

Nutsa'maat

Courtesy Colleen Mullin

by
Darren Danyluk
SD 06 (Rocky Mountain)
in conversation with
Colleen Mullin



Although I was paying attention, I drove right past the exit.

I could be forgiven; it comes up without much warning, and is a left-hand turn. Travelling in the right-hand lane, it was impossible to cross traffic when the road sign saying 'Brenton Page Rd.' registered in my view. The first opportunity for a U-turn was several minutes down the highway in Ladysmith. By the time I had backtracked and returned to the exit, it seemed I would be asking for forgiveness from Colleen when I arrived late for our meeting.

About nine kilometres down a two-lane road that hugs the shoreline, BCPVPA member Colleen Mullin was waiting for me at the Stz'uminus Community School. During my term as president for the Association, I had spoken with Colleen and learned she was working in a First Nations school on Vancouver Island. I had so many questions, and had waited two years to visit with her; I guess another ten minutes wouldn't be so bad.

Colleen is part of a team at Stz'uminus Education Society School. She is the Principal of Instruction and is Co-Principal to Kelly Hall, the Principal of Hul'q'umi'num, Community and Culture. Together, with eight other dedicated people, Colleen and Kelly form the Leadership Team at the schools. Colleen leads Instruction for grades JK to 12, which is comprised of three schools.

More than twenty years ago, Colleen came to BC from Ontario, where she taught at Francine J. Wesley Secondary School. FJWSS is under the Hishkoonikun Education Authority in Kashechewan, Ontario. Colleen and I nearly crossed paths in the Nechako School District, where I began my teaching career, and she started her BC experience, at Fort St. James Secondary School. And, before arriving in the Cowichan Valley in 2017, Colleen served as a Principal in Merritt, at the Kengard Learning Centre. I was to learn that the sum of Colleen's experience made her the right person for this unique situation which first piqued my interest in 2021: a BCPVPA member leading in a First Nations School.

To be eligible for membership in the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association, an individual must be employed within BC as a Principal or Vice-Principal "of a public school," and Stz'uminus Education Society Schools are governed by the Education Department of the Stz'uminus First Nation. I wanted to explore this apparent contradiction, learn more about the vision behind its development, and understand if this arrangement was more common than I realized. This curiosity led me to the turn-off near Ladysmith, and a wonderful conversation with Colleen.

While most of the province was enjoying spring break, Colleen and I sat down together at the Stz'uminus Community School to begin my education. We reminisced about Fort St. James, a common point on our journeys, and then talked about Colleen's current path. Colleen is a Principal for the Cowichan Valley School District, and has been seconded by Stz'uminus First Nation's Education Society. She has been 'temporarily detached' from School District No. 79 (Cowichan Valley), yet technically her employment remains in the public education sector.

Stz'uminus Education Society adopted a new and unique approach, restructuring how it provides services to the community. This approach harmonizes BC curriculum with Stz'uminus language and culture. Stz'uminus Education is governed by a new Board which includes Ted Cadwallader, a system change consultant specializing in Indigenous learning, as a member. "One challenge of First Nation operated schools is consistency and retention of staff," said Cadwallader, "particularly Principals and Vice-

Stz'uminus Education adopted a new and unique approach, restructuring how it provides services to the community. This approach harmonizes BC curriculum with Stz'uminus language and culture.

Principals with experience of what it is to be a Principal or Vice-Principal.” Stz’uminus Education Board member Denise Augustine similarly noted the importance of mentoring and fostering leadership in education, commenting that, “Public schools have a greater capacity to share resources.” Augustine understands the benefits of a secondment as a mechanism to share and further develop the skills of our best educational leaders.

A secondment, however, relies upon cooperation between two parties. Members of the Stz’uminus Education Board credit Cowichan Valley District Superintendent Robyn Gray with, “making it so simple.” Part of the reason that Gray has embraced such a partnership is her own personal experience. In 2001, while working for Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools as a District Principal, she was seconded to work with a First Nations school. “This historical experience I owned allowed me to see its value,” Gray recalls. “The partnership and relationship is incredible as you share learning and resources... [it is the]

While uncommon, partnerships between First Nations schools and the public sector can be rich and reciprocal; however, much depends upon who steps forward, and how they tread.

greatest gift to immerse in learning on a Nation, a gift to have a greater understanding.”

While uncommon, partnerships between First Nations schools and the public sector can be rich and reciprocal; however, much depends upon who steps forward, and how they tread. A leader must come to this relationship with the right approach, and they must see it for the remarkable opportunity it presents. As recognized by Denise Augustine, “Colleen is genuinely open to wrestling with ideas.” Augustine added that Colleen is interested and curious, and





Courtesy Colleen Mullin

Kelly Hall and Colleen Mullin

a child-centred advocate, making her an excellent choice for this work.

As we spoke, Colleen characterized the heart of this work as *nutsamaat*, uniting with "one heart & mind." The journey commences with her Co-Principal — Kelly Hall, hailing from Cowichan First Nation — and intertwines with Stz'uminus roots. Kelly imparts *snuwuyulh* (sacred wisdom), cultural insights, and language teachings, serving as Colleen's anchor and complementary force. Colleen emphasizes that,

"She steadies me, reshapes my perspective — my essential counterpart. This endeavour thrives on our synergy." Together, they work to gently bring about the changes as directed by the elders and the community voices.

