

Aboriginal Education

A Discussion Guide

By Catherine Abraham and Joyce Gram

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The authors have been involved in parent education in British Columbia for over twenty years. Catherine Abraham has written extensively for parents in the areas of special education, parent support, and policy development. Joyce Gram has written for parents in all areas through newsletters and websites. Both have held numerous executive and advocate positions on school and district parent advisory councils and have worked at the provincial level.

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Other guides for parents in this series, available electronically from the authors:

Student Assessment in B.C.'s Public Schools: A Guide for Parents

Building Student Success in B.C.'s Public Schools: A Guide for Parents

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Aboriginal Education

Improving education for Aboriginal children is a collective challenge facing all of us. Aboriginal students in public schools have a long history of lagging behind their non-Aboriginal peers. Despite effort and innovative programs, our schools have not yet succeeded in engaging these students to the point where they are graduating, or even staying in school, in acceptable numbers.

In 2004, the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education published a research study entitled *Sharing Our Success: Ten Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling* by Dr. David Bell.¹ The project studied ten diverse schools in western Canada in which Aboriginal students were achieving academic success. In each of these schools, families and educators shared profound respect for each other and their respective roles, and dedication to the students they served.

The schools studied were in rural and urban areas of B.C., the prairie provinces, and the Yukon. They included large and small elementary and secondary schools, and other grade combinations, with varying percentages of

Aboriginal students. Some schools were band operated, others were under the authority of school districts, and one was under the Yukon Department of Education.

In-depth research from each school revealed common factors leading to success. This guide presents a brief overview of those factors and is intended to provide a glimpse of the common ground shared by successful schools. In addition to the 2004 study, we have included references from a 2007 study also conducted by SAAE entitled *Sharing Our Success: More Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling* by George Fulford,² which focused on ten schools in eastern Canada.

We do not expect this guide to provide answers but to help parents and educators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, begin to explore questions. Finding ways to bring learning to life for Aboriginal students has proven to be a complex task. With mutual respect and shared commitment, we are confident this can and will happen.

^{1,2} See **Resources** on page 13 of this guide.

We all share responsibility for creating a supportive environment in which students learn the skills, acquire the knowledge, and develop the attitudes to successfully meet the challenges of a changing world. We bring learning to life.

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 48

Governance

Background

Across Canada, governance of Aboriginal education falls into three categories:

- Schools that are operated by Aboriginal governing authorities
- Schools that are operated by provincial or territorial authorities that negotiate with Aboriginal groups for the education of Aboriginal children
- Schools that are a blend of these two structures

In all cases, teachers must be provincially certified and schools must teach the provincial curriculum.

Information on governance of Aboriginal education in B.C. can be found under **Resources** on page 13 of this guide.

What the Research Tells Us

There are highly successful schools operating under each type of governance structure.

Fully independent schools operated by Aboriginal governing authorities provide Aboriginal communities with the greatest control over their educational system. However, the population base must be large enough to produce a leadership pool, support services, and adequate financial resources.

Schools that are operated by provincial or territorial authorities often require monitoring of student progress through assessment and examinations. This monitoring appears to improve student achievement.

Schools with a blended form of governance have the potential to be highly successful if they receive additional funding, student support personnel, and language and cultural specialists, while maintaining local control.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) defines *governance* as “the values, rules, institutions, and processes through which people and organizations attempt to work towards common objectives, make decisions, generate authority and legitimacy, and exercise power.”

How would you describe your governance structure?

Leadership

Background

Leadership can have a different meaning in Aboriginal communities than in other cultures. Historically, Aboriginal leaders were expected to lead by example and, when speaking, to express the thoughts of their people. Leadership was often seen as a skill used to meet a specific need, rather than general authority to command others. In addition, people were under no compulsion to follow; they could choose freely. A skillful leader could persuade others to put aside their individual concerns and pursue a common goal that was important for the welfare of the group.

What the Research Tells Us

In Aboriginal communities, members of band councils, educational committees, or boards often demonstrate a blend of governance and leadership functions.

Research on leadership by Kouzes and Posner quoted in *Sharing Our Success 2004* identified five key elements:

- Challenge the process.
- Inspire a shared vision.
- Enable others to act.
- Model the way.
- Encourage the heart.

