

CHALLENGING SCHOOLS

When Culture and History Meet School Change

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Quil Ceda Tulalip Elementary School, Marysville School District, Marysville, Washington

OUR SCHOOL

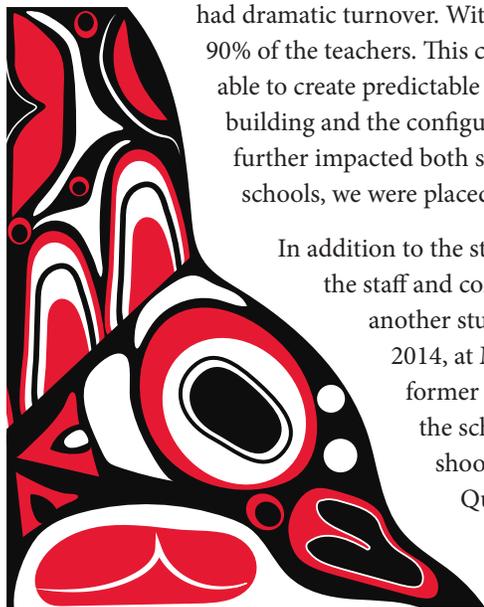
Quil Ceda Tulalip Elementary is located on the Tulalip Reservation in Washington State. The school is composed of 78% Native American students and 74% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

The Tulalip community has strong ties to its history and cultural traditions. However, the destruction of their culture and the history of boarding schools has had a negative impact on the trust the community has in the educational system. The implementation of boarding schools ripped kids out of their homes and attempted to assimilate them into “mainstream” culture. This left generations of kids confused about their identities and how they fit into the world. Brain research tells us that trauma changes the way brains are developed. It rewires a growing brain in ways that affects their ability to regulate their emotions. Students who have experienced trauma are wired to be hypervigilant. We see the effects of complex trauma and generational trauma in the classroom when students and families struggle to become engaged and build relationships with staff. In addition to the generational trauma our families are trying to heal, we are now seeing teachers and students experience vicarious trauma.

Quil Ceda Tulalip (QCT) has always had some sort of improvement label, due to being “under performing” and in the bottom 5% in the state according to test scores: School Improvement Grant (SIG) status, Required Action District (RAD) status, or other “in need of improvement” label. Prior to 2011, the reservation had two elementary schools, Tulalip Elementary and Quil Ceda Elementary. Tulalip Elementary became a SIG school in the 2010-2011 school year followed by Quil Ceda Elementary in 2011-2012.

Each of our schools experienced extreme circumstances. The Quil Ceda Elementary staff experienced the death of three students within one school year. Tulalip staff, had dramatic turnover. Within eight years, Tulalip had five principals and lost 90% of the teachers. This constant turnover has led to students not being able to create predictable attachments. The closing of the Tulalip Elementary building and the configuration of QCT at the Quil Ceda building in 2011 further impacted both sets of students and staff. After the merge of the two schools, we were placed in RAD status due to lack of student growth.

In addition to the stress of the merger, the RAD status and the turnover, the staff and community experienced more trauma; the loss of another student and then a school shooting on October 24, 2014, at Marysville Pilchuck High School, involving our former students. The shooting shook the community and the school. Not only were the students involved in the shooting former students of Tulalip Elementary and Quil Ceda Elementary, but at the time of the shooting, many of the siblings, cousins, and families of the students involved attended our school. All of these events deeply affected our staff,



students, and our community and added an additional and more complex layer of stress to what was being felt by staff working in an underperforming school.

OUR VISION

Knowing the history, cultures, and trauma of the community and schools makes social emotional teaching essential. Before students can access curriculum materials and grow academically, they need to feel safe, loved, and have their basic needs met, such as safety, security, and acceptance. We view this to be just as important as teaching academics and culture. We know that we need to improve our school culture before we can fully proceed with academic goals.

The shared mission of Quil Ceda Tulalip Elementary is to be a safe, healthy, positive, inclusive community. We are committed to empowering and motivating each member of our school community to learn, grow, and improve. We make this happen through three focuses, social emotional learning (SEL), academic acceleration, and culture. We've incorporated our Compassion Plan, based on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's book *The Heart of Learning and Teaching*, to help teachers create healthy attachments, teach self-regulation skills, and help students feel more competent academically as well as socially. Our Compassion Plan includes: creating a safe environment with predictable structure; warning students of changes and planning for transitions; establishing a calm zone in every classroom where students can practice their self-regulation strategies while staying connected to their teachers and classmates; teaching breathing strategies, yoga, and mindfulness; and posting schedules to inform students what is expected within their school day.