The change she speaks of has come through the vision of the Stz'uminus Education Department leader, Justin Magnuson. It is a vision of educational excellence and ongoing growth to meet the needs of the Stz'uminus Nation. It is a vision to build capacity,

foster learning, and forge relationships between First Nations schools and the public sector. It has called upon the staff to reflect on their practice, delve into data from the community, take risks, and trust one another to rebuild the entire system from the ground up, with students at the heart of the process.

Colleen recognizes the importance of breaking away from conventional methods and daring to challenge the status quo. "They have been courageous," she acknowledges, referring to the staff who have embraced this transformative endeavour. "I can be hard to be with — I challenge them," she adds, emphasizing the significance of confronting established norms for the greater good.

The process of decolonizing the educational system is no easy task. Colleen understands the need to dismantle the existing structures and systems that may perpetuate biases and inequalities. She has engaged with elders, seeking wisdom and guidance to ensure the journey respects and acknowledges the community's language and cultural heritage. By tapping into the passions and desires of the staff, she encourages a collective ownership of the transformation.

Crucially, Colleen actively seeks student input and works closely with families to ensure that the learning experience is inclusive and reflective of the diverse needs of the community. Empowering students to voice their ideas and concerns is at the core of this endeavour. It is an approach that fosters a sense of belonging, and strengthens the student-teacher bond,

ultimately leading to a more enriching educational experience.

Colleen has a determination to "blow things up", highlighting her commitment to breaking down barriers and reimagining what education can be. Her relentless pursuit of change is driven by a deep belief in the power of education to positively shape lives and communities. As the school embraces a new path, it welcomes the autonomy to marshal resources, aligning them with the community's unique requirements.

Colleen is quick to point out that her secondment is not the only unique feature of her current role. She works closely with her Co-Principal Kelly to bring together instruction and culture. However, the vision is a flip of the narrative, with language and culture over curriculum, guided by the four principles: *snuwuyulh* (sacred teachings), *tsi-tsu watul* (helping each other), *nu stli'ch* (love), and *nutsamaat* (together as one). As we talk, Colleen shares with me the Provocative Propositions which serve as the engine that drives their mission. Central to all is connection: connection to culture, language, land, and each other. Colleen speaks of awakening language and culture gently, "together, one heart... one mind," while reconciling provincial curriculum, pedagogy, and Stz'uminusqun. This is exemplified by the new primary school that is under construction for the Nation, and Colleen talks about the considerations for its design. As an instructional leader, she will challenge the notion of traditional classes, and challenge educators to honour traditional ways of being together.

At this point in our conversation, Colleen reflects on her unique leadership journey with the Stz'uminus Education Society, and of *etuaptmumk*, two-eyed seeing. In the words of Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall, *etuaptmumk* is to see the world simultaneously through the lenses of both the colonized world and the Indigenous world, and to find success through the strengths of each. Colleen teaches each day – she is a biology and chemistry teacher – and, alongside

The process of decolonizing the educational system is no easy task. Colleen understands the need to dismantle the existing structures and systems that may perpetuate biases and inequalities.

staff, she consistently strives to honour language and culture and create tradition while preparing learners for education beyond secondary school. With the gift of understanding this profound struggle, a seconded leader can return to their district, able to mentor and inspire. Colleen speaks of the change in her own sight; she is more sensitive to the challenges Indigenous learners face in a colonial system. “I see it everywhere, and I see it where I wouldn’t have seen it before.”

Through her work with the Stz’uminus Education Society, Colleen feels that she is beginning to understand what it means to move at “the speed of trust.” She speaks of the Elders, and their influence upon her. “Elders ground me. They are honest, true, and reflective, with no agenda.” Colleen is learning to not always default to giving advice, but to focus on empowering others by building agency and trust. When she moves on from this experience, she hopes that the Elders will see how the team has tried to create a student-centred program, built upon language and culture, and the voices of families. And, for herself? Colleen shared that the experience is “making me honest. I will be a better Principal, and a better person, because of this.”

When such a partnership can realize this deep transformation and reciprocal benefit, one might expect to find many examples throughout BC. In truth, there are a precious few. While the financial aspects of this arrangement may pose a significant challenge for

Colleen is learning to not always default to giving advice, but to focus on empowering others by building agency and trust.

consideration, the greatest barrier may be a scarcity mind-set. Even in a time of staffing challenges, sharing and exchanging expertise, resources, and knowledge must be seen as an opportunity to give, to receive, to teach, and to learn. It is a Provocative Proposition – *We heal, hope, and love one another: our snuwuyulh teach that we are one and, by sharing our gifts with each other, we learn and grow together.*

My time with Colleen ended. Although it was spring break, the school was busy with the activity of the community, and my host needed to return her attention to the work of her Leadership Team. The sun was trying to break through the clouds on this typical March day on Vancouver Island. As I wound my way back to the highway along the quiet seaside road, I thought about journeys, the impressions they leave, and the transformations they inspire. I slowed to a stop when the road met the highway and I paused to read the sign which greeted me. The sign declared it was not possible to join the flow of traffic, and to go back the way I had come; I had to turn in an unexpected direction to continue this journey. There was no going back. I smiled, signaled, and smoothly joined the forward stream of travellers.

Do you have a story to share about your own school or district?

We'd love to hear about it!

sandra@bcpvpa.bc.ca