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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Whytecliff Agile Learning Centres

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Photography provided by Whytecliff Agile Learning Centres.

Written by Glen Herbert

Since 1998, families have trusted Our Kids to help navigate the private school landscape. Drawing on years working with education experts, parents, and school insiders, Our Kids provides families with insights into the top schools—and into choosing the right school for a child.

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Preface

"All we're really doing is taking kids and giving them the best time of their lives. We help kids have the most fun they've ever had. And when you do that, guess what? They want to go to school. And when you go to school you begin to have friends and then you become part of a community. And then all the kids begin to teach each other."
—Robert Kissner, founder and director, Whytecliff Agile Learning Centres

Every private school is unique, with its own character, facilities, programming, culture, and reason for being. No private school is right for every learner, but for every learner there is a right school. Your task—and it isn't an easy one—is to find the right school for your child; the one that offers the right challenges and the necessary supports; the one where she feels comfortable and included; the one that allows him to grow into a sense of himself and his place in the world; the one where people laugh at their jokes, and ache in the same places. The one where they know, without question: those are my goals, these are my friends, this is my school.

About Our Kids

We know how hard it can be for you, as a parent, to research private schools. For more than two decades we've published Canada's most trusted annual private school guide, building on insights gained over years of work. The *Our Kids Private School Reviews* series of book-length reviews is aimed at information-seeking families, providing a detailed look at the offerings, the traditions, and the culture of each school. Titles published in this series to date include:

1. Académie Westboro Academy
2. Appleby College
3. Bond Academy
4. Branksome Hall
5. Brentwood College School
6. Columbia International College
7. Crescent School
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Whytecliff Agile Learning Centres

Founded: 1993

Enrolment: 42-46 (Langley), 32-34 (Burnaby)

Grades: 8 to 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day, Homestay

Language Of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities: Balanced, Emotional

Curriculum: Progressive

Curriculum Pace: Student-paced

Academic Culture: Supportive

Avg. Class Size: 3 to 6

Special Needs Support: Learning, Developmental, Behavioural

Introduction

Whytecliff is different, something the youth and families who attend seem to deeply appreciate. Smaller in size than a typical high school, students here thrive in its safe, comfortable, and caring environment, where staff are warm, welcoming, and incredibly supportive. For students with diverse learning needs, especially those who have struggled with anxiety or depression, Whytecliff is a refuge—an island of stability in a turbulent world.

Humbly situated on a nondescript corner in the heart of the business district, the Langley location of the Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre doesn't announce itself in the way that some other private or independent schools do. As one stands outside the two-story, seafoam-coloured building, one is struck by how unlike a typical school Whytecliff looks. The day I visited was a cold, drizzly day in late October. It was the kind of damp that can seep into your bones. If it was cold and grey outside, inside was the opposite: warm, close, welcoming. When I entered I found the entire school gathered in the first-floor art room, and they invited me to join in. ("This is Glen. He's here to write about us." "Hi, Glen.") Some of the students were standing, some sitting. Jeff Stroud, a teacher, was lightheartedly asking the kinds of trivia questions that new citizens are asked on their citizenship tests. "What is the largest First Nation community in Canada?" One student said the Inuit. "It's not the Inuit. It starts with a C." Another answered the Cree, which is correct.

The reason for all the Canadian trivia was because that weekend, Rachael Sorsabal, another teacher, became a new citizen and they were celebrating her achievement. Rachael was standing by, though others were as well, all in a casual jumble. It's not your typical school assembly. There isn't a front of the room, even though most were facing Jeff. There's no dais, and no speeches. It felt less like a school and more like a cozy gathering in the large family room of an oversized home. The room looks like that, too, with incandescent pot lights and lots of warm yellows and greens. There were foody smells drifting in from the kitchen, as a few students had volunteered—of their own accord—to make soup for lunch. Everyone was together in the room, including Bridget Smit who, in title at least, is the administrative assistant—though her role is much broader than that. She's a kind of den mother, the first face, and the first smile, that students see when they come in the door each morning.

Robert Kissner was there, too. He's tall, soft spoken, and friendly, if initially a bit imposing, and he looks younger than his years. ("I'm old!" he playfully says later as we talk in his office, which sits just off the main foyer.) He's also a character in all the best possible ways. He's the founder, having begun the program in 1993 and then serving as the executive director for all its life. He's the one who initially conceptualized and crafted the entire program, and while others have contributed, it's largely his vision. During the morning meeting, though, he's just a person in the room. There's a sense that all are equals, staff and students alike. It's a reflection of what Kissner talks about as reciprocity in education: everyone learning from everyone, participating equally in a shared community. That feeling of community permeates the morning meeting and it's present throughout the building, too.

Mounted on the wall in the main foyer is a plaque that includes the compelling vision statement of the program that reads in part: "Within this community, individuals have opportunities to build their resources, develop new skills, and discover their talents. These

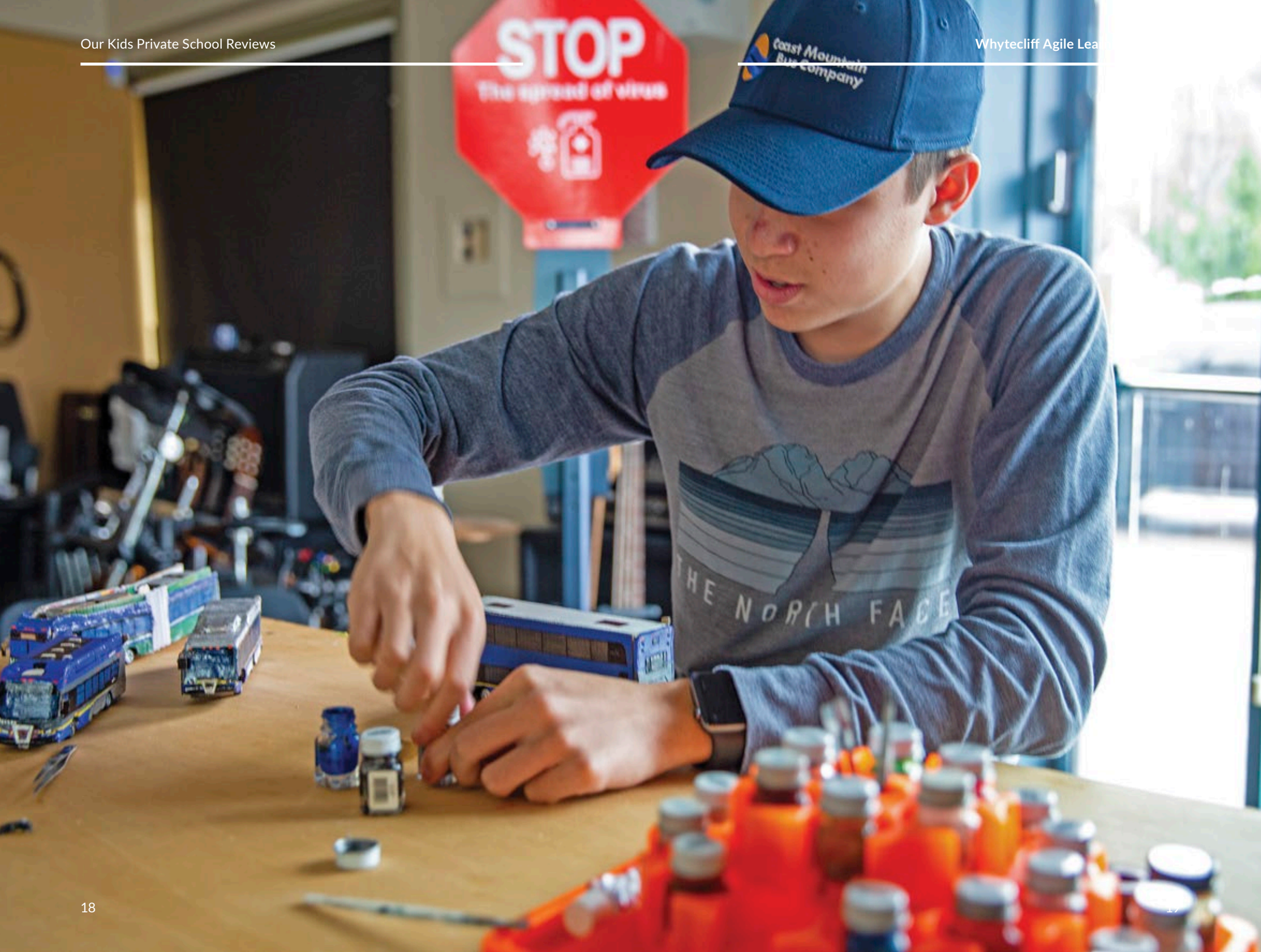
experiences encourage self-reflective behaviour and a strengthened relationship to family and the wider community. Living these principles inspires hope and leads to promising futures rich with dignity, purpose, and options." It's a simple premise with a transformative promise. Spend a morning at the school and you'll see it taking shape in all kinds of little ways: in students playing trivia games together and chatting in the lobby, making new friends and helping each other with their studies, learning new concepts and exploring different hobbies, getting together and planning educational adventures in the community, celebrating each other, and sharing homemade soup. They're engaging in positive relationships with others while gaining life-changing knowledge, skills, and understandings about themselves and their world along the way.

