

# Walking together for a better future

The Aboriginal Enhancement Network of Schools is helping to realize the vision of a better future for the learners they serve.

by Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert

The vision of the schools in the BC network of schools is every learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options. The Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN) represents one effort to make the goals of individual district enhancement agreements come alive in classrooms through inquiry, teamwork and creating relationships of respect. The work in AESN schools reflects a small part of the work that is taking place across schools and communities in BC to strengthen the learning experiences of Aboriginal learners. This article describes the way in which AESN schools are 'walking together' to realize the vision of a better future for the learners they serve.

Until fairly recently, Aboriginal education was often perceived as the responsibility of the Aboriginal department within a district or the Aboriginal support workers within a school. The development of Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements is helping to create a sense of shared responsibility — a sense of walking together. Once district educators and community members have worked to es-

tablish trust and have reached consensus about the goals for the First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners in their community, their commitments are made official through the signing of an Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement. On the pathway to the signing event, many obstacles have to be addressed, including histories of pain and mistrust flowing from the residential school experiences of many community members.

Without exception these “new start” agreements have powerful implications for all teachers, all learners, and all learning settings.

How can the important intentions embedded in these agreements be honored in action and become system-wide realities now (not in some distant future) ... and in every setting, not just in a few isolated places?

Although each agreement is

unique to the district and to its specific Aboriginal communities, there are some important commonalities. Young people gain strength through strong identity with their culture and heritage and a focus on language and culture is imperative. High levels of literacy and numeracy are emphasized, as is high school completion. Developing a culture of appreciation for the traditions, histories and ways of life of Indigenous peoples in Canada is also an important outcome for all learners.

Most participants in the agreement process come to a personal conviction that the fabric of our society would be strengthened if we all learned more about the more holistic view of learning — spiritual, emotional, physical and mental — valued by Aboriginal people. We can view these local enhancement agreements as clarion calls for developing a deeper understanding of indigenous ways of knowing for all learners, through the development of what indigenous scholars describe as two-eyed seeing.

### From Agreements to Action

So, the consensus has been created and the agreements have been signed. What actions will now take place? As the poet T.S.Eliot has written:

*Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the shadow*

The shadow of fatigue from the work of building consensus can sometimes overwhelm the desire for action. The best will in the world is not enough. The work of achieving these goals is work for everyone, not just a few.

Concerned about the fatigue factor, in December 2008, Trish Rosbor-

ough the Director of the provincial Aboriginal Education Enhancements Branch, asked a question: Would members of the Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS) be interested in developing a parallel network willing to explore ways of making the goals in signed enhancement agreements come to life in classrooms? The answer to the question was an emphatic “yes” and the AESN was formed. A small grant was provided by INAC (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) and the Ministry of Education to initiate the work. Schools were invited to develop a question related to the goals of their local signed enhancement agreement. They were encouraged to explore new ways of developing cultural understandings. They were asked to develop greater individual ownership of learning through the thoughtful application of the six key coaching-for-learning strategies embraced by NPBS. They agreed to use the BC performance standards as a way of knowing what difference was being made for learners and to provide a focus for the school change “story.”

So, what has happened? Since Trish Rosborough first asked the question, two years of exploratory work in

schools has taken place and there are now 75 schools across the province actively engaged in AESN inquiries. Here are some of our observations so far:

### 1. Getting started matters.

At a spring seminar in 2009 Debbie Leighton Stephens urged the 200 participating educators to walk slowly with learners, to walk beside the learners, and to be a known face in their local communities. Gayle Bedard, District Principal (Surrey) and Colleen Hannah, District Principal (Mission) demonstrated through their humor and insight that there are “no dumb questions.” They encouraged educators to find a local Elder with the cultural knowledge, build a relationship with him or her, and then heed the advice. If you make a “mistake” culturally, apologize. Willie Pierre from the Katzie Nation demonstrated and then talked about how to have an appropriate acknowledgment ceremony. With these sets of models, teachers and principals have taken tangible steps to incorporate cultural respect and understanding into their formal meetings and on-going work.

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Editor

Richard Williams

## 2. Learning more matters.

At the 2010 seminar, Dr. Lorna Williams helped participants understand more about the historical record of cultural oppression. She also suggested ways for educators to deepen their learning including using the Aboriginal Holistic Lifelong Learning models available on the CCL website, (<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/AboutCCL/Knowledge-Centres/AboriginalLearning/>), reading the BC First Nations 12 text and learning more about the First Nations Language courses. AESN schools have been exploring some of the indigenous ways of knowing shared with us by Dr. Williams. These include:

**Kamucwkalha** – the energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose.

**Celhcelh** – each person is responsible for his or her learn-

ing, it means finding and taking advantage of all opportunities to learn and maintain an openness to learning. Each person must take the initiative to become part of the learning community by finding their place and fitting themselves into the community. It means offering what knowledge and expertise you have to benefit the communal work being carried out.

