

Through hell and high water:

The climate crisis comes to Merritt, Canada —and its Schools

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In November 2021, only months after an unprecedented heat wave killed hundreds in the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC), massive floods inundated significant portions of the territory. The following account is from a teacher from the BC interior town of Merritt, which was largely submerged and cut off from the rest of the province during the floods. (An earlier version of this article originally appeared in “Teacher,” a publication of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation)

I woke at 4:00 a.m. to police banging on our door telling us that we need to evacuate. The Coldwater River, 200 metres from our house, had reached the top of the dike. We began packing some clothes and food, connected our travel trailer to our truck, and 20 minutes later we were leaving; the river had breached the dike and was halfway up our truck tires.

Josée Warren, teacher, Merritt Secondary School

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This was the reality for thousands of Merritt residents on Monday, November 15, 2021. Merritt Secondary School, Merritt Central Elementary School, and Diamond Vale Elementary School all flooded, with Merritt Central taking on the most water and suffering the most damage. Schools on higher ground were safe from flooding, but one, École Colletville, was cut off from the rest of the city because of bridge washout and sewage line damage.

The Coldwater River had never seen that volume of water moving down it in recorded history. By 9:00 a.m. Merritt city officials declared an evacuation order for all of Merritt because homes were flooded, bridges were unstable or washed away, water was unsafe to consume, and the sewer system had been compromised. Residents were instructed to take 72 hours' worth of supplies, report to Emergency Support Services, and evacuate to the nearby cities of Kamloops or Kelowna. The main highway was closed because of washouts, so nobody could access the Lower Mainland (a coastal region where the province's larger cities and services are located).

Within a couple of days, school staff checked in with administration and learned of major damage to some of our schools. It was clear that we would not be back in Merritt after 72 hours. Then teachers began doing what teachers do: worrying about the welfare of our students and colleagues. By the end of November, many teachers were in contact with students and families and consoling each other, offering support ranging from educational resources to food and supplies. Flood waters ravaged the homes of hundreds of our students and colleagues.

About 10 days after the flood, people with homes on high ground unaffected by the flood waters were granted access back into the city. But thousands of other residents were told it was unsafe to return. Some houses required extensive repairs, while others had suffered irreparable damage and were uninhabitable. It became abundantly clear to teachers from Merritt's schools that things were not going back to normal anytime soon. We were not permitted access into the buildings to gather supplies or

check on damage until early December. School board officials had to creatively rethink how education was going to be delivered.

Three weeks after the flood, some schools resumed varying degrees of instructional programming for students. Two unaffected schools were able to welcome back their staff and students—if those staff and students had homes to which they could return. It was really difficult to contact some students' families, because their lives had been turned upside down and they had lost their homes. Some were cut off from the community because bridges or whole sections of highway had been washed away by a raging river. "We lost everything, we had to run for our lives," said one parent whose son would not return to school as we tried to resume some educational programming. "School is not a priority right now. Our priority is survival: finding a place to live and food and clothing."

Thankfully, the school board continued to pay contract teachers, Teachers on Calls, Education Assistants, and all support staff throughout the school closures and allowed staff to prioritize home rebuilding and family over employment responsibilities. We were all affected and the only way to get through it was to work together, support each other, and help each other. Many teachers and other colleagues came out to assist flood victims. Strangers came out to help strangers. A colossal amount of mud came down the Coldwater River and entered homes, but community spirit was strong. People showed up at affected houses and started shoveling heavy mud, moving destroyed furniture, piling heaps of destroyed possessions at the roadside, pulling out drywall and flooring, and helping to console devastated families.

It took four weeks until a member of the provincial government came to Merritt to survey the devastation. When the Canadian Prime Minister came to BC to survey flood damage, he only visited the Fraser Valley (a fertile farming region near the BC Coast that was inundated in the flooding), ignoring BC's Interior. These delayed actions and inactions really frustrated people in Merrit. We realized that citizens of rural communities



need to be prepared to help each other and work together without expecting immediate government assistance. Eventually, military personnel were deployed to bolster temporary dikes.

