



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** Woodlands Secondary School

**District:** SD68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Area of focus:** Transitions

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**Question / focus area:** Will using the Girlz'tuff program as a platform to facilitate mentorship by the senior Aboriginal participants help ease the new and younger Aboriginal students' transition into secondary school while building a sense of belonging for all participants?

**Scanning:** Students tend to experience a significant change in support, sense of belonging and community when transitioning from elementary to secondary school. There are many students who struggle socially and emotionally during this transition, which can then lead to academic struggles and vice versa. Many young girls entering secondary school also experience anxiety, isolation, and low self-esteem.

**Focus:** How can we facilitate a supportive and welcoming transition and integration into the Woodlands Secondary School community for our grade 8 and 9 participants? What are strategies for supporting the returning and senior participants in the Girlz'tuff group to becoming mentors and role-models for the new participants? Will increasing 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? Will including Elders, community mentors and guest speakers build knowledge and respect for culture, identity and motivation? How will this relationship building and mentorship effect students school experience and will it filter into the general school population and community?

**Hunch:** There is a need to continue to develop a strong sense of community, build and foster healthy relationships and support and promote positive role models. The Aboriginal education department, Woodlands School and local community need to continue to come together to celebrate and embrace traditional culture and assist students and their peers building self-esteem and positive self-identity.

**New professional learning:**

- The use of material focused on the Girlz'Tuff and Girl Power programs

- New workshops and training in facilitating girls groups as well as leadership and peer mentorship training
- Professional development may also be gained through mental health and alternative-education conference participation
- Attend workshops and have guest speakers, as well as accessing non-violent communication workshops and literature
- Building a professional learning library to support and enhance both facilitators' skills, knowledge and interest areas

**Taking action:** Meetings were held on average 1.5 times a month during the built in enhancement block on Fridays, with supplemental activities and events throughout the month. Our focus was to build strong and lasting relationships with peers and mentors through dialog, group activities, traditional teachings and respect with focus on the areas emphasized in the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement.

We provided the opportunity for our learners to build self-esteem and confidence, create connections and build relationships, and support excitement to lifelong learning leadership. We brought in guest speakers on healthy relationships and communication. A worker came and spoke about health, wellness and substance abuse.

We had some of the students take leadership roles and help with the weekly "Souper Tuesday." They also organized and decorated the Aboriginal awareness wall in the Aboriginal education room that changed monthly, and welcomed/acknowledged the First Nations territory at school assemblies and events. The Girlz'tuff group had parent and staff volunteers join us in making moccasins, which helped build relationships within the school and with the community.

**Checking:** To document learning, growth and a sense of belonging in the group and in the larger school community we used journals, attendance and student led discussions and activities. Student's participated in *Truth and Reconciliation* conferences and workshops in Nanaimo and Vancouver as well as *We Day* in Vancouver. We also tracked student attendance with the Girlz'tuff meetings and at school in general as well as the use of the supports within the school and especially the Aboriginal Education room. The meeting times were unfortunately sacrificed to assemblies, pep rallies, holidays and were in competition with enhancement field trips and activities. It was also identified that the students that benefited from attending Girlz'tuff meetings were often the same students that were required to use the enhancement blocks to make up missed assignments and tests which is important, but we believe that these students missed out on valuable relationship building and a chance to connect to the school, students and staff role models.

**Reflections/Advice:** Throughout the duration of this project we identified the need for support around health and wellness including mental health, relationships, communication, substance use and physical health. We identified that creating space, time and validating the importance of health and wellness were important factors in

effectiveness of the Girlz'tuff program. Consistency of meetings and clear group developed expectations are necessary for the success of these types of groups.

Advice for future groups would be embedded time within the timetable to focus on health and wellness especially with the grade 8 and 9 students. Having formal leaders and other teachers as collaborators and supporters of the program to insure a sense of validity and importance of the project is extremely helpful. Finally, more opportunity to document with the students their feelings of success and progress, through video, voice recording, slideshow presentations, photographs, artifacts and presentations would help solidify learning, confidence and mastery among participants.