June 4, 2021

Dear VMS Families:

In light of recent findings of mass unmarked graves of 215 children in Kamloops within the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation, I have asked to reach out to our families at VMS.

It was my original intent to connect with our Indigenous families to let you know that I am thinking of you; I carry your families and communities in my heart and know that I grieve alongside you. The more I thought about my letter to our Indigenous caregivers, the more I felt it was important to reach out to all of our families as we all are impacted by this news and have been uniting in our collective response in solidarity for reconciliation. It is heartwarming to see the many grassroots responses to this tragedy. I also felt it was important that our parent community is aware of the work that is being taught within VMS about residential schools, not just in response to this appalling discovery, but throughout the year.

I am honoured to introduce myself as the Indigenous Enhancement Teacher at Vedder Middle School, a role I have been in for the past 2 years. In this role, I look to provide learning opportunities to help embed Indigenous worldviews within the curriculum for all of our students. I want you to know that as an Indigenous educator I don't take my position lightly. I believe that any gifts and talents I come to hold, come with an immense responsibility to pass along to our future generations. In the past few years, I've aligned my efforts with the Truth and Reconciliation calls to action; specifically, calls 62 and 63 as it pertains to Education for Reconciliation.

This week I had many difficult and hard to answer questions from my children and I'm sure you have had these conversations as well. When I teach in the classrooms, I remind students that the true history is only recently being taught. While Indigenous families have known this history, it was only in 2015 that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) published its final report detailing the experiences and lasting impacts of the residential school system. Therefore, many of our parents might find themselves not fully aware of the real history of residential schools making these challenging questions even more difficult to answer. I am linking below the TRC Final Report and Calls to Action and a document put out by the BCTF called the Project of Heart to further understand this true history. In learning and educating ourselves and our families on the truth, we are upholding the heavy lifting already done by the survivors, intergenerational survivors and the organizations who completed the work.

As an educator I am willing to unpack lingering questions our students have, but please be aware that right now this horrendous discovery has opened a deep wound to many Indigenous people. Please refrain from asking Indigenous friends any questions, but instead, simply offer a listening ear or kind words of solidarity which will be welcomed during this time.

We as a school at this time have half of the 216 new baby items that we are aiming to gather and donate and therefore we will still accept items next week. We also look forward to sharing the pictures and plans on how we will use the memorial pinch pots our students made partially of Chilliwack River clay. I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that I thank everyone who wore orange shirts and sent their kids wearing orange shirts this past week. I hope this also sparked meaningful conversations within your circles of influence.

In my family we have a saying, "to do everything with a good heart". The information in this email is intended to educate and inform. I can only speak from my own lens and do in no way speak for all Indigenous people. I appreciate the time you took to read these words.

Have a restful weekend and take care.

Mrs. Tosoff

http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf   https://bctf.ca/HiddenHistory/