

Wednesday, January 26, 2022

RE: We offer our deepest condolences to Williams Lake First Nation

Dear Families:

It is with profound sadness that I write to you after the preliminary findings from the first phase of the St. Joseph's Mission Residential School investigation into the presence of unmarked graves on the school grounds and surrounding areas. Yesterday, Chief Willie Sellars and Council from the Williams Lake First Nation released geophysical results after a ground penetrating radar investigation.

The horrific stories and testimonies shared in the report shed light on Canada's shameful past. While it is difficult news to hear, we need courage to listen. This is our shared history and this horror happened to our fellow Canadians. The legacy of the residential school system is still apparent today and we must find space in our hearts to absorb this information with respect, compassion, and courage.

I can understand that this news will cause extensive suffering in the Williams Lake First Nation's community and beyond. We want to honour and send our deepest condolences and offers of support to the Williams Lake First Nation, and to those impacted by this news in our school community.

I also understand this is a very difficult time for families and communities, including survivors of residential schools, families of survivors, and for those who may have lost a loved one to the historic and ongoing legacy of the residential school system. Please know that our learning community is here for everyone who is grieving, and we hold space for you.

It is heartbreaking to know that 93 students left for school and never returned home. As a leader, I understand that I have a responsibility to address the ongoing impacts of colonial institutions, including our educational system, and how they still affect the well-being of our children today. As a Canadian, I have a responsibility to engage with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report.

At the Greater Victoria School District, we are committed to collectively continuing our work towards Truth and Reconciliation and in becoming culturally responsive and culturally safe for Indigenous students, families and communities. We recognize the painful trauma from the past, the ongoing impact of colonialism, and are doing our work to be allies. We recognize that increasing this work benefits all children and raises awareness for a more informed community of learners.

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The Greater Victoria School District wishes to recognize and acknowledge the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations, on whose traditional territories, we live, we learn, and we do our work.

In conclusion, we know the news from today's announcement may be triggering for our students, staff and communities. We encourage anyone who needs support to please reach out, we have supports in place. Our Indigenous Education Department alongside our Critical Incident Response Team is readily available. If you or someone you know requires mental health support, please connect with your School Principal.

As allies, we must continue to create safe spaces for Indigenous Communities to mourn by offering respect, support and actively listening with an open heart to their stories.

Sincerely,



Deb Whitten
Interim Superintendent of Schools

Additional supports include:

- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Website – <http://www.trc.ca/index.html>
- Indian Residential School Survivors Society – [24 Hour Crisis Line \(1-800-721-0066\)](http://www.irs.org/)
- KUU-US Crisis Line Society – [24 Hour Crisis Line \(British Columbia\) \(1-800-588-8717\)](http://www.kuu-us.org/)
- National Indian Residential School Crisis Line (1-800-925-4419)
- Métis Nation BC – [Mental Health Services](http://www.mnbc.ca/)
- First Nations Health Authority – [Mental Health Benefit](http://www.fnha.ca/)

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