Program Evaluation of Cowichan Valley Open Learning

by

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Abstract

This paper encompasses a Program Evaluation of Cowichan Valley Open Learning Centre (CVOLC), to determine *what aspects of our Alternate educational structures are the most important in allowing students who have been previously unsuccessful in school to achieve personal success*. The researcher engaged in an analysis of the inputs, outputs, and outcomes of CVOLC’s structures, framed around the 9 Guiding Principles in British Columbia's *Guiding Principles for Alternate Schools* (Hannis, 2016). These principles are: Relationship-Based Programming, Community Supports and Partnerships, Engagement, Food – Engagement and Relationship-Building, Sense of Program Legitimacy/Viability, Supportive Culture, Clear Student Transitions, Flexibility, and Staff Connections. CVOLC’s structures and resources in each area were examined for alignment with the Guiding Principles and the needs of the current student body. Data was derived from the researcher’s personal observations, staff meeting minutes, staff newsletters, student intake data, completion rates, and satisfaction surveys. The findings found many areas of exceptional success as a program and many areas in which practices could be re-examined for further success. Several recommendations have been made, many of which address more than one of the 9 Guiding Principles. Key amongst the findings is a need to increase relevance of Advisory and work to address student transitions, both in and out of SD 79 Alternate systems. Structures for sharing more responsibility for student learning, engagement, and overall progress in the program with classroom teachers will be explored as possible avenues. These two key changes, it is hoped, will address many of the areas of need identified in the Program Evaluation and provide guidance for other Alternate systems to maximize efforts to enable student success.
In April of 2014, I made the decision to get my Master’s Degree. The decision was made for all the wrong reasons. I was already a Principal and it felt like I ought to. Also, my Superintendent figured I ought to. Luckily for me, there were people in my life who knew it needed to be done for the right reasons. First and foremost, my wife Rosanna, who is my partner in all things, wanted us to do this for the right reasons: to learn together, to become better professionals together, and to go to school together, because everything is more fun when we do it together. Since those early days of promise, we have taken turns supporting each other through wave upon wave of personal trauma. We have taken turns falling down and picking each other up. Both of my grown children nagged me the appropriate amount to allow me to finish, and to them I owe a great deal of thanks, as well as appreciation just for being the great human beings they are. In April of 2014, both my parents were alive, and they supported this endeavour financially and with their whole spirits. Sadly, in four years much has changed. I dedicate this paper to Mom and Dad, who believed in me and whom I wish could have seen this journey come to an end.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Throughout all educational jurisdictions, there is some kind of system in place for students who have been unsuccessful or unable to operate within a regular school setting. These systems are frequently referred to as Alternate Schools, and although the means by which students arrive in these institutions is as varied as the school themselves, there are commonalities throughout. Generally, students who attend an Alternate School have been unsuccessful in traditional schools and school authorities have directed them to attend an Alternate School. However, in growing numbers, students are deciding for themselves that they require something different. What something different entails is usually some combination of flexible expectations, personalization, and/or a sense of connectedness to or engagement with school, as well as the presence of additional supports as required (Smith, Peled, Albert, MacKay, Stewart, & Saewyc, 2007).

My previous experience with Alternate Schools was in Houston, BC, in School District 54 (Bulkley Valley), where, over the years, the Alternate Program went through a significant evolution as our District student demographic shifted dramatically. I was the first Vice-Principal of Houston Secondary (2007-2009), then the Principal (2009-2015), and I oversaw much of this evolution. When I arrived, there was a long-standing Alternate Program that was run out of a portable on the school site by a remarkable teacher who had been in charge of the program for almost 20 years. Following his retirement, we kept the same format of part-time academic support combined with some work experience for two years, but without its founder, the program floundered. In consultation with School District 54 Senior Administration, we chose to instead open up a separate facility that functioned as an Alternate School. It was formally an annex of the Bulkley Valley Learning Center, based out of Smithers and thus called BVLC – Houston
Campus, but the reason for this affiliation was simply to avoid the process of opening a brand-new school and registering a new school code. For all intents and purposes, it was an individual Alternate School of which I was the Principal. BVLC Houston Campus had many of the common elements of existing Alternate School programs, including flexibility and choice, a warm and caring environment, and affiliations with additional service providers. The most notable partnerships at BVLC Houston Campus were with the federally funded Youth Empowerment Program and with Northwest Community College, on whose campus we physically housed our school.

In this program, I was certainly able to generate a feeling first-hand for how a separate location with flexible programming, a culture of caring, and partnerships with third-party resources (Counseling, Youth Empowerment Program, and access to Northwest Community College programs) allowed students to engage in school. These were all students who had previously been unable to fully involve themselves in the regular daily life of the main Houston Secondary campus. At the same time, I felt that these students weren't successful at our own main campus because of some failings on our part at Houston Secondary. Although we were generally a flexible school with a caring culture, there still seemed to be an inability to accommodate our most vulnerable students. This was perhaps because of things beyond our control, such as crowds and the physical building; however, perhaps it was also in part because we still had rigid structures that didn’t allow for us to make accommodations for some of our vulnerable learners. As Principal of Houston Secondary, I knew that this format at an off-site alternate school was working for our students, but did not have a theoretical basis for this knowing, other than the fact that students who attended our Alternate School were in fact
graduating and many were transitioning into functional adulthood—something that seemed unlikely for them as students attending our regular programs at Houston Secondary.

**Alternate Education in British Columbia**

When I moved to another jurisdiction, I was able to see that despite differences in structures and processes, there were also commonalities in how Alternate systems operated. An accepted description of an Alternate School is a school that "educate[s] students who have not been successful in traditional K-12 schools and are at-risk of school failure, often because of behavior, disciplinary, or safety concerns" (Hodgman, 2016, p. 30). British Columbia's *Policy Statement on Alternate Schools* states overtly that the purpose of Alternate Schools is to serve the most vulnerable members of our school system (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). Because of the vulnerability of the population served by Alternate Schools, there are required structures in British Columbia Alternate systems designed to ensure that Alternate Schools are working to transition these students towards not only graduation, but towards a functional existence, as opposed to being an off-ramp to eventual dropout. Having the opportunity to see how much of what we had created in Houston had in common with my new setting was a revelation.

**Alternate Education in School District 79**

In the Cowichan Valley, my current school District (SD 79), Cowichan Valley Open Learning (CVOL) encompasses a wide variety of Alternate educational options as well as our Distributed Learning school. The Mission Statement of SD 79 Alternate Program is to, in partnership with the community, “provide students with an alternative to the regular school programs by offering an opportunity to experience success in a safe, nurturing, learning environment that emphasizes social, emotional, physical, academic and vocational development” (Cowichan Open Learning, 2016). The programs under the umbrella of SD 79
Alternate Program include the Middle Alternate Program, for students aged 10-13 that have behavioural issues and/or social/emotional challenges, and the Cowichan Valley Alternate School (CVAS), located at Providence Farm, for students aged 14-16 with behavioural issues and/or social/emotional challenges. Also included under the umbrella of the SD 79 Alternate Program, all four Secondary Schools in the District have an Open Learning Program on their site. Students at these satellite sites are able to be cross-enrolled in their home-school to take electives while learning their core academics through CVOL. Referral to these sites is usually made by the home school’s School-Based Team in consultation with the Principal. Although not identical in student profiles or processes, the generally applied criteria to this program is that the school has exhausted all efforts to provide the student with opportunities for success. As a general rule, students referred to Open Learning Centres rather than CVOLC itself are more connected socially to the school despite their lack of academic and behavioural success.

Finally, Cowichan Valley Open Learning Centre (CVOLC), is a centrally located Secondary School for students aged 15-19 who are experiencing challenges in their personal and/or school lives. Students of CVOLC are referred by school counselors, community counselors, or self-referral. Total enrolment in CVOLC alone last year was approximately 175 students; but it is growing every year as more and more students find themselves disenfranchised from our other Secondary Schools. At the time of this writing, CVOLC has almost 200 students registered for the 2017-2018 school year. This explosion in population has allowed the school to expand dramatically, now offering a rich array of electives and academic courses. Last year alone, CVOLC had almost 70 Dogwood (academic) graduates, including several young mothers, and an elaborate and moving graduation ceremony to celebrate the adversity these students had overcome. With the similarities between my experiences in Houston and the Cowichan Valley, I
cannot help but think that such a large alternate school in some ways exists because of a combination of the home-school struggling to meet their needs and students making the choice to self-refer for either the right or wrong reasons. Yet at the same time, it is hard to argue with a system whereby students who have experienced failure in traditional settings can find a place where they belong and are successful. This central question—whether there will always be students who cannot function in a regular system or whether alternate schools exist due to the failure of traditional schools to meet their needs—remains a focal point of discussion in our School District as well as many others.

Now, as the newly appointed Principal of CVOL, it is important for me to determine the most important services that SD 79 Alternate provides for the learners of the Cowichan Valley, especially in light of the enormous growth of our program in recent years. Specifically, at CVOLC, how can we accommodate this growth in student population, student diversity, and expansion of programming without losing sight of the original focus of the program? How can we ensure that our most vulnerable learners can engage in school and achieve success? Further, is it my function to stem this growth and try to re-integrate students into their home-school? It has frequently been a point of discussion at our Principal’s and Vice Principal’s meetings that having an enormous Alternate Education Program is not something that we as a District should be proud of, as it implies that our traditional schools are not responsive to the needs of a growing number of students. In my time at Open Learning, I have also tried in vain get some sense of commonalities or themes as to why students are choosing an Alternate model in ever-increasing numbers. This has proven to be extremely difficult, as every student who walks into my office seems to come with their own story for why traditional education isn't working for them.
Likewise, there is an extremely wide variance in their external challenges to learning and their hopes and dreams for their post-Secondary world.

**The Purpose of this Study**

It is my intent to establish clarity on the purpose of Alternate Education within the setting of education as a whole and, thus, what student success means in our context in SD 79. I am also interested in exploring the profiles of Alternate students and which particular aspects of our service are providing these opportunities for success. In doing this, it is my hope to establish a framework for helping guide the direction of CVOLC moving forward. As a further result, some of the findings may provide direction for the school system as a whole to address what students with obstacles to success in traditional settings really need.

Thus, my question:

Using Cowichan Valley Open Learning as a case-study, framed around the British Columbia *Alternate Schools – Guiding Principles* document, what aspects of our Alternate educational structures are the most important in allowing students who have previously been unsuccessful in school to achieve personal success?

Throughout this process, I will be reviewing all aspects of CVOLC and determining what aspects of our service delivery are the most effective in ensuring that students achieve success. In order to effectively accomplish this, the indicators of success in an Alternate setting must be established, and then that information must be analyzed for specific areas that allowed these learners to achieve this success.
Definition of Terms

Cowichan Valley Open Learning (CVOL): Open Learning consists of all learning programs other than traditional schools. Included within CVOL are Distributed Learning, Alternate programs and Dual-Credit/Trades-Based partnerships with post-Secondary institutions.

SD 79 Alternate: Refers specifically to CVOL programs that are geared towards learners who have been unsuccessful in traditional settings.

Cowichan Valley Open Learning Center (CVOLC): Refers to the centrally-located Alternate Secondary School.

Alternative/Alternate: From the reviewed literature, the terms Alternative and Alternate are often used interchangeably. However, in this School District and with colleagues from around the Province, there does seem to be a distinction. Alternative refers to any form of educational delivery that is different from a traditional mainstream education. Alternate refers to a system specifically for students who have been unsuccessful and require specific, targeted interventions to help them address their lagging skills. Understandably, these distinctions can become blurred in conversations, but in this paper, these definitions will be applied. CVOLC is an Alternate School, and although it has elements of an Alternative program delivery, its function is to serve as an Alternate School. Our Superintendent, in participating in our ongoing program evaluation, has used the phrase “come for the Alternate, stay for the Alternative.” For the purposes of this paper, the term Alternate will be used primarily.

Home-School: Home-school refers to the school from which the student was referred or self-referred. The home-school remains an important part of the student’s program because of the possibility of a re-integration.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Alternate Education and the Educated Citizen

In order to determine and assess levels of student success in an Alternate School setting, one must determine what the function of the Alternate School system is within the context of the overall function of education. British Columbia Ministry of Education's *Framework for Enhancing Student Learning* defines the parameters of an Educated Citizen (2015). Key amongst these parameters are the ability to think critically and creatively, to communicate effectively, to be capable of making independent decisions, to gain satisfaction through achievement, to be cooperative and principled and be aware of their rights, and to be prepared to exercise their responsibilities as citizens (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). Embedded within these expectations is also the ability to be skilled and contribute to society (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). Meanwhile, the Conference Board of Canada (2000) echoed those educational goals with the skill-sets required for citizens, stating that tomorrow's citizens need to be creative problem-solvers with continuous improvement skills, have risk-taking tendencies, and be relationship-builders, communicators, and effective implementers of ideas. Noam Chomsky (2016) furthered this discussion when he asserted that "the core principle and requirement of a fulfilled human being is the ability to inquire and create constructively, independently, without external controls" (p. 1); and he made a strong differentiation between education and indoctrination. Elsewhere, the ultimate goal of learning is referred to as the acquisition of adaptive expertise, the ability to used gained knowledge and skills and apply them “flexibly and creatively in different situations” (Dumont et al., 2012, p. 3). As such, there seems to be an established link between educating youth and developing the required skills to be engaged citizens. The focus of education becomes
less about subject content (outside of foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy), and more about the acquisition and application of skills that students can bring to their lives.

