

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments for Urban First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students

Pamela Sparklingeyes
Edmonton Catholic Schools

Presented at Session 2: Aboriginal Canadians and the Economy I: Education Issues
Organized by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards and the CD Howe Institute

Annual Meeting of the Canadian Economics Association
University of British Columbia, Vancouver
June 6, 2008

Abstract

Research conducted by Edmonton Catholic Schools has demonstrated that the majority of Edmonton's First Nations, Metis and Inuit families prefer to send their children to inclusive schools within their geographical neighbourhoods. Therefore, the District has implemented Aboriginal Learning Services in to ensure that neighbourhood schools are fully responsive to the needs of FNMI students in inclusive settings. The District recognizes that FNMI students are more likely to be holistic, kinesthetic learners who prefer reflective, visual styles of processing and respond to learning environments that honour cultural values. Over the past seven years, the department has implemented a series of *promising practices* providing schools with culturally relevant educational supports in the areas of curricular adaptations, professional development, educational resources, liaison services and cultural programming. By supporting schools in the creation culturally welcoming environments, FNMI students have experienced an increased sense of belonging and mastery thus positively influencing the Districts ability to support, retain and graduate FNMI students.



May 2008

Edmonton Catholic Schools

Creating inclusive learning environments for urban First Nations, Métis and Inuit students

Research conducted by Edmonton Catholic Schools in 2001 concluded that the majority of Edmonton's First Nations, Métis and Inuit families preferred to send their children to inclusive schools within their geographical neighborhoods. Families interviewed for the study wanted neighborhood schools to welcome and support their children while also being sensitive to cultural values and practices.

In response to the Districts research, a partnership with Alberta Education was formed to create the Edmonton Catholic Schools Department of Aboriginal Learning Services. The partnership created the opportunity for Alberta Education and the District to conduct a research project in six pilot schools over three years to identify and implement a series of positive practices. Several prevalent themes emerged over the three year project and have been the basis for service implementation across Edmonton Catholic Schools and other Districts in the province. The themes identified by Alberta Education are currently being implemented in Edmonton Catholic Schools as follows:

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Parent and Community Engagement:

First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project—Promising Practice #1

Clearly schools that can engage FNMI parents/community and develop positive, supportive relationships are more likely to produce positive outcomes for their Aboriginal students.

- Edmonton Catholic Schools has created an Elder's Advisory Council that meets regularly with the Board of Trustees to provide support and feedback on District policies and programming. Elders on the council are available to schools for consultation, support services and cultural activities
- A number of schools have recruited FNMI parents to participate in school council committees
- The District has held a number of cross-cultural workshops for school administrators, teachers and support staff to build an awareness of FNMI cultural practices, learning styles and assist schools in creating welcoming environments for FNMI children, parents and community
- Schools are encouraged to utilize recognized leaders from the FNMI community for school events such as career days, read-in week and other school celebrations

Aboriginal Cultural & Language Programming:

First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project—Promising Practice #2

Schools that include cultural and language programming for their FNMI students capitalize on a powerful positive practice supported by current literature

Successful schools provide both FNMI and non-FNMI students with opportunities to appreciate the richness of FNMI cultures

- Edmonton Catholic Schools created two Cree Bilingual Programs that operate in dual-track schools so that students in both the Cree and English programs can benefit from the richness of the culture and language. The programs started at the kindergarten level and have expanded every year as the students have advanced. The programs have high satisfaction, retention and achievement rates.
- Edmonton Catholic Schools created the Rainbow Spirit Dance Troupe in 2001. The dance troupe gives youth the opportunity to explore the commitment to traditional, holistic living through cultural teachings and ceremonies. Participants receive mentoring from community members who have been part of the dance circle for many years. Youth are taught the significance of being a dancer and are encouraged to follow a traditional path. Youth who are involved in cultural dance are more likely to stay in school, avoid negative behaviours and develop a strong sense of community as they are part of a positive peer circle.
- Aboriginal Learning Services provides holistic educational instruction that is culturally based and reflects the needs of FNMI students. Schools can access instruction on cultural teachings such as dance, song, fine arts, history, protocols, celebrations and history through classroom visits, after-school programs or Aboriginal Awareness Days.
- Consultants and Elders are available to assist teachers in the infusion of Aboriginal perspectives into existing curriculum based on the Alberta Program of Studies. Teachers may utilize lesson plans or attend professional development workshops provided by Aboriginal Learning Services.

