. "The workshops gave students the vocabulary to describe injustices they experienced and empowered students to stand up to all forms of racism in our school community. Thais and the BIPOC Liberation Collective are doing truly transformational leadership anti-racism work through their workshops."

The BLC also led celebrations within their school to make sure students from different backgrounds feel seen and welcomed. Celebrations include a Black Music Night, Eid celebration, and Dia de los Muertos.

"In the three or so years the BLC has been running with Thais as its sponsor teacher, its positive impact is undeniable," said Jane Akindele-Abe, a former BLC student participant. "From the individual level, up to the provincial level where it drafted and executed the province's first K-12 anti-racist workshop, the BLC was a much-needed group, akin to a safe haven."

Outside of her classroom, Thais's anti-oppression work continues through the union. She has been a BCTF facilitator, is a member of the Anti-Oppression Educators' Collective, and participates



Thais (centre) with her parents, Carlos Cabral (left) and Zilma Maria Pimentel Cabral (right).

“There would not be a relationship between the BCTF and the Paulo Freire Institute without Thais; it was driven by her passion to have more people understand what anti-oppression work looks like.” – Lizanne Foster

in local committees, including the Surrey Teachers’ Association (STA) International Solidarity Committee.

In 2021, the STA International Solidarity Committee discussed providing financial support to teacher organizations in South America. Thais volunteered to look into establishing relationships with organizations in Brazil, a country she has strong connections to and experience teaching in.

At that time, Paulo Freire’s legacy in Brazil was under attack from Bolsonaro’s government. Freire’s philosophy about liberation through education, and education as a tool for social change, contrasted with Bolsonaro’s far-right ideology. As such, the Paulo Freire Institute was facing severe funding cuts.

Over the course of two years, and countless emails and calls, Thais drew on her experience living and teaching in Brazil and BC to build a relationship with the Paulo Freire Institute (IPF) in Brazil.

“Thais [...] was responsible for the foundation of this partnership, introducing the IPF to everyone, translating the documents, identifying common points of struggle and resistance,” said Angela Biz Antunes, Pedagogical Director at the Paulo Freire Institute. “Her boldness, creativity, [and] persistence found ways to clear up some aspects of bureaucracy, making the partnership viable.”

Eventually, it was clear that this partnership had the potential to create meaningful and lasting change in both Brazil and BC. She presented at the BCTF International Solidarity Committee to raise awareness of the threat minority groups faced under Bolsonaro’s government and share her vision of how relationship-building can create international solidarity that is more horizontal and less hierarchal.

“It was important to participate in international solidarity based on reciprocity, not based on economic power,” said Thais.

Her idea for the BCTF’s relationship with the IPF was to establish a partnership where both organizations contribute something. The BCTF would support the IPF financially. In return, the IPF would offer professional development opportunities and anti-oppression training to BC teachers. During her time as a BCTF facilitator for anti-racism workshops, Thais saw first-hand how anti-oppression training could improve BC’s public education system. The idea of an exchange program where teachers could learn about anti-oppressive pedagogy came from this experience designing and facilitating workshops.

“Thais truly was a warrior in helping the Paulo Freire Institute survive and also thrive,” said Annie Ohana, STA and WR Long Committee member. “She was and

is integral to building this *intercambio* relationship. What I took away from her herculean efforts was that so many of our members give their heart, soul, heritage, and lived experiences to our union so that we can be ever-more inclusive.”

Thais’s presentation eventually led to the BCTF’s first international solidarity trip to the IPF in São Paulo, Brazil, where BCTF members had an opportunity to learn about Freirean pedagogy. Members reported that the trip was transformational for their own practices as teachers in BC.

Building this relationship for the union was a way for Thais to honour her connection to Brazil while also decolonizing our education system. It gave teachers an opportunity to learn from their colleagues in Brazil, and to bring that anti-oppressive pedagogy into their schools where more teachers and students can benefit from it.

