

# British Columbia Exchange Teachers' Association

January 2017

BCExchangeTeachers.ca

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

This past September, we welcomed 6 exchange teachers from Scotland, France, Switzerland, and Australia. This month, we have an additional 8 teachers arriving from Australia. Teachers are located all over the province in places like Burnaby, New Westminister, Mission, Victoria, Nanaimo, Comox, Kelowna, Prince George, Nelson and way up there in Port Simpson!

The BC Exchange Teachers' Association hopes that these teachers have a wonderful professional and personal experience while in British Columbia.

Our Association's main objective this year is to promote the exchange program across the province. This will be done by hosting a number of information sessions in various locations. Upcoming events on the lower mainland include a Meet and Greet at the end of January and a 5 Pin Bowling Night early in February. ([see calendar of events](#))

We held an information session in Comox last November and hope to add several more throughout the province in the near future. We also had our second annual Christmas Potluck dinner. ([see articles on both events](#))

We are looking into hosting events for both former and current exchange teachers to attend. After a very successful weekend in Victoria last May, we intend to repeat this event in 2017. If you would like to participate in the organization of the Victoria Conference, please [contact us](#) as soon as possible.

## The current executive for the BCETA is:

President/Communications Chair:

Catherine Gagnon – [bcexchangeteachers@gmail.com](mailto:bcexchangeteachers@gmail.com)

Past President:

Kulwant Toor – [ktoor@shaw.ca](mailto:ktoor@shaw.ca)

Vice-President

Martin Wheeler - [wheeler\\_m@surreyschools.ca](mailto:wheeler_m@surreyschools.ca)

Treasurer

Pearl Wong – [pearlw576@gmail.com](mailto:pearlw576@gmail.com)

Secretary

Leon Jensen – [Leonj1@hotmail.com](mailto:Leonj1@hotmail.com)

Members at large - Mel and June Caldwell

## About Us

The BC Exchange Teachers' Association is a volunteer organization dedicated to hosting information sessions and social activities with the intent to make the year an exciting and memorable one for exchange teachers and their families. <http://BCExchangeTeachers.ca>

Welcome to BC! Our association is made up of former exchange teachers who are delighted to share their experience with current exchangees. We welcome any questions or comments you might have regarding all matters related to your teaching exchange.

Newsletter Editor: Catherine Gagnon [cteachr@hotmail.com](mailto:cteachr@hotmail.com)

Now available – newsletters from CLEE (Canadian League for Education Exchange) and other Australian International Teaching Fellowships <http://feb122010.wordpress.com>

## GETTING INVOLVED

At this time, the Executive and activities of the BC Exchange Teachers' Association are mainly located in the Lower Mainland. The Association would like to improve on that by bringing information sessions to various areas of the province.

To this end, we would welcome your assistance and involvement. If you are interested in presenting an information session in your area, either a weekend/evening/after school or a Professional Development Day session with your local union, contact [Catherine Gagnon](#).

**Help us plan our calendar of events** - Do you have an idea for an activity that exchange teachers might be interested in and could travel to without too much difficulty? It could be a skiing event in the interior over a long weekend, winery tour, whale watching, hiking trips, a corn maze, hosting a BBQ or potluck, or even a walking tour of your town or city. We are open to all suggestions. If you have an idea and would like to help out, please contact [Catherine Gagnon](#).

## Coming Events

<b>Jan</b>	Welcome to Southern Hemisphere Exchangees/Welcome Back Canadians
<b>Feb</b>	5 Pin Bowling Lower Mainland
<b>April</b>	Potluck dinner Lower Mainland Ski Whistler
<b>May</b>	Victoria Conference Weekend
<b>June</b>	Farewell to Northern Hemisphere Exchangees
<b>Sept</b>	Fraser Valley Day and BBQ
<b>Oct</b>	Information session – Lower Mainland Halloween celebration
<b>Nov</b>	Information session – Vancouver Island
<b>Dec</b>	Traditional Christmas dinner/ farewell to our Southern Hemisphere teachers

## Suggested Activities

- Visit the Fairmont Empress – One to the best known landmarks in Victoria. Their high tea is renowned. Prices vary by season, so you might plan a visit in the fall or winter months. [Tea at the Fairmont Empress](#)
- Stanley Park is the iconic outdoor destination in Vancouver. Explore the seawall on foot or cycle, the First Nations' totems are always a great photo-op and don't miss the Aquarium. [Download a self-guided tour here.](#)
- BC is well known for its wildlife and outdoor adventures. [Here is a list of ideas to help you plan.](#)
- If you love winter and can't wait, start planning a ski weekend to [Manning Park Resort.](#) Or join us for a Whistler weekend in April when the prices drop.
- Closer to Vancouver, you can enjoy the awesome sights from [Grouse Mountain](#) on the Skyride. Try your hand at skiing or snowboarding.
- Living on the island? [Consult this guide](#) for a list of festivals and events.
- Kelowna has some [amazing activities during the winter months.](#) It's not always about wine you know!
- Take in the [Prince George Winter Festival](#) with activities all through February.
- Enjoy the snow in [Nelson](#)
- Don't forget that Canada is celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year! [Parks Canada passes are free!](#)