In British Columbia, the re-designed curriculum has an emphasis on a holistic set of skills. These skills-sets are emphasized through the existence of not only curricular competencies, but also through the core competencies. Thus, assessing student success in all settings has now expanded away from numeracy, literacy, and graduation rates, and moved towards assessing a student’s ability to use these skills. In Alternate Education, determining success for each learner has the potential to be more complex than in a traditional setting. However, in this case, one could argue that what is occurring throughout the system parallels what Alternate Schools have always known: that when “the student actively participates in the design of his or her learning and demonstrates mastery of the content in a competency-based system,” some degree of success has been achieved (McClaskey, 2017, p. 1). What constitutes success in an Alternate setting now needs to attempt to determine for each learner whether these skills were developed more through an Alternate pathway than they would have been at their traditional school. Exploring the stated objectives of Alternate School systems can help us determine whether these measurements of success are consistent with the function of education as a whole.

If, as Hodman (2016) suggested, the function of Alternate Schools is to "educate students who have not been successful in traditional K-12 schools and are at-risk of school failure, often because of behavior, disciplinary, or safety concerns" (p. 30), the concept of being educated needs to be discussed against the parameters set out previously. In an analysis of whether alternative schools are exceeding or meeting their purpose, Booker (1999) re-iterated the larger purpose of offering "quality second chance education…[in order to] develop academic, personal,
social and community skills in order to assist them in becoming positive, contributing members of society" (p. 3). Yet, despite these larger sets of stated purpose, there is a prevalence in publications about Alternate Education to focus on retention and completion as the stated end-goals instead of the means to a larger vision. We can see this in British Columbia's Policy Statement on Alternative Schools, which has a particular emphasis on the fact that Alternate School students are the most vulnerable in the school system (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). Governments at all levels acknowledge that graduation itself is in fact a gateway to further opportunities, and that there are huge societal and financial implications for students not completing a Secondary School education. In Canada, the estimated difference in lifetime costs to society is over $300,000 over the lifetime of an individual dropout. Although correlational, these were attributed to increased health costs, lost tax revenue, and other assorted costs (Hankivsky, 2008).

Embedded within the question of whether students at Alternate Schools are successful in becoming "educated" must be a comparison of their previous levels of success in a traditional setting. If, as Chomsky (2016) suggested, indoctrination is the counter to a successful educational experience, one could argue that these students were quite successful, as they were not being indoctrinated successfully in their old schools and, in fact, an inherent desire for independence likely helped the school determine that they were no longer a good fit in their institution. Alternate Schools traditionally tended to measure success by student connectedness and attitudes towards school as indicators of success, and there has been evidence to support the fact that students attending Alternate programs in British Columbia are being more successful than they were previously, using these measures (Smith et al., 2017, p. 18). Because the profile of Alternate students indicated that they require learning that is “relevant and applicable to life
outside of school and to future learning and work opportunities" (Ruzzie, 2006, p. 55) in order to engage with their work, one might conclude that Alternate Schools have been required to provide education that meets the measures of an Educated Citizen. There have been indications that "alternative school students also are shown to adjust better to higher education, report less anxiety and depression symptoms, and show greater life satisfaction and academic achievement when compared to their traditional school peers” (Shankland, Genolini, Franca, Guelfi, & Ionescu, 2009, p. 353).

Further to this function, Alternate Schools serve another function that traditional schools are less inclined towards: that of assisting students in avoiding high-risk life choices and providing appropriate interventions. These are necessitated by the fact that students at Alternative Schools have not only behavioural challenges, but also risk-factors such as substance abuse, adverse living conditions, and high-risk sexual behaviors (Smith et al., 2008). The cost-savings to society and the implications towards functional adulthood are hard to measure, but it seems fairly straightforward that students with addiction issues or who are in unhealthy relationships or who become parents early in life will have a more difficult time becoming Educated Citizens, using the British Columbia Ministry of Education's criteria for such (2015).

In fact, in order to be compliant with Ministry of Education funding, an Alternate School must have both an individual Student Learning Plan that explores these needs, and have a plan in place with additional supports (above and beyond what a traditional school is expected to provide) to specifically address each child’s needs (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). Although this can take many forms, staff at Alternate Schools have interventions in place that are not present in traditional school settings. These include, but are not limited to, a prescribed intake/interview process, exit strategies, and evidence of additional services such as counselling and community
support (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). Thus, Alternate Schools not only serve to help students learn the mandatory curricular aspects for ensuring that they graduate, but also endeavor to give them skills for real-life coping and surviving in the post-Secondary School world.

In BC, students with identified behavioural challenges had less than a 25% six-year graduation rate as of 2007 (BC Ministry of Education, 2007). Although Alternate Schools service a wide range of students, one of the most common causes for referral is behavioural challenges. In School District 79 (Cowichan Valley), a survey of Secondary School teachers, principals and counselors established two main themes with regards to perceived reasons that students drop out of school (Baker, 2016). The first theme centred around the inflexibility of school structures, while the second theme revolved around the culture of the school (Baker, 2016). In exploring the commonly used and effective strategies in Alternate Schools in British Columbia, we will see these themes recur frequently.

**Common Effective Strategies Used by Alternative Schools**

Knowing what we know about the implications of students not completing their education, British Columbia's Ministerial Order ensures that Alternate Schools in British Columbia have some fundamental aspects in place to combat non-completion (BC Ministry of Education, 2007). Consistent with these findings, Mills and McGregor (2016), in their study, “Alternative Education: Providing Support to the Disenfranchised,” identified common themes in what Alternate Schools do to help students achieve success, particularly emphasizing material supports, climate, and pedagogy/instruction. Further to this study, Janine Hannis and a team with the Ministry of Education participated in quality reviews with several successful Alternate systems around the province of British Columbia (Hannis, Lawson, & Lait, H., 2017). This report was titled *Guiding Principles for Alternate Schools*. This team identified 9 Key Guiding
Principles for Alternate Education, and proposed that Alternate Schools can be more efficient with where they spend their time and energy. The Principles, in no particular order, are as follows: Relationship-Based Programs, Community Supports and Partnerships, Engagement, Food – Engagement and Relationship-Building, Sense of Program Legitimacy/Viability, Supportive Culture, Clear Student Transitions, Flexibility, and Staff Connections.

**Relationship-based programs.** Students who are disenfranchised with their educational experience thus far need to know and feel that things will be different when they attend an Alternate School. They need to know that "they have two adults who care about them and believe they will be successful" (Kaiser & Halbert, 2013, p. 1). They need to have not only authentic, but also purposeful relationships with adults in their lives. The BC Ministry of Education overtly expressed that at an Alternate School, there must be evidence of “enhanced counseling services based on students’ needs” (2009, p.3). These counseling services can be provided by having increased school counselor time, Student Support Workers, or additional non-enrolling staff members. Further, teachers at Alternate Schools either arrive in an Alternate system by choice or at least stay by choice. These teachers understand the importance of relationships given that “students at greatest risk of dropping out of school are those who have never been friends with any teachers” (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Bockern, 1990, p. 13). Frequently, these teachers have reported frustration with the bureaucratic limitations of a traditional school, self-identify as Alternate themselves, and/or are more interested in the social work aspect of their chosen profession than the academic aspects. Staff in an Alternate system generally accept and embrace the notion that they need to earn a student's trust, as it cannot be assumed and is the “essential ingredient in establishing relationships” (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 23). Relationship-based programming doesn’t only include relationships between adults and
students. Since students at an Alternate School generally have “histories of disciplinary problems that entail substance abuse, academic failure, and interpersonal conflict” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 211), having programs to help students acquire the skills to have more positive relationships with peers is also key in school design. Situations that involve conflict at successful Alternate Schools are generally addressed through restorative justice and conflict resolution. Students at an Alternate School frequently have learned the “conflict cycle” (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 79), and thus situations involving conflict have to be approached carefully and thoughtfully. At a traditional school, there can at times be an assumption that the students involved in conflict have the skillsets to solve the problem, and that they simply have to make the choice to employ these skills. In fact, “school discipline policies are generally punitive and do little to offer strategies to de-escalate negative interactions with and among students” and “set disproportionately rigid rules for our most vulnerable students” (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 2). Students in Alternate settings frequently need direct instruction and opportunity to practice conflict resolution skills. Students need to learn empathy skills and the ability to place themselves in others’ positions and then, together, dialogue towards acceptable resolution.

Relationships with families are instrumental to student success as well. Frequently, students in an Alternate setting have a conflicted history with the school system, and rebuilding that can help achieve engagement for both the students and their families. Schools can sometimes have a tendency to blame parents and make assumptions about their intentions or skill levels (Greene, 2013, p. 73). In fact, while parents tend to blame the school first, the child second, and themselves lastly, schools do the exact opposite (Brenktro et al., 1990, p. 140). Meanwhile, effective interventions for students who are struggling strive to establish “teamwork relationships” with parents (Brenktro et al., 1990, p. 89). Many parents have a deeply ingrained
desire to play an active role: however, they also frequently have the same lagging skills and have become used to experiencing a cycle of blame and shame when they interact with the school system. Effective Alternate Schools seek to create an open dialogue and teamwork relationships with parents, as the more that students can have similar strategies and interventions at home and school, the more likely they are to succeed (Smith et al., 2013, p. 144).

**Community supports and partnerships.** An integral aspect of Alternate Education in British Columbia is the concept of service “above and beyond,” meaning that students must receive service that is more individualized to their particular needs and challenges than those provided at a traditional school. According to the BC Ministry of Education, there must be “evidence of additional services as required by the student population” (2017, p. 3). Some of the potential recommended additional services include “youth workers, drug and alcohol counsellors and/or sessions, etc.” (BC Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). During a Ministry Compliance audit, the school is required to demonstrate that it not only has services from its own contracted employees, but also that is has established partnerships with community agencies, and that these partnerships are based upon the needs of the student population (BC Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). In many if not most instances, this means a coordinated response to the child’s needs between many service providers. Because school is the place at which there is the highest chance of regular, daily contact, it is frequently the hub of these coordinated supports. An effective Alternate School must have established working relationships with mental health support, childcare, substance abuse, and trauma support. Nurturing and enabling these relationships throughout the community is integral to ensuring that each student is able to achieve a degree of success for them personally.
Amongst Alternate learners, the ability to connect with addictions services alone is integral to success. In the face of the enormous expansion of cannabis use and the opioid crisis, for some students, simply avoiding the possibility of an overdose or impending medical trauma is success unto itself. Cannabis use is symptomatic of today’s society, but also has strong linkages to previous trauma in that “adolescents who were physically and sexually abused are more likely to be using cannabis” (Baiden et al., 2013, p. 23). For all students, let alone students with previous high-risk factors, single-session, fear-inducing approaches to drug and alcohol instruction have been proven highly ineffective. If there is one thing we know from the DARE program, “it is that the ‘just say no’ message doesn’t work for kids” (McKibben, 2017, p. 3). In fact, a program whereupon students are educated about trauma-informed and resiliency-focused measures, including mindfulness and positive psychology framework and educational resources around the science of addiction, are proven to be far more effective (McKibben, 2017, p. 2).

Further, creating a culture of overt shame around drug use is not likely to promote attendance, and thus a school’s likelihood to make any impact is reduced. In an Alternate setting, students have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with adult care providers who can then connect those students with agencies that could be of assistance should they request it.

**Engagement.** Student engagement is frequently characterized as when “students make a psychological investment in learning and try hard to learn what school offers. They take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success (grades), but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalizing it in their lives” (Newman, 1992, p. 3). Engagement in the Alternate Education context refers to engaging learning opportunities, supported by personalized learning. This approach can be, but is not limited to, the inclusion of place-based learning, project-based learning, and/or cross-curricular opportunities that connect with student interests.
(Hannis et al., 2016). It is integral that the student’s learning is practical with clear connections to their hoped-for career and life path. Ideally, this includes innovative practices by the educational service providers and helps create relevant skills for short-term or long-term work and life readiness. Connections to the greater community, family connections, volunteerism, and intergenerational connections are also strongly encouraged (Hannis et al., 2016).

One of the most important connections in Alternate settings that breeds engagement is a sense of agency. Many students report that at a regular school they don’t feel a connection between their efforts and success. Students struggle at mainstream schools to engage because they “don’t accept the staff’s agenda as worthwhile” (Bascia et al., 2017, p. 13). Alternatively, in a setting where students have mutually agreed upon their path to graduation, their goals, and their plan towards success, student engagement can be a more tangible concept. Further, choice in what is perceived by the student to be engaging leads to increased engagement. Thus, successful Alternate systems recognize this “psychological and moral imperative” (Goodman, 2013, p. 123). Further, “when agency is restricted within the authorities’ comfortable silos” (Goodman, 2013, p. 124), students, especially those who have learned to be recalcitrant, will not achieve a sufficient level of engagement. Thus, successful Alternate systems “should gradually grant authority as well as power, and be carried out in a supportive, then more challenging context” (Goodman, 2013, p. 124).

**Food – engagement and relationship-building.** One cannot assume anything with regards to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs with students in an Alternate setting. Fundamental to an Alternate School system is the awareness that schools must attend to the nutritional needs of its students. Beyond their nutritional needs, there is also the emotional impact of students knowing that nutrition is available through the school, their main place of meaningful daily contact.
Having to seek "food security can be detrimental to children's academic achievement, potentially perpetuating a cycle of poverty and food insecurity" (Faught et al., 2017, p. 11). While ensuring that students have appropriate nutrition when they are in the school can help them achieve their goals, it is not possible to be ignorant of the fact that the presence of food also serves as a magnet to get them into the building. This then enables the school to help them achieve academic progress, connect them to additional services providers, and give them a sense of place and belonging. In an Alternate setting, “sharing a meal was identified by classroom staff as one of the most rewarding and important aspects of their program….and gives an opportunity for staff and youth to connect over an activity unrelated to their academic work” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 24).

