

A commitment to getting every student to graduation

A school in Port Alberni takes a “wrap around” approach to improve student success.

by Leslie Dyson



Last October, Kaththea Snoek hit a particularly low point in her life. It was her graduating year, but no one at Alberni District Secondary School (ADSS), least of all herself, expected she would graduate. Other struggles in her personal life had already caused her to fall behind in her schoolwork. Then tragedy struck. Her boyfriend and best friend for six years was killed in a car accident.

“For the first two months, I was pretty much a wreck,” she said. “School wasn’t really on my mind.”

However, her mother called the school and explained what was happening. The principal, teachers and support staff, with a commitment

and told her counsellor that she was prepared to take the extra year that she thought she’d need to complete her Grade 12.

That was all the school needed to know. Everyone in her circle kicked into high gear and came up with a plan that would see her cross the stage in June with her peers. However, Kaththea would have to complete seven courses in five months!

She took four through ADSS and three from an alternative school— Vocational Adult Secondary Training (VAST). “I was determined to get my school work done. I have lots of teachers to thank. They had my back through my whole education. And my counsellor (Rob Ostwald)

to get every student to graduation no matter what it took, stayed in touch with Kaththea and offered comfort and encouragement.

“Finally, I got to the point where I could see life goes on,” she said. She came to the school in the new year

helped me a lot.”

In June, she received her Dogwood Certificate. “I amazed myself and pretty much everybody,” she said. “I’m the first to graduate in my family. Everyone’s so proud of me.”

Her next goal is to move forward again. She’s in Edmonton earning money so that she can continue her education. She wants to get a certificate as a hair and nail technician. “That’s for me so I don’t have to pay so much for it,” she laughed. She also plans to get a degree in early childhood education. “I know I’m good with kids. They always come to me and we just connect.”

Kaththea’s story is one of many in Port Alberni, a small community with big social problems.

“Out of 26 regional districts, we’re at the bottom for every socio-economic indicator,” said Mike Ruttan, principal. “We have more poverty, poorer health, less employment. The school faces significant educational challenges.”

The student population of 1,200 is transient with “400 ins and outs in a year,” he said. “Some students are in



and out three times in a year. Family connections bring them back.”

ADSS has undergone a dramatic transformation. Kaththea said she’s seen a change at the school. “I believe this school is unique and special and VAST is too.”

Based on a school-wide assessment four years ago, the school staff decided the way to overcome the societal difficulties affecting student success was to move away from the obsession with numbers and focus on the relationship between staff and students. “The numbers fall into place when the students feel they’re being supported and treated fairly,” explained Ruttan, who has been at the school for seven years.

The theory seems to be correct—and the numbers prove it. The graduation rate has gone from 70 percent to 90 percent for Aboriginal students. Several students get 100 percent on their provincial exams every year and it’s hard for school staff to choose only 12 top academic students for the awards ceremony.

“It’s a wrap-around approach,” he said. “Everyone’s bought into the goal to get every student to graduation.

“Learning something new is a risk. You’re risking your ego and failure,” Ruttan said, “but students know we’ll help them up and help them get where they need to go.” Support

doesn’t stop at the usual school offerings. It extends to food, clothing, shelter and dealing with outside agencies. “If support isn’t coming from the home, the school will provide it,” said Ruttan.

Setting students on the path of success means convincing them that grad-

uation is not an end. They’re shown “what’s beyond the valley,” he added. Visits are made to North Island College, UVic, UBC, BCIT and other post-secondary institutions.

Following the school-wide assessment, parents got on board and asked themselves what they could do to help improve graduation rates. DPAC president Mary Burton said, “Parents can play such an important role because we’re good at knowing how to meet kids’ needs.”

During final exams, the PAC provided breakfast all day. Students could replenish their energy levels with bagels, raisin toast, Cheerios, fruit and juice donated by local businesses.

In early June, it brought in 15 community volunteers to hand out ice cream bars. “They are kids,” Burton said. “They like the attention.” Members of the community, Toy Run and RCMP enjoyed the interaction with the students and most of the kids were delighted.

There was one exception, Burton said. One student was shocked to see a police officer in the school and feared that she was about to be arrested. Burton took the situation in stride and said, “Let me introduce you.” Fears were allayed and the officer appreciated that all she was required to do was say a few words of

support and hand the student a treat.

