

CREATING AN AUTHENTIC ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN NORTH OKANAGAN-SHUSWAP

Aboriginal Education Issue 05 Success Stories

February 25, 2016



by Daniel Palmer, Writer, British Columbia School Trustees Association

When Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report last year into the shameful treatment of aboriginal children in residential schools, it brought to light a dark chapter in our educational history.

But on February 2016, when board members at North Okanagan-Shuswap School District #83 passed a motion to improve Aboriginal education for all students, they had no idea they were likely making history of their own.

"The B.C. Ministry of Education told me that as far as they knew, we are the only School District to adopt the commission's calls to action," said Irene LaBoucane, District Principal – Aboriginal Education in SD83. Those calls to action include developing culturally appropriate teaching materials – something the province is also implementing – and protecting aboriginal languages and culture.

"It's a huge responsibility, but it's all very timely, especially with the new relationship the national government is building with aboriginal people, and with B.C.'s curriculum changing," LaBoucane said.

The board also endorsed a school district action plan drafted by an implementation committee that included local First Nations representatives, teachers, principals, Aboriginal education staff, and the district Superintendent, Glenn Borthistle. The plan breaks down Aboriginal education into four areas:

curriculum, resources, teacher capacity and student capacity. That means any innovative ways the district can find to be more inclusive and respectful has to stay within the existing budget.

“It makes a difference when we have someone at the top championing us at a higher level,” LaBoucane said. “Glenn Borthistle has done an amazing job in the last three years, and we’ve seen a shift where most people now acknowledge the (traditional aboriginal) territories at our district meetings. I’ve been around the school district recently and a number of principals now do that as well.”

The plan also calls for appointing a Truth and Reconciliation teacher representative at each school, as well as having the Sewepemetsin language as a learning option at elementary school by 2017-2018.

Bobbi Johnson, SD 83 board chair, said the board felt it was important to heed Chief Justice Murray Sinclair’s Truth and Reconciliation recommendations for public education. The catalyst for the plan came when a delegation comprised of Chief Wayne Christian (Splatsin Nation), Chief Judy Wilson (Neskonlith Band), First Nations Band Coordinators, and an Elder presented to the Board of Trustees the importance of endorsing the TRC’s Calls to Action.

“Although it’s a complex topic, we feel our path is quite straightforward,” Johnson said. “We need to build teacher and student capacity around curriculum and resources to gain a better intercultural understanding, and strengthen students’ capacity for empathy and respect.

Johnson said the district’s core values include statements around building relationships that are respectful and caring, as well as building on diversity and strengths of students, staff and families.

“By integrating Canadian Aboriginal history and culture into our curriculum, including the difficult truths around residential schools, we can help all of our youth build empathy and have a clearer understanding of our shared history,” Johnson said.

The next step is to create a five-year implementation plan and a means of measuring success, LaBoucane said.

“When I started working 25 years ago, I used to call it the ‘beads and bannock’ approach. There was very little genuine understanding of aboriginal communities in schools. But now, fast forward to authentic representation in the curriculum, that’s a huge step forward,” she said. “The huge work ahead is to get teachers to do this right, and believe me, they want to do this right and in a respectful manner. So when we talk about building teachers’ capacity, enabling them, they feel good about it. It’s our responsibility to honour the territory in which we live, work and play, and to remember we’re all invited guests to this territory. I remain optimistic because everyone is embracing these changes and looking to the future.”

A SAFE PLACE FOR SYRIAN STUDENTS AT THE RICHMOND SCHOOL DISTRICT

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by Christopher Sun, Writer, British Columbia School Trustees Association

NOTE: Names of the family were changed, as requested by the school.

Rima was nervous and tearful when she brought her school-aged son and daughter to Richmond's McKay elementary for the first time.

The mother of three and her children only spoke Arabic, having just arrived from Syria. Her daughter Amira was starting Grade 5 and her son, Zahid, was entering Grade 2. They were accompanied by an English speaking aunt, Fawzia, who already lived in the community and acted as a translator for them.

Principal Marilyn Turnbull was the first person they met and she put Rima at ease by welcoming them personally, giving them a tour of the school and introducing them to various faculty and staff.

"When a new family arrives here, whether from Syria or a neighbouring school district, the one thing we want to establish is trust," Turnbull said. "You want to put them at ease, especially when you see a mother in tears because she's scared and nervous."

Turnbull refrains from calling the family "refugees" as she wants to make them feel like regular people who are new to the community.

