

# MECCS

*A newsletter for Mother Earth's Children's Charter School to share its successful traditional and innovative programming.*

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## Amazing Opportunity in Belize

A request at a board meeting led to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for two MECCS staff members.

In September of this year, Superintendent Ed Wittchen was at a meeting of the Alberta Public Charter Schools superintendents when a unique opportunity came our way. Dr. Lynne Paradis, superintendent of Suzuki Charter School, mentioned that she was looking for a couple of educators for a literacy project she has been heading up in the country of Belize for the past decade or so.

Superintendent Wittchen immediately volunteered MECCS principal Erin Danforth and teacher Maxine Hildebrandt for the job. Erin and Maxine were excited to undertake work on this well-established project, and felt they would be able to learn from the experience as well as share their skills with the local teachers.



*Two young students from San Jose Succotz RC School in Hopkins, Belize, where two MECCS staff members recently visited and worked.*

The project in Belize provides quality resources and coaching on effective literacy strategies for Belize educators and volunteers. Another component of the



project focuses on strengthening local libraries to support community literacy development. This project is supported by the Rotary Clubs of San Ignacio, Belize, and Red Deer, Alberta, the Ministry of Education (Cayo, Belize), and many dedicated literacy volunteers in both Alberta and Belize. This project involves Canadian literacy and community development experts working in teaching teams consisting of Belize educators, public librarians, women in the community and local volunteers. The adult participants provide stimulating learning programs for Belize school-aged children, preschool-aged children, and developers of local library preschool and classroom programs supporting literacy achievement for both adult and child participants.

Under the guidance of Dr. Paradis, the group undertook to introduce teachers at the San Jose Succotz RC School in the Cayo District of Belize to the principles of Guided Reading, using new resources donated to the school by both the local Rotary Club and the Red Deer Rotary Club. The teachers from MECCS worked for four days with teachers in Standard 3 and 4 (grades 4 and 5) on strategies that would help them to implement the Scholastic Guided Reading program. They met some amazing and dedicated teaching professionals who do so much with so little.

- Clockwise from bottom left:*
1. The landscape coming into San Ignacio, Belize.
  2. Dr. Lynne Paradis speaking to staff and volunteers in a typical classroom at San Jose Succotz RC School.
  3. Dr. Paradis presenting certificates to teachers and librarians.
  4. A classroom block (standard 4A and 4B) at San Jose Succotz RC School.

Schools in Belize are unlike North American schools. Most are run by organizations such as religious groups but they must all deliver the Belizean curriculum. Because the schools are often built by these non-governmental organizations, they are built in stages as funding is found. This means a school's



classrooms are not always under the same roof. There are no gymnasiums; physical education classes take place on fields or on paved areas. Bathrooms are usually housed in their own separate buildings. Running water is not always standard. Nearly all the buildings in Belize are made of cement blocks. The school buildings don't have glass in the windows, just shutters or louvers to let the air circulate.

*Clockwise from top left:*  
 1. Maxine and two of the other teachers enjoying some down time.  
 2. Standard 3 (grade 4) students on a break during the school day.  
 3. The main pyramid at Xunantunich Mayan Ruins.  
 4. A beautiful spot in Hopkins, Belize.  
 5. Palapa (outside dining area) at the Aguada Hotel.  
 6. Canadian teachers learning Garifuna drumming.

“The classrooms were pretty much as one would expect,” Erin stated, “except for the fact that they were so hot. We likened them to Easy Bake Ovens!”

Resources are scarce, as they are costly, and the local teachers have to purchase their own supplies. However, they do amazing things with just a few resources.

The Cayo District of Belize extends along the border with Guatemala. Because of this, the predominant language is Spanish. Many of the students arrive at school with very little English but all instruction and assessment is done in English. This creates a problem with reading fluency and comprehension once students arrive at school. The Literacy Alive project works to make sure that educators not only have appropriate resources at their disposal but also the training necessary to make the best use of them. They





can also continue to be in contact with the Canadian team members for coaching and for any questions that come up.

After the five days of teaching in San Jose Succotz, Erin and Maxine travelled with the group to a community on the coast of Belize. Hopkins is in the Stann Creek District and is commonly known as the cultural centre of the Garifuna people of Belize. Hopkins is also known as “The Friendliest Village in Belize,” which both of our teachers can confirm.



While in Hopkins, they visited the local library, staffed by Danisha Martinez who was a participant in the Literacy Alive workshops that were held for librarians. The Miss Bertie’s Hopkins Community Library is a place where kids can go to read, learn and play, and it was full of busy children during their lunch break. Ms. Martinez kindly offered to help the group from Canada experience the best of Hopkins while they were there. She suggested they take in some Garifuna celebrations since the Garifuna Independence Day holiday was just around the corner. Maxine and some of the other Canadians attended a drumming workshop in the village. They not only learned to drum Garifuna-style but they also got to drink coconut water from coconuts fresh from the tree. During their last night in Belize, they attended a concert at a local restaurant and were treated to traditional Garifuna music and dance.



Leaving your comfort zone often presents the opportunity to change and grow. The experiences had by our two teachers were exciting and challenging, and both teachers stated that they felt like they had learned as much as they had taught others. They both indicated that they were grateful to the wider charter school community for the connections that let them take on this new opportunity for growth. Both are interested and willing to return to Belize with this project as soon as spots on the team become available in the future. Thanks to Dr. Paradis and the Red Deer Rotary Club for this amazing opportunity.



*Counterclockwise from top left:*  
 1. Students from the San Jose Succotz RC School.  
 2. Standard 4 (grade 5) students in their classroom.  
 3. Maxine Hildebrandt with her Standard 3 (grade 4) students.  
 4. Participant teachers in the program.  
 5. Maxine with local elder Felipita Valdez, a retired educator who lives in the community and volunteers with the school. Ms. Valdez shared stories about Belizean history and culture.

