

“The Stories That Shaped Us”

Historical Review of Aboriginal Education in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools

Background

The following is a short report summarizing the findings and outcomes of a unique meeting that took place at the Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools (NLPS) on February 18th, 2014.

The meeting was hosted by Leaders for Learning Executive Group (formerly know as the Aboriginal Education Leadership Council AELC) comprised of representatives from the three land-based First Nations: Snuneymuxw, Stz’uminus, Snaw-Naw-As; Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre; Mid-Island Metis Nation; and Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools Aboriginal Education division.

The Executive Group indicated the former Aboriginal Education Leadership Council was too large and diverse in interest and underwent a strategic restructuring November 2013 where they reviewed their purpose and goals. The Executive voted to disband the larger AELC Group, narrowed their committee structure to the five Aboriginal Community Partners and NLPS and re-named the AELC Executive Group to Leaders For Learning.

Leaders For Learning meet monthly to receive and discuss updates on key activities occurring within the District and to share information from and to their communities/organizations. At the January 2014 meeting, the Group approved new terms of reference and strategic direction. With the restructure, Leadership engagement is high with strong meeting attendance and working relationships between all partners.

This specific event was conceived and designed as an occasion to inform Leaders for Learning’s ongoing strategic work by bringing a historical perspective to it. Each leader invited several other community leaders and pioneers of Aboriginal education to the meeting. The leaders and guests spoke to their individual and collective experiences, sharing their reasons for getting involved, recalling stories from earlier days, identifying significant turning points and indications of progress. They then turned their attention to what still needs to be done and spent the afternoon identifying what they saw as important next steps in advancing Aboriginal education in NLPS.

The meeting was facilitated by Stephanie Johnson (Toro Marketing) and Aftab Erfan (Whole Picture Thinking). They used visual facilitation techniques to map the timeline and [literally] draw a picture of the historic trajectory of the events, leading into the future.



Attendees

Nancy Seward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders for Learning Group Member • Education Director for Snuneymuxw First Nation
Bill White	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snuneymuxw Elder • Leader of Aboriginal Education dating back to the 1970s • Unable to attend but sent a written, historical statement read aloud
Eleanor White	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snuneymuxw Elder • Welcoming prayer
Terena Ross	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snuneymuxw First Nation Education Support Worker
Tim Harris	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders for Learning Group Member • Education Director for Stz'uminus First Nation • Stz'uminus Band Councilor
Charlotte Elliott	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders for Learning Group Member • Education Director for Stz'uminus First Nation
Pearl Harris	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal Stz'uminus First Nation • Former teacher within NLPS • Hul'qumi'num Language Leader
Patti Edwards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders for Learning Group Member • Education Coordinator for Snaw-Naw-As First Nation • BA Child & Youthcare from UVic • Mentored by Barbara Barltrop and the late Barbara White
Barbara Barltrop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader of Aboriginal Education dating back to the 1970s • Started Snaw-Naw-As School • One of the Instrumental leaders that brought Hul'qumi'num Language to SD68 • Founding member of the First Nation Education Steering Committee and First Nations Schools Association • Former Administrator of Snaw-Naw-As First Nation School
Jessica Edwards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snaw-Naw-As First Nation Elder • First Home Outreach Coordinator dating back to the early 1970s
Joy Bremner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders for Learning Group Member • President of Mid Island Metis
Margaret Sloan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long respected Metis Elder • Involved with Metis sharing and teaching of Metis Culture dating back to the 1970s having engaged with thousands of children over the length of her involvement
Isabelle Ouelette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long respected Metis Elder • Continues to share the culture with pride and commitment to the health, well being and education of students in SD68. • Still participates in the cultural sharing and education of students.
Brenda Hogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metis member who lobbied for recognition that the Metis had a right to a seat on Aboriginal education committees. • Participated on a provincial and federal level to lobby for the right to participate on behalf of Metis students. • Celebrates her culture, sharing, teaching and sitting on the Board of MIMN at various times since its formation.
Carol Ellison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metis Member