Through Alternate Schools providing food and nutrition, students also acquire the skills to be able to nurture themselves in the future. Learning how to budget, prepare food, and clean up after themselves can be gateways to both future employment, and also an ability to be productive in their personal lives. Alternate students in particular require this explicit teaching because frequently these skills, including simply taking part in preparing the meal, are not modelled at home. Learning about food at school can lead not only to establishing “cooking skills and awareness of healthier food, but also future career pathways and help in the establishment of critical thinking skills around the social value of food and the food system” (Worsley, Nanayakurra, & Margerison, 2017, p. 3). Not only then can Alternate Schools use meals and food preparation as a useful asset in order to create community and address food insecurity issues for students in their everyday lives, but they can also use it to connect with the vision of education in British Columbia, and in particular the vision for Alternate Schools.

**Sense of program legitimacy/viability.** Within the present funding structure in British Columbia, Alternate Schools remain viable for their Districts to run. While a traditional
Secondary School is funded by a 0.125 portion of a full student funding for every credited course the student takes, Alternate Schools receive head-count funding. Every student who has a program receives full funding, provided that there is evidence of attendance, a Student Learning Plan, and access to additional services (Ministry of Education, 2017, pp. 3-4). These additional services require the school to provide evidence that there is additional staffing or at least access to these additional services. The exchange for this with regards to long-term viability is that students do not need to be enrolled in a full-time program in order to qualify for full funding (BC Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). The challenge in ensuring that any Alternate educational program is considered legitimate and viable is the fact that from District to District there are wide variations in how programs are resourced. There is little in the way of consistency with regards to staffing and measurements of success in Alternate systems throughout North America (McGee, 2017, p. 181). Further, because Alternate Schools are not subject to Bill 28, teacher to student ratios vary greatly throughout the province. However, beyond their viability, Alternate Schools need to be “understood and valued by colleagues through the district and community” and “have a clear fit or role within the district” (Hannis, 2016, p. 9). Further, students need to have “equitable access to resources and feel that they are on a parallel journey, not a less-than” (Hannis, 2016, p. 10).

**Supportive culture.** According to Green (2013), “access to supportive, educational programs and having a connection to school are therefore vital protective factors in the lives of youth, particularly for those who are disengaged from home and community” (p. 7). Safety, clear boundaries, and restorative approaches to conflict are frequently addressed in schools through

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1 Bill 28 is the result of a Supreme Court Decision around class size and composition. In essence, most enrolling classrooms in British Columbia have strict formulas around a combination of total number of students and designated special needs students. Alternate schools are exempt from these rules.
the Code of Conduct. While Codes of Conduct were introduced to support the behavioural expectations of students in schools, they seemingly have the opposite effect on students who are ultimately referred to Alternate Schools. Codes of Conduct are often part of the “tyranny of obedience,” stating that compliance and subordination are valued attributes in large, industrial complex schools, and that they help with the governance of the building, creating zero-tolerance rules that clearly identify what you can do and what you cannot do (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 31). For students who struggle to comply with behavioural expectations, school systems tend to apply further consequences. The problem is that whether “of the natural or artificial variety, consequences do not teach lagging cognitive skills or help kids solve problems” (Greene, 2014, p. 41). Thus, for successful Alternate systems, there needs to be the recognition that behavioural challenges are the result of “lagging skills rather than poor motivation...[and that]...challenging behaviour usually occurs in predictable situations called unsolved problems” (Greene, 2014, p. 41).

In contrast to zero-tolerance policies, which for students who struggle with behavior can be a “catalyst for the school-to-prison pipeline” (Teasley, 2014, p. 131), successful Alternate systems are required to recognize that helping students overcome behavioural challenges is one of their primary functions for each student. Hannis and her team (2016) found that, while being supportive, high-functioning Alternate systems in British Columbia still had clear boundaries that staff and students understood, but employed a restorative approach to school expectations when students were not meeting behavioural expectations. The restorative justice models chosen by Alternate Schools are “based on the development of a value set that includes building and strengthening relationships, showing respect, and taking responsibility” (Teasley, 2014, p. 132).
Clear student transitions. Student transitions both into Alternate systems, back into the mainstream, or into functional adulthood should be at the core of each student’s goals. In British Columbia, all Alternate systems must have an “intake process to facilitate district referrals or self-referrals” (BC Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). Although some Alternate systems in BC have designated intake periods, “most have a continuous intake process, allowing youth to reconnect with their education when they are ready to do so” (Green, 2013, p. 38). This allows students who are either out of school in school and not finding success to transition back into their education when the moment is right. Further, this ensures that a school can be focused on the transition of manageable amounts of students at any given moment rather than overwhelming numbers and artificially decided-upon start and end times.

When and if it is time for students to attempt a transition back into a traditional school, some of the challenges include the perception of legitimacy and stereotypes about students who attended an Alternate School. Further, another challenge around this transition is that students who have found success usually wish to remain where they are successful. In one study, only 36% of Alternate students, when asked if they had a desire to return to their home-school, responded affirmatively (Smith et al., 2007, p. 55). However, some British Columbia School Districts have specifically addressed this issue by assigning a transitions counselor for the District. The hope, however, is that by “building self-esteem…in a safe and supportive environment,” those students will have an increased ability to cope and thrive upon their return to their home-school setting (Smith et al., 2007, p. 64). Ultimately, according to the Ministry of Education, all students are required to have embedded in their Student Learning Plan “an exit strategy to facilitate the student’s transition back into regular school system, continuing education centre, graduation or to work or to post-secondary training and education” (2017, p. 3).
Although a return to the regular school system might be considered an optimal objective, the requirement to have a clear transition plan ensures that for both student and school, there is a purpose to their experience beyond simply taking some courses. With students for whom a return is not going to be possible, the hoped-for transition is a Dogwood Graduation, either Adult or 2004, and into either the workplace or post-Secondary continuation of their education.

**Flexibility.** A successful Alternate system has demonstrated strategies of systems for meeting diverse needs and ensuring that the school fits its students’ needs instead of vice-versa (Hannis et al., 2016). In British Columbia, it is mandated that every student have “an annually reviewed Learning Plan; either an official Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a Student Learning Plan that clearly defines the objectives for the student, additional services provided as required, progress made, and any transition plans” (BC Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). Thus, each student has an individually designed plan whereby their own goals and needs are factored into the everyday educational decisions made with them. Successful systems demonstrate that expectations can be “adjusted for each person” based on where their strengths and needs presently are (Nunn, 2014, p. 14). Although the plan is not limited to self-paced classes and flexible delivery, these are important components to ensuring that students can work their academic pathways into their otherwise unsettled lives (Smith et al., 2007, p. 40). Many youth report that this aspect of Alternate systems allows them to keep attending (Smith et al., 2007, p. 40). With regards to the need for not only a flexible pace but also flexible delivery, “effective teachers use a variety of strategies and a range of methods” (Christenbury, 2011, p. 46). Flexible teachers also “adjust curriculum, methods and pacing to meet the needs of their students” (Christenbury, 2011, p. 46).
**Staff connections.** Staff in successful Alternate systems show evidence of collaboration, clear roles, professional development, physical and mental health awareness, and a willingness to combine personal interests with curricular goals. The most essential factor in effective school reform is “collaborative time for teachers to undertake and then sustain school improvement [which] may be more important than equipment or facilities or even staff development” (Raywid, 1993, p. 1). Successful schools are distinguishable from unsuccessful ones by the frequency and extent by which teachers discuss practice, collaboratively design materials, and inform and critique one another. This trait is of particular importance when dealing with a vulnerable student population. Staff working together to reinforce common goals and strategies for helping students work towards success is integral. Given that public education is frequently referred to as “the de facto mental health system for children” (Parrow & Amador, 2018, p. 1), and is an environment where a higher than proportional number of students are suffering with mental health issues, the staff need to have better than average knowledge of effective skills and strategies for assisting with these struggles. At the same time, combining these supports with personal interest and curricular goals requires an integrated approach. Staff need to have relationships with each other, and also be aware of the work being done by partner agencies working with the student.

Integrated Case Management meetings occur frequently for students who are struggling with issues on many levels. Integrated Case Management refers to “a team approach used to create and implement a service plan for clients” (Ministry of Children and Families, 2006, p. 3), which creates a plan for the student on all levels, including their educational goals.

Staff in Alternate Schools work with students who face a variety of issues, including but not limited to anger, depression, ADHD, learning disabilities, addiction, illness, or domestic violence (Smith et al., 2007, p. 17). Thus, beyond much of the learning that colleagues in
traditional schools engage in around student learning and coping with different learning, Alternate School staff members need to at least have some understanding of these challenges. Staff need to gain an in-depth knowledge of youth needs and challenges and be able to assess individual student needs and offer additional supports as required (Smith et al., 2017, p. 40). Part of the training for this staff may include trauma-informed practice, including the art of “restoring normalcy” for students (Cook, 2015, p. 1). The scope of professional development that staff at an Alternate School might take part in and how it is different from a traditional school is represented by the scope of workshops presented at the 2018 Alternate Education Conference. Some of these workshops included Building Resiliency, the Trauma-Informed Brain, Working with Youth on Probation, Dealing with Vicarious Trauma, Working with Homeless Youth, Coping with Anxiety and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (BC Alternate Education Association, 2018).

Summary

Where there remains a segment of school populations that hasn’t been able to find success, it is important to have institutions that hold a slightly different set of values and different structures to service these students. These institutions in BC are called Alternate Schools and there are a great deal of commonalties amongst them. Successful Alternate Schools emphasize the importance of ensuring that their programming and philosophies reflect positive and purposeful relationships with students, and building connections to support students with other community agencies that work with students are risk. They strive to instill a feeling of engagement in their students, both with their academic programming and their life goals. Food is an important component of the service they provide and they understand the value that this can have in creating community and engagement for their students. Alternate Schools have a greater
chance of success when they have a clear place within their jurisdiction and are valued partners in the education of all students. Further, these schools strive to create a supportive culture that is a safe and orderly place to learn. They understand the importance of creating transition for students, both towards their next goal in life but also within their daily lives. Staff at these institutions value flexibility and work collaboratively to create systems of support for the District’s most vulnerable learners.
**Chapter 3 – The Design Process**

Continuous and ongoing program evaluation should be a consistent ongoing practice for any administrator of a school or educational program. This approach to practice is even more true when the school or program is either new to them or serves a unique function within the School District. Because both of these factors are true in this case, engaging in a thoughtful, process-driven evaluation of a program is necessary to be effective in my capacity as Principal. Determining “a program’s merit or worth” is crucial to determining best steps moving forward for that program (Cook, 2007, p. 298). Given that concurrent to this program evaluation, there is also a District-led review of the role of Cowichan Valley Open Learning in the School District and an internal one being done with the staff of CVOLC, this program evaluation will utilize a mixed methods approach and will pull key findings from my own professional journaling, staff meeting minutes, staff newsletters, student intake dates, Ministry completion rates, satisfaction surveys, and other information available to me as the lead researcher and Principal of the program.

**Defining Program Evaluation**

Program evaluation has been defined as “the application of evaluation approaches, techniques and knowledge to systematically assess and improve the planning, implementation and effectiveness of programs” (Chen, 2005, p. 1). Effectively, the program evaluation takes into account inputs, transformation, and outputs while also factoring in the environment (Chen, 2005, p. 3). By factoring in how we allocate our resources, what we do with those resources, and our hoped-for outputs, we can at least begin to have the conversations about where our efforts are consistent with our beliefs and hopes.
Types of Program Evaluation

In the early days of program evaluation, a reductionist theory was predominant, which led to a simplified assumption of cause-effect; and for this reason, the approach was often experimental or quasi-experimental (Ahmady et al., 2014). In the present, complexity theory is the dominant theme and thus there is much more consideration given to processes, situations, and other background variables (Ahmady et al., 2014). The logic model expects that the researcher takes into account the beliefs and assumptions of the organization as well as external factors, dynamic interactions, and the environment. Nonetheless, the fundamental concept of considering the inputs, outputs, and outcomes still guide the thinking. For situation analysis, it is important that the main problem is clearly stated and the background of the program is considered from many angles. For inputs, the resourcing is the consideration: how we choose to invest in staffing, resources, and with what partners the organization aligns itself. Outputs are what activities, services, and products are achieved at the end of the program, and outcomes are the ultimate aspirations of the organization, including short-term benefits, and medium and long-term impacts. For this project, the logic model was chosen as the most fitting approach. An Alternate School is, more so than many other schools, subject to variables that are challenging to track and measure, such as the referral policies at neighbouring schools, existing sociological patterns within the community, fluctuating staffing, and very little control over the amount of inputs provided by the School Board. Thus, a model that takes into account as many of the variables as possible is appropriate.
The Process

Although there are a variety of different teams working on the various aspects of this program evaluation, the findings in this paper are those of the researcher. The conclusions and findings will be based upon a variety of sources, including my own professional journaling, staff meeting minutes, staff newsletters, student intake data, CVOLC completion rates, satisfaction surveys, and other information available to me as the lead researcher and Principal of the program. Although most of the information can be parts of various domains, the researcher has organized the findings into the 9 Guiding Principles of Alternate Systems and will attempt in each domain to utilize the structure of situation, inputs, outputs, and outcomes to summarize key findings. For the purpose of assessing inputs, the assumption of the researcher is that resources are finite and thus can only be readjusted while factoring in the environmental factors.

**Relationship-based programming.** In an Alternate setting, ensuring that students and staff have authentic and purposeful relationships is a required outcome prior to any efforts to achieve measurable academic progress. How CVOLC allocates its finite resources and what results are achieved is the determinant of the success of our program. Some specifics inputs that will be examined include the timetable and whether it reflects a commitment to ensuring that relationships are positive, the selection of staff, the intake and follow-up process, the function of Advisory, relationships with parents, and the role of the Student Learning Plan in guiding appropriate decision-making for a student's program. Evaluation will be based upon attempted comparisons of student-by-student progress prior to and after the transition to CVOLC.