Which is kind of the point. The hallmark of the Whytecliff program is, as Kissner will repeat, that it's community-based and anchored in real relationships. "We're not teaching subjects," says Kissner as the morning meeting begins to dissolve, "we're teaching children. And without a relationship we're not teaching anything." Two girls headed off to check the progress of the broth simmering in the kitchen. Smit returned to her desk just inside the front door. Others go upstairs, both students and staff. The staff includes youth workers as well as teachers (though it can sometimes be hard to tell the two apart, as their professional roles tend to intersect and overlap). As Kissner walks me through the building, we find ten or twelve students in one of the two larger rooms upstairs. They're all busily engaged and working at something, though on this particular morning, most appear to be working independently on different things. There's a youth worker helping a student at a computer who's working on a piece of writing. Across the room are two students sitting side by side but working on their own material, one creating a Venn diagram, the other seemingly drafting a letter or essay of some kind. Still others are at opposite ends of a couch, one curled up with a book, the other happily tapping away on a laptop.

Here, instead of classrooms with neatly arranged chairs in a row,

there are multiple learning spaces throughout the school, reflecting a relaxed, coffee house feel. The students are free to choose their courses of study, free to engage with activities and others if they wish, and free to follow their curiosity and pursue their own passions and interests—a stark contrast to what we typically picture school as being: regimented, rigorous, punitive, constraining. And judging from students' glowing praises of the program, the successes of that approach are clear. "If I didn't have this school," a student says, "I definitely would not be graduating. They gave me so many opportunities and chances that I would not have had at a regular school." Says another, "It's like a rehab facility for your soul. You are here to do school, but you just find out so much about yourself and what you're actually capable of. It really just lets you discover who you are." Students talk about feeling safe at the school—physically as well as emotionally. Safe to ask for help, safe to take chances, and safe to share their inner thoughts in creative writing and other forms of expression. "When I walk in, I breathe a sigh of relief," says a student; "I feel safe and ready to learn."

For many participants, Whytecliff is the first truly positive, inclusive community they've been a part of. This is key to the program's success. It shows that when students are made to feel safe, comfortable, and cared for and are given exciting opportunities to participate equally within a shared community of interest, then any number of personal or academic challenges—algebra, essays, graduation—can be overcome in due time and with the right supports. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding, and that's demonstrated through Whytecliff's high rates of attendance, course and degree completion, and academic success. In time, students here will go on to take the provincial exams, and they'll do well. They will graduate, the vast majority achieving the B.C. Dogwood Diploma, and they'll successfully move on to other meaningful things students do—gap years, post-secondary programs, trades and apprenticeship positions, and the world of work. They will know that they have something to give, an understanding that there is joy, community, purpose, and exciting possibility in life, because they have each lived with and experienced these at Whytecliff.


STOP
THE NORTH FACE

Basics and background

Whytecliff was founded in 1993 to meet the needs of learners who, for a variety of reasons, struggle to thrive in the conventional school system. Its two campuses in Langley and Burnaby, British Columbia are exclusively dedicated to addressing the needs of youth with a range of diverse learning needs and personal challenges (who qualify to work from IEPs). These include youth who find themselves at the margins because of specialized learning needs or socio-emotional issues, who have been bullied or ostracized, are experiencing anxiety or depression, or who feel lost, unwanted, or unsafe in a large impersonal school system that caters to the norm.

The program has a number of key professional accreditations. It's the only program in Canada, as far as we know, that is accredited both as an Independent High School (by the provincial Ministry of Education) as well as a Positive Youth Development program (by CARF, the same people who accredit B.C. hospitals). It is equal parts school and youth development program, combining the leading research and best practices from both in a unique and innovative formulation. The Whytecliff Approach, as it's informally known, is rooted in an impressive range of influences, including the work of progressive educators like John Dewey, developmental philosophers like Lev Vygotsky, trauma-informed researchers like Bessel van der Kolk, and positive psychologists like Barbara Frederickson and Martin Seligman. The big idea and overarching goal of the

approach is to increase a youth's academic engagement and educational success within the broader context of fostering their personal development and whole-person well-being. To that end, the program involves both teachers and youth development workers—often working side by side—engaging youth in a mix of hands-on learning projects, academic tutoring, community-based activities, and mentoring (with a special emphasis on social-emotional learning and cultivating positive mental health and wellness).

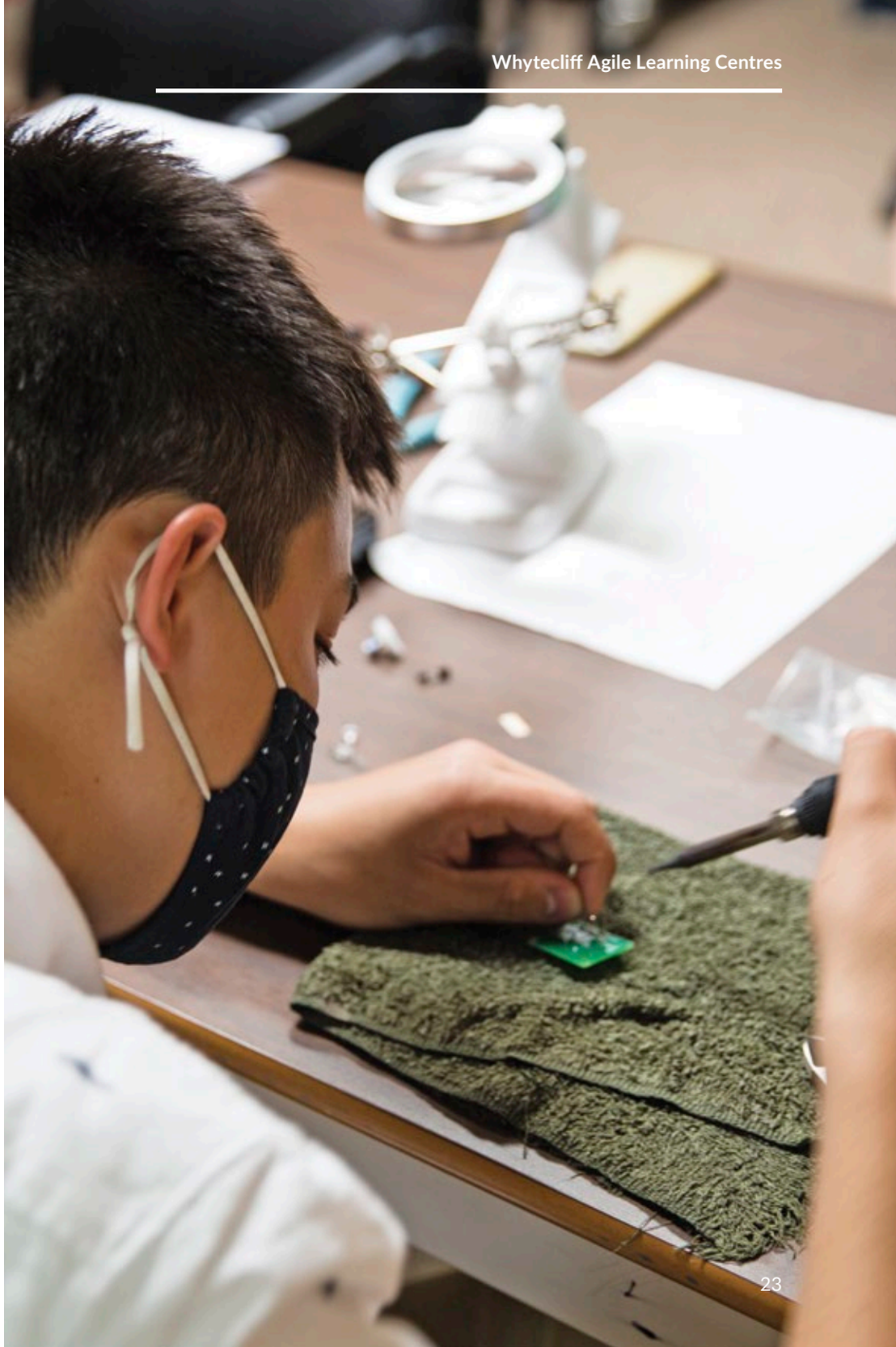
On a day-to-day basis, the Langley and Burnaby locations are run somewhat independently. Both sites share a common philosophy though, and the same set of goals, standards, and definition of success. The staff also get together frequently, engaging in professional development and training, and sharing ideas, best practices, and curriculum where appropriate. However, each location has a dedicated staff and leadership, and the only person with a foot formally planted in both programs is the founder, Robert Kissner.