In the *Sharing Our Success 2004* study, small schools with less-experienced staff and high staff turnover tended to give most decision making to the principal. Larger schools with stable staffing saw more staff input in decision making.

Successful schools had a common vision and clear set of priorities. Ideas for improving student achievement were welcome, and people felt they could change things that weren't working. School leaders modelled the relationships they expected from staff and students and worked to develop a "culture of celebration."

"A parent related a story about witnessing a child wheeling his broken bicycle into the schoolyard. Although the bell signalling the start of the school day was ringing, the principal spent the next few minutes fixing the bicycle, so the student could focus on his schoolwork and not the broken bicycle."

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 125

Can you describe your leadership in terms of the five key elements?

Parent Partnerships

Background

Research clearly shows that strong partnerships between parents and schools improve student achievement.¹ Trust is integral to a healthy relationship with families. Part of the important work of school staff is to create a climate in which trust between home and school can develop and grow.

What the Research Tells Us

Aboriginal parents and communities look more to actions than words when evaluating relationships. All the schools in *Sharing Our Success 2004* worked hard to win the trust and support of parents and communities. Communication between home and school was

good or excellent. Teachers, administrators, and support staff kept in regular contact with families through phone calls, reports, and home visits. Contact was frequently initiated by the school to relay compliments about a student's behaviour or accomplishments.

Smaller school communities had more opportunity to build relationships through informal encounters.

School staff offered a variety of non-threatening opportunities for school visits, including sports events, concerts, plays, and celebrations. The sharing of food with staff, students, and families was particularly important, especially when this was tied to cultural events.

¹ See *Building Student Success in B.C.'s Public Schools: A Guide for Parents* by Catherine Abraham and Joyce Gram.

“It’s a 24-hour deal. We bring school to our house and we bring our home to the school. Half of the circle is at our home and the other half is at the school. That is how it is working, or has to be in order to work.”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 230

How would you describe the relationship between home and school? What kinds of events involve families?

Aboriginal Languages and Culture

Background

The ten schools in *Sharing Our Success 2004* offered language instruction in seven Aboriginal languages. English was the dominant language of instruction in all schools, but all schools offered native language programs. Schools varied in how satisfied they were with the quality of the native language they were able to offer. For secondary students, elective local language courses were available, although in many cases these were not recognized for post-secondary admission.

What the Research Tells Us

Almost all schools in *Sharing Our Success 2004* noted a shortage of appropriate language-lesson materials. Two schools were considering immersion programs, but were having difficulty finding instructors who were both fluent speakers and qualified teachers. Only a smattering of elders in the smaller communities were fluent in their language. In many schools,

all staff were learning native languages, and schools intentionally used strategies such as hiring support staff who were fluent in the native language.

The importance of native language instruction to parents and community members varied among communities. Language instruction was more important to parents of students attending schools on reserves. Each school had achieved a balance between community expectations for native language instruction and what the school was able to offer.

The importance of cultural teaching and practice also varied among schools in the study. While all communities wanted their schools to honour native history and traditions and to show respect for their cultures, most parents saw themselves as their children's cultural tutors and saw limited involvement for schools in this area. *Sharing Our Success 2007* showed, however, that Aboriginal culture, arts, traditions, and history were strongly entrenched in the life of the school and in the curriculum.

“Most of the teacher assistants are parents/grandparents of children in the school and each one speaks Cree fluently. They provide a key communication link with the parents and the community.

Every elementary classroom teacher has a TA who is trained in early reading. Parents feel comfortable talking in Cree or English with a school staff member of their choice who in turn passes on the concern in open and honest manner to the person responsible.”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 77

Is there consensus in your school or district about teaching Aboriginal languages and culture?

Teacher Quality

Background

Many researchers see teacher quality as the single most important factor in improving student success. Teachers who are evaluated highly tend to have students who are academically successful. Their training, experience, knowledge of the subject matter, expectations, standards, and cultural understanding all contribute to their students' better performance and behaviour.

What the Research Tells Us

The capabilities, dedication, and work ethic of good teachers go beyond culture. Personal qualities such as being friendly, accepting, respectful, and fair are particularly desirable for teachers who work with Aboriginal students. Teachers with these qualities are better able to develop trust with parents and good partnerships between home and school.

