



Photo courtesy: Karen Ware

by

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SD91

Questions and Dreams

The summer after my first year as a school administrator was different from the summers I had experienced as a teacher. My mind was occupied by the question of how our school and community would thrive in the upcoming school year, especially amidst a pandemic. Many of our students had missed important instructional time and needed social connection. In the background, the question held my attention until early August. Then, one night, I had a very real and clear dream, and that dream was about a focus on kindness, a project that could bring together our school community. I could clearly see students learning and thriving as they sought to be kind in a practical and purposeful way. After reflection, I knew that it had to become more than a dream, but rather a vision of future action.

A Necessary Reminder

In the weeks leading up to the start of school – especially before the start of school in September 2020 – the office phone rings more and more frequently as the first day of school approaches. With everything that needed to be accomplished before that exciting day, I spent my time implementing new guidelines, reorganizing, and having meaningful conversations with students' families who, not surprisingly, had a lot of questions about the start of this unprecedented school year.

Sometime during the juggling of tasks and conversations, I realized that I had already forgotten the dream I had in the summer which was meant to direct my work this year. While sitting in my office, I decided then and there that I would focus on kindness during the next call I received. I would not simply answer the questions posed, but would support the *person* and go beyond the questions.

Soon after I made that decision, I answered a call from a grandparent who is raising their grandchildren who attend our school. They had many questions about COVID-19 and our school guidelines, but I soon realized that these concerns were not the main reason for the phone call. The grandparent told me

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about their life, both past and present, and shared the hardships they were facing as a family and how they felt that they were failing as a grandparent and guardian. They needed to hear words of kindness and encouragement. They needed to hear the truth: that they are a wonderful grandparent, and that they are the reason their grandchildren come to school ready to learn.

Yet, after our phone conversation, I knew that kind words were not enough. While words can heal the heart for a time, there were needs in that home that words could not meet. That day I stood up from my chair, walked out of my office, drove home and, for what seemed like the first time since becoming a Vice-Principal, truly did my job with a focused vision and full purpose. My wife and I packed up some of her famous freshly-made peach jam and stopped for some groceries to share with the family. Through a practical action of kindness, a new connection and friendship was formed.

This type of intentional and practical kindness is what woke me up in the summer, and it is the type of kindness that our school desperately needs so that we can continue to engage in, teach, and undertake activities as a school community.

The Project

As an educator in BC, the 2020-2021 school year has been one like never before. Our communities – and our minds – are filled with the stressful buzz and zap

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of words: COVID-19 tests, social distancing, mandatory masks, potential exposures, positive cases, daily health checks, and unprecedented times.

As a school leader, I sensed how those words and others like them weighed on staff, students, and families. However, I saw a way of moving forward with another word. That word is kindness, and for William Konkin Elementary School, it has become more than a word.

Our school embarked on a new and exciting project this school year. Our mission and vision were to build, grow, and share kindness in our school, local community, and the broader world. In a time when we were all feeling so far apart, I believed we needed to come together in a new way. This would require us to not only talk about kindness, but to make purposeful and practical actions of kindness the centre of our learning.

Students from grades K-7 are doing that, taking part in this project of kindness during the teacher prep time that I deliver as our school Vice Principal. The project has three phases: build, grow, and share.

BUILD



Photo courtesy: Karen Ware

In the build phase, students learned the skills to build wooden crates. This involved learning how to use a measuring tape, square, handsaw, hammer, sander, electric drill, jigsaw, wood glue, pipe clamps, and brad nailer. When they heard about the project, the Careers Department in our district, along with the local CO-OP, donated the wood materials we needed. We were also given the use of our district's mobile ADST (Applied Design, Skills, and Technology) trailer. Our dedicated students have exceeded the goal to build 70 wooden crates this school year.

GROW

In the grow phase, students are learning how to plant, germinate, and care for garden vegetables. We are able to grow spinach and different types of lettuce using indoor tower gardens that use an aeroponics system and artificial light. In a place that is covered in snow the majority of the school year – and that reaches temperatures of -30 degrees – it truly feels like a miracle to see green leafy life spring up before our students' eyes.



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SHARE

In the share phase, students are sharing kindness in two ways. First, we are sharing the mature vegetables we are growing, packaged into our wooden crates, with the local food bank. Food banks rarely have fresh produce donations, and our students were able to practically meet that need for our community. Second, 36 of the wooden crates have been sold to raise money for Biniyam, a grade 2 boy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Our school partnered with **Hope for Korah**, a non-profit organization that works to give hope to a population facing extreme poverty in Ethiopia. The money our school has raised through selling the student-built crates has paid for one full year of schooling for Biniyam. Before Hope for Korah found Biniyam's family, his mother would have to scavenge daily through the Addis Ababa trash dump in order to survive. Their 'home' was built out of materials found in the trash dump, was located within the landfill area, and was too small for Biniyam's mother to fully stretch out when she slept. With education for Biniyam, the cycle of poverty can be broken. Our students are passionately taking on this challenge and sharing kindness.



Kindness: A Reminder

Kindness cannot simply be something we hope takes place in our school community. It is deeply connected to intentional actions and deeds. Kindness is a skill and behaviour, and is something we express through doing. Educators model kindness well everyday with their students, colleagues, and communities. Educators also do a great job of intentionally teaching kindness in classrooms and in schools.

That is important work, and has limitless value for our learners. I wonder, though, what value and power we could gain by flipping that learning experience. Instead of only modeling, teaching, and talking to our students about how to be kind, we can take on real and practical acts of kindness together as a learning community and learn from the actions themselves. Kindness, as an action, becomes a powerful source of learning. It ripples out into our communities and empowers a generation of learners to build, grow, and share kindness.

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