Essential to the creation and running of Whytecliff, it was Kissner's vision to begin the school back in 1993, to design an integrated, life-affirming program for youth who were falling through the cracks of the conventional school system. Like progressive educational philosopher John Dewey, Kissner views education as holistic—integrating the mind, body, and emotions, interconnected with the community, and practical in its orientation. With his doctorate from the University of Chicago and background as a specialist in stress and trauma, Kissner brings his knowledge and experience of children's developmental growth, resilience, and recovery to his leadership at the school.

From the outset, Kissner sought to develop a program that was different from the norm. Instead of centring on a singular issue—say, creating a program exclusively for students with anxiety, or dyslexia, or ADHD—Kissner wanted to build a diverse, inclusive community that could open its doors to a wide range of learners. In the early days of the program, Kissner worked in cooperation with the Langley public school district. While the core concepts in

that partnership were sound, the initial delivery wasn't, and he saw that "it just couldn't work." For one thing, in the earlier model the staff wasn't as dedicated to the program since they were seconded to it from their full-time teaching positions. They also had other jobs, other responsibilities, and often lacked the necessary patience. "People would be upset if somebody was swearing." As Kissner tells it, they also wanted to modularize the delivery into six-month blocks. Something about the whole arrangement just didn't sit right with him. "So," he adds with an air of finality, "that was when we became an independent school."

Becoming independent brought all the things that were lacking in the earlier model. The new staff were dedicated to the program and keen to put in the time and energy to make it all work, from driving the vans to caring for students in the afterhours, to working more closely with families even outside the confines of the instructional day. The program was initially branded Youth Futures and Youth Futures R3, and in homage to its roots some of that branding remains at the Burnaby school, including the logo on the front of the building and on the wall of the main foyer. Later, it became what it is today, the Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre (with the word "Agile" being a playful nod to their flexibility and willingness "to pivot and adapt" to meet students' diverse needs). In any case, it was initially established, and continues to be administered and funded in part, by the Focus Foundation, a non-profit begun in 1975 to provide social and educational programs for children ages 13–19. The mandate of the foundation reads that "in contrast to approaches that focus on deficits and problems, we seek to build a tailored program based on each child's strengths to inspire hope and promote engagement in their capacity for positive growth." A noble mission and a worthy goal. And the school, pretty much to a T, meets that objective.



Student population

The schools are small—at Langley there is a total enrolment of about 45, at Burnaby there is 30—though each student also belongs to a smaller pod that's led by two members of the staff. The school welcomes students with a range of diverse learning needs, including ADHD, FASD, dyslexia, high functioning autism, Asperger's, language processing disorders, depression, anxiety, troublesome behaviour, gifted children, children with chronic health needs, and other challenges. Most students usually enrol at Whytecliff after an experience in the public school system and typically arrive with either a Ministry designation or a diagnosis that qualifies them to work from IEPs. One of the eligibility criteria for attending is that they have one.

The students are somewhat different between the two locations, though that's not intentional. "I don't know if it's urban versus valley," says Burnaby principal Ilona Davidson, "but they're just different. I'm not sure if sophistication is the right word, but there's a little bit more of a hip sophistication for the urban kids, whereas the valley kids tend to be a little bit more homey." In common, most students at Whytecliff require more emotional, practical, and tailored learning supports than mainstream and other schools provide.

Often, they've also been misunderstood. "Most of the students haven't heard themselves spoken about in a compassionate way before," comments a parent of the program, "or in a way that told them that they had gifts, or that they had anything special." Many arrive believing—in some cases because they've been told—that they have physiological barriers or intellectual limits, and that they'll never get past a certain level of academic achievement. Davidson talks about two students who recently enrolled who had been assigned to the Evergreen program for intellectually challenged youth. Not long after arriving, it was clear, at least to the staff at Whytecliff, that neither were intellectually challenged at all. "They just fell into a system in their old school where they received a label early on." They perhaps began to see themselves in that way, and to let that label define them. "But as soon as they showed up here, we could see quite quickly that they are intelligent, thoughtful. They are able to write." Had they been candidates for the Evergreen program, that would have been fine too, and indeed there are students within the school who benefit from that program. But for all, arriving at Whytecliff is a chance to reconsider all those decisions that have been made, all those identities that have been adopted, and to ensure that students reach their true potentials.

The staff take that as the first challenge to be faced with each new student who arrives; namely, to open up their sense of their abilities and their opportunities for intellectual and personal growth. Says Langley principal Shelley Donald, "we've got a kid in our program right now who came in afraid to try anything because he was afraid to fail. He was afraid to get an answer wrong, because he felt that defined him as a failure." His lack of achievement wasn't due to a lack of ability but was symptomatic of a negative self-image and self-limiting beliefs, mixed with a long history of not getting the supports he needed. Before diving into course content, the job was to first ease his underlying worries and concerns. Staff reassured him that it was safe to try new things at Whytecliff without fear of feeling labelled or judged, and that he could venture beyond his comfort zone when he was ready. Next, they worked together to identify and engage his strengths and interests—the goal being to open up his sense of himself as a bright, talented, capable learner by engaging him in learning that felt natural and fun. And so, says

Donald, that's what they did.

Which is no easy task, especially considering some of the difficult backgrounds and challenging stories that students arrive with. After all, they aren't at Whytecliff because things went well at other schools. They're here because something wasn't working, and they and their parents were actively looking for a new start, a new approach; a school that might have success where others hadn't. "We have kids who have a long history of negative school experiences and often real stressors around relationships with adults," says Davidson, "particularly those adults who are supposed to tell them what to do to get an education. … They have a long history behind them of having tried other places, and so they come to us often much more gun shy, much more desperate, perhaps really negative. [Thinking] 'Why are you going to be any different?' And their parents come with those attitudes and fears, too."

At Whytecliff, each student has a story. And while that's true of every student in every school, it's especially true here. At one point I entered a room where a number of students were gathered, but they weren't expecting me—you get a sense of that. One was open and very talkative. Others hung back, while others still, at least on the face of it, presented as resistant, if not outwardly defiant. Later, Langley youth worker Ian Graham says that some students have challenges with authority, both inside and outside the school environments that they've experienced in their lives, and I could, simply by my presence, raise some of those memories. "Sometimes they are difficult out of self-defence," says Donald, "because they have been made to feel worthless all their lives, and so they live up to that expectation." They also, for a wide range of reasons, can have trust issues, so opening up to an absolute stranger is not something they relish. Always one to focus on the positive and keep things in perspective, Kissner says of the students that, "everybody is doing the best job that they can, and they are either showing you the skills they have or the challenges they face." It's certainly true that anyone can have a bad day. And the staff are adept at reading

students' behaviours for what they are, seeking first to understand, then approaching them empathetically and supportively with a sense of calm and a remarkable level of patience.