During the tour, the family visited a Grade 2 class where students were happily singing. They also saw a Kindergarten class with excited and smiling kids, when suddenly a class of Grade 7 students came in, surprising Rima. Fawzia asked why the older students were coming in, and Turnbull explained they have a buddy system at the school, which allows the older and younger kids to play and interact with each other. Tears then streamed down Rima's cheeks.

“We want to make the family feel accepted here, make sure that they know they are in a safe place, a safe school, a safe country,” Turnbull said. “I told her she can stay as long as she wants as I could tell she was still a bit apprehensive.”

A nice surprise for the family was when three Arabic students ran up to the Amira and Zahid, speaking to them in a familiar language, offering to hang out, show them around and introduce them to other students during recess and lunch. As Valentine’s Day was being celebrated at the school the next day, February 12, Amira’s and Zahid’s teachers asked Fawzia if the kids would like to participate.

“The aunt spoke up and said, ‘of course they can participate! I will bring cookies. We are in Canada now,” Turnbull recalled.

“The two are adjusting very nicely,” Turnbull added.

On the second day of school for Amira and Zahid, Fawzia told Turnbull that the night before their first day of school, the two couldn’t sleep because they were apprehensive, but the next night, they couldn’t sleep because they were excited to go back.

While the school tries to treat the family like a new arrival to the community, there is a Settlement Worker in School (SWIS) contact for Rima’s family. That SWIS contact acts as a bridge between the school and community such as helping the family find housing and access medical and dental services.

And there will be support available should the students show any stress and trauma from what they experienced in Syria.

“Some have gone through extreme turmoil,” said Richmond school district chair Donna Sargent. “When you come from a war-torn country, it does something to a person’s mental health.”

“As we get to know them and if we see any needs arise, we will address them,” Turnbull said.

Sargent added that a SWIS worker also helps with helping a family open a bank account, grocery shop and to fill the gaps for a newcomer. An added bonus is the support and positive response they are getting from the community.

“They said we need a car seat so I put something out in our school and families came out with strollers, clothes, home baking, toys, everything they think a new family would need,” Turnbull said. “I introduced the mother to the parent who supplied the car seat, the stroller, to help make that connection. Even though she can’t speak English, you can tell she was thankful with her smiling, shaking hands and nodding.”

It’s been a couple of weeks since Amira and Zahid started school and Turnbull said they are settling in nicely. Zahid was away sick for a few days and when he returned, she asked if he was feeling better, in English.

“He said, ‘not sick,’” Turnbull said. “They are learning English so quickly.”

Currently, there are three Syrian families being privately sponsored with five kids attending a Richmond school. Three more are expected to come, but that number can increase at anytime.

“It has been a real treat welcoming this family,” Turnbull added.

IN MEMORIAM: HENRY ARMSTRONG, BCSTA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (1972-1988)

Issue 05 Profiles

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BCSTA would like to pay tribute to past Executive Director, Henry Armstrong, who passed away at Peace Arch hospital on Thursday, February 11th. Henry served as BCSTA's Executive Director from 1972-1988, and was very influential provincially, both with boards of education and with government. He had a positive impact on public education, and because of all of his hard work and passion for education, his legacy will live on.

"The stories about Henry Armstrong formed a significant part of the culture of the BCSTA. No long term staff member spoke of the organization, its values, and culture without relating at least one Armstrong story. His values, beliefs, and administrative style have deeply influenced the organization and its history.

– Christopher John Rochon (A Case Study in Effective Third Sector Organization, University of Alberta, 2007)

QUESNEL SCHOOL DISTRICT CONTINUES TO IMPROVE ABORIGINAL GRADUATION RATES

Aboriginal Education Issue 05 Success Stories

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by Randy Curr, Director of Instruction – Human Resources, SD28 (Quesnel),
and Patty Kimpton, District Principal of Aboriginal Education, SD28 (Quesnel)

Approximately 25 per cent of the student population of the Quesnel School District are of Aboriginal ancestry.

Like many boards of education in the province, Quesnel trustees consider the improvement of Aboriginal student graduation rates to be one of their highest priorities. After consulting with the District Aboriginal Education Council, the Quesnel District Teachers' Association, CUPE Local 4990 and the Quesnel Principal and Vice-Principals' Association, it was determined that one of the most important resources required to improve Aboriginal student learning was the hiring of staff with Aboriginal ancestry.



