



2013-2014 AESN Case Study

School: Hugh Boyd Secondary **District:** SD38 Richmond

Area of focus: Transitions

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Scanning: Research says that some Aboriginal learners struggle as they make the transition from elementary to secondary school. After becoming accustomed to the structure and the supportive relationships in place at elementary school, the jump to secondary school can be challenging. Coping with the size of the high school, the number of teachers with differing expectations, and the increased academic workload can become overwhelming. Frustration can result in disengagement from school, and a questioning of the purpose of school, in general. Anecdotal feedback from Aboriginal parents and students indicates that the curriculum for English and social studies in grades 8-10, in particular, are neither reflective nor accurate with regard to Aboriginal contributions in history and literature. The disconnect between school and student is amplified by a Eurocentric delivery of curriculum. The result is that Aboriginal graduation rates lag behind the graduation rates of non-Aboriginal students across the province.

Focus: How do we best support the transition from elementary to secondary school for our Aboriginal students in such a way that they are connected to their educational experiences, and can see a purpose for their current school experiences, thus gaining clarity about their future beyond graduation?

Hunch: Currently, the Aboriginal education support services department does not have a clear process to follow during the transition of Aboriginal students from elementary school to secondary school. While conversations about transition support happen amongst the members of the department, we think that there is a need to create an itemized list of procedures to follow to ensure that students are fully supported in this important transitory time. We also have a hunch that some students are unclear about the purpose of high school graduation. We think that defining that sense of purpose for students by educators is essential for success at high school. Purpose may be gained through a greater understanding of post-secondary options, and by connecting their learning to their life experiences, both inside and outside of school. Bringing a cultural connection in line with the current educational context and an understanding that post-secondary options are available and accessible requires a dedicated focus on monitoring success in school and success in transitioning from one grade to the next, especially in secondary years.

New Professional Learning: As teachers, we attempted to deepen our understanding of how students experience the transition from elementary school to high school, what is necessary for students to feel supported through this transition, and what potentially causes disengagement from school. We explored what can nurture and grow a sense of purpose within students. We did this through surveys and interviews with students and parents, a formal leader, and a school counselor.

Taking Action: As part of our research, we held a traditional ceremony in October to mark the significance of the transition into high school for our grade 8 students with Aboriginal ancestry and their families, which was also attended by school formal leaders, counselors, and the district Aboriginal support services team. This event was led by a Musqueam Elder, who blanketed the students in a beautiful ceremony to honour them, and to let them know that they are cared for, and supported, not only by their families, but also by their schools. At the event we asked the students and their parents and guardians in attendance, to respond to a written survey about their transition thus far.

In February, the midpoint of the school year, we did follow-up surveys with all grade 8 students and their parents and guardians in order to further gauge their experiences with their grade 8 year. Our feedback indicates that the transition experiences of our students has been overwhelmingly positive. Students have felt prepared for the transition prior to their entrance into grade 8, and then, they have felt supported in their transition by their schools, by our Support Services team, and by their families. Likewise, the parents of our Aboriginal students have also felt satisfied by the district supports for transition.

Reflections/Advice: This data runs counter to our knowledge, as educators in this district, that a disproportionate number of students with Aboriginal ancestry in our high schools end up in our alternate programs, or disengaging from school altogether. When we asked school staff about their feelings about the transition process for grade 8's, and after interviewing a student that we are tracking for our research, a couple of interesting things came to light for us.

First, we wondered whether we were wrong about the grade 8 transition being as overwhelming for students as we had initially thought. Our principal said, "I think we do a good job of the transition, but then we don't do anything to maintain the transition as grade 8 goes on and into the further grades." Perhaps, we need to work harder on supporting students after their grade 8 year, therefore increasing support for students after grade 8 when disengagement appears to surface. Teachers from our support team who provide direct support to our students with Aboriginal ancestry in our district confirm that students in their grade 10 year find school especially challenging.

After interviewing one of our students with Aboriginal ancestry, we found out that he is so comfortable as a grade 8 student, that he volunteered to act as an ambassador for his new high school in a presentation about the school to current grade 7 students. In his words, "Grade 8 creates a big change. You can look at this from different

perspectives. It's not as easy, but it can make you more responsible for your actions and decisions. It can go both ways." This insightful student comes from a strong family unit who supports his education, and this student's school counselor believes this factor has made a great impact on his successful transition. This indicates that schools need to be nurturing more positive relationships with families, particularly when family units are not as cohesive.

From our inquiry, we have learned that Aboriginal students within our district are transitioning from grade 7 to high school very well. Moving forward, we will make sure to maintain the current support for this transition, and will now turn more attention to how to best support Aboriginal students, with an intensive focus on students in care, in their grades 9 and 10 years, which are critical years to maintain engagement with school, in order to graduate with an academic Dogwood Diploma.