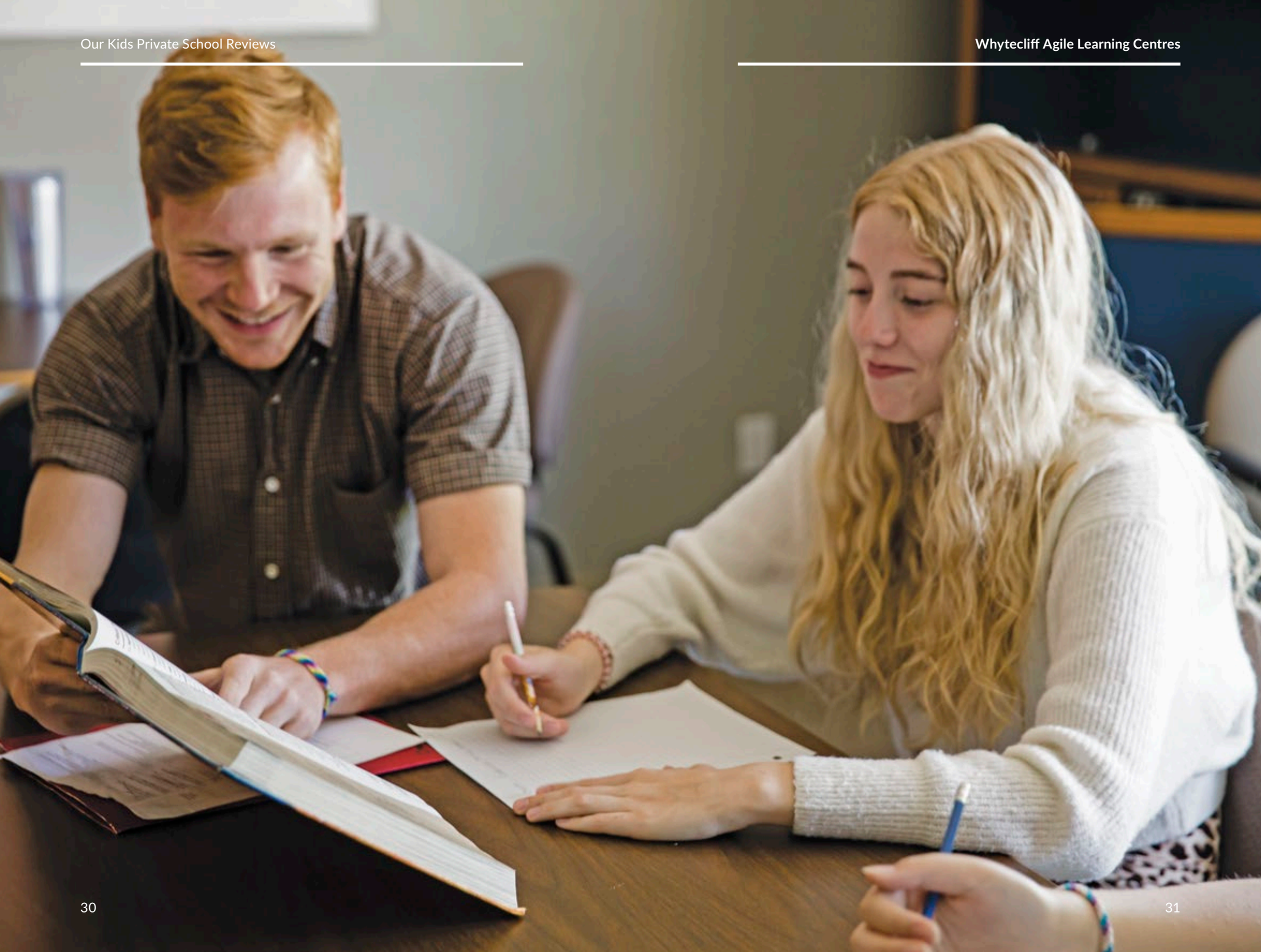
Academic environment

The success of the school (which, it needs be said, is strikingly impressive, but more on that below) is based in creating the right environment. Whytecliff's atmosphere is calm, comfortable, welcoming, and reduces stress and anxiety in students who are sensitive to the social environment. Says Graham, "a lot of the kids deal with a lot of anxiety, and sometimes depression or stress. And one of the reasons that this school works so well for them is that we provide an environment where they don't feel that as much … the environment makes it easier for them to step a bit outside of their comfort zones." The space is like a sanctuary—students are made to feel comfortable within it, and with the people that they share it with—which is an important aspect of the program's success.

The design of the Whytecliff interiors has been conducted with that concept foremost in mind. Spaces are bright, open, and flexible, with lots of natural light. The interior of the Burnaby location is reminiscent of the interior of the Vancouver airport, which is more than mere coincidence—the airport was designed by Clive Grout, and his architecture firm gifted their assistance and played a role in the design of Whytecliff. In both locations there is a prominent use of wood, natural surfaces, textured wallpaper, aquariums, and organic shapes that reflect the cultural and physical environment of the region. The colour scheme—yellow for hope, blue for calm, green for growth—is shared between the two locations. Soft incandescent lighting is used throughout, and cozy chairs and couches are grouped to provide areas of reflection or conversation. Every room very intentionally feels like a little campfire. It's subtle—nothing here is going to jump forward as particularly daring or ground-breaking—but that's the point. The learning environment was constructed to reflect what the participants need most: calm, a sense of home, and a space that they define through their presence within it.

The students arrive at about 9 a.m. each day. Some are dropped off while others are picked up by the staff in vans. Some days they gather as a group to start the day, others perhaps not, though when they do, they gather at 9:30. The morning tends to be devoted to academics as that's when the kids are most awake. The staff works to engage with students around their interests and their strengths, and to ensure that they find the work meaningful, rather than just working through worksheets. They have binders to track their work and to help decide how to spend their time each day. Otherwise, students tend to congregate in one of the classrooms upstairs or gravitate to wherever they feel most comfortable at that moment. One boy tends to not get much further than the lobby, where he sits quietly, reading or working on a math problem. Others gravitate together, though they aren't required to stay within their grade cohort or all be working on the same material. The formal instructional day ends at 2:30, with time for additional one-to-one support until 3:30.

Because of the unique needs and strengths of each student, the teacher/student ratio is low, usually around 1:5. "Kids in public school tend to disappear into an ocean of faces, and a lot of issues then go unnoticed," says Donald. "At Whytecliff, because there are so few students, we can take the time to build stronger relationships. … We know more about their families and their family situations. We get to meet their siblings. We go to their homes and just participate in their interests." In the evenings they may take students to a concert or a movie or a sporting event. "It makes the kids feel cared for, that people are taking the time to be with them. and that they



are special because of who they are. You know, 'I'm not doing this for you because you got a good grade on a chemistry test. I'm doing this for you because you're an amazing individual.' "

The staff includes administrators, teachers, and youth workers who have degrees in social work. Each member of the staff brings a frankly remarkable range of interest, perspective, and experience, beginning with Kissner himself. He's got a PhD and is also a registered social worker. He's taught at the University of Chicago, SFU, Trinity Western University, UCFV, and Douglas College, in topics ranging from social work, to education, to human development, to criminology. He's a specialist in stress and trauma, with an interest in facilitating resilience and emotional recovery. He is a former member of the Simon Fraser University Senate and Board of Governors, has served as president of the B.C. Association of Social Workers, and was the B.C. provincial representative to the Canadian Association of Social Workers.

The others may not have as long a resume, though they bring an equally remarkable range of attributes. Ilona Davidson has a master's degree in brain-based teaching and learning, through which she looked at how the brain works and the benefits to students of understanding how their brains work. She based her thesis on the work that she's done at Whytecliff. "I'm all about mindset, teaching kids how to understand what's really going on when they're learning," she says. "How what you think about yourself now is not necessarily who you will be." Cliodhna Barrett had taught troubled youth in Dublin and London. "She's very much a Mary Poppins," says Kissner, "she's got that warmth." Ian Graham has a background in working in colleges. Marcus Vander Veen graduated from Trinity and details cars in his off time. "He's more task oriented." Jeff Stroud joined the faculty in 2021 and has taught in ten countries as well as northern communities in Canada. "I like to move around and see things with my own eyes." At one point he mentions that he likes to study the work of great educators, so I ask him what he feels makes a great educator. He answers that it's someone who has "a way of

engaging almost everybody they meet in a variety of ways on all sorts of different levels. Where you walk into the room and you can see, or you can sense, that it's not just some of the kids who are into that teacher [but] the vast majority of the kids are participating or working toward something that the teacher feels is going to be important." After a pause he adds that "it sounds very simple, but in practice it's very challenging." He then mentions what he feels are strengths of some of his colleagues. "You look at Cliodhna, she's so gracious and calm and friendly and supportive. And anyone who needs that, you only have to walk into the room and you feel that's what's in the air." Rachael, "well, she engages people with science, and that's easier said than done, because a lot of people aren't really interested in how the universe works. But every time I drop by her classroom, I see that she's managed to engage people in science and has made it real for them." Of Shelley Donald: "There's no one in the school who works harder. And she's always coming up with new ideas, ways to make the abstract concrete."

That's something that, in my experience, is shared across the staff: an ability to make the abstract concrete. Everybody is working naturally and sensitively to grow the students' capacity to learn. "Everybody has particular gifts and talents," says Sorsabal, as does she. She is a recreational fly fisher and was planning on teaching some students how to tie flies. "There's attention to detail, let me tell you, when you're tying flies," she says, "I'm curious to see who will walk in." What the staff clearly shares is a great professional pride in finding creative ways to teach, preparing students ultimately for success on the province-wide exams: the graduation literacy assessment (GLA) taken in Grades 10 and 12 and the graduation numeracy assessment (GNA) taken in Grade 10. Jeff Stroud comments at one point that "it's a really exciting school." He's right. It is.

