



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** Houston Secondary School      **District:** SD54 Bulkley Valley

**Area of focus:** Transitions

**Inquiry Team Members:** Donna Stanyer, Catherine Quanstrom, Sam Birkedal, Ravneet Minhas

**Scanning:** In examining the female population of Houston Secondary School, specifically grades 8 and 9, it is apparent that negative peer pressure and a perception of unspoken norms seem to influence many to make self-limiting decisions. HSS has a high percentage of Aboriginal students. We think these influences are having a negative effect on their attendance and affect their overall feeling of connection to the learning community. Our asset worker, Sam Birkedal, confirms these assumptions, saying that the Aboriginal students she supports often report feeling disconnected and that school is irrelevant.

**Focus:** Will a program of senior female mentors (Girls Mentoring Girls) influence the choices and self-concept of junior girls in grades 8 and 9? Will including our female Aboriginal students in these groups make them feel their input is valued (as mentors) and will it make the junior students feel comfortable and included in the school community? Will these girls then feel empowered to make healthy choices and feel a strong connection to the learning community?

**Hunch:**

- Teachers have noticed that young girls at HSS seem vulnerable to the influence of older boys and sometimes develop inappropriate and/or unequal relationships where there is a power differential.
- Teachers, administrators and the counselor have observed that there seems to be a group mentality among younger girls where many do not feel confident to express their individuality and individual choices and decisions.
- Girls seem to restrict their own choices based on perceived peer pressure regarding appearance and female roles.
- Formal leaders say absentee and late rates among Aboriginal girls tend to be higher than among the non-Aboriginal school population.
- Many of our students come from challenging family situations, leading to more time with peers and less time with significant adult mentors.

**New professional learning:** Relationship building is key to effective instruction. We believe that by encouraging mentoring bonds, new students in transition to high school will feel more connected to the school community and have less anxiety overall. We

hope this will be reflected in their academic performance. By enabling and encouraging the mentors, school staff can provide support in a facilitation role rather than in a central leadership role.

**Taking action:** A grade 12 student leader (Ravneet) took the initiative on this inquiry, while the teacher leaders provided infrastructure, support and coaching. Ravneet attended the Minerva program at UBC in the spring of 2013 and returned with a wish to implement a mentoring program at HSS.

In consultation with Donna and Catherine a program was designed that would provide leadership experience for senior girls, with a special note to encourage and include senior girls of Aboriginal heritage, while also providing mentoring in the form of monthly activities and encouragement for ongoing relationship building with the grade 8 and 9 girls (including junior girls of Aboriginal heritage).

Participation by both senior and junior students is voluntary. As well, senior students were required to apply to be a mentor; they were asked to articulate their reasons for wanting to be a mentor and to outline what they could offer to the program.

**Checking:** Questionnaires were used in the fall, winter and spring where we asked the junior girls questions about their sense of place among peers and in the learning community. The questionnaire was developed jointly between the teacher leaders and the senior girls. We kept a separate record of answers from Aboriginal students.

**Findings:** We conducted surveys of both junior and senior girls in the fall and late spring. In our initial questionnaires the seniors told us:

- They wanted to welcome younger girls and help them feel more welcome
- Being a mentor would look good on resumes and applications
- They wanted to encourage and help younger girls to try new things

The juniors told us:

- They were interested in meeting some older students
- They were nervous about coming to the high school
- They were scared of senior students

After a year of monthly meetings and one weekend sleepover, we surveyed the girls again.

The juniors told us:

- They had gained more friendships and had fun
- They found that, for the most part, senior students were nice
- They like high school and feel more comfortable here – like they belong
- Two did not like the Mentorship program and felt that “girl drama” made it not fun

The seniors told us:

- They felt more responsible for younger students

- Activities were fun and helped them connect with the younger students whom, normally, they would have just ignored
- Loved the idea of being a positive role model for younger students
- Connected with different students than they would have otherwise (both Jr. and Sr.)
- It was a great learning experience
- One felt it was not worthwhile for her but did not give a reason why

Our learnings from this are that:

- There are many girls who enjoyed the group and found it smoothed their entry into high school.
- The majority of senior girls found an outlet for giving, sharing and mentoring. Our Aboriginal senior members preferred to be paired with Aboriginal juniors.
- Rapport between mentors and mentees was critical to an ongoing relationship.
- We still had cliques within the larger groups that turned off some students causing them to withdraw.
- Cooking activities were popular, but we need to provide a greater range of activities (including some outdoor physical activities).
- We need to meet more often than 1 time/month to maintain connection.
- We need to check in informally more often with both seniors and juniors.
- We need to check in specifically with our Aboriginal members, and track their attendance to see if the program has a positive effect on their absenteeism.
- We will continue to shape and develop the program.
- A motivated senior leader has a great influence on the success of the program.