



CBC journalist Jason D'Souza

Photo Courtesy CBC Vancouver | Christian Amundson/CBC

Matheson

How A Surrey School Is Shifting Their Narrative

The first time that Peter Johnston heard about the idea of having an embedded CBC reporter in his school was during a Friday afternoon call from Surrey Schools Communication Services Manager Doug Strachan. Johnston is the Principal of L.A. Matheson Secondary School and his first response went something like “Yeah. No.”

But the conversation continued. Strachan explained that the CBC had approached Surrey Schools at the District level to see if they could make something work. The public broadcaster had recently recognized that much of their coverage of Surrey and Surrey schools could be considered negative, and they wanted to open a dialogue about changing that. Strachan stressed that the focus of the series was to be on students, and student voice. That was something very close to Johnston’s heart, as the new Principal of Matheson in the Fall of 2018. “This is what we are

focused on, too, this is my commitment: students owning their learning through student voice, student choice and student agency at Matheson. When I came to the school in September, I wanted to focus on all the good work that teachers and students do. I said okay: let’s talk.”

Doug Strachan attended Matheson’s staff meeting the following Monday and presented the idea to the staff. There was much discussion surrounding student rights and confidentiality; the procedural implications of an emergency, should

one occur during that time; the concerns about what might be included and reflected in the CBC’s reports. “There was a lot of conversation about the barriers,” said Johnston. “I flipped it and said let’s talk about the benefits: can we look at this as a chance to change the narrative of Matheson, to move beyond the bad press that we’ve had and to actually give our kids an opportunity to express themselves. I suggested that we see if there might be four Grade 11 teachers who would be willing to have the embedded reporter in their classes. In the end, I had about a dozen teachers come forward.”



Peter Johnston
Principal, L.A. Matheson
Secondary School

The next step was to meet with the reporter, Jason D’Souza, Early Edition host Stephen Quinn and their team so that an agreement could be reached as to the guidelines for the project. This was a leap for the CBC as well, and the local team had successfully sold the idea to their senior management despite the fact that a reporter would be working for an entire month but not actively filing stories.

“It was very important to me to be clear about the intent of the story-telling,” said Johnston. “If they were coming to be on the ground when ‘bad things’ happen, well, those things can happen in any school. I did not want that to be the expectation. Jason assured us that was not why they wanted to be there. Interestingly enough, Jason and I went to the same high school – although some years apart – and so we had some common experience to draw from and each recognized how assumptions can be made about certain schools. It’s like that typical ‘east-west’ divide in Vancouver, when in reality one school is certainly not all gangsters and one school is certainly not all rich.”

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Johnston recognized that the project could have gone sideways very quickly. There had been lockdowns and emergencies at Matheson in the Fall, but he was committed to accentuating the positives. “This community is changing, the demographic here is changing, and we don’t want to be held to stereotypes of the past,” he said. “I was concerned that a



major event could happen, but I was not at all concerned with what staff and students might say. We have a terrific PAC, the parents all understood and embraced the idea, the President really understood the advantages of marketing.”

“We communicated with all of the parents and they received a letter outlining the project, but when it came to Jason’s first days at Matheson it seemed that many students weren’t really aware of what was going on. There was a buzz about who this guy was: is there a cop in our school? Is this 21 Jump Street? Jason got razzed about that a lot.”

While Jason was embedded, he and Johnston discussed what he was learning. “It started out simply as a radio series, but once Jason had been there for a couple of weeks they asked if



Photo Courtesy CBC Vancouver | Evan Mitsui/CBC

they could take the series to television as well,” said Johnston. “The material was so rich. And the stories were so great.”

“My inbox had dozens of comments once the stories started to air: I had colleagues across the province who were emailing me. Episode after episode, we received more momentum. A few things happened where – well, kids being kids, they were talking about issues or situations that the teachers didn’t like being represented that way.” Johnston pauses. “From a leadership perspective, I say what can we learn from that? If kids are feeling that way, it’s important to give them their voice. And that’s a huge part of what the series did, it generated discussion. We still need to unpack that further, and to re-listen to the episodes and find out what we can do better.”

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It was an educational experience for the students as well. As a reporter who knows his craft, Jason made everyone feel comfortable but didn’t hesitate to ask the more challenging and insightful questions. Johnston laughs. “He’s a reporter: he’s reporting. It’s not an educational journal, it’s entertainment. He did a really good job of keeping it light enough and entertaining enough that people would listen, while still telling the important stories. I had students who would come to me and say, I didn’t know he was going to write about that, and I’d say yes: that’s good learning, isn’t it?”

As to what he might have done differently? “We could have done a better job of going into the classrooms Jason was going to be in and letting them know why he was there, that he was a reporter. We didn’t emphasize enough for the students that this was an opportunity for the public at large to learn how you think, how the school is being represented, how the city is being represented. And that’s part of our learning from the experience.”

Johnston recognizes that there has been impact from the exposure on a number of levels, as parents and the community are experiencing the shift in the narrative. The Matheson boys’ soccer team was at the top of the province standings for most of the year, and their robotics team is third in the world. “Those are the stories that we’re telling,” said Johnston. “We are also now getting feedback from elementary parents and students at associate schools who may have had concerns about the school’s narrative in the past and they’re now hearing that there is

change. We’ve talked to the CBC, and they may want to come back and follow-up on some of the stories. I’ve told staff that this is just the start, but that we need to endorse and build on that narrative.”

Johnston believes that there are opportunities for other schools who may choose to take on a project that has public or media exposure. “I would say to go in with a strategic plan for what you want to take away from it: what’s your ‘spin’? Go in with that plan clear in your mind and know how it aligns with your school goals and mission statement, your school plan. Make sure that you’re being strategic in connecting that opportunity with the positive things within your school.”

Johnston and the Matheson staff will be spending time unpacking the learning and talking about the issues that were highlighted in the CBC series. “We are in a collegial learning environment, we’re the lead learners, and we’re here to listen and learn. If students don’t feel safe or have a voice, that comes back to our learning.”

“I can’t say enough about the experience for our school, and the integrity of the CBC throughout the project. We went on this journey so that we could improve the public image of our school which is full of great students and great educators, and along the way we learned much more than we ever expected.”

Missed
“Matheson”
on CBC?

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