

# Winter 2020-2021 Leaders & Learners

The official magazine of the Canadian  
Association of School System Administrators

Association canadienne des gestionnaires  
de commissions scolaires



## Equity and Inclusion for Student Well-Being

### Part 3



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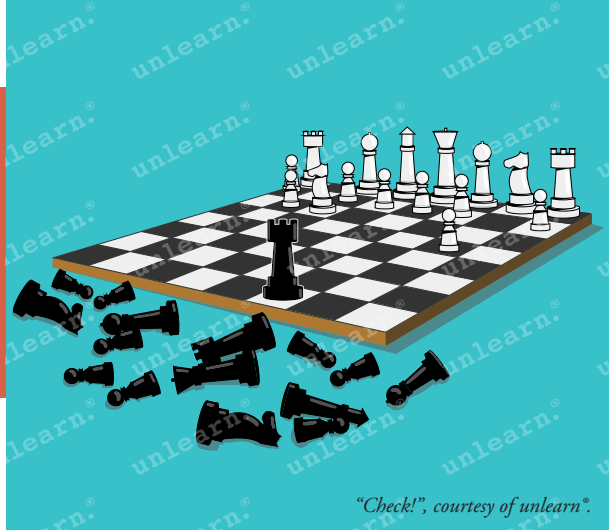
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| Winter 2020-2021 |

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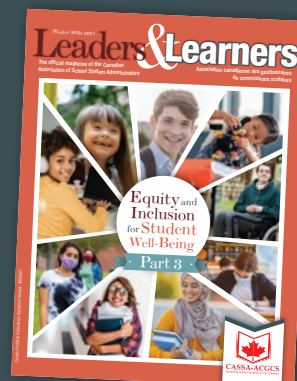
Cody Chomiak

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# Equity and Inclusion for Student Well-Being



**Curtis Brown**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

I've been doing a lot of thinking about equity and inclusion of late, what those words mean, and how they manifest in our schools in a way that impacts wellness. Equity refers to the fair and respectful treatment of all people, despite our differences, and it values diversity and prioritizes inclusiveness. In order for all people to feel included, they must feel respected, accepted, and valued. Equity and inclusion are foundational to staff and student wellness, and wellness underpins staff and student outcomes.

In Canada, we're doing so much to feel proud of. Yet, we still have so much more to do to ensure equity and inclusion.

## **Workplace Equity and Inclusion**

In the workplace, gender equity and affirmative action policies intend to level the playing field and create a workforce more representative and welcoming to the population served. Here in the Northwest Territories (NWT), Indigenous and Northern students are encouraged to learn the local Indigenous languages and to enter the teaching profession so our students, the majority of whom are of Indigenous descent, see the education system as one that honours their identities and perspectives.

## **Inclusive Schooling**

Equity and inclusion in education most often refers to efforts to ensure fairness and belonging for students with unique needs. All students, including those who experience significant barriers to learning and adverse childhood experiences (poverty, trauma, etc.), should have access to a quality education program. In order for all students to be successful, some students need extra support in the form of a pyramid of interventions, to build on their strengths, address their stretches, and support them to independence. Here in the NWT, students with unique needs are placed in a

regular instructional setting with their age peers, and in their home community right up through Grade 12, where possible (even in communities of less than 300 people, reducing the need for residential schools).

## **Equity and Inclusion in a Pandemic**

The pandemic has heightened awareness of the inequities that already existed for disadvantaged students. Students have had disruptions to regular programming and to the school breakfast, snack, and lunch programs that are so important for families living in poverty. Our health and social service partners tell us that the number of eyes on kids decreased—child and family services issues increased—when in-school programming was disrupted.

Further, recent pivots to blended and remote learning reminded us that many students still don't have access to a digital device (computer or tablet) with internet connectivity. Those students are disadvantaged in terms of access to information and a quality education. This is an equity and inclusion issue that CASSA and the Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) recently issued a joint letter to federal Ministers about, asking they take immediate action to ensure all students, families, and school staff have reliable internet connectivity.

## **Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia**

Worldwide, far too many biased and unethical political stances, often in the name of nationalism, are used to justify and promote divisiveness and exclusion, resulting in hatred, discrimination, violence, and even genocide and wars. Recent disturbing and undeniable evidence of bias-motivated violence have compelled social movements such as Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter and show that North American society has a long way to go to ensure equity and fairness.

Our schools have a significant role to play in ensuring a more just society, and it starts with ensuring safe and caring schools, for ALL students. The best interest of each student is at the heart of an inclusive education system, regardless of race, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socio-economic factors.

## **Relationships**

Everyone can be an ally and play a part in creating an equitable and inclusive culture. Behavioural psychiatrists, like Dr. Jean Clinton, tell us connection is key and that every interaction can be like an intervention for disadvantaged students. All students and staff must feel they belong at the school, and that requires all school staff bring the right attitude, have a strong belief that each student can and will attain their potential, and treat students with empathy, kindness, and caring.

For Indigenous students, the relationship with culture, identity, and the land are also foundational and must be cherished. Every interaction and every effort to indigenize education contributes to reconciliation.

Despite all we have done already, we continue to seek ways to ensure all students—regardless of background or personal circumstances—have equitable and inclusive opportunity to reach their full potential. Now, more than ever, social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices are needed and expected of teachers to help students be there socially with, and for, each other. With that expectation, the challenge for schools, school system leaders, and governments continues.





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I hope that you, your families, and the communities you serve are safe and healthy as we move through the pandemic. I know this has been a very challenging time for Canadians in all sectors. I look forward to a return to normalcy, whatever that may look like.

The inequities that exist across Canada have been underscored since last March, including: access to technology, access to Wi-Fi, and the ongoing challenge of food insecurity for many families in many communities.

I recently participated in an international webinar hosted by the International School Health Network. Among the many presenters was Anna D'Addio, lead author of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* by UNESCO, who presented the summary and key messages from UNESCO's 2020 report, titled *Inclusion and Education: All Means All*. To read the full report, visit <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721>.

I highly recommend the report, which includes these key messages:

- Identity, background, and ability each dictate education opportunities;

- Discrimination, stereotyping, and stigmatization mechanisms are similar for all learners at risk for exclusion;
- Despite progress, many countries still don't collect, report, nor use data on those left behind;
- Millions are missing out on the opportunity to learn;
- A key barrier to inclusion in education is the lack of belief it's possible and desirable;
- While some countries are transitioning toward inclusion, segregation is still prevalent;
- Financing needs to target those most in need; and
- Teachers, teaching materials, and learning environments often ignore the benefits of embracing inclusion.

