

Education is the cornerstone of a strong, equitable society. It is fundamental to building possibility and opportunity, nourishing our minds and our spirit.

From an early age, education has played a pivotal role in my life. It has guided my decisions, given me confidence to stand up for my beliefs and provided direction and drive throughout my career. I grew up in New Westminster, attending Herbert Spencer Elementary and New Westminster Senior Secondary, before graduating from Burnaby South Secondary. I then attended Douglas College and Simon Fraser University.

My educational journey was enriched by the support and mentoring from teachers, Principals and Vice-Principals and professors who motivated and encouraged me.

I have always been driven to be an advocate, partner and supporter on a wide range of social issues, from accessible post-secondary education and affordable public childcare to medicare and health equity.

In my most recent role as chief spokesperson for the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU), I represented more than 50,000 people who provide care and services in our health care system. It was a privilege to listen and learn from their experiences, to advocate for a strong public health care system, and to help address their concerns and challenges in the health sector, to support them to do their best work. I will do the same in my new role – be

Advocate Partner Supporter

**The province's new
Minister of Education
talks about the work ahead
as we move past the pandemic,
and the focus on Indigenous
education, anti-racism
and mental health**



an active listener and passionate advocate for students and staff.

It is an honour to be appointed Minister of Education. As a lifelong learner this is an incredible opportunity to delve into the complexities of the education sector and find innovative ways to build on our collective successes. Ultimately the strength of the sector is dependent on strong and respectful relationships with all partners including students, families, teachers, support staff, Principals and Vice-Principals, superintendents, Indigenous educators, trustees and others.

Our shared responsibility is to ensure all students – no matter their ability, background, community or age – have every opportunity to achieve their best.

B.C. students continue to be recognized as among the best in the world through national and international assessments, due in large part to their hard work and dedication, but also through mentorship from education professionals. Principals and Vice-Principals play a vital role as leaders who help teachers and staff build day-to-day relationships with students. In many respects, school administrators set the foundation, culture and environment in each school, and set the tone and expectations for student-to-student and student-to-staff connections.

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The past year has been one of the most challenging for everyone in every sector and every household. By mid-March 2020, the world recognized the rapid spread of COVID-19, and education systems everywhere adjusted quickly to determine how and where students could learn safely during a pandemic.

In B.C., we took this challenge head-on and adapted to the new reality by putting in place a comprehensive staged plan to provide remote learning for most students. Schools stayed open for children of Essential Support Workers (ESW) and those with complex needs who required in-class instruction. This temporary, but monumental shift in how and where students learned, was championed by more than 2,600 Principals and Vice-Principals in nearly 1,600 public schools.

While the 2020/21 school year has presented a variety of challenges so far, we have worked together to address concerns and make changes to improve health and safety guidelines and keep schools open. The ongoing commitment by Principals and Vice-Principals is at the forefront of school operations and student success, so I thank you for your tireless commitment during the past year.

As the vaccine rollout is now underway, our goal for this coming September is for all K-12 students to fully return to school under Stage 1.

The mandate I recently received as Minister of Education builds on a government commitment to put people first, through a strong focus on equity and truth and reconciliation.

I'm committed to ensuring students have more access to meal programs and classroom supplies, so parents and teachers don't have to pay costs out-of-pocket. There will also be a renewed

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focus to bring childcare into the broader learning environment through a strategy that is expected to move the delivery of childcare into the Ministry of Education in the next few years.

I'm also committed to building on our investments in safe and accessible playgrounds for students in our schools.

As we move past the pandemic, we will focus on our ongoing systemwide commitments for the success and well-being of all students, with a particular focus on Indigenous education, anti-racism and mental health.

The Ministry of Education hosted a Community Roundtable on Anti-Racism in July 2020 to support the development of a K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan, which continues to be developed and is expected to be released later this year.

The roundtable allowed us to review how we can strengthen our provincial curriculum to include new teachings, perspectives and history. Since then, we've seen school districts lead the way to develop new courses on Black and Indigenous history.

In December 2020, Vancouver (SD 39) approved African Descent History in British Columbia, for its grade 12 students, which will allow them to better

understand the rich history of the Black community in B.C. The teachings of black history will enlighten students and serve as a commitment to anti-racism.