Sharing Our Success 2004 found that effective teachers of Aboriginal students have the following characteristics:

- Ability to create a warm, accepting, and supportive learning environment
- Commitment to student success that includes the belief that each student can learn
- Flexibility to adapt and experiment to find optimal educational programs and methods for each student
- Commitment to performance-based education and willingness to use appropriate assessment tools
- Attitude of solving problems
- Understanding and respect for local culture
- Involvement of parents in learning partnerships

There was some evidence that teachers who came from small communities and attended colleges were better able to work in remote communities. Schools in this study had high-quality professional development. Teachers noted that consultation with their colleagues was very helpful.

“As a teacher said, ‘It goes back to respect—as teachers we dance too, we learn too. We are expected to dance at the big house and we do.’”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 62

What qualities do you look for in teachers?

Literacy and Language

Background

All schools assess students on an ongoing basis and use diagnostic and screening tools for students at risk. Formal assessments show how well students have progressed compared to provincial or district norms. Students are taught how to assess their own work. As they work their way through more difficult reading material, they become aware of their own progress.

What the Research Tells Us

Giving Aboriginal students literacy skills is fundamental to their academic success. Schools in *Sharing Our Success 2004* used a variety of literacy programs tailored to at-risk students. These programs had a positive impact, and students' progress was measured and documented.

The communities studied emphasized early childhood intervention, which resulted in a greater number of children entering grade one ready to read. Once in school, students in primary classes received the most intensive intervention, with focus on developing phonological awareness.¹ Some schools reduced their primary class sizes or added resource staff to allow for small-group reading instruction.

For older students, intervention included tutors, computer-assisted programs, access to special materials, small-group corrective reading, and alternative programs. Schools worked hard to involve parents in home-reading programs, and community workers assisted families who needed help in this area.

¹*Phonological awareness* is the ability to hear sounds that make up words in spoken language. This includes recognizing words that rhyme, deciding whether words begin or end with the same sounds, understanding that sounds can be manipulated to create new words, and separating words into their individual sounds. See http://www.reading-tutors.com/tips/TH_Tips_PhonAware.pdf

“The band council has supported communication on achievement through the erection of community billboards. On Halloween one such billboard displayed a spider web accompanied by the caption, *Caught in the Web of Learning*, and in front of a private residence a large sign boldly pronounced, *Feed your mind: Read*. It is apparent this community values and talks about education and literacy.”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 105

What measures has your school or district taken to increase literacy?

Programs and Services

Background

Schools in *Sharing Our Success 2004* carefully selected a variety of academic and support programs. Academic programs tended to focus on literacy and early literacy intervention. While all the programs contributed to student success in some way, no single program was universally adopted.

For many schools, building students' self-esteem, coping skills, and resiliency were a priority. Most schools provided students with food, either full meals or snacks. Some schools emphasized proper nutrition in the curriculum.

What the Research Tells Us

These schools recognized that, to be effective, programs for Aboriginal students must attempt to reach the whole child. In other words, they must address not only intellectual and academic

needs, but also physical and sociological needs that may arise out of isolation, poverty, or difficult family life.

The effective schools in this study were flexible in the way they met the needs of individual students. They provided a structured environment that was supportive, as well as counselling, nurturing, and parenting. Staff related well to their students: If students were hungry, staff fed them. If students were addicted, staff counselled and supported them. In short, staff acknowledged and dealt with students' present circumstances while helping them prepare for a better future.

Sharing Our Success 2007 noted that schools provided services that were not restricted to K to 12, including early childhood services, support for adults and families, and transition services for youth moving to the next level of training or education.

“It is a very safe place to come, a place where they can have fun and grow. The students think highly of the staff, from the janitor who plays soccer or hockey with them in the gym after school, to the teachers who are doing their dance with them, to the principal they come and talk with.”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 233-234

How do you select the programs and services for your school or district?

Assessment

Background

Aboriginal students do better in school when their teachers are willing to give them work that is appropriate to their level, while at the same time encouraging them and making it possible for them to reach higher levels.

Teachers measure a student's performance in a variety of ways, in order to develop an accurate picture of each student's learning, to verify a student's progress, and to check whether an instructional method or program is effective. Assessment is considered an important part of continuous improvement.