Pages 18 to 22 in the report present findings and observations that would be most relevant to school systems. Pages 22 to 24 offer recommendations within the broad understanding that All Means All; Learner Diversity is a strength to be celebrated.

This issue of *Leaders & Learners* offers a window into some of the wonderful work being done across Canada to provide equitable and inclusive schools that support student well-being, from the South Slave



**Ken Bain**

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

Divisional Education Council in the Northwest Territories, to BC's School District No. 10; from Alberta's CAPE School, to a partnership between Riverside School District and Lester B. Pearson School District in Quebec. Also highlighted is the work of the Rick Hansen Foundation and the Wellington Catholic District School Board in Ontario.

Please check out the CASSA website, <https://www.cassa-acgcs.ca/Page/9>, for professional resources and leadership updates as we move through 2021.

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# Quebec Students Snooze Their Way to Success:

## National Recipient of the 2020 Health Promoting Schools Champion Award

By Reut Gruber, McGill University; Gail Somerville, Douglas Mental Health University Institute; and Cindy Finn, Lester B. Pearson School Board

**C**hronic sleep loss affects a large proportion of the student population. Several recent large-scale studies found that one-third to one-half of Canadian youth don't get the amount of sleep recommended for their age, and that 60 per cent of this population reported feeling tired in the morning. Thousands of articles have provided unequivocal evidence that sleep is critical to achieving the key goals to which Canadian schools are committed; namely, maximizing the academic success, mental health, and physical health of their students.

A modest but chronic reduction of just one hour of sleep per night has been shown to have a significant negative impact on performance on tasks measuring executive functions and attention. A comparison of school performance measures with reported total sleep time found that students who had grades of C, D, or F averaged 25 to 30 minutes' less sleep per weeknight than did their peers with better grades.

In addition, higher sleep efficiency is associated with better report card grades in Mathematics, English, and French among Canadian students. Sleep deprivation also affects students' mental health, as it's associated with high levels of depression, inattention, drug use, and suicidality. In terms of



physical health, sleep deprivation weakens the youth immune response, making students more likely to get sick.

Despite the pervasiveness and magnitude of sleep deprivation and poor sleep habits in Canadian youth, recognizing the importance of sleep and prioritizing sleep health as a part of school health curricula are neglected by most Canadian schools. Furthermore, the tools required to support the behavioral changes needed to optimize sleep are generally lacking.

To address this problem, our Quebec-based partnership has pioneered the integration of sleep health education into school curricula and has demonstrated that this approach extends and improves sleep and enhances academic performance. The partnership, which has been rooted in community-based participatory research since 2007, includes the Riverside School Board (RSB), the Lester B. Pearson School Board, and the Attention, Behaviour, and Sleep Lab at McGill University / Douglas

Research Centre in Montreal. The partners comprise the main stakeholders, including school principals, teachers, parents, students, school psychologists / mental health workers, physical education experts, and key administrators.

Between 2007 and 2015, we created, implemented, and evaluated Sleep for Success (SFS), a comprehensive, multi-module, school-based sleep health education program. SFS was integrated into the curricula of elementary schools. Participation in SFS was associated with significant improvements in children's sleep and report card grades in Mathematics and English. Since 2015, our partnership has gradually shifted its focus from elementary school students to adolescents, who differ from school-aged children, in terms of their sleep patterns and preferences and in the ways they think, feel, and interact with others.

The potential targets for change and the most suitable strategies to facilitate improvements in sleep behaviour were expected to be different in this older age group, so we created, in partnership with Johanne Boursier and Sujata Saha from Heritage Regional High School, a school-based sleep intervention tailored to the developmental, psychological, and physiological characteristics of adolescents. The resulting data show significant improvements in students' sleep, sleep behaviour, and mental health. In April 2020, the partnership was recognized by Physical Education Canada and named as

the national recipient of the 2020 Health Promoting Schools Champion Award.

The most recent implementation of this program took place just before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. During the pandemic, our partnership continued to work remotely, documenting the impact of schedule changes on students' sleep. Typically, our key findings were that developing adolescents had a two-hour shift in their sleep, longer sleep duration, improved sleep quality, and less daytime sleepiness compared to what was observed under the regular school-time schedule. Most students extended their sleep, and our preliminary findings indicated that students who participated in the SFS intervention just before the school closure had better sleep hygiene during the pandemic and their sleep quality was better than students in a control group.

Due to disruptions in typical school schedules and the extended school shutdown that occurred in the spring of 2020, students have been able to sleep longer during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the return to school in Quebec this fall, teachers have also worked hard to better recognize and accommodate their students' needs. Unfortunately, teachers' stress levels have increased significantly during the pandemic.

Intense prolonged stress has a negative impact on sleep. In addition, high levels of stress and poor sleep influence each other over time. An individual's stress levels affect both the extent to which daily experiences interfere

with sleep and the extent to which poor sleep increases the stress experienced during the day. Given that students' success is directly related to educator well-being, the time has come to ensure teachers have access to the knowledge and tools they need to protect their sleep and help students better manage their sleep habits.

## Tips for Better Sleep

*Prioritize your sleep.* This is easier said than done, but it's possible! Clear your schedule so you can go to bed when you're sleepy and have enough time to get your optimal sleep duration.

*Determine your optimal sleep duration.* Sleep shouldn't be too short or too long. Rather, the optimal duration should be based on the person's age and their feeling of being well-rested. A pre-determined wake-up time, such as the school or work starting time, should be used as an anchor. From there, count back seven, eight, or nine hours (depending on your age and your individual preference), and determine a desired bedtime.

*Small extensions count.* If you can't get your ideal sleep duration on a regular basis, remember, even small changes count! Studies have shown that small increases in sleep duration—even 28 minutes per night on a regular basis—are associated with improved functioning in school.

*Protect yourself against the impact of sleep deprivation.* If you're about to enter a busy stretch, extending your sleep prior to this period will reduce, to some extent, the impact of sleep deprivation on your attention and performance.

*Sleep!* Identify positive reinforcements you can give yourself for adhering to your set sleep schedule, and then follow through.

The effect of sleep deprivation can only be undone by ensuring you get enough sleep. ○

*Reut Gruber, Ph.D., is an associate professor for the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University. She is also director of the Attention, Behaviour and Sleep Lab at the Douglas Research Centre.*

*Gail Somerville, M.Ed., is former director of Complementary Services at the Riverside School Board in Quebec. She currently works at the Attention, Behaviour, and Sleep Lab at the Douglas Research Centre.*

*Cindy Finn, Ph.D., is director general of the Lester B. Pearson School Board, which is headquartered in Dorval, Quebec.*





# A Dollop of Northern Courage and a Cup of “Crazy”

By Dr. Trudi Rowlands, South Slave Divisional Education Council

**T**he Northwest Territories education renewal vision is that of the “Capa-

ble Person,” who is able to fully participate in society with integrity in relationships with themselves, the land, other people, and the spiritual world. How, in a COVID-19 socially and physically distant world, do you foster relationships, empathy, and resiliency and enhance social-emotional learning, while delivering quality instruction, access to resources and supports equitably and inclusively for all students, staff, and communities?