**Emhaka7** – each person does the best he or she can at whatever the task, and keeps an eye on others to be helpful. To work respectfully and with good thoughts.

**Responsibility** – each person is responsible for helping the team and the learning community to accomplish the task at hand in a good way.

**Relationship** – throughout the course each person will be con-

scious of developing and maintaining relationships, with the people, the teachers and guides, and the communities beyond the learning community. It also means relating what you are experiencing to your past knowledge and to what you will do with what you are learning.

**Watchful listening** – an openness to listening beyond our own personal thoughts and assumptions.

**A7xekcal** – how teachers help us to locate the infinite capacity we all have as learners. Developing one's own personal gifts and expertise in a holistic manner.

**Kat'il'a** – finding stillness amidst our busyness and need to know.

## 3. There is no "perfect" way to start.

Some schools build confidence by



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A number of schools have created videos and banners for their schools in which learners express their belief in themselves and their views about completing school and “crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.”

starting with fiction and non-fiction accounts of Aboriginal history, strengths and experiences. These schools don't stay “stuck” in a literacy orientation. They often move on to rich, hands-on experiences drawing on the expertise of local Aboriginal elders. Other schools, sometimes with the leadership of Aboriginal cultural workers, engage with Aboriginal ways of knowing and worldviews right from the start. Regardless of the starting point, learners in both settings are exhibiting more interest in and respect for cross-cultural understanding.

#### **4. Believing in a goal beyond high school matters.**

Having a goal for life after high school is critically important and schools are working hard with their learners to create visual images of possibility. A number of schools have created videos and banners for their schools in which learners express their belief in themselves and their views about completing school and “crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.” These banners are “flown” with pride and the short videos help learners communicate with their family members and “see” themselves as part of a lifelong learning community.

#### **5. Learning across types of schools and geographic locations matters.**

BC communities are diverse and our contexts for learning

are varied. Learning across communities and across contexts is an important feature of the AESN work. As example, this year two schools have created a shared inquiry linking learners from Kyuquot, a small Aboriginal community on the west coast of Vancouver Island with learners at Rockridge Secondary in West Vancouver. By exchanging art-based narratives about family, culture and the environment, learners are exploring the world views held by indigenous and non-indigenous people in BC.

Hartley Bay School in the Prince Rupert School District has been exploring the extent to which utilizing traditional Ts'msyen methods of teaching will result in greater student engagement and subsequent academic and personal growth. They turned their goal-setting right-side up by deciding to wholeheartedly embrace the local indigenous ways of knowing – and they are finding

that attendance patterns, learner engagement and learning gains are all being transformed for the better. Every educator who has listened to this story at regional meetings has been inspired to “think differently” about approaches to learning. Three other small schools in Nisga'a, Stewart and Cherryville connected to engage boys in reading through on-line discussions and friendly competition. Each school is creating its own way forward.

#### **6. Connections with community leaders and Elders matter.**

Connecting with local communities, with Elders and with families is important. There are many examples of ways in which AESN schools are reaching out to communities and Elders. One small school in Vanderhoof has made direct and personal connections. The grade four and five learners at Sinkut View wrote formal postcards at the beginning of the year to Grand Chief Ed John, Hereditary Chief of the Tl'azt'en Nation. Their postcards described what they knew about the local Aboriginal culture. After engaging in a yearlong study of the local culture, the students again wrote to him to

### **Know more**

Lewthwaite, B. & McMillan, B. (2010) “She Can Bother Me, and That's Because She Cares”: What Inuit Students Say About Teaching and Their Learning. *Canadian Journal of Education* 33, 1 (2010): 140-175.

Tanaka, Michelle, T.D. (2009) Transforming perspectives: The immersion of student teachers in indigenous ways of knowing. downloaded Nov 15 2010 from:  
<http://dspace.library.uvic.ca:8080/handle/1828/1664>

Williams, L., & Tanaka, M. (2007) Schalay'nung Sxwey'ga: Emerging cross cultural pedagogy in the academy. *Educational Insights*, 8(3). Available at:  
<http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v11n03/articles/williams.html>



share what they had learned. The growth in the knowledge and insights of the students was impressive. Through the initiative of the Aboriginal support worker, Grand Chief Ed John made the time to visit the school to talk with all the students about local history and traditions – and to commend them on their personal learning journeys.

One of the goals in the *Enhancement Agreement* in Haida Gwaii is that “students will develop a strong sense of belonging to their environment and community.” In their AESN inquiry, the school asked to what extent a focus on oral story telling would have a positive impact on student performance in reading, writing and understanding. Students created their own talking sticks, wrote and told stories, and invited Elders and community members to their story-telling sessions. The school saw recognizable improvement in student confidence as well as in their speaking and story-telling abilities. The support of the Elders was part of the key to their growth.