While our Compassion Plan focuses on supporting children, we are recognizing that supporting children can only be accomplished when teachers understand, and apply for themselves, proper personal self-care. At Quil Ceda Tulalip Elementary we are teaching children how to create positive connections to adults, and yet we, as professionals are leaving in record numbers, resulting in three new administrators, nine new teachers and many new classified staff in the 2015-16 school year. In order to create predictable attachments, we must first learn as professionals how to take care of ourselves in order to create sustainability in our SEL practices that have a positive impact on the whole child. After multiple losses (including shooting at the high school) and changes over the last two years we struggle to hold on to the great strides our staff made over the previous three years to spread SEL, implement our Compassion Plan and support multiple areas of need for our students to promote growth in healthy attachments, ability to self-regulate and social/emotional/behavioral and academic competency. Despite our struggles many staff members are implementing strategies and promoting our Compassion Plan and we are seeing a positive impact on building-wide and individual student levels.

OUR STORIES: CAYLA PAUSTAIN, 1ST GRADE TEACHER

I was first introduced to the students at Tulalip Elementary in 2010 before the two schools merged. I went to visit a friend from college who had been hired as a first grade teacher at the school. She asked me if I wanted to volunteer in her classroom while I waited to be put on the substitute teacher list. On my first day as a volunteer at Tulalip Elementary, I witnessed panic. It was the children's first day as well, and as the teacher informed them that the school supplies they had brought would be left at school they started to panic. For many of them these were the only crayons, pencils, glue sticks, etc. they had; they worried that if they gave them up they would never see them again. I connected with these kids immediately, coming from a childhood of poverty myself I knew the feeling of needing to hold onto things in case you never got them again. The teacher did not understand this feeling or reaction. In order to decrease anxiety and



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to ensure access to supplies at home I worked with their teacher to create supply kits for home. This was the first heart string that pulled me to these students. I volunteered in her classroom every day, getting to know the kids, their stories, families, and unique needs. When I was finally able to start subbing I was able to still be at the school everyday. My connection grew from just the one class of first graders to every student in the school. As I watched other substitute teachers come for a day and never return, my relationships with the students grew stronger. I started reaching out for strategies on how to make my time with them more meaningful. I read articles, bought books, observed teachers, sat in on meetings and conversations and eagerly soaked up anything I could use to make a difference in these kids lives.



One day at lunch in the staff room, the school counselor Christy Anana told me that she had just met with a small group of students who made a list of people they knew loved them and I was on the list. I was in disbelief. Out of everyone else they could have picked, they picked a substitute teacher, me. From that point on I knew this was the place I needed to be. If I could make a child feel safe and loved as a substitute teacher, I couldn't imagine what impact I could potentially be able to make as a classroom teacher. So I waited for that to happen, and I had to wait three years. During these three years, the schools merged, new administration was introduced and I continued to grow as an educator. I continued to build relationships and get to know the heart wrenching stories of so many kids. I was able to sit in on lessons from both of the school counselors, and grow my box of tools. I almost left a few times wondering if the wait was worth it, but every time I would leave for a short time, my heart would ache for the kids I hadn't been able to connect with in a few days. I missed the hundreds of hugs I received everyday (although I did not miss the lice it gave me twice), and I missed the deep connections I had made.

By the time I landed my own classroom, teaching first grade, I was ready. I knew I had the tools to meet their academic and social emotional needs. I was able to look at behaviors as a communication tool, and share everything I knew with the 13 other new teachers also hired the same year. This first year at our staff orientation was the first time I heard of the school Compassion Plan. I had no idea that everything I was doing was part of an official plan, I just knew they were the things my students needed. My practices were affirmed, but I knew I still wanted to learn and do more to meet their social emotional needs. Being able to focus my efforts on just one classroom of students, allowed me to view and get to know them in new ways. I was ready to take on the strategies anyone suggested and make it work for me and my kids, and it worked, not everyday, but most days.