"Every day is different," says one of the youth workers. "Every day is a fresh experience." That adds a sense of possibility, which is also an element of the success of the school. And while they don't have a strict schedule, there is a basic outline of the day, divided

into four blocks, which is laminated and posted to the walls in the classrooms and common spaces, though when I ask Sorsabal what the difference is between, say, between block one and block two, she says only partially facetiously, "the position of the hands on the clock." Programming varies day to day as well, sometimes guided by nothing more than the curiosities that the students bring into the room. Other times it's more structured and planned. The day I visited the Burnaby school the students had been engaged in what they call a Carousel, where they circulate between a set of activities mounted at locations throughout the building. At one of the stations the students were learning to cook Indian food, taught by teacher Kiran Dhillon. At another they played basketball in the back parking lot.

The spaces have been crafted to allow that kind of instructional fluidity. In the art room in Langley, for example, there may be five to ten students working on a range of different projects, from sculpture to animation. There are lots of exemplars and materials for them to use. (On the wall in one area are some models of B.C. ferries, exceptionally detailed. They were made by a student who now sells that work and accepts commissions to build models of the ferries, all out of cardboard.) At the end of the room there are guitars, and students can play those as well. There is lots to do, but students are also free to have some time apart when they need it. The instructional spaces are varied, but all have glass windows, so people within them are seen, though the clear sightlines are also such that kids can easily find places to sit where they feel most comfortable. Some rooms are smaller, much like tutorial spaces like you'd see in a university library, with a table and chairs for two or three people at most. Others are larger and look a bit more like classrooms, with whiteboards, bookshelves, and desks with computers. Both sites also have open, family-style kitchens that serve as natural gathering places. On the second floor at the Burnaby location there is a main classroom area where students, as in the art area, work on their own or in small groups. That's the room where it's okay to talk a

bit—this isn't a library, and there aren't stalls. It's a flexible and social learning environment, one in which students feel free move around and to ask questions of each other or of any of the educators that circle through.

Academics

At Whytecliff, each student works from a personalized learning plan tailored to their unique strengths, needs, abilities, and interests. Students here are challenged in their work, yet not overwhelmed, and find their successes in their own accomplishments rather than through comparison with the goals and successes of others. While students have their projects and lesson plans to complete, they are free to work at their own pace with support and guidance from teachers and youth workers. It's a more flexible and individualized approach, one which places students at the centre of their educational experience through "self-paced" and "self-directed" learning.

Instruction is student-directed, though it's not laissez faire. It's more that every student is on their own mission. The teachers build on students' natural curiosity and passions and adapt the curriculum content to tie into students' personal goals and interests. Says Kissner, "This is particularly important for students who have had negative experiences in school and are turned off traditional ways of learning." At Whytecliff, a student's favourite comic book might be the way into the English curriculum, getting at concepts of narrative and character development. As in the school's training material, "an Aboriginal art project might be the way into the social studies curriculum for an Indigenous youth. Or football or hockey passing strategies might foster a broader interest in physics or mathematics." Instructors place their efforts in sparking curiosities, piquing

interests, and then capitalizing on them as natural motivators and entry points into the curriculum.

Using the provincial curriculum, students work toward completing their Dogwood Diploma or Evergreen Completion Certificate, just as they would in any other private or public school. The academic delivery, however, is unique to Whytecliff and, were you to visit, the differences would be readily apparent. For one, the students aren't separated out by grade as they would be in a more typical learning environment. A Grade 9 student might be studying science next to a Grade 10 student working through biology material, the teacher helping each, though also keen to find areas of overlap, sparking discussions between students and across curricular areas. "Rachael's great at that," says a teacher of Sorsabal. "You know, if one student is working through ionic bonding, she'll use that as an opportunity to walk them all through that at the same time." Students work at their own pace, either on their own, in pairs, or in small groups, with teachers providing materials, support, and guidance as needed. "We're kind of a cross between a teacher and a counsellor, a motivator, a mentor, a leader, all at the same time," says an instructor. Teachers are adept at seeing and accepting opportunities as they arise, and the variety helps keep interest and engagement high.

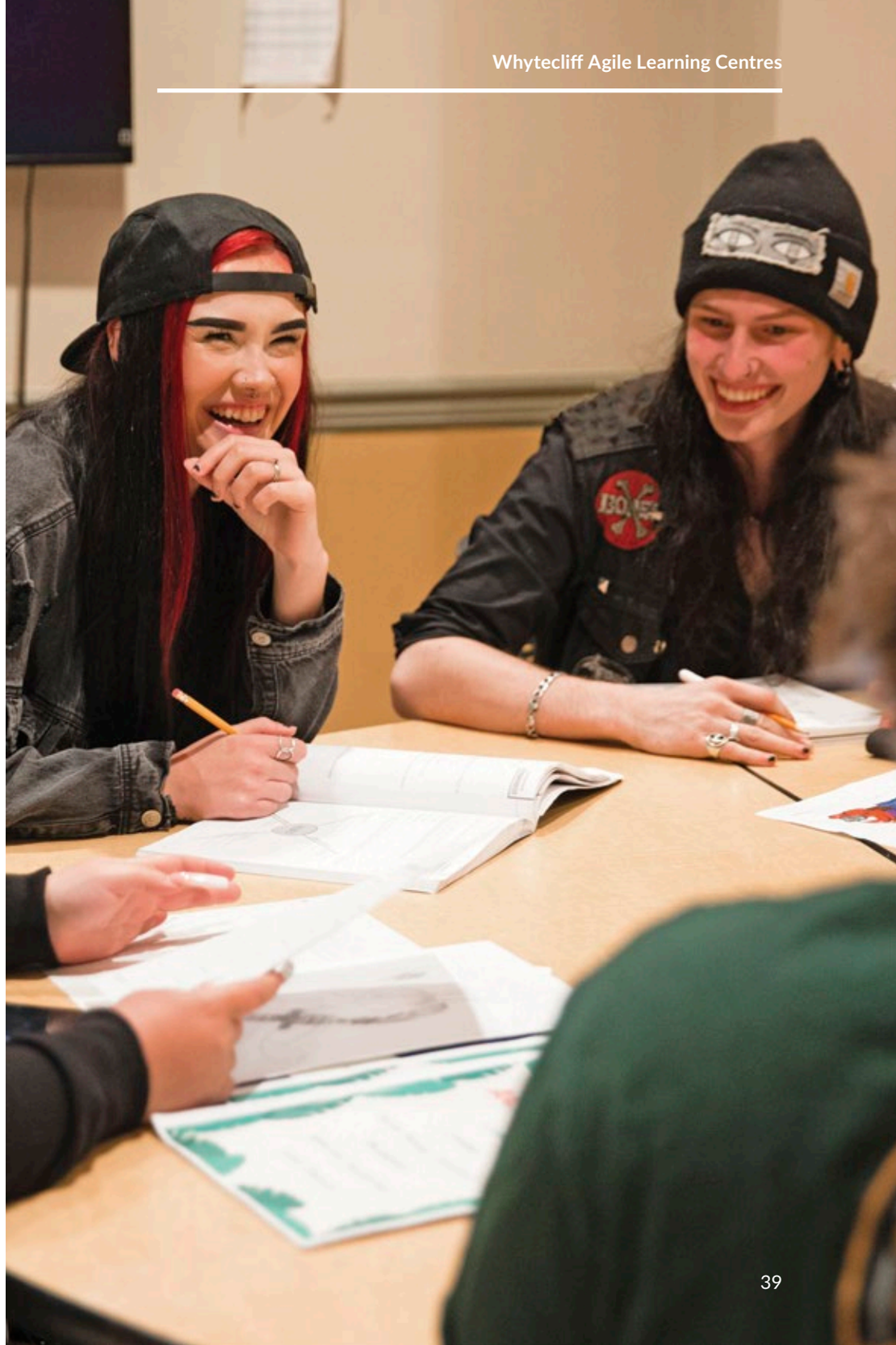
The academic program is accredited by both the Ministry of Education and the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). As Davidson puts it, "we speak to two masters." She also admits that it can take a while for youth and families to grasp how the program is different from other academic settings. When the students comment that they can do anything they want, to the casual observer unfamiliar with the program, that can sound like they aren't doing much of anything at all. Davidson agrees. "As a parent, I would think that, too. But here we have kids who have a long history of negative school experiences and often real stressors around relationships with adults, particularly around those adults who are supposed to tell them what to do to get an

education." Davidson says that the key to getting through to youth is a function of moving slowly, taking things at a comfortable pace that challenges yet doesn't overwhelm the student, "so that maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, there's an opening for that teacher to say 'Hey, are you ready to do some math? Do you trust me enough now?' " It may take months to reach that point, or even longer, "but once they make that shift, once their brain goes, 'Aha' then they can go great guns."