**Community supports and partnerships.** Knowing that many, if not all, students require and benefit from the services that are provided by community agencies outside of the school setting, what structures and allocation of resources at CVOLC specifically work to ensure that
this function is purposefully addressed? Is the proportion of staffing assigned to nurturing these relationships adequate? Is this purpose of the program explicitly stated and where do classroom teachers fit into this equation? What initiatives have been initiated to specifically address this need and have these initiatives been effective? Are the workshops being provided proving to be of value to students? In order to assess success of this arena at CVOLC, data will be drawn from Student Learning Plans, anecdotal observations, and progress with regards to the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning document that guides CVOLC in setting and attaining goals (BC Ministry of Education, 2015).

**Engagement.** If students at CVOLC have traditionally had a pattern of disengagement from their education, what aspects of CVOLC are specifically designed to re-engage these students? In both academic and elective classes, what aspects of the learning are designed to increase engagement for students? Does CVOLC as an institution specifically design learning activities and structures to purposefully increase engagement? Considering both anecdotal observations and analysis of students’ patterns at their previous schools as well as referring to Student Learning Plans, is student engagement being achieved at CVOLC for these students who had struggled to engage in their prior settings?

**Food – engagement and relationship-building.** Students at CVOLC often struggle with food insecurity, need skills and knowledge around food preparation and consumption, and lack the knowledge that food and mealtimes also have cultural significance. Given this, how are CVOLC’s structures and resources allocated to address these needs? Inputs to be considered include the instructional hours devoted by both teaching and non-teaching staff to both food preparation and instruction as well as the budget allocation for this purpose. Anecdotal and quantitative analysis of student numbers and meals accessed will be used as indicators of need.
and results. Student attendance patterns as they relate to food access and preparation as well as observations about cultural impacts will be used to assess the success of the program.

**Sense of program legitimacy/viability.** The legitimacy and viability of CVOLC within SD 79 must be considered from both an internal and external perspective. Determining the value that SD 79 places on the programs and the students in the program provides a context for analysis of the success of the programs. Further to this, SD 79's internal review of where Alternate Education fits within our role in servicing all students in the District provides information related to CVOLC specifically, but also the supports that CVOLC can provide to students at risk in other programs. Within this section, the referral process, strategies for addressing increased marijuana use, and strategies for establishing an appropriate profile will be examined. Measurements of success in this context will be drawn from feedback from partners in education, including other School District employees, the community, and parents, as well as anecdotal reflections on student success.

**Supportive culture.** An Alternate School is designed to be a culture that is supportive of individual student growth, finding a balance between helping students address lagging skills while also working to ensure progress towards eventual graduation or transitions to the next stage of life. Ensuring that the school is a safe and orderly place, while also using supportive approaches to address misbehaviour, are part of the mandate. Examining CVOLC’s structures in relation to maintaining a supportive school culture can help determine whether success is being achieved. What emphasis does CVOLC place on individual student progress in relation to personal versus academic goals? What strategies does CVOLC employ to support students with behavioural challenges while also ensuring a safe and orderly school? What role does the Student Learning Plan have in making decisions for individual students? Determination of success will
be drawn from student feedback and student progress, as well as traditional measures such as graduation rates, attendance rates, and observations of engagement.

**Clear student transitions.** It is an explicit expectation that Alternate Schools have a strong focus on appropriate methods for students to transition into an Alternate School and support a plan for transition into the next stage of their education and life. Further, students are expected to transition on a daily, weekly, and periodic basis through stages of their academic journey. Examining CVOLC's structures for each of these transitions will include the following: referral process, screening processes, and daily structures to support student's physical transitions. Determinations of success will be extracted from student progress as it relates to goals set out in the Student Learning Plan, as well as anecdotal observations and extracts from staff discussions about priorities for CVOLC.

**Flexibility.** Students at CVOLC have typically struggled with some of the rigid structures at traditional schools. In what ways does CVOLC strive to ensure that student needs drive educational programming? What structures at CVOLC are designed to ensure that each student has the opportunity for a flexible, individualized program? What aspects of CVOLC's growth have hindered its ability to be flexible and what options exist for ensuring that it can continue to deliver flexible programming? Determinants of success will be drawn from observations of individual student programming, student success as it relates to goals in Student Learning Plans, and staff discussion around best strategies for ensuring that flexibility remains a priority.

**Staff connections.** Ensuring that staff are cohesive and focused on individual student needs as well as professionally cohesive and up to date on current practice as it relates to youth at risk needs to be priority at an Alternate School. What aspects of CVOLC’s design and its use of non-instructional time are aligned with this belief system? What choices are made for how to
spend Professional Learning time, School-Based Team meetings and staff meetings? Examining these inputs as well as determining how CVOLC can more effectively engage in learning with colleagues in other schools will provide direction moving forwards. Determinants of success will be extracted from staff input and alignment of our Framework of Enhancing Student Learning with school needs.

**Discussion of Reliability**

The situation and context of this program evaluation are extremely fluid, and thus the findings are unavoidably interpretive. More than most settings, the student population is variable every year. For example, as our organization attempts to work with our partner schools to ensure that referrals to CVOLC are truly there once all other interventions have been attempted, there could realistically be a downturn in course completions and academic achievement in the school. While this might be interpreted in a simplistic manner as a decrease in outputs, it could also be interpreted as an improvement with regards to outcomes, if the larger District picture is being taken into account, assuming that the District’s hope is to keep as many students in their regular school as possible. Thus, through hundreds of hours of immersion within the program and interacting with staff, students, parents, and community members, the researcher believes that the findings are accurate and fair; however, it is entirely possible that another researcher might come to different conclusions. This is somewhat the nature of education, but even more so the nature of a program that isn’t defined by geographic boundaries. Nonetheless, the process of engaging in a program evaluation has been valuable for me both as a Graduate student, and even more so as the Principal of Cowichan Valley Open Learning; and it is my belief that the information found below will be invaluable in moving not only our organization forward but also the School District as a whole. This project and the corresponding evaluations at the school- and district-
levels will continue to guide future conversations about the role of Alternate programs in our School District.
Chapter 4: Program Evaluation of Cowichan Valley Open Learning Centre

School District 79 is located in the Cowichan Valley on Southern Vancouver Island, south of Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District and north of Sooke School District. There are approximately 7,800 students in 16 Elementary Schools (Grades K-7), four Secondary Schools (Grades 8-12), as well as Cowichan Valley Open Learning. Cowichan Valley Open Learning describes a wide array of alternative services for students who desire something different from a traditional school setting. Amongst these are a Kindergarten to Grade 9 Distributed Learning School and a Grades 10-12 Distributed Learning School. Both Distributed Learning programs support a variety of students, including home learning families, and also families who have left traditional schools for a variety of reasons. The Middle Alternate Program (MAP) is an Alternate program for 10 students aged 10-13, referred by Elementary Schools, who are experiencing a lack of success and frequently display behavioural or mental health challenges. The Cowichan Valley Alternate School (CVAS) is a program for 18-20 students aged 14-16 who have similar criteria to those in MAP but are referred to the program by Secondary Schools. This program operates out of a leased site at Providence Farm and has its roots in physical work and an outdoor setting. All student referred to MAP or CVAS are screened by an administrator at Open Learning and decisions for placement are made in consultation with the student’s original school.

At each of the four Secondary Schools, Cowichan Valley Open Learning provides a 25-30 student Open Learning Center, which operates as a school within a school. Students attend the Alternate School, while still maintaining roles in the community and culture of the home-school. These students are generally referred by either the home-school through their School Based Team or by an administrator at Open Learning. Finally, the Cowichan Valley Open Learning Center (CVOLC) is a stand-alone Alternate School for approximately 200 students based out of
what used to be Duncan Elementary in Central Duncan. CVOLC has grown significantly since 2013, especially since the school moved to the Nagle Street Location from its previous, smaller building on Cairnsmore Avenue. Several factors have led to this expansion, but one of the primary roots has been the elimination of a District-wide screening process that had previously limited enrolment at CVOLC. The school is now perceived as a school of choice with the only screening being done by an Open Learning administrator during the intake process. Also, as the population of CVOLC increased, the ability to offer a variety of learning opportunities expanded, and thus it became more attractive as an option. Over 80% of the students at CVOLC were originally students at Cowichan Secondary in Duncan. Cowichan Secondary is a large Secondary School that, since 2013-2014, has been operated as a dual-campus school of 1,400-1,500 students. As of the February 2018 Open School Board meeting, this structure will change for 2018-2019 and the Quamichan Campus will be an independent Grade 8/9 school, and Cowichan Secondary will return to a single campus, Grades 10-12 school.

**CVOLC**

At the time of this writing, CVOLC has 211 students. Of these 211 students, 70 of them are at their chronological graduation age (meaning they are in their fifth year since they started Grade 8), and another 55 are in their sixth year of Secondary School. There are 85 students who are on track to graduate this year. Twenty-three of them are intending to graduate with a full 2004 Dogwood Diploma, whereas the other 52 are going to complete an Adult Dogwood Diploma. The Adult Dogwood consists of considerably less completed credits than the 2004 Graduation and has replaced what was formerly identified as a GED in British Columbia. Sixty-

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2 In British Columbia, a student, upon turning 18 but not earlier, may transition to an Adult Dogwood. An Adult Dogwood allows for graduation with reduced course completions. Specifically, an Adult Dogwood consists of a Language Arts 12, a Math 11, and 3 Grade 12 electives, of which 3 of those 5 courses must have been started after the student’s 18th birthday.
six of those 211 students identify as First Nations, with 45 of them being Status On-Reserve, all but four of them Cowichan Tribes members. Thirty-one percent of students identifying as First Nations heritage is higher than the 21% at the neighbouring Cowichan Secondary. With regards to Special Education designation, CVOLC enrolls students with the following designations: two students with Moderate Intellectual Disabilities, two students with a Physical Disability (both FASD), three students with Autism, 17 students with Severe Behaviour/Mental Illness designations, one student with a Mild Intellectual Disability, and 25 students with a Learning Disability. Of notable comparisons here, 8.1% of CVOLC students have a Severe Behaviour/Mental Illness designation, while at Cowichan Secondary there are 18 students with that designation, comprising 1.3% of their population. At CVOLC, 11.8% of students have an official Q designation, while at Cowichan Secondary 95 students and 6.8% of their population is designated with a Learning Disability.³

CVOLC is staffed based on existing ratios in the District for Alternate Education and there is an expectation that classroom teachers will be responsible for much of the adaptations required for students with Special Education needs. Further, because Open Learning is staffed as one entity, despite all of the different sites and because each of the Satellite site teachers is officially a Special Education teacher, there are not a great deal of Resource or Special Education teachers at CVOLC. The school currently employs a full-time Intensive Behaviour teacher, who case-manages the 17 students with an H designation, and a 66%-time teacher, who is the case-manager of the all the other IEPs. However, given that every student in a British Columbia Alternate School must have either an IEP or a Student Learning Plan and all students at CVOLC

³ An official Q designation means that the student was put forward for an Educational Psychologist assessment, was tested, and was confirmed to have a Learning Disability. Traditionally, students who have not demonstrated consistent attendance were not chosen by the screening committee to get an assessment; thus, there is a reason to believe this number could be higher at CVOLC.
already have a Student Learning Plan, the expectation is that the additional needs created by Special Education designations are managed at the classroom level.

CVOLC operates on a traditional five blocks/day timetable with a mix of academic and elective offerings. Students are assigned to an Advisory teacher who is responsible for working with them on their Student Learning Plan and acting as their primary contact person at the school level. There is a 10-minute block assigned to Advisory each day, and this is the students’ opportunity to check in with their advisor, connect, and review progress. The school has a weekly assembly where information on expanded educational opportunities and additional supports are communicated. The school offers all courses required for a 2004 Dogwood Diploma and various other electives. For the most part, teachers are a mixture of subject specialist and generalists. We have two teachers who are primarily focused on all of the courses required for graduation, notably Math 11 Apprenticeship and Communications 12. Each teacher has an elective area that they are passionate about, which they teach beyond their core subjects. For example, the Math and Science specialist also teaches Photography. Students are assigned to the teacher who teaches the subject they need for every block of the day. In order to reduce transitions, there has been an attempt to have one person teach the same student multiple subjects.

The initial goal for all students is to graduate with a full 2004 Dogwood Diploma; however, many of the school’s graduates receive an Adult Dogwood due to the fact that they are behind academically and the school tries to find the right balance between academic expectations and socio-emotional supports. As do all schools, CVOLC has regularly scheduled parent-teacher opportunities, IEP meetings for designated students, and three report cards each year. In addition, teachers communicate directly with students using Facebook or school-supplied cell phones.
However, for each student, the document that guides our decision-making together is the Student Learning Plan. Integrated within the 40 minutes of Advisory time each week, the advisor and student are expected to regularly refer back to the Student Learning Plan and the goals that the student set out for themselves for the year, month, and week. These goals include both academic and non-academic goals. On four occasions each year, the school offers an incentive to all students who have dialogued with their teacher and revised their Student Learning Plan. These Student Learning Plan incentives have replaced attendance-related incentives in previous years.