### **7. Respect is essential.**

Two Manitoba science educators, Brian Lewthwaite and Barbara McMillan (2010) have studied what Inuit intermediate students say helps them with their learning. In their report, aptly titled *She Can Bother Me, and That's Because She Cares: What Inuit Students Say About Teaching and Their Learning*, they describe the helpful behaviors of the teachers from the perspective of the learners. These include:

1. Teachers consider how their students perceive educational success (what students perceive as success is based on their recognition of, and pride in their tangible achievements). Teachers

then reposition their efforts to acknowledge success in students' terms, especially regarding perseverance and working through to an end product.

2. They listened to learners and then reconsidered what they believed to be the attributes of a positive learning environment. As a result they became more interactive and cogenerative in their approach.

3. They let their learners know that they care about their educational success. They do not see deficits in their students and they are committed to their success.

4. They allow room for learners to use their first language in the classroom.

5. They communicate clearly and concisely and directly with their learners – they undertalk rather than overtalk.

6. They use multiple strategies including modeling to foster learning. They adapt their instructional practices based on learner need.

7. They allow time and provide individual support for learners.

They provide generous amounts of informal and informative feedback to their students.

8. They establish reciprocal learning opportunities within their classrooms. They recognize that others can contribute to the overall learning and promote students to both seek out and provide support in learning as the need arises.

9. They use local contexts, stories and resource materials in their learning program. They do not believe they are the central figure in their students' learning.

10. They recognize that they can and must change their teaching to help learners learn. They do not insist on their own way, they change to better suit their students reflect their home culture.

These findings match the strongest work in BC schools where educators are demonstrating these qualities in their work with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners.

### **Changing Perspectives – Walking Together**

Educators can learn a great deal

## AESN partnerships

The AESN has benefited from a number of helpful partnerships. Productive partnerships developed with members of the Ministry Aboriginal Enhancements Branch staff, with the leaders of the Healthy Schools Network and with representatives from INAC. Key Aboriginal educators such as Dr. Lorna Williams, Debbie Leighton-Stephens, Colleen Hannah, Gayle Bedard, Trish Roshborough, Laura Tait and Stella Bates were generous with their advice and guidance. Colleen Hodgson from the Métis Nation of British Columbia made sure schools were aware of resources available to all learners through MNBC. Another important and significant early partnership was with the BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association, particularly with Gaila Erickson, the Manager of Professional Learning. Gaila understood the urgency of confronting deficiency stances and she provided a model of genuine and strategic collaboration. The production of short videos with First Nations educators answering questions about protocol and honouring ceremonies was just one tangible example of her leadership (see <http://www.bcpvpa.bc.ca/node/78>)


— JH & LK



Students from Sinkut View Elementary cleaning the day's catch.

about the forms of professional learning that are most helpful in changing perspectives from reading the work of Michelle Tanaka, a doctoral student of Dr. Lorna Williams's (Canadian Research Chair in Indigenous Studies). In Michelle's research study, summarized in her thesis, *Transforming Perspectives: The Immersion of Student Teachers in Indigenous Ways of Knowing*, she found that four important areas had to be confronted for non-Aboriginal teachers to learn and grow:


1. They had to learn to work alongside, and to walk alongside each other and Indigenous people.
2. Teachers had to put aside the familiar and connect to the unknown.
3. They had to learn to let go of perfection.
4. New teachers had to overcome their fears of engaging in emotional territory.

These observations have powerful implications for practice and are helpful in forming a conceptual framework for the work of AESN schools. Walking together and working together across spaces, places and cultures, we are confident that we can make a learning world of which we will all be proud – one that affords dignity, purpose and options to every learner in our province. We believe that the AESN schools, through their willingness to take risks, to work together in a spirit of respect and inquiry, and through sharing their stories with generosity and openness, are helping to create new ways forward. 

Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser are co-leaders of the Network of Performance Based Schools and assistant professors of studies in Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University. They recently collaborated to write *Leadership Mindsets: Innovation and learning in the transformation of schools*. They can be reached at [jhalbert@telus.net](mailto:jhalbert@telus.net) and [lkaser@telus.net](mailto:lkaser@telus.net)

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but the trend now seems to use scholarly opinion as the basis for philosophical and curricular change in our system. We read books from high-level individuals who have been immersed in education for years. We know the information they provide is influential and believe the information to be accurate, but we are still left without the research that quantifies the influence and importance that principals and vice-principals as instructional leaders play on student achievement.

Our members have told us that it is time we engage in and encourage research that can help us guide our leadership in a significant way. This work will engage principals, vice-principals and teachers in addressing these questions. I will share in upcoming issues of *eNews* opportunities for you to engage in and respond to this work. 

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