



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** John Barsby Community Secondary

**District:** SD68, Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Area of focus:** Transitions

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**Question / focus area:** Initially our question had to do with transitioning grade 7 Aboriginal students to encourage them to become a more active part of Barsby's community.

However, our focus changed radically in the winter of 2013-14 when we realized the much bigger issue and a deeper concern of our incoming students and parents was the closure of Cedar Secondary and the splitting of its student body between Barsby and Ladysmith Secondary. Transitioning the at-risk Cedar Aboriginal students became the more essential issue.

**Scanning:** We realized there were many different perceptions by the parents and students of Cedar about Barsby. Parents, at open houses held both at Cedar and at Barsby, expressed concern about the choice and quality of academics and the break-up of their children's social groups when friends chose different schools. They worried about the different emphasis placed on different sports and extra-curricular. Economic challenges played a role, as our school district offered bussing to Barsby but not to Ladysmith, as it was out of catchment area. There was also a concern about the at-risk Aboriginal students falling through the cracks as they transitioned from Cedar to Barsby. On a bright note, Aboriginal Education provided a note of consistency in that the Aboriginal support teacher for both schools was Donna Flett.

**Focus:** Our focus was to discover whether concerted transitions activities developed by Barsby-Cedar student support staff for at-risk Cedar Aboriginal students might provide a stronger platform for those students during the transition and make it more comfortable for those students. We wanted them to feel connected to the Barsby student community so that they would connect to the school's support systems when they began school in the fall of 2014.

**Hunch:** Barsby administration and student support staff run an in-depth, broad-ranging, and systematic tracking, information sharing, and monitoring system for our at-risk youth. We anticipated that without specific transitions activities for those in-coming at-risk Cedar Aboriginal students, they might find this tight wrap-around, far-reaching approach somewhat surprising and might reject it. By providing advance orientation and transitions activities and follow up, we wanted to ensure that students instead felt warmly welcomed and understood the Barsby support staff and formal leaders were caring, concerned, and committed to the students' success and well-being.

**New professional learning:** Our team hoped to learn which strategies worked best for transitioning older at-risk Aboriginal youth into the Barsby community. This will help us with Aboriginal students transitioning from other areas of the province and schools other than Cedar.

**Taking action:** Our team developed a series of activities for the core group of at-risk Aboriginal youth, both in terms of transition activities and private interviews. These students also had the opportunity to participate in transition tours and activities when Cedar visited Barsby.

**Checking:** We used before and after surveys, interviews, and student tracking to monitor our progress. Initial surveys showed Aboriginal students had strong feelings about Cedar closing. Several student comments were negative. A few thought Cedar would not close. Fewer were looking forward to coming to Barsby. Once it became clear Cedar would close, most Aboriginal students worried about leaving their friends or losing their friends and whether or not they would fit in with the existing Barsby student body. These concerns became stronger as the closure date got closer and transition activities emphasized the change.

Our Aboriginal at-risk youth had concerns about missing the bus and “not knowing if people are going to accept you.” One young student thought she might be picked on at Barsby.

For our specifically chosen at-risk Aboriginal transition students we offered:

- Private and in-depth tours of the school in small groups (generally 2-3 students)
- Introductions and private visits with the counsellors and our well-known child and youth worker
- A meeting with our formal leaders team members and the specific formal leader who would be monitoring the student
- Lunch at the school

Follow up surveys and interviews indicated that the at-risk students who participated in the “up close and personal” transition sessions felt more comfortable about coming to Barsby, better knew where to go for help and support, and were feeling less anxious about asking for help. Most could list off four or five avenues of support they might need to access should they have difficulties. We also had a chance to closely monitor how our target group was fitting in when school started.

Two of the at-risk students have already voluntarily received help from the child and youth worker. They connect with him often in the halls and have chats with him to check in. Another at-risk student has not needed the support of the counselling staff.

One of the students commented this fall that Barsby's comfortable and supportive community surprised her. "What with all the rumors about Barsby hating Cedar and Cedar hating Barsby, I find I actually have a good group of Barsby friends," she said.

Two of our target students did not participate in the personally-tailored activities and these students are now struggling with making a transition in spite of their desires to make a success of school. Issues of attendance, skipping, commitment, and home and social matters continue to interfere with students success.

One of our at-risk students who struggled at Cedar had looked forward to coming to Barsby: "I wanted to start my life over and get all my stuff on track.... Not get distracted by all the people I knew—they're here, but I don't hang out with them." This student is now focusing more on doing well in school courses and looks forward to getting into drama in the spring.

**Reflections/Advice:** Our team learned that the personal and in-depth approach removes either implied or perceived extra barriers for the at-risk youth transitioning to Barsby. Those youth who participated in these activities made a stronger connection to Barsby, are generally happier students here, know where to go for help, and are less reluctant to seek it. We would recommend this personal and tailored approach to smooth the way for any student transitioning into a new learning environment.