

Healthy Schools Year End Story

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School Name: Suwilaawks Community School

School District: Coast Mountains School District #82

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Student Leadership Group – 16 students in grades
Grades 2 – 6

Video address: <http://youtu.be/j87orViNCDI>

The Story of Suwilawwks Community School, 2012 – 2013

Imagine a school where everyone felt welcomed, where bullying was not tolerated, where peace of mind was a goal for learning. Imagine a school, where the question where did you come from is not as important as the question where are you going, how will you get there and what can I do to help you travel along your journey? Imagine a school where academics are an important goal, but secondary to total well being and developing a sense of self. Imagine a school where time is taken away from reading, writing and other academic pursuits and given over to finding yourself, your passions and knowing who you are.

Welcome to Suwilawwks Community School! It is located in the urban center of the city of Terrace. It has a beautiful playground, a lovely garden and it is an attractive building.

This school has been supported in a way that fulfills the four pillars of Comprehensive School Health. Within the building the education ministry supports (through LINK funding) a community support worker. This worker enables connections throughout the community and public service sectors. These connections benefit the school and include programs such as GRRLS, baking programs and by creating parent/community links. LINK funding and committed grant application writing have resulted in a flourishing school garden and indoor playground equipment. An afterschool program, led by an Aboriginal community member, is funded by the education and health ministries and provides for supervised afterschool activities. A creative administrative team has created links beyond the school to resources that enable further funding opportunities. The Social and Physical environment is enhanced by the school garden and the indoor playground, by a staff focus on implementing the MindsUp! program. Social/emotional

health is supported by an elementary school counselor and by staff and students reacting positively to support each other.

There is an obvious effort to connect students with authentic and meaningful aboriginal art, by professionally painted pictures within the building and displayed student art. Students welcome guests with traditional songs and dances. Drumming and singing are practiced within the building.

Parents are welcomed. Many of the parents attend before school to assist with the breakfast program and to help prepare the lunches. They are learning about nutrition from the community school workers as well as providing a much-needed service to the school. Parents are welcomed and invited to be a part of the school community.

This school is focused on developing a Healthy School Policy based on the needs of the students. Students are playing a huge role in developing and adapting the policies of school health around the issues of the context and needs of the students. Students are examining “What is a healthy school for us? What do we need in order to move forward and further create a healthy school environment?” These students are not your average students, existing only temporarily in a learning environment for five hours of their day and then disappearing into safe homes. These are students, who, like many students in BC, rely on the school to address many of their basic needs. These students are courageous – they are defining how educators need to adapt and adopt different understandings of what learners need. The teaching and learning piece is being co-developed by the students and the educators. They are finding creative ways to develop curriculum that addresses life long learning around physical, mental, and social well being. Any of these programs would tell a worthy story and set this school apart – but although all of the above embellishes the story, it is not the story that Suwilaawks Community School is telling this year.

Suwilaawks is telling a story of creating community and connectedness. The adults in the building wanted more than the story of a school that existed only from 9 to 3 and then magically disappeared into an empty building. Students needed more and knew that the school was the center of their community. Students needed a place where they could come beyond the school hours. They wanted a community center, a building that would thrive from early morning to evening and be filled with laughter and enjoyment and a love for learning. Both groups wanted the school building to be more and had an idea about how to move forward. They wanted each day to be a celebration of the day and the future, developing an understanding of community and connection.

This is a story about creating the feelings of being cared for. This is a story about creating a balanced student/adult led inquiry around the question of “To what lengths will we go to create a healthy school?” Students and educators exceeded their own expectations as they explored the possibilities with the strategy – there are no barriers and they learned a valuable lesson – neither can lead the inquiry. The inquiry is a co-experience, equally led by students and educators. Educators are needed for support to make the ideas happen and to create workable boundaries, students are needed for their perspective and understandings about their peers and what they believe is important. Together, they can create change.

Student leaders acknowledged that some students were having a hard time getting to school 'on time' – that is before the bell rang and that the day to day existence in this elementary school needed embellishing. School life needed to be more fun. Educators were well aware of student stragglers and student lack of engagement. In order to improve attendance both groups knew they had to make attending more attractive. They decided to start each day with a celebration – and to be inviting to the students and the school community. The goals were to be inclusive, making sure everyone took part, and everyone needed to be moving. They used the Daily Physical Activity mandate as the structure for the change. They started each day with dancing – learning moves from YouTube or video clips, and from live instructors – each other! Students led, educators led – everyone had an opportunity to shine. The morning activities grew, though, into something bigger and better. Students started to show their voice. Students started to show “life” talents, talents that would never of been acknowledged except for this unique opportunity. Each morning became a showcase with proud students sharing their learning, the learning that happened both at home and at school. A celebration took place each morning during and after the physical activity. Students became more attached to their community, and had a new purpose in arriving in a timely manner. Everyone became interested in honoring learning and students just couldn't wait to share. Arriving on time became important to the students because it was a time to honor and respect their peers, interact playfully with staff and create new relationships. It became a time to celebrate, and full of joyful activity, just as planned. On the rare times that students learned that their morning welcome was cancelled, they objected strongly and looked to adult leaders to correct this unfortunate situation.

At the same time, educators and students knew they wanted more from school. They wanted to grow the passions that they knew the students held, but were not necessarily sharing openly. Students told educators what they would like to learn about. Together they developed the 'Friday Academies' – opportunities for students to participate in cooking, knitting, Lego building, forms of art – outside the normal classroom offerings that students had interests in, but not necessarily the ability to pursue. Students participated in six week blocks, and were able to do things that interested them, and develop a new interest. Some of the academies addressed huge issues – for example, the cooking academy afforded opportunities for students to prepare food that was sold at a reasonable cost for home meals. Educators were adapting to fit the learning needs of the students of students, and students were learning that their passions were honored and respected. This was a very popular event, held every Friday.

Reflections:

All of the activities cost money. It is really hard for school staff to ensure sustainability when there is a constant struggle to finance the learning needs of the students. Academic performance can only occur after social/emotional and physical needs are met.

Agencies like DASH BC can make a difference in schools that are struggling by raising awareness of the school's needs provincially and by creating a partnership with health agencies. We need these partnerships now.

What went well:

Everything we did – students and educators created connections and strengthened understandings about healthy living, what it means to them and in a broader understanding, and how small steps can lead forward.

What would we do differently next year?

Bring in more outside leadership around leading the daily physical activities. Students are recognizing the importance of appropriate social interactions. They are very focused on learning more about nutrition. Physical activity is important, but within students' choice and control. Learning to eat well, prepare nutritious food and develop social interactions around meals is important for individual success. We need to find a more reliable source of money to develop our meal plans. Feeding students at school is a band-aid solution. We need to develop the nutritional skill sets that will enable our students to provide healthy meals for themselves. This is a global issue, not necessarily restricted to our school. Child poverty is a provincial issue, and belongs to each of us.