



Turtle Island Tribute

September 2025

Faculty and Staff

ursa Teaching Team For 2024-2025

Melanie Guest – mguest@thirdschools.ca – Elementary ELA, Math, Science, Health

Tina Parish – tparish@thirdschools.ca – Elementary ELA, Math, Social Studies, Junior High Social Studies

Jason Ash – jash@thirdschools.ca – Elementary ELA, Math, Onsite Foods

Sonita Bhavra – sbhavra@thirdschools.ca – Elementary Science, Junior High Math, Science, Health, Genius Hour

Thera MacKinnon – tmackinnon@thirdschools.ca – Junior High ELA, Senior High ELA, Social Studies, Art

Tracy Gilluley – tgilluley@thirdschools.ca – Principal, Junior High ELA

Dean Ingram – digram@thirdschools.ca – Associate Principal Distance, Senior High Math and Science

Susan Alexander – susana@thirdschools.ca – Senior High Math and Science

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Erin Hiemstra – ehiemstra@thirdschools.ca – Elementary Art and PE

Jeff Watt – jwatt@thirdschools.ca – Senior High Art



Principal Message



Welcome to a brand-new school year with **ursa**! Whether you are joining us for the first time or returning for another year, we are so glad to have you as part of our learning community.

The **ursa** team believes that every student's learning journey is unique and worth celebrating. Our team is here to welcome, encourage, and support you every step of the way. We are excited to see where this year takes you—through new challenges, discoveries, and achievements.

As a primarily online school, we understand the importance of connection. Throughout the year, you'll have opportunities to engage with teachers, classmates, and the broader school community in meaningful ways. Together, we'll create a supportive environment where all students can learn, grow, and thrive.

Throughout the year, you'll receive a monthly newsletter. This newsletter is a vital tool to keep you updated on our Shared and Distance programs. It will provide a sneak peek of upcoming events and other important information. Please take a few minutes to read through each newsletter. This month, we introduce the team of teachers who will be working with our students.

Here's to a wonderful year ahead—we can't wait to see all that you will accomplish!

Warm regards,
Mrs. Tracy Gilluley

Ms. Guest

Hello! My name is Ms. Melanie Guest. I have been teaching in various environments for over 20 years! That is right, I started when I was only 5, pretty impressive, ya?

The first teaching assignment I took was at an international secondary school in Kampala, Uganda. While I was there I helped organize a physical education program for all the East African international schools run by the Aga Khan. I loved the opportunity to work with local teachers to create programs that utilized minimal or flexible equipment, providing students in grades 7 to 12 with great body awareness and physical literacy skills. While there, I was also part of organizing and implementing two educational field trips for students aged 12-19 to learn about mountain environments. One trip took students from my school in Uganda to Mount Elgon, and another trip for students at a sister school in Tanzania to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. It was a wild ride and a great learning opportunity not only for the students' growth, but also me to see what is possible with some creativity!



I have guided and taught in various environments and at multiple schools through my career as an educator. Some of the other highlights were working to develop the WILD program in Cochrane, helping develop and implement the first years of outdoor CALM at the Outdoor Learning Center in the Bow Valley, before finding my way to the Third Schools Family over 5 years ago to bring the first LYNX class from concept to reality in Canmore in 2020!

I love the outdoors for recreation and as a learning environment and believe in the use of nature as a teacher. Unfortunately, this same love of the outdoors took me out of it when I was injured at the end of the 2021-22 school year. Lucky for me, I was already teaching a couple of online classes with **ursa** in the mornings and was able to pivot to the online teaching environment full-time the following year.

Though online was not where I thought I would end up, I soon fell in love with teaching through this medium as well. It provided new learning, new challenges, and new opportunities to connect with students and families from all over the world, and I soon fell in love with it! Although it was originally a temporary move while I recovered, I have chosen to stay online for many great reasons.

I join my students from the beautiful community of Canmore in the Canadian Rockies, where I live and have been raising my own 2 children since my return from Africa. From here, I am transported to locations with diverse environments to explore through my students' screens, stories, and work.

I am looking forward to continuing to watch my past students grow into their most wonderful selves while connecting with all the new students and their families who are joining us this year online!

I look forward to seeing you around, either online during classes or out in nature after school!

