



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** Delta Secondary    **District:** SD37 Delta

**Area of focus:** Transitions

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### **Scanning:**

- Significant emotional reaction among staff members during and after the professional development day
- Surprise at the history of residential schools on the part of the staff
- Students taking healthy risk of sharing importance of their culture with other
- Increased student comfort expressing emotion through the medium of art

**Focus:** Delta Secondary focused on the transition of Aboriginal students from high school to adulthood. We wanted to generate an increased sense of pride and connection in our students, not only in the Aboriginal classroom, but school-wide.

**Hunch:** Though some work has been done in this area, the entrenched history of racism and residential schools continues to affect both non-Aboriginal staff and students, as well as the Aboriginal students at Delta Secondary. There is a disconnect between Aboriginal and mainstream culture. Students are often ashamed or unwilling to celebrate or promote their Aboriginal ancestry because of these entrenched attitudes.

Our inquiry team believed that working to promote pride in students, as well as educate staff about the history of residential schools would help break down some of these barriers, and work towards healing the disconnect. Students who left the high school environment with a strong acceptance of self would transition more easily into the larger adult world.

**New professional learning:** Our team focused on the benefits of learning from outside experts. We discovered that, sometimes, having a different person pass along the same message is more powerful for adults and youth, alike.

**Taking action:** Our team took a two-pronged approach to improving transitions through building student knowledge/pride and building staff knowledge/pride. To work with staff, we provided a professional development opportunity that included an Elder speaking about his experiences in residential school, and a virtual reenactment of the residential

school system. This activity, in alignment with the *Seven Learning Principles*, provided a strong emotional impact to enhance learning.

As well, we had our Aboriginal students work with a First Nations artist– he shared his story of education, and guided students through an art workshop. He also focused on the expression of emotion through art.

**Checking:** Unfortunately, we do not have any performance standards available to measure change. However, some quantifiable changes are worth noting:

- This year, our Aboriginal program at the school is larger than ever before, though the number of Aboriginal students in the school remains relatively static.
- The staff feedback from the professional development was overwhelmingly positive. There was definite interest expressed in further exploration of the issue of residential schools.
- The art that many students created during their First Nations art workshop expressed the frustration and struggles that students have had with racism, stereotyping and the education system. The facilitators of this inquiry grant feel that it is a positive step that these students were comfortable enough to express these feelings.
- Many of the Socials teachers used the contents of our staff professional development to generate a project for her socials class based on the guiding question: “To what extent did the government treat Aboriginals fairly?” Anecdotal evidence from student journals shows that several non-native students shifted their attitudes and beliefs towards Aboriginal culture and heritage from the beginning to the end of the unit.
- Resources provided at the staff professional development day were used in all of the school’s Socials 10 classes in several different units

There are also some other significant gains forward. During the staff professional development day to promote education and understanding of systemic racism, two students gave up their day off school and worked with the Elder and staff...they sang and drummed in front of the entire staff, and were available to comfort staff who were struggling emotionally. One of the students had her mother present – both parent and student expressed pride not only in participating in a cultural activity, but in being able to share their culture with the school.

**Reflections/Advice:** This inquiry illustrated the lack of understanding on the part of both staff and students as to why there is a disconnect between many Aboriginal learners and mainstream education. While working with the Aboriginal youth is critical, for sustainable change to occur, staff and non-Aboriginal youth must be educated, as well. This sort of project needs to be long-term in scope...focusing on this area for one year will create some positive benefits, but multiple years are needed to create a wide-scale cultural shift.