



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** Bayview Elementary      **District:** SD68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Area of focus:** Enhancement Agreement

**Inquiry Team Members:** Jennifer Stringer, Gena Seward-Wilson, Diane McGonigle

**Contact Information:** jstringer@sd68.bc.ca, gseward-wilson@sd68.bc.ca, dmcgonigle@sd68.bc.ca

**Question / focus area:** Will a school-wide family heritage project increase Aboriginal student engagement in their learning and family engagement with our school?

Our goal fits within the following three areas of the Building Success for Aboriginal Learners AEEA for 2011-2016 for our school district.

- *Spirit: How do we ensure Aboriginal learners are successful through the full effort of SD68 and Aboriginal communities in supporting the Enhancement Agreement?*
- *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?*
- *Body: How do we enhance all students' and all adults' understanding of Aboriginal history, perspectives, and people respecting that there is a contemporary context?*

**Scanning:** We have 143 students in our school of which 108 have Aboriginal ancestry (making our Aboriginal student population 75%). We noticed that most of our Aboriginal students could not answer the question, "Where are you from?" Our engagement data from last year showed that we need to find additional ways to help engage our Aboriginal learners. We also noticed that many of our Aboriginal families are not visibly present in our building and, when they are, communication and discussion is minimal.

**Focus:** Our focus was to increase Aboriginal student and family engagement by working and learning together in a school wide family heritage project based on a book that will connect students to their local heritage and culture, and give staff an opportunity to learn more about our families.

**Hunch:** Our world is busy and the opportunity to even sit down for a family dinner let alone discuss family history and visit with our Elders is often lacking. In school, we talk about the importance of relationships yet we often get caught up in what 'needs to get done' and don't take the time to stop, engage and listen as much as we could and

should. In addition, we have a diverse population of students from many different Aboriginal backgrounds. They are not all the same and, as a staff, we need to be aware of this and honour each of our students' and their families' unique backgrounds. We also think, due to the history of colonization and other factors, many Aboriginal family members view school as a threatening or unsafe place leading to a lack of participation and involvement. Our hunch is that this project could help our Aboriginal families feel more comfortable and welcomed in our school.

**New professional learning:** Professional learning took part in the form of discussions and opportunities to listen and reflect on stories and sharing from Elders and Aboriginal family members. Listening to students and families share about their backgrounds taught us a bit about the numerous local First Nations we have in this area as well as other nations across Canada.

**Taking action:** Our plan was to work on a school-wide family heritage project entitled 'We Are All Related.' The project is based on a book and the plan was for each student to complete two pages for the book. One page was to include background information about where the child's family is from and advice from an Elder. The other page was to include photos of the child, an Elder, and other family members, along with artifacts of significance to the student and family (illustrated in words or pictures). We wanted to take as many opportunities as we could to invite family members in to the school to make connections and enhance our relationship with the families. We also wanted to give our students the time and space to take pride in their families and share with us what they have learned.

With this project, we were attempting to increase family engagement so one of our strategies was to look for and/or create opportunities to invite Aboriginal family members and Elders to visit the school. We posted pictures in the front foyer of some Snuneymuxw Elders, which created lots of discussion within the school as well as within the community. We had people come up specifically to see these photos and sometimes to get a copy of one of their ancestors. We had a Snuneymuxw Elder, and great-grandma to some students, visit. She is 99 years old and answered the students questions about what it was like to live here almost 100 years ago! We had another Snuneymuxw Elder, and great-grandma of some of our students, come speak to our Grade 6/7 classroom to answer the many questions they had about residential school.

Two classes also conducted family interviews where family members from a variety of backgrounds (Status/Non-Status, Metis) were invited for an afternoon. Students spent about an hour with their guests, serving them scow and refreshments and conducting small group interviews. In the hopes of promoting our project, collecting photographs and getting families in to the school, we had a professional photographer come to our Christmas concert and take family portraits at no cost to our students. We put on a celebration, displayed students' work throughout the halls, and invited families to come do a gallery walk.

We kept our Aboriginal Education classroom open to families everyday before and after school. Families were always welcome to visit our Aboriginal Education staff and check out the new classroom full of wonderful photos of Elders and Bayview/Princess Royal school history. Throughout the year, we noticed an increase in family members coming to visit us in this classroom. They would often come in to ask questions about the project or to ask for help in printing off pictures.