“There would not be a relationship between the BCTF and the Paulo Freire Institute without Thais; it was driven by her passion to have more people understand what anti-oppression work looks like,” said Lizanne Foster, retired teacher who was formerly on the STA International Solidarity committee. “Every step of Thais’s teaching and being includes anti-oppressive philosophy; she lives this work.” •



BUILDING BELONGING THROUGH MOVEMENT

The heart behind the Comox Valley Inclusive Track Meet

By **Jina Taylor**, District Lead Teacher for Physical Literacy, Comox Valley

WHEN WE FIRST ENVISIONED an inclusive track meet here in the Comox Valley, it was with a simple but powerful goal: to create a space where students with disabilities could feel celebrated, empowered, and—most importantly—valued. A few years ago, Mat Zadvorny, the driving force behind the vision for this event, brought forward the idea of launching an inclusive track meet in our district. Having volunteered for many years at the Special Track Meet in Surrey, and learning alongside Marg Geddes, the long-time organizer and principal behind Surrey's event, Mat saw first-hand the joy, confidence, and sense of belonging these meets brought to students. He knew this kind of experience would have a lasting impact here as well. When he approached me with the idea of assembling a team to bring the event to life in the Comox Valley, I jumped at the opportunity. From there, we began planning School District 71's inaugural inclusive track meet, joined by fellow organizer Amanda Lange.

Last spring, I had the joy of co-leading our second annual event alongside Mat and Amanda. Together, with our phenomenal volunteers and community partners, we created a day the kids—and all of us—will never forget.

In 2024, we welcomed 80 student athletes. In 2025, that number grew to 120. That's not just growth in numbers: that's growth in belonging, opportunity, and visibility for kids who too often don't see themselves represented in sport.

The day featured eight adapted activity stations designed for a wide range of abilities: wheelchair races, obstacle courses, long jump, soccer, water-bottle sticker decorating, javelin, boccia, and beach volleyball. The event culminated in a minimarathon and bubble party—two moments that lit up the entire track with laughter, cheering, and more than a few happy tears.

What struck me the most? The smiles. The hugs. The lack of meltdowns. For many of our students, life outside of this one day can be filled with barriers, sensory overwhelm, and exclusion. But here, surrounded by peers, volunteers, and a community that sees their potential, students thrive. By fostering an inclusive space, we can make kids feel valued.

“... surrounded by
peers, volunteers,
and a community
that sees
their potential,
students thrive.”

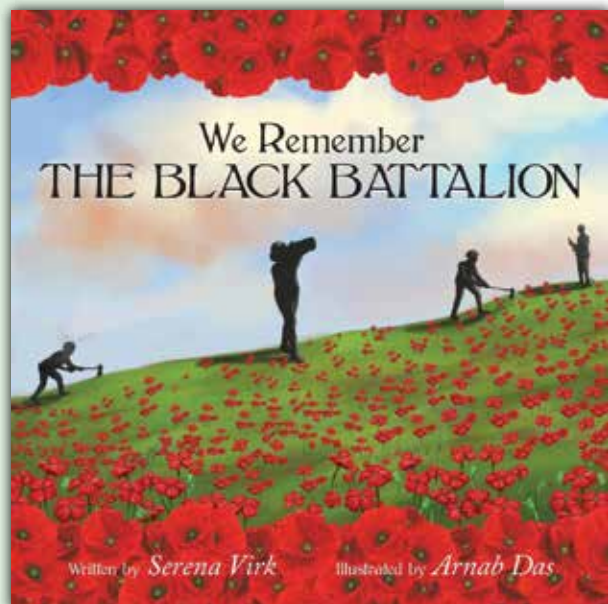
Organizing an event like this requires collaboration with community partners who have experience making sports accessible. We were grateful to work with Indigenous Sport, Physical Activity & Recreation Council, Pacific Sport Vancouver Island, SET-BC, and OneAbility. These organizations provided volunteers, introduced students to wheelchair sports, brought

inclusive games that ignited excitement and co-operation among our students, and inspired us with their leadership in the inclusive sport movement. The OneAbility Games are leading the charge toward the first-ever multisport disability games in BC, slated for May 2026 at the Richmond Oval. I'm honoured to be a part of the Educator Champion Network helping to shape that historic event, and excited that we will be able to share resources and learnings from the Comox Valley Inclusive Track Meet with other school districts and educators across the province through the OneAbility Games Community Resource Hub.