Existing inequities in the North—remote location, complex needs, socio-economic factors, and inter-generational trauma—all amplified the risks of remote, home learning. Yet, the students, parents, and communities we serve are no less deserving of a quality education. Therefore, as Bronfenbrenner states, “In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last, and always.”

James Comer says, “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.” Further, Shanker explains, “Brains grow and develop as children interact with their environment; all learning is based on relationships.” More recently, Carrington suggests, “First, last, and in all ways, it comes down to connection... It’s all about connection. Full stop.”

Leveraging our commitment to social-emotional learning, and set within a framework of self-regulation, positive attachment, and social responsibility, the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC)

draws on well-known programs (e.g., Zones of Regulation, WITS, Fourth R) infused with the Dene Laws and Seven Sacred Teachings unique to our northern and Indigenous context, to enhance the holistic wellness, mind, body, and spirit for all students and staff. Then we “PLUSSED” it.

Framed within the context of the Five Leadership Practices staff seek “crazy connection,” leaning into and living our “why.” (Kouzes and Posner)

**1 | Model the Way:** Schools are creative in supporting access to dynamic teaching and learning resources through online classrooms and even establishing Drive Up / Drive-Thru Wi-Fi internet in the school parking lot, to work around accessibility and bandwidth issues. Provision of technology (laptops or tablets and mobile internet sticks) delivered by schools to homes is enabling equitable access to learning, facilitating connection via three-way conferences, one-on-one tutoring and parent engagement opportunities.

Poverty is a reality in our school communities; maintaining breakfast and lunch programs has been essential to physical well-being. Schools have established partnerships with local businesses to provide / donate



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**How, in a COVID-19 socially and physically distant world, do you foster relationships, empathy, and resiliency and enhance social-emotional learning, while delivering quality instruction, access to resources and supports equitably and inclusively for all students, staff, and communities?**

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gift cards to local grocery stores and keep healthy food boxes available each week for families, often delivering these to homes to help students stay nourished. Modelling our care and investment in our students has deepened community ties at a time when our people need us most. Identifying gaps in provision of online resources, the SSDEC recently built a database for students, parents, and staff to access, which is now being populated and adopted by the whole territory but remains a work in progress as we develop this initiative.

**2 | Inspire a Shared Vision:** Consistently focusing on the regional priorities and maintaining fidelity with the PLC collaborative learning team has resulted in the refinement of our essential learning outcomes and competencies, which has enabled teachers to help students focus on inquiry and deeper learning. McLaughlin, like DuFour et al., says, “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community. The path to change in the classroom lies within, and through, professional learning communities.”

**3 | Challenge the Process:** Reimagining our teaching, encouraging creativity, and ingenuity have facilitated the creation of Google Classrooms. This resource, focused solely on wellness, allows users to develop a sense of belonging to school communities. These wellness classrooms promote broad social-emotional supports such as stress management strategies with links to exercise videos, art instruction, mindfulness resources, and opportunities for connection through exercises, like the photo or baking / cooking / craft challenges with participating teaching staff.

During school closures, staff were empowered to share their passions and interests and deliver various sessions to students and whole families to foster fun and connection. Pet photo sharing proved to be quite popular! Schools further supported physical well-being through fine motor bootcamp (Junior Kindergarten to Grade 1), developing mindfulness and brain gym exercises through teacher-created videos, and sharing staff-created workouts to get students moving and promote whole-brain learning.

**4 | Enabling Others to Act:** The innovative creation of the online resource database supported our communities. Additionally, other divisions across NWT leveraged them to assist their own communities—and ours—in return. The schools’ leadership teams have intentionally adopted a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach to supporting staff wellness. Whether it’s through implementing weekly meetings or conference calls to support staff, addressing any concerns around the rapidly changing situation, transitioning to and from home learning, and offering mentorship for new teachers, the teams acknowledged the intersectionality that exists between teacher wellness and student learning. Healthy, balanced, and emotionally regulated staff are best-positioned to support social-emotional learning and create safe spaces for our students to move from support, to independently thriving—as Fisher and Frey note, “I do, we do, you do together, you do on your own”—enabling both student and individual wellness.

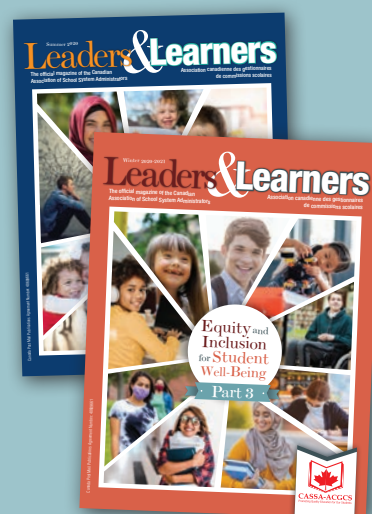
**5 | Encourage the Heart:** Possibly the most important element, our teachers never stopped directly showing they care, providing direct instruction of social-emotional learning. Schools have evolved to meet students’ needs, and schools have continued programming as best they can, given the circumstances, whether they are in-person, blended learning, or remote learning. Some schools developed new initiatives such as the staff and student walks. These scheduled appointments with individual students have occurred outside on the school track to “walk and talk” about their goals and their progress in a physically distant way. These mobile meetings have provided a stronger connection between school and students and increased both student engagement and exercise. Enhancing access to school counsellors by phone or online has been intentional, as schools seek to establish connection with vulnerable / marginalized students who are foremost in priority.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the SSDEC has remained true to its vision and mission. It has focused on a consistent framework of academic achievement and social-emotional learning embedded in culture to enhance positive and trusting relationships with self, others, culture, identity, and the land to promote wellness

and mental health in a bid to help create future Capable Persons. As odd as it may be, COVID-19 has a silver lining, as it has reminded us to intentionally build empathetic relationships, to stay “crazy” for our kids, and to authentically build bridges into homes and communities.

