

## Backgrounder: Dear Coastal Neighbour! Strengthening Social Connectedness on the Sunshine Coast

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**Big Picture:** There is overwhelming research evidence that shows that social connectedness is a critical ingredient in human development and wellness, as well as for the overall functioning of a community. Social connectedness is a basic need for everyone and is as important as food and shelter. There are studies that show that a lack of social relationships is equivalent to smoking as a risk factor for poor health and mortality. Yes, it is that important!

**Context:** The COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with the Provincial Order to “social distance”, has in many ways weakened social connectedness, heightening people’s feelings of social isolation and impacting people’s mental and physical wellness. This feeling is especially acute amongst population groups that tend to feel socially isolated even in the best of times.

**Call to Action:** While we need to be keeping a 6-foot physical distance from each other, we should actually be practicing the opposite with regards to social behaviour. We should be strengthening solidarity and putting in extra effort to increase social connectedness. This will help to decrease people’s vulnerability and increase people’s wellness during the pandemic, as well as help to rebuild and maintain this key determinant of health that the Sunshine Coast will require during the recovery phase and beyond. A more connected Coast is a more resilient Coast.

**Curriculum Link:** Any course or module that looks at: health and wellness; social responsibility; humanities & sociology; Communications; Writing & Arts; or that looks at building student mental wellness, strengthening empathy and pro social behaviour, increasing community belonging & relationships.

### Other Benefits for Students:

- The opportunity to give back and help out others.
- The opportunity to share something of themselves & what they love about the Sunshine Coast.
- The encouragement to come from a place of inquiry & curiosity about others who live in their community.
- The excitement of being part of something positive & bigger, to strengthen connectivity across the Coast.
- To have curriculum that is timely and relevant to one of the biggest historical markers in the last century.
- To strengthen their own connections to each other and to the Coast.

**The Idea:** Some components to enable social connectedness already exist on the Sunshine Coast. For example, people are video chatting and using various forms of social media to keep connected to friends and family and, for people who are typically isolated there are programs such as friendly visiting phone calls, etc. However, the pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the social fabric of society. More needs to be done.

- **What:** Going low-tech and bringing back the magic, art and intimate nature of human exchange and connection through the medium of letter writing.
- **Who:** While we hope to engage the broader public on the Sunshine Coast in this initiative, we think this is a particularly good opportunity to engage children and youth through the School District.
- **Why:** Everyone loves to receive a thoughtfully written letter! A handwritten letter is a powerful way to connect to someone. It is more personal and requires more thought than most forms of electronic mediums. In addition, not all people who are socially isolated have internet connection or are tech savvy. Moreover, it is a “new” and different way to spark connections between and reach out to people. For students, it also provides them a way to help out during the pandemic, as well as integrating a relevant teachable component into the curriculum (e.g., creative writing, arts, social responsibility, social-emotional development, etc.).
- **How:** Basic idea is that the letters might be included with the groceries that are being delivered (e.g. via Persephone) and possibly more broadly through the local Canada Post office. Letters might invite the recipient to respond to the letter writer if they wanted to. Details (Ideas and Basic Protocols & Logistics) will be outlined in a separate guide.
- **Timelines:** We are hoping to put this idea into action as soon as possible.

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