



Relationships First

Nurturing a Healthy School Culture at Coley's Point Primary

by ROXANNE SKANES

Students and staff at Coley's Point Primary School (CPP) in Bay Roberts have been involved in the implementation of Restorative Justice practices as a way to build positive school culture and to promote healthy relationships among students, staff, parents and the school community for the past three years.

Started as a pilot project when I first joined the staff as Assistant Principal in September 2012, the philosophies behind Restorative Justice have been utilized to help develop "Relationships First" (RF) practices at the school. After completing an intense two-week Restorative Justice in Education training with MUN Professor, Dr. Dorothy Vaandering, and 20 other teachers from the, then, Eastern School District, I felt I had a place to utilize the philosophies as part of the school district's Safe and Caring Schools' initiative and as part of our School Development plan.

Restorative Justice in Education (RJE) cultivates a relational school culture that honours the worth and well-being of all. The three core RJE values of RESPECT, RESPONSIBILITY and RELATIONSHIPS, have been firmly fixed and practiced in the everyday life at Coley's Point Primary. From their school-wide 'Tree of Virtues' project to the implementation of "Circle Time" in all classrooms and staff meetings, CPP's school community has been growing and fostering a culture of character and respect, while promoting positive relationship building ever since.

Circle time is used often by teachers and staff to teach curriculum, for fun, and when disputes or harmful issues occur. Administration and Guidance often carry out individual or small group talking circles or CHATs to discuss minor incidents on the school behaviour matrix. I coined the term "CHAT" to mean a 'Caring Harm Awareness Talk', which quickly became and is still a big part of the RF language at CPP. Students and a 'facilitator' sit

in a circle to allow everyone to see one another and to emphasize connectedness and equality among the participants. Usually a 'talking piece' is passed around to allow everyone the opportunity to express their ideas about what happened, what they were thinking/feeling, who was harmed/hurt, and discuss what may need to be done to go forward to repair the relationship(s).



Students at Coley's Point Primary enjoy circle time.

A group of staff members, including guest teachers, student assistants, and other support staff, meet in circle once a month to discuss school operations, culture, and school life to ensure that the voices of all staff members are heard. As well, as part of the administration team, I invite bus drivers to the school each year for a Meet and Greet to discuss bus-sing issues and concerns. The intent of this circle meeting is to promote open communication and support for the drivers, as well as help to further build relationships with those who bring our children to and from school on a daily basis.

The teachers and staff at Coley's Point Primary believe that education is all about relationships and learning to develop, maintain, and repair relationships helps provide a safer, more positive environ-



ment for everyone. In all circles, whether curriculum related or just for fun, everyone works together to help real conversations happen and to build better relationships. Staff and students are learning that no matter what is going on in or around the school, there is always a 'story' that needs to be heard and they feel that their 'voice' or opinions will be heard.

In the past year, the Relationships First: Restorative Justice in Education NL Consortium, which is a not-for-profit organization whose partners recognize the significance of authentic relationships in healthy development of youth in NL, was formed. The Consortium, of which I am an active founding member, has as its aim "to nurture and support educational organizations where children, youth, and adults alike thrive because their inherent worth, well-being, and interconnectedness is recognized". The Consortium, which is planning a launch for the end of October 2015, provides professional development and a variety of services to create environments of belonging and respect where challenges and harm are addressed proactively using restorative justice. More information on our initiatives can be found at www.rfrje.com or twitter @relatfirstnl.

Relationships First at Coley's Point Primary continues its journey with the aim this year to implement PD for parents and school community members to introduce the philosophies of Restorative Justice and its implementation successes at CPP. It is my belief that this evidence-based initiative's purpose, to promote healthy relationships and build community partnerships to support and maintain safe, caring, and inclusive learning environments through positive role modeling and open communication, is being felt throughout the corridors and the entire school community. Also, I believe that, as expressed in our school song, "Coley's Point Primary makes me feel loved, secure and needed!"

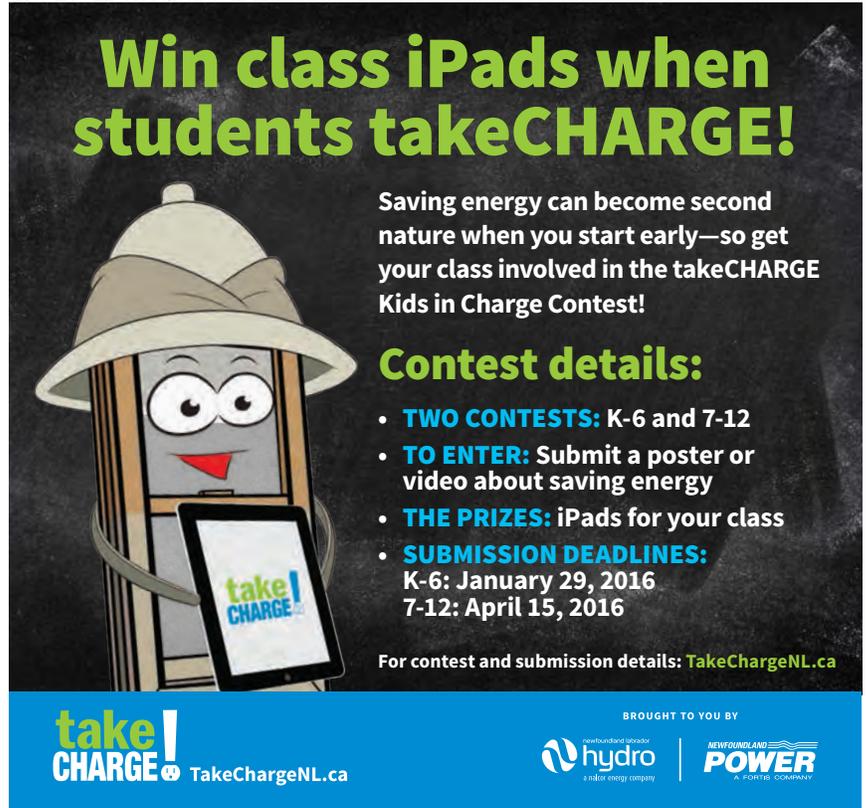
Roxanne Skanes is Assistant Principal at Coley's Point Primary in Bay Roberts and a founding member of the Relationships First: Restorative Justice in Education Consortium for Newfoundland and Labrador.

We are broken within the context of relationships; and we are also healed within the scope of relationships.
~ Hilda Nadjiwan

Before you assume, learn the facts; Before you judge, understand why; Before you hurt someone, feel; Before you speak, think.

~ Anonymous

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