

## How SEEDS Works With Schools

### Background

Founded in North Vancouver, SEEDS (the Social Emotional Empathy Development Society) began in 2011 (became a BC registered nonprofit society in 2014) with one peer-mediated friendship group at Highlands Elementary whose members called themselves "Club G". It evolved into a broad-ranging lunchtime and playground group that included dozens and dozens of students whose initial aim was to support the social learning of one boy on the autism spectrum. The members' own social and emotional learning, and the impact they had on their whole school community was so remarkable that the grade that comprised "Club G" decided to give a "buddy bench" to the school when they left for high school in 2015. So the Club itself began a process of community-building that has become one of the three program pillars of SEEDS: school wide initiatives like a buddy bench that foster compassion and inclusion of everyone.

What started as a more traditional peer mediated friendship group evolved into a unique partnership between kids, their community, and their parents...and this triumvirate is part of what differentiates SEEDS' work. It simply doesn't exist elsewhere. For this, "Club G" and SEEDS won the "Inclusive Education Award" from the Canadian Association for Community Living and Inclusion BC in 2015 for "fostering understanding, compassion and improved learning outcomes for all its participants".

### A Vision for School Communities

Imagine a place where everyone at school has somewhere to be, great things to do and caring friends to do them with. No one is lonely, no one is excluded, and no one is bullied. Were it possible to watch these young people unobserved, you would immediately see that they are true friends, and they care very much about what they are doing together. Your eyes might notice a "difference" in at least one of the students, but the students in the group don't see things that way. There is no "helping", there is no "charity", there is no reward beyond the intrinsic joy of connection and growth together. The families of these children are proud of their children's involvement, are intimately familiar with what goes on in the Club and actively look for ways to promote it, speak well of it, and support the staff involved.



## How Does SEEDS Create That?

SEEDS doesn't do it "for" schools and families because schools already know a lot about inclusion. Our role is to educate, coach and train kids and adults (EA's, teachers, parents) in ways that develop their own capacities to be architects for empathy, compassion and inclusion in their community. Three modules comprise SEEDS work:

1. friendship group for kids and communications/pr for it and the school;
2. parent education and coaching;
3. community-building projects.

### Module One: Friendship Group and Related Communications

The difference about a SEEDS friendship, or peer mediated learning group is that instead of only a handful of people directly involved in it knowing about it, we will inform and involve a wide range of kids, staff and parents. Our philosophy is not only do we need to have fun and do good work, we must tell everyone about it and invite their participation and ideas. ..many ways, and many times!

### Module 2: Parent Education and Coaching

The work that SEEDS does with parents is integral to the success of the friendship group. We describe it as developing an appreciative mindset. This is what makes SEEDS work with parents unique and what enables the friendship group to influence the wider school community. A number of recent change strategies like asset based community development, positive deviance, and appreciative inquiry all move the focus away from what is missing and what's not working to strengths, capabilities and what is working. We have found that partnerships between parents and schools work best when people look for and align with the positive intentions that others hold. Learning to exert influence by focusing on what you want more of from your partners, seeing their positive intentions and actions, and amplifying that, is a much more effective strategy than focusing on what you don't want or don't like and complaining about it. We teach parents a "tracking and fanning" strategy (Bushe, 2009) that is simple, practical and yields tangible benefits for their children and the school community.

### Module 3: Community Building Projects

Usually, but not always, this is a third phase of SEEDS work and can be seen/used as a "booster" to support changes that may have occurred as a result of an established friendship group. Or it can help to promote certain values that school communities



decide are reflected in what the friendship group is accomplishing, and can operate parallel to a newer friendship group.

Typically, schools can expect that these kinds of projects will be school-wide, or at least multiage/grade and reflect a priority or need that the school has identified. In some settings, these have ranged from "buddy benches" (a physical bench on the playground where students can unconditionally and reliably find a new friend/activity) to student clubs devoted to random acts of kindness (<http://suspendedcoffees.com/kindness-is-priceless/> and <http://suspendedcoffees.com/growing-kindness-ideas-for-an-elementary-school/>).

## Some Scholarship Our Approach Rests On

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sowing the SEEDS of empathy