Most important, however, is the PAC’s breakfast program which serves 300 students every school day. Burton, also the coordinator of the Breakfast Club, said, parents were spurred on by stories like the one from a new teacher who said that a student told her “I’m too hungry. I can’t listen to you right now.”

Burton said, “There are kids who really depend on this. Kids have passed out from hunger. We’ve had kids coming to school just so they could get a piece of fruit.”

After addressing hunger issues, the parents followed up with personal care kits. They saw that students needed socks and deodorant. The PAC puts together boys’ and girls’ kits that also include encouraging handwritten notes.

Beyond this, the school provides bags of groceries, cooking instructions and menu suggestions for students who are living on their own.

Burton acknowledged that these efforts aren’t ending poverty. “It’s not the perfect solution, but it’s something.” She’s confident the work of the school will help many break out of the poverty cycle and that some will “pay it forward. We tell them, ‘Remember that you were helped and that you can help others.’”

VAST also operates a summer program. It provided food and support to students during the summer break even if they weren’t enrolled.

There’s a strong relationship between the school and VAST. The alternative program provides the smaller school setting that some students require. “As educators you have to lose your own professional ego,” Ruttan said. “It’s about making sure kids get what they need, not where they get it. Just get them to graduation.” There’s also a conviction that financial constraints won’t



stop students' dreams. Ruttan said one of the students was chosen to run in the Olympic torch relay and he desperately wanted to purchase a torch as a memento. But he didn't have the funds to do it. The school purchased it for him and then had him work to pay off the debt.

The school relies on the target funding and staffing offered by the district, Ruttan said. It also takes advantage of every strategy that's available. AVID, now in its sixth year, "is making a huge difference."

The timetable also allows students to use one out of four blocks as tutorial time and it is being used by students who need extra help.

Parent-teacher conferences are held three weeks before report cards are issued so that parents have time to work with their children to get assignments completed and raise grade levels. If necessary, the school will pick-up parents and bring them to the school. Staff will even make house calls, Ruttan said.

Port Alberni is also the administration centre for 13 First Nations bands, although students also come from other groups across the country.

To help Aboriginal students, the school has put together a team of people including a vice-principal and counsellor devoted specifically to this group. First Nations workers,

introduction of the Social Justice 12 course. ADSS was a pilot school for the program five years ago. It's taught by Kama Money, a graduate of the school 10 years ago. "I chose to come back to help make the school more inclusive and the school has changed since I went here. Mike (Ruttan) has made a big difference. There's a lot of support in the school. We're all working together."

Her class attracts all ranges of abilities and socio-economic levels and empowers kids at the margins. By the end of the school year, "we're really like a family," she said.

Students call it the "isms class." They learn about issues related to human and animal rights, Aboriginal rights, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community, global health concerns and poverty. "It's a challenge to teach and was initially banned by at least one school board," said Money.

The aim is to have students share ideas in a well-formed and respectful manner. "I learn just as much from the kids as they do from me," she said. "I'm surprised every day."

Money creates an atmosphere where the students feel safe and soon they have no problem getting up in front of the class and talking about their personal experiences with poverty and racism. "When

teachers, administrators and support staff meet monthly to discuss policy issues. A steering committee meets weekly to help individual students when personal issues come up.

Another contributing factor to the improvements in the school was the

one at-risk student tells his or her truth, it makes it safe for others."

Ruttan said a highlight for him was seeing students from the class writing messages of love in chalk on the sidewalk outside the school.

Debunked stereotypes and expanded awareness spill into the corridors of the school, although Money said the benefits to the school would be much more long lasting if the course could be offered in Grade 9 or 10.

The students also benefit from a project-based learning program offered to Grade 9s. A classroom has been constructed of recycled materials with solar panels and a green roof in a woodlot 25 minutes away. Students learn about the science of natural resources by doing 60 per cent of their work in the field.

Ruttan said he knows the changes are working. Besides better numbers, he said he can see it in the school pride and reduced garbage and graffiti. "They see this as a place that's helping them." He's also encouraged by the increase in the number of conversations among students about what they're going to do next.

"There's never just one thing that turns a school around," he said. "It's driven by people with the attitude that kids can do well. It's about improving things for kids. That's why we went into education. "But we don't take no for an answer," he added. "The teachers have to be pit bulls — but they're nice pit bulls." ^{bcp} _{vpa}

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