

CHARLES DICKENS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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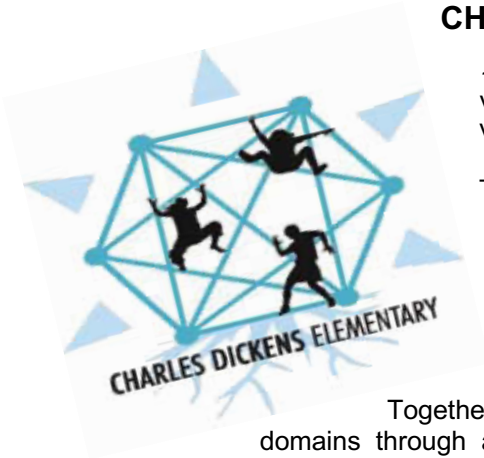
Secretary: Michelle Ventresca

PAC Co-Chairs: Daniela Forde, Sara Getz,

Laura Poree, Tiffany Searchfield

Director of Instruction: Aaron Davis

Trustee: Carmen Cho



MISSION STATEMENT

Together we bring alive our commitment to develop each child's potential in all domains through a long-established philosophy built on mutual respect, continuous learning and opportunities for leadership within a child-centred, multi-aged framework.

April 2021

We acknowledge that we *learn*, work together, and play on the unceded and traditional territory of the x̣m̄əθk̄əȳəm (Musqueam), sełłwıtulh (Tsleil Waututh) and s̄k̄w̄x̄w̄7mesh (Squamish Coast Salish) peoples.

IMPORTANT DATES IN APRIL:

Wednesday, April 14: Early Dismissal for all students (at 1:55 or 2:00 pm)

Monday, April 19th: PHOTO DAY – individual photos only taken outside

Monday, April 26th: Pro-D Day – No school for students

Dear Dickens Community:



Paul Nicholl's last day of teaching after 27 years at Charles Dickens Elementary School.

Retirement Beckons...

Staff, students and Community wish begins the next has written some at Dickens which are I would like to say amazing generosity staff, and time of my retirement school at the end of very deeply moved students, parents, tsunami of kind notes on to me. My new psychologist, read written comments out experience. **All that deep and moving** Dickens staff with all generosity also gave relief First Nations an abalone eye. The supposed to local cultures. I gift as I love First placed it in a location the moment I wake



parents of the Dickens Paul the very best as he chapter of his life. Paul thoughts about his time shared below. thank you for the of the students, parents, administration at the and departure from the March of this year. I was by the comments of the and staff and the and well wishes passed partner Ana, who is a every single one of these to me – an extraordinary **was said had a very impact on me.** The their kindness and me a wonderful bas-carving of a Raven with raven is a bird which is represent music in many greatly appreciate this Nations art. I have where my eye falls on it up.

The Parent Advisory Council also gave me the lovely gift of a bottle of Italian Chianti that was an utter revelation to me, so smooth, rich and complex, that it gave me a completely different idea of what this type of wine could be. I also deeply appreciated the comments from parents that came with it. As well, some of you may know that when I did not think the students were playing as well as they might need to; when things were really falling apart all around, I would say “that sounds like stinky socks!” The students always enjoyed this phrase; we even developed a degree of stinky-ness scale of “one week”, “two weeks”, a “month”. I am a long-time backpacker, so I know all about stinky socks. Over the years there was always a lot of giggling about **“the sound of stinky socks”**, a paradox which has always helped to calm and make fun of the experience of an implied critique.

I had not realized the extent to which this phrase had entered the culture at Dickens until I saw the references to it in the comments, thanks, and well wishes from the students. And this was further confirmed as the presents from the PAC also included a pair of “Non-Stinky Socks”; socks with fun musical instruments on them and a card on top proclaiming their “Non-Stinky” pedigree. I greatly appreciated this as well as the fun that the student giving them to me seemed to be having along with their very mischievous expression. I have since put these socks with their explanatory card up on my wall and am treating them together as an ironic postmodern conceptual artwork. I think that perhaps I should take a high-resolution digital photograph of them and sell it as a unique blockchain non-fungible token on the crypto-currency art market as fundraiser potentially yielding millions for the school.

Other presents I really appreciated were lovely bottles of wine from students and parents (a smooth cote-du-Rhone and others), as well as a truly great cookbook, tea, and a BC red. Other things included contributions to my travel fund which I greatly appreciated. Many students had suggestions for what to do when I retire. **One brother and sister suggested I play marimbas on a hill in Africa** or sell marimbas on a beach in Hawaii. Other suggestions included taking up meditation (advice perhaps from

a more enlightened generation), making a recording, joining a band, and of course lots of relaxation and world travel. The teachers had suggestions along similar lines.

