



Rethinking the Middle Years Experience at Mount Sentinel Secondary School

Background - Our context and what has led us here?

Mount Sentinel Secondary is a Grade 7 to 12 school located in the community of South Slocan, British Columbia, on the traditional territory of the Sinixt, Ktunaxa, Secwepemc, and Syilx Peoples. With an enrolment of 280 students, the catchment area of this small school extends for 65 kilometres along Highway 6 from South Slocan, north, to the village of Slocan. Mt. Sentinel is considered the graduating school for students who may transition from one of three schools in the Slocan Valley, including Brent Kennedy Elementary, Winlaw Elementary or W.E. Graham Community School. The majority of our learners transition from elementary school in Grade 6 to start high school in Grade 7. The Grade 7 and 8 program has not historically provided a transition program between elementary and secondary schooling. Our middle year students are learning in a high school context; they follow a secondary student schedule and are fully immersed in a high school experience. No flexible learning spaces or playgrounds are currently present at the school. The question and now a curiosity has been raised: are Grade 7 and 8 students entering this rigorous timetable too soon? The school's current principal, Shellie Maloff, returned after two years at neighboring Brent Kennedy Elementary with the priority to shape and intentionally design a true middle years program. After many years previously at Mount Sentinel as a classroom teacher, case manager, and Vice Principal, she has listened to feedback from our learners, parents, staff and community and was excited to build a team to review the current grade 7 and 8 structures. This initiative is referred to as *Engaging All Learners In the Middle Years – Mt. Sentinel Program Review 2020 – 21* and has been opened up for staff to collaboratively plan and provide feedback.

The resounding input from parents, staff, and students themselves speaks to the lacking “middle stage” at Mount Sentinel, as the new 11-13 year old students are abruptly immersed in the secondary school environment. To address these concerns and support the school's youngest learners, a Middle Years Program (MYP) is being designed and will be implemented in the 2021-2022 school year. This program will introduce grade 7 and 8 students as a multiage learning cohort. There will be no formal bell schedule for this cohort and students will be assigned a group of core teachers who will collaborate on integrated learning projects.

Where have we been/what have we done in the past?

- The level of comfort with trans/interdisciplinary programming continues to grow at Mount Sentinel. Since 2017, the school has been running the *Senior Performance and Media Academy*, a full semester project-based program for grade 10-12 students focused on digital media, film, and theater, integrated with English and Social Studies.
- As per our *School Improvement Plan (2018 - 2021)*, under the focus area of “organizational excellence,” one of our goals is to *use staff collaboration to provide creative, cross curricular learning opportunities to increase relevancy and improve literacy and numeracy learning.*

- Collaborative teaching partners were formed based on shared blocks and staff input during the 2018/2019 school year. Staff had creative flexibility to design and implement a learning opportunity for students.
- The depth and nature of collaborations varied, experience opened up staff conversations.
- In 2019, a teacher leadership team was invited to join the *Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning* in a multiyear project which aims to 'reinvent' the school timetable and to reconsider how we organize for learning for the school's youngest students. Efforts to achieve this goal include supporting transitions, developing collaborative transdisciplinarity teaching teams among staff, and fostering student empowerment.
- Within existing structures, many teachers currently involved in the development of the MYP have a long history of experimenting with both collaborative and transdisciplinary learning opportunities:
 - For the last two years, two members of the MYP team have collaborated on an English and Science class for one semester (Scienglish). This pilot was used in 2019 to investigate benefits, potential issues, and engagement in students for a larger schedule change.

What actions have been taken, as we move towards the implementation of an MYP?

What started with a search for opportunities for collaboration and inter/transdisciplinary learning *within the existing timetable and structures* of the school has progressed towards changes that can be made *to the timetable* to facilitate and sustain these learning opportunities for both our learners and staff.

- School visitation in October 2019 to W.L. Seaton, a school in Vernon running a Grade 8-9 Academy.
 - Opportunity to see a similar program in action, to meet with students and team members.
 - Exploration of the facility itself, along with both previous and current staffing/timetabling.
- The MYP planning team meets on a weekly basis to connect with educators (including teachers, administrators, and thought leaders) across the province, and to plan visitations and information sessions.
- A virtual parent night was held in March of 2021 to share with parents the direction in which we are heading as a school, and to provide the opportunity for parent involvement by way of sharing feedback and curiosities.
- April 2021, two of the MYP teachers held an information and brainstorming session with current grade 7 students. Spiral journal exercise was conducted to explore:
 - *What kind of learning experiences do you love and would want to keep doing next year?*
 - *If you could spend your time at school working on a big project that is meaningful to you, what could it be?*
 - *Describe your dream school trip (where would you want to go, what would you want to do?)*
 - *Design your ideal learning space... what does it have to help you be successful?*
- One member began feeder school visitations in April 2021.
 - Opportunity to build relationships with future students of the program.
 - Drawing inspiration from Shelley Moore's work, we are exploring individual and group interests, strengths, and stretches to build cohort profiles.

- Collaboration between an Academy Performance and Media student and the current grade 7 class is underway to begin MYP program branding.

Emerging questions:

- How can we redesign our school-wide timetable to be more flexible, inclusive, and offer opportunities for collaboration between more teachers and students?
- With transitions into and out of the MYP in mind, how can we best structure an integrated middle years program to support literacy, numeracy, and relationship-building?
- How can we honour kids' excitement about elective-type speciality learning and the potential for integrated learning (with access to expertise and specialized spaces)?
- What practices and approaches can we deepen and take up that will increase inclusion, equity-centered school transformation and learning success (literacy/numeracy, academic, and social-emotional/well-being)?

We feel fortunate to have been welcomed and supported by the innovative network of rural educators in this province. Participation in the Think Tank will enable us to reflect upon our individual and school practices and to grow our potential next steps from the feedback and ideas shared about our emerging questions. Recognizing that Think Tank educators are coming from diverse backgrounds and are situated in unique rural-school settings, our collective interest and commitment to implementing programs that are responsive to learners' unique needs inspires innovation that reaches beyond our rural communities. We look forward to the opportunity to connect and collaborate with educators across the province with various experiences and insights on multi-age, integrated learning opportunities for middle year students.