Now I am in year three and I continue to seek new strategies and ways to meet their needs. Every year the group of students presented to me provide their own unique needs and challenges, some tools that worked in the past no longer work, and some continue to be strong. Being able to look at each student and determine what will work best for them is challenging, but when it works, and you see the growth the student makes, there is no better feeling. This work is challenging, exhausting, stressful and sometimes just plain hard! However I am able to look at some of my past students, now in third grade and be proud of the growth they have made, and will continue to make and know that I was part of their successes, no matter how small, and that makes all of the sleepless nights, stressful days, heartache, and tears worth it.

OUR STORIES: KATHLEEN O'BRIEN, 1ST GRADE TEACHER

"It's just a way to get your foot in the door, you can transfer at the end of the year." I heard that over and over again once I was offered a teaching position at Quil Ceda Tulalip Elementary in 2013. I had lots of people warn me that being at QCT was going to be difficult, and it was. I never had to deal with behaviors like the ones I had to deal with, I wasn't even sure what to do most of the time! I had students running out of class, chairs being thrown, terrifying tantrums daily, among other behaviors. I thought about transferring to another school after my first year, but decided to stay because everyone said your first few years of teaching are difficult. I also really loved my administration. They understood what teachers needed and how to help support us.

I knew I really needed to stay at my school after the shooting at the high school on October 24, 2014, my second year teaching. I had a student, Eli, who lost someone in the shooting. After this happened, he really changed. He was always a little shy, but after October 24th, he completely stopped talking. He refused to do any work. He refused to leave my classroom. He would even get so upset that he would begin throwing things around my classroom. I would have to evacuate my class and we would both be left in my room crying. He was having a hard time and I didn't really know what to do. I was having a hard time myself, I wasn't sure how to help me, let alone someone else. I didn't try to force him to do anything he wasn't ready for. I just met him where he was. I spent my whole day with him. Recess, lunch, planning time, and even our PLC time -- Eli was in the room with me. I was exhausted and that year I think I cried more than I have in my entire life. I didn't come to him with a plan of getting him to specialist or lunch, I just wanted to understand what he was going through and what I could do to help him. He wouldn't share with me what he needed verbally. I just had to learn over time what his body language was telling me he wanted. I would talk to him, sometimes feeling like I was just talking out loud to myself. But, eventually, Eli began talking with me, even if it was just a yes or no sometimes. Slowly, after a few months had passed, he began going to PE, then recess, then lunch and then other specialists. He also began doing his work in class. It started with math and then reading. He still had a hard time writing, unless it was non-fiction. Just like the rest of us, Eli was beginning to find himself again. Everyone would tell me that they were amazed at all I was doing for him, but I didn't feel like I was doing much. I was just doing what he needed, I was just doing what I thought any teacher would do.

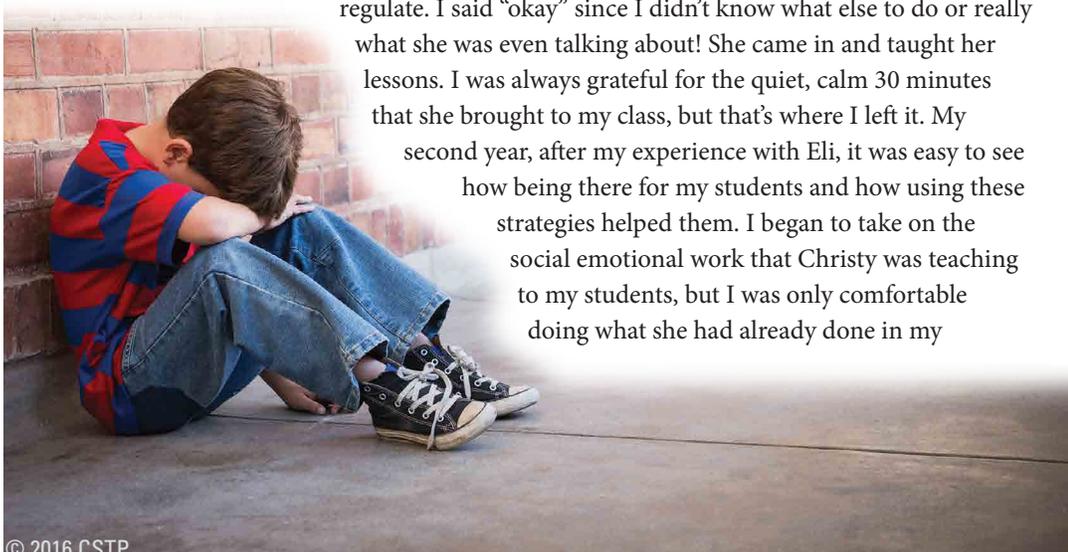
I met Christy Anana, one of the counselors at QCT, on my first day of my first year teaching. She got up and went through a powerpoint about trauma and what the school was doing about it, and I was so overwhelmed. She came up to me and told me she was coming into my room to teach mindfulness, yoga, and breathing strategies to the students to help them learn how to self

