

ABORIGINAL ENHANCEMENT SCHOOLS NETWORK
2011-2012

GLENVIEW ELEMENTARY
#57 Prince George

Leadership Team

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School Context/Community Involvement

Our goal this year in selecting and pursuing an AESN inquiry question was to deepen the learning about local Indigenous knowledge, culture and traditions students and staff experienced in 2010-2011 and to continue to build connections with our Aboriginal students and their families, Aboriginal support staff, and Elders.

In the past three years, our Aboriginal student population at Glenview Elementary has remained fairly consistent at or around 25% of our total school population. While we strongly believe that it is particularly important to promote and support the understandings of Indigenous knowledge for our Aboriginal students; we also believe that it is equally important to extend these understandings to all students and teachers in the school.

In 2010-2011, we began to nurture our relationships with our Aboriginal students and their families (many of whom were new to our school due to school amalgamation in 2009-2010), Aboriginal support workers and Elders in our community. We did so by introducing and engaging students in classes that were interested, to a variety of activities focused on learning about local Indigenous knowledge. These activities involved local Elders initially visiting the school and later sharing their stories, artefacts and knowledge; by viewing, reviewing, and discussing the teachings of Elder, Sophie Thomas in her video: “The Warmth of Love”; and by reinforcing fundamental universal Aboriginal understandings such as: respect for the land, respect for Elders and each other, and personal responsibility within a family using a collection of Aboriginal texts.

We believed that by nurturing our relationships with our Aboriginal students and their families and by acknowledging, understanding and valuing their traditions and culture it would inevitably promote their academic success at school. We also believed that in doing so, our Aboriginal students and their families would feel more connected to the school and see the school as an extension of their community. And lastly, we believed that the fundamental principles of traditional Aboriginal culture, traditions and Indigenous knowledge would benefit all students and teachers in the school community.

In 2011-2012 we extended and deepened these understandings and connections within the school and community in a variety of meaningful ways with all students and teachers who demonstrated interest and commitment.

School Inquiry and Action

School Question

How will deepening student understanding of local Indigenous knowledge, people and history increase student awareness and improve academic achievement of our Aboriginal students?

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This year our inquiry question provided an authentic framework for the learning we hoped to achieve but proved to be a challenge in terms of formal data collection and assessment. In the fall and spring of 2011-2012, we planned to utilize the *Aboriginal Understandings Performance Standards—SD68Aboriginal* (Copyright Laura Tait, SD68 Aboriginal Education 2011) to help us collect both formal baseline and final data to measure student understanding of Indigenous knowledge. However, despite good intentions, formal data collection was not realized.

Informal data, however, in the form of a scrapbook was collected. We first created the scrapbook in 2010-2011. It contains photos of field trips, visiting Elders, and many special events that were planned and executed over the course of two years. It also contains a variety of student responses to these events in the form of letters, captions, thank you cards, reflections and samples of projects made. In June 2012, a ceremonial Feast to commemorate our graduating Grade Seven students, was also video-taped as part of our informal data collection.

Our plan was to utilize FSA results (2012) and formal data collected in the fall and spring as it relates to the BC performance standards to measure Aboriginal student achievement in key curricular areas. Due to current BC teacher 'job action', data was not provided to our school principal and FSA results were unavailable.

Strategies

To develop our question, it was important to us to consult with our Aboriginal Education worker, Anita Gray and District Aboriginal coordinator and Elder-in-training, Cheryl Webster. We also consulted with our school principal and interested teachers as well. We considered previous student understanding as it related to local Indigenous knowledge and the connections we made in previous years with our students, their families, Elders and others. When we referred to the *Aboriginal Understandings Performance Standards-SD-68 Aboriginal Education (copyright Laura Tait, SD68 Aboriginal Education 2011)*, we believed that our staff and students were at the 'Awareness' stage in terms of their understandings of local people, history and Indigenous knowledge.

We attempted to build on aspects suggested in this current stage by planning visits by local Elders in the fall and spring with classes from Grades K-3. During these classroom visits, Elders shared their Indigenous knowledge of local plants, animals and ways to gather and store food as it related to the seasons and to Carrier culture. The *Seasonal Carrier Calendar* provided a visual framework for students and Elders to relate to as the presentations commenced and many stories shared by Elders during these visits touched on local history and traditions.

We also planned a field trip to a local Provincial Park that would include two classes (Grades One to Three), one local Elder and an Elder-in-Training, our Aboriginal Education worker, two teachers and support workers. The field trip, which took place in mid-May 2012, involved walking with Elders on a trail through the forest at Eskers Provincial Park, located 25km from the school. Elders shared their knowledge of traditional plants and the wonders of the natural world with participating students on a 4 km walk. As an aside, our partner school, Hart Highland Elementary, received a grant in 2011 to work with local Elders to place 'sign posts' that identified local plants and their traditional medicinal uses. During the walk, the Elders referred to these sign posts along with identifying actual plants for students to see, touch, smell, sometimes taste, and learn about their medicinal properties. Many students soon realized that some of the

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plants identified were the same plants Elders presented and referred to in classroom visits! These same students expressed enthusiasm when recognizing the plants in the forest.