CVOLC has expanded counseling services, in comparison to a similarly sized Secondary School. It has a full-time counselor for its 200 students. The counselor oversees all Graduation Plans and places students with appropriate teachers for their subject requirements. Attendance is traditionally a struggle for students at CVOLC for a variety of reasons. Over 80% of the students arrive with histories of attendance issues, and the school has responded with a flexible pacing structure. The structure of flexible pacing at least ensures that students with inconsistent attendance don’t fall behind the class’s learning and feel lost. According to school data, in April of 2017, 12% of students attended 80% of classes or more and 37% attended 60% or more of their classes. In the past two school years, CVOLC has worked to gather more information by tracking block-based attendance as would a traditional Secondary School; however, because of a variety of reasons, this venture has been a challenge. First and foremost, CVOLC students tend to choose, despite their timetable, where and with whom they work. As such, a student might be in attendance on a particular day, but has chosen to work in another classroom than their scheduled class. Further, as students complete courses on a continual basis and then must change classes and teachers, ensuring that timetables and the timetabling software’s information is accurate has been inconsistent.
CVOLC and District Dialogue

Within School District 79, Cowichan Valley Open Learning is the subject of an internal program review that is being conducted with administrators from all of the Secondary Schools. The current Superintendent is leading the exercise with several key questions guiding the discussion. Some of these questions explore whether or not the District views Alternate Education to be an off-ramp, an on-ramp, or a parallel pathway. In other words, the District is exploring whether Alternate Education serves to support the traditional system, or if it is in fact a viable alternative to the traditional system. The other questions being discussed are whether students are referred to Alternate Education because of a belief that this student would benefit from the services available at an Alternate School, or because the student is simply making the management of the referring facility too challenging, and thus having them attend a different school alleviates pressures on the home-school. Finally, all administrators are being asked what Cowichan Valley Open Learning is able to do to help students find success and what our traditional schools might be able to do to parallel that success for vulnerable learners.

At the same time, the administration at CVOLC is engaging in an ongoing dialogue with staff, students, and parents about its own function within School District 79 and determining whether the existing practices and structures are best suited to this purpose. This process has included the establishment and definition of its own values and beliefs around student success. By engaging in this activity, CVOLC has been able to examine the structures and practices to ensure that what the school does is consistent with what its believes. The *Guiding Principles of Alternate Education*, developed by Janine Hannis and her team (2016), was acknowledged by staff to be a solid organizing tool, and staff felt they shared the values and beliefs in this
document. Thus, the “Butterfly,” as it is affectionately known, has been a valuable framework for guiding internal staff discussions at CVOLC.

The purpose of this Program Evaluation is to parallel and complement these two other processes in identifying our own areas of strengths and areas requiring improvement. This report operates from within what can be controlled internally. It will assess our inputs and outputs and in what areas we could strive to improve our practices to ensure that we provide optimal services to the students who are presently registered with us. In addition, it will evaluate what our role is in the School District and how the service we provide can ensure that all students are able to achieve success in whatever setting they are in. The findings below, as much as they are reflective of all of these processes, are ultimately my own determinations, and although many of them will come into practice in the coming years, it is also prudent to be respectful of the progress that has been made by my predecessor and the team that surrounded him. I have used the 9 Guiding Principles of Alternate Education as a meaningful organizer for these findings.

This year, Cowichan Valley Open Learning underwent a Ministry of Education audit, whereby a team from the Ministry examined the intake process, evidence of additional services, and specific student learning plans for a sample of students. Although the end result of the Ministry Compliance audit was a conclusion that CVOLC is an exemplary program and the District suffered no financial losses, several recommendations came to light from the audit team, and school administration has identified several key areas through the process as potential areas for improvement. The audit also was helpful in provoking some conversations with staff about its own systems. Throughout this paper, the vast amount of valuable learnings that took place though the audit process will be embedded. The key component of the Alternate Education audit was the necessity for ensuring that CVOLC is providing something that is different and above
and beyond that of a traditional school. There were several Alternate Schools in British Columbia that suffered significant financial losses. These losses specifically related to their screening and referral processes as well as what they provided in terms of additional services. Although they were schools that were serving students who required something different, they were not in compliance with the requirements of an Alternate facility. In essence, they were operating as a flexible, self-paced Secondary School with small class sizes. The audit could not have been timelier in the evolution of CVOLC, as staff have been examining its role in the District. The findings of the audit will be re-visited throughout this evaluation.

**CVOLC Program Evaluation Organization**

For the purposes of this evaluation, inputs, products, and outcomes will be discussed and evaluated and, if necessary, suggestions made for improvement. These will be built around the 9 Guiding Principles of Alternate Schools (Hannis et al., 2016, p. 4), which are Relationship-Based Programming, Community Supports and Partnerships, Engagement, Food – Engagement and Relationship-Building, Sense of Program Legitimacy/Viability, Supportive Culture, Clear Student Transitions, Flexibility, and Staff Connections. Further, the findings of the Ministry audit team will be referred to as possible suggestions.

**Relationship-based programming.** Students who are disenfranchised need to have authentic and purposeful relationships with adults in their lives, and, more specifically, “two adults who care about them and believe that they will be successful” (Kaiser & Halbert, 2013, p. 1). Further, “students at the greatest risk of dropping out of school are those who have never been friends with any teachers (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 13). Although CVOLC staff would not consider themselves “friends” with their students, this perception amongst students is evident in many of our practices and structures, which reflect the value that is placed on relationships with
students. Staff philosophies also reflect this value; and the most evident practice that parallels this belief is the practice of eschewing the traditional use of formalized titles. Students are expected to address staff by their first name, which is an immediate indicator of the different philosophy with which relationships are approached. Staffing is structured with enhanced counseling time, dedicated administrative time for supporting specific students’ behavior, and Student Support Workers who are accountable to enhanced student services for every student on a minimum monthly basis.

Philosophically, the staff at Cowichan Valley Open Learning are all very aware of how important relationships are to learning. This philosophy is due in part to a careful and thoughtful history of staffing, and the previous administration ensuring that there are commonalities in staff philosophy. This trait is further strengthened by two pieces of expected reading. All staff are presented with copies of *Lost at School* (Greene, 2014) and *Reclaiming our Youth at Risk* (Brendtro et al., 1990). These two resources are frequently referenced, in particular when it comes to conflict resolution. Staff are expected to and frequently do utilize the strategies in *Lost at School*, whereby students are expected to collaborate with a trusted adult to problem-solve conflict and/or academic challenges. Staff at CVOLC engaged in an activity at several staff meetings whereby targeted students were chosen and carefully worked through a strategy following the problem-solving strategies in *Lost at School* to help these particular students address their lagging skills.

Every student in a School District 79 Alternate Program has gone through a multi-step process of screening, intake, and placement. The first step is an extensive interview with an administrator. Through this process, each student not only becomes acquainted with the school and the expectations, but also, the administrator learns about the student and their particular
needs, both academically and holistically. Something is learned about their background, where they struggled in their previous setting, and what their future goals are. The student is then set up with an intake meeting with the counselor, who has the student partake in an assessment and another extensive sit-down review of their goals and needs. Prior to the student starting at the school, their picture and profile is presented to the entire staff at a School-Based Team meeting, and following that they are thoughtfully placed with an Advisor teacher. This teacher will co-create a Student Learning Plan with the student, and oversee their integration and progress in the school. Further, the administrator schedules a 30-day check-in with the student during which their transition will be reviewed. By this time, the student should be able to self-report whether they are feeling connected and are making progress towards their own personalized goals. This process is designed to engage the staff in supporting the students and to give the student an opportunity to build connections with various adults in the building.

As of this writing, staff at CVOLC are engaged in a review of the role of an advisory teacher and the reasonable expectations that can be placed on this staff member under its present configuration. Frequently, if a student had stopped attending regularly and/or seemed to be dis-engaging, administration would query staff at a School-Based Team meeting regarding what they knew. Although the Advisory teacher had co-created the Student Learning Plan and was technically the overseer of the program, they didn’t always know what was happening, and in fact had not necessarily had any meaningful contact with the student. This program review has revealed several issues with the Advisory system as it existed. First and foremost, the challenges revert back to the structures that are in place for the school. Due to a desire to offer a rich array of programs, the school has a traditional 5x5 timetable. This consists of five blocks each day for a student with up to five teachers. The challenges for the students will be outlined later in the
paper, but the challenges for teachers is evident. If a teacher teaches up to 100 students in a day for 55 minute blocks, where does their role as an Advisory teacher fit for them? How meaningful are the 10 minutes each day allocated to Advisory class?

Through an exploration of the *Framework for Enhancing Student Learning* at CVOLC, the staff have identified that the role of an Advisory teacher needs to be meaningfully embedded into other learning. As a staff, the school is exploring structural changes to adapt to this need, including reducing transitions and embedding the Advisory concept into credit-carrying subjects. One example that is being explored right now is changing the timetable to reduce student transitions. Students would be with their Advisory teacher for the first two hours of the day, working on their Student Learning Plan and related credit-carrying subjects. Thus, instead of being 10 minutes each day, Advisory could be meaningfully incorporated into any and all activities the class does. School administration has also encouraged the staff to find reasons to plan group activities with their Advisory groups in an area that either they or their cohort have a passion for. It is expected that subject-based teachers will support school-wide opportunities for learning as the school strives to emphasize the power of relationships over covering content. Without a relationship with at least one, hopefully more, adult in their lives, engagement is unlikely.

Engaging parents in conversations about learning has been another challenge. Amongst staff, there is a fear that in some cases, parents’ involvement can damage their existing relationship with the student. While some would concede that some parents could be challenging, the school has worked to re-establish the belief that parents want to be involved and can be helpful until they prove otherwise. By most reports, this has been a significant culture change at CVOLC. Staff continue to be committed to keeping parents informed and included in
decision-making, and team meetings with parents have become commonplace. Part of the
challenge with these meetings is ensuring that with parents there, staff continue to follow the
pattern of allowing students the room to co-create plans that will work for them. Frequently, a
pre-meeting or phone conversation with the parent to inform them of the plan for the meeting
and to respectfully request that they allow this process to play out has proven helpful. The
purpose of this conversation is also to reiterate that the meeting is not intended to discipline the
student, but in fact to help them find success. Further, this year it became a point of focus for the
school to establish a meaningful Parent Advisory Council and this has created an enormous
change to the culture of parent involvement in the school. This will be referred to further in the
section on Legitimacy.

In essence, there is an understanding and an embracing of the philosophy that without
meaningful relationships with the students, the staff at CVOLC will not be able to engage them
and encourage them to achieve academic and personal success. While there remain areas of
processes and procedures that could use improvement, relationships are a relative area of
strength for CVOLC as a school. For future examination of strategies to improve the power of
our relationships, Advisory will be the place to start.

Community supports and partnerships. CVOLC strives to maintain and develop open
and meaningful relationships with many third-party service providers for our students. The
school has regular communication with Child and Youth Mental Health, Ministry of Children
and Families, Youth Probation Services, RCMP, Community Options Society, FASD Support
Services, the John Howard Society, Discovery Addictions Services, and the Growing Together
Daycare Society. As well, the Ministry of Children and Families team hosts monthly Vulnerable
Youth Meetings that serve primarily as an information-sharing service for our youth who are the
highest-risk. Frequently, these children are not deemed school-ready, but whenever possible, the school arranges for them to meet the administration in an informal way so that when they feel school is something for them to explore, they don’t have to meet someone new and they know that we are a non-threatening enterprise.

Counseling from non-School District personnel is necessary for many students with complex needs. These relationships are an Alternate School policy requirement and an important funding necessity for students with an H designation, but they are also extremely positive for students. Having the expectation that students will be able to access these resources and then be able to continue with service unsupported is sometimes unrealistic. Thus, an effective Alternate School ensures the facilitation of these relationships for students in need. In the Cowichan Valley, this can include Child and Youth Mental Health (CYMH), a division of the BC Ministry of Children and Families, or Discovery Addictions Counseling, a division of the Vancouver Island Health Authority, or independent and non-governmental non-profits, such as, in the Cowichan Valley, the Community Options Society. Effective organizations and partnerships have regularly set up meeting times and/or processes for referrals and visitations rather than an ad hoc crisis-based intervention model.

Administrators and case-managers at CVOLC work with a variety of community partners to support youth at risk, and this collaboration can be effective and rewarding. However, at the same time, there is an apparent lack of systems. Sometimes the support for youth is entirely crisis-based; agencies connect when a child is in crisis, come up with a short-term emergency

[^4]: Student with an H designation must have either a formal diagnosis of mental illness or documented evidence of extremely disruptive behavior in the school environment and an ongoing relationship with a third-party mental health provider, whether that be a counselor, psychiatrist, youth probation worker, or other examples. The case-manager for the student in the school is expected to work with these partners to develop a plan for success for the student.
plan, and then contact frequently discontinues until the next crisis. Agencies and schools both struggle to develop long-term pro-active opportunities for organizations to support youth at risk. In response to this challenge, CVOLC administration has endeavored to schedule regular, ongoing communication and contact with these partners regarding youth with whom all of the partners regularly work. Three particularly successful examples of this are with the RCMP detachment, the Youth Probation teams, and the Discovery Addictions Services. With the RCMP, it has been a simple model of actively and persistently extending an invitation for them to be part of the school environment. Last year, the school experienced a particular incident in which the RCMP’s handling of a 13-year-old First Nations girl having a psychotic episode was felt to be controversial amongst the school staff. In consultation with the Vice Principal, the RCMP were welcomed into the building early this September and discussed both the school’s concerns about that incident and a plan moving forwards. As a result, the RCMP members have attempted to make coming in for a coffee with students a regular part of their schedule, and over the course of the year, the students have become comfortable with their presence. With Youth Probation, a monthly meeting has been scheduled for the significant number of youth involved with both agencies. Together, information is gathered over the course of the month and shared to make a plan for those students to keep them actively engaged. With Discovery Addictions services, one of their counsellors does weekly Yoga sessions that are entirely voluntary, targeted at CVOLC’s female population. By being in the school on a consistent basis, CVOLC staff and its partners at Discovery are able to communicate effectively around student progress. While participation in the sessions varies, the counselor has several new clients who have chosen to access the service.
CVOLC also has many workshops for our students. This year, student interests and needs were assessed early in the year and workshops were coordinated accordingly. This information was gathered and compiled from our Student Learning Plans, and then the Student Support Worker endeavoured to contact the appropriate service providers and choose the appropriate workshops for the existing clientele. These workshops have been delivered by important community partners, and thus gave the opportunity for students to meet potential resources and access information. Although CVOLC students may not be noticing the difference overtly, the menu of workshops was set up in part based on what staff were able to learn about their lives and struggles as well as what they specifically expressed an interest in. Further, CVOLC staff are revisiting the Student Learning Plans to reference learning from the specific workshops. Changing the conversation with students and community partners to try to make all activities targeted-based on needs is a powerful tool to try to help each and every student find a measure of success.

