



SD8 reflects on #MeToo social media campaign Educators aim to help students have positive conversations

Will Johnson Oct. 26, 2017 2:30 p.m. [News](#)

There are a lot of difficult conversations going on in School District 8 in the wake of the #MeToo social media campaign, in which Nelsonites came forward online with stories of being groped, harassed, cat-called, raped and humiliated.

But parents can feel assured they have an administration that takes this issue seriously, according to superintendent Christine Perkins.

“What’s important for us is creating safe spaces where kids can ask honest questions and get good answers that help them to question their own thinking and their own judgments,” Perkins told the Star.

“The biggest thing we offer in the district is role modelling. All of our teachers are expected to be exemplary models of the human condition, and that’s the number one thing kids watch — how teachers treat each other and the people around them.”

Perkins said the district is being proactive about ensuring their charges grow up with the means to form healthy, lasting relationships.

“I think we’re responding to the #MeToo controversy in meaningful ways, hosting these discussions in classrooms, at assemblies and through things like our extracurricular boys’ groups. From kindergarten to Grade 12, students are interacting daily with these issues, and building strength and competency in those areas will make them stronger in the long run.”

Healthy boundaries, respect and inclusion

L.V. Rogers principal Tamara Malloff has been keeping her eye on the #MeToo situation, which initially stemmed from a scandal involving Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. She wants to make sure her staff is being “consistent and proactive in addressing gender identity, healthy boundaries, respect and safety as well as inclusion.”

To that end, they’ve teamed with organizations outside of SD8 such as Freedom Quest, and engaged with travelling educators such as David Hatfield — who returned to the Kootenays last week for the second time this calendar year and visited multiple schools in the district.

“We work toward ensuring that any conversations regarding harassment, sexual or otherwise, are global conversations. For example, how females treat each other, how males interact with each other, and how all gender diversities are treated with respect,” she told the Star.

“We continue to infuse our curriculum with these opportunities.”

L.V. Rogers parent Martha Wilson, who works as a doctor in town, was responsible for inviting Hatfield to the district. She has sons who attend the high school, and she wants to help them embrace their masculinity in a healthy way.

“My personal interest is in supporting the next generation in not following the old masculine model, so we don’t repeat what Harvey Weinstein represents in our culture,” she said.

All that being said, abuse and harassment is bound to happen, and Malloff said they’re well-equipped to respond when and if it does.

“Our counsellors and youth and family workers connect with community agencies to ensure that any students who are victims of harassment or abuse get the support that they need as quickly as possible.”

Introducing positive male role models

Trafalgar Middle School principal Carol-Anne Leidloff thinks it’s a little early for her students to be introduced to adult concepts like sexual assault, but she’s invested in helping her students learn how to interact respectfully with one another.

“We look at respectful language, and how do boys treat girls — for instance, you don’t smack girls on the butt, and it’s not appropriate to be hanging off each other at school,” she told the Star.

For some time now, they’ve been developing extracurricular activities for boys — they recently hosted Hatfield and now they’ve teamed up with a 10-year-old B.C. organization called Boys Club Network that operates all over the province and aims to reach at-risk boys.

She feels her students are being bombarded with information, and they don't always know how to process it.

"These words and concepts are out there on social media, and they're getting it from YouTube and Facebook and Netflix, and sometimes I think they throw out these words without truly understanding the impact," she said.

"As a school, part of what we're doing is trying to help them understand what they're seeing in the media, giving them critical thinking skills and the perspective to make informed choices."

She feels the #MeToo campaign has brought some ugly truths into the light.

"Gender bias and a lack of understanding around gender challenges is pervasive. It's interesting because I think 10 years ago the perception was we've come so far, and it's almost like the pendulum has swung back the other way," she said.

"Women are educated and have the opportunity to move into roles traditionally occupied by men, but still gender stereotyping and harassment exist — so it's positive at this point in time there's freedom to constructively address it. And we can only do that by having collaborative conversations."

Helping boys develop a moral compass

Boys Club Network organizer Walter Mustaphich is thrilled to team up with his first middle school at Trafalgar, and is planning to start weekly meeting with the boys that will involve a series of guest speakers.

"The boys are fed at every meeting, so they can settle and focus, then the idea is we bring in a series of speakers, mostly men, who have had challenges or adversity in their lives," he said.

"They tell the students about how they faced different crossroads in their lives, about the decisions they made the lessons they learned. Through the storytelling of personal experiences, the boys are encouraged to develop their moral compass."

His goal is to "help them figure out what constitutes a good man."

"That includes how do they treat women, their families, the community, themselves — and we ask them how does a man give back? If you don't have money, give time," he said.

"It's a basically a citizenship course where you learn to be a good person."

Mustaphich said boys suffer from a lack of attachment in their lives, and part of the work BCN does is ensuring they have positive role models and influences supporting them.

"We've learned that if these boys can't find a positive attachment, they'll find a negative attachment. And in the worst circumstances that's when gangs come into play — they prey on you, say we'll protect you and be your family," he said.

“We’re not trying to be their family, but we do try to provide them with a base where they can feel safe, speak out and learn what it means to be a good man.”

‘They’re emerging into a very complex adult world’

David Hatfield understands how challenging it can be for SD8 students to interpret the stories of harassment coming from figures such as Jian Ghomeshi, Bill Cosby and even the President of the United States.

“This is a troubling time in North America. It seems like we’re waking up to a lot of the abuse and violence in our society, and I think that’s largely to do with Trump’s election,” Hatfield told the Star.

“He’s such a polarizing figure that we’re seeing with more clarity the racism, homophobia, Islamophobia that we we may not have realized was there in our society because people are being more strident and overt about it now. That means we have people standing up and speaking out about issues like sexual assault, which is exciting.”

Hatfield started out his career as a sexual assault prevention worker, so hearing about the proliferation of #MeToo posts doesn’t surprise him.

He believes there’s a huge amount of work to be done to educate the coming generation on issues such as consent.

“We’re in this together, it’s affecting everybody, and it’s essentially a lifelong negotiation. Hopefully we can support each other and raise awareness,” he said.

During his most recent visit, Hatfield spoke not only to boys but also hosted sessions for girls, a men’s group, and teachers. He wants to help people talk to each other about difficult topics such as pornography, misogyny and sexual harassment that might not otherwise get broached in a school classroom — and everything starts with helping the kids develop a sense of identity.

“We need to recognize these students are being exposed to an adult level of information at a new rate. I feel drawn to helping people recognize and validate that their childhood is ending and they’re emerging into a very complex adult world,” he said.

Some problems, he feels, are universal.

“I’m a more old-school person in that I think the human condition hasn’t changed much. Sexuality, attraction, the complexities surrounding that, these are age-old issues. They’re coming in a new form through technology, but it’s the same problems we’ve been dealing with forever.”