Teachers, Instruction and Curriculum Resources:

First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project—Promising Practice #3

Schools that hire teachers who have high/flexible expectations and are able to build strong, healthy relationships with their students built on trust and mutual respect have a greater chance of success in the education of their FNMI students

Classrooms that have culturally relevant materials, are informal in nature, encourage cooperative learning/group work, support open-ended questioning, inductive/analytic reasoning and student participation, produce positive results for FNMI students

The infusion of FNMI culture, issues and perspectives across the curriculum and access to appropriate instructional resources to support this infusion are integral to FNMI student success. Schools need to be flexible and adaptable in order to be truly successful

- Edmonton Catholic Schools actively recruits FNMI employees by connecting with post-secondary institutions to provide practicum placements for post-secondary students and to recruit graduating students.
- Aboriginal Learning Services provides schools with culturally relevant learning resources such as novel studies, lesson plans and kits to enrich standard classroom curriculum with FNMI perspectives. Schools are also encouraged to invite mentors, elders and guest speakers into classrooms to give presentations on a variety of topics.
- Professional development opportunities for teachers include educating teachers on Aboriginal issues, practices and values
- Schools have focused on literacy intervention programming in an attempt to support all students to read at grade level in early elementary

Individual Student Supports:

First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project—Promising Practice #4

Planning for student transitions and ongoing services to individuals within the school setting are important factors to FNMI student success. Transition planning, Elders, on-site counseling and social work, leadership and mentorship programs are examples of wrap around services that support FNMI learners

- Edmonton Catholic Schools recognizes that schools must go beyond a narrow definition of education and provide a variety of supports outside of the classroom, as a result, school liaison workers are available to provide on-site counseling and social work services to students and families.
- High drop-out rates have been linked to poor transition planning as FNMI students often struggle with the move from small on-reserve schools to large urban schools or small elementary/junior high schools to large high schools. Aboriginal Learning Services has developed a number of strategies to support students through transition periods including school welcoming activities, liaison services, tours and family nights.
- Welcoming classrooms where students feel they belong have proven to create student success. Aboriginal Learning Services assists teachers in creating learning environments

that create a sense of belonging for FNMI students through the visible reflection of Aboriginal culture and values. Extra-curricular activities have also been developed to engage FNMI students in positive activities that bond them to school. Schools offer after-school clubs and Aboriginal student councils that participate in cultural and recreational activities.

- Connecting FNMI students through mentoring programs has also had a positive impact on bonding students to school and increasing school involvement. Aboriginal Learning Services has partnered with The Big Brothers/Big Sisters Society of Edmonton to provide several in school mentoring programs. Community role models are recruited to provide one-to-one mentoring and literacy intervention to elementary students, Aboriginal post-secondary students are recruited to provide group mentoring and career planning to high school students and staff deliver group mentoring programs with a focus on healthy choices and life skills to junior high

Data Collection and Identification of Barriers:

First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project—Promising Practice #5

Pilot schools developed broad based accountability frameworks to determine their level of success in improving outcomes for their FNMI students. These frameworks incorporated achievement results, student participation/completion rates, satisfaction surveys, FNMI parental involvement and integration of FNMI education into the ongoing program of the school.