I read once that being lost is not the problem. Rather, being lost and knowing no one is looking for you is the problem. We remain “crazy” for our students, for relationship, and for connection, whether in class, behind screens, or in homes, and we commit to leaving no child or heart behind! ○

*Dr. Trudi Rowlands is the assistant superintendent at the South Slave Divisional Education Council. Prior to joining SSDEC, she was a director of high school curriculum with Alberta Education. For a full list of references, contact the author at [trowlands@ssdec.nt.ca](mailto:trowlands@ssdec.nt.ca).*



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# Equity:

## A Successful COVID-19 Response to Support Our School Community

By Teresa Di Ninno and Jeney Gordon,  
Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence  
Public Charter School

**T**he personalized program at the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) is predicated on the concept of equity. Overt teaching of fair versus equal occurs in all classes throughout the year. Students come to understand that each student will receive the support they need when they need it. Within this ideal, students also develop an appreciation and acceptance of differences.

COVID-19, unexpected and sudden, thrust us into a new reality that has confronted us all, and it will continue to do so for some time. We were pushed toward in-school, at-home, and blended learning options and challenged to re-think our strategies and processes for ensuring equity within our student population. In addition, the idea of equity extended to families and staff. It was apparent that the pandemic truly was a test of our own preaching: each person will receive the support needed, when needed.

The first week after the provincial closure, our teachers were completing second term report cards. They focused on reporting student progress and growth, while administration focused on a fact-finding mission: our students' and families' needs. Point-people were designated for key areas: food supplies, housing, mental health, physical health, and interpersonal connections. Priorities were placed on basic needs first, as food from our kitchens and programs was distributed to families and community. Safety and sanitation supplies were delivered to community businesses to help extend their work.

Once immediate priorities were addressed, polling our parents gave us information about the access to technology—and the level of comfort with that technology—in each household. We were able to identify concerns, and we learned from the experiences of global learners to develop an at-home learning model that was responsive to individual needs and would have some common elements for structure and familiarity.

The next step was to develop equitable teams to support learners. In the development of grade pod teams, teachers were supported by educational assistants. Staff experienced with technology was shared among groups. Expertise with online programs, differentiation, and specialized needs were also shared between groups. In this way, each student would have a team





of professionals supported by colleagues to solve problems and respond to questions.

Equity of resources expanded far beyond the classroom and became a crucial aspect of learning. Since 1994, CAPE has been dedicated to its one-on-one computing program. Several years later, it's expanded to include all Grade 4 to 9 students, so each individual can benefit from 24/7 access to an individually assigned iPad for use during the full academic year. CAPE had also strived to build staff capacity in the use of laptops and iPads as teaching tools. This proved to be a great advantage, as we were thrust into the era of online learning. Our vice-principal took the lead in the deployment of the technology, apps, and training.

We distributed additional iPads and laptops and expanded the use of Zoom to reach out to parents, students, staff, board members, School Council members, and the community. Within each instructional pod, tech leaders were identified to support colleagues, students, and parents. Our principal also supported parents with both group instruction and individual guidance, as they adapted to online learning, so they could, in turn, support the children. Teachers and educational assistants focused on teaching and met with students in large groups,

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small groups, and individually. Quickly adapting to online options was a huge learning curve for everyone, but each person was able to access supports, if and when needed.

Equity extended past students, since supporting families and professionals was also of crucial importance. Our principal organized staff meetings to brainstorm individual student programs and family supports—but also to just see each other, bad hair days and all. Staff worked to maintain weekly connections with families. Our educational psychologist focused on the well-being of each student, staff, administrator, and parent, with the support of the entire school community: system leaders, the board of directors, and community health professionals and agencies. Families were made aware of online and face-to-face resources available within the community. She let staff know of available webinars on topics such as stress, anxiety, emotional wellness, social health, and self-regulation.

Our principal, in addition to being our in-house counsellor-of-sorts, organized virtual voluntary staff meetings to talk, share, connect, vent, commiserate, and just laugh. In responding to a student's need for social connections, one of our staff members facilitated virtual recesses. What a simple, brilliant idea! The superintendent sent

## COVID-19, unexpected and sudden, thrust us into a new reality... We were pushed toward in-school, at-home, and blended learning options and challenged to re-think our strategies and processes for ensuring equity within our student population.

cards to each student celebrating a birthday and to each student needing a bit of a boost. Staff was not forgotten. They, too, got little personal notes once in a while. Teachers dropped off study packages while connecting with students and families. Educational assistants called students and parents to say hello. One of our staff members spearheaded the development of a video, the CAPE Song *When You're Gone*, which was shared on our Facebook page.

Even though the provincial closure of schools has been lifted, equitable supports remain available for students, families, and staff. Whether in class or from home, students are able to access lessons and personnel to assist them with learning. Families continue to be able to use administrative supports for assistance with food supplies, mental wellness, and physical health. Staff input regarding required supports resulted in changes to our academic calendar, to the

provision of release time, and to the planning for time together as a team.

Using distributed leadership and social capital, CAPE was able to provide equitable supports to assist the school community during the pandemic. We know we are on track. The faces of the children who returned to our classes this fall, the messages of thanks from our parents, and the words of thanks from the staff tell us we are. ○

*Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is an alumnus of McGill University and the University of Toronto. She is founder, past principal and current superintendent of CAPE Public Charter School in Medicine Hat, Alberta.*

*Jeney Gordon, B.F.A., B.Ed., Diploma of Vis. Com., is an alumnus of the University of Lethbridge. Jeney has been the principal of CAPE Public Charter School for 15 years.*

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# Keeping Our Gaze on Equity and Inclusion for Student Well-Being

By Terry Taylor, School District 10 (Arrow Lakes)

**I**n the early days of the pandemic, School District 10 (Arrow Lakes) staff drove meals hundreds of kilometres to feed 40 per cent of families in need throughout the district, provided 50 per cent of learners with laptops, and ensured all families had internet access for learning. The efforts constituted no small feat in a geographically dispersed rural district faced with poverty, little or no connectivity, and families already struggling with food sustainability and well-being.

Yet sustaining equity and access to high-quality teaching, learning, and food programs for marginalized learners and families is vital. The school district motto is “World-Class Learning in a Rural Environment,” an ambitious goal for a rural district comprised of six small schools located amid forests, lakes, and mountain passes in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. Yet, it forms a shared vision everyone in the district takes to heart.

In this way, all students with identified diverse learning needs, and those who self-identified as needing extra help, were welcomed in their schools from March to May. In June, as the province transitioned to more students in schools, 72 per cent of learners returned to school, their educators happy to see them back in numbers far beyond provincial return-to-school metrics. Inclusion of all learners in high-quality learning environments designed around student strengths and needs is the DNA of School District 10 (SD 10).