What the Research Tells Us

Staff at the schools in *Sharing Our Success 2004* had a positive attitude toward assessment. While they had valid concerns about using tests that were developed in different cultural groups, they understood that assessment can help them learn more about their students. Assessment fell into three categories:

- **For instructional purposes:** This included measuring student learning and the effectiveness of instruction; grouping students for instruction; diagnosing learning difficulties; and identifying at-risk students. The tools most commonly used were teacher-designed tests, commercial measurements, and built-in program evaluations.
- **For reporting purposes:** Assessment results were given to students, parents, local or provincial education authorities, and in some cases the public. Regular formal progress reports to parents were required by all education authorities. Parent-teacher interviews and portfolios provided additional information.
- **For accountability purposes:** School districts and provincial ministries of education frequently required the results of standardized tests. There was evidence that standardized tests were increasingly used to demonstrate specific needs to educational authorities, governing bodies, parents, and the public.

“Those provinces that conduct student assessments and require their use in school improvement planning have documented the strongest gains in Aboriginal student attainment.”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 321

What types of assessment are used with Aboriginal students in your school or district?

School Climate and Environment

Background

School climate strongly influences the education a student receives. Many factors contribute to school climate. In schools with a good climate, everyone takes care to create and maintain a positive learning environment, characterized by safety, mutual respect, pride, focus on learning, and celebration of success.

What the Research Tells Us

The school buildings in *Sharing Our Success 2004* varied significantly in age, but all were clean, tidy, and well maintained and there was a general lack of litter, graffiti, and vandalism. Respect for staff and students and the belief that learning deserves to take place in a proper setting were evident in the care shown for the physical plant.

Schools carefully monitored attendance.

Behavioural expectations for students were high, and rules were well communicated in a positive way. Misconduct was addressed immediately by staff and administrators. Parents said that their complaints were also addressed quickly. Many students spoke of the respect, trust, acceptance, humour, caring, and hard work of staff. The students said they liked being there.

Most schools had an open-door policy and used celebrations to bring families and community members into the school. All schools paid close attention to honouring the past, through displays and photographs, mementoes from schools that had been replaced, or historical artifacts prominently displayed. Reflecting Aboriginal culture made families feel welcomed and respected.

“From the gentle drum beats of Morning Circle to the bison hunt and the bannock feast, each gave special importance to honouring and affirming students’ pride in their identity.”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 15

Can you see a link between the climate in the Aboriginal schools in your district and student achievement?

Schools and Communities

Background

School and community partnerships often benefit schools in subtle ways that are hard to measure. For example, partnerships can result in diverse resources becoming available to the school. These relationships are often better developed and more productive in urban schools than in isolated rural schools.

What the Research Tells Us

The urban schools in *Sharing Our Success 2004* had developed strong partnerships with their communities, giving them access to equipment and training not available within the school, work-experience programs, cultural support organizations, and funding for special projects and equipment.

Often these schools had built up excellent goodwill through these partnerships. The school's reputation was good—the larger community knew the school and what it stood for. Parents new to the area had heard good things about the school and expected a positive experience. This greatly assisted the school to build a better sense of community, pride in accomplishment, and an expectation of learning.

“Each year the school honours the elders at a special tea party just before the Christmas concert. Elders are invited to attend the high school graduation ceremonies and the monthly classroom and student awards for attendance, effort and special recognition. On various occasions teachers invite elders to speak to share their wisdom regarding certain community values or teachings that directly relate to student behaviour or attitudes.”

Sharing Our Success 2004, page 89

How would you describe your school's relationship with the community?

Resources

First Nations Education Act

The British Columbia government passed the *First Nations Education Act* in November 2007. The Act complements federal legislation, the *First Nations Jurisdiction over Education in British Columbia Act*, and outlines the authority of participating First Nations over education on reserves.

The *First Nations Education Act* can be found at http://www.leg.bc.ca/38th3rd/1st_read/gov46-1.htm.

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements

School districts throughout the province have negotiated Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements with local Aboriginal communities. These agreements lay out the collaborative partnership between the school district and the Aboriginal community for the education of Aboriginal students. They include joint decision making and specific goal setting to improve student achievement. More importantly, they bring respect for Aboriginal culture and languages into the process.

The agreements are intended to cover a five-year period and incorporate continuous assessment, tracking of progress, and information sharing. They are structured to ensure consensus and dialogue throughout the term of the agreements.

Further information on legislation and Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements can be found at <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/agreements/agreements.htm>.

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