

SAFE SCHOOLS: STRATEGIES FOR CHANGING A CULTURE

Langley, BC

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Given recent societal trends of increasing violence and harassment in schools, no one would be surprised to hear that many teachers, administrators and communities are looking for ways to make their schools “safe schools”. But what does a safe school look like? Some seek to make schools safe by enforcing zero tolerance school discipline policies, where any perpetrators of violence are consistently suspended or expelled. Others try to implement anti-bullying programs which attempt to identify and then isolate bullies in hopes of creating a safer school environment for remaining students. In addition, teachers are constantly handed new information and programs designed to assist with classroom discipline and behavioural issues. We all try to do what we can to make our schools safe places for children, yet we continue to witness and be disturbed by ongoing incidences of aggression and violence. Evidently, more than isolated efforts are needed, but instead something that will encourage a shift in the culture of the way that we view conflict and punishment.

School District #35 in Langley, BC was a place that wanted to see significant culture change in schools. In June 2000, the Langley School Board adopted a strategic plan, the first goal of which was to promote safe schools. Again, the issue presented itself: how do we make our schools safe in an effective, long-term way? Brenda LeClair, Deputy Superintendent of Educational Services, Dyan Burnell, District Counsellor Coordinator, and others in the school district recognized the limitations inherent in a punitive approach for promoting safe schools. Dissatisfied with a model based on punishment and isolation to keep a school safe, Dyan and Brenda were convinced of the effectiveness of applying restorative justice principles to school discipline issues.

Having a long-standing relationship with local agency Fraser Region Community Justice Initiatives (CJI), a new partnership was born when the district and CJI agreed to work together to explore how restorative justice principles might be applied to affect culture change throughout the local school system, which includes 46 schools, 2000 staff and over 21 000 students. The concept was that restorative justice based approaches will give frustrated parents and educators alike additional strategies for effectively addressing misbehaviour, the underlying issues responsible for that behaviour, and harms that occur as a result.

Although there are a number of individual schools across Canada, the US and elsewhere that have begun to use restorative justice based approaches for dealing with school conflict and discipline situations, this project is one of the first in the province of BC that is addressing the issue in a comprehensive manner throughout the entire school district. It is also unique in that both CJI and school district staff involved in the project are committed to ensuring that this project is

sustainable and not one more “here today, gone tomorrow” program.* This partnership is committed to helping create a culture where safety, respect and inclusion are commonplace in the schools, rather than the more typical culture of punishment and blame.

We are currently in the second year of a multi-year project with sustainable funding. The project focuses on eliciting existing wisdom as well as providing training and education for school administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff, students and parents in restorative justice philosophy, values, principles and practical applications. The hope is to build capacity for respectful, peacemaking, restorative interventions at every level in Langley School District educational hierarchies, thereby reducing the incidence of adversarial, punitive, retributive responses to conflicts and tensions that arise.*

That’s a lot of lofty goals and ideas. So what are we actually doing?

For starters, we offer regular presentations and educational sessions about restorative action which help raise awareness across the school district. Changing a culture, however, requires not only education and awareness-building, but practical skills and programs which can be implemented. In Secondary Schools, we have a “Restorative Action” curriculum for students, parents, and staff. The trainers, two staff from CJI and two from Langley School District, provide a 4-day training designed to equip participants to be Restorative Action Mediators in their schools. The training includes Restorative Action philosophy, Communications Skills, and Initial Meeting/Mediation skills. The participants can then form “teams” in their schools, to be called upon when conflict in the school arises. Referrals to the teams may come formally from school administration, or more informally from concerned friends or staff. We have completed this process with two secondary schools thus far.

At the elementary level, our training consists of a similar curriculum as the secondary schools. The participants are teachers, parents, and other staff from the elementary schools. At this point, we are not training the elementary school children directly, but equipping their educators with restorative skills and then later, providing those educators with the training and curriculum to train their own students.

Through all this, we aim for a systemic effect of changing a culture, but in the day-to-day realities, we are encouraged by individual students, parents and educators who are learning skills and changing their worldview one by one. We have often heard students say they liked our training because they are now more able to listen to their friends and show caring and empathy. One secondary student who completed our training remarked: “My friends say I’m listening to them now. They don’t know what’s happened to me!”. An elementary school teacher stated in an assignment to us: “I never really took the time to listen before without any personal agenda. I was amazed when the person thanked me for listening and said she had better clarity on how to solve her problem...when I

hadn't told her to do anything!" Our goal of culture change will take years of consistent hard work. However, we are encouraged to continue because of individual interactions that reveal how developing a restorative mindset can be life-changing for individuals and those around them.

**Excerpted from a grant proposal written by Sandi Bergen and Dave Gustafson*