Given the structure of the school, the staff has the time to persist through challenges over periods of time that other educators in other settings simply don't have. "There's a greater flexibility, and we're blessed with that because we're so small." What Davidson doesn't say, but which is equally true, is that they are inclined to be patient and persistent, and to never give up. One teacher tellingly describes her role as that of "a listener and a caregiver, in a sense, in dealing with social issues and life skills. As opposed to the educator that is separated from the students' lives. We take on a ... more personal role." Says a student, the teachers are "more personal, straight up, interactive. They care about my health. They care about my well-being, you know. They care about how I'm doing and stuff like that. …They're in it for us." There is ample evidence of that.

In addition to supporting each student's individual path toward achieving success in their courses, the teachers believe in the importance of developing community among the students. Many of the students who come to the school have experienced isolation, loneliness, or rejection and need to feel like they belong and are part of a group. So, as students become ready, they are introduced to activities that engage with others and involve teamwork; these experiences build a sense of belonging, acceptance, and a positive sense of personal identity. Says Davidson: "... So many of our kids come to us with negative school experiences, and they really need, initially, the one-on-one time ... the helping hand of a teacher ... but we really notice the magic when kids begin to work in groups."

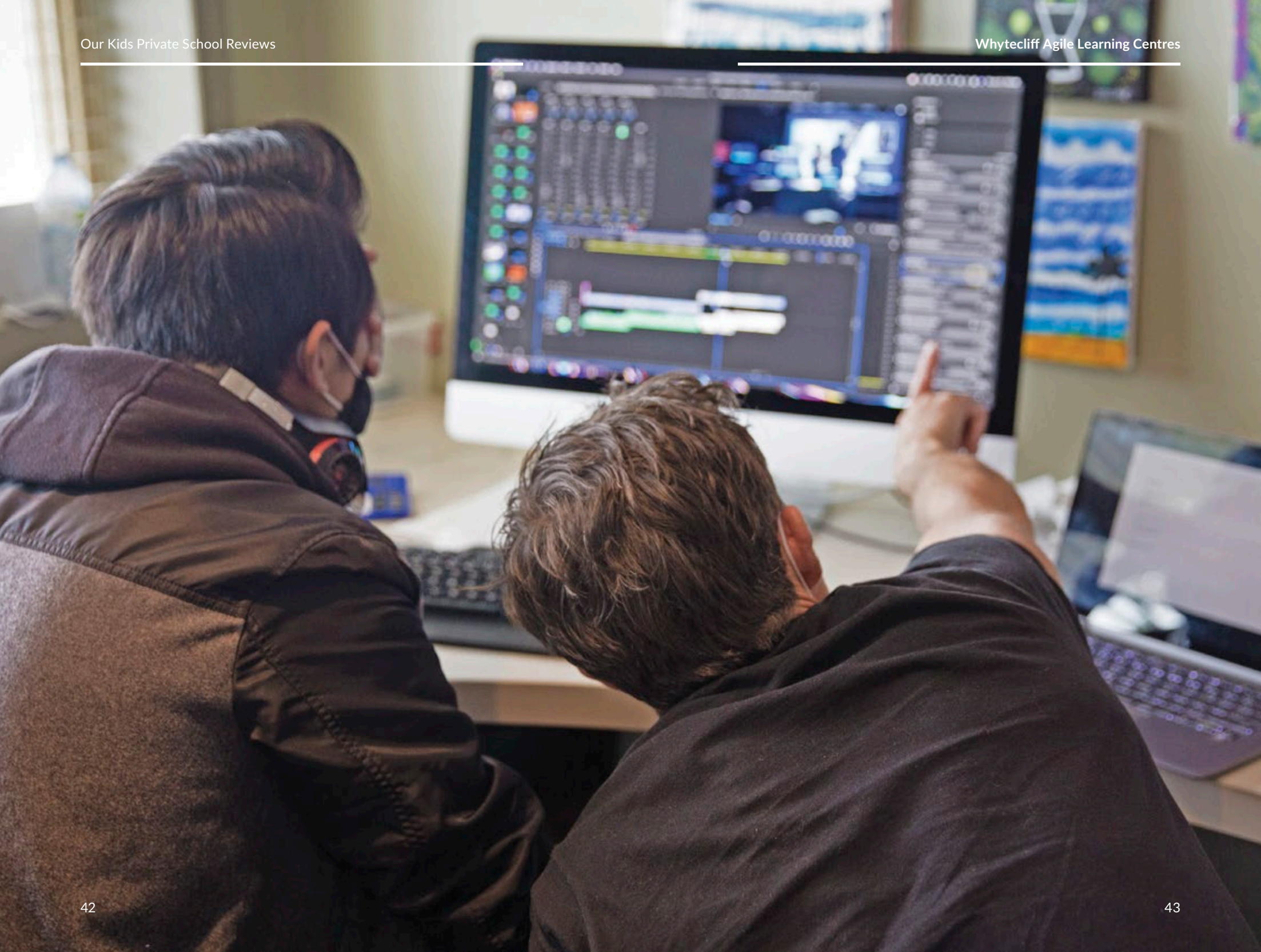
The activities can range broadly from year to year and student



to student—this isn't the kind of school where teachers begin the school year by flipping back to page one in their lesson plans—though the teachers track the lessons against the curricular outcomes and are mindful of the concepts that students will need to master. "We've got to do the same curriculum," says Davidson, which is the provincial one. "We've got to cover all the same stuff, but we don't have to do the three-week project on Louis Riel in the library. There are other ways of going through the Louis Riel curriculum, or doing quadratic equations, or whatever it is, there are ways of getting through the material that doesn't have to involve the traditional learning activities that you would see in a regular school," such as extensive group work, projects, and presentations. Here there's great flexibility given that the student body is so small and instructors have the freedom to follow their instincts around the needs of the students.

The question that some might raise is that while there is intellectual and social freedom, at some point you have to move through the curriculum and fulfill the diploma requirements. "That's the challenge," admits Sorsabal. "Right now, Shelley and I were just talking about another youth who is avoiding. How can I get her engaged? We had trouble last year, so how can we be creative this year?" Being creative for her means finding project-based, intentional activities that can be used to lead the students to a fluency with the core curriculum. Later, as we sit in her classroom, principal Shelley Donald talks about how that relates to math and the strategies she uses to get students engaged with things like sine and cosine functions and triangulation. On a piece of paper she quickly sketches out how, a few weeks before, the students had measured the width of Logan Street using those functions. They also measured the height of the building using triangulation and, because they are able to get up on the roof, were able to check their result using a tape measure. It's about being resourceful, thinking outside the box, and seeking new and exciting ways to bring the curriculum to life. "This is a discovery-based education," says Kissner. "It's real

foundational learning. You're learning what all these things actually mean." Similarly, "cooking is applied biology and chemistry," says Sorsabal, naming other creative ways to engage the kids in hands-on projects. Staff are also adept at finding cross-curricular opportunities and incorporating different health and wellness themes when planning the various activities and offerings. Throughout, equal attention is paid to all aspects of the learning experience: intellectual, physical, emotional, and social.



Wellness and co-curriculars

As a CARF-accredited Positive Youth Development program, Whytecliff holds a strong commitment to fostering the health, wellness, and social-emotional development of each and every student. As part of that commitment, it places a special emphasis on learning to live a healthy lifestyle, as well as nurturing a sense of community and positive social connection. This community focus is integral to the design of the program, since strengthening students' connections with the community and building long-term life skills is a fundamental goal. Through a range of co-curricular programming and hands-on projects, students are able to extend their understanding of their academic work and access valuable real-world experiences.

Each month, students are introduced to a different therapeutic wellness-related theme. Some themes focus on sleep, some on nutrition and healthy eating, some on yoga stretches and exercise, among many others. Oftentimes, teachers seek to incorporate the monthly themes into students' projects and lesson plans. For the most part, the activities and lessons connected to these themes are commonsensical, intuitive, and grounded in solid science. Each is also a no-brainer when it comes to supporting children's healthy development and academic success. After all, a child can't concentrate if their physiology is off, whether from poor sleep, a skipped breakfast, or because they've been slumping in a chair for three hours straight and the blood flow's cut off to their brain. That's why

they start with the fundamentals: sleep, nutrition, exercise.

