

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

REAL LIFE EXAMPLES OF COMPASSIONATE SYSTEMS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

A British Columbia School District's Vision of Creating Systemwide Well-being

Shannon Derinzy, an Assistant Superintendent with the Maple Ridge & Pitt Meadows School District 42 in British Columbia, Canada, has long believed relationships are central to positive change, that through our interconnectedness we create an ethos of care. In fact, this former high school English teacher's master's paper was based on Nel Noddling's work and creating a role of the vice principal through a lens of care.

For many years, the B.C. province had placed a strong focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) to better support students and educators alike. SEL meant many things to different schools, but essentially staff identified resilience, self-awareness and social awareness as areas that required attention. In 2016, through a research project with the Human Early Learning Partnership at University of British Columbia, it was confirmed that there were pockets of great work happening in B.C.'s 60 school districts. What was found lacking was alignment and leadership from a systems perspective. The data indicated that they had many positive practices but that these practices lacked coherence. Additionally, in response to Dr. Kimberly Schonert Reichl's¹ research bringing to life the reality of stress contagion, one of the key areas the province began focusing on were supports to adult educators recognizing that adults need to be healthy to effectively support the students they serve.

In mid-2019, Shannon and her Superintendent Sylvia Russell² became part of a six-person team of BC educators from diverse positions to participate in the Certification Program for Compassionate Systems Master Practitioners, including individuals from the B.C. Ministry of Education, superintendents and principals associations and university researchers. The hope was that their rural-suburban district, comprised of approximately 15,000 students in 22 elementary schools, 6 secondary schools and a continuation school, would become a proof of concept district for the rest of the province, specifically showing how the Compassionate Systems tools could help in bringing greater coherence in creating systemwide well-being in a safe, caring and compassionate BC education system.

Shannon's specific focus in supporting this goal was to work within several of the existing structures in her district to develop a greater ethos of care. This started with a Social and Emotional Learning Cohort that included 80 principals, vice principals, teachers and support staff. Starting in the fall of 2019, she began to introduce several core leadership practices to this group and others that supported personal mastery, reflective conversations and systems awareness.

Shannon began introducing and facilitating a grounding practice to the beginnings of meetings that included:

- A guided meditation to help individuals settle into the space and quiet their minds
- Time to journal with 1-2 reflection prompts
- A small group check-in, a time in which each person was given a chance to deeply connect and share with others

To help educators better see the interconnectedness between self-awareness, awareness of others and awareness of the larger system, Shannon introduced some of the systems awareness tools including the Ladder of Inference and the Systems Thinking Iceberg models. At one vice principal meeting,

"We were using the Iceberg model to problem solve around issues that many were finding challenging. For example, one group was working on negative talk in the staff room and another was discussing work refusal of challenging students. The model enabled the vice principals to really explore these issues deeply—by examining what was above the surface and, more importantly, what was going on below the surface and how could that information be used to help support and address the problems. The complexity of the problems became evident. Coming into play was the stress of change, beliefs about inclusion, the impact on roles and discussions around changes to the service delivery model."

From Fragmentation to Coherence



¹ Eva Oberle, Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl. **Stress contagion in the classroom? The link between classroom teacher burnout and morning cortisol in elementary school students.** *Social Science & Medicine*, 2016; 159: 30 DOI: [10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.031](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.031)

² Shannon Derinzy & Sylvia Russell, Certified Compassionate Systems Master Practitioners, Class of 2019-20

Shannon's aim was to make these productive working sessions and to also inspire the administrators to continue and extend the work. "I believe that if principals and vice principals have confidence in using the (Compassionate Systems) framework, they will then share the tools and strategies with their staffs who will share this in their classrooms."

In time, Shannon began receiving encouraging feedback. One principal shared, "One tool I find myself utilizing regularly is Mindful Reflection. Reflection can be an empowering process. It can help you make sense of your day, to set a course of action, to step away from your habitual way of doing and thinking and discover new opportunities. Building time into business agendas for mindful reflection has proven beneficial in setting the tone for a meeting by inviting everyone to set aside their distractions for a few moments and be present together. In addition, I have witnessed greater connectivity, understanding and comradery when members have had the opportunity to share their reflections with others."

Shannon also feels the work of SEL and Compassionate Systems aligns perfectly with the First Peoples Principles of care, community and patience. Given how important reconciliation with First Nations people is in British Columbia and Canada more broadly, "It is incumbent upon us to both recognize the trauma we caused and to work to repair our relationships and ensure our First Peoples have a real voice in our schools. We have learned so much from our relationship with our Katzie and Kwantlen Nations and our Metis peoples. We need each other in profound ways. Compassionate Systems enables us to celebrate all people and the gifts they bring us."

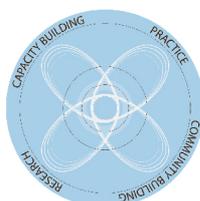
Shannon believes having her superintendent practicing and leading this project with her communicated its importance to the school district. Shannon believes also that their initial focus on site administrators was a key part of initial community building because of their influence and leadership at the school level. In time, they plan to expand the impact of the work by engaging greater numbers of staff and students.

The BC team has potential community reach across the province. As their collaborative efforts continue to unfold into 2021, Shannon sees this team engaging with other school districts, participating at professional development sessions and working with other ministries such as the Ministry of Children and Families and Mental Health. She has confidence that the growth will occur with little need to drive it from the top because it connects with people's basic values. "Using these models has broken down barriers and we remember to see each other as people first and to really take the time to listen to each other and hear and see the humanity in all of us. We are people first and our roles second."

"Exploring the Ladder of Inference and the Iceberg allowed me to really pause and wonder about the role assumptions, biases and life experiences play in the decision making processes in our education system."

— Principal, Maple Ridge Pitt Meadows School District

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