To this end, growing inclusive classroom and school cultures, where learners with diverse abilities and disabilities, Indigenous learners, and learners with diverse gender identities are valued, nurtured, challenged, and supported in deep learning is key. These are cornerstones of district pedagogical frameworks. However, the work of inclusion and equity isn’t a finite state; it’s a continuous and sustained journey.



*Students spent Orange Shirt Day 2020 at the Nakusp Elementary School.*

The district has evolved and grown inclusive and equitable teaching and learning practices in all schools through intentionally designed, multi-year collaborative professional learning over the past decade. Diversity scholar-practitioner Dr. Leyton Schnellert, from the University of British Columbia; Drs. Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser, leaders of the Network for Inquiry and Indigenous Education; literacy expert Faye Brownlie; inclusion and diversity specialist Shelley Moore; and assessment consultant Katie White all work with district teachers. Each year, 82 per cent of SD 10 teachers voluntarily engage in one or more professional learning teams.

This investment in professional capacity building for inclusion and equity has yielded

success for learners seen on provincial and district assessments, and is visible in the district video gallery, <https://sd10.bc.ca/video/>. In addition, strengthening professional capacity for co-teaching and co-planning with Learning Support specialist teachers alongside classroom teachers resourced with adequate Education Assistant support has also deepened inclusion and equity.

Meanwhile, despite results above provincial averages for Indigenous students, closing the equity gap for the 22 per cent of the district’s Indigenous learners is a current strategic priority. Good is not good enough. Schools, the district, and the Indigenous Education Advisory Council have hunkered down with data and are conducting Equity



## Good is not good enough. Schools, the district, and the Indigenous Education Advisory Council have hunkered down with data, and are conducting Equity Scans with Indigenous learners, parents, and Elders to inform the path to greater equity.

Scans with Indigenous learners, parents, and Elders to inform the path to greater equity. Increasing the agency and voice of Indigenous learners and community, deepening Land-based learning, and other culturally responsive pedagogies is essential. We ask ourselves, “How can we better decolonize, unlearn, and re-inhabit the district’s signature pedagogy of place-consciousness informed by Indigenous worldviews and perspectives?”

Inclusion and equity have long-informed the thoughtful journey in SD 10 to shifting practice using the pressure of data to inform shared moral purpose around success for all learners and support through capacity building.

Recently for example, due to increased anxiety in adults and children during the pandemic and increased concerns about student well-being, the Board of Education expanded counselling time at all schools, while district staff deepened community partnerships, creating mental health outreach for more seamless support to vulnerable children, youth, and families. Equity is also about responding to emergent needs through continuous scanning of data and evidence to inform action.

As a result, SD 10 school and district leaders reviewed Middle Years Development (MDI) data revealing declining student well-being across British Columbia and the school district. In October 2020, the Board specifically targeted enhancing student and adult well-being as a district strategic priority in recognition of the correlation between educator and student well-being.

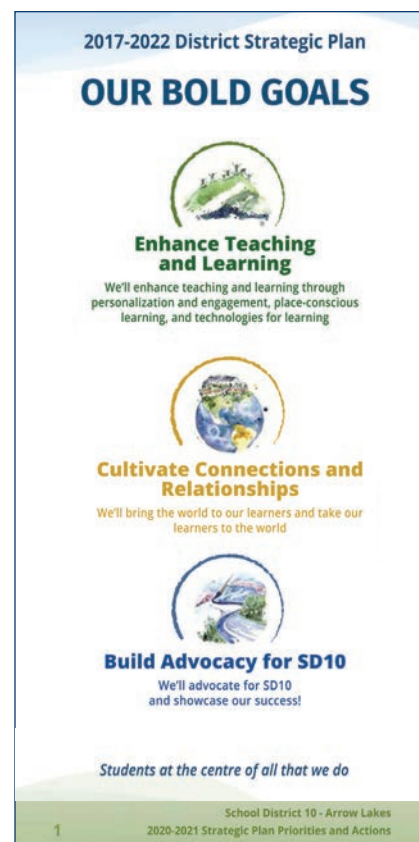
Consequently, the district is building leadership capacity through Compassionate Systems Awareness with Drs. Peter Senge and Mette Boell. This initiative aligns with British Columbia’s new Mental Health in Schools (MHIS) strategy which also prioritizes

adult capacity-building for student well-being. Compassionate Systems is identified as a crucial pillar in nurturing well-being for everyone. All school leaders and district staff engaged this fall in the four-day Compassionate Systems workshop, while Compassionate Systems Awareness training for teachers and students is planned for 2021.

This coherence between Ministry of Education MHIS and school district mental well-being strategy provides additional leverage for difference-making in the lives of young people and greater equity and inclusion. Meanwhile, building on previous educator well-being work, the local teachers’ union and district collaboratively planned a professional development day focused on well-being, SEL, and mindfulness for January 2021. All teachers new to the district are given a copy of *The Well Teacher*, a book by Wade Repta that is provided by the school district to all teachers and educational support staff along with educator wellness Pro-D work. Sustaining thoughtful and evidence-based well-being capacity-building is intentionally focused.

In this time of crisis therefore, SD 10 actions focus on multiple solutions to address complex fundamental problems rather than simple quick fixes.

In this way, the school district scanned diverse data sources and chose targeted foci to deepen existing socio-emotional learning and mental well-being supports. It nurtured already strong arts programs, filled a gap with a new elementary music program, and continued support for environmental education and outdoor learning to respond to the diverse passions and interests of learners. The district narrowed its focus, addressing the equity gap for Indigenous learners, and interrogated decolonization of its educational structures. System change succeeds when it builds on what currently exists and strengthens it. Equity and inclusion for




*The school district's priorities help outline the direction toward greater equity.*

student well-being are therefore responsive to the changing and emergent needs of our young people, families, and communities.

At ICSEI in 2016, Pasi Sahlberg interpolated equity and student achievement data from PISA scores and extolled, “the world needs more Canada” because of greater inclusion and equity in Canadian education systems. Yet, ensuring equity and inclusion for all takes intentionality, shared vision, and hard work. We are not there yet. Equity and inclusion are predicated on collaboration among all educational partners and communities, keeping our gaze on quantitative and qualitative data to inform direction and track progress, and ensuring evidence-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies inform our actions. In this way, we can continue to grow safe, caring, and inclusive learning environments so foundational to public education in Canada and British Columbia and so very critical to the well-being of all learners. ○

*Terry Taylor is superintendent and secretary-treasurer of School District 10. For a full list of references, contact Terry Taylor at [terry.taylor@sd10.bc.ca](mailto:terry.taylor@sd10.bc.ca).*

# The Age of the Virtual Classroom

A photograph of a classroom setting. In the foreground, a young woman with brown hair tied back, wearing glasses and a maroon shirt, is seated in a wheelchair. She is looking towards the front of the room and has her right hand raised. In the background, a male teacher in a blue shirt is standing and pointing at a whiteboard. Other students are visible in the background, some standing and some seated. A laptop is open on a desk in front of the student in the wheelchair.