The hiring of staff with Aboriginal ancestry improves the educational experience of Aboriginal students by providing Aboriginal students with cultural support and role models within their schools. Aboriginal staff are able to provide cultural relevance and a sense of belonging and inclusion. They also serve as a safe link to the parent community and they are able to help ensure that lessons are culturally sensitive.

Employers in BC who have a bona fide reason to hire employees based on ancestry should apply to the BC Human Rights Tribunal for a Special Program that will permit the employer to hire an individual from a specific group who have experienced a historical disadvantage. The objective of the Special Program is to address the historical discrimination. Should a school district hire staff based on their Aboriginal ancestry without a BC Human Rights Special Program, the district could face a discrimination challenge by an unsuccessful candidate who is not Aboriginal. (For more information regarding the BC Human Rights Special Program please see: http://www.bchrt.bc.ca/special_programs/index.htm)

The Quesnel School District has had two Special Programs in place since 2008. One program is for support staff positions and the other program is for teachers. In the case of the teachers, Letter of Understanding Number 4 in the Provincial Collective Agreement, encourages Districts and Locals to seek a Special Program and offers the assistance of BCPSEA and the BCTF in completing the application process. A staff member from both BCPSEA and BCTF came to Quesnel and worked with a group of stakeholders that consisted of members of the Aboriginal community, trustees, teachers, support staff, principals, and senior administration.

The CUPE support staff Special Program applies to all Aboriginal Education Support staff. Applicants must have Grade 12 graduation, at least one year of post-secondary education, and knowledge of Aboriginal culture. Currently the district employs twenty-two Aboriginal Education Support staff, some of whom are certified Education Assistants which increases the value they are able to provide to the district. The CUPE membership supports the Special Program even though it means that the majority of the union membership would not be eligible to work in this department.

The teachers approved a Special Program that requires Aboriginal ancestry for all positions that are assigned to the Aboriginal Education Department. Additionally, every year the district and the local association meet to select one continuing full-time teaching position that must be filled by an applicant who is of Aboriginal ancestry. At a time when the district is experiencing declining enrolment, and therefore fewer teaching jobs, the willingness of the union to approve the requirement that one position from the general pool of teaching jobs must have Aboriginal ancestry demonstrates the teachers' commitment to improving the Aboriginal student graduation rate.



School District #28 has an Aboriginal Education council that consists of representatives from the four local bands; Kluskus, Nazko, Lhtako, ?Esdilagh, as well as the local Metis Association and Quesnel Tillicum Society Friendship Centre. This council participated in the initial development of the Special Program as well as the renewal process. They were able to share what they believe are both the strengths and weaknesses of the Quesnel School District in terms of how their children were served. They also saw how committed all district stakeholders were in their desire to improve the service to Aboriginal students.

In late 2013, the stakeholders met again, this time without BCPSEA and BCTF support, as the 2008 five year Special Program was about to expire. The group was unanimous that the Special Program had contributed to improving Aboriginal student success. In 2006/07 Aboriginal student graduation rates were 53 per cent (female 62 per cent – male 41 per cent) compared to 63 per cent (75 per cent female – male 52 per cent) in 2014/15. Based on the 2014/15 year-end data, there were 8,972 instances of enhanced service to students and increased contacts from the home and community to school and vice versa. The development of the Special Program has served to bring the Quesnel education partners together. It has led to a shared understanding that all groups must continue to work together to improve the opportunities for Aboriginal student success. Over time it is hoped that Aboriginal graduation rates will be equal to that of non-Aboriginal students and that the percentage of district employees that are of Aboriginal ancestry will be similar to the percentage of the students who are of Aboriginal ancestry.

The Quesnel Board of Education has identified Aboriginal education as one of their priorities. This is reflected in both budget decisions, professional development funding, and the ongoing support for the BC Human Rights Special Program. As British Columbia and SD28 roll out the revised 21st Century curriculum, with First Peoples Principles of Learning underpinnings, there is much hope and optimism that we will reach our goals of equity in the workplace and the schoolhouse.

BCSTA'S 111TH ANNIVERSARY

Issue 05 News & Events

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On February 16, 1905, 20 school trustees from around British Columbia met at the Vancouver School Board office. These trustees, from eight boards – Grand Forks, Kamloops, Ladysmith, Nanaimo, Nelson, New Westminster, Vancouver and Victoria – discussed common problems and ways to improve public education. Agreeing to continue working together on matters of shared concern, they formed BCSTA, the first school trustees association in Canada.