regulate. I said "okay" since I didn't know what else to do or really what she was even talking about! She came in and taught her lessons. I was always grateful for the quiet, calm 30 minutes that she brought to my class, but that's where I left it. My

second year, after my experience with Eli, it was easy to see how being there for my students and how using these strategies helped them. I began to take on the social emotional work that Christy was teaching to my students, but I was only comfortable doing what she had already done in my



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class. As time went on, I wanted to help my students more, so I had to learn more strategies. Now, every time we come in from recess, we listen to a chime in silence and breathe. This helps us get our bodies and minds calm so we are more able to learn. We use different breathing strategies when someone is upset to help get them calm and help keep the rest of the class calm. Students are able to go take a break when they need it in my classroom in our ‘calm zone’. It’s just a space in one of my cubbies with a curtain hanging from it. Inside are books, a stuffed animal, a puzzle, and a box with reminders of our breathing techniques. We do yoga every Friday, either Christy leads it or I lead it. We are doing brain breaks to help us with transition times. I try and do as much as I can to help my students have a successful day at school.

Whenever Christy presents on our Compassion Plan, I realize how much I am doing with my class, but I never really have to think about it much. I just always do what my students need. Some days I definitely need to remind myself of some of the strategies I know and use when I’m more stressed, but most days, it is just second nature. Society just expects students to know how to behave and be calm at school, but we can’t expect children to be able to do something they’ve never been taught. Children are amazing learners. If we teach them how to regulate their bodies and how to get calm, they will be more successful at it.

Now, over a year after October 24, Eli is in 2nd grade, but I still see him every day. He has his ups and downs, but he is more like himself every day. He comes to see me two to three times a day, during his recesses and specialist. He tells me about his day, sports he plays, vacations he takes, the Seahawks, anything that comes to his mind. Seeing this change in him is amazing, going from not speaking to not being able to stop! He said to me the other day, “I’ve been having really good days. At the beginning of the year, it was really hard. I had really bad days, but now I’m having good days.” That in itself is all I need to show me that what I’m doing works and is important.

OUR STORIES: KYLA CURTRIGHT- NATIONALLY CERTIFIED SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

I joined the QCT staff the year the two schools combined. I had been warned that the school was very difficult, but was excited for a new challenge and was hoping that my recent experience with the district’s special education behavior program would allow me to provide support for some of the unique needs that had faced Tulalip and Quil Ceda in the past. When I started at QCT, I had been told again and again how the students were “difficult”, “out of control”, and “very low”. I was sure that the number of students with actual disabilities impacting their learning were not higher than at other schools and I hoped to shift people’s perception of this and provide new ideas to support students as well as be mindful of not over qualifying native students. I had very limited prior knowledge or experience working with Native American communities and was open to learning about their community.

As an educator who views student behavior as communication, I was naturally drawn to others in the building that had similar beliefs. One of those staff members was one of our School Counselors, Christy. Through learning more about Compassionate Schools, our school’s Compassion Plan, and what she was doing through classroom lessons and small group work with students, my understanding of student behavior and strategies to support student self-regulation and positive attachments grew. I began creating more meaningful relationships with specific students who, I felt, were showing the adults in the building that they needed more. I began using many of the calm-down strategies Christy had taught in classrooms with individual students and saw results. Katie, a current first grade student, was one that I saw these strategies work for first hand. Katie struggled to regulate her emotions and control her reactions. She often used her classroom’s calm down area and I met with her at least four days a week for a short time so that she had a secure and consistent adult with whom she knew she could depend on and process problems with. Over the past year I have worked with her when she has been escalated