While these have all been extremely positive developments, the connections to these partners still tend to be only through administrators and the school counselor. CVOLC administration is seeking and working with staff to become more involved in these partnerships, as they are the adults who more regularly see the students and oversee their educational programs. It is hoped that by expanding the profile and level of importance of the Advisory system, teachers can also start to benefit from the wrap-around services that can be provided. There have been instances this year in which the strategy of blocking a student’s timetable around their advising adult has proven to create a more meaningful connection, and thus some headway has been made in this regard.
Engagement. If engagement is “when students make a psychological investment in learning” (Newman, 1992, p. 11), achieving actual academic engagement can be challenging for students with histories of academic distress and mistrust of the system. However, engagement is increased by having accessible levels of work, and this is something that CVOLC has a system to address. Through the intake process at CVOLC that helps in establishing levels of capability, staff can work to ensure that all academics start with a reasonable access point, and thus the work can be within the student’s proximal range of development. Also, through student-directed elective classes and a flexible philosophy, CVOLC students do engage with their learning for at least parts of their day. For many students who have not been in regular attendance for a significant period of time, it is accepted that for a while, that student might only engage in the elective classes where they feel successful. However, there remains a concern for the level of meaningful engagement that exists in many of the academic subjects.

Here is where a paradox has been noted. Because many students have inconsistent attendance patterns and are all starting with deficient skills, the work needs to be self-paced. Every student is at the place they left off the last time they engaged. For this reason, the work is generally scaffolded from a minimal skill level, and students can enter into it wherever their skills suggest that they should. The problem with this approach is that in some of the academic courses, there is not inherently a lot of intrigue or creativity in the work students are presented with. In fact, it is frequently presented to students as packages or units, which students find uninteresting.

5 In this context, there is a distinction between what is referred to as an academic subject as opposed to an elective. In the BC Graduation system, there are several required academic subjects. In this context, these subjects are Math, Science, Social Studies and Language Arts. They are distinguished from subjects that students can choose from an array of options, such as Foods and Nutrition, Art, Digital Photography, and other such areas, in which the student might have a greater interest.
This situation has given rise to two sets of questions that staff are currently exploring. Firstly, since real learning takes place through something being right outside of the proximal zone of development, how can this be achieved with package-based work? Further, there isn’t any real learning as a community. Students can’t really explore concepts together and engage in the meaningful peer-feedback systems that are known to be effective. However, this presents a philosophical crossroads regarding the overall relevance of the academic learning in an Alternate setting. Perhaps, for some students, the academics shouldn’t be the focus, and perhaps meaningful engagement in Mathematics, for example, isn’t really the goal at this time for these students. Perhaps if they are accessing the help they need and learning valuable social skills and resiliency skills, then the dip in academic learning is simply the outcome of them being at CVOLC. Perhaps achieving a Dogwood graduation or Adult Dogwood allows them to take the next step in their lives. If, in fact, a student is adjusted well enough that they can handle the frustration and challenges that come with deep, engaged academic learning, then perhaps that is our time to reintegrate them into the main school.

Having said that, it is known that project-based learning and inquiry work is another way to allow students to engage at a level that they are capable of; but this will take time for CVOLC to implement. Worksheets and prepackaged materials are inherently easier in a systematic way to deal with such a vast array of student abilities. CVOLC staff have been actively exploring ways of increasing student engagement in academic work. The primary avenue for this has been through exploring the relevancy of the work that CVOLC does. Whenever a student can be presented with the opportunity to do something real and relevant, especially if it is relevant to their next stage in life, efforts are made to attach it to real learning outcomes, and thus to make the work doubly meaningful. One staff member is currently investigating a pilot in which all of
his students spend much of their day with him and learn all subject areas through a land-based approach, based on his belief that the holistic and healing nature of a connection to the land will help create engagement. Students are engaged in activities while out on land-based trips that allow for credit to be assigned to not only Outdoor Education classes but also to Communications, Math, or Earth Science. For example, reflections about a certain trip and skills learned are incorporated into Language Arts.

It has been observed that in CVOLC’s elective subjects, students are engaging much more meaningfully than they had in the past in their home-school, based on previous report cards and/or anecdotal reports from their previous administrators. This engagement is likely linked to freedom and choice. Electives at CVOLC are not prescriptive and every student can engage however they choose. Whether it is designing a fitness program, working on a photography project, or picking up an instrument, students chase a passion that they have and credit is attached to the project. Students are also allowed and encouraged to self-design their day. If a student is unable to engage in Math for the day, they simply engage in their passion area for an extended period of time. Through this activity, students are engaged with adults, they can be guided, and they are doing something meaningful to them. Where the staff sees challenges with this practice is when they try to re-direct students back to more traditional academic work and focus. Seeking the answer to this question perhaps lies in CVOLC’s roots and identity as an Alternate School. In a small Secondary School, there would inevitably be a time to re-direct the student towards academic requirements. However, at an Alternate School, the Student Learning Plan and the goals for the student should determine the course of action. If at this time the therapeutic nature of the activity fits within a student’s goal of combatting anxiety or withdrawal from addiction, then with the student’s involvement, perhaps it is best to support this choice. If
the school’s responses are inconsistent with this guiding document, then either the Student Learning Plan or the response needs to be revisited, while remembering that if the student is not engaged in what they are doing, it is unlikely to be meaningful or helpful.

**Food – engagement and relationship-building.** At CVOLC, food is an integral part of every day. Breakfast is available every morning and it is generally a healthy, balanced meal prepared by the Student Support Worker. Lunch is supplied every day, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays, it is a full spread made by students. At CVOLC, 140 students were identified who met the criteria for being vulnerable with relation to food security and nutritional deficiencies. As a result of this, approximately $17,000.00 was budgeted, both from Community Links BC grants and CVOLC’s resource budget, to deliver nutrition to the student body. Over the course of 2017/2018, 11,722 meals were served to 165 students at no cost to them.

A select few students plan the menu for the week, are responsible for the grocery list and budgeting for the purchase of the menu, organize roles for each other, and then are recognized for their contributions to the school culture. These students also receive credit for a Foods and Nutrition course for their work preparing these weekly meals. One of the most effective indicators of this aspect of the school culture’s success is that absenteeism is almost non-existent for students who were being counted on to supply the day’s meal. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the school community gathers in the downstairs classroom to eat and socialize together. Staff members take advantage of this opportunity to engage in non-structured conversations with students, and many long-standing staff members feel that this is a crucial part of trying to create a sense of belonging for their students. Despite the fact that staff are in a non-formal, non-supervisory role, their presence ensures that it is a safe environment for students. Many staff have observed that through communal lunches, students who would not appear to have anything
in common share experiences and interact with each other. Although the challenges that preceded them can vary from bully to victim, from class dissident to withdrawn anxiety, there is a commonality in being at CVOLC that seems to transcend these challenges, and the mealtime is believed to be an important part of this transformation.

For many of the students, school attendance is in part—and in some cases fully—because of the food. CVOLC staff accept this as a reality, at least during a student’s landing year. Many of the students suffer from food insecurity, and the school values its role in helping alleviate this source of anxiety. In fact, it is known that that some students eat the food and accomplish little else during the day. However, this minimal engagement level may keep them attending and engaged in some small way; they may continue working on their other lagging skills, and frequently, when they mature, they can become ready to produce academically. Further, for the students involved in the preparation of the food for the community, there is a great deal of pride, and other students actively express their appreciation. For many students, starting with a Foods and Nutrition class as their hook into the school has been extremely effective, while at the same time they make a positive contribution to school culture, sometimes for the first time in their lives.

Special school events centred on food are also an integral part of the school community. These events are spaced out and often provide an opportunity to make contact with students who haven’t been seen in weeks or even months in an effort to re-engage them. A particular example of this is the Christmas/Holiday feast. Staff cook turkey and all the traditional holiday fixings,

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6 The “landing year” is a commonly used term for students who are new to CVOLC and have been disengaged from learning for quite some time. Historically, staff report that many students take a full year without any significant academic engagement just to assess whether they truly feel safe and like part of the community. Frequently, during the landing year, students can be extremely challenging as well. Staff report that in a student’s second year at CVOLC, they are frequently extremely different, more motivated, engaged and goal-driven.
enough to feed all students, their invited family members, and the school’s community partners. Typically, there is also enough food for most students to take a meal home. Many students will not have another Holiday meal over the break and it is a cherished opportunity for staff to communicate their caring.

**Sense of program legitimacy/viability.** CVOLC is fortunate enough to be in a District where its programs are celebrated and valued. CVOLC itself is a unique, central facility that was remodeled from its earlier days as an Elementary School. Open Learning is also provided with appropriate facilities at each of the satellite sites. CVOLC’s accomplishments are frequently touted at the District level. In fact, the recent District-wide review has challenged the traditional schools to wonder what they can do to more effectively simulate some of CVOLC’s areas of success. However, there has been inconsistent messaging and a need to redefine the school’s identity, in particular with regards to CVOLC being a School of Choice. Because of the school’s recent experience with an audit and audit language, staff are aware that any student in the Alternate system needed to have documented evidence of best efforts made by the home-school to accommodate the student’s needs. Although students have a right to choose what school they attend, they must meet a set of criteria to attend an Alternate School. In collaboration with the home-school, some students were asked to return and attempt to resolve their challenges with the administration and counseling team. Fortunately, the audit gave the School District the opportunity to revisit this criterion and have valuable conversations. One of the important parts of this conversation was around the specific services an Alternate School is designed to deliver.

At the District level, the guiding questions for the overview of School District 79 Alternate are as follows:
i) Is Alternate Education in School District 79 an on-ramp, off-ramp or parallel highway? 

ii) What is it that Alternate Education in School District 79 does for struggling students?

iii) What obstacles exist for traditional school to begin to provide the same services that Alternate Education does for those struggling students?

This District-wide review is just underway and has thus far consisted of one meeting of all Principals and Vice Principals of Secondary Schools. The conversation has been rich and comprehensive and is an important part of ensuring that all educators work together to service all the students in our system. At the same time, it has created a good venue for discussing who should be referred and/or encouraged to attend Alternate School.

The referral and intake systems for ensuring that all students who entered the Alternate system in Cowichan Valley was deemed excellent by the Ministry audit team and, in fact, has been shared with many neighbouring jurisdictions. All students go through a series of checks and balances and the school learns a great deal about that student through this process. Thus, educators have worked together to determine that SD 79 Alternate programs are designed to support students with complex socio-emotional needs. As such, the intake process has been modified to ensure that CVOLC only takes students within its mandate. For example, one change implemented is that all referrals were brought to the school administration. In the past, CVOLC would get referrals from counsellors who deemed a student would benefit from smaller classes

7 In this context, the off-ramp refers to a place that students can go prior to eventually exiting the system. Essentially, this would ensure that the referring school won’t statistically be responsible for the student’s non-completion, and thus this student won’t hurt the school’s graduation rates. An on-ramp would refer to new opportunities, including the possibility of re-entering the regular stream. A parallel highway would imply that it is an equally viable option for students to pursue their academic pursuits.
and flexible attendance policies. The School District has determined that these types of accommodations can and should be attempted at the school level prior to a referral to Alternate. It is important for counsellors to understand that these needs can and should be addressed by a regular Secondary School. This message has been very successfully delivered, and in the past year, referrals have been done more thoughtfully and with more communication.

Naturally, a review of what would be considered “best efforts” by the traditional school and what constitutes significant socio-emotional challenges and lagging skills resulted from this overview. Two particular issues at the heart of this discussion were attendance and marijuana use. With regards to attendance, one argument could be that students who don’t attend clearly have some significant challenges that are inhibiting them from engaging physically with their education regularly. In this argument, attendance is simply the symptom of larger issues. However, is this something that requires an Alternate School approach? When is a traditional school deemed to have exhausted all efforts? One could argue that the necessity of concrete reporting deadlines and cohorts of students working together in a classroom results in students with extremely poor attendance being unable to function in a traditional school setting. Further to this, if a student has completely stopped attending and has expressed an interest in joining CVOLC, to deny them the service that an Alternate School can provide has ethical implications.

With regards to marijuana use, anecdotally there seems to be a consensus that use amongst students is on the rise. Whereas previously a student who was a chronic user of marijuana might be considered a candidate for Alternate School, that criteria applied today could result in an overwhelming number of referrals to CVOLC. What has become an issue is the perception of leniency as an appeal. This is something that must be considered very carefully at intake. There are some students who almost explicitly state that their school is too strict, in their
opinion, when it comes to tolerance of marijuana use at school. While CVOLC does not condone or allow the use of illegal intoxicants at school, the school does apply more of a harm-reduction approach to our conversations with students. For those for whom Alternate School is perceived to be an option simply for this reason and this reason alone, attempts will be made to try to work with the home-school and encourage that student to reconsider their choice. Frankly, many students do know that should they continue with their patterns, they will eventually achieve what they desire, which is the potential of a referral to CVOLC. Although this challenge remains, it has been alleviated by maintaining an ongoing dialogue with partner schools and parents and by ensuring that there is consistent messaging as to what constitutes an appropriate referral to CVOLC.

