

Getting rights to the heart of school culture

A school in Coquitlam becomes the first in Canada to adopt a UNICEF initiative designed to improve school culture for students and adults.

by Bill McGovern and Kelly Quinlan

Rights Respecting Schools (RRS), a new initiative of UNICEF Canada's Global Classroom program, promotes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis for enhancing an inclusive, participatory and respectful school culture for children and adults.



Involving students in decisions are vital to a Rights Respecting School.

Learning based on respecting rights

As a framework for educational improvement, RRS helps schools address the whole learning environment through a consistent, rights-based approach. Building on what schools are already doing, RRS brings children into early contact with the universal ideals of respect for oneself and for others in the school community and in an interdependent world.

Connecting the Convention to the classroom

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) outlines the rights all children (under 18) have for optimal survival, development and protection — and to participate in family, school and community life.

Canada ratified the *Convention* in 1991, committing the federal and

provincial government to prioritize the best interests of children, and use the tools at their disposal to provide for and protect these rights. But next to families, schools are the social institutions that are closest to the daily lives of children, in which the protection and provision of children's rights so profoundly shapes their potential.

The Rights Respecting School is premised on the understanding that for children to want to achieve, they must feel included



Benefits for Students and Staff

- There is a decline in bullying and less disruption.
- Children's approach to resolving conflict with each other and with adults is less adversarial.
- Children show greater concern for themselves, for each other and for children around world.
- Children's language becomes more sophisticated and they are more likely to use higher-order thinking.
- Children are less likely to be excluded.
- Attitudes toward diversity improve and become more positive.
- School attendance rates improve.
- Children begin to behave like citizens.
- Children actively participate in decision-making around the school.

Benefits for Teachers

- Teachers feel empowered and many are reminded of why they entered the profession in the first place.
- Teachers have more time to teach, achieve better results and higher standards for children.
- There is less low-level disruption.
- The classroom and school atmosphere is healthier.

One School's Story

As the first Rights Respecting School in Canada, students and staff at Cape Horn Elementary School in Coquitlam, have been teaching and living the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* for the past two-and-a-half years.

At Cape Horn, teachers worked on a Learning Team to write and implement the curriculum suited specifically to their students' needs. Then, teachers, students, parents and the

Connecting one child to another

The Rights Respecting School is premised on the understanding that for children to want to achieve, they must feel included, and that they matter. Children can then begin to make connections with the needs and rights of other children in their school and around the globe, beginning the journey of learning about rights and responsibilities and the values that underpin them. This brings children into early contact with the ideas of interdependence and cooperation.

Learning that how things are done in school is based on the rights and responsibilities drawn from articles in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* resonates with all children because:

- it appeals to their self-interest
- it connects them to children everywhere
- it derives from a higher authority (all but two of the world's nations have signed the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*) and is not simply created by the school's rules or mission statement.

Connecting Leaders: Learning for Changing Times

October 21-22, 2011 • Hyatt Regency Vancouver

Keynote Speakers:

Dennis Shirley, Professor of Education at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, author of *The Fourth Way* (with Andy Hargreaves) and *The Mindful Teacher* (with Elizabeth MacDonald).

David Warlick, a 34-year educator (teacher, district administrator and staff consultant) and author of four books on instructional technology and 21st Century literacy.

Skilled BC practitioners will lead the breakout sessions.

Information/registration/hotel accommodation

<http://www.bcpvpa.bc.ca/node/66>

Cape Horn School Charter

We have the right to our own culture, to express our beliefs, and to be proud of who we are.

We also believe it is important for us to have the right to learn, to eat healthy food and to be safe from not being hurt by adults or our friends ... so that we can all live peacefully, be happy and feel safe.

District Coordinator for Social Responsibility were invited to form a steering committee that recommended a year's worth of projects with involvement by the entire school.

Students took on more leadership within the school, including organizing and leading monthly assemblies; participating in student government; mentoring younger students and welcoming new students. Through their participation on these committees and articles written in the monthly school newsletters, students had a voice in decision-making and were able to express their opinions knowing they would be heard.

Last June, Cape Horn organized a "Walk for Water" event in which students learned about the need for clean water in developing countries and raised money to purchase a well for an impoverished community.

Each class has also participated in conversations using the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* as a guideline to create their own class charter, signed by all members of that class. The steering committee has also writ-

ten a school charter that was presented at an assembly by student leaders (see box, left).

As a staff we continue to lead the way in developing, presenting and evaluating *Rights* lessons, however, our focus has shifted to embedding the *Rights* within our existing curriculum so that they are not a separate entity, but inclusive in our daily life. Students are reminded in the classroom, on the playground and in the halls of expectations based on the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* that they have a responsibility to be respectful of their own rights and the rights of others.

Students were invited to share their stories at the 2010 BC Representative for Children and Youth Summit. Information and contest galleries can be found at <http://www.rcybc.ca/content/home.asp>



Bill McGovern is the principal at Cape Horn Elementary School, in Coquitlam. Kelly Quinlan is the Education Manager for UNICEF Canada in British Columbia. This article has been adapted from the article *The New 3 Rs* (Teacher Dec.08) by Thomas Hanley. For further information on UNICEF Canada's Rights Respecting School Initiative email kquinlan@unicef.ca

JUST KIDDING



Rod Maclean is a former Surrey principal. For a weekly cartoon email Rod at ramaclean@shaw.ca

Cover story



Our cover art this month is by Kaylee Turvey, a grade 8 student at Rutland Middle School in Kelowna. We thank Kaylee, her teacher, Jeanne Parker, and her principal, Sandra Sellick, for submitting this work.

Note to BCPVPA members: If you are interested in having one of your students' artwork on the cover of Adminfo during the 2011-2011 school year, email rwilliams@bcpvpa.bc.ca as soon as possible.