



The Brain Builders Lab was a joint initiative of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Its aim was to move Brain Story science, which links childhood trauma to later health outcomes, into action. Between 2019 and 2021, participants in the Brain Builders Lab undertook projects to spread and embed Brain Story science in their communities. This case study along with the others in the series provides practical advice on how to develop and implement projects, along with project impacts and lessons learned.

School District 91, Nechako Lakes

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Stephanie Lindstrom, Psychologist, School District 91, Nechako Lakes

Location

- North-Central British Columbia

Introduction and Project Goals

School District 91 (SD91), Nechako Lakes, serves approximately 4,500 students in 20 educational sites in Fort St. James, Fraser Lake, Burns Lake, Vanderhoof and surrounding areas, as well as several Indigenous communities in the region. While the effect of trauma on students' capacity to learn and succeed academically was already on the district's radar, the understanding of why this happens was missing from those conversations and not everyone agreed on how to approach it.

Stephanie Lindstrom's goals in joining the Brain Builders Lab were to:

- Deepen the understanding by SD91 staff of why trauma affects learning, health and social outcomes for students; and
- Create a common language for this issue to help align opinions and response strategies in the classroom.

Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Tailoring the information for the audience: Stephanie developed a workshop that wove core Brain Story concepts together with psychological theory and a parent–grandparent perspective. She used short videos from the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative to illustrate key concepts, included the Brain Architecture Game and built in time for group discussion to ensure the workshop would be engaging for people with different learning styles, and professionally and personally relevant for the audience.

Targeted awareness-raising: Stephanie's role includes providing professional development for district staff, so she delivered her workshop at the first available opportunity. The workshop was very



well received and she was invited to deliver the same session to another school at their next professional development day.

Securing leadership buy-in: Stephanie's strategy to engage SD91's leadership was to target them through their regular professional development sessions since many of these individuals are also teachers and principals. As she expected, many administrative leaders were present and quickly bought into the relevance of brain science knowledge for SD91. The knowledge aligned well with what had already been recognized as a priority issue, so it was seen as a tool to facilitate the district's broader agenda rather than a new direction of work.

Digital communication: Stephanie included a link to the Brain Story Certification Course in her email signature as a passive strategy to promote the Brain Story to anyone she contacted digitally.

Outcomes and Impact

Shifting mental models: Stephanie was surprised at how quickly the knowledge was embraced by high school teachers as she thought they might see it as less relevant than their elementary school colleagues. However, that was not the case. Brain Story science is now permeating staff discussions and starting to create a common understanding and language across the district. Conversations about trauma and its impact on student experiences are now happening regularly and staff are exploring new ideas about how to respond to this issue in the classroom.

New champions: Workshop participants have been passing on resources to colleagues, which suggests that brain science knowledge was highly relevant. This additional sharing among staff has helped spread the knowledge faster than Stephanie could have accomplished on her own.

Organizational change: The administrative staff who attended Stephanie's workshop quickly bought into the relevance of the knowledge for SD91. The district has since asked all principals to complete the Brain Story Certification Course and encouraged the rest of their teaching staff to do so as well.

Practice change: The Brain Story has influenced Stephanie's own practice. She now approaches clients with a greater appreciation of how their experiences have contributed to the challenges they face and has adopted a more trauma-informed approach in her practice.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Tailoring for the audience helps create buy-in and engagement. Stephanie credits much of her success to pulling the science into a useable format for teachers and delivering a workshop that was engaging and thought-provoking. This strategy helped gain traction among high school teachers as they could see the relevance of the Brain Story to their students. It also helped all staff understand their role in supporting not just learning but also well-being among their students.

Where possible, integrate the work into your regular responsibilities. Partway through the project, Stephanie's role shifted to providing regular professional development for SD91 staff. She took advantage of this and made her Brain Builders Lab project an integral part of her day job. The work was never relegated to the side of her desk; it was always front and centre and is now part of her regular responsibilities.

Align with organizational culture and goals. The effect of trauma on students was already recognized as an issue for the district and helped pave the way for rapid buy-in for the Brain Story across the district. SD91 is a learning organization with a culture of professional development and continuous improvement, so it was easy for staff to move from awareness to a desire to implement change based on new knowledge.



Stephanie plans to focus on how to apply the science in more school settings so that in time all schools within SD91 can be trauma-informed and aligned with brain science. Once pandemic restrictions allow, she also intends to share the information in smaller segments with community organizations.

Resources

- CCSA impact video: [Application of Concepts in a North-Central B.C. School System](#)

