



2015-2016 AESN Transitions Case Study

School: Frank Hurt Secondary

District: #36 Surrey

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Our focus for this year: Successful transitions for Aboriginal learners.

Scanning: Before we could begin to scan the experiences of our learners, we had to first consider our context, positionality, and relationships. A non-Aboriginal man took on the role of Aboriginal Teacher Advocate at Frank Hurt Secondary five years ago with a set of assumptions about his knowledge, himself, and his students. He developed a support model in relative isolation and positioned himself as the source and deliverer of solutions. Over the next several years, the Teacher Advocate began to understand how his biases were self-fulfilling. He and his former colleagues created an Aboriginal Team (including an Aboriginal Child and Youth Care Worker (ACYCW), and Aboriginal Education Assistant) that gathered regularly to honour each Aboriginal student by identifying their strengths and proposing supports for success. Collaboratively, the Team also began to work more closely with the Aboriginal Enhancement staff at their partner schools. Together, in support of grade 7 to 8 transitions they initiated an annual Transition Kayaking Trip, an event intended to build a sense of belonging between incoming students and current Frank Hurt students and staff. Over the next few years, things continued forward with a sense of purpose and direction. Between June and September 2016, staffing changes saw the Advocate as the only returning Enhancement staff member in a team once six strong. With fresh perspectives and strong convictions, the new Frank Hurt Aboriginal Team began to redefine itself as members developed the love and trust necessary to truly hear their students' stories.

When a full time Aboriginal Youth Care Enhancement Worker arrived before the end of the 2014/15 school year, she hit the ground running with an open heart and keen ability to develop new relationships. She had trained as an Aboriginal Child and Youth Care Worker (ACYCW) at Frank Hurt only two short years earlier, so the routines of Frank Hurt were familiar to her. However, when a second ACYCW joined them for two days a week in the fall of 2015, she did not feel at home. At once an office, lounge, lunchroom, and program space, the Aboriginal room seemed chaotic and absent of Aboriginal cultures. On a professional development day in late fall, the second ACYCW discovered, stuffed away in cupboards throughout the room, artifacts from years of cultural work by past students. Disconnected from her home school for two days a week and displaced into a space that seemed to push aside her culture, her spirit was stirred inside. With help from one of our team members and a cultural facilitator, she began to unpack the culture from our cupboards and restore the spirit to our room. When the Advocate returned, he was awakened to all that had been pushed aside and hidden away. And so our inquiry begins...

Conferencing with each of our grade 8 learners one-on-one, with the enticement of a chocolate bar, we recorded individual narratives of the early transition experience in the fall of 2015.

Among other findings, we discovered that only 15 out of 21 respondents could name two caring adults; and 19 out of 23 respondents had a sense of belonging at Frank Hurt. According to the Ministry of Education Aboriginal Report 2011/12-2014/15, 90% of grade 7 students, and only 73% of grade 10 students could identify at least two caring adults in their schools. Although our findings could be framed as statistically consistent with district data, our scanning left us questioning the efficacy of transition enhancement for approximately one third of students. A team member observed our tendency to deliver services where relationships exist, positioning our disconnected grade 8 students in perhaps the most vulnerable position of any demographic.

Focus: We hope that by enhancing transitions for our Aboriginal Learners (with an emphasis on grade 7-8 transitions), that our students might form a deeper connection to the school and sustainable sense of belonging that will continue throughout high school and beyond.

Hunch: We noticed that although many of our students came by the Aboriginal room on a regular basis, many did not. We were working hard to meet the needs of the students in front of us, and perhaps addressing the needs of our vulnerable students as well, however, those we didn't know, we didn't have time to get to know. The most obvious group of students that remained hidden were our grade 8s. Enhanced services are delivered where relationships exist. We participate in school-wide transition events, individualized transitions for some, and hosted a transition kayaking trip for incoming grade 7s. We do all the 'things' we do, but what happens when what we do is not helping certain students? How can we ensure that each student develops a sense of belonging that is sustainable?

New professional learning: In the fall, all staff, including our ACYCW and one of our parents, participated in the *BCTF Blanket Exercise* which reveals the hidden truths of Canadian history. This shared experience challenged many of our assumptions and perceptions, and opened up a dialogue to consider our positionality as educators and begin to consider the implications of perpetuating biases. In particular, this was an opportunity for the Teacher Advocate, ACYCW, the parent, and others, to publicly share their authentic journeys and build trust and understanding going forward.