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Aboriginal Liasons in SD68 for many years, participating at Metis Awareness Days and on call as a cultural story teller.
Inga Neilsen-Cooper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders for Learning Group Member • Education Director, Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre
Grace Elliott-Neilsen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director • Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre
Tony Schachtel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Manager • Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre
Laura Tait	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Instruction responsible for Aboriginal Education • NLPS
Patti McCarthy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Assistant, Aboriginal Education • NLPS
Michelle Swecera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Aboriginal Resource Coordinator • NLPS
Mandy Jones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hulq'umi'num Language Teacher • NLPS
Neil Varner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional Coordinator, Aboriginal Education • NLPS
Robyn Gray	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Superintendent, former District Principal, Aboriginal Education • NLPS
Connie Kulhavy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long time Aboriginal Education Assistant, former District Aboriginal Resource Coordinator
Fran Tait	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tsimshian Elder and Leader of Aboriginal Education dating back to 1974 • Worked at VIU for 32 years starting as the first Native Student Councilor Aid helping pave the way for the beginning of Aboriginal Education at the former Malaspina College

Facilitator Questions for Discussion

In preparation for the meeting, attendees were asked to prepare by thinking about the following guiding questions and bringing relevant stories with them.

- When and how did the story of Aboriginal Education begin in our school district?
- Who has been involved and why were they chosen (or why did they step forward)?
- Individually, why did you get involved? What is your story with the group?
- What challenges did you face in the early days and how were they overcome?
- What are some of the actions that have been taken over the years that you're most proud of?
- Are there moments, milestones, turning points or transitions that have been significant to you personally?
- Who have we been targeting as the audience of our actions?
- Who do we need to be targeting and what actions do we need to take now to make the biggest difference?
- What actions should occur to ensure a collective ownership is interwoven throughout our district?

Collective Ownership: Why We Care?

One of the key questions we sought to explore was how people in the room came to care about Aboriginal Education and how they came to be involved. These questions of purpose and motivation seem critical as the School District moves forward to nurture collective ownership for Aboriginal Education and to draw more people into these efforts. Figure 1 provides a broad summary of who was in the room and some of the reasons that got them there.

Reasons given for caring and getting involved varied widely between attendees, while there were also many common themes:

- For most people getting involved in Aboriginal Education had something to do with caring for children – their own children, others' children, and the children within themselves. We noted that women have been and continue to be at the forefront of this work – as such; advancing Aboriginal Education is largely the work of women on behalf of children.
 - Some people got involved because they could get a job in Aboriginal Education, which meant they could support their families. They also saw themselves as working to make the education system a healthier and more supportive place where their children could thrive.
 - Some became passionate about supporting children academically (particularly Aboriginal children struggling within the school system), while enriching their learning and their sense of identity with relevant cultural content. They took

delight in “seeing a light-bulb go on” for students, in instilling pride in them and in watching their self-esteem grow.

- Some also saw working with Aboriginal children as a doorway into working with Aboriginal parents and strengthening the fabric of family and community more broadly.
- Some committed to this work because it connected them strongly with their own experiences as children. They remembered the pain and prejudice they felt growing up, and the lack of role models of Aboriginal ancestry in their own schools – and they wanted to change that reality for the future generations.



Figure 1: Collective Ownership

- Another set of reasons given for getting involved in Aboriginal education was to address the disconnect between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Some noted that the general public is ignorant of the history of Aboriginal people and particularly of the history of Residential Schools. Education is seen as a way to build bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities through increased cultural awareness, and to ultimately make it easier for Aboriginal children to “fight the big battle” of living in a non-Indigenous mainstream society.

- Several people also noted the role of their teachers, mentors, elders and leaders in inspiring a desire in them to work in Aboriginal Education. Some were moved by the vision of people like Bill White, while others literally stepped into the shoes of their teachers after being an apprentice. Leadership from within the School District and from Band chief and council was identified as an enabling key factor.

On the theme of collective ownership, several people commented that this work is not solitary work, that it is important to work together in line with Indigenous traditions that privilege the “we” over the “I”.

Historical Timeline: The Stories that Shaped Us

Much of the day was spent sharing and listening to stories about the development of Aboriginal Education in the School District. Figure 2 illustrates the historic timeline that was drawn up. Here are some of the highlights and themes that stand out in reviewing this timeline and its stories:

- The story of Aboriginal education in SD68 began in the 1970s and 1980s.
- It was championed in the early days by a number of Aboriginal leaders (Barbara Barltrop, Barbara White, Tony Schactel, Bill White, Jessica, Terry) whose primary concerns were to (a) address what they saw as misspending of funds slated for Aboriginal students by the District (e.g. building more playgrounds while students were really struggling academically and personally) and (b) getting Aboriginal people into the education system and involved in decision making processes impacting students.
- The early days were tough days. The pioneers were met with hostility (an illustrative example is Barbara White getting yelled at, at a School Board meeting in 1977 for asking for “our money back”). They saw their role as challenging the system to work together.
- Significantly, these early days were days of individual initiative. Though the pioneers knew each other and worked closely together, the communities had not yet banded together to advance this work.

