

## Alternative Education

Jurisdiction: Prince Edward Island

Contact: Roberta Clark

Level: K-12

Theme: Organizational/Structural

### Description of Practice:

The majority of Mi'kmaq high school students living on-reserve in Prince Edward Island attend one of two geographically distant, rural, provincial high schools. At each of these high schools, the Aboriginal population represents a minority of the overall student enrolment. English is the language of instruction and the majority of First Nation students are not fluent in the Mi'kmaq language.

In both the Western and Eastern School Boards, one Alternative Education site is located at the public high school where the majority of the area's First Nations students attend. In recent years, at each of these high schools, an Alternative Education Site has been established and is contributing to the academic success of some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Although other Alternative Education sites exist across the province, these two particular sites represent good practices for Aboriginal education mainly because of the close communication and support between the schools and the First Nation communities.

Both of these Alternative Education sites offer low student-teacher ratios, youth worker support, increased opportunities for individualized adaptations and modifications, and more flexible scheduling, all aimed toward the goal of high school graduation in a well managed setting. Prior to the establishment of these Alternative Education programs, the number of Aboriginal graduates from these high schools was extremely low. Establishing a welcoming atmosphere for learning with students who were not finding success in the larger classroom settings has changed the attendance, dropout and graduation rates dramatically.

### Background:

In the Western School Board, this particular Alternative Education site's enrolment comes mainly from junior high school age students. This site has been designed as an early intervention program to help struggling Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students move successfully toward full integration into high school programs. By providing the right atmosphere and necessary supports in small class settings, students who are struggling in the junior high setting can find a place to be successful.

In the Eastern School Board, this particular Alternative Education site's enrolment comes from Grade 10-12 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students requiring additional supports to achieve academic success. In the 10 years prior to the development of this style of Alternative Education program, the percentage of First Nation graduates from this particular high school was extremely low. The new Superintendent at the time worked diligently to arrange cultural sensitivity training for the district's Counselling Consultant and together they actively led the development of this program.

### Development:

The successful development of each of these two sites relied upon building up trust within the entire school community. In the beginning stages of development, a general lack of trust was evident between First Nation communities and the schools. As misconceptions and misunderstandings were openly discussed, an improved mindset developed and support was

forthcoming. Strengthening relationships and partnerships allowed the home, school, and community to resolve issues in the best interests of the students.

Enrolment was low until Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents came to trust the program. Parents and caregivers gradually realized these particular sites were able to offer the academic and emotional supports necessary for some students to achieve success and to stay in school longer. Establishing an ongoing presence within the First Nation communities by regularly meeting with parents, Elders, and community leaders to listen and learn about the range of supports necessary to suit each student's needs was instrumental in the development of these two Alternative Education sites and also their continued support.

A small teacher-student ratio (no more than 12 students per class) and the ongoing liaison efforts of a youth worker at each site are considered essential.

Evidence:

Attendance is always a key factor in student success. Through the supports in place within the school and within the First Nation communities, attendance for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is closely monitored and efforts are made daily to ensure students are in class. If necessary, efforts are made to arrange transportation to school for those who do not arrive on time and parental permission is usually forthcoming. As a result, attendance rates have increased significantly.

Student well being, self-confidence and identity are very important factors showing a positive move through participation in these specific Alternative Education programs. The dropout rate of Aboriginal students living on-reserve and attending Prince Edward Island's public schools has decreased dramatically in recent years. Intermediate grade dropouts are now virtually non-existent and Aboriginal students, more than ever before, are progressing to the high school level. High school graduation rates are also improving dramatically and more Aboriginal students are continuing their studies and finding success at post-secondary institutes. Many of the high school graduates who participated in the Alternative Education program for some of their coursework are recognized as role models for not giving up on their dreams.

Adaptability:

The key factors in the success of these Alternative Education sites lies in the quality of communication between home and school and the personality of the people hired to work as liaison staff and teachers. Youth workers hired by the school district and liaison staff hired by the First Nations play an integral role in student success. Self-motivation and a keen desire to meet the needs of each student and family that often go well beyond the basics of academics are key qualities to look for in the people to work at such sites.

Further information: Contacts and Weblinks:

Western School Board:	Phone: 902-888-8400	Weblink: <a href="http://www.edu.pe.ca/wsb">www.edu.pe.ca/wsb</a>
Eastern School District:	Phone: 902-368-6990	Weblink: <a href="http://www.edu.pe.ca/esd">www.edu.pe.ca/esd</a>
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