## My Year-long Teaching Exchange in Switzerland

By Andrew Roome

One evening back in December 2013, when I came home from a day of teaching at Parkland Secondary in Sidney, my wife asked me if I would ever live in Switzerland for a year if I had the opportunity. Of all my travels through Europe, it was one country I had missed visiting and thought it would be great to have the chance to go, but I couldn't guess what she was about to surprise me with. Through CEEF, she had found a Swiss math teacher and his family wanting to go on an exchange in Canada, and because his school offered a bilingual program for students, I would be able to teach in English. Excitedly, we Googled his school in Lucerne and, much to my delight, it was situated beside Lake Lucerne and my classroom had a view of the water, much like my school in Sidney has of the ocean.

We were hoping to be in Switzerland the following September, so I needed to get the paperwork started. After submitting the forms and documents to CEEF by early January 2014, we were told that the exchange family would not be able to participate until the following year. At first we were disappointed, but it turned out to be a blessing because time goes so quickly and we needed the extra months to prepare. Also, the BCTF went on strike in the autumn so it was better that a foreign exchange teacher didn't start his experience with a picket sign in his hands.

Living in our own house with all its flaws is one thing, but leaving it to a family of five for a year is another. All my renovation projects that I had put off suddenly gained a measure of purpose. Will the appliances hold up? Will the cars keep running? What happens in case of an emergency? An exchange is no easy task but if you can keep all the "what if's" at bay, it is a very rewarding experience.

We put in a missing stair railing, replaced many windows, power-washed and painted most of the decks, while keeping our fingers crossed that all would be well with the house for our exchange guests.

We were very lucky to be matched with the Fischer family because they have three girls who are very similar in age to our two girls. Their children would not be offended by the pink bedroom walls at our house, and toys, bicycles, and crafts at both homes would be compatible with everyone.

We left for Switzerland in late July 2015 and arrived at the Basel Airport late at night after a long stopover in London. Lukas and his father greeted our weary family, but we were excited to meet them and chat for an hour while driving in 2 vehicles through the darkness. We arrived in Rothenburg (a small town outside of Lucerne) at midnight. Unbelievably, they were all up to greet us at the door with welcoming smiles and hugs! I had been in contact with Lukas by email for over a year but I had never Skyped or phoned him so it was great to speak with him in person finally. I felt like I had known him for years.

The Fischers kindly to let us all stay in the same house with them while they were trying to pack and get ready for their flight. Before leaving, Lukas helped get us a Swiss bank account (who doesn't dream about having one of those?!), organize our car insurance, and complete some paperwork at the local city hall. His father and I drove the Fischers in two vehicles to the airport with all their bags and wished them well on their journey. It seemed strange to say good-bye to someone who was about to live in our home, meet my friends/colleagues at school and our neighbours, and do my job for a year. ([continued](#))

## Info Session – November 2016

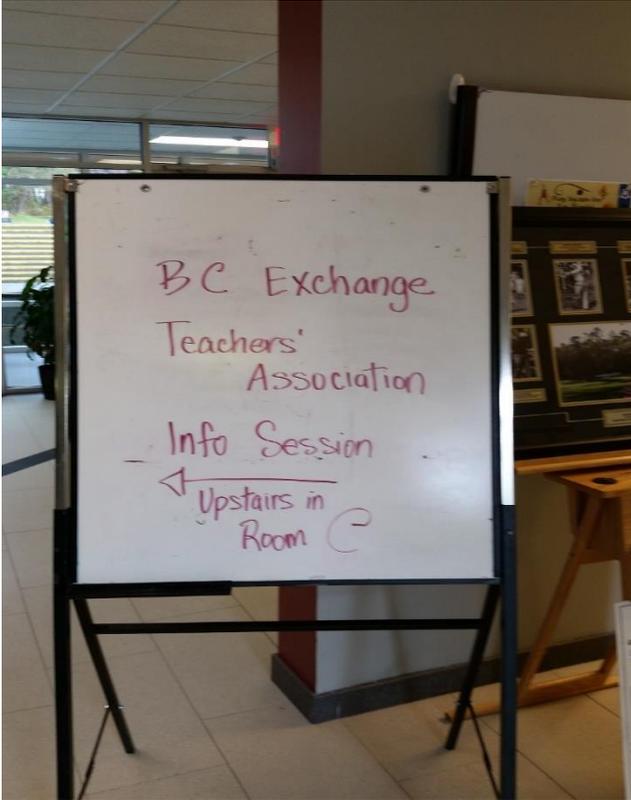
The BC Exchange Teachers' Association loves to promote teaching exchanges whenever possible. So in that spirit, we held an info session last November in Comox. With an attendance of 10 interested teachers, I think it was rather successful for a first effort in that area.

