



Kitwanga Elementary Inquiry 2022-2023



Artwork by Camden Wilson, Grade 5

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 70 students, of which 93% 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 and wellness, 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 will continue to focus on improving literacy and numeracy successes for students via necessary interventions and provide Gitksan Language and Culture programming for all students.

Our Mission at Kitwanga Elementary School is ‘Working Together for Student Success,’ we work to support our students as they develop into self-assured, informed and thoughtful decision makers with a strong sense of identity and pride in their cultural heritage. We have worked hard to change the experience for all of our learners, to create an educational experience that is full of love and care, and is centered around the goal of creating a positive, family-feeling experience that is full of concern and compassion for our children. We have come to understand that this flows

out into the community, and is in direct contrast to the historic educational experience of the majority of our families, especially our Indigenous families.

Students at Kitwanga Elementary enjoy strong relationships within their school community, they value the safe and trusting connections they have with their peers, our staff, and within their families and community. Our students are honest and communicate their needs openly; knowing their voices are heard and valued has become an expectation for their experience here. 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 understanding of their identities as well as their academic, social, physical, emotional and cultural skills. Our students have expressed a desire for a more immersive cultural experience, as well as outdoor, out-of-school excursions and community-building opportunities as a regular part of their learning experiences.

This year, we will continue to maintain a focus on academic interventions, as many of our students are either below or just-below grade level expectations in reading and writing, a situation that has been magnified by the impacts of the recent pandemic. 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. Especially important this year, we want to ensure we remain focused on providing social and emotional supports for all within our school community, in order to provide authentically for the mental health needs of all, in whichever capacity is necessary. We have also begun to discuss the importance of re-connecting with our family and local communities, to 'de-pandemic,' if you will, in order to change the message of the past few years from a 'we are closed due to the pandemic' message to one that is open, welcoming and focused on reconnecting and supporting student success.

Due to our unique location on traditional Gitxsan Laxyip, 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 focus on ensuring that Truth and Reconciliation, redressing the debasing of Indigenous culture and decolonization are a part of our curriculum. We intend to support this focus through the incorporation of local Gitxsan culture in all that we do, as authentically and meaningfully as possible. 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, and their growing pride in their developing identities (knowing who they are, their history and the powerful legacies of the peoples from which they come), through:

- school-wide, regular Gitxsan language learning opportunities

- 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 Laxyip,
- Ensuring students have access to important learning around our Gitksan Ayuuk’,
- 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 leaders
- increasing opportunities to be on the land: visits to local culture camps, harvesting and processing of traditional foods, visiting places of significance to Gitksan history and hearing the stories from those who hold the knowledge of this place-specific history
- incorporating opportunities for hands on learning (smokehouse learning, moose meat processing, 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 and access to the FNRC to ensure we have the resources required to undertake the work that needs to be done

As a school community, we are taking important steps 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 have begun to plant the seeds of a vastly different experience for our students. We understand the need for Indigenous cultures to be visible, to be authentically valued and for the biased teachings of the colonial past to be corrected. We acknowledge the need to focus on Truth and Reconciliation, decolonization and cultural redress. We are beginning by supporting the adults in our school as they continue to learn Indigenous values, language, history and knowledge of cultural significance in ways that speak to authenticity and respect, rather than 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' wellness and academic development through strong practice and targeted interventions, remaining committed to authentic embracing 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, their work ethic and perceptions of their motivations and success?

The professionals in our building are strongly connected to our Gitksan communities, some are of Gitksan ancestry, and 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, others are new on their journeys of learning and understanding, and all have a genuine respect for the Gitksan people, their



history, language and culture. This learning journey requires respect for the individual process, and the space for choice, seeking out teachers and finding our 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, Gitksan values and respect. We will continue to invite local chiefs and elders to speak to our students on issues of cultural value and significance. 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. We will also need 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 of, 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 everyone within our community requires us to listen, reflect,

allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and purposeful in our response to student needs, which we undertake with both seriousness and a respectful flexibility.

School Principal Signature: _____

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'J' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

