

## HOW THE COWICHAN VALLEY OPEN LEARNING COOPERATIVE IS CHANGING STUDENTS' LIVES

Issue 07 Success Stories

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By the time Sarah Birge was 16, she had attended 12 different schools in eight years.

She moved around a lot in her childhood which she felt made it difficult for her to fit in. While in Grade 9 at a Vancouver Island high school, an incident occurred, something she still feels uncomfortable talking about, despite it happening more than five years ago.

"I was at Francis Kelsey for half a year and had a really awful experience there [...] it became important for me to leave," Birge explained. "It was very public and it affected me."

Birge was also have personal problems. She wasn't living with her parents and she was getting into "a little trouble" during that time. Not wanting to completely quit school, she heard about an alternate school program in Cowichan and decided to look into it with her dad.

"I was in a very delicate time in my life," Birge said. "The staff there really welcomed me. They were like a family. It changed my life."

Cowichan Valley Open Learning Cooperative (CVOLC) is a collection of different programs for students to earn their secondary school diploma. The programs include an alternate school known as Cowichan Valley Alternate School (CVAS), a distributed learning program, which allows students to work at home or take extra courses while in high school; adult learning, and dual credit courses, giving students academic credit at either Vancouver Island University or Camosun for taking career programs such as mechanics, hairdressing and welding.

Each Cowichan Valley secondary school has an open learning centre, with a full time teacher and a student support worker, allowing students an easier integration between CVOLC and a regular school.

CVOLC also has a physical school located in Duncan, where about 1,300 students are enrolled in the various CVOLC programs, explained principal Larry Mattin.

“We are located in a beautiful, hundred year old school” Mattin said. “It was actually the first school built in the Cowichan Valley.”

The type of students CVOLC attracts is diverse. They include the standard students from troubled homes, young mothers, kids with high anxiety, victims of bullying and teens who have been out of the school system and want to transition back. But there are also current high school students wanting to take extra courses, students wanting to go at a faster or slower pace than the regular schools and those interested in the career programs.

“We get students from both private and regular schools,” Mattin said. “We are not just a school for kids who get kicked out of regular schools.”

Start time for regular classroom courses also varies, allowing students to have classes in the morning, afternoon or evening. This kind of diversity allowed one student Mattin had to complete her high school education by the age of 16 and go straight into nursing school.

“The one thing we can offer that traditional schools can’t is flexibility,” Mattin said. “If a student lives on their own, or if mom was laid off and the student has to work part-time to help support the family and can only come to school two times a week, we can accommodate them. In a traditional high school, if you miss three days a week, you will fall behind.”

Mattin is proud that CVOLC has everything a regular school offers along with a few extras, minus the large classrooms, bullying and cliques that can be seen at a regular school. CVOLC has various sports teams, a music program, a gym for physical education, a second gym that was converted to house the carpentry program, numerous career programs, a robotics program and daycare provided by the Ministry of Children and Family Development for teenage mothers. Students are also allowed tremendous flexibility in completing their education.

“We encourage kids to follow their passion,” Mattin said. “If they need to take a break from English and want to focus on carpentry, we tell them ‘of course you can. You can go back when you’re ready.’”

Mattin started his teaching career being a teacher-on-call for elementary schools. About 12 years ago, he was tasked with leading an outdoor education program at CVOLC, where he ended up staying.

“I was taking kids camping and snowboarding, but it was challenging at times,” Mattin said. “One time after a three-day kayak trip, two of my students were arrested for stabbing a cab driver.”

Despite that incident, Mattin has seen more success stories than negative ones. He eventually became principal when his predecessor retired, and he and his staff have worked hard at making CVOLC a successful, standalone school. Last year, CVOLC had 63 high school graduates. Twelve years ago, there were none.

“We are a fantastic high school,” Mattin said. “It’s the most rewarding job I’ve had.”

One thing Mattin continues to work hard on is changing the stigma attached to alternative education. Birge agreed that stigma is the only “downside” about graduating from CVOLC, despite graduating early and being a valedictorian.

“In order to get an opportunity to attend a school like this, you almost have to be troubled in some way,” Birge said. “Alternate schools have a bad reputation, like we’re all hoodlums or something, but it’s not true.

“The standardized education system doesn’t work for everyone, it doesn’t cater to children’s needs. We are expected to conform but there are many different minds and different ways of thinking,” she added.

The teachers and the alternate program made such a huge impact on Birge that it inspired her to strive to become a teacher and teach at an alternate school. After graduating high school in 2012, she went to Camosun College and then University of Victoria, where she is two semesters away from her B.A. in English literature.

“Learning can be so beautiful when done in a proper setting,” Birge said

“Students would really learn the joy of learning if given the opportunity to do it their own way.”

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## A SMART AND CARING JOURNEY

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It was almost five years ago that I wrote a post Smart and Caring. I was taken by our new (at the time) Governor General of Canada, His Excellency, the Right Honourable David Johnston, and his call for a smart and caring nation. I was initially struck by his installation speech:

Anyone who has achieved any degree of success and been placed in a leadership position can point to dozens of teachers, mentors and coaches who have made them better persons along the way. In my case, they number in the hundreds.