Mrs. Parish



Welcome to the 2024-2025 school year! My name is Tina Parish, and I will be teaching 1-4 ELA, 3/4 Math, and 1-9 Social. I will also be doing the online arts and crafts (Grades 1-6), and Book Club (Grades 7-9).

I live in Humboldt, Saskatchewan, and have been teaching for 26 years. I have also been teaching ECE programs at various colleges for 20 years. I am married and have 3 kids – 21, 17, 13. In my spare time, I love to travel, attend concerts and sporting events and run. I

am excited for this upcoming year and look forward to getting to know more about your child. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask! Here's to a great year!

Mrs. Bhavra

Hello and welcome to the start of a new school year! Some of you are returning families, and some are new - either way, I'm excited to start a great year together.

My name is Sonita Bhavra and I am the homeroom teacher for **ursa** grade 7 and 8. This year I am teaching Math 7-9, Science 5-9, Health 7-9 and Genius Hour 1-12. I have been with Third Schools since 2016. I started teaching at Third Academy and am now part of the **ursa** team!



I have been married for 19 years and have three children. My oldest is in grade 12, my second is in grade 9, and my youngest is in grade 1. Needless to say, things are never quiet at home!

Have you heard of Oobleck before? We will be exploring this curious substance soon in science and genius hour. Here is a sneak peak: <https://youtu.be/nw8KaHglokQ>

Looking forward to a fantastic school year!

Ms. Mackinnon



ABOUT ME

I'm an educator with 17 years of experience teaching in New York City, Calgary, and the Dominican Republic. With a Master's in curriculum design and instruction, I specialize in literacy, reading strategies, and supporting diverse learners. I believe in blending creativity, curriculum, and innovation to engage students. Outside of education, I'm an artist and dressage rider who loves spending time outdoors in nature.

For the past 17 years, I've had the privilege of teaching and leading in diverse educational settings across New York City, Calgary, and the Dominican Republic. My career has centered on helping students discover their strengths, close academic gaps, and develop a lifelong love of learning. Over the years, I've worked with learners from grades 5 through 12 in English, social studies, ESL, and reading.

Outside the classroom, I'm an artist and equestrian who loves painting, drawing, and dressage training. Having grown up in rural Alberta, I feel most at home when I'm outdoors connecting with nature.

I'm passionate about education, collaboration, and using creativity to inspire students and colleagues alike.

ELA 7

What an excellent start to the year! I am very excited to be part of your educational journey this year. We've just begun classes, reading and analyzing short stories. Next month, we will begin our creative writing unit and have the opportunity to have our work published!

ELA 10-12

I am very excited to start the year with a fantastic group of young people. All classes will analyze short stories, essays, and poetry for the first month.

Mrs. Gilluley

Hello everyone! My name is Mrs. Gilluley, and I'm excited to be teaching our Grade 8/9 English Language Arts class, this year.

This is my 31st year in education, and I can honestly say I enjoy teaching just as much today as when I first began. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to teach everything from Kindergarten to university-level courses, and each experience has helped shape the way I approach teaching and learning. I love helping students discover their strengths and feel confident in their abilities.



I completed my Bachelor of Arts at the University of Calgary, majoring in Psychology and Sociology, before going on to earn my Bachelor of Education. Since then, I've taught in a variety of schools and roles—from starting my own school with a focus on inclusive learning, to serving as a Principal and Head of School, to working in special education and leadership at Third Academy. In 2020, I was part of the launch of ursa, and I am proud to continue building a strong and supportive online learning community.

While I enjoy teaching many subjects, my favourites are math and English Language Arts. As a teenager, I found math difficult, but thanks to some excellent teachers, I learned how powerful asking questions can be. That lesson has shaped my teaching philosophy: I want my classroom to be a safe place where students feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, and challenging themselves. I also love reading, researching, and writing—and while creative writing is a challenge for me, it's one I'm always excited to work on alongside my students.

Outside of teaching, I have a wonderful husband, two daughters in university, and a house full of pets—including two parrots and two cats! When I'm not teaching or spending time with my family, my greatest passion is traveling and discovering new places.

I'm looking forward to a fantastic year of learning and growing together. Let's make it a memorable one!

