

## Kitimat City High School Improvement Plan 2023-24



### Our Context

Kitimat City High School is situated on the traditional unceded territory of the X̱á'isla Nation.

KCH is a small alternative school with a population of approximately 60 students who come from diverse backgrounds, cultures and worldviews. The school offers self-paced assignments with many learning options and hands on learning opportunities in order to meet individual needs. Indigenous cultural lessons and activities are woven into subjects in partnership with X̱á'isla role models.

In year-end reflections, KCH students often refer to the school and staff as their “home” and “family”. They feel valued, seen, connected, safe and supported by the staff. Adhering to Bruce Perry’s “Attachment First Theory”, staff focus on students’ mental health. Staff prioritize helping students build healthy attachments through development of social and emotional skills. To aid in this development, staff maintain close ties to community agencies, parents and caregivers.

As a staff we want to celebrate many aspects of our inclusive school community. At our school, students feel safe. Staff are available to students beyond the regular school hours: the day

begins by 8:00 a.m. with breakfast club, includes gathering for lunch and often extends after school hours with messaging if extra support is needed. We celebrate and support diversity in culture, gender identity and abilities. In year end reflections, our students can identify two or more caring adult advocates within our school walls. This support has enabled students to grow over time, as staff walk along with them and watch them develop into positive citizens in our community.

## **Our Students**

Our students' strengths emerge once they connect with the staff. Once they are connected, they are willing to take risks and make improvements in their life. Many seek help to improve their mental health and learning. For the 2022-23 school year, 100% of the students accessed support from the Youth Support Workers (YSW) or the First Nations Support Worker (FNSW). In that same year, 61% of our students also accessed support from outside agency counselors (either MCFD, Kermode Friendship Centre or CMSD). Many students feel comfortable to be their authentic selves and explore who they are. Last year one of our students was exploring their gender identity and felt comfortable enough to transition to "he" within our school and, after experimenting with that option, felt comfortable returning to "she" later in the year. Staff honour and respect inclusion of LGBTQ+. Within KCH's inclusive environment, several of our X̱á'isla students have taken leadership roles in sharing their Indigenous history and X̱á'isla culture with the rest of the student body: creating school presentations for the residential schools and the Red Dress Campaign, teaching X̱á'isla months and meanings to the school population, sharing how to harvest different plants and respect X̱á'isla territory. They feel excited about learning, especially in hands on programs such as the Trades program, Outdoor Education, Robotics, Art, Photography and Capstone. Trades students punctuality and attendance improved while taking the program. Robotics students often stay after school hours to work with their team and prepare for the annual contest. In his year end reflection, one student noted, "I've loved the photography and the freedom [the teacher] allows to have with it to express whatever we feel like as long as it fits the category we're working on." Once they feel connected and safe, students at KCH advocate for themselves and their peers. In her English 12 final reflection, one of our students wrote, "Growing up I always had a fear of public speaking . . . I was invited to join Student Voice and give suggestions about what we think could make our school a better place . . . I felt heard to be able to give out my opinions on subjects that I thought we could improve on." Over time, many of our students make healthier choices. In her final reflection for English 12, one of our students who had struggled with addiction wrote, "With the help of my sponsor, I was able to get the support outlets that I never thought I would've needed. I was able to gain back the work ethic I left in 10<sup>th</sup> grade."



KCH students have strengths, but they also have challenges. Many of our students have experienced trauma in their life. As Bruce Perry states in *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*, “Trauma is not what happens to you. It is what happens inside of you as a result of what has happened to you.” This trauma makes it difficult for them to attach, trust and feel safe with others. This trauma has often hindered their learning, in both academic and life skills. It often leads to self-harm and/or addiction issues in attempt to mask the pain caused by the trauma. While in school many feel supported and safe enough to grow and learn yet revert to unhealthy choices outside of school time. When returning to school after weekends and extended holidays, many students share stories of alcohol or drug use that have negatively impacted their lives. For other students, their challenges and learning gaps may be the result of other issues such as chronic illness, anxiety, depression, multiple moves. With almost half of our student body graduating last year, we realize that almost half of this year’s cohort will be new and, therefore, not yet connected to staff which means they will come with behavioural and academic challenges. It will take time to build their trust in us so that they allow us to support them in overcoming these challenges.

**The broad focus of our school improvement plan is to empower our students by fostering a greater awareness of self and connection to community through local cultures, history, landscapes, and experiences.** Greater awareness of self leads to a recognition of strengths which builds self esteem and provides scaffolding on which one can build more strengths. Connection to community and culture helps to build a sense of belonging and purpose. Learning of the history and landscape of our local area will promote understanding and respect. Time and time again, students involved in hands-on learning experiences have been invigorated and given positive feedback. Bruce Perry in *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing* connects healing to connections:



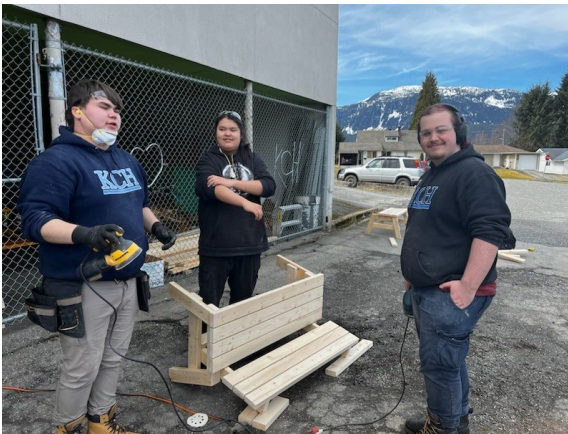
Our major finding is that your history of relational health—your connectedness to family, community and culture—is more predictive of your mental health than your history of adversity. This is similar to the findings of other researchers looking at the power of positive relationships on health. Connectedness has the power to counterbalance adversity.