The goal of Alternate programming in School District 79 is to provide a systemic response to students who are struggling to meet expectations academically or socially. As such, the preferred referral is one that involves all stakeholders early in the process. One of the challenges of the referral process seems to be the different approaches taken by schools that provide the referral. In some instances, the school is in communication with Open Learning administration for months prior to an actual referral. Frequently, CVOLC administration is involved in planning interventions for that student to try and avoid a referral. If the day finally arrives whereby the student is referred to Open Learning, the messaging has been positive and they are open and welcoming to the possibility of a change. It is a goal in Open Learning to ensure that all of the sites operate in this manner, so that less work needs to be done to engage students following the referral and registration.

The recent compliance audit had a strong emphasis on an exit plan or strategy for each student, and that strategy was to be embedded within the Student Learning Plan. This has been a
struggle for CVOLC as a school, for although fundamentally it is believed that a student who has been successful should perhaps be reintegrated to their home-school, the greater fear for the student is the stigma of rejection. Many students have not felt a sense of belonging at any school, and if they begin to have positive experiences in an Alternate setting, beginning the conversation with them about going back to the school from whence they came and had bad experiences should give one pause for thought. Having said that, the audit was a great reminder that although a student may have settled and may be extremely functional in an Alternate setting, that doesn’t mean that the intensive work on their lagging skills is complete. The ultimate goal is that they will acquire the skills in an Alternate setting to be able to eventually transition into something appropriate based on the co-constructed Student Learning Plan, which may mean for some students transitioning back into a regular school setting.

The establishment of a functional Parent Advisory Council has created a sense of legitimacy and advocacy for CVOLC; however, there is a need for caution in this case. The Parent Advisory Council has been a tremendous opportunity for dialogue amongst parents about upcoming initiatives, a space for them to air grievances, and a vehicle for them to advocate on our behalf when it comes to the community. However, the difference between being a legitimate member of the School District and being the same as other Secondary Schools has been an important topic of conversation. Some of the parents wish to alleviate any worries they have about their own child by assuring themselves that CVOLC is in fact a small, flexible and friendly Secondary School. Communicating the fact that the school is not funded as such, does not operate as such, and is not intended as such without alarming them about the needs of their own child has been a delicate but positive conversation. It is important that the narrative about CVOLC is accurate and fair in the community and that it applies both ways. It is not appropriate
for our students to be mischaracterized as violent or dangerous, but neither is it appropriate for them to be presented as quirky or recalcitrant. The fact is that in order for them to be a CVOLC student, they have demonstrated some form of complex socio-emotional need, and typically some level of challenge to meet the expectations of one or more schools in the District.

**Supportive culture.** Maintaining high expectations while remaining supportive of students’ struggles in an Alternate system is a constant source of discussion. Staff at CVOLC dialogue about the balance between assessing academic pursuits with strong social/emotional support. They often wrestle with the following questions: Does allowing students to achieve the same learning outcomes in a more flexible, personalized way equate to lower standards? What standards are being referred to? In order to define or measure the concept of “higher standards,” one must determine in what areas standards are measured. The fact is that in some areas CVOLC does not have standards as “high” as the neighbouring regular schools. For example, CVOLC does not have the same expectations of attendance and much more significant levels of non-compliance are tolerated; however, this expectation is because CVOLC is an Alternate School. Staff continue to wrestle with the notion that this might equate to lower standards for each individual student than was originally the case in the home-school. In many cases, the regular school, it could be argued, had lower expectations because the student had entirely disengaged while there, whereas at CVOLC more strategies will be attempted to ensure that this does not occur.

As far as straightforward academic standards and the route to graduation, Grade 12 courses are a source of discussion for staff. In fact, in some cases there is a legitimate fear that at CVOLC, with regards to some academic courses, students were expected to do more than their counterparts at Cowichan Secondary. Meetings with both our Physical Education teacher and an
Art teacher occurred, and during those discussions, concerns were expressed around what completion of Art 12 and PE 12 with a minimal grade would look like in a traditional school. In Physical Education, one particular Learning Outcome was the source of discussion, in which a student completing PE12 would lead a class or unit for the class. The question was pondered: Did all students at Cowichan Secondary who achieved a C- in PE 12 demonstrate this skill? Further, we discussed whether a student who attended 60% of classes could achieve a C-, whereas the practice at CVOLC is to log meaningful hours in classes, and 100-120 hours is considered to be the minimum requirement to achieve credit for the course.

However, with regards to straightforward academic expectations, the fact is that 77% of CVOLC graduates in 2017 graduated with an Adult Dogwood, whereas at the neighbouring Secondary Schools that number last year was under 5%. Through further discussions, though, it has been discovered that this is because traditional schools very rarely extend a student’s education beyond the fifth year after they enter Grade 8, thus rarely does a student reach an age whereby they could be eligible for an Adult Dogwood. However, it must be conceded that the number of courses a student completes to achieve an Adult Dogwood is significantly less, and thus as far as academic achievement is concerned, on a straightforward level, an Adult Dogwood is not comparable to a 2004 Graduation achievement. However, with all students one must attempt to postulate upon a parallel trajectory. What would be the projected outcome of their educational experience had they remained at their original school, whereas what did they accomplish at CVOLC? Further to that, what skills are they carrying into the post-Secondary world? These are certainly more difficult to measure as opposed to the relative simplicity of comparing two forms of graduation.
A part of ensuring that expectations remain high is through the intake/interview process as well. It is the role of the administrator to ensure that students are coming to Alternate for the right reasons. There are times when it becomes apparent that a student wishes to attend CVOLC simply because they believe it is an easier way to graduate. In those instances, it is the responsibility of the administrator to work with the partner school and reintegrate immediately rather than accept that student without reinforcing and refuting their belief that it is easier. Part of how this is done is by reinforcing the Student Learning Plan and the emphasis of personal goals that extend above and beyond the academic aspects of learning. Advisors frequently do scheduled check-ins with students to determine if they are meeting the co-created goals. In the ongoing discussion about what success means, these goals are frequently the best benchmark to determine if students are being “successful.”

In academic classes, CVOLC staff usually reference the Student Learning Plan and create individual goals and standards for students based on their expressed post-secondary desires. Many CVOLC students graduate with Adult Dogwoods and choose Communications 12 as their Language Arts choice. This, however, is not necessarily reflective of lower standards as long as it isn’t misrepresented. For students who have expressed a desire to attend post-secondary in an academic field, an intensive English 12 class is offered that is designed to prepare students for the post-Secondary world. This experience is designed to not only provide students with the academic skills to survive the university/college world, but it also helps teach them the resiliency required in a supportive environment.

Although CVOLC is a school where a disproportionate number of students have behavioural challenges, it is still incumbent upon school administration and staff to provide a safe and welcoming environment for all students where standards of behaviour are not
abandoned. In the 2017/2018 school year, CVOLC staff wondered whether the introductory package that was being presented to students was inconsistent with both existing practice and philosophical alignment. Whereas in reality the previous administrator had requested that all students read *Lost at School* and adopt its process for addressing behavioural challenges or conflict in the building, the Code of Conduct was a traditional list of dos and don’ts. In response to this, a working group was formed and all staff were invited to a series of Friday afternoon sessions. Nearly every teaching staff member chose to attend and engage in this discussion. This opportunity allowed staff to review the school’s behavioural philosophy. Although there is a tendency to want to return to familiar responses when it comes to disruptive behaviour such as hallway/smoke-pit loitering and off-task behaviour, reviewing beliefs and processes helps return to a supportive culture. This ended up reflected in the document that was produced together as a staff. This document was then reviewed in Advisory classes for student feedback.

For individual student issues that require an administrative response, there have been significant differences between situations where the administrator chose to use the behavioural processes outlined in *Lost at School* versus when more traditional reiterations of expectations of compliance were utilized. Specifically, the adult empathizes and ask the student what their feelings are about the observed challenges. The adult’s concerns are then shared and the student is asked to help come up with a solution that may work, while the adult resists the temptation to come up with a solution for them. This is the essential format outlined by Greene in *Lost at School* (2013).

Compliance for the sake of ensuring that a school can operate has always been a struggle. Generally, more effective and enjoyable approaches are based on a dialogue with students about the “why” school expectations exist. At CVOLC, there has rarely if ever been times when the
end result of a disciplinary process is to simply reiterate an expectation of compliance. If the behaviour involves another student, CVOLC administration and staff are comfortable in standing by a shared belief, established in the CVOLC Code of Conduct, that school is a safe place for everyone. If the behaviour involves disruption to others, the student and administration are generally able to agree that everybody has a right to learn. If the behaviour involves a student’s own learning, both the CVOLC Code of Conduct and the student’s own Student Learning Plan are the basis for problem-solving. If it is clearly identified that the behavior is inconsistent with the student’s stated goals, then a different plan must be examined. From that starting place, students and staff are generally able to co-create a plan for helping them learn strategies for changing the behaviour.

The current Principal shared these reflections on working with students and their behavioural challenges:

My teaching assignment involves the support of students identified as “H” (Intensive Behaviour/Mental Illness). This dedicated time to a small number of students has allowed me to work with these strategies at times other than when an inappropriate behaviour has presented itself. Together with the 8 students on my case-load, we meet either weekly or semi-weekly, reviewing goals, talking about incidents that have occurred and how effectively the strategies we co-created have worked. My tendency, as with many adults, continues to be to impose my own solutions and strategies and neither have the patience nor allow enough room for the student to come up with their own ideas. It takes an extraordinary amount of patience. Having a structure to fall back on is crucial in working with other staff with these behaviours as well. I frequently review before a meeting with staff members our strategies. I noted an occasion with a young mother in March where
we had an extremely unsuccessful meeting which resulted in the student leaving the meeting in anger. The staff member and I reviewed our processes and acknowledged that we had filled all of the spaces. We didn’t follow our agreed upon strategy and as a result, the student felt like we were “employing negative theories of behaviour” (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 23). We invited the student to re-join us and we followed the protocol. Although there remains a great deal of lagging skills and external variables that haven’t allowed this student to make significant strides yet, the meeting ended with all parties feeling heard and with a plan moving forward that we all agreed upon. It is important to me that if I have an expectation that staff will use this model for working through behavioural challenges that I model this approach as well.

At CVOLC, the staff believe that all students can learn and can achieve success at school. Staff have commented that they find it incredibly refreshing to work in an environment where philosophical alignment doesn't have to be sought out. Although at times there is a tendency and a temptation to impose traditional consequences, CVOLC staff generally remember the school’s philosophical belief that students misbehave when there is a disconnect between their skill-set and what they are being asked to do. Together, staff work to create an environment where students are allowed to develop those lagging skills in a safe and supportive environment.

Moving forward at CVOLC, structures are being sought to allow for more staff ownership around helping students develop their lagging skills. Because of the aforementioned timetable and the feeling that meeting the academic needs of the many students that each teacher works with, there isn’t time for teachers to engage in focused work with students on their own personal behavioral and interpersonal goals. This, however, is not as a result of teachers not wanting this responsibility or having a desire to do this important work; rather, it is a result of the
structures within which the school presently operates. The ongoing conversation, mentioned previously, around increasing the meaningfulness of Advisory and decreasing student contacts and transitions, will be a big step towards creating the room and time for staff to engage in this meaningful work.

**Clear student transitions.** As in all Alternate systems in British Columbia, creating a transition plan that is more detailed than a traditional school is a required part of a CVOLC standard Student Learning Plan. When a student is first introduced to CVOLC, they are asked what they want to be doing in a semester, a year, when they are graduated, and beyond; and they are then promised that staff will try to help make that happen. For students who have been referred as a result of expulsion, the expressed desire is usually to return to their previous school, and during the intake meeting, it is agreed upon what conditions need to be met prior to that recommendation being made. In most cases at CVOLC, students change their minds and decide to stay at CVOLC as they begin to perceive the school to provide an environment where they feel successful. The desire to stay rather than return speaks a great deal to the educational experience CVOLC staff are providing students. Despite this experience, some students choose to return to their home-school. Eight students were reintegrated to their home-school this September, and they have not returned as of this writing. In all of these instances, contact with the Principal of the partner school was initiated, explaining the student’s intentions. There were differing scenarios for these transitions, but in many instances the students had achieved success and wished to try a regular system now that they felt more confident and settled in their personal lives. In other instances, students who had not achieved success in the Alternate system perceived that their lack of success was in part due to their academic program placement. In these particular cases, unless the student had been placed at CVOLC by the School District
because of behavioural transgressions, the chosen approach was to create a supportive system for the transition and to ensure that the student knew the door was open for a return should they struggle. The underlying belief for transitions is that students should feel they have choice and agency with regards to their educational plan. Periodic check-ins with administrative partners on progress is maintained once the student transitions back to their home-school. At the end of Semester 1, there were three students for whom their Principal believed a return to Alternate would be beneficial—an option that will be revisited when the time comes.

Two types of students who remain at CVOLC instigated a great deal of introspection on the part of staff members and continue to be the subject of many conversations amongst the staff. The first is those who will not graduate with a Dogwood and will not have any testing to support an Evergreen graduation. These students are said to have “aged out” of the school system. Frequently, these are students who were out of school for many years. They come to CVOLC, and through a combination of many of the factors discussed previously, they become engaged in school and begin to attend regularly. However, frequently their fundamental skills are too low to be able to complete the required courses for graduation in time. In other cases, staff start to suspect that there may be a cognitive reason that was previously undiagnosed. Until 2016/2017, these students would then transition into the Cowichan Valley Adult Learning Center; however, the School Board for monetary reasons chose to close this facility at the conclusion of 2016/2017. Adult Learning has since become the domain of Vancouver Island University Duncan Campus. As a result of this change in venue, not a single student from CVOLC has yet to be immediately transitioned there for graduation after aging out. Paperwork, fees, and other perceived barriers have prevented this transition. CVOLC staff are exploring a Continuing Education evening model restarting next year to help address this need for students. Further to
this situation, several meetings were initiated with Vancouver Island University’s Adult Basic Education administrators, and CVOLC administration will work closely with them through the spring to assist students in transitioning to VIU and, as much as possible, support them through the transitions.

