

# Supporting Student Success

Inspiring educators offer strategies for student success in a COVID-19 world.

BY TEDDY KATZ



Diana Wang-Martin, OCT

**C**COVID-19 turned lives upside down for teachers and students alike. This pandemic has highlighted in big yellow marker the types of skills students are going to need to be successful in life and in their careers: self-reliance, creativity, critical thinking, reinvention and resilience.

Four innovative Ontario Certified Teachers share how they've taught these skills in unique ways both in and outside of their classrooms.

## BRINGING CREATIVITY INTO THE CLASSROOM

When an award-winning science teacher at Glenforest Secondary School in Mississauga, Ont., stands in front of her class, her mind is on much more than the content.

"I'm always thinking about what creative ways I can come up with to make it memorable because when I think of my high school days, I don't remember the content I learned," says Diana Wang-Martin, OCT, laughing. "I remember the projects I did and the experiences."

In 2018, Wang-Martin received the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence for her innovative methods

she's infused in her teaching over her 17-year career.

She often turns to unique hands-on experiential projects that help her students develop the skills they need to be successful.

One project last year is a case in point. The Grade 9 IB students at her high school taking science and French courses participated in an interdisciplinary activity. They were matched with younger students at a nearby French Immersion elementary school. The goal was to have the high school students teach a bilingual science lesson to the elementary kids.

The elementary school children spent a day at the high school, and the older students tested out their lessons on the youngsters. They then refined their lessons and created an illustrated children's science book featuring the elementary students as characters in the book.

"Through projects like this one, we are not just teaching kids the science content but also giving them the chance to build the skills they need," Wang-Martin explains. "By working with each other as well as with the



Terrance Saunders, OCT

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elementary kids they’re building their leadership, collaboration and communication skills in particular.”

She adds, “Very quickly they realized that some of their lessons were too detailed or too complex. And on the spot, they had to use their creativity to bring it down to a level the elementary students could understand.”

Wang-Martin is now trying to find funding to get the illustrated book published. “I’ve been told that I’m not able to keep things small,” she laughs.

It is the same with extracurricular programs Wang-Martin spearheads. She helped form a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) club, which caught the attention of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Under her guidance, a group of students organized three mammoth conferences, including one that featured close to 1,800 students from all over Canada, with the aim to get more students interested in STEM.

One year student organizers partnered with an organization and raised about \$90,000 in sponsorship and brought in 50 speakers including industry leaders from Microsoft, Siemens and General Motors.

Another year they even invited Prime Minister Trudeau. He was unable to attend, however, the students kept reaching out to him on Twitter with Wang-Martin’s encouragement. Eventually after some back and forth with the Prime Minister’s staff, they were invited to Ottawa to meet him.

“The kids will remember that for the rest of their lives. And I will too. I think they learned from that the idea of resilience. If you really want something and you just keep pushing, it can happen.”

### **TACKLING SYSTEMIC RACISM**

Just a few months into his first job as a teacher, Terrance Saunders, OCT, was asked by his principal to come to her office at a school in a Toronto neighbourhood with one of the city’s highest child poverty rates.

The principal had visited his class and saw the Grade 1 students rotating through activities that Saunders had been trained to teach them. Trembling, he didn’t know how to respond when the principal said she had concerns. “I’m not sure there is learning taking place,” she said. “Our children need something different.”

The young teacher was devastated and near tears. But it became a defining moment. “It shifted my teaching to the realities of what do you do with children who arrive at school already marginalized,” Saunders says. “The principal just knew these children needed a special kind of teaching to show them they could be successful.”

Thirty-four years later, Saunders has found innovative ways to engage his students, many of whom are from single-parent homes.

In 2019, he was awarded a certificate of achievement from the Prime Minister’s Awards for Teaching Excellence for the way he’s turned to the power of the arts, drama and dance, and integrated that with language arts and social studies. This, in turn, has helped the Grade 6 to 8 students he now teaches build their self-esteem and confidence.

“What I saw was the need for high expectations. There was a need to help them not be afraid to shine,” Saunders says. “They bring with them the insecurity, the impact of subtle racism, and all the stereotypes of society.”

Saunders teaches his students about critical thinking and how to ask difficult questions. He uses an anti-oppression and culturally relevant framework and pedagogy with his students. He often has them examine key events in history by looking at those who were excluded and silenced — something his students can relate to from their own experience. The hope is through these stories the students will find their own voice.

The year's work culminates in the annual drama production Saunders produces. "I don't do Disney," he laughs.

One theatrical production explored the traditional narratives of Confederation amid Canada 150 celebrations by looking at it from the perspective of non-signatories to the *British North America Act*.

He included segments showcasing often forgotten contributions from Sikh- Canadian soldiers fighting for Canada, the No. 2 Construction Battalion of 1916 of African-Canadians, the plight of Indigenous youth in residential schools, and the treatment of Chinese-Canadians in the Second World War.