Pilot Schools engaged all sectors of their FNMI community in genuine dialogue in order to identify barriers and possible approaches to improve FNMI student success

- Edmonton Catholic Schools conducted several interviews with Elders, parents, educators and community members in 2001 to identify and address barriers existing in the education of FNMI students in District schools. The information gathered resulted in the formation of Aboriginal Learning Services
- Aboriginal Learning Services has since conducted parent satisfaction surveys, parent focus groups and school discussion groups to further assess the on-going needs of FNMI students. Aboriginal Learning Services meets monthly with an Elders Council which also meets regularly with the Board of Trustees
- Aboriginal Learning Services is under supervision of a District Principal and therefore has direct access and communication to the District Superintendent and Board of Trustees
- Accountability measures include provincial achievement test results, student attendance, FNMI graduates, and parent surveys

FNMI Parent and Community Engagement:

First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project—Promising Practice #7

Principals play a critical leadership role in developing positive relationships with FNMI parents and community. Being accessible, welcoming and willing to engage FNMI parents/community beyond the confines of the school are key components to developing this positive relationship.

A wide variety of staff members of pilot schools were involved in the development of enhanced relationships with the FNMI community beyond the confines of the school.

Concerted efforts to initiate positive relationships with FNMI parents provided flexible, supportive relationships between schools and home.

- Aboriginal Learning Services has conducted several professional development opportunities for teachers in leadership development courses as well as for current school principals. Up-coming and current school administrators are encouraged to develop sensitivity towards FNMI students, social and educational issues as well as build positive relationships with families and community members
- District schools have school based liaison staff to support students and families as well as ensure schools are culturally welcoming environments for FNMI students. Liaison workers host cultural events for their schools such as Aboriginal Awareness Days, Parent Tea/Bannock Nights, Round Dances, Career Days and Elders Circles.
- Schools have made efforts to have FNMI parents participate in parent/school council committees and contribute to school activities and celebrations.

Results:

Student Enrolment Trends

Enrolment figures for the period September 2000-September 2007 are reported in the table below. Over the past 7 years Edmonton Catholic Schools has experienced continuous growth in the enrolment of FNMI students. A comparison between the June 30 figures for 2001 and those for 2007 indicates an increase of slightly more than 130%. Also, each of the last 4 years has seen a trend where FNMI enrolments rise by midyear and then fall slightly. However, in spite of this anomaly, the pattern of growth is significant. A number of factors contributing to increasing numbers of FNMI students include:

1. An increase in the overall FNMI population in Edmonton due to birthrate and migration into the city as reported in the 2006 Statistics Canada Census
2. Heightened appreciation for the benefits of education, healing and wellness within the Aboriginal community
3. Improved supports for FNMI students increasing the Districts ability to attract, retain and graduate FNMI students

TABLE 1: FNMI Enrolments in ECSD for 2000-2007

| | 2000-01 | 2001-02 | 2002-03 | 2003-04 | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2007-08 |
|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Sept | 1384 | 1426 | 1426 | 1674 | 1753 | 2022 | 2397 | 2555 |
| Feb | 1045 | 1473 | 1549 | 1775 | 2049 | 2374 | 2466 | 2545 |
| June | 1045 | 1500 | 1567 | 1729 | 2042 | 2319 | 2423 | n/a |

Attendance Data

Table 2 shows absence rates for elementary and junior high students have declined an average of 23.35 full days to 18.76 days. High School absences are recorded per period with 112.4 reported period absences in 2003/04 to 85.5 in 2006/07.

TABLE 2: Average Absences per Aboriginal Student

| | 2003/2004 | 2004/2005 | 2005/2006 | 2006/2007 |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Grades 1-9 | n/a | 23.35 | 24.9 | 18.76 |
| Grades 10-12 | 112.4 | 97.6 | 101.4 | 85.5 |

Transitions and Retention

Since 2001, time and energy has been expended by Aboriginal Learning Services to secure and maintain enrolments of FNMI students in Edmonton Catholic Schools. Increased enrolment and attendance figures suggest that these efforts have been successful. Enrolment data from Table 1 demonstrates that the trend towards FNMI students remaining in school from year to year also continues.