During my term, we will find ways to properly recognize our teachers who are responsible for our intellectual development. If there is one trumpet call from my remarks today let it be “Cherish Our Teachers”.

I have always had great admiration for the teachers and educators of this country.

I had the chance to be part of a program with His Excellency [in March] in West Vancouver, and five years later, his words, his message and his vision for our country are still striking. At the invitation of the West Vancouver Community Foundation, and other local foundations, His Excellency spoke to a full theatre of community members, and participated in a panel of local citizens that I had the good fortune to facilitate.

He once again spoke about the power of a strong public education system. He also returned to his theme of “smart and caring”, one he has regularly covered over the last six years and the connection he has made to Canada’s upcoming 150th birthday. He said:

And perhaps that’s the greatest gift of all you can make to Canada—to create hope. Because hope, as the ethicist Margaret Somerville once put it, is “the oxygen of the human spirit.”

His Excellency told a number of simple, personal stories related to the giving of blood – something he has done since his youth. He noted that Canada is one of the few countries of the world, where giving blood is a volunteer activity and it speaks to who we are as a people, noting, “like any nation-state, Canada, of course, is only as strong as its people, as its communities”. He also linked his beliefs around smart and caring to the current Syrian refugee work, quoting Conrad Sauvé of the Canadian Red Cross:

“We’re dealing with people who are fleeing war. Nobody wants to leave their home. They’re leaving because they don’t have a choice, because they’ve lost hope.”

But he added:

“Their hope now is Canada.”

During the panel, thoughtful local citizens shared their views of a smart and caring nation. A local entrepreneur and CEO of Earth’s Own Food Group, Maheb Nathoo discussed his views of universal truths including the need for gender equity and commitment to sustainability and the environment. Local high school student Liam Grant talked about the key role young people could play in community building and Shannon Ozirny, Head of Youth Services and the West Vancouver Memorial Library expanded our view of community raising the need for a smart and caring digital community. Finally, Adina Williams, a member of Squamish Nation, and student at the University of British Columbia, shared how her view of community has changed in recent years and expanded beyond her First Nations reserve, something she hopes for her entire community through the work of reconciliation.

Towards the end of the session I asked His Excellency about what advice he would give a community like ours. He spoke about the upcoming 150th birthday for Canada. He said that he was really taken by Calgary’s Mayor Nenshi and his 3 Things for Calgary initiative. His Excellency thought this idea was something for others to consider and link it to our nation’s birthday celebrations. Of course I was left thinking that it would be quite powerful to pull together His Excellency’s belief in a strong public education system, and Mayor Nenshi’s “3 things” challenge – wouldn’t it be great if students, staff and community recognized the sesquicentennial by doing 3 things for their schools and for public education? So, just what messages from His Excellency stick with me? A strong public education system is crucial for our country. We are a smart and caring nation. There are small things we can all do to contribute.

And I was left with a deep sense of pride in my community who showed so well for His Excellency, and for our country which His Excellency and others spoke of in such high regard.

Here is a link to His Excellency’s speech and here a link to event photos taken by Sonya Adloff.

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This article originally appeared in Chris Kennedy’s blog, Culture of Yes.

## THE WORK YOU'VE ACCOMPLISHED AT AGM 2016

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### BCSTA Resolutions from AGM 2016

On Saturday, April 16, BCSTA member trustees came together in Vancouver to vote on motions and set the direction for the Association's advocacy work in 2016/2017. The carried resolutions are available online, and cover a range of topics, from funding to strategic planning. [View the 2016 motions here.](#)

Have you seen the BCSTA photo gallery?

BCSTA has a Flickr photo gallery which includes albums from our major annual events. We have just updated it with new photos from our 2016 Annual General Meeting, have a look!

## LEARNING FORWARD 2016 IN VANCOUVER

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During the 2014 /2015 year, the decision was made by education partners to support an educational conference hosted by Learning Forward, an international association.

Learning Forward 2016 will be in Vancouver, December 3-7, 2016. The conference will be taking place at the Convention Centre.

All BC education partners have agreed to forego their professional learning event for the fall/winter season of 2016, in order to make the Learning Forward 2016, a potential event for educators and leaders to attend. Monday, December 5, 2016, is assigned to be a "Conference in a Conference" Day, and most districts have elected to provide a non-instructional day on that date so that teams of educators can come together and participate in the professional learning.

Monday, December 5, 2016 will be the date we provide space for Morning Branch Meetings at the Convention Centre. Learning Forward has assured us there will also be speakers on that day that will be of interest to trustees.

The program can viewed at <http://learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/annual-conference#.VxgFszArKUK>

Conference details include:

Saturday / Sunday, Dec. 3 & 4 are pre-conference days

Monday, December 5, 2016 is our conference in a conference day with an extended BC focus

Tuesday, December 6 and Wednesday, December 7th are also regular conference days.

There is a \$75.00 USD rebate if you register before June 30, 2016 for a 3 day conference package.

Also a friendly reminder to book your hotel early if you are planning to attend!