Kyla M. Curtright, Ed.S., M.A., NCSP, is a nationally certified school psychologist and is dual certified in school psychology and school counseling. She just completed her ninth year as a school psychologist and has been working at Quil Ceda Tulalip Elementary for five years. She has a passion for finding ways to measure the positive impact of Compassionate strategies and other interventions on student behavior and social-emotional well-being and has developed successful ways of looking at data to target and adjust teaching strategies that will increase resiliency and social emotional well-being for all students.

(screaming, crying, hitting others, hiding under tables, etc.) and walked her through her the breathing strategies she had learned, coached her through reactions that are more expected, as well as other self-regulation strategies she had been taught. Over this school year Katie's escalations in class have decreased significantly from happening more than once a day to being almost nonexistent.

I knew that the state's focus was on test scores and not the type of growth students like Katie were making. A lot of what we were doing in classrooms through Christy's work and teachers and other staff continuing that work with students every day (even when not lead by Christy) was having an overall positive impact on student lives. When our students felt more secure and safe they were more available to listen to and engage in academics and were beginning to be willing to take risks in the classroom. I wanted to find a way to measure the non-academic benefits of our work because it was leading to academic growth. I also knew we needed to find a way to better channel and focus our resources toward the students with the highest needs and that we needed a more subjective way to determine which students had the highest levels of need (not just teacher report or anecdotal). I researched and chose a social/emotional/behavior screener (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire or SDQ) for all classroom teachers to fill out for each student. With support from administrators, I provided a brief training to all staff on the purpose of the SDQ and the information I hoped it would provide. The SDQ results in scores for the following areas: Emotional Distress, Behavior Difficulties, Hyperactivity and Concentration Difficulties, Difficulties Getting Along with Other Children, Kind and Helpful Behavior, Overall Stress, and Impact these Difficulties Have on the Child's Life. Having teachers fill out an SDQ on each students resulted in our school having access to another set of more subjective data that could lead to more informed decisions. Through extra funding provided by SIG and RAD our school had the opportunity for grade level teams to meet weekly, during their planning time and PLC time, to discuss data and create acceleration groups (with targeted intervention plans).

In the past, these meetings were typically focused on academics, but using the SDQ data has opened the door to having more meaningful, productive and intervention focused conversation about social emotional learning and behavior. At each grade level data team meeting the school wide data was reviewed and then the grade level data was looked at more closely. The teams focused in on the students rated in the very high range. This lead to conversations about why and what students needed to be taught in order to grow in their ability to regulate their behavior in that particular area (most often it was the Hyperactivity and Concentration Difficulties). Grade level teams would then create grade-wide intervention plans to implement with support from the school counselor or other staff. As a team we would agree on the results indicators, how to track growth and keep data, and the set time to check in on the results of the intervention. Data

team meetings that focused on looking at the SDQ data also provided space and time for individual teachers to talk about individual students in a problem solving manner, as well a chance to make sure that building support staff and resources are aligned with our students in greatest need.



OUR STORIES: CHRISTY ANANA, NBCT SCHOOL COUNSELOR, 2015 WA STATE COUNSELOR OF THE YEAR

Our school is within a beautiful community and there have been challenges. I've been to more funerals than I'd like to count. I've walked alongside families in extreme situations. But, here there is great resilience. I've learned from families and sought non-traditional strategies to address stress and trauma -- the everyday stuff and the deep pain rooted in generations. We develop strategies to help us feel better. Together we have done much: breathing, yoga, mindfulness, and tapping. And after a particularly difficult time -- a school shooting involving some of my former students who were at the high school and then impacting siblings and cousins at my school, we have been given more strategies -- Rainbow Dance, using music therapy techniques to build attunement and attachment, and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), which addresses the trauma directly so it doesn't trip them up later in life and offering strategies to help students process mixed up thoughts and feelings.

We've had the opportunity to incorporate unique strategies for our students. One student came to me stuck in a traumatic memory about being told by her mom to hide from the CPS worker. As she told her story, I knew she was not ready for a day of learning in third grade. I remained present with her and introduced her to Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) or 'tapping' to address her traumatic memory. Within five minutes of using this strategy, she told me she was ready to return to class.