B.C.'s 18 Ministry-approved Indigenous languages in the curriculum, as well as courses and teachings for additional Indigenous languages, continues to be recognized by other provinces, territories, countries and education organizations in the world. School districts have demonstrated a commitment to make learning about Indigenous languages and cultures more accessible to students by engaging with local Indigenous communities to develop curriculum, and by acknowledging the necessary financial and human resources needed to build, expand and maintain Indigenous language programs. With new programs and courses being offered, B.C. students learn more about Indigenous cultures every day.

Kamloops-Thompson (SD 73) has a leadership development program where current and future Principals and Vice-Principals attend cultural competency sessions with a local lens and pay attention to potential systemic biases in pedagogy. They also submit short, medium and long-term equity goals in school growth plans.

In Mission (SD 75), a Vice-Principal initiated a schoolwide Legacy Project and partnered with classes to incorporate Indigenous Worldviews and Perspectives. Local Nations, trustees and the entire school body were included to witness the unveiling of the project.

It's exciting to hear about the recently proposed Academy of Indigenous Studies at George Elliot Secondary in the Central Okanagan school district (SD 23), which will be offered to all students in Grades 10 through 12.

I am optimistic that more school districts will

follow Vancouver, Kamloops, Mission and Central Okanagan with innovative programs. While we have taken many steps forward in our journey to teach history, heritage, diversity and inclusion, there is more work to do.

Now, more than ever, we need to prioritize the mental health and well-being of our children and our staff. Our experience through COVID-19 has highlighted the critical importance of having strong mental health supports in our K-12 sector.

We know there will be a lot of young people who have experienced stress and anxiety in their lives as a result of this pandemic. Mental health represents a large commitment in my mandate as Minister. That's why I'll be working with my colleague Sheila Malcolmson, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, to get dedicated child and youth mental health teams up and running as soon as possible, so school districts have more resources available.

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The dedicated teams will build on our new Mental Health in Schools (MHIS) Strategy, which embeds mental health and substance use programs and services for students throughout the education system and also expands on A Pathway to Hope, our government-wide strategy to transform mental health and substance use care for children and young people.

The Cowichan Valley School District (SD 79) started the school year by reviewing the Compassionate Systems Leadership models with

all Principals and Vice-Principals. Compassionate Systems Leadership is one of three elements in the MHIS Strategy. The school district established a multi-disciplinary Clinical Leadership Competency Framework (CLCF) Community of Practice that is being led by school district counsellors who are applying the principles in their practice throughout the district. The development of Compassionate School Communities teams is also being piloted in six schools across the district.

The Mental Health in Schools Strategy also identifies adult well-being as a key priority. As a part of the Compassionate Systems Leadership element within the Strategy, the Ministry is partnering with education leaders to explore and foster adult well-being in the school system. The Ministry is partnering with The Center for Systems Awareness to host workshops for educators and leaders to support positive mental health and adult well-being. And we have offered trauma-informed practice training for staff. In February 2021, the Ministry offered an Introduction to Compassionate Systems Leadership workshop specifically for Principals and Vice-Principals.

We've seen some amazing examples from school districts. Surrey (SD 36) has implemented a virtual leadership coaching program to support the growth and development of Principals and Vice-Principals with over 90 participants. The Surviving to Thriving program includes group and individual coaching with a focus on leadership in times of complexity. While West Vancouver (SD 45) is using a Compassionate Systems Leadership approach in hiring an external facilitator to explore how racism is experienced in the school district, the findings will be used to create a framework to address inequities within their system and leadership.

