



## Kitwanga Elementary Inquiry 2020-2021



Kitwanga Elementary School is a small, rural school nestled above the Skeena River between the Gitksan communities of Gitwangak and Gitanyow. Our student population is comprised of roughly 80 students, of which 95% are of Indigenous ancestry. Our students come from communities that have many cultural and community strengths, yet continue to deal with socio-economic challenges and the intergenerational impacts of colonial trauma. Kitwanga Elementary School has maintained a focus on Self-Regulated learning, community building and the integration of local Gitksan culture to attend to student needs in order to ready them for learning and working together. We have focused on improving literacy successes for students and provide Gitksan Language and Culture programming for all students.

Our Mission Statement at Kitwanga Elementary School is 'Working Together for Student Success,' through which we endeavor to encourage the development of the whole child as a self-assured, informed and thoughtful decision maker with a strong sense of identity and pride in their cultural heritage.

Students at Kitwanga Elementary are very responsive to adults in our school, they have a strong desire to connect with their peers and adults and honestly communicate their needs in many ways. They have shown and shared with us that they value relationship with one another and adults in our school deeply. They value a safe environment with clear expectations and boundaries, where they feel supported in developing their academic, social, physical, emotional and cultural skills and knowledge. Our students have expressed a desire for enjoyable, outdoor, out-of-school excursions and community-building opportunities as a regular part of their learning experiences.

This year, we will maintain a focus on academic interventions, as many of our students are either below or just-below grade level expectations in reading and writing. We provide a number of opportunities for small group learning supports, individual supports for those students who require more intense interventions, and larger-scale literacy and numeracy programs for students requiring personalized supports.

Due to our unique location on traditional Gitksan territory, our student makeup, and the fact that our Indigenous knowledge, culture and history has long been dismissed or silenced by colonial culture and institutions, we will maintain a continued focus on the incorporation of local Gitksan culture in all that we do, and in all areas that we are able to incorporate local culture meaningfully. As well, we want to ensure our children have a myriad of opportunities to connect with their lands, people and culture. We aim to enhance learner engagement holistically by appealing to students' deep connections to their lands and culture, as well as their desires to tend to their growing pride in knowing who they are, their history and the powerful legacies of the peoples from which they come, we intend on attending to our school values through:

- school-wide Gitksan language learning,
- regular, culturally relevant, engaging and meaningful learning and sharing experiences,
- excursions onto the land to discover plants, resources and spaces that resonate with significance for Gitksan people,
- harvesting within our school garden or on Gitksan lands,
- attending local Elders gatherings to serve and spend time with our community elders,
- preparing, sharing and hosting meals with others within our school and local community as opportunities to build our sense of community connection,
- inviting local chiefs into our school to speak to our students on what leadership means to the Gitksan people, or to speak on matters that they consider important
- to enhance the visibility of Gitksan culture throughout our school (especially at our main entrance) and school grounds (we are requesting district support for culturally appropriate outdoor learning spaces – specifically a smokehouse and a longhouse area) to further develop our sense of community and ensure that our students' experience does not feel institutionalized, as has historically been the case for Indigenous people within the BC education system
- incorporating student feedback from student voice forums into staff communications to ensure all staff understand what students feel will be most important in supporting their learning experiences
- incorporating language in multiple ways that ensure it is not only heard but seen
- creating after-school opportunities for students to explore their culture with the support of local cultural leaders (i.e. culture clubs)

- increased opportunities to be on the land: visits to local culture camps, harvesting traditional foods, visiting places of significance to Gitxsan history and hearing the stories from those who hold the knowledge of this place-specific history (we will be approaching local bands for transportation supports)
- incorporating opportunities for hands on learning (smokehouse learning, incorporation of traditional foods into the curriculum)
- a focus on supporting strong identity formation amongst our students, knowing who you are before you enter the world, understanding identity first before incorporating non-traditional knowledge
- holistic learning, understanding and incorporating 7 Traditional Learning Techniques into our classrooms
- supporting regular staff visits to the FNRC to ensure we have the resources required to undertake the work that needs to be done

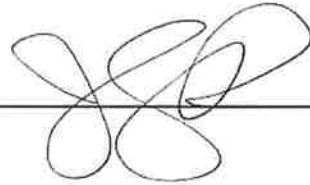
As a school community, we understand the need to begin to reconcile the history of Indigenous education within western institutions through our current actions – it is no small undertaking, and yet with small steps, we begin to plant the seeds of a vastly different experience for our students. We understand the need for Indigenous cultures to be visible, to be unquestioningly valued and for the biased mis-teachings of the colonial past to be corrected. We can only do these things by making concerted and tangible efforts to learn and share practices, skills, and knowledge of cultural significance in ways that do not speak to tokenism. We control what we do in our environment, and so we can ensure that we create space regularly for our local cultural knowledge and history's inclusion- so that eventually we will no longer have to create these spaces intentionally – that they will simply exist as valued and valuable areas of our canon, and so children will never again have their cultures denied to them as part of a mandated curriculum, nor as part of institutionalized systemic bias. If we continue to support our students' academic development through strong practice and necessary interventions, while maintaining a commitment to authentic and respectful incorporation of Indigenous culture, history, language and ways of understanding and being in our world, what will the impact be on student concepts of their identity, work ethic and perceptions of their motivations and success? We will need to touch base with students to form a baseline of understanding of where they are through conversation early in first term, as well as at least twice throughout the year to gather their perspectives on the areas of focus.

The professionals in our building are strongly connected to our Gitxsan communities, some are of Gitxsan ancestry, some have married into our Gitxsan nations, some have lived here so long that they have become a part of our fibres of existence. Many of our professionals have deeply rooted cultural knowledge and experience, some are new to our area and have a genuine respect for the Gitxsan people, and a desire to learn. Learning opportunities are fraught with complexity as Gitxsans are a humble and respectful people – humility and reciprocal respect have been taught to us throughout our lives. Learning is often an individual experience, allowing space for choice, seeking out teachers and finding your way. We will begin our year once again, by inviting in the local chief upon whose traditional territory our school sits to join us and speak to us on matters of leadership, Gitxsan values and respect. Last year's visit was an engaging experience for students and staff alike, and we will continue to invite local chiefs and elders to speak to our community on

issues of cultural values and issues of importance. We will also ask local experts to take time to teach us what they feel comfortable sharing, on our own or together on district professional development days. It is also up to each of us to continue to learn what we can, as this is now an integral part of the Professional Standards for BC Educators, and it will be up to all of us to continually seek out learning opportunities and to share our cultural knowledge with our students.

A real commitment to our goals around the learning of and incorporation of local culture into all areas of our students' learning experiences, as well as connecting with the lands and people of the Gitksan, will mean making efforts to not only continuously learn alongside our students, but to be vulnerable enough to share with them the struggles, joys and challenges of our learning journeys as well. How will we know if we are making a difference? How will we know if we are engaging our learners holistically? We will need to ask our learners often: how are we doing? What can we do better? What do you need more or less of? What do you love about coming here? How does learning about our people, lands, culture and history make you feel about yourself? Does this influence your efforts in school in general? What makes you feel excited to learn and work hard? Truly engaging those around us requires listening, reflection, vulnerability and a purposeful response to student needs, which we undertake with both seriousness and a respectful flexibility.

School Principal Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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