All the while, donations from people all over Canada poured in to help affected families and individuals. Several teacher unions sent donations to the Nicola Valley Teachers' Union (which represents teachers in Merritt and surrounding areas), totaling thousands of dollars. The generosity of other locals helped many of our members with immediate costs related to devastated homes.

At the heart of our devastated community, the Nicola Valley Food Bank accepted monetary donations, food, and supplies from around the country to help our local citizens, many of whom relied on this generosity as they had been left with nothing. These community supports were important for Merritt locals, but also people from

the town of Lytton who had sheltered in Merritt. Just six months before the catastrophic flooding, an extreme heat wave swept over the region, bringing the temperature close to 50°C and contributing to widespread wildfires that burned Lytton and other local areas. Many Lytton evacuees relocated to Merritt until the flood forced them to evacuate for a second time in less than a year.

Following the winter break at the end of December, school board management made arrangements for all students and staff to be back in buildings. Students and staff were split among three locations because some school sites are still unsafe for occupation. The logistics of transporting people in so many directions became a challenge for our bus driving staff, but they took it in stride and worked hard to keep students safe and going to all the right places. Many teachers travelled daily between locations, carrying with them the supplies needed to deliver education to students.

After spring break in March 2022 students at most schools were able to return to their respective buildings to resume instruction. Unfortunately, Merritt Central Elementary staff and students remained displaced because of the nature of the extensive damage to their school and could not return to their school building until the new school year began in September, 2022.

So, what have we learned from all of this? Nature is powerful and swift, and we humans are at its mercy. The November 15, 2021, flood far exceeded the City of Merritt's 200-year floodplain limit map. Nobody expected a flood of this magnitude to hit Merritt, inflict this much damage, and create so much trauma. Climate events of this magnitude are staggeringly powerful and should cause us to re-evaluate how we live and how we affect our natural world. Humans have inflicted untold damage on the world's ecosystems, precipitating extreme disasters. Our footprint is everywhere as we cut down forests, pollute waters, invade pristine wild places, and burn fossil fuels that alter the chemistry of the atmosphere.

Being displaced from home is traumatizing, especially when one's home has been partially or fully destroyed. The whole city was evacuated for a few weeks, but some people were still displaced five months later, living in hotels or with family or friends. Upon returning to school after the winter break, some students and staff had to deal with the rigours of academic expectations combined with rebuilding their homes, replacing lost possessions, and relying on the generosity of others for food and clothing.

Trauma takes a toll on people, often seriously affecting their ability to function and behave as expected, but we endured. Routine is essential during traumatic experiences. School provides a safe place for children to be, whether they are in Kindergarten or Grade 12. Displaced children need stability and caring adults to be there for them and their families.

Even though many of our students and staff have been teaching and learning in facilities that were not

their normal places of education, and even transferring between locations at midday, the care and attention that staff showed for students and for each other is remarkable. Educators are tenacious. Despite devastating and traumatic events, we adapted. Our school board secured alternate facilities and educational resources for all students while our teaching and support staff provided quality education and assistance for our students wherever they were placed.

As one Merritt Secondary School staff member, Melissa Pinyon, stated, "I see so much resilience, but I also see tired students and tired staff. I see everyone showing up even when they feel like there isn't much more to give. I see people coming together and making adjustments to support those who need it the most. I see the big wins and small wins are all celebrated the same, small steps back to whatever normal looks like. Everyone shows up, and for that I'm thankful." We care for each other.

This experience has demonstrated that humans respond with compassion and care in emergencies. In the words of another colleague, Amanda Lamothe, "Through all this, I've learned to always be kind. Chances are people are going through hell or high waters in their daily lives. All we can do is be kind."

A flood is not something I wish for anybody to experience. The flood has profoundly affected Merritt as a city and has taken a serious toll on education, but we have persevered with support from neighbouring communities, many Canadians far and wide. We have demonstrated that education goes beyond foundational academic skills. Our school system is a crucial component of a well-functioning, healthy society that provides stability for children and social and emotional wellness for many.

As the climate crisis worsens, the role of schools in helping students cope with climate anxiety and trauma from climate events will only grow. We have a responsibility to our natural world and our children to respond expeditiously to climate impacts to mitigate future disasters.