Principals and Vice-Principals, teachers, school

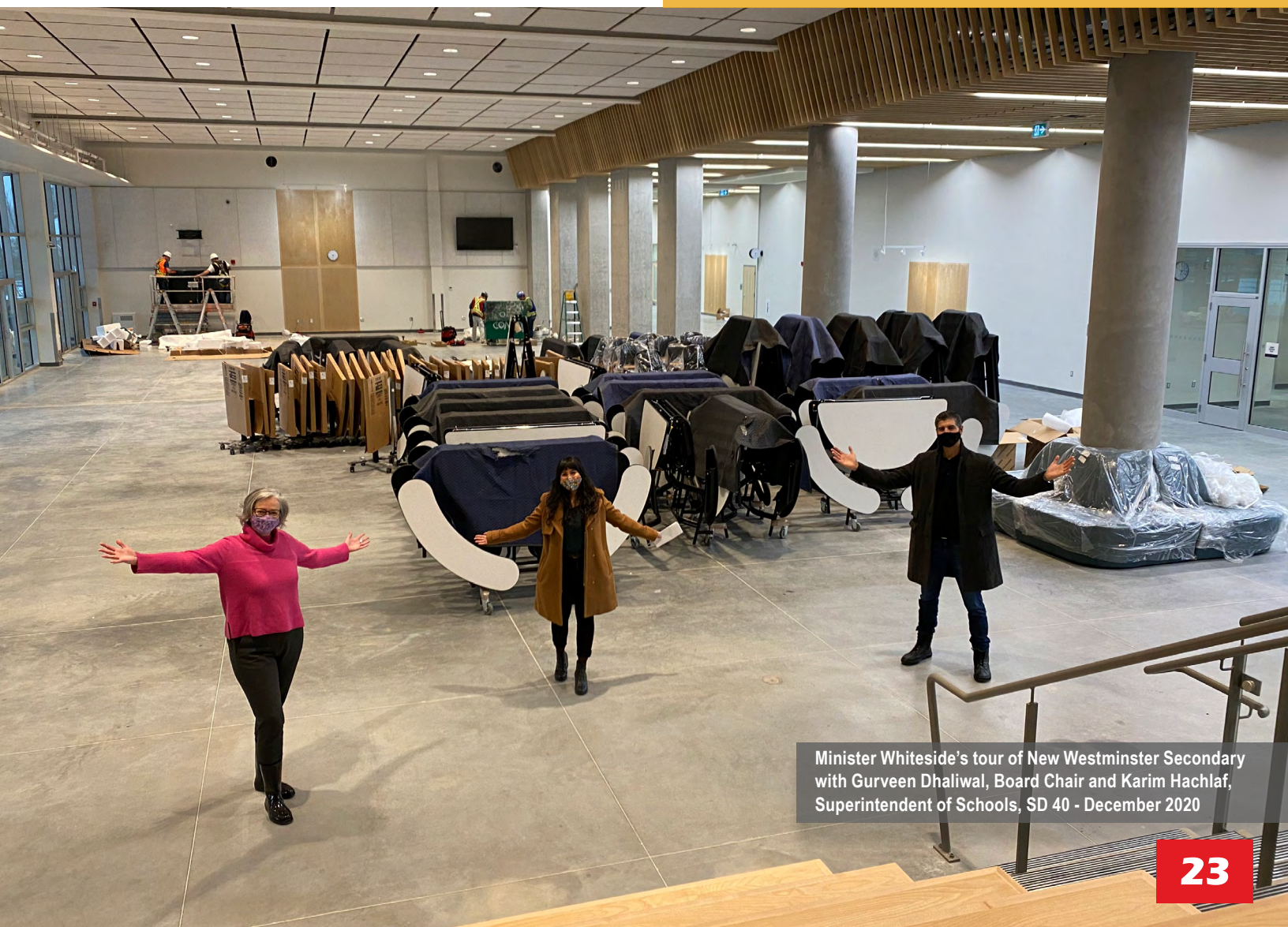
staff, parents and communities have done a tremendous job to keep kids learning throughout the pandemic. I applaud this collective teamwork by our education professionals and parents to keep students learning in safe spaces and places. I know we will continue to maintain our success to the end of this school year and into September.

While we still have a challenging road ahead of us until vaccines are widely distributed, let's all continue to support each other during these difficult times and continue to put the success of our students first. The lessons we teach today through our words and actions, will shape generations to come as an example of resiliency, unity and hopefulness.



@JM_Whiteside

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Minister Whiteside's tour of New Westminster Secondary with Gurveen Dhaliwal, Board Chair and Karim Hachlaf, Superintendent of Schools, SD 40 - December 2020