The students at the Langley location have access to a fitness centre across the street and they make use of it almost daily. It has indoor basketball courts and fitness studios. The morning we were there, Marcus Vander Veen, a youth and family worker, walked through the school casually asking if anyone would like to go to the gym. A number did, and he passed out cards and we walked across the street. There, the students played basketball. For those students who are interested, the staff has been developing training schedules, making use of the weights and fitness machines. On Monday they do upper body, Tuesday is legs, and so on. They're also learning about how their muscles work, and how nutrition contributes to overall health. The Burnaby location has a basketball hoop out back as well as a few planter boxes, where students can stretch their legs, get some fresh air, and tend to some gardening when they want to take a break.

At Whytecliff, staff take great pride in working together as a team to come up with creative ways to engage the students in co-curricular and community-based activities which support and add value to the curriculum. The staff rightly sees the resources available throughout the region as valuable learning tools. The range of offerings can vary somewhat from year to year, depending on the particular needs and interests of the students. This year, for example, there is a hike club, much beloved by the students who choose to participate, which typically goes out on excursions every Tuesday. There are also trips to cultural and academic events. The day I visited the Burnaby school they were heading to an event called the DaVinci Experience in Tsawwassen. Teachers and youth development workers had been brainstorming ahead of time to find interesting ways to connect the trip with the academic curriculum. In prep, students had been learning about DaVinci's life and work, and some had participated in creating a model of one of his bridge designs. At the Langley location, principal Shelley Donald has been taking a group of students to a wildlife rescue society to help build

enclosures for animals as well as ramps and platforms for them to play on. As with the academic program, none of these activities are mandated, and students are free to participate if they wish or to opt out if that's their preference. But the range of activities, and their frequency, add an important dimension to the school experience. That they are all tied back to the curriculum and the core competencies only adds to that.

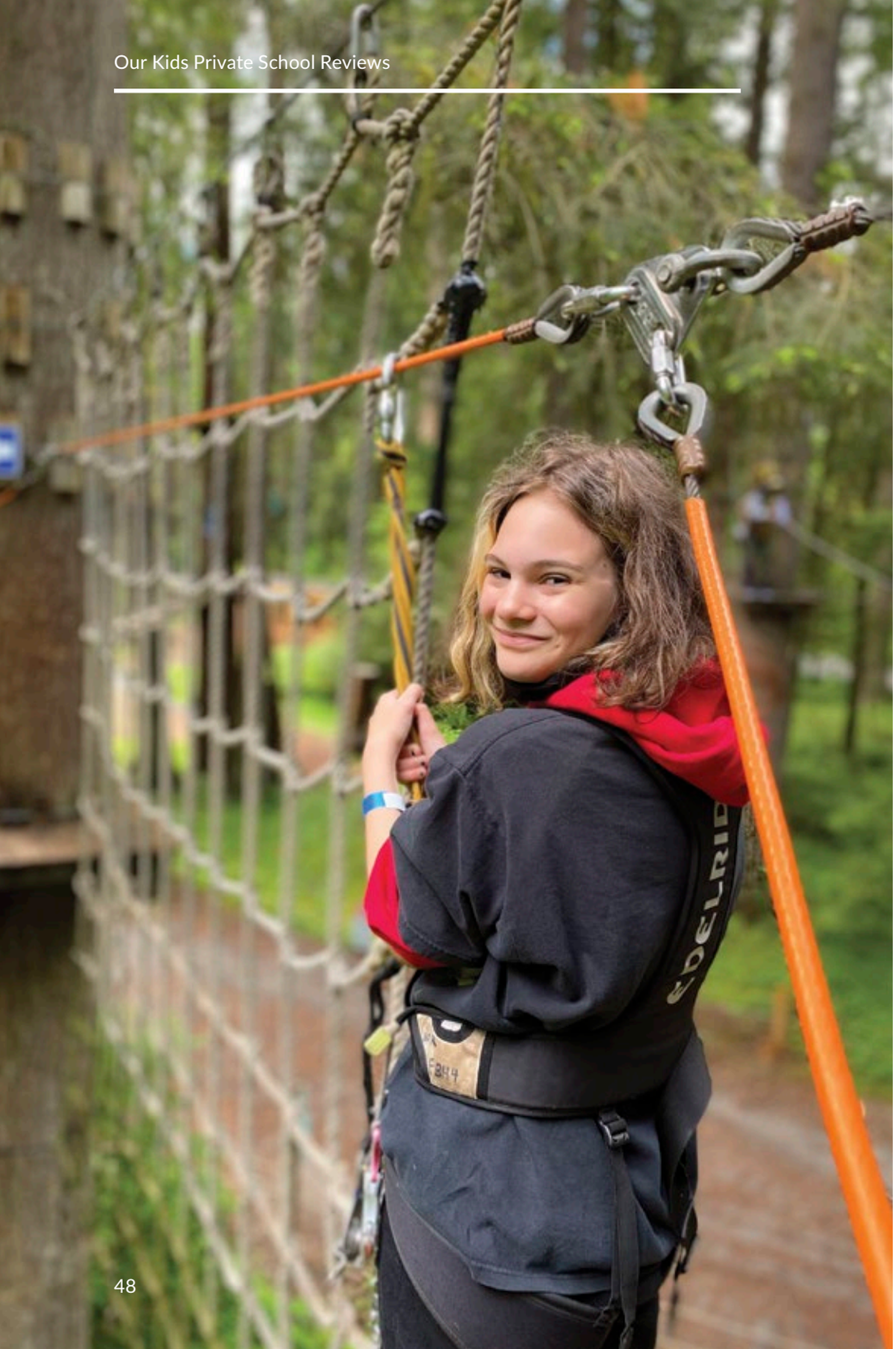
While there isn't a band, the opportunity to explore music is a guiding principle. In the arts, perhaps especially, this is an environment in which the right answer is seemingly always "yes," and instructors are keen to capitalize on any interest as an entry point to the curriculum. One teacher told us about a student who wanted to learn saxophone, so the instructor went out and rented two saxophones—one for him, one for her—and they learned the instrument together. Teachers credit the freedom and flexibility of their job role at Whytecliff with the building of positive and responsive relationships essential to facilitating students' healthy development. The most important difference between this school and others, says a teacher, is "the relationships that teachers and staff are encouraged to have with the kids. The number one thing is the relationships."

On an ongoing basis, the school offers optional off-site programming, some of it delightfully oddball, which is precisely the point. They're as likely to go to a farm as a mattress factory, to play indoor volleyball or have a day at the beach. "Around Christmas break we do things like go-karting, go get a Christmas tree," says one of the Langley youth workers. "We go to a lot of places and try to load up as many kids as we can into our 15-passenger vans. We have three of those." Each trip is an adventure. Examples of past activities include participating in outdoor sports, engaging with creative projects, mentorships in the trades, doing volunteer work, or (for Indigenous youth) participating in a smudging ceremony or other cultural practices. Trips have included those to museums, provincial parks, as well as cultural centres and landmarks in the community.

Fun is a distinct aspect of the Whytecliff experience, as you

see walking through the learning spaces or joining in on off-site trips. Not every minute, perhaps, but on the whole. It's intentionally woven into the students' experience, especially through engaging, student-led projects and hands-on experiential learning. "We do rock climbing, basketball, hockey, art, photography, digital media—a vast array of fun and meaningful activities," says Burnaby principal Ilona Davidson. Through these and other experiences, students reach a fuller understanding of themselves and acquire a sense of direction for their future vocation and life beyond school.

True to form, there's often more deliberation—and a deeper reason—to the various off-site trips and co-curricular offerings than meets the eye. "A lot of what we do is based on what we now understand about the brain and how kids learn," says Davidson. "We [might] sound like a 'fun' program, and we are, ... but everything we do is deliberate and based on what most current research says about how kids learn, how schools are effective, and particularly how we work with vulnerable learners. So, we use brain-based research, and brain-based research says a few things: if kids aren't feeling safe, if they're not having fun, and if emotion isn't involved, they're unlikely to learn, and they're unlikely to come." Says Kissner, trying to boil down the philosophy of their approach while being slightly modest, "All we're really doing is taking kids and giving them the best time of their lives. We help kids have the most fun they've ever had. And when you do that, guess what? They want to go to school. And when you go to school you begin to have friends and then you become part of a community. And then all the kids begin to teach each other." In Kissner's formulation, children's experience of positive emotions such as comfort, belonging, interest, inspiration, hope, pride, and especially joy are key indicators and enablers of the program's success. He goes on to add, "For us, laughter is a form of quality control. If there's enough laughter and fun going on, the program is working. And when you do that, people increase their capacity to learn." As you see when you visit, the students are laughing, learning, and having fun.