Mr. Ingram



Hello ursa community! I'm Dean Ingram, Associate Principal with ursa Global Online and Numeracy Lead for Third Schools.

Born and raised in Newfoundland & Labrador, I've spent 30+ years teaching math and science—as a classroom teacher, principal, curriculum contributor, and for the past two decades, an online Teacher.

Since 2022–23, I've had the joy of working with ursa students; this year, I'm excited to continue supporting our learners in Math 10C and beyond. I believe math is a language everyone can learn—with practice, patience, and a bit of good humour. I'm here to help: if you need support, reach out

early and we'll book a time to meet. Please provide 24 hours' notice so I can plan and find a time that works for us both.

When I'm not teaching, you'll find me outdoors—camping or on the water—or lacing up for a run. I'm a former varsity wrestler, a steadfast Toronto Maple Leafs fan (so I know a thing or two about perseverance!), and a proud recipient of the Newfoundland and Labrador Award for Bravery (2020). Let's make this a year where confidence grows and numbers start to make sense. You've got this—and I've got your back.

Mr. Snook

My name is Isadore Snook, and I am a Distance Online Teacher (DOT) in mathematics and science with ursa Online. I bring over 30 years of teaching experience to my classes, and I am excited for a great year ahead in Math 20-1, Math 30-1, Math 31, and Math 30-2. This year, we're also looking forward to exploring new tools, such as Desmos Classroom and Lumio, to support student learning.



Mrs. Alexander

Welcome to a New School Year!

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire - William Butler Yeats"

Hello! My name is Ms. Susan Alexander, and I teach Math 10-3, Math 20-2, Math 20-3, and Online Science Explorers.



With nearly 20 years of teaching experience from Grades 1 through 12, I hold a Bachelor of Science in Math and Education and a postgraduate degree in Computer Science. My teaching journey began after a turning point in my own education, when the encouragement of teachers and family helped me discover my passion for learning and for teaching.

This year in math, we will explore both practical and academic pathways:

Math 10-3 will connect mathematics to real-life skills like budgeting and measurement, Math 20-2 will dive into algebra, trigonometry, and logical reasoning for post-secondary preparation, Math 20-3 will emphasize personal finance, statistics, and applied problem-solving.

Alongside these courses, Science Explorers will take us on exciting weekly journeys through space, energy, biology, and at-home experiments—designed to spark curiosity and wonder with hands-on activities and “what if?” science questions.

You can reach me anytime at susana@thirdschools.ca or through Canvas. I look forward to a rewarding and inspiring year with you!

Fun & Inspiring Links to Explore

- [NASA Kids' Club](#) – Space games, puzzles, and fun facts.
- [PhET Interactive Simulations](#) – Free, interactive math and science simulations.
- [Wonderopolis](#) – Daily “wonders” to spark curiosity in science, history, and the world around us.
- [Khan Academy Math](#) – Short videos and practice for extra support in math.

Mr. Ash

Welcome to the 2025-2026 school year. I will be your teacher for ELA and math and I am excited to get to know each of you.

I was born and raised in Calgary and attended both Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary, where I received my education degree in 1997. I have been teaching for 28 years in the private, charter and public school settings. Over the years, I have taught every grade level from Grades 1-12 and almost every subject at least once. Primarily, my focus has been on middle school (Grades 5-8) over that span and I enjoy working with children and always learning new things. This is my sixth year with Third Schools. My assignment this school year is Grade 5/6 online English Language Arts and math, as well as the Okotoks LYNX program for grades 1-9.



I have two daughters in grade 10 and 7, and we love to spend time outdoors, camping, hiking, and playing sports.

I am very excited to be your teacher this year and look forward to an amazing year.



Extra-curricular Activities

We are excited to be able to offer extracurricular volleyball on Wednesdays 12:45-1:45 for September-November. The hope is to be able to field a school team that will play in the interscholastic league. We have the mindset of fun above all and its not about winning or losing. We have a high interest in the grade 6-11 age

range among girls and are likely going to have a 7-8 team for this season, as well as potential exhibition teams for higher grades. Throughout the year we will be announcing opportunities for varying sports for both boys and girls from grades 5-12 so keep your eyes open for future announcements and opportunities. Please contact me for more information jash@thirdschools.ca

Picture Day

For those who wish to have a school picture for this year, please reach out for an appointment using the link below. There was an earlier email sent out regarding this.