Another production focused on the life of Michaëlle Jean, after she became the first Black person to be named Governor General. The students researched her life as an immigrant to Canada, learned about some of the early racism she endured and performed a play about her life that the Governor General attended. According to Saunders she was moved to tears. "Her story was very powerful. It was a wonderful way to champion her as an educator. Her nomination to this post is indicative of what education can do for you," he says.

Saunders cast one of his Muslim students wearing a hijab in the role of Michaëlle Jean. "I wanted to ensure that a first generation Muslim girl wearing a hijab could envision herself as a leader."

Saunders's mother had been his Grade 2 teacher when he was growing up in the Bahamas. He never saw

himself teaching then, but "it was certainly an experience that has impacted me greatly because I saw the care and love she provided for not only me but all the students." Now the 62-year-old recognizes he found his calling. "This is my gift. A friend of mine said to me recently, you are still going to be [teaching] at 90."

### PROMOTING SELF-RELIANCE

Venessa Poirier, OCT, believes it's never too early to teach self-reliance and to empower students to take control of their own learning — even if it's before they know how to read and write.

Poirier teaches Grade 1 at École élémentaire catholique Lamoureux in Ottawa. The school is one of a handful there that uses a cutting edge approach to teaching: putting the students in charge of what they do for a few hours every day.

Poirier lets them know what they need to complete in two-week intervals, and the students decide on their own what they want to work on and progress at their own pace.

It's called "personalized learning" and it turns her classroom into a beehive of activity. The six- and seven-year-olds learn to think on their own as they walk around her classroom to get their worksheet and the tools that they need to complete the work.

"It makes the students become a lot more responsible," Poirier says. She adds, "The students are motivated by this type of learning. It is new and different for them."

She also introduces her students to computers and using apps to complete some projects.

At the beginning of the year, the Grade 5 and 6s come into the class to show her students how to use a Chromebook for the first time. Within an hour, Poirier says her children are experts. Even more impressive is how they learn to respond when the internet is down, or when they forget to plug in their computer and have to turn to pencil and paper. "They are



Venessa Poirier, OCT



Ken Liddicoat, OCT

able to adapt to different situations. By teaching them in these different ways, they just become more resilient,” Poirier says.

That became even clearer when COVID-19 hit and many children in the province struggled when they had to turn to online learning. Poirier says her students seemed to adapt without difficulty because they were already using the technology.

Through her online teaching, Poirier is able to work with students at different learning levels. “I’m able to give a student who is struggling extra help, and with someone who is more successful, I’m able to push them further,” Poirier says.

After eight years teaching this way, Poirier has changed how she introduces new topics. At the beginning of her career, she would explain everything off the top. Now she keeps her comments to a minimum and lets the students lead the discussion. “Everything starts from their point of view and what they observe. That’s a good way to let them become more curious,” Poirier says.

### REINVENTION AND RESILIENCE

Ken Liddicoat, OCT, is a perfect example of how students can reinvent themselves. And if they have the right skills in their tool belt, they can make quite an impact.

Liddicoat had worked as an auto mechanic for 16 years when, in 2007, a friend recommended he go into teaching. Twelve years later, he became a 2019 recipient of an Indspire Award for his significant contribution to Indigenous student success.

“We’re making a difference in students’ lives,” Liddicoat says. “It’s very humbling.”

Liddicoat, who is non-Indigenous, teaches at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay, Ont., a private Indigenous school that serves 24 remote northern communities. Most of the students fly in and are boarded in the city. The school tries to teach them how to be resilient, set

goals, shut out distractions and have pride in their Indigenous roots.

Six years ago, Liddicoat led a team that fundraised and developed a First Nations Trade School within the school. They completely transformed classrooms built in the 1960s into four state-of-the-art shops for teaching manufacturing technology, transportation technology and culinary arts.

“We’re teaching them so many valuable life skills,” Liddicoat says. “Like making food, or just knowing how things work and how to fix them.” He adds, “These are skills that they can use in any industry or take back with them into their communities. The demand is there in their [northern] communities. They need cooks, carpenters or entrepreneurs ... there’s a huge need for people who work in the trades.”

Liddicoat says these are valuable jobs and the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that. “You can see with the pandemic — a lot of the people who work in the trades are [essential].”

Liddicoat focuses on project-based learning where students develop skills by using their imaginations to design and solve problems to build something that performs a function. One of the favourites for his students was building electric guitars.

Last year, his manufacturing students worked with the construction class to build wooden buddy benches now found throughout the school. His manufacturing students designed the metal detail that was embossed onto the benches using Oji-Cree syllabics.

One of the highlights for Liddicoat comes every year when the school travels to one of the 24 feeder communities to play hockey and broomball. Last year, they drove 18 hours to Sandy Lake First Nation where he saw one of his former students working as the school’s maintenance supervisor.

“Whether or not I had a direct influence on him choosing that as a career, being able to see him using those skills to benefit his community is a huge feel good.” **PS**