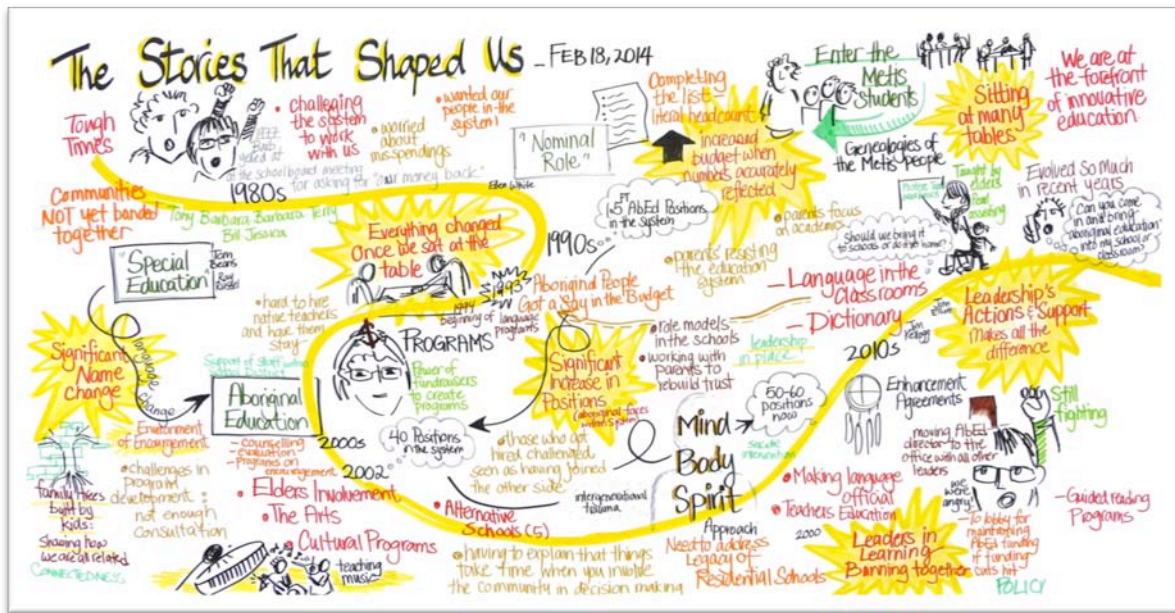


Figure 2: Historic Timeline of the Development of Aboriginal Education in SD68

- The early 1990s were a significant turning point as several watershed events took place: (a) In 1993 Aboriginal representatives finally got a seat at the decision making table and a say in the budget. (b) A headcount of Aboriginal students in the District proved the numbers to be much higher than previously captured on the “nominal roll”. This led to an increase in the budget for Aboriginal Education, which was allocated on a per capita basis. This was also the beginning of involvement of Metis families whose children were included in the headcount for the first time. (c) The term Aboriginal Education came to replace “Special Education”, a significant symbolic development that signaled Aboriginal histories and communities being recognized and valued.
- Following these watershed moments, the 1990s were a time of blossoming of programs for Aboriginal students. A paradigm of educating the Mind, Body, Emotion and Spirit formed the backbone of these efforts. Language programs began in 1994, support programs, counseling, the arts and cultural programs soon followed. Examples included the creation of a Hulqumimum language dictionary, building of family trees, and music programs that brought different cultural traditions together. By the early 2000s elders’ involvement had become customary in programs.
- An important development over this era was that Aboriginal people started to get hired by the School District in increasingly large numbers. Positions grew from 1.5 full-time-equivalent in the 1990s to 40 full-time-equivalent positions by 2002, and up to 72 full-time-equivalent positions at the present moment (2014), which includes teachers as well as education assistants. Having Aboriginal faces within the schools means that Aboriginal

students have role models and that Aboriginal families have a better chance of building connections and trust with the school system.

