



**ABORIGINAL ENHANCEMENT SCHOOLS NETWORK
2012-2013 INQUIRY CASE STUDY**

SCHOOL NAME: John Barsby Community School

DISTRICT: Nanaimo-Ladysmith #68

INQUIRY TEAM: Joelene Akitt, Donna Flett, Tanya Heidelbach, Dave Sully,
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Scanning: Students, parents, and teachers have, over the past four years, mentioned that they wished there was a higher profile indication of our school's large Aboriginal population. We are also aware, having met with the local Snuneymuxw community education representatives and some SNM PAC members, that SNM parents sometimes feel anxious about approaching the school on their own. Students have expressed an interest in painting the large concrete pillars outside our school in order to make the entrance more welcoming. Taking all these qualitative comments into account, we sponsored a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and artist mentors to paint four of the entrance poles as welcome poles that represent the broad range of our Aboriginal students' backgrounds following our school-wide survey to see if we were on the right track.

Focus: Our focus was three of the four goals of the 2011-16 Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement for our district: **Spirit:** *How do we ensure Aboriginal learners are successful through the full effort of SD68 and Aboriginal communities in supporting the Enhancement Agreement?* **Body:** *How do we enhance all students' and all adults' understanding of Aboriginal history, perspectives, and people respecting that there is a contemporary context?* **Emotion:** *How do we enhance Aboriginal students' sense of belonging within schools and their belief that they can be successful in SD68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith while at the same time enhancing the belief of the system that Aboriginal students can be more successful?* We focused on making the Aboriginal presence at Barsby more obviously recognizable by honouring all our students' nations in four welcome poles. We felt the project would also beautify the school. We initially intended to engage the local communities (Snuneymuxw, Metis, Tillicum Lelum and our school neighbours) in this project by surveying their impression the school's entrance before and after the project, but simply ran out of time.

Hunch: As mentioned in the introduction, many students and staff members have mentioned over the years that they wish to see a higher and more visible presence of the Aboriginal connections in our school, specifically at the entrance to the school to make visitors more welcome.

Taking action and question, Part One: Because of our team's commitment to another school-wide event in late March, we were not able to get started on this project until April, but ran into time difficulties due to the district's process in granting permission for work to be done that altered the look of a school. Also, the district had agreed to fill the bubble holes in our concrete poles and also to do the base coat painting, all of which took time in terms of work orders, getting the work orders OK'd, and then getting the appropriate tradesperson out to do the work. We had not anticipated this type of time delay, as our initial proposal was accepted in March. By the time we started painting the poles, it was the end of May. Before we began any painting, we did a school-wide survey to see what effect our project might have on students and staff and to see if we were indeed on the right track in choosing to transform our concrete pillars into welcome poles. We were able to complete two poles by the time school finished, and to hold an informal unveiling of the two poles on the last day of school. At that informal unveiling, we had our district Aboriginal staff in attendance, a district assistant superintendent, two representatives of the local Snuneymuxw community and three members of the local Mid Island Metis Nation community in addition to a group of Barsby students and staff, and visitors from other schools. Our first survey prefaced our questions with a statement that noted that one third of our students were of Aboriginal heritage and listed the diverse communities from which those students came. We also stated the reason for our project proposal, as is outlined in this Inquiry.

School Findings

SURVEY ONE

We were surprised by many of our findings, but not in areas where we thought there might be some debate. We thought that perhaps the Barsby community would decide that Welcome Poles were not their choice of project. In the end, the school community chose a totem pole from all the options presented, but that was far beyond our budget. We were pleased to have the school community confirm that the welcome pole project was their second choice, and one we had the budget to complete. But the most interesting information came from the comments staff and students made, and the choices of other options available on the questionnaires. Barsby's student population is approximately 640. We had 386 of our first surveys returned (approximately 60%), two of which were ruined. Our staff of teachers, Education Assistants and support staff number approximately 75; 44 returned their first survey (also approximately 60%). Respondents could choose as many answers as they wanted with regard to the general questions, but only one choice for the selected project. Because of the way some surveys were filled in, it was clear the respondents had not read the introduction or the instructions well.

SURVEY ONE: GENERAL QUESTIONS

	Barsby already has enough recognition of students with Aboriginal heritage at its entrance.	Barsby does not have enough recognition of students with Aboriginal heritage at its entrance.	If Aboriginal designs decorated Barsby's entrance, it would make Aboriginal students, parents, and families feel more welcome.	If Aboriginal designs decorated Barsby's entrance, it would remind those coming to Barsby of the diverse Aboriginal heritage of students and the significance of the traditional territory.	The look of the school entrance should not reflect the student population.	The look of a school entrance should be institutional.	I support the idea of design changes to a school entrance to reflect student population, but am worried about the designs and what the visual impact will be.
Students	209	38	84	71	127	46	88
Staff	4	12	24	29	2	0	4

SURVEY ONE: PROJECT OPTIONS

	Erecting a totem pole in front of the school main entrance.	Painting a mural along the upper area of the breezeway.	Painting the large concrete pillars at both entry doors (office and gym) as traditional Welcome Poles.	Installing a modern 3-D Aboriginal sculpture where the tree in the middle of the roundabout currently grows.	Installing wooden carvings along the top area of the breezeway.	Sandblasting the entrance door windows to the main office area in an Aboriginal design.
Students	49	32	37	25	29	31
Staff	8	9	19	2	4	11

