

Feature

A Journey of Change

by
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When is the best time to embark on a journey of significant change at a school that is steeped in long standing traditions? What is the best way to convince a staff that the time has come to replace certain approaches with a new mindset? How do you lead students and staff through change so it becomes sustainable and acknowledged as a 'better way'? These are the questions that nagged at my conscience each day when I exited the parking lot of Parkside Secondary School as the school's Principal.

When it comes to my 30-year career in education, I believe that everything has happened for a reason, although the purpose – I must confess – has not always been immediately apparent to me. Looking back, it is as if an invisible hand has been guiding and sometimes even pushing me to embrace change and confront challenges. Two years ago when I had spent a summer learning about trauma informed schools I realized that this was the missing ingredient needed for our students to realize their full potential. Now that I 'knew better' I was compelled to 'do better' as the school leader.

Prior to my summer of online learning, I had previously paved the way to transform our small alternate high school into a trauma sensitive school by focusing on the concept of 'Growth Mindset' as coined by Carol Dweck (2006). I needed the staff to see every student as a capable learner and, more importantly, recognize any unintentional bias on their part stemming from a 'Fixed Mindset'. Higher expectations became linked to the school's motto of "Love, Strength, Courage". I also showed the staff the documentary film *Paper Tigers* (2015) directed by James Redford. Lincoln Alternative High School in Walla Walla, Washington is the focus of this film that strives to answer the questions about what it means to be a trauma informed school, and how teenagers are educated when their childhood experiences have left them with a brain and a body ill-suited for learning. The quiet persistence of love is shown to have a powerful impact.

Now I know eyes can sometimes roll when love is mentioned as an essential component of a school's mission, but research has recognized the importance of rapport between teachers and students for decades. A meta-analysis of 119 studies has linked teacher

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empathy and warmth to better student achievement, motivation and behaviour (Cornelius-White, 2007). Promoting positive teacher-student relationships was recently emphasized by Susan Shebby and Tameka Porter (2021) when they stressed the importance of noticing students as individuals and showing them that you care, while challenging and encouraging students to meet the high expectations expressed by their teachers. Helping students connect their effort with success allows them to develop grit, an essential ingredient of academic achievement.

With preliminary steps taken to set the stage for becoming trauma informed, it was time to create a school growth plan that encouraged every staff member to embrace a new approach for helping students reach their goals. I knew that the adults in the school cared deeply about their students and wanted them to thrive. This would be the starting point for our journey. The foundation upon which I wanted to motivate staff to change needed to be built upon educational research that had a proven record of undisputed success.

I recognized that the information I had accumulated during the summer about trauma informed schools needed to be shared with every staff member on an ongoing basis if Parkside was going to be transformed into a trauma informed secondary school. I knew that the flow of wisdom had to be like a water faucet that was continuously dripping into a bucket of knowledge and seeping into the brains of every staff member. Each drip of water represented a new insight gained

about trauma informed strategies and brain-based research.

When school started in September, every staff member was given a 12-month subscription to an internet-based video library that contained an extensive collection of topics for their consideration. I had deliberately given everyone a buffet of potential wisdom and encouragement so that they could sample as many items as they desired. In addition to this online membership, the staff were given the book *Help for Billy* written by Heather Forbes (2012), with an accompanying study guide (2017)

and quick reference guides from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall (2018) (2019), as well as Julie Causton and Katie Macleod (2020), to help support one and all with their learning journey. Together we would be paddling our way through a river of knowledge with everybody taking part in the adventure.

Monthly staff meetings became opportunities for sharing information. Social-emotional learning, the impact of trauma upon the brain and mindfulness activities became agenda items for discussion.