When: Wednesday, October 15th. Afternoon, by appointment.

Where: East Campus, 400 Prince of Peace Way, Rocky View

Note: Parents will be emailed the appointment booking link at the beginning of October.



Proctorio



In order to add another layer of security to our online assessments for our junior and senior high students, **ursa** has implemented a platform that enhances our ability to monitor

students while they are completing the assessments. Proctorio is used globally by many institutions worldwide and has proved successful. This platform will be used for all **ursa** junior and senior high online assessments during the 2025-26 school year. More information on the requirements is provided in the updated Parent Handbook.

Teen Hub

As students grow into their teenage years, developing connections with peers becomes increasingly important. However, we understand that home-educated teens may not always have

access to the same social opportunities as their peers in traditional school settings. That's why we're excited to continue our peer-to-peer mentoring program for students in grades 7-12 enrolled in ursa's Distance, Parent Directed, and Shared Responsibility programs.

This program will provide a fun and interactive space for your child to meet and connect with like-minded students. Using platforms like Kumospace, participants will have the chance to engage in meaningful conversations, share experiences, and make lasting friendships. Our program will be led by a teaching professional who will guide the students through these interactions in a structured and supportive way.



We believe this mentoring program will help your child develop important social skills while giving them the opportunity to make new friends and feel part of a larger community. It's a chance to explore new connections, learn from peers, and build a positive online experience—all while staying in the comfort of home.

Please fill out this form to let us know if you are interested:

<https://forms.gle/4qT9CKN2f1kobeN79>

We're excited about the possibilities this program will offer and would love for your child to be a part of it. If you have any questions or would like more details, please don't hesitate to reach out to our coordinator.

Alisha Brignall BGS, B.Ed M.Ed
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Trivia Club!



Introducing the ursa Online Trivia League

Ready to flex those brain cells and have some fun with friends across the ursa community? Say hello to the ursa Online Trivia League—a year-long, school-wide competition where curiosity counts, laughter is encouraged, and bragging rights are very real.

Who can join?

Every ursa student! Players will be grouped by age/grade level so matches are friendly, fair, and full of great rivalries.

How it works

- Play all year: Short, fast-paced trivia events run throughout the school year. Join a single match or compete regularly and climb the standings.
- Solo or with friends: Jump in on your own or team up with classmates—either way, you'll meet new people and sharpen your trivia game.

· Fresh themes every round: Pop culture, science, sports, history, music, world wonders, wild card rounds—you name it.

· Prizes & glory: Win spot prizes during events and collect points toward end-of-year awards for each division (plus ultimate ursa bragging rights).

Why join?

Because this is about more than questions and answers. We're building a vibrant online community outside the classroom—a place to hang out, cheer each other on, and enjoy friendly competition with schoolmates you might not see in your daily classes. Think quick matches, lively chat, and a steady stream of "I totally knew that!" moments.

All levels welcome

Never played trivia before? Perfect. The league rewards teamwork, creativity, and bold guesses. If you're curious and up for a good time, you'll fit right in.

Getting started

Watch for the signup announcement from ursa, grab a friend (or fly solo), and pick your division based on your grade level. We'll share event dates and simple joining instructions—just bring your best guess and your best emoji reactions.

Let's make this the most connected, welcoming, and delightfully nerdy corner of ursa. See you on the leaderboard!

High School Homeroom Initiative

New for 2025–2026: Monthly Homeroom Classes for Grades 10–12

This year, we are excited to introduce monthly Homeroom classes for our students in **Grades 10–12**. These one-hour sessions will be held on Mondays and are designed to support students in both their academic journey and personal growth.

Each month, homeroom will focus on a different topic, including:

- Goal setting
- Post-secondary planning and transitioning
- Scholarships and funding opportunities
- Career awareness and exploration
- Volunteering and giving back
- Study skills and learning strategies
- Mental health and wellness
- Financial literacy

Homeroom is a valuable opportunity for students to connect, prepare for the future, and gain skills that extend beyond the classroom. Homeroom teachers will share the schedule of days and times directly with their students.

We look forward to seeing our high school students grow through these new sessions!



Dean Ingram