- The years of rapid development were accompanied by many challenges as well. (a) It was difficult to hire and keep qualified Aboriginal teachers. (b) Some programs were developed quickly and without adequate community consultations. Other times leaders had a hard time explaining to the School District why things had to take so long when you involve the community in decision making. (c) Parents resisted the school system, remained focused on academics and often did not appreciate the value of the whole range of programs offered. (d) Leaders in Aboriginal Education were sometimes criticized by their own communities because they were seen as “having joined the other side”. (e) The legacy of Residential Schools and the intergenerational trauma remained as a deep wound, difficult to address, impossible to ignore.
- In more recent years, the 2000s and 2010s, Aboriginal Education has entered another new phase in NLPS, characterized by more strongly coordinated action, and a gradual expansion in focus from addressing the needs of Aboriginal students to intervening in systemic ways to expand Aboriginal content for all students.
- The Leaders for Learning came together in 2000 and three Enhancements Agreements have been drafted to formalize the role of Aboriginal Education within the School District.
- In parallel to these efforts, five band Schools have been created, delivering education to Aboriginal students outside the jurisdiction of the School District.
- The image of Aboriginal Education has changed drastically in recent years. It is now seen at the forefront of innovation in education.
- Aboriginal educators sit at many tables now and have far more visibility. There has been a shift in the system so that it is no longer Aboriginal workers seeking to get into the classrooms, but classroom teachers calling to request Aboriginal content, materials and resources.
- At the same time, Aboriginal educators continue to lobby for more influence at strategic levels, for more programs, and for the protection of funds for services to Aboriginal students. Their fight is far from over.

A strong theme that runs through this entire history is the importance of leadership, not only of the Aboriginal pioneers whose stories were told, but also of the Band leadership behind them, and of allies within the School system (e.g. Tom Beans, John Elliot, Ray Russell, Jim Kellogg) who supported these efforts and provided an environment of encouragement.

The Path Ahead

The last two hours of the meeting were spent thinking together about the next steps for Aboriginal education in SD68. Figure 3 illustrates the ideas participants brainstormed.

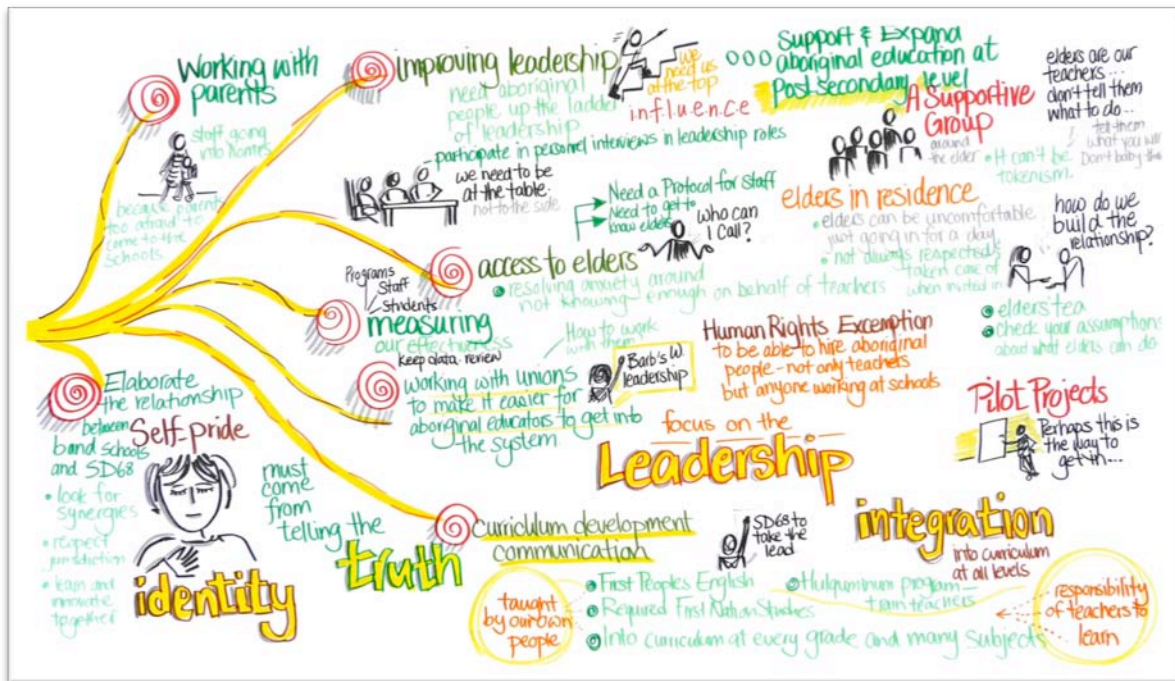


Figure 3: Ideas for Future Directions

Their ideas fall into seven categories:

