

Our School Story

What are the unique, positive characteristics that we celebrate in our school/community?

- Land-based learning---connection to nature---kids comfortable in learning outdoors, no matter the season
- Kids are very active and in shape
- Walking in 2 worlds-Syeyutsus Framework- reconciliation- embracing knowledge and understanding of First Nations people and cultures.
- Island, small and close-knit community, awareness of multiple roles school staff have in the community (parent, teacher, EA, etc)
- Love of art (after-school Art Club), performance (Drama Club/ Band/ Choir), and reading
- All students are connected---it takes a village to raise a child
- Growing food and the knowledge of where it came from- People for a Healthy Community gardening program
- Multi-age mixing/Connections to community groups
- Supportive and engaged volunteers
- Inclusive and diverse
- Community support of families and the school
- Community based hot lunch program

What are the important demographics of our school and community?

- Unique- had to advocate for support- hot lunch program, community bus
- Rural community
- Low indigenous and immigrant population
- 40% child poverty---diverse socio-economic situations
- Many single-family households
- Struggling families (lack of access to outside agencies)
- High rate of mental health issues and substance abuse
- Community-minded- work with a variety of community groups on a variety of projects
- More new, young families than in the past 3 to 4 years, yet mean age is still 63
- Student population is declining, especially since COVID
- Struggle to attract/retain family doctors
- 152 students/21 staff
- Extended families raising families
- Most teachers and other staff live here and are part of the local community
- Artists and musicians who support youth by volunteering materials, time, and expertise
- Housing crisis- families are being priced out of affordable housing- lack of rentals
- Limited employment opportunities
- Geographic infrastructure challenges (internet, access to hospital, loss of power regularly, cell service)
- Increasingly transient student population

Our School Goal

Build a sense of community through connection and belonging.

Our School Celebration Story

THE CEDAR CANOE PROJECT

Our goal is to build a sense of community through connection and belonging. The cedar canoe project is a perfect example of how we work together to build connection within the school and the larger communities of Gabriola and the Snuneymuxw People.

Beau Wagner, a local indigenous carver, created a dugout cedar canoe on the GES property from October 2021 to June 2022. He worked on the canoe for a few hours 2 or 3 days a week. The project began in the fall with a brushing off ceremony where Beau and the students brushed off the log and put positive feelings into it. They heard from Beau and Patrick Aleck, from Stz'uminus First Nation, how important it was to begin the project in a good way with positive thoughts and emotions.

Throughout the seasons, Beau and the GES students participated in a learning journey together. Beau would tell stories to classes who were out watching him transform the log into the rough outline of a canoe and then helped him use his adzes to dig it out. They built community and connection through their shared experiences and in learning of the significance of cedar to the Snuneymuxw and Stz'uminus Peoples.

Students spread cedar chips in the forest with positive words and emotions written on them for others to find. They learned from Beau that they "are loved, are kind, know joy, and know belonging". This mantra was repeated many times throughout the year and students and staff felt these teachings resonate within.

The steaming and naming ceremonies were very powerful as they brought together the students and staff of GES and community members to witness and acknowledge two important milestones in the journey from cedar log to cedar dug-out canoe. The audible gasp and excitement from students when the canoe was uncovered, and the steam washed over them left a mark on all who were present as did seeing the canoe in the water for the first time.

The transformation from the raw cedar log to the finished canoe, named xwcuni:lucun, was remarkable. The process of change and renewal can be likened to the school and Gabriola community as we navigated through, and are emerging from, the COVID pandemic. The ability to bend and be flexible, like the cedar canoe, have made us stronger as a community and has built our resiliency.

The singing of the "Equality Song", gifted to GES by Patrick Aleck, in September 2022 was the fitting finale to the Cedar Canoe project and highlighted the continued building of community at GES.

The work done by Beau and the GES students can be seen in a documentary that will be shared widely within the next few months. The trailer for "Our Teacher" can be viewed at ourteacherfilm.ca