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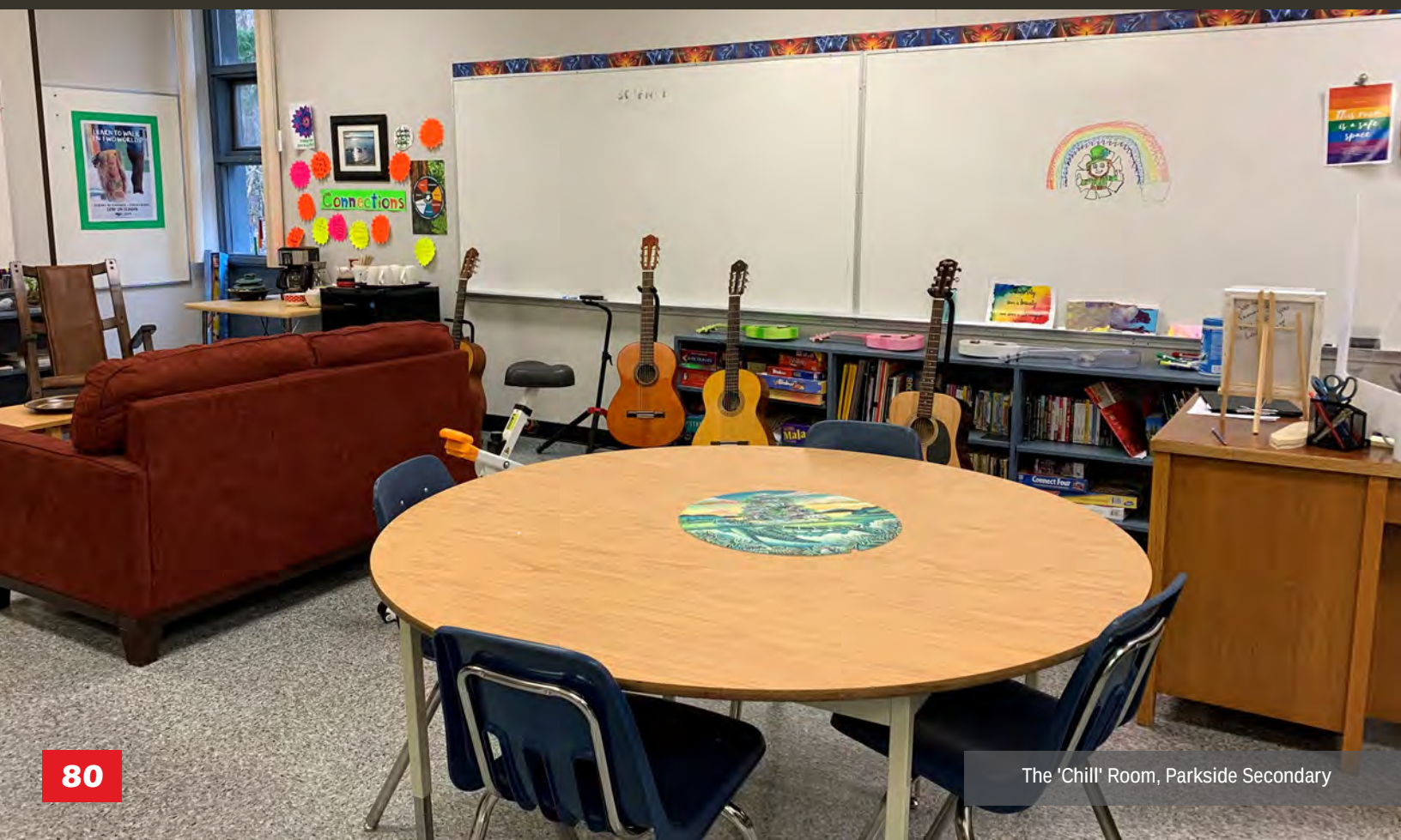
Wellness became a focus for everyone because, as we all know, change can be difficult and stressful so calendar tracking sheets were given to students and staff to assist with personal wellness goals of harm reduction or embracing new healthy habits.

Every student's schedule was changed to allow for three 'checking in' times between the students and their teacher in the morning, after lunch and at the end of the day. The 'checking in' connection times allowed staff to gain an awareness about their students' emotional state so interventions could be intentionally offered to any student who expressed agitation before academic activities were started. The 'checking in' times also allowed for mindfulness activities to be given to students so they could become calm, alert, and ready to participate in their own learning. At the end of each day, an attitude of gratitude was encouraged as students and staff reflected upon what they appreciated while at school.

