



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** Wellington Secondary School **District:** SD68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Area of focus:** Transitions

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**Question/focus area:** Will running a girls group facilitate mentorship by the senior Aboriginal participants and help ease the new and younger Aboriginal students transition into secondary school while building confidence and a sense of belonging for all participants?

**Scanning:** Many of the female Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in grades 8 and 9 at Wellington Secondary School verbally identified feelings of apprehension, anxiety and isolation. The same students that identified the feelings mentioned above were also in many cases the same students that were struggling in their classes and with attendance in general. A number of senior students who had been part of a girls group or used the Aboriginal education room consistently expressed the benefits of the room, group and connection with an adult and peers in helping to build relationships with other students and staff, as well as developing a sense of belonging in the school.

**Focus:** Will introducing student-led discussions and activities develop confidence, voice and a sense of leadership for the senior students and a sense of belonging, safety and acceptance for the new participants? How will this relationship building and mentorship effect students school experience and will it filter into the general school population and community?

It became apparent that there was a need and a desire for relationship building, a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose within the school for these junior students. We also found that even though our focus was on Aboriginal students and our model was influenced by Aboriginal concepts and ways of knowing, this girls group benefited and was embraced by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants.

We wanted to create a space where friendships grew, where students were encouraged to understand and accept individual differences, and a sense of purpose and action was made available. Recruiting senior students that could mentor and inspire these youth was also a driving focus to this project.

**Hunch:** There was a gap in transition support for many of the grade 8 and 9 girls especially in the area focused on Aboriginal students. The shift from elementary to

secondary school can be a very challenging one for many and traumatic for some. We noticed a number of girls that would walk, eat, study or sit alone in the hallways before school, at lunch and during breaks and after school. There were also not enough opportunities for senior students to mentor and interact with the junior students one-on-one and in small groups. A safe and caring space for students was also in need and is something many students feel is unavailable to them. There is also a lack of time available to fully meet the social and emotional needs of students. Counselors, teachers and support staff are busy and the time-table is full with academics and the limited number of electives. Lunch time, before school and after school are the only times available to hold meetings.

**New professional learning:** We used material that was recommended by another girls group called Girlz'tuff, and another called Girl Power. This material was informative however, with the lack of time within the school day, running the intended lessons was a challenge. We began using the model from "Reclaiming Youth" called the 'The Circle of Courage'. We took training in this philosophy and began using and adapting activities from a book modeled after this philosophy called. These lesson ideas were simple but very meaningful and created many opportunities for talk, sharing, metacognition and creating connections between participants and leaders. The move to using a philosophy rather than a packaged project was a shift that helped create more space for effectiveness.

**Taking action:** The first steps were space, recruitment of mentors, invitation of participants and funding. The Aboriginal education room was booked for Wednesdays at lunch for the duration of the year. Senior student mentors were suggested by other school staff, from students that used the Aboriginal education room during the week, face-to-face discussions, and from an announcement made to the whole school requesting mentors.

Junior students were referred by other school staff confidentially and invited face-to-face. Announcement and invitation posters were presented to the whole school and by word of mouth. We used some reserve funds from the Aboriginal education fund to begin the project and then used a combination of inquiry grants, PAC funding and fundraising for the duration of the inquiry.

**Checking:** The inquiry started with a small group about 6 girls and one adult facilitator. At the completion of the inquiry we had an average of 15 girls attending regularly and a second adult mentor. The girls actively participated in group discussions and activities, encouraged other girls to attend, and committed to fundraising activities. The girls donated proceeds for two fundraisers to local charity groups and a number of girls participated in other school groups and teams directly related to the new relationships and support systems they had developed. When mentors became peer tutors, for school credit, in the junior grades a number of girls already had a substantial relationship to the mentor and were observed to attend more regularly, ask questions and participate in class more frequently and become peer mentors themselves. Using the *Medicine Wheel* to track wellness we identified that the girls were able to increase

the number of adults that they felt cared about them within the school. There was not enough time to meet the identified needs of belonging and relationships and the girls identified the desire for more time to spend with the group that did not take away from their academic classes.

**Reflections/Advice:** We observed that many girls in our secondary school feel isolated, bullied, self-conscious and anxious. There is a need for peer, senior student and adult mentorship to help increase a strong sense of belonging. Through relationship building, allowing for student voice, and the opportunity for supported participation and generosity, all students will develop and strengthen inner wellness and confidence at school and in all areas of their lives.

- We suggest that there is increased attention to the transition of students from elementary to grade 8 and through grade 9.
- There is a desire from students and a noticeable need of increased healthy role modeling from senior students and more adult to student mentorship.
- Finally, there is also the need for attention and validation of the importance of student wellness and sense of belonging by creating space in the time-table for more social/emotional development.