We also partnered with many local volunteers and donors. Over 80 volunteers stepped up: parents, educators, support staff, high school leadership students, members of the community, small business owners, and more. They supported, cheered, coached, and celebrated every single child. Their support ensured we had the resources, equipment, and extras, like the bubble party, ribbons, and fun touches, to create a truly memorable experience for every participant.

The support of our tireless volunteers, our amazing students and families, and the wider community helped transform this track meet from an event into a true celebration of all abilities. I'm honoured to work alongside Mat and Amanda who devoted countless hours to ensure every detail was thoughtfully managed. I'm looking forward to watching this event bring joy and belonging to our community again next year.

Let's keep growing, together. •



BOOK GIVEAWAY

Upload a teaching resource to bctf.ca/classroom-resources before October 31 for your chance to win a copy of *We Remember the Black Battalion*. Teachers who upload a resource will be entered in a draw to win one of three copies of this book. Or visit www.virkbooks.com to buy a copy and find free lesson activities.



Screenshot from www.no2constructionbattalion.ca.

Visit www.no2constructionbattalion.ca and www.blackcanadianveterans.com to learn more about the Black Battalion.

HAVE YOU HEARD OF THE NO. 2 CONSTRUCTION BATTALION?

Highlighting the contributions of Black Canadians in WW1

By **Serena Virk** (she/her), teacher and author, Ontario

IT IS NEVER TOO LATE to learn about No. 2 Construction Battalion, also known as the Black Battalion. In the First World War, when so many brave young people enlisted to fight, there were many Black men who wanted to join, but many were denied because of racism from commanding officers. Instead, the Black Battalion was created. It was primarily a labour unit that supported the war effort by cutting lumber, milling logs, and maintaining infrastructure.

These men were still soldiers, and they served Canada proudly. *We Remember the Black Battalion* features a free-verse poem about Black Canadian soldiers that introduces topics like racism and discrimination in a format suitable for young readers. A glossary and reflection questions section help educators engage with students on the issues raised in the book.

MORE ONLINE RESOURCES ABOUT THE BLACK BATTALION

To complement the book, I created www.virkbooks.com, a website offering year-long, cross-curricular lesson activities for teachers. The lesson activities are designed for primary and junior grades. By connecting history to multiple subjects, VirkBooks empowers educators to teach about the Black Battalion while meeting curriculum goals in social studies, language arts, math, French, and technology.

In addition to the book and lesson activities, educators are encouraged to use the No. 2 Construction Battalion website, www.no2constructionbattalion.ca, as a research tool. This resource provides historical insights through member profiles, the battalion's myths, and a video gallery. Teachers can guide students in exploring archival materials, photographs, and stories to build a deeper understanding of the soldiers' experiences.

For example, students might use the website to research where individual battalion members lived and map their journeys to enlistment. This activity can be tied to the curriculum and fosters critical thinking about the social and geographic diversity of Canada's Black communities during the early 20th century.

The website also includes lesson plans for teachers that can accompany the stories, videos, and other resources about the Black Battalion.

Teachers may also be interested in visiting www.blackcanadianveterans.com to read more stories about members of the Black Battalion as well as other contributions of Black Canadians in the military.

WHY THIS STORY MATTERS

Teaching about the No. 2 Construction Battalion is an opportunity to highlight the contributions of Black Canadians to the nation's history. By integrating *We Remember the Black Battalion* into the classroom, educators can spark meaningful discussions about fairness, representation, and how history shapes the present. The book's lessons encourage students to reflect on the importance of inclusion and the value of remembering those who paved the way for a more equitable future. •