The creation of a 'Chill Room' for students to access whenever they felt overwhelmed in their classroom setting was a key component to the transformation

of our school being trauma informed. Indigenous support staff embraced the Chill Room as a special place to support students on a daily basis. A fly on the wall would see this special room as a sanctuary where students could feel safe and secure as they worked through their emotions by doing art, playing a musical instrument (guitar / ukulele / electric keyboard with headphones), or simply sitting in a rocking chair eating a snack and chatting with a staff member who wanted to help them. Once the student became calm, the assignment they brought to the Chill Room from their classroom would become the focus. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child or – in the case of Parkside Secondary – it takes an entire staff working together to help students experience success.

Food became a tool to build rapport with students and staff. In my opinion, there is no better way to build a positive relationship with teenagers than by offering them something to eat or drink. With this in mind, I took over the breakfast program at Parkside Secondary School by creating two kiosk-style stations





with donations from the local food bank and coffee shop, as well as financial support from the Breakfast Club of Canada. Any time during the school day, students could access complimentary snacks from the Breakfast areas. As an amateur baker, I view food as a source of comfort that could bring joy and relief to those who needed a caring gesture. My nickname for many years has been the 'Lemon Loaf Lady' as a testament to the most requested item I prepare for folks in my local community of Terrace. At Parkside Secondary, I have a new nickname – the 'Smoothie Lady' – because I prepare fruit smoothies for students and staff at 10 am, and deliver the drinks as I wheel my beverage trolley from classroom to classroom.

You can imagine the surprised look on the faces of newly-registered students when their Principal offers them something refreshing to drink each morning. On Friday mornings, chocolate milk is served as an additional beverage option because who wouldn't want to have a bit of chocolate added to their day? This year, to tackle the stress of living through a pandemic, I have added another layer of nutritional

support by proclaiming the slogan 'Friday is Pie Day' to denote the fact that I offer slices of pie to students and staff in the afternoon as a final note of thanks for being at school.

So what has been the overall impact of this journey of change? Improved student attendance and reduced behavioural concerns were noticed by staff members in the first year as we paddled our figurative canoe down the trauma informed river. We realized that our new approach was having a positive impact upon students. Now, as we enter the second year of our trauma informed journey, we have augmented the initial support strategies of weekly yoga and horseback riding sessions with ergonomic bicycles in classrooms for both students and staff, thanks to grants and financial assistance from local community groups.

Being a trauma informed staff has been advantageous as we constantly navigate the murky waters of a global pandemic. On a daily basis, we are experiencing some sort of trauma or stress stemming from

COVID-19, but we now have tools at our disposal that can mitigate the adverse ripple effects we face. Examining the importance of “Grit” as described by Angela Duckworth has become a focal point for our staff this year as an additional layer of knowledge to help students persevere when confronting obstacles.

This year’s school slogan of “Stronger Together” has been a reminder for everyone that, collectively, students and staff can thrive even during the most hectic days. The key is to remember that we are never alone and that kindness can infuse others

with strength. One day I am certain I will look back and recall with fondness the “Journey of Change” at Parkside Secondary as one of the most worthwhile adventures of my career. Until then, I will continue to paddle my trauma informed canoe down the river of learning and invite others to join me on my adventure because being part of a team is always better than being isolated. As the secretary at Parkside Secondary keeps telling me, “Together you and I will always be smarter than we could ever be alone.” Wise words worthy of remembrance when work becomes overwhelming.

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Jane Arbuckle is the current Principal of Parkside Secondary School in Terrace, British Columbia. As an experienced teacher and administrator working in elementary, junior and senior secondary schools, Jane is passionate about helping students experience success at school. Jane maintains an optimistic 'can do' attitude inspiring others to be creative.

Her hobbies include baking, taking relaxing walks, watching British mystery shows and cheering for her favourite sport teams, the Toronto Maple Leafs. *Go Leafs Go!*

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The 'Smoothie Lady', a.k.a. Jane Arbuckle