TABLE 3: FNMI Grade 12 Graduation Rates

| 2002-03 | 2003-04 | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2007-08 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 44 | 40 | 67 | 55 | 75 | 81 |

Achievement

Significant improvements in the achievement of FNMI students were reported in the six pilot schools in the first year that support programs were in place. Provincial Achievement Test results comparing 2002-2003 to the 2001-2002 school year indicated that the percentage of FNMI students achieving the Acceptable Standard in Grades 3, 6 and 9 had increased significantly:

- Grade 3:** **79%** of students achieved the Acceptable Standard in English Language Arts (compared to 26% in 2001/2002).
85% of students achieved the Acceptable Standard in Mathematics (compared to 42% in 2001/2002)
- Grade 6:** **70%** of students achieved the Acceptable Standard in English Language Arts (compared to 35% in 2001/2002)
70% of students achieved the Acceptable Standard in Science (compared to 47% in 2001/2002)
63% of students achieved the Acceptable Standard in Social Studies (compared to 35% in 2001/2002)
- Grade 9:** **77%** of students achieved the Acceptable Standard in English Language Arts (compared to 50% in 2001/2002)

Satisfaction Surveys

Aboriginal Learning Services has conducted annual satisfaction surveys in a large sample of schools serving FNMI students for the last three years. The study was to assess stakeholder satisfaction with District progress in providing effective service to the FNMI community. All students, parents and school staff in the target schools were asked to complete questionnaires relating to their experiences in Edmonton Catholic Schools. The data generated by the surveys reflected the opinions of all members of the school communities. To specifically gather feedback from the Aboriginal community a group of three Elders were also asked to participate in an annual interview process. The Elders were chosen based on their stature within Edmonton's Aboriginal community and their knowledge of the traditions, culture, spirituality and issues facing their people.

Information was gathered under the following themes:

1. Comfort with the school atmosphere
2. Cultural experiences and events
3. Student learning
4. Student Discipline
5. Specific Aboriginal support and programming
6. Overall satisfaction with school

The data was collected and subdivided into respondent groups as follows:

1. Students
2. Parents
3. School Staff
4. Elders

The results have shown a growing comfort with school as survey responses of FNMI students fell in to the same trends as those of their non-Aboriginal classmates. Highlights from the 2006-2007 survey are as follows (The first figure to appear is the result for all respondents and the second figure is the response for Self Identified FNMI respondents):

- Students feel happy with their school experience (88.3%/80.3%)
- Students feel they get along well with others (92.0%/85.0)
- Students feel they are welcome at their school (91.2%/85.7%)
- Students feel they are fairly treated by teachers (90.0%/82.7%)
- Students accept the importance of attending school (96.3%/93.9%)
- Parents feel their children are being prepared for post-secondary (88.7%/92.3)
- Parents feel their children are learning to the best of their ability (92.2%/96.8%)
- Parents feel schools are culturally sensitive (93.4%/89.3%)

Recommendations:

- Enhance the emphasis on academic success for FNMI students by offering staff in-service programs focused on the learning styles as they are affected by culture and gender
- Create formal mentoring and transition programs to directly assist FNMI students with adjusting to new environments such as:
 - Students moving from grades six to seven and grades nine to twelve
 - Students new to a school due to transfer or moving
- Identify staff to monitor and assist all schools with FNMI students experiencing attendance issues
- Establish integration teams composed of curriculum consultants, Elders and school staff to weave FNMI content into existing curriculum
- Establish a handbook of teaching strategies to assist classroom teachers in effectively instructing FNMI children
- Recruit more FNMI staff to the District
- Create Aboriginal career centres in high schools to ensure FNMI students have access to comprehensive career information
- Create FNMI student centres and councils to provide peer support, tutoring and mentoring opportunities
- Strengthen relationships between the Aboriginal community by involving the Elders Advisory council in:
 - Dealing with serious discipline or family issues affecting FNMI students
 - Revising District policies and regulations related to FNMI learning
 - Infusing curriculum with cultural perspectives
 - Selecting and supporting new staff for FNMI programs

Sources:

Alberta. 2007 "First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project: Promising Practices." Prepared by Alberta Education. First Nations, Métis and Inuit Services Branch.

Alberta. 2008 "Summary Report on Aboriginal Learning Services 2006-2007." Prepared by Aboriginal Learning Services, Edmonton Catholic Schools.