



2014 - 2015 AESN Case Study

School: Deroche Elementary **District:** #75 Mission

Area of Focus: Enhancement Agreement

Inquiry Team Members: Cyndie Anderson, Marijke Ell, Justin Laslo, John Murphy, Susan Olivier,Carolynn Schmor, Michael Van, Johnny Williams

Contact: cyndie.anderson@mpsd.ca

Our focus for this year: We made a mindful and deliberate focus to participate, learn about and celebrate First Nations culture for all of our students. The majority of students at Deroche have First Nations Heritage, many with status from the two local Leqamel and Scowlitz First Nation Bands. At Deroche we are inclusive, being mindful of all of our students, native and non-native. An example of this is providing an orange t-shirt to every student at our school to recognize the experience of former students of Indian Residential Schools and affirm a collective commitment to ensure that every child matters. This year we had an inquiry focus on the salmon, the life force of the Sto: lo people of the Fraser River.

Scanning: The vision of Siwal Si'wes, our Aboriginal department, is to recognize and nurture strengths of our Aboriginal students so they will thrive as individuals, thus contributing to the well-being of their families and communities while preserving tradition. This vision for Aboriginal learners speaks of connectedness to family, community and preserving tradition.

Despite our previous focus on Aboriginal teachings, the students reported they did not relate to or were learning about Aboriginal peoples. On the Sense of Belonging Students Connectivity Survey, 35% of our Aboriginal students reported they “sometimes” feel they do not belong. 23% report they are “sometimes” happy to be at Deroche.

We made a purposeful effort to create and provide opportunities in learning for Deroche students to attend school with a positive attitude towards learning, to get along with each other and solve problems peacefully. Demonstration of socially responsible behaviour is a byproduct of students feeling connected to the school; showing a sense of pride and belonging.

Focus: Our efforts led us to focus on two themes of the district Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement.

- Theme 1: Honouring Culture and History

Ensure ALL students are learning about and respecting Aboriginal peoples, culture, and history.

- Theme 3: Meaningful Contributions

Create empowering opportunities for students to grow as individuals and prosper as a part of a community.

Hunch: Considering that the majority of our student population is of First Nation heritage, we recognize it is difficult for any child to think in a broader sense outside of their own ethnicity. The curriculum teaches children about Aboriginal history and culture from a Eurocentric point of view; along with the cultural activities facilitated by school staffs, one cannot assume that the children personally relate to the activities and connect as a person of Aboriginal heritage. Siwal Si'wes, the district's Aboriginal department, reports that input from community meetings, parent and student surveys suggest a need for better relationships and connections, more support with learning and more opportunities to spark curiosity and interest in learning leading to feelings of success and thus keeping children engaged in school.

New professional learning: Deroche has a small staff of full-time and part-time educators consisting of three classroom teachers, part time support staff and a teaching Principal. We each have varying understandings of Aboriginal reconciliation and cultural competency. Other than our Aboriginal support workers, the staff is primarily non-native. We agreed to improve our efforts with an active approach to learning with a focus on Aboriginal teachings and culture that would benefit the student body with collaboration and support from our local First Nation members and Elders.

Taking action: Every year, with the help from the Salmonid project, we hatch salmon eggs in a large tank. This is primarily monitored by the intermediate students. The younger ones are most excited when the eggs hatch and the Alevin are hiding in the rocks in the tank. When asking the children about the life cycle of the salmon it was surprising to learn they didn't really have an understanding of the Salmon and the habitat in which they thrive. In an effort to reclaim this learning about the salmon, this year we took a deeper look at Salmon as a whole school inquiry. Salmon are very important for the local First Nation Bands along the Fraser River. There are many stories and legends about salmon within the Sto: lo First Nation bands who live along the Fraser River. We collaborated with the Fraser Valley Watershed society, the Legamel First Nation Band council and Chief and the Williams family from the Scowlitz first nation.

Our inquiry was focused on how to teach the children to respect the environment and to learn how to preserve this important resource for generations to come. We had a display in the foyer of our school and borrowed books and activities for classes to take part of within their daily lessons in the classroom. We learned the words and sang songs about the salmon in Halq'emeylem, the traditional Coast Salish language in the area.