1. **Curriculum development.** The leaders in attendance encouraged NLPS to take a lead in developing curriculum and implementing new programs and courses, which may become a model for other jurisdictions. The key concept distinguishing this wave of curriculum development is “integration”: moving beyond developing programs targeted to Aboriginal students, and into integrating or mainstreaming Aboriginal content into the curriculum delivered to all students. This could take the form of new classes in First People’s English, required First Nations Studies, and inclusion of Aboriginal content into existing curriculum at every grade level and every subject matter. It was suggested that these could be framed as pilot projects, which are often an effective way to get “in the door” with innovations. (One unresolved question and tension that remains alive around these issues is whether Aboriginal content should always be delivered by people of Aboriginal ancestry, or whether all teachers should be responsible for learning and teaching this content.)

2. **Elders involvement.** It was noted that there is a growing demand from classroom teachers for access to elders who might come into the classroom to share their knowledge and their traditions with children. While this is a welcomed development, there are also many stories of elders being invited to schools and not receiving the care and respect that they deserve. There is a serious concern that elders can be taken for granted and used in a tokenistic way, instead of being respected for the wisdom they bring as teachers. As a result, it seems necessary to educate teachers about the role of elders in Aboriginal communities, to establish a protocol for invitations that are truly respectful to the elders, and to encourage the building of relationships with elders through programs such as Elders in Residence.
3. **Working with unions.** Despite the existence of a human rights exception that supports signing on Aboriginal teachers and other staff, hiring remains a challenge due to union policies. One area of action may be to advance ways of working around this problem with the unions.
4. **Working with parents.** Given the difficult history of Aboriginal communities with the western school system, it is no surprise that many parents have such a difficult time with their own children's schooling today. An area of action might be to expand the efforts to build bridges into the homes of Aboriginal students, which may take the form of staff making home visits.
5. **Influence at leadership levels.** It was acknowledged that hiring teachers and staff at the school's lower ranks is not enough. To introduce fundamental changes in the school system Aboriginal people also need to be represented at the highest level of influence and must be able to climb up the ladder of leadership. Enabling this kind of advancement may be a priority for Aboriginal Education in the School District in the next few years.
6. **Relationship between SD68 and Band Schools.** Given the expanding role of Band Schools it seems essential that NLPS develops a more sophisticated relationship with them. There may be important synergies between the two, such as an ability to learn from each other's innovations, and the possibilities for better supporting students who may go back and forth between the two systems.
7. **Measuring effective.** A focus on keeping data and reviewing programs periodically is essential in order to learn, to course-correct as needed and to ensure that students, staff and programs get the best chance at success.

Recommended Next Steps

To further support Leaders for Learning and NLPS in determining and walking its emerging strategic directions, two types of next steps are recommended, each consisting of further critical conversations to be convened:

- 1. Strategic directions and action planning.** The group started a very strong list of items they would like to see in the 'path ahead'. A next step would be to confirm if this list of items have been addressed within the NLPS Aboriginal Framework 3-Year Plan and if not, expand, complete and formalize this list into a strategic plan with specific actionable items. This may involve consultation with a broader cross-section of stakeholders at the strategic directions level (possibly during a large meeting) as well as targeted conversations with those most knowledgeable and involved to identify and articulate specific actions and decide on who can be responsible for them (possibly in break-out groups).
- 2. Expanding the Collective Ownership Conversation.** As Leaders for Learning attempt to integrate Aboriginal Education across the school curriculum and expand the influence of Aboriginal Education within the school system more generally, it becomes more and more important to begin a conversation with the non-Aboriginal community about these issues. This could take the form of an initial meeting between the Leaders for Learning and the most high ranking staff and Trustees of SD68. The question of "why should we care?" may be explored collectively at this meeting. As well, it could be a chance for immersion in and education on Aboriginal content for these non-Aboriginal leaders. Ultimately the Aboriginal Education division will likely have to work with principals and teachers across the school system, but this initial meeting may be necessary to set the tone and establish a mandate with the most senior leadership.