*This student is learning in an adapted educational setting.*

By Rebecca Blissett, Rick Hansen Foundation

Arielle Weltman's passion for teaching is evident in her commitment to find new and exciting ways to engage with students.

When she was a student teacher, and her Grade 8 class was reading Eric Walter's *Rebound*, a novel about a young boy named David who made a new start after a car accident left him paralyzed, she was inspired to show the class what being in a wheelchair was like. Weltman rented five child-sized wheelchairs from a local charity, so students could experience wheelchair basketball, just like the character David.

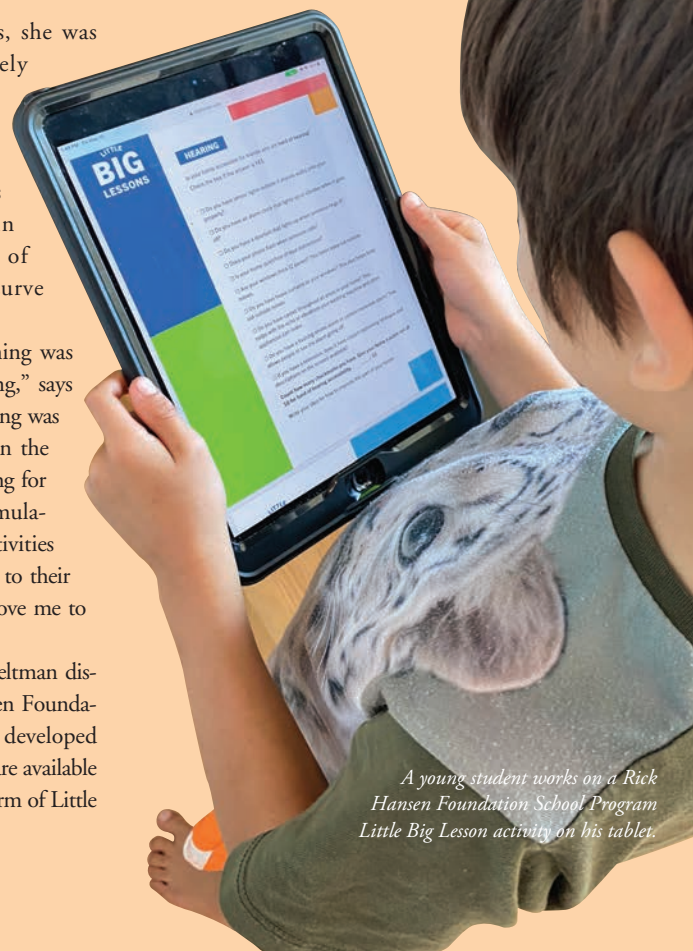
"I wanted them to get a real understanding of what life was really like playing basketball, dribbling, and wheeling around," says Weltman. "The results of my lesson that day were well worth it. My students walked away with everlasting lessons that certainly made a profound impact on them."

Fast-forward 13 years. Weltman teaches Grade 7 in Vaughan, Ontario. As with

many other Canadian educators, she was forced to adjust to a completely virtual environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed the doors to most brick and mortar classrooms across the country. Weltman quickly rose to the challenge of navigating the steep learning curve online teaching presented.

"The transition to digital learning was initially isolating and fairly daunting," says Weltman. "What really kept me going was the reminder that precious souls on the other side of the screen were yearning for engagement, connection, and stimulation. Knowing my lessons and activities gave students purpose and meaning to their otherwise lonely and empty days drove me to work extra hard."

In sourcing digital resources, Weltman discovered the team at the Rick Hansen Foundation (RHF) School Program had developed and updated their resources, which are available online for free. These came in the form of Little



*A young student works on a Rick Hansen Foundation School Program Little Big Lesson activity on his tablet.*



Big Lessons, a collection of bite-sized engaging activities for K-12 students learning on the big themes of disability, accessibility, and inclusion.

“Little Big Lessons have been a phenomenal success with students,” says Weltman. “Whether it was posting the ‘difference maker bingo challenge’ for the younger students, or engaging older learners in the ‘first impressions and stereotypes lessons,’ there are resources and supports for all ages that are eye-opening and interesting and that facilitate thoughtfulness and fabulous discussions.”

Along with Little Big Lessons, the Foundation partnered with GHM Academy to build an interactive Man In Motion World Tour activity, through which students can learn about Rick Hansen’s historic achievement through maps and lessons in the context of geography, weather, and mathematics. Teachers can also set up a virtual classroom to assign activities and mark quizzes.

Weltman is grateful for compelling resources that not only cover the basics, but that also show kids the nuanced value of a diverse society.

“Students must have an understanding of disability, inclusion, and accessibility, so they can learn to be fair, empathetic human beings who take initiative to show courage and integrity at every opportunity,” she adds.

The RHF didn’t want the pandemic to hamper efforts to connect with youth, with both classroom activities and offering inspiring presentations from role models. Since 2002, the RHF Ambassador program has created meaningful dialogue about disability, inclusion, and accessibility by providing presentations from individuals with varying disabilities at schools across Canada. Due to COVID-19



*Students working on The Boy who Loved to Move Little Big Lesson activity, which is an animated story of Rick Hansen's inspirational journey.*

restrictions, ambassadors are reaching students through online platforms such as Zoom at schools, like the Leo Baeck Day School in Toronto, Ontario.

Marni Appel, a Grade 3 teacher at Leo Baeck, originally connected with the RHF when one of her students chose Rick Hansen for her biography research project on difference-makers a few years ago. Her presentation was a hit with the students, and the icing on the cake was a surprise appearance from Rick himself via Skype.

“It was quite incredible for them to see their research come to life,” recalls Appel. “Since then, we’ve continued to reach out to the RHF each spring when we do this unit.”

RHF Ambassador Fernando Resende visited Appel’s school last year and, in a first for the program, returned virtually this year. The students were just as captivated as they were during his live presentation, especially as Resende gave a virtual tour of sporting gear in his garage and the mobility equipment he relies on to get around in his home.

“Right now, there are so many different segments of our population suffering or facing

challenging times due to COVID,” says Appel. “Raising the awareness to students that, even at their age, they can make a difference in the lives of others is powerful and empowering. Our students come out of the presentation and look differently at each storefront or building they enter. They talk to shop owners about ramps and main floor bathrooms.”

This is proof of how education can lead to positive change.