We entered a contest with BC Hydro for community champions and won some money that helped us put a plan in place with the Fraser Valley Watershed Society to teach the children and to learn about salmon enhancement and life in a wetland. For the past three years we have raised salmon fry in a school tank and released them in the Silvermere creek bed. We did this again this spring but what was different is the day spent previous to the release with our whole school, all 72 students working and learning in their bear clan groups about the wetlands and salmon stream restoration. Our school planted over 100 trees that day. It was exciting to hear the intermediate students, who returned to release the salmon fry, talk about the trees and how much they grew since we were there last. Some of our students made a point of telling me that their families went on a special hike to the wetlands to go see the trees we planted. Taking ownership of the area and connecting with the earth, digging into the dirt, helps the students make a personal connection to the work.

Every year our school is fortunate to host the First Salmon Ceremony for our school and families. This was the third year we had the ceremony. What was different was the planning and participation by members of both local First Nation groups. An elder and child from each band were selected to present the salmon. Members from the Leqamel First Nation drum team sang songs and drummed the Salmon in to the room. We have the fortune of having Johnny Williams and his family in our school community. Johnny is from the Skowlitz First Nation and is an Aboriginal Support Worker in our district assigned to our school. Each year he and his family provide the first salmon ceremony for the school. We included the funding application in our grant proposal from our district to support this event. Johnny and his family prepare a meal for the entire school. This year we enjoyed the first Salmon Johnny caught from the river this spring. The ceremony was attended by the whole school, families, elders and special guests. Earlier in the day we had a mini cultural day with students decorating the gym with cedar branches, listening to stories about the salmon and making a salmon egg nest with rocks and clay.

Checking: We did not use any performance standards to assess growth in learning. We did observe and make note of the children's attitudes and attendance for the activities that took place. We noticed that our attendance was high when we had a function or significant event taking place. We do have the results from the last two years for the Sense of Belonging survey completed for our Aboriginal department, Siwalsiwes. We hope the student scores will be higher saying they feel connected and happy to attend school and have a deeper understanding

of First Nations culture. We will use the survey for all of our students and track this for a school goal in our School Growth Plan.

Reflections/Advice: We learned that having an organized leadership activity once a month was ambitious. We settled on once a term which was manageable with staff willingness, time and finances. We learned to let some things go if it wasn't working. We learned that the most successfully attended activities involved food! We learned that if the students are involved in the planning they are more likely to invite their parents and talk about it at home. This was true for all people involved. We learned to have parents and elders alongside us on fieldtrips in the community to help the children stay on task and be present in the activity. We noticed that those who had some ownership of the activities had more commitment and followed through. We also learned that some volunteers may wander a different path and that is ok. The best learning is sometimes spontaneous so to let go of the reins was a good experience for the teachers and Principal. We learned to work together in our community. One can't go wrong with a child focused approach. We learned that collaborating with the Siwalsiwes department and the local First Nations bands as partners in the learning was rewarding and productive as is any project "Where Children are First.....(our school motto).

Next steps....Next year Deroche is in transition with new teachers. It is an interesting time with only one of our part time teachers returning. We will explore cultural competency with support from Siwalsiwes staff and from community elders. The plan is to explore past practice, look at the new curriculum and see what opportunities will fall in our laps. The new BC curriculum has Aboriginal teachings and learning in every grade K-6. We will include the school leadership team, the families and community members. There is talk about us reclaiming a local stream that navigates through our school yard. This project would have to involve outside school staff so community collaboration is key. This was part of our discussion last year with Leqamel FN. Some legwork and inquiry has already been completed by a local community member to help us get going. Ideally, we would like to partner with a group that has a project like this on the go in our school community or area in which the children live and learn.

One change we made this year was to adopt and include this belief stated below into our 2015-16 school growth plans. A teacher can plan and teach the best lesson they ever prepared and all can go well in the classroom but if the children are not engaged, if they cannot relate or are not feeling successful then they are not learning and all our efforts are for naught.

Rationale: (Siwalsiwes Enhancement Agreement)

"We believe that students come to school for many reasons, but it is the positive learning experiences that keep students engaged through to graduation. We have defined engagement

as feeling successful, connected and supported in their learning with student actions such as coming to and staying in school. Students who are engaged in their work are successful, curious, connected, and supported in their learning”.