My actual intentions after retiring from being the music teacher at Dickens are to work full time on my **other career as a music composer and artist**. This will of course be once I get vaccinated and have a minor but very important operation at the end of April. I will be lying low at home listening to music and doing a lot of thinking until these critical things happen. I am very concerned about the new variants of the virus that causes Covid-19 and intend to take considerable care with protecting myself from them.

If anyone is interested, my music is published under my artist name of **Paul Alexander**. You can hear some of it on Soundcloud using the URL www.soundcloud.com/paulalexandersmusic. You will notice my western hat there in my photo. My music is a combination of world music, classical music, and multicultural ideas about the purpose of music itself. One of my future projects will include developing a festival called *Pale Blue Dot - a Festival of Arts and Ideas in the Anthropocene*. I am also working now with an Indian Classical Dancer on collaborative projects combining dance with world music. I will be traveling to Germany in the Fall to work with a virtuoso pianist to record and perform some of my Spanish and African influenced piano music. There is also a project called *Remembering Steel Skies Raining Tears* which is a big string quartet based on interviews I did with child survivors of the Holocaust. A top music agent will be promoting this work to some of the best ensembles of this kind in Canada and Europe.

I have taught at Dickens since 1994 and I was also a student teacher at the school, and **this place is deep in my heart** because the feeling of connection is so positive at all levels. I believe in everyone and everything we do here. I have worked very hard to incorporate the philosophy of the school into the way that I teach music. As well, the community approach to music learning seen in parts of Africa has also become a part of what students have done at our school.

The students say how much they value the experience of **music as being fun, exciting, and powerful**. I have always had a high standard for the students but what seems to really drive things is the way that they work together and teach each other. This they know from their classroom teachers for whom I feel great gratitude for their utter excellence and humanity. Having a chance to make jokes and even laugh in music also seemed to help student enjoyment and perhaps this happened as a way for me to stay sane too in all the noise and intensity of this kind of teaching. Students seem to genuinely respect musical knowledge and never want to be talked down to. I am grateful that **Dickens was a perfect place where I could experiment with new ways of teaching music**. I do not think it would have been possible elsewhere.

My initial interest in becoming a music teacher was around teaching composition and computers in school music. I am a music composer and studied that field at UBC Music and at SFU along with the cello. I quickly ditched the computer part and instead started in at the school with a focus on the exciting fields of musical multiculturalism and rhythm. At the time I was working and studying with a true **African master drummer and dancer** from the Ewe tribal people of Ghana. His name was Modesto Amagago, the son of a village chief. Modesto was taking a Ph.D. in dance at SFU and has since taught Ento-Musicology and dance as a professor at Queens University in Kingston for many years.

In the mid-1990s the school gave me a very generous budget to buy instruments, I was excited to start an African drum program and there were at the time no African drums available to buy in Vancouver. As a result, I had to go all the way to Seattle to John's music to get our first instruments. Some of these instruments were quite unique, such as two huge Ghanaian Atumpans; instruments on which **rhythmic poetry was "recited" in the royal courts of the Ashanti Kingdoms of Ghana** going back to before the time of the slave trade. I also acquired some of the first West African Djembes to be used in schools in the province as well as rarer Kpanlogo drums from the Akan people. Modesto Amagago came to the school a number of times as an artist in residence to kick things off. It was extraordinary to see him teach in such a radically different way than we are used to seeing – so effective and so simple.

The next phase of the program was to introduce **Samba drumming from Brazil** to the school. This involved buying some of these unique instruments from Brazil with the help of the PAC. We also brought in some wonderful artists in residence to teach this music including Milton Randall, Pepe Danza (whose children also went to the school) and the internationally famous Brazilian percussionist, guitarist and composer Celso Machado (who now lives in Gibson's).

Much of this early work culminated in a trip to the Vancouver School Board Band Festival in 1997 to present both African drumming and Samba Batacada drumming at district wide event of this type. It was the first time that anything other than Western music had ever been played at a large music education event and it proved to be an **even more significant occasion than it seemed at the time**. I remember feeling an enormous feeling of pride in the way our students performed so excellently and how shockingly exciting it was to hear this powerful and rhythmically complex yet precise music in a large hall with more than a thousand people listening. The reception was very generous and appreciative.

Around this time a colleague called Eric Hartman and I started a loose organization of Vancouver School music teachers called the **World Music Continuum** which we founded to bring together teachers who were interested in multicultural music and arts and in moving beyond the Eurocentric focus. Eric and I published a book together on teaching Samba in the schools which sold all across North and America and Europe although I cannot say we made much money from it. We also gave many workshops on teaching multicultural music which was hugely fun and exciting.

Around 1998 I started to feel there was something missing in the drum program, something more melodic and harmonic than what we were experiencing with drums, which was when I began working with Zimbabwean Marimbas since there was a group from Victoria called Shringara Marimba touring the province at the time playing Zimbabwean music with these instruments. Colleagues and I put together a grant which was the largest one that had ever been submitted to Arts Starts at the time. Our proposal was successful in part because the grant administrators had heard the Dickens students perform Samba and Ewe Drum music the year before at the Band Festival.