We are currently looking at data to determine validity of these strategies. Anecdotally, I notice students are having fewer big reactions. It was normal at our school to have students throw chairs daily. Now, it is a rare occurrence, and only when we can pinpoint significant changes.

When new teachers like Kathleen and Cayla come to our school, I feel the pressure to prepare them for the challenges they will face. I want to give them the understanding that will help them be successful in their classrooms. I tell them the most important thing they can do for children is to keep their own mood stable. School counselors are in a unique position as teacher leaders, and we can guide teachers on how to be curious about children's behavior. We can role model keeping our own body calm in the midst of a child's storm of dysregulation. By being present, we teach the child resilience and build their capacity for enduring tough moments. We can also role model self-care -- where we step back, ground ourselves in the moment, take a deep breath, and say within -- "It's not about me."

As a school counselor, I provide lessons in the classroom about creating a positive school climate, like doing class meetings. Both Kathleen and Cayla have created routines and rituals within their classrooms that encourage a feeling of safety and security. Before students leave for the day, children in Kathleen's classroom get the choice of a high five or a hug. Most of them opt for both. Cayla has structured her classroom for success with opportunities for brain breaks, sensory movement, small groups, and high interest technology options.

The question now is how to take care of the staff we have to stay committed to this difficult work. How do we maintain an environment where teachers feel safe, vulnerable, and present for students? How do we teach them to maintain their self-care plans so they will have a long, healthy career at our school? We hope to attract those who feel a calling for our work, a resonance for this compassionate work with children.

Kathleen, Cayla, and Kyla grew from college graduates to skilled educators and vulnerable caregivers. Their stories of working in a challenging school are important to tell. Their journey



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led them to understanding behavior as the mechanism for the child to communicate. Their role as educators helps them give voice to the needs of the whole child. Our children need to be heard, acknowledged, loved, and honored as competent humans in a self-serving world.

Together, we have done much to build relationships, teach self-regulation so that students feel competent and can go on to be successful, kind people. I feel blessed to be in Washington State where we have a valuable resource of Compassionate Schools, a model for trauma informed care, that is free and helps educators understand how trauma impacts learning and the brain.

I am proud to be part of this amazing school where we build equity for all students and access to opportunities. Some days, I can't believe I get to do yoga with kids, teach students how to regulate their emotions with mindfulness, EFT, rainbow dance. Other days are harder and there have been rough days. I want people to be inspired by my work -- there is great hope.

Kyla, Kathleen, and Cayla now have the ability to become teacher leaders and walk with new professionals on their journey. They are teaching children how to connect to people. They create predictable attachments, and they continue to take care of themselves. Compassionate attachment with students grows healthy students and precedes academics.

OUR FUTURE

The year of the school shooting was a difficult one for our school. School staff struggled to support students at the expense of our own personal health. Nine teachers left, along with our whole administration. However our SDQ data showed that observed behaviors prior to the shooting and observed behaviors at the end of the year were at about the same level. This indicates that we, as a staff, were able to provide students with supports and strategies that enabled them to better regulate their own behaviors and emotions, and to deal with stress they might experience in their lives.

Bringing on new administrators for the 2015/2016 school year along with many new teachers and classified staff, while right in the middle of this difficult work, has proved to be challenging and disruptive to the progress we have been making. Our SDQ data from our current school year has shown an increase in the number of observed concerning behaviors in our students, which has prompted us to feel more urgency in creating sustainability. We are now challenged with how to continue our work and make it maintainable no matter what changes in staff, administration or in programs we encounter; e.g. changes in administration or staff.

We seek to support each other, our students, and our families. We honor the growth that we have made. We know the challenges we've overcome have made us stronger and able to face other issues. The next chapter of our story is unknown, except that we no longer feel alone in our journey. We've created a self-care for educators class where we practice mindfulness strategies. We've started to collect all of our strategies in a shared video library. As we find successful culturally responsive and trauma-sensitive techniques, we are collecting video clips for others to watch and learn. We strive to make our practices sustainable so that more educators can replicate what we have learned works to support all students. We continue to learn more about the ever changing needs of students and challenge ourselves to grow and adjust accordingly.

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