The surprising evidence was that which indicated a reluctance to be inclusive and a lack of knowledge about Aboriginal history and culture in staff and students. A large number of students and some staff felt there was already enough recognition of students of Aboriginal heritage, and did not want to see any designs at the front of the school or wanted all cultures and heritages recognized. Written comments in that vein numbered 44 from students (including negative inclusion comments such as "What about the rest of us?" as well as positive inclusion comments such as "I'd appreciate seeing all heritages represented."), and six from staff for a total of 50 comments. Some of the comments regarding our Aboriginal students and their recognition at Barsby were very negative, and those numbered approximately 29. Some were abusive and one contained foul language. One staff comment was very negative. Interestingly, there is only one Aboriginal carving (a small pole in a case) and one small mural in the school foyer. Another surprising thing we learned is that our school loves the tree in the front roundabout. Many wrote that they did not want to see it cut down or moved to accommodate a project. Overall, there are some questions about the validity of the survey responses: some responses looked as though they were "copycat" responses, and two classes appeared to have had some discussion about spending money on school supplies and resources instead of Aboriginal design projects, as there were large numbers of almost identical comments on surveys from those classes. Another surprising piece of evidence was the number of students and staff who wanted the school to look institutional and non-representative of its students; by adding the response numbers to questions 5 and 6 together for both students and staff, we get a total of 175 agreements with those statements.

Taking action and question, Part Two:

Our second survey was distributed following the completion of one pole and the partial (3/4) completion of the second on June 19. Our second pole was completed by June 26, while students were still visiting the school for exams and final work catch up. We will not be able to complete the third and fourth pole until August and hope to have these done for school reopening. Because it was the last day of school and everyone was extremely busy, we did not expect a large return of our second surveys. Even so, 114 student surveys were returned (approximately 17%) and 21 staff surveys (approximately 30%, half of the number that completed the first survey). In the introduction to our second survey, we acknowledged that in survey one, students said they wanted a wide range of heritages and cultures to be represented on the poles. We invited interested students to fill out a small section at the bottom of the survey so that they could form a team and design their own heritage welcome pole in the fall of 2013. We stated that Aboriginal Education would be donating the paint for those poles.

SURVEY TWO: GENERAL QUESTIONS

	I never noticed them [the poles].	I noticed them, but did not stop to take a close look.	I stopped to admire the poles.	I like the poles so far.	I attended the informal unveiling on Mon. June 17 at lunch.	I don't like the poles because I am against any designs at the front of the school; the look of a school entrance should be institutional.
Students	8	49	10	25	3	14
Staff	0	8	5	14	4	2

SURVEY TWO: COMMENTS

We made note on our second survey that neighbours and visitors to the school complimented the poles and the work the students were doing. The survey asked, "What short comment can you make?" Here are some responses:

STAFF

- "Compelling and unique 'Eye Candy'!!!"
- "Adds more character to school."
- "Great to have some colour."

STUDENTS

- "Stupid. It doesn't have any relevance to our school."
- "Cool"
- "I like the cultural background put in by the school."
- "Kind of a nice addition, neat thing to do."

We also asked respondents who had initially been against the poles if they had changed their mind, seeing the work. No staff members had changed their minds, but 20 students had been against the idea at first and now liked the poles. Then we asked if any respondents were still against the poles and why. Only two staff members were still against the poles, but 47 students said they were still opposed. The main reason for the student opposition was that the pole designs should include other heritages and cultures (20 such comments). However, at the end of survey two, when students were given the opportunity to sign up and submit their own designs for poles illustrating their heritages, we did not get one volunteer out of the entire 114 student surveys. It also appeared that students had not read the introduction to survey two.

During the painting of the poles, Aboriginal staff and administration were concerned about potential graffiti and defacement. Interestingly, there were two only incidents. The first pole was attacked by what appeared to be someone wielding a skateboard on the evening of the first day of painting. Approximately seven long marks and scuffs were made on the design, damaging the paint. This was easily repaired. The second pole had a racist slur scribbled in permanent marker at the base of the pole, but not on the design, shortly before it was finished. Again, this was easily repaired. Both poles have since had protective coatings put on, and there have been no further incidents.

Reflections and Advice

By far, the most obvious and most important outcome from our first survey was to learn that the staff and students needed some education around the history and culture of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and specifically BC and our territory. Following survey one, a staff presentation was quickly arranged and delivered following the BCTF teacher workshop on inclusion paired with some research by a Masters student with regard to residential schools.

Staff responded positively to that presentation. Several teachers also visited the school's social justice student group and made the same presentation there for students to share with others. Staff members also visited certain classes to invite students to join with the social justice group for the Walk in Solidarity in Vancouver in September 2013 and gave background information as to why this was important. We hope to see a follow-up workshop for staff in the fall, as we will be getting a large number of new staff members, and we hope that students will respond positively when we get more chances to organize the Walk in Solidarity in September.

One staff member suggested that perhaps we should have not included questions that had allowed for negative comments to be made about Aboriginal students and their profile at Barsby. However, our team is of the opinion that we would rather know about the undercurrents of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge so that those gaps can be addressed. Our entire set of 2013-14 Inquiry projects for Barsby are centered on addressing the need to build a more inclusive school community and to increase cross-cultural understandings, but from three very diverse perspectives. We are looking forward to working on those projects and to seeing more positive changes in our school community. We plan to complete the last two poles in August and to have a blessing ceremony in September to kick-start to our 2013-14 Inquiries.