Once we got the grant, **we actually had to make the first set of Zimbabwean marimbas ourselves**. This building process took place at the wood working workshop at Britannia High School with the help of the Britannia School teacher. It took many hours after school to construct and tune the two sets of instruments, yet these instruments are still being used by schools of the VSB 23 years later. Dickens received the first set in the fall of 1998, and we debuted them at the Band Festival two weeks later. **We were the first school in Canada to use these instruments**. They have since spread throughout the district and the province, but it all started here.

In the year 2000 with the help and sponsorship of both the BCTF and the VSB, we took a group of VSB World Music Continuum music teachers to **Cuba** to visit the outstanding music schools and academies in Matanzas (near Varadero) and Havana. I had my Cuban influenced music played there too. This cultural exchange confirmed the importance of multicultural music to me as well as my sense that we have to introduce a sophisticated rhythmic language to children at a much younger age than we do in Western music. This is what children at Dickens have since experienced.

Since 2006 PAC has generously donated the money so we could purchase these hand-made professional instruments for the school. We have continued to add to the set and now have exemplary sets of instruments to play for which **the amazing generosity of the school PAC** is largely responsible. Meanwhile the students themselves are supremely motivated, musically cooperative and informed of a great attitude to music and musical creativity.

Over the years we have given together some amazing concerts at Dickens and elsewhere, although now, unfortunately Covid-19 stands in the way. I would like to thank everyone for their incredible support. **Working at the school has been the core of my professional life and spiritually it has profoundly changed who I am as a person**. I will miss the deep connections and feelings of appreciation I experienced with both the staff and students at our school.

Warmest regards, Paul Nicholls, Former Music Teacher

Here is a surprise for the Dickens community **and** for Paul. Recently I was covering in the Music room when Paul was away. I took advantage of his absence to record Division 15 playing a piece he had arranged. The students played on their own, insisting on doing a full-length performance because 'It's Paul's music and we want to be respectful by doing the full piece.' Thanks to Shelley for creating the link below.

<https://vimeo.com/531482768>

[Private video on Vimeo](#)

Join the web's most supportive community of creators and get high-quality tools for hosting, sharing, and streaming videos in gorgeous HD with no ads.

vimeo.com

password: paul

THE IMPORTANCE OF MINDSET



Here is a poster by Division 8 showcasing famous people who were successful because they had a positive mindset. More and more educators are helping students to embrace a 'growth mindset' in which they learn from mistakes, keep on trying their hardest to improve, and develop a 'can do' attitude towards preferred and less preferred activities and subjects. When looking at your children's work during their at-home student-led conference, remember that the process is as important as the product.

Some classes already had their conferences on March 10th while others will have theirs on April 14th but remember that **all students will be dismissed an hour early at 1:55 or 2:00 on April 14th**. This year conferences look vastly different as parents cannot come into the building. Teachers have used a variety of approaches to have students share their work with parents and offered the opportunity to connect virtually or by phone to discuss successes and areas for growth. Since parents are not able to come into the school, we made a tour of the first floor which was shared in a previous email. It features our shiny post-Spring-Break-Spring-Cleaning floors. A huge shout-out to Peter, Phil and the cleaning team.

Student Writing from Division 13

I spent some time with Division 13 last week when they were working on stories. Every student shared their favourite sentence with the class, and some agreed to let me publish their sentences in the newsletter. Here they are. You might note that gory suspense is a bit of a theme.

Abby – “What other choice do we have?” Haley was meaning for it to be a rhetorical question but obviously “We could stay here!” Helen says.

Anisa – She turned around just in time to see an arrow shooting at her. She ducked and it missed her by inches.

Henry - Darkness spread around the night sky like ink.

Sadie - My hand turns black. It spreads to my wrist and then to my arm. It keeps spreading. Can't feel my hand anymore. It shrinks. It starts to melt. I fell to the floor and started turning into ashes.

Julian - He just barely made it out as the creature dug its claws into his ankles.

Davey - The light of the cannons firing was blinding as the shells screeched across the sky, the rumble of tanks in the distance. It was all wrong he thought, war shouldn't be a thing.

Kalena - White Paws was the quickest so she was in the front effortlessly dodging Shadow Paws' blows.

RECHENKA'S EGGS



I hope you all enjoyed the long Easter weekend and the two four-day weeks following Spring Break. It seems that we have all needed the slow start back as we continue to deal with the COVID-19 protocols which have once again been tightened. Our grade fours are now wearing masks as are many of our primary students. Staff are reminding students to walk single file in the halls and to physically distance. Thank you again for all you are doing at home to support us at school. As always, it is much appreciated.

Division 3 made stunning eggs after reading the story, *Rechenka's Eggs*

Julie Weatherall,

Principal, Dickens Elementary