### **Our Focus**

The focus of our school improvement plan is to empower our students through greater awareness of self and connection to community through place-based learning. This focus encompasses supported personal growth, increased knowledge of local culture, history and geography as well as connection and responsibility to community.

Our students' learning goals include:

- Recognizing and communicating their strengths, needs and goals
- Understanding that success comes in different forms and, with support, taking steps to reach their goals
- Taking the time to get to know each other and connect so that they can approach each other with empathy, compassion and respect
- Acknowledging and respecting diversity in culture and gender identity
- Participating opportunities to increase knowledge of local culture, history and landscape
- Participating in projects that aid and/or improve our community



Last year, KCH students involved in the Trades program, built a greenhouse so that the school community can grow vegetables in the future. Students in Outdoor Education learned the traditional  $\bar{x}\acute{a}'isla$  method to harvest devil's club and cottonwood and the medicinal qualities of these plants. They made cottonwood balm which they shared with the school community and gifted to some  $\bar{x}\acute{a}'isla$  members. Staff would like to expand these types of opportunities into the Kitimat and Kitamaat communities.



### **Our Next Steps**

KCH returning students have grown in awareness of the strengths and needs, the communication of these needs and goal setting. Most understand that success can come in many forms. The majority treat each other with empathy, compassion and respect and are inclusive. However, almost half of our cohort will be new this year and contain an eclectic mix with mental health and learning challenges. We recognize that it will take time and patience for the new students to feel connected to the staff and their peers. All of our student body participated in opportunities to increase their knowledge of local culture and history. The Outdoor Education class (approximately 25% of the student population) delved into this more deeply and also explored the local landscape. Both Outdoor Education and Trades (approximately 40% of the student population) students worked on projects that benefited the community.

Based on last year's cohort, here are two pieces of evidence specific to the learning goal "Recognizing and communicating their strengths, needs and goals" as well as "Understanding that success comes in different forms and, with support, taking steps to reach their goals". Both of these pieces of evidence are taken from year end reflections and discuss their growth over the school year:

Reflection 1—"I feel like I have changed a lot in this past year, for the better and I really say it's been the school that has done it for me and the people in the school. The difference in myself that've really noticed is my confidence. I've been able to step out of my comfort zone to talk to others and have been pushing myself to get out into the world more which has been good for me personally. Along the same, the school has helped with my mental health providing me a place of safety where I can

really relax (Yes even with having to do school and trades) I feel like I've been able to more of myself here than I have in years."

Reflection 2—"This year has been a difficult year. The healing process is a long and hard journey, and sometimes to heal you have to spend a lot of time questioning. You have to question everything that's ever happened to you, everything you've been taught, and everyone you know. It's hard to put a fresh perspective on your own life, but you have to rethink everything from a new perspective. Sometimes you make a revelation or realise something that absolutely breaks your reality. This factor caused me a lot of grief during the year. I think I've improved my communication. I've been teaching myself to have a more carefree attitude. While this might not sound productive, it helped me learn that I can't always be worried about what everyone else thinks. I've spent every waking minute of my life trying to be "good" and follow what I believe others want me to do. I've learnt that the things I say and do don't matter as much as I thought they did. I'm more able to speak my opinion even in large groups."

The next two pieces of evidence taken from year end student reflections demonstrate student growth in the last four goals. These two students improved our school community by sharing Xá'isla culture with staff and students which promotes understanding and respect for our local Indigenous culture.

Reflection 3—"Another think I think I've grown in is social responsibility, for example, I have shared some Xá'isla background with Spencer while we were on our outdoor ed. adventures."

Reflection 4—"There are small opportunities that were offered to me that are building me up into a more confident person. Opportunities like being able to write and say the Xá'isla months in front of people, being able to share my knowledge with the teachers, and others. All this leading up to the biggest offer I've said yes to—singing for the grads."

Moving forward, the staff at KCH would like to continue to build connections with the students at KCH and support them in their journey of self-awareness, mental health, personal growth and social responsibility. We would like to create wider connections with both the Kitimaat and Kitimat communities through learning opportunities and service acts. As Kim Barthel in *Conversations with a Rattlesnake: Raw and Honest Reflections on Healing and Trauma* states,

[W]hen you experience anxiety, depression, or stress, helping others not only makes you feel good, it also strengthens the structure of your DNA . . . . There is this really important piece on the end of our DNA strands that protects them from damage over time and keeps us healthy longer as we get older. There is an enzyme (a kind of chemical) that helps to keep these shoelace tips healthy and it's called telomerase. Low levels of telomerase and short shoelace tips result in accelerated aging in the

face of unremitting stress . . . . There is very cool research that shows when you practice mindfulness and when you help others, your telomerase goes up in quantity, which helps you grow your shoelace tips back.

In this way, staff at KCH would like to help students who have experienced trauma, increase their telomerase levels and become healthier and better able to cope in the face of trauma and stress.