“In teaching students about the importance of accessibility and inclusion,” says Weltman, “I hope to pass on the torch of passion and dedication to the next generation and inspire a world filled with awareness, inclusion, and accessibility for all.” ○

*Teachers rely on online resources such as those provided by the Rick Hansen Foundation (RHF) to make virtual classrooms both interesting and educational. RHF School Program lessons and activities are free, available in French and English, and align to provincial curricula. Visit [www.RickHansen.com/Little-Big-Lessons](http://www.RickHansen.com/Little-Big-Lessons) to obtain your free resources, or e-mail [schools@rickhansen.com](mailto:schools@rickhansen.com) to set up a meeting with a representative.*



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# Unlearning Everything: Anti-Racist Education in the COVID-19 Context

By Yvonne Runstedler,  
Wellington Catholic District  
School Board

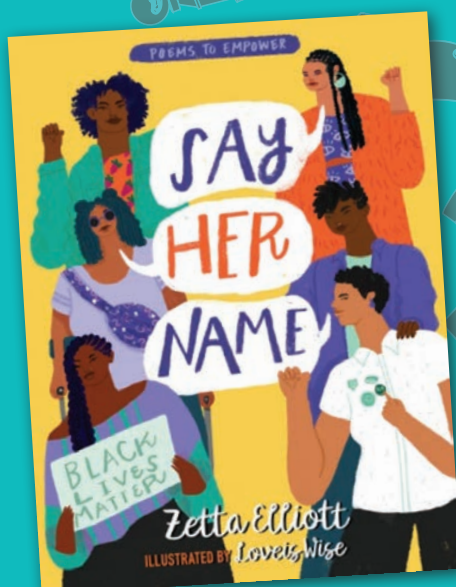
When teacher-librarian Cindy Della Croce participated in the unlearn® Webinar series<sup>1</sup> offered to Wellington Catholic educators during the pandemic school closure in the spring of 2020, she had no way of knowing her career path would take a sudden turn and she would be redeployed as a teacher in the newly formed virtual school beginning in September.

Her 28-year career included both elementary and secondary classrooms, and inspiring students to love reading through her role as teacher-librarian had always been, in her words, “the pinnacle of her career.” When all school libraries were closed due to COVID-19 safety measures and she was redeployed to teach Grade 9 English for the Wellington Catholic virtual school, she faced the steepest learning curve she had ever experienced.

“I cried,” says Cindy. “A lot.”

This story is reminiscent of so many other teachers across the country during COVID-19. Faced with an assortment of new public health protocols, new restrictions on how we work and live, and the evidence of equity imbalances exposed by the pandemic—including access to technology and increased challenges to mental health—Cindy had to adapt.

Adapting as a requirement of educator practice was further punctuated by the murder of George Floyd and the resulting increased awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement. Students, and the community around us, were asking questions and seeking justice. To Cindy, there was



*Say Her Name is a collection of poetry by Dr. Zetta Elliott, a Black Canadian-born writer.*



a profound understanding that addressing systemic racism in her classroom needed to take prominence, while navigating what this might look like in a virtual setting, using Microsoft Teams, Desire2Learn, and other web-based modalities.

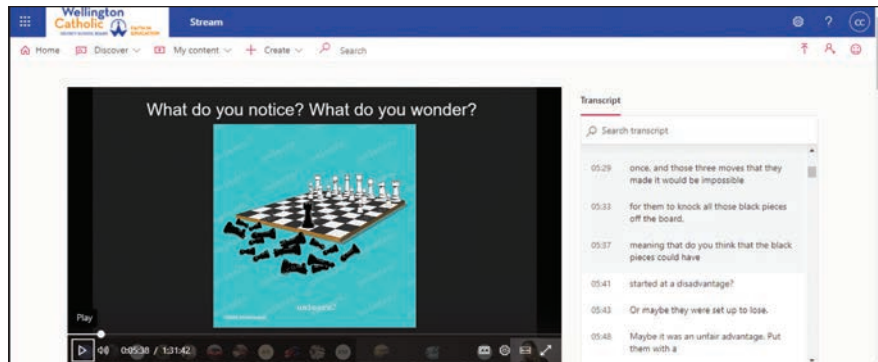
In the Wellington Catholic Program Department, coordinators and coaches were having long conversations about how to best support educators in this unprecedented learning climate. With in-person professional development off-the-table, we had no choice but to consider how online platforms could advance conversations on equity. With this in mind, we decided to build upon our relationship with Abhi Ahluwalia and Lakhdeep Dhaliwal from unlearn® and to deliver a three-part webinar series for educators.

We advertised this to all staff but expected a limited response, recognizing the pressures placed on educators during the pandemic and acknowledging we are a smaller school board. We thought perhaps a group of 15 would be interested. When over 50 educators from a variety of employee groups including librarians, educational assistants, teachers, administrators, and child-and-youth workers signed up for the series titled *Real Conversations in an Unreal World*, we decided to offer this opportunity in three different sections, allowing the groups to be manageable, so everyone would get a chance to participate and contribute. These were affectionately named unlearn® Groups A, B and C. The sessions were themed with an equity lens as follows:

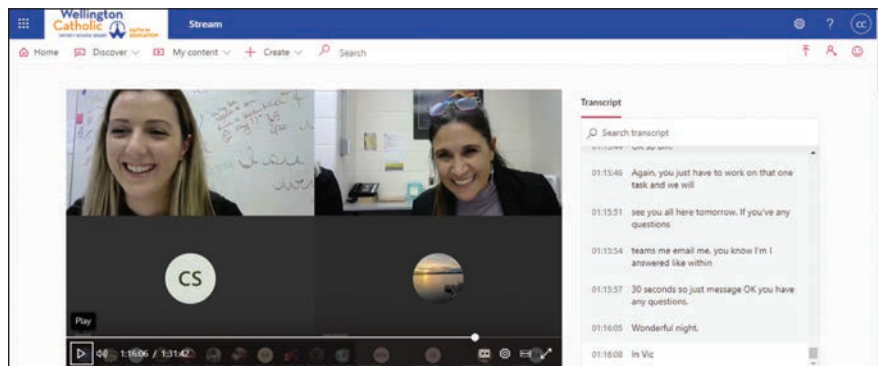
1. Dismantling and discussing the COVID-19 context;
2. Considering the equity concerns September would bring; and
3. Engaging in discussions on future possibilities, envisioning a post-pandemic world.

Cindy was in unlearn® Group C.

