



2015-2016 AESN Case Study

School: Howe Sound Secondary

District: #48 Sea to Sky

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Our focus for this year: Supporting the building of relationships between Aboriginal students, non-Aboriginal students, staff, and community.

Scanning: I noticed that Aboriginal students wanted to build a stronger identity for themselves and their Aboriginal Leadership class in the school and the wider community. They felt that they were not seen as a “real class” in the school, and that their learning, history, stories, and ways of being were undervalued in many places in the school.

In the First Peoples Principles of Learning, it states that “learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors”, and “learning requires exploration of one’s identity.” School District 48’s strategic plan identifies collaboration and contributing as core competencies.

Focus: At the beginning of the year, I thought that I needed to look at transitions for students from secondary to post-secondary; it appeared that much of the stress they felt was due to the uncertainty around this stage of life. As the year progressed, it became clear that students were feeling a strong desire to contribute to the school and wider communities, and to create a more concrete place for themselves and the Aboriginal Leadership class within the school. They were committed to building their leadership skills in secondary school in order that they could take those skills with them to post-secondary.

Hunch: Students communicated very clearly that they felt Aboriginal Leadership was not considered a ‘real class’ by many members of the school community. Our school also has a Leadership and an Athletic Leadership class, and the group was feeling a bit lost regarding what their purpose was in the wider context of the school. As well, many students commented that they felt stereotyped by members of the school community. Also, when students attended 24 Hour Drum meetings, staff sometimes reacted in a negative way; students felt that the learning and work they were doing was not considered to be as important as the learning in other classes in the school.

New professional learning: Much of my professional learning involved conversations with our school’s Aboriginal Support Worker. We talked about how to support students in building their identity within the school. I also sought advice from our District Principal of Aboriginal Education. Both colleagues were important in my learning. I also started exploring the use of circles in promoting discussion.

Taking action: My process this year of implementing strategies was definitely one of learning and mistakes. Upon reflection, I realize that there was not enough scaffolding for students in terms of building on their strengths in leadership to complete concrete tasks. Our leadership

classes were often rich in discussion and relationship building. When it came to completing projects for events like the District Implementation Day where students spoke about their realities in school, and the 24 Hour Drum, where students presented projects about the environment, students and I struggled in terms of producing concrete results.

In terms of communicating with staff about the identity of the Aboriginal Leadership class, I communicated frequently in discussions with individual teachers about the importance of student work in leadership. I also made sure to email examples and evidence of student work to all staff so they could see what the leadership class was about.

Checking: There was definitely growth in terms of building connections this year. I noticed that non-Aboriginal students are definitely more aware of the purpose of the Aboriginal leadership class, and there are non-Aboriginal students joining the class and expressing interest in being a part of the group. I look forward next year to continuing the process of building relationships with staff and community. I felt that there was definitely a good start in terms of understanding the importance of Aboriginal leadership in our school.

Reflections/Advice: My biggest learning for the year was that there is a need in our school for a much bigger commitment to building relationships through honouring Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing in all parts of the school. Although the focus on leadership does have an impact on students and on positive relationships, there is much more to be done to see bigger and more meaningful results. As we are in a time of reconciliation, I feel the school system can play an integral role in moving this forward.