

embracing change

From Powell River School District to qathet School District: One Step Closer to Truth and Reconciliation

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Nestled atop the Sunshine Coast – accessible by sea or air, and 90 miles north of Vancouver – sits the stunningly beautiful community of Powell River. Our city is welcoming, close-knit, connected, and a playground for those who love trails, the ocean, and lakes. It is also a city rich in history, and one that has most recently been navigating churning waters as it moves from a resource-based, single-industry community to a more modern and dynamic economy.

In this same city, a significant transformation is taking place that reflects not only the collective commitment to education, but also the dedication to reconciliation and the acknowledgment of Indigenous heritage. A landmark in this transformation has been the decision to change the name of the school district from Powell River School District 47 to qathet school district.

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I grew up in this community, and I have a large extended family who have lived here for many generations. Originally from Ireland, my family came here to work in the logging industry. We maintain a strong sense of our Irish heritage, where large family dinners occur regularly, the fiddle comes out at the drop of a hat, and connection, food, and laughter are constants. We spent our summers 'up Powell Lake', and over the years, our families grew. Through this time, I do not recall any of us reflecting on the name of our town; it was simply where we grew up. That has been the extent of my own thinking about our city's name, and what it represents, until now.

In the early part of my career as a high school English teacher, I always shared a lesson about the importance of naming. The lesson involves listing car names and making the connection with the meaning behind the name. We would generate a list – Ford Mustang, Chevy Pinto, Volkswagen Rabbit, AMC Gremlin, Volkswagen Bug, Dodge Viper – and students would reflect and write about how the name influences the car's image, and defines its selling features. Why would the manufacturer choose that specific name for the vehicle? What message does the name send? It is a great lesson, intriguing for the students whose written responses were always insightful.

When it was announced that the district would change its name, I began to reflect upon what this

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means to me as an individual in this community, as a leader in my school, and as a person with a role in the province's education landscape. There were a few 'a-ha' moments.

Powell River was named after Dr. Israel Wood Powell, the first Superintendent of Indian Affairs for British Columbia in the late 19th century. While Dr. Powell made contributions to the province, it is crucial to recognize that Indigenous peoples suffered tremendously under his leadership; years of unimaginable hardship and trauma resulted from the acts of abuse perpetrated by those who explored this region. The name Powell River not only represents a historical figure, but also carries with it the legacy of colonialism and the erasure of Indigenous identities.

A name is not just a label; it is a powerful symbol that carries historical, cultural, and social significance. It defines who we are, what we stand for, and how we are perceived by others. In the case of our school district, this change signifies a shift towards a more inclusive, respectful, and equitable future.

I want to share that I have been writing this article for a few months, much longer than I would have anticipated. I have sat down to write, only to find myself hours later with a well-organized linen closet, vacuumed and polished floors, and alphabetized books on my bookshelf, and here is why. In writing

about the past and this transition to *qathet*, my worry has been, "what if I make a mistake? What if I discover something about myself that is problematic? What if the name Powell River means more to me than I think it does?" As always, introspection is the greatest teacher, as the process and name change has left me with more questions than answers. While I discovered that the name *qathet* means 'working together', I wondered about the process for naming and – most importantly – what we can do to ensure our school community reflects the intention behind the name change.

Many of us who lead reconciliation work in our district are seeking ways to support our colleagues on a journey of Truth and Reconciliation. This journey is complex, and distinct, as we are all at different places in the journey to reconciliation. A significant action such as a district's change of name is a signal to everyone, in and out of the organization, that the history of Indigenous peoples and the connection to land must be understood and its significance made explicit. If done with the right intention, a name change *should* elicit thought and emotion. We *should* be reflective of our practices and intentions, of our language and context. We need to be thoughtfully and carefully aware of those whom we serve, and those whose voices have historically been silenced.

In T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", as a reflection of his internal struggle and hesitation, the writer asks, "Dare I disturb the universe?" The idea of disturbing the universe suggests a fear of breaking societal norms or causing a disruption. Disturbing the universe means stepping out of our comfort zones and leading change. And, despite feeling the internal angst, sense of unease, discomfort, or awkwardness in having more questions than answers, the answer to the question, "Dare I disturb the universe?" is undeniably YES. The 'how' is where we roll up our sleeves and work together.



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