We had invited a few special guests, namely a current Australian teacher Janine Trickey and my partner in crime, the non-teacher, Leon Jensen to share their experiences with the group.

It all resulted in a very rich discussion with plenty of opportunities for questions. If you are on exchange now, or contemplating an exchange, you know how many questions come up during the preparation time.

BC has been a choice destination for many foreign teachers for a great number of years. Although our numbers are not as large this decade, we are hoping to see a resurgence in interest and applications as a result of our efforts to publicize this valuable once in a lifetime professional and personal development opportunity. Please [contact me](#) if you wish to share your own experience with other potential exchange teachers through a local info session or if you would like more information on teaching exchanges.

*Catherine Gagnon*  
President BCETA



Janine from Victoria, AU and Sherry currently on exchange in NSW, AU and yours truly sharing a meal after the info session.

In Switzerland, school starts three weeks earlier than in BC. I started teaching on August 18<sup>th</sup>. It seemed strange to be teaching when the weather is still 30°C outside. It was a 10 km bike ride from the house in Rothenburg to the school in Lucerne. The school had a wonderful underground bicycle storage area for both staff and students. Many staff members rode their bikes to school even though parking for the day only costs staff 2 Francs, which is a bargain in Switzerland! I accomplished my goal of riding the bike every day, rain or shine (or snow). It was a mild winter and I only had to ride four or five times in the snow.

The Swiss education system streams students when they enter the secondary school system. My school was an academic school with 1600 students and six grade levels. Students could choose to take their classes in English. I taught two classes of the equivalent of grade 9 students, one class of grade 10 and one class of grade 11. The classrooms are designed to hold up to 24 students and I had from 8 to 23 students in my classes. The bell schedule was much more flexible than my BC school. It was like being at a college. This allowed students to take many more interesting subjects like religion and philosophy. The graduating students were preparing for their Matura exam, very intensive final exams in all their subjects.

Staff and students were very accepting of me and my teaching style. In Canada, I use a tablet PC to project my notes via OneNote onto a large screen. I brought my tablet to Switzerland and used the same technique. The school was implementing a "bring your own device to class" model the following year so using a tablet was a good introduction for my students. Most teachers at the school still use chalk and a blackboard, but each classroom has a sink and a window squeegee to clean the boards. It works very well and the class was not dusty like BC classrooms of the 1970s and 80s.

A surprising difference between the two schools is that beer and wine were served at school staff functions on school grounds. I told the Swiss principal that Canadian teachers cannot have alcohol on school grounds and he asked if it was because of the students. "It's because of the teachers", I quipped. The Swiss quickly got used to my humour.

I had a very patient and caring supervisor at my school. He watched a few of my classes and I sat in on a few of his. We often touched base to make sure my experience was positive and that I was meeting their teaching expectations. The majority of the teachers had a Masters degree and at least 15 staff members had a Doctorate. The staff members were well-educated and very professional.

Most elementary school students in our area of Switzerland come home for lunch each day and no student was allowed to be on school grounds during lunchtime. My children would ride their bikes home from school and have lunch at home then ride back for the afternoon classes 90 minutes later. We registered our kids in a lunch group at the soccer club on Tuesdays so my wife could have a full day to explore the country by car on her own. I would be home to greet my children in the afternoon because I only worked mornings on Tuesdays. Our children went to a regular Swiss elementary school and had their lessons in High German. In the beginning, it was difficult for them, but they persevered and really enjoyed classes and made many friends. Our nine year old ended up knowing the most German out of us all. Her classmates did not speak much English so her German language skills developed very quickly. Both of their teachers spoke English well and were able to help them understand assignments clearly. The girls loved that their school had pet goats, rabbits and a cat they could play with. Not all Swiss schools have animals though, apparently. We were just lucky!

At the end of the school year, all children get their work bound in a large binder and returned to them as a record/ souvenir of the year. It was a nice memento for my children of their time in school in Rothenburg.

We tried to take advantage of our time in Europe by travelling as much as we could during the four two-week breaks in the Swiss school year. At the end of September, we drove down to visit a retired Parkland Secondary French teacher in a small, medieval village near Carcassonne in southern France. ([continued](#))

We spent ten days exploring the countryside and castles, and spent two nights in Barcelona, Spain as well. One long-weekend in November, we drove to Turin, Italy and visited a former Parkland Secondary Italian exchange student and his family. During Christmas break, we drove to Verona, Venice, and Florence.