The second type of student who causes significant concern are those who only have the goal of achieving an Adult Dogwood graduation certificate and are not prepared to set any further goals. Although CVOLC staff try to work very closely with the Careers and Trades department and transition many students into a Dual-Credit program whereby they get technical and applicable skills and acquire Grade 12 elective credits at the same time, some students cannot at this time see beyond the goal of graduating. It is known that by having a Dogwood, these students have one less barrier to success down the road when and if they choose to resume their career aspirations. In contrast to the challenge of creating a partnership for transitioning aged-out students to Vancouver Island University’s Adult Basic Education Program, partnerships in Dual-Credit and Trades Programming at VIU are thriving. Despite the opportunities that exist, many CVOLC students are not ready for this level of commitment at the time of graduation. Further, it is known that they are unlikely to have the supports there that were previously provided, and thus if they are not willing to engage on their own, they are most likely not ready to succeed in this environment. At this time, despite the concern that these students are not aware of what the world of life and work after Secondary School will entail, the first goal is to ensure that they achieve a meaningful graduation. Although there is assistance available with the next step in transition, CVOLC will not pressure a student into entering a program that they are not ready for.
While concerns exist for students and their transition to life after school, staff at CVOLC are also working to alleviate the challenges students face with transitions at school. Any time students transition within their school day, there are challenges associated with it, and at this time CVOLC students transition quite a bit during their school day. They move from academic teacher to academic teacher and they often struggle with these transitions, both physically and with tone and expectations. CVOLC students do not abide very well by their timetables, which is similar to the patterns they had established at Cowichan Secondary. This situation presents a delicate balance around CVOLC’s beliefs on flexibility and choice with an expectation that students will participate in the program that they have co-created. The suggestion mentioned in previous sections for reducing transitions and giving each student more of a fixed timetable with an Advisory teacher is something that it is hoped will help alleviate this challenge for students. Yet, transitioning is an important part of being a successful and Educated Citizen, and how the school encourages and supports students in following their assigned timetable continues to be one of the most discussed topics amongst CVOLC staff on a regular basis. Again, CVOLC staff look at the Student Learning Plan on an individual basis, to determine whether the student is, by their own standards, achieving success with their program.

**Flexibility.** There is no such thing as a standard program at Cowichan Valley Open Learning. Students, in consultation with staff as part of their Student Learning Plan, determine the schedule that will best meet their needs. Some students attend half days, full days, Friday only, leave at 1:00 for work, take only electives for a period of time, only attend the Soft-Landing anxiety program, or various combinations of the above. Staff at CVOLC strive to do whatever it will take to re-engage a student in learning. If things aren't working, the approach will be re-examined. Bureaucratic, organizational needs do not get in the way of student needs.
Having said all of that, there are, as mentioned before, obstacles to a completely flexible schedule, and these obstacles remain a point of discussion amongst staff.

At all of the partner Secondary Schools, there is some form of a rotating block schedule, whether it changes weekly, daily, or every several weeks. By having a static timetable, CVOLC actually increases flexibility and that is, of course, supported by self-paced classes. Many CVOLC students choose to or must be employed. At last count, almost 40% of the students at CVOLC are employed and almost half of those are employed during school hours. Socio-economic pressures on students are significant, and in order to help their family and/or have any money whatsoever for personal needs, employment is necessary. CVOLC strives to complement this situation. Staff and students actively seek Work Experience credits, and one staff member helps students find work placement and assists with the necessary paperwork to receive credit for this work.

In some respects, CVOLC’s natural flexibility has been hampered by growth. In its desire to become a more viable educational option for struggling students, over the last seven years, CVOLC has added more electives into the timetable. There are now also a few “set” academic classes that occur at a particular time each day. Another impact of growth is the existence of more subject-based teachers as opposed to generalists. This has, as was referenced earlier, led to more student transitions, but further to that, it has also in some respects hampered the ability to offer entirely flexible programs. If a student wants a particular course, they are sometimes limited in what time of day they can take that course. Further, if a student has created a meaningful bond with one staff member and that staff member doesn’t teach the subjects they need, exceptions need to be made to the general way of doing things, or the student will have to create a new relationship. Despite these challenges, at CVOLC, an individual student’s needs are
always placed first, and through a combination of staff desire and structure, CVOLC is able to provide students with a great deal more flexibility at this time than is available at the neighbouring Secondary Schools.

**Staff connections.** The staff at CVOLC engage in learning together. They also meet twice each week to discuss student needs and stories. Plans are created for students who are struggling, and in fact there is a plan in place for all students. One of the challenges in a relatively large Alternate School is ensuring that staff know up-to-date information with regards to the students’ ever-changing personal lives and what impact that has on their short- and long-term educational goals. A significant improvement has been made with regards to information flow this year with implementation of Office 365 One-Note. Most of CVOLC’s staff are now on a shared One-Note account, and it is requested that staff document any meaningful interaction with students. This was essential during the audit for demonstrating that the students have complex needs and that the school serves purposes “above and beyond” those at a traditional school. Its larger purpose, though, is ensuring that staff are up to date with important information. It has become standing practice before any non-enrolling staff engage in sensitive conversation with students to check the One-Note account to make sure they do not bring up topics that have been covered by another staff member, or to read current notes that can help shape the conversation. Often, a non-enrolling member has made a change to the student’s program that everybody needs to be aware of, and through the use of this tool there has been an enormous improvement in communication between staff this year. CVOLC non-enrolling staff have thus far welcomed it and many staff are improving daily with ensuring the information is up to date.
In terms of meaningful professional development together, two significant obstacles have presented themselves and these conversations have been recurring amongst staff. These two issues are the tyranny of the urgent and difficulty finding meaningful collaboration outside of the school organization. When working with the most vulnerable students from generally the least stable lives in the School District, it is extremely rare that there is not a student in crisis. As a staff, the tendency is to try to assist these students, whether with emotional support, transportation and connection to another service provider, or simply providing them with the time and patience to work through issues. The impact of this is that, for an administrator, it is sometimes challenging to get everybody to discard their urgent duties and engage in meaningful development together. For a caring staff, it is extremely challenging to engage in a meaningful dialogue while at the same time being on phones with the imminent crisis. In the long term, engaging in learning together will have a wider-reaching impact than the temporary solutions that are being provided in that moment for that particular student in crisis; but it is hard for a caring staff to not attend to the immediate situation that involves one of their students. Of late, the school has received more engagement and participation from staff in learning activities together.

The second challenge is that whenever the District or local union is providing professional development, there is a feeling amongst many staff that it isn’t applicable to CVOLC because the setting is so unique. There is a feeling that the rest of the schools are underperforming and that is why CVOLC has so many students, thus why would CVOLC learn from and with them? Again, on this topic, there have been conversations about this belief system. First of all, staff at all schools need to be aware of where students come from and what is happening at those schools. In fact, it could be argued that as other schools embrace diversity and
personalization, CVOLC need to stay ahead of the curve and keep being innovative lest the institution become irrelevant.

The Provincial Alternate Education Association has an annual conference every year and CVOLC staff have frequently participated as a group, travelling together and participating in the various workshops together. The conference frequently has a well-respected Keynote speaker. In 2018 it was Dr. Martin Brokenleg, and many important sessions frequently focused on areas outside of the regular academic realm. The school has traditionally supported this opportunity with significant funding to ensure that staff feel encouraged to attend. The previous administrator also went to great lengths to ensure that the school worked around any financial or union obstacles so that all staff could attend, not just teaching staff. Creative ways have been found to continue to support this, although there are some caveats attached to this support. Staff are working to create structures for ensuring that the learning acquired at the Conference is followed up on and that vessels are created for sharing the learning. This is a work in progress, and a goal to revisit this learning in upcoming staff gatherings, including Staff Meetings and Professional Learning Community afternoons.

**Ministry of Education Compliance Audit findings.** Overall, the Ministry Compliance Audit found CVOLC to be an outstanding Alternate School with well-designed systems for enrolling students, providing detailed Student Learning Plans, and documenting services that extend above and beyond that of a traditional school. The auditors found that the services provided to students matched up well with their identified reasons for referral. There were no financial penalties imposed upon CVOLC as an Alternate School. However, a compliance audit is in many ways an exercise in ensuring that minimal levels of service are appropriately documented, and the results of the audit do not in any way mean that CVOLC shouldn’t continue
to examine itself as an enterprise and implement changes that are known to be beneficial to students. From the audit, there were also some recommendations that have already been put in place. In particular, the auditors did not feel that the school counselors at SD 79’s Partner Schools were equipped with the knowledge necessary to make unsupervised referrals to Alternate Schools. In response to this concern, CVOLC has changed existing practice so that all referrals meet with a CVOLC administrator for a formal intake session, regardless of what program they are planning on attending. It was also recommended that CVOLC’s Support Staff (Intensive Behaviour Teacher, counselor, Student Support Worker) create a more meaningful coding system to ensure that student contact is documented and accessible and can be referred back to the student’s Student Learning Plan. Finally, the last recommendation was that CVOLC’s Student Learning Plans should be more detailed and focus on the possibility of a return to the original school. As referenced above, we will treat this recommendation with caution.

**Summary of program evaluation.** CVOLC has many aspects that undoubtedly make it a very successful Alternate School. Key evidences of this include the extremely positive feedback received during the audit process and the large number of students who either graduate or transition successfully every year from CVOLC. The praise that is received from stakeholders is also valuable feedback. However, any successful program benefits from periodic analysis of its components and perpetually looks for ways it can improve. By specifically focusing on the 9 Guiding Principles and asking questions about the alignment of our practices to these Principles, this program evaluation has the potential to result in some changes to structures and resources at CVOLC, to ensure that our inputs, outputs, and outcomes are as optimal as possible. One key recurring finding revolves around the following question: How can we better share responsibility
for learning and student engagement at CVOLC? Most staff agree or at least acknowledge that examining the role of Advisor and the Advisory class can be key to addressing this question. Through self-examination and a willingness to change, we can find new ways to ensure that all staff can meaningfully engage in incorporating the Guiding Principles into each student’s experience at CVOLC.
Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

Since August 2016, CVOLC has been the subject of a Program Evaluation. The purpose of the Program Evaluation has been to answer the following question:

Using Cowichan Valley Open Learning as a case-study, framed around the British Columbia *Alternate Schools – Guiding Principles* document, what aspects of our Alternate educational structures are the most important in allowing students who have been previously unsuccessful in school to achieve personal success?

This Program Evaluation involved an analysis of the situation, the inputs, outputs, and outcomes of CVOLC's structures, framed around the 9 Guiding Principles in British Columbia's *Guiding Principles for Alternate Schools* (Hannis, 2016). These principles are as follows: Relationship-Based Programming, Community Supports and Partnerships, Engagement, Food – Engagement and Relationship-Building, Sense of Program Legitimacy/Viability, Supportive Culture, Clear Student Transitions, Flexibility, and Staff Connections. For each of these areas, the current body of research around what practices are effective for vulnerable Alternate students was examined, as well as research around what student success means for vulnerable students. CVOLC's structures and resources in each area were examined with regards to alignment with the Guiding Principles and the needs of the current student body. Data was derived from personal observations of the researcher, staff meeting minutes, staff newsletters, student intake data, completion rates, satisfaction surveys, and any other data that was available. Over the course of the research, CVOLC was also the subject of a BC Ministry of Education Compliance Audit and an internal School District 79 review of Alternate programs, and the findings of both of these were incorporated into the research. The findings found many areas of exceptional success as a program and many areas in which practices could be re-examined for further success.
Several suggestions have been made, many of which address more than one of the 9 Guiding Principles. Key amongst the findings is a need to increase relevance of Advisory and work to address student transitions, both in and out of SD 79 Alternate systems, but also within the system itself. Structures for meaningfully sharing more responsibility for student learning, engagement, and overall progress in the program with classroom teachers will be explored as a possible avenue. These two key changes, it is hoped, will address many of the areas of need identified in the Program Evaluation.

On April 20th, 2018, this program evaluation was shared with CVOLC teaching and non-teaching staff at our Staff Implementation Day. Staff were asked to share their own findings and recommendations for CVOLC in the morning, and a plan was created for the school based on the District’s *Framework for Enhancing Student Learning*. In the afternoon, the Program Evaluation as outlined above was shared with staff to see how it correlated with their own findings and recommendations. In general, the document was well received. Although not all recommendations found within this document will be immediately put into place at CVOLC, as staff ownership is an important part of change, staff were not surprised by any of the findings or recommendations, and they felt it was reflective of our conversations throughout the year. Two staff members in particular stayed late that day and wished to read the Literature Review and Introduction of the paper as well. Both of these staff members expressed appreciation for the background information that had been provided and felt that they had a lot to think about over the weekend and moving forward.

Following this publication, the report will be shared with members of the Senior Management team and will be incorporated into CVOLC’s *Framework for Enhancing Student Learning*, which is the document whereby the school goals are shared with stakeholders,
including students, parents, members of the community, and the School District. It is hoped that the school administration will engage in a follow-up to this report throughout the 2018/2019 school year to determine areas in which identified needs are in the process of being addressed and in what areas more follow-up is required.

As there are no signs that School District 79 or the Province of British Columbia are going to be able to service all students in traditional schools in the near future, it is my sincere hope that the findings in this document might prove helpful to not just CVOLC but also to other Alternate systems trying to find their niche within their jurisdiction.
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