Prior to the walk, students were involved in a brief ceremony where they marked their faces: East-West (each cheek), North- South (forehead and chin) with charcoal from a previous fire on location as a demonstration of respect before entering the forest with the Elders. At a half way point on the trail, students were also involved in another ceremony that demonstrated respect for Mother Nature by giving a gift 'back' to 'her' and thanking 'her' for providing all that 'she' provides for us. Students were encouraged to choose a special stone, piece of bark, feather; next, they were instructed to let the wind take their gift as they expressed their words of gratitude.

The Elders present on this trip later shared that they felt that by involving students and teachers in these special traditional rituals it helped students and teachers to recognize and understand how important the land is to Aboriginal people historically and today. More importantly, they shared that these rituals are a sign of respect for walking, hunting, and gathering on the land that they share with others, both living and not living. After the walk, students were encouraged to draw and label the plants that they learned about in a sketch book. The Elders were available to answer any questions and to guide any misunderstandings.

With the help of Cheryl Webster and local Elders, our Aboriginal Education worker, Anita Gray, took the initiative to plan and involve two classes of Intermediate students to make a traditional gift to give away at the end of the school year. The students in the Grade Seven class made a dream catcher and wrote a note to welcome new Kindergarten registrants. And Grade Six students made mini-drums to give to graduating Grade Seven students. In June, the drums were given to the Grade Seven students at a very special Feast held in the school gym and the dream catchers were given to new students on 'Welcome to Kindergarten Day', also held at the school. It was expected that both initiatives would develop an understanding for these students that there is honour in giving gifts to others.

The Feast attempted to introduce students to understand and honour various local Carrier protocols such as sitting students, their families, and Elders in local Clan groups, introducing each member to the group, blessing and eating traditional foods, participating in a prayer and an acknowledgment of traditional territory, and acknowledging the presence of Elders.

Lastly, we planned two more field trips that involved students from two classes in Grades One to Three and Aboriginal students. Interested Aboriginal students were invited to attend and participate in a Leheil Tournament at a local school. Students in Grades One to Three visited a private home with Aboriginal Elders, teachers, support workers and parents to participate in and learn about tapping birch sap. The birch sap was later processed, and the same students had an opportunity to taste the birch syrup and to learn about the traditional uses with our Aboriginal Education worker and Elder-in-training.

School Findings

The informal assessment information we gathered is based on visual and anecdotal records collected in a scrapbook, teacher and principal observations, student reflections, and conversations with Elders and Aboriginal Education workers. Based on these informal findings

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we believe that in general, we successfully built on participating student and teacher understandings of local culture, history and Indigenous knowledge. We believe that our efforts continued to nurture relationships with our Aboriginal students, their families, and local Elders. While we are proud of our efforts and we believe, as do the Elders who have worked with our students, that our student responses are sincere, honest, and evident of growth in terms of their understandings, we are not confident that this informal data is sufficient in measuring the success of what our AESN Inquiry question expected to explore this year.

AESN Plans for 2012-2013

We have been informed that our Aboriginal foci will shift from a focus on Indigenous knowledge to a focus on local language and culture, with a possible emphasis on Aboriginal art. We have also been informed that we will be working and learning with a new District Aboriginal coordinator. We have not yet determined what our inquiry question will be, but we plan to be more diligent and persistent in our data collection and assessment. We plan to create a student and teacher survey developed from the *Aboriginal Understandings Performance Standards-SD68 Aboriginal Education* (Copyright Laura Tait, SD68 Aboriginal Education 2011) to assist us in collecting baseline and final data. We have explored the idea of creating a mural with students that will represent the local culture and artistic talents of our Aboriginal students, and represent our school and local community. We have also explored ways we can delve deeper to move our student and teacher understandings into the 'Developing-Acquiring' stage of development with Aboriginal literature, themes, and local Elders.

Reflections, Advice

One obvious challenge we had this year was the scope of our question and data collection. We learned that we did not 'begin with the end in mind' when it came to the development of our question and the use of appropriate assessment procedures to help us measure the growth and success as it related to our question. We believe that part of our challenge this year was that our formal leader was unable to assist us in monitoring data collection and setting deadlines for collection and interpretation.

We felt that in terms of including more classes, students and teachers, we were successful. The plans we initiated were successfully pursued and included several visits by Elders, three field trips, a Feast and the completion of two creative gifts.

We were proud of the informal evidence we collected in the form of a scrapbook: it tells the story of our journey with Elders over the past two years from our student's perspective and it highlights the level of respect and understanding our students have attained as a result of their relationships with them.

Our visiting Elders have expressed on more than one occasion that they are happy to visit our school and to share their stories and knowledge with staff and students because they feel respected and valued. This is what we are most proud of as a team. One of the most profound insights a team member has commented on is that when we (students and teachers) are in the presence of Elders, whether it is in or out of the classroom, the pace of our busy lives slows down: our ears begin to listen more carefully; our eyes begin to see more broadly; our minds and bodies become quiet and still; and our hearts begin to value the beauty and richness of all that is shared with us in the moment.