The Fischers usually spend a week with friends and family in a ski chalet near Lucerne during the Fasnacht (Swiss Carnival) break. Our family was invited to join the group to replace the Fischers that winter. It was one of the highlights of the trip because not only did we make new friends and eat awesome food, but also learned new games, taught our children to ski for the first time, and experienced Swiss ski culture. Our daughters both loved learning to ski and experienced all types of weather and ski conditions on the mountain that week.

Right after the ski trip in February, we took a 6-night trip down to Rome (nine hours by car) and had four days exploring the city. At Easter, we drove to Paris (a six-hour drive) and stayed in an Airbnb for a week. Staying in a townhouse in Paris made it much more affordable for a family of four. The children used their French skills and got to go up the Eiffel Tower.

After seeing multiple art museums and palaces, the kids deserved a special day just for them, so on the return trip to Lucerne, and after a stop at Verdun to view the battlefields and tour the fort of the infamous battle, we spent a day at Germany's popular Europa Park with Swiss friends. The girls loved all the roller coaster rides, which were another first for them.

A long-weekend in Geneva in May topped off our school-year vacations. We toured the Ariana Museum, CERN, and the United Nations. Because the weather was gorgeous, we could see Mont Blanc in the distance beyond the Jet d'eau in Lake Geneva. Our special bank account allowed us free entry to all public Swiss museums. This meant we visited many of the castles, as well as textile, historical, and art museums. The Castle of Chillon, at the eastern edge of Lake Geneva, was a favourite of the whole family.

At the end of the exchange, we rented a VW camper van and drove around nine countries in Western Europe. After 9000 km and seven weeks in a camper, our fantastic year (and a month) abroad was over. We spent three days with the Fischers at their house at the end of August (Lukas was back teaching at his school) and our families had a wonderful time reminiscing about the exchange with each other.

With any exchange, results may vary, but we were extremely fortunate in that everything went very smoothly for both families. The families have fabulous memories for a lifetime. We were very lucky to have been matched with such a kind family as the Fischers. My fellow staff members got to know Lukas well, but I feel like I have known him my whole life. After many evenings of Skyping during the year about students, lesson plans, school expectations and cultural questions, I made a special bond with my exchange partner. His extended family really helped us feel welcome, inviting us to dinners and assisting with questions we had. We are hoping some of them visit us in Victoria in the coming years.

Our family would definitely go on another exchange and we cannot recommend it enough to other BC teachers thinking about doing one.

*Andrew Roome teaches in North Saanich, BC.*

### There's more online!

If you follow Facebook, you'll find pages for some great groups and blogs –

[CEEF Discussion Group](#) – for Canadian exchange teachers and potential exchanges, this group was set up to allow interested parties to ask and answer questions about their exchange year and preparation leading up to it. Very rich in information. If you've been on exchange from Ontario, BC or the Maritimes, you have worked with the CEEF. Just ask to join.

[ITA](#) – for exchange teachers to Victoria, AU (past and present)

[Turning my world Upside Down](#) – read my own exchange adventures and find links to newsletters from other teaching exchange organizations.

[CLEECanada](#) has [website](#) and [blog](#) for exchange teachers in Ontario and BC. The blog also has stories and links for teachers currently exchanging to BC. Many new links have been added from teachers currently on exchange. Wonderful inspiration!

And coming very soon –

[BCExchangeTeachers.ca](#), our own blog about all things relating to BC teaching exchanges.

On a snowy December night, the BC Exchange Teacher's Association put on a Christmas in Canada themed dinner and gathering for exchange teachers past and present. Winter driving conditions and other engagements unfortunately kept the numbers in attendance low, with Martin Wheeler, a Western Australia exchange teacher in 2014, and family represented, along with Leon Jensen, spouse of Catherine Gagnon, Victoria 2011. They were joined by Debora Robinson, a teacher from Paramatta, New South Wales on exchange at Johnson Heights Secondary School in Surrey, along with her husband, Graeme and daughter, Mikhayla.

There was more than enough food for all with mini tortieres, mashed potatoes, turkey and gravy provided by the Canadians and a lovely quinoa and cranberry salad contributed by the Australian family. Drinks were typically Canadian; moose milk otherwise known as rum and eggnog, and a selection of beers (though one could argue the latter is typically Australian too).

Conversations revolved around the usual exchange teacher topics: favorite holiday spots, comparing school systems and whether or not future exchanges are in the works. On the subject of future exchanges at least one teacher left the evening with an email address in hand, along with a pledge to keep in touch as to future exchange opportunities. Such are the connections that can be made through exchange teaching networks, and enjoyable evenings such as this one.

Martin Wheeler,  
BCETA Vice-President



**The Atkins and Wheeler families (the family pictured was standing in for Marie Vitali and family from France who couldn't make it out of Mission due to the snowstorm)**



**The Feast!**



**Leon, Mikhayla, Graeme and the Wheeler family**



**Our hosts!**