We were also striving to increase student engagement. Even though this project was time consuming and a lot of hours were spent trying to collect family photos, we tried to give students the time and space to share what they knew and what they learned about their families. Our Aboriginal Education Assistant, who is a Snuneymuxw member, was often able to help students find information about their families and draw connections between themselves and their relatives (often even other students within our school). Most students worked one-on-one or in a small group to complete their write-ups. They were given the chance to really take pride in sharing all about their family. Aboriginal Staff also had the opportunity to phone home to clarify information and/or get further information for the students, which enabled us to make further connections.

**Checking:** We used some baseline data about student engagement that was part of our VIU literacy project last year. Teachers used the engagement rubric in the fall and the spring last year, and again this year.

**2013-2014 Engagement Data – Aboriginal Students**

|   | Moving<br>Toward the<br>Water -<br>Emerging<br>(1) | Boarding the<br>Canoe -<br>Developing<br>(2) | Raising Your<br>Paddle -<br>Applying<br>(3) | Journey into<br>Deeper Water -<br>Extending<br>(4) |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Fall 2013<br>(Fall 2012 for<br>comparison)        | 29/97 30%<br>(41%)                                 | 50/97 51.5%<br>(51%)                         | 17/97 17.5%<br>(5%)                         | 1/97 1%<br>(3%)                                    |
| Spring 2014<br>(Spring 2013<br>for<br>comparison) | 17/106 16%<br>(26%)                                | 49/106 46%<br>(42%)                          | 35/106 33%<br>(30%)                         | 5/106 5%<br>(2%)                                   |

This project definitely made a difference in the engagement level of our students as evidenced by the data. The data shows that we are making gains in having more of our Aboriginal students engaged in their learning at deeper levels. 38% are applying or extending their learning as compared to 32% last year. 46% are developing as compared to 42% last year and we have a 10% decrease in students still at the emergent level. The data also shows us that we still have continued room for improvement.

It was very important for us to have a culminating event to celebrate this project. We held our celebration on the morning of the last day of school with a packed gym of families. Snuneymuxw, Jerry Brown, opened the celebration and welcomed everyone. The Snuneymuxw dance group danced as part of the celebration. This was a huge accomplishment as many of the dancers are members of our school and had been asked to dance at the school on a number of occasions in the past but the students never wanted to. Our Bayview Shawl Dancers and Drummers also performed. Jennifer and Gena spoke to our audience about the project and showed a powerpoint of the steps along the way. Students and families were then led from the gym by the Shawl Dancers and Drummers and joined by the Snuneymuxw dancers in the hallway to lead our students back to class. Family members then collected their children and spent time together in the hallways sharing the completed projects. Those students who didn't have family members in attendance toured the halls with a big buddy or other staff member. Families also enjoyed a feast of scow and salmon. Some photos from the event have been attached and we are working on being able to submit the powerpoint.

**Reflections/Advice:** This inquiry was one of the most worthwhile – and time consuming - inquiries we have ever been involved with at a school. There were so many benefits from the inquiry including:

- Students learning more about their background and whom they are related to
- Increased pride and sharing of family background
- More connections with families and the school – Elders and other family members coming into the school and sharing with classes – more involvement with the school overall
- Photos of Elders generated a lot of engagement from families – family members would hear about the Elders' photos on display and come into the school to check them out, talk about them, and add additional photos
- Connections with families branching into other areas of the school/curriculum
- Non-Aboriginal students and staff expanding their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history and perspective
- Aboriginal students expanding their knowledge and understanding of other First Nations
- The celebration was the first time the SFN dancers who attend our school felt comfortable to perform in front of their peers

The project was not without its challenges. It was very time consuming and we were continually revising our planning. A lot of valuable one-on-one time was needed and

spent with students and/or their family members and planning needs to incorporate this. Collecting photos and information from some families was difficult. To help with this, we had a family photo opportunity during our Christmas concert, took our own photos of sibling groups and/or cousin groups at the school, and gathered photos and information from websites to help students complete their collages (e.g., maps of territories, symbols, crests). With our Children in Care, we had to tread carefully but we had some heartwarming examples of helping connect them to their families and helping them remember and celebrate their families.

Our plans for the future include:

- Highlight the information we learned this year in a number of ways including displaying a world map as well as a BC map and indicate where our students are from using push pins
- Display all the First Nations communities our families are from on a large map of BC and Canada and showcase details about the different nations on a bulletin board and at assemblies – also invite families to come in and share information with the students
- Continue to keep our Aboriginal Education Room open and possibly run monthly coffee and muffin mornings to continue to build on the connections we made with families last year
- Possibly offer another family photo opportunity