In order to move forward with critical collaborative inquiry, our team needed to develop trust. As a school, we participated in a series of workshops on effective communication, *Turning Point Resolutions*. Although one of our ACYCW was not able to directly participate in these activities, the Teacher Advocate and full time ACYCW were able to distribute these capacities through modeling and reflective dialogue. With the language and skills of healthy communication, we were able to inquire within a space of dissonance and questioning, while honouring the strengths and motivations of each team member.

Despite our conscientious enhancement efforts, we did not position the First Peoples Principles of Learning as primary pedagogies in supporting transitions. The tendency is to think of Aboriginal Education as content, or secondary knowledge that can be infused into existing Western pedagogies. Two years ago, while leading a drum making workshop at Frank Hurt, our Cultural Facilitator stopped partway through and told the students: "This is not an activity, it is a way of life. It is my way of life. All the thoughts you have and words you say while you create your drum, you put into it. When you gift your drum to your grandmother, you give with it all that energy." Understanding that the First Peoples Principles of Learning represents ways of

life is critical to developing transitions that honour our community, are accountable to each member, and sustain belonging over time.

The BC Ministry of Education project, Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives in the Classroom: Moving Forward, provides a framework for considering the implications of First Peoples approaches to education. In particular, our inquiry considers *Connectedness and Relationship, Local Focus, Engagement with the Land, Nature*, and experiences in *the Outdoors*. Our inquiry puts an *Emphasis on Identity*, through the recognition of *Traditional Teaching* and tradition building through *Experiential Learning*.

Taking action: The scanning phase initiated stronger relationships with our grade 8s and was a springboard to action. After our initial one-on-one conferences with students, we determined that more regular contact with grade 8s was necessary. Throughout the second semester, we invited grade 8s to the Aboriginal Room for pizza lunch. During these touchback sessions, we reinforced our interest in their stories and our collective identity. Our ACYCW discovered that through personal invitations and regular gatherings, she was able to engage more students and connect them to our space.

We invited mother/daughter cultural facilitators, to guide all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal grade 8 learners in cultural teachings through Coast Salish weaving. Through discussion with Humanities 8 teachers (and Math/Science as needed), we discovered that teachers were eager to participate in a grade-wide weaving project. With explicit connections to curriculum, what originally seemed like a disconnected add-on, became something embraced broadly as relevant and meaningful. Over several Fridays from February to May, students were invited in small group sessions to participate hands-on in the weaving process. The purpose of the project was to acknowledge that cultural teachings are relevant to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners alike; provide opportunities to connect with grade 8 Aboriginal learners; and reinforce a sense of connectedness and belonging among all grade 8 students. Once the blanket is complete it will be prominently displayed, and present at all grade level gatherings from grade 8 to graduation as a reminder of who we are and where we are from.

Acknowledging the importance of tradition and the good work we have done in the past, we will continue our grade 7 transition kayaking trip. In the past, we invited senior leaders to facilitate team building activities, however, this year we have invited all our current grade 8s as leaders. We will train interested grade 8 students to help facilitate successful transition for our incoming students, using their stories and experiences as the starting point for building new relationships and enhancing transitions.

In order to ensure that we determine the efficacy of our transitions and the needs of our students, we must develop a tracking system that holds up our students for success. Building off of the Response to Intervention Model (RTI), that provides tiered school-wide, targeted, and individualized interventions, we have begun to track the nature of enhanced services required for group and individual student success. We hope that this tracking system will help inform localized programming and enhanced service needs.

Checking: Checking in with our students provided us encouraging feedback on our inquiry process, but also pointed to necessary growth. We improved compared to our initial finding that 73% of students could name two caring adults. Of the 21 students that participated in check-ins, 19 students, or 90% of respondents, identified two caring adults. A common theme

that emerged from our check-ins was that many students identified that the purpose of what they were learning is to prepare them for the future. One student in particular said that what he is learning “keeps him going in the right direction”. As a team, we acknowledge the importance of shifting our transition enhancement away from a singular life event, to more of a way of life. Importantly, we acknowledge the importance of building capacity of our students in supporting each other in moving forward together in a good direction, whatever direction that might be for each individual.

Reflections/Advice: We must continuously reflect on the connectedness of all our students, and inquire into universal, targeted enhancement that will reduce the number of students that require individualized enhancement during their transition process. We must create opportunities to value individual narratives, establish community, and contribute to each other's success.

Obviously we pride ourselves in establishing strong relationships with our students, but perhaps we have work to do in building stronger support networks for our incoming students. Of the 47 caring adults identified, only nine were enrolling. Moving forward, we have identified our responsibility to bridge relationships between our students and their caring classroom teachers who play a meaningful role in promoting positive identities as learners.