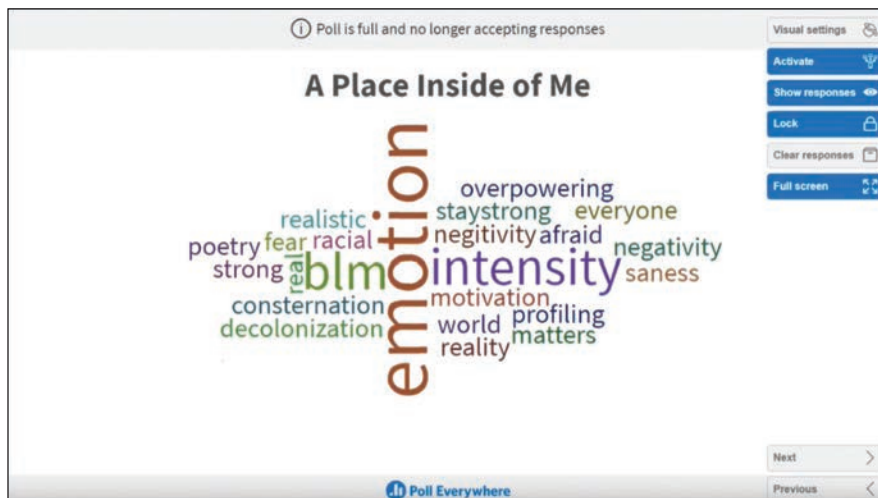
The aforementioned webinar series was planned and coordinated prior to the murder of George Floyd. Witnessing this, and becoming more aware of the need in education to augment educator skill in addressing systemic racism, we offered a summer book study based on Robin Di Angelo's *White Fragility*; again, a three-part series offered online to an over-subscribed list of educators wanting to understand their positionality and privilege in the context of 2020.



*This exercise using unlearn®'s Check! poster prompts student discussion to Dr. Elliott's poetry.*



*Victoria Nestico and Cindy Della Croce learned how to teach students in a virtual classroom during the pandemic.*



*A sample of student responses to Dr. Elliott's poetry.*

While these webinar series were underway, Victoria Nestico was completing her Bachelor of Education degree at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, with aspirations of supply teaching in September. She was elated when she was offered her first teaching job at our virtual school. Her personal interest the online learning platform, Desire2Learn—BrightSpace (D2L), was an asset needed and made her stand out as an applicant. She was assigned Grade 9 academic English. Paired with Cindy, whose expertise in teaching pedagogy honed over

her 28-year career and her recent professional development in anti-racist education, Victoria realized, "I was not alone. As long as I was with Cindy, I was okay." And as long as Cindy had Victoria's technological know-how, she would be okay, too.

Together, Victoria and Cindy leveraged their collective knowledge. Where Cindy struggled with using online learning tools, like D2L and Microsoft Teams, Victoria took the lead. Where Victoria wasn't aware of school board-based supports such as the unlearn® posters and their capacity to create safe spaces

for dialogue on a range of issues, including Black Lives Matter, Cindy could fill in.

Both educators shared a dedication to incorporate a wide range of resources in the English classroom context, using concepts of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. Through Instagram, Victoria was introduced to Dr. Zetta Elliott, a Black Canadian-born writer, whose book *Say Her Name* was set to be published. After each educator purchased a copy directly after the book's release, Victoria and Cindy decided to read with their students, tagging the author on Twitter with the results. When Dr. Elliott herself replied, offering teaching resources, Victoria and Cindy were elated and decided to risk an additional request: Would Dr. Zetta Elliott be willing to speak directly to their virtual class about her poetry? To their surprise, she agreed.

At this online meeting, the knowledge Cindy gained through the equity professional development opportunities offered as a result of school closure, the best practices she and Victoria demonstrated in collective efficacy, and the good fortune of receiving Dr. Elliott's generous offer to become a virtual guest speaker all converged.

When one student, remembering the unlearn® presentations arranged in all Grade 7 and 8 classes two years prior, asked Elliott, "Did you feel as though you had to unlearn the way you were taught when you were younger?" Elliott responded that she had to "decolonize her imagination."

She went on to explain that, "You reach a point where you have to decide how much responsibility you are going to take for your education," noting that her "first Black educator was in university" as one example of systemic racism she faced in the Canadian educational context. This discussion was prompted by the recently released unlearn®

poster, *Chess Pieces* and the use of Poll Everywhere, which allowed students to share their thoughts in response to Dr. Elliott's poetry.

As a teacher-librarian, Cindy couldn't have imagined she would be teaching in one room, physically distanced from her colleague, away from the school in which she had spent much of her teaching career. Victoria imagined getting supply calls, carefully attempting application of COVID-19 safety protocols.

As a program coordinator before the Ontario Ministry-mandated school closure, I scoffed at the idea webinars could be an effective platform for delivering professional development. I also couldn't have imagined the system wide unlearn® presentations by guest presenters, Lakhdeep Dhaliwal and Abhi Ahluwalia, in Grade 7, 8, and 10 classes would be remembered and then brought into a discussion by a student two years later with noted author Dr. Zetta Elliott.

We have all been in a deep process of unlearning, and while I would not wish the pandemic on anyone, this story is good news only made possible by this context, leading me to wonder which "unlearnings" we will encounter as this school year continues to unfold. ○

*Yvonne Runstedler is a program coordinator for the Wellington Catholic District School Board with responsibilities in equity and inclusion. Her passion lies in the promotion of social justice and, at the time of publication, is mid-way through a doctoral program at Wilfrid Laurier University in the area of equity and inclusion.*

## REFERENCE

1. See [unlearn.com](http://unlearn.com) or *Creating Student Upstanders* in the Summer 2020 edition of *Leaders & Learners* for more information.

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### From Amazing Artists

## MISTY COPELAND

### I BELONG HERE

"Quiet on the set!" commanded the director, Georgia Hudson. Two chords played softly on the piano. Dancer Misty Copeland stood stage left in first position, awaiting her next cue. She was on set filming a commercial for the clothing company, Under Armour. A child's voice is heard over the music. She says:

"Dear Candidate,  
Thank you for your application to our ballet academy. Unfortunately, you have not been accepted. You have the wrong body for ballet ..."

Although this rejection letter was written only for the commercial, Misty recalled receiving letters like this herself that were equally harsh. Misty was considered an unlikely ballerina because of her

ethnicity and the fact that she started ballet late, at age 13. She sautéed past the critics, all the while saying to herself, "I belong here."

Four years after Misty Copeland took her first ballet lesson at the San Pedro Boys and Girls Club in California, she had won awards in competitions and joined a ballet company.

**BORN:**  
September 10, 1982

**NATIONALITY:**  
American

**OCCUPATION:**  
Dancer

"Something happens when you feel the music."



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