Getting in

Applications are made directly to the school, typically first by making contact via email. In some cases families are referred by other educators, though for most, finding Whytecliff comes as a result of a long search through a range of options. There are a few open house events throughout the school year and attending one of those is highly recommended. Intake occurs from April through late August or early September, for the full school year, though entry during the winter and spring terms can sometimes be accommodated.

Before joining the community, each student is interviewed at length to determine if there's a good fit and if the program is indeed right for the student. "I'm looking for you to have some intention for growth," says Kissner to the applicants, "and some intention to make good choices and have rich experiences in your life." Davidson agrees, noting that a good fit includes an ability to self-reflect and a disposition to take on a program of positive change. That has to come from the students themselves, and part of the interview process is to determine if the students themselves are making the choice to attend. No students are here simply because someone else thinks it would be good for them; rather they are here as an act of agency, of taking control of their learning and their lives.

From there, there are tests administered to gain a sense of the student's strengths and challenges. The information gathered there is used to build an approach. Diagnoses are important, though they

don't rule the day. More weight is given to ongoing assessments and conversations, which are then used to build and inform each student's IEP.

Tuition is lower than you'd expect for a private or independent school within this academic market. In part that's because many costs are covered through the Focus Foundation. However, there is also a desire to keep costs low in order to ensure that the program is within reach of all who can benefit from it. Because the program is therapeutic, there is some tax relief available for families who enrol.

The takeaway

Whytecliff was founded for perhaps the best reason there is, namely, to meet a need that wasn't being met. It's been achieving that in innovative, exceptional ways for more than 25 years. Since the beginning, the force of the programs was in working with assets, rather than deficits: finding talents and passions, and using those as the means of developing skills and engagement. It's unlike any school in the region or, for that matter, the country. Both locations provide a safe, comfortable, and welcoming learning environment for students in Grades 8 through 12. The school offers the provincial curriculum, small class sizes, and individualized attention. It has a history of meeting students where they are and leading them to academic success.

Students arrive with a range of challenges, though also with a shared experience of finding themselves on the periphery of their communities and social circles. In that sense, while they may be different from each other, here they are different in the same way. The school gets them to the completion of their secondary degrees—almost invariably, the students admit that such a thing wouldn't be possible anywhere else—though they achieve much else in their time at Whytecliff, some arguably more important than a diploma. When students leave, they've experienced community and have grown into a sense of themselves as capable, talented individuals with much to give. Following on, Davidson is clear that graduation isn't the only goal, as important as that is. It's also about growth,

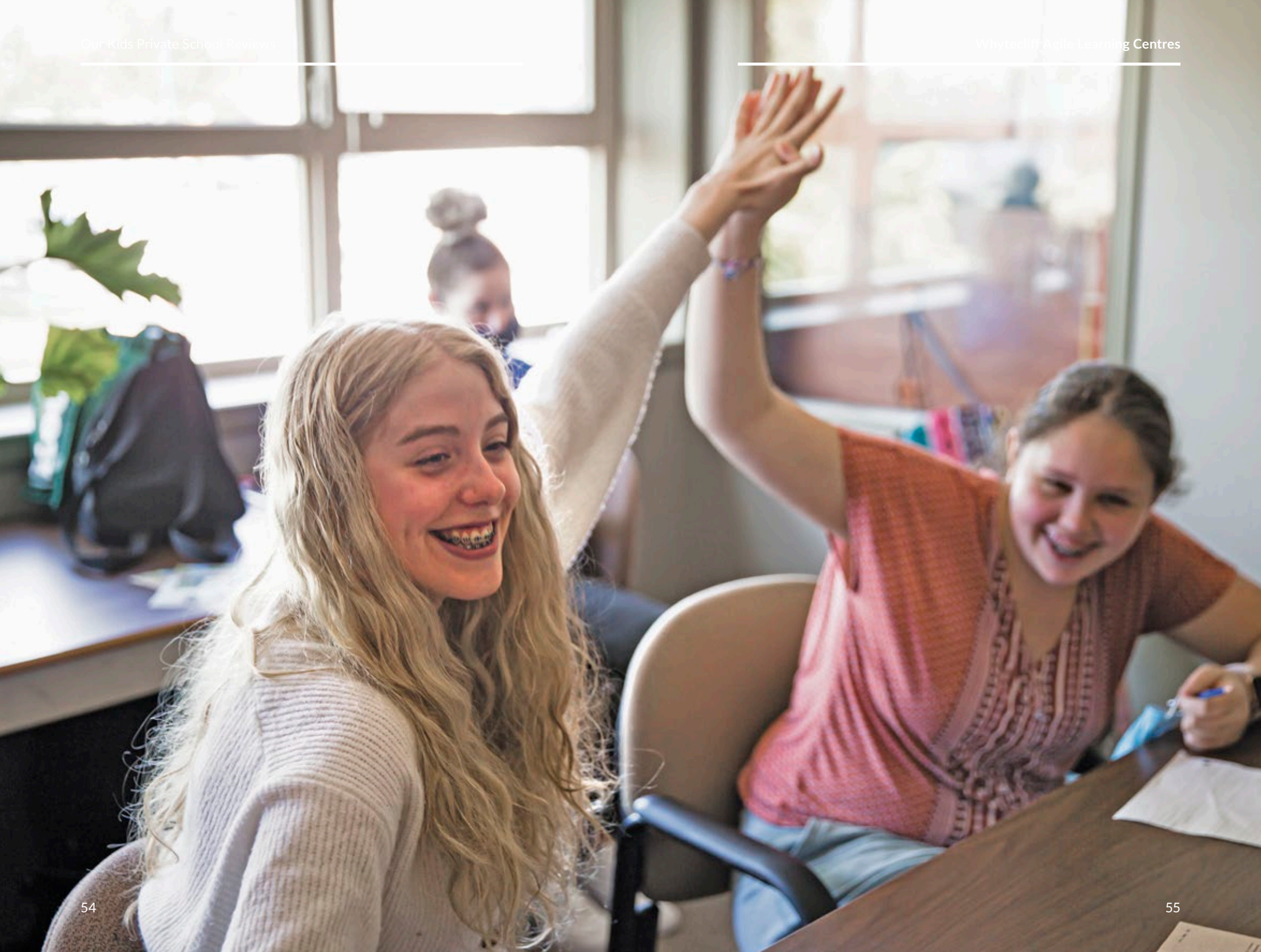
and if students leave the school different from when they came in, "taking with you the skills, mindsets, beliefs that will serve you well ... that give you hope and optimism for your future."

Whytecliff sets a lofty goal of not just educating young people, but changing their lives, giving them a sense of place and purpose. As one parent notes: "I just love the program. At the typical assembly-line school my daughter fell between the cracks. Here they gave her self-respect and dignity and fostered her talents and abilities." The school embraces a progressive perspective that does not view youth according to their designated special needs label or their particular emotional or life challenge. Rather than focusing on treating students' deficits that need fixing, they focus instead on students' assets—their gifts, talents, strengths, relationships, and personal resources. Staff look beyond the labels and seek the bigger picture of each student's unique strengths.

The faculty brings a wealth of professional and therapeutic accreditation and professional and personal experience, not limited to teaching, which provides the basis for a substantial program of wellness, one integrated throughout every moment of the instructional day and beyond. The philosophy of wellness and individualized services is threaded throughout the organization and is very evident if you were to visit. It's a flexible and social learning environment, one in which students feel free to move around and to ask questions of each other or of any of the educators or youth workers on hand. There are smaller classrooms for more directed instruction, though even there, the pace is very much set by the students themselves. The quality of the offering is reflected in very high attendance rates and course completion, which increases 4 to 8 times. 95% of students entering Grade 12 graduate, and later self-rate as 9.3 out of 10 for being on a solid life path.

The real successes of the school, though, are personal. For many students, Whytecliff is the first truly positive, inclusive community they've been a part of. Speak with anyone about Whytecliff and you hear charming stories of disbelief at their good fortune for finding

the school. There's a sense of muted delight, on the part of both students and educators, that there could be such a perfect place to become who you want to be, and to bring yourself into the service of others. But there is. In every way, Whytecliff is a hidden gem and an academic setting like no other. Which is too bad, in a sense, given that other schools, not simply those dealing with special needs learners and vulnerable youth, could benefit from adopting some of the best practices that have been developed here. Would that more people could step inside and see all the great things happening here.



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