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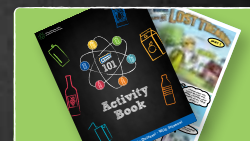
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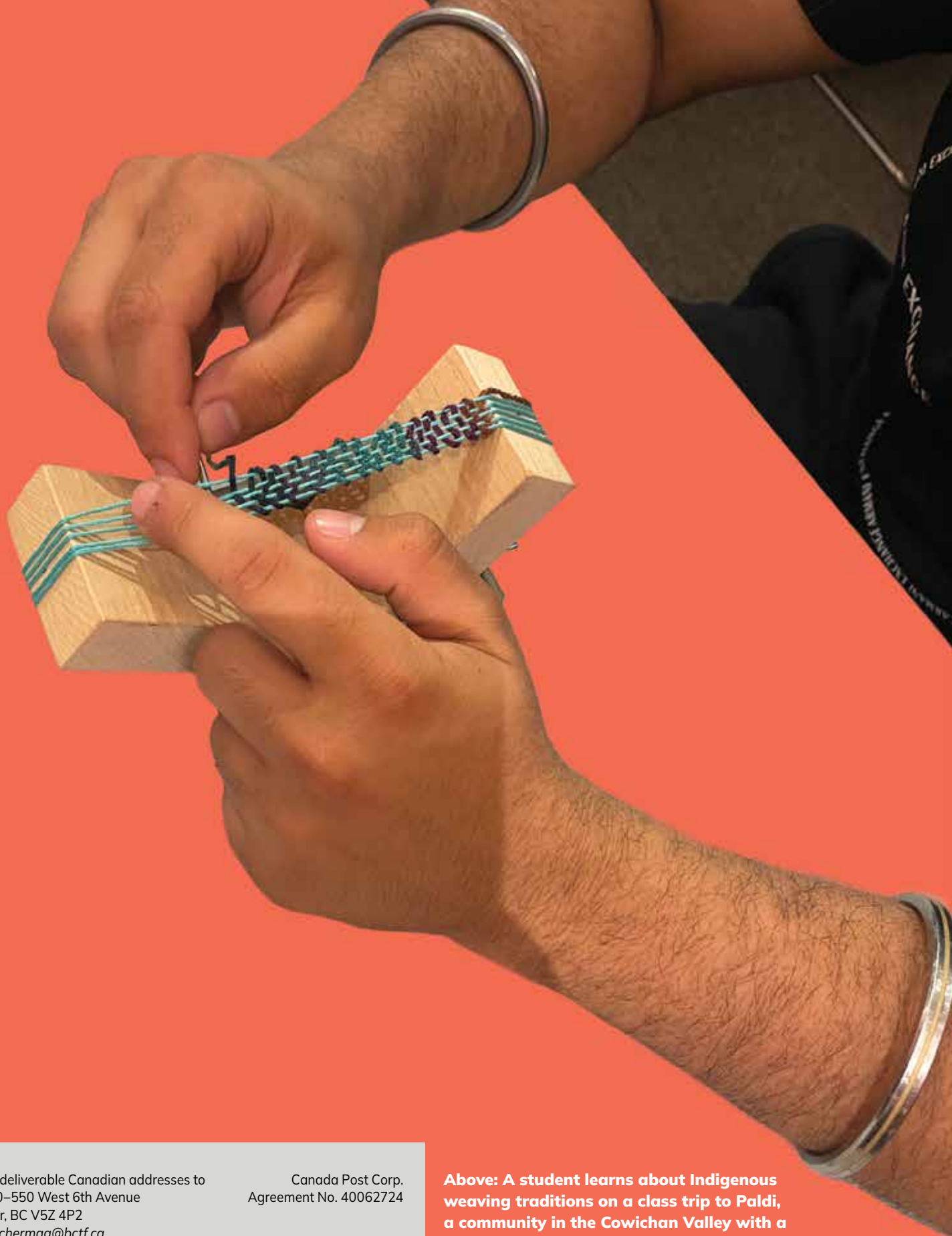
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Above: A student learns about Indigenous weaving traditions on a class trip to Paldi, a community in the Cowichan Valley with a multicultural history going back a century. Read Sarbdeep Kaur Johal's article about her class trips to Paldi on pages 16–17.
