

Mi'kmaq Transition to High School

Jurisdiction: Prince Edward Island

Contact: Roberta Clark

Level: K-12

Theme: Transitions and Linkages

Description of Practice:

On Prince Edward Island the majority of children from one First Nation are educated in their home community from K-Grade 6 then transfer to the public school system for Grades 7–12. These students have the opportunity learn many aspects of Mi'kmaq culture and language within their First Nation school, but the primary language of instruction is English. From Grades 7-12, these students will form a minority population in their new schools and English will continue to be the language of instruction.

The schools where these First Nation students transfer for Grades 7-9 and then for Grades 10-12 have been working diligently to ease the transition for Aboriginal students into the public school system. Although these schools make a special effort to honour National Aboriginal Day, respect and appreciation for Mi'kmaq culture is a year-round happening. Stable, ongoing support from the First Nation community is crucial in the development of a successful program of integration into the public schools.

Background:

Students from the First Nation School are accustomed to small class sizes and a sense of knowing everybody in the school they were attending prior to their entry into junior high. As the Aboriginal students join non-Aboriginal students, friendships are gradually established and a new sense of identity forms. Just walking into this junior high school's lobby and admiring the artwork depicting the cultural strengths of the region is a powerful experience in itself.

Through socializing and participation in team sports at the junior high level, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students create new bonds of friendship. By the time they are ready for high school, the challenges of transition to the public school system have been mastered and the move is less intimidating than the move to junior high. As the move to senior high begins, Aboriginal students identify first and foremost as First Nations but they are also comfortable now identifying with their junior high classmates.

At the high school level, a special Lounge was created in 2003 where all students are welcome to come and relax on their free time. Aboriginal students appreciate having this area to use but non-Aboriginal students also like to use this area to “hang out” with friends.

Van transportation supplied by the First Nation community is a great incentive for students to participate in after schooling boxing, weightlifting, etc. When the ride home is not a concern, participation rises. This First Nation community also supplies daily cafeteria lunches for students from their community so being hungry would never deter them from learning.

The number one support that comes from both the First Nation community and the school district that is considered essential in promoting academic success for Aboriginal students is the hiring of self-motivated employees to support the Aboriginal students. Whether providing transportation when needed, making home visits, helping with academics or any other number of individual needs, these employees must, first of all, be respected as a friend within the First Nation community.

Development:

The position of Youth Worker at the high school has been funded through the Department of Education and the Western School Board; the junior high level has a similar position funded by the First Nation. Each position was established to directly support Aboriginal students.

Recently at the high school level, the Youth Worker has arranged for a number of outside agencies to come into the school setting to reach out to all youth. This may at first seem like an intrusion into time on task with curriculum objectives, but in rural PEI, the programs and services offered by agencies such as Health, Mental Health, Social Services, Justice, and Addictions need to use the school setting to address many crucial issues with peer groups. The issues raised do not just pertain to Aboriginal students; all students are offered the support services. Using the school setting offers the best means for outside agencies to reach all youth who may be in need.

Inclusion is the key to acceptance; many Aboriginal students express satisfaction in knowing that the issues that affect their community and personal health are also factors in the lives of many other classmates. A stronger sense of community develops in schools where the outside agency programs are geared toward meeting the needs of all students.

Evidence:

In this area of the province, communication between the First Nation leadership, school, students and families has strengthened over the last number of years and has led to increased academic supports for students. Partnerships have been strengthened and everyone has benefited. Having one main liaison person between the home, school and community eases the communication process for everyone. Other stakeholders become involved as necessary.

With the right motivation and support systems in place, more Aboriginal students are finding success. The interventions arranged through the school and the First Nations are helping Aboriginal students get through to the next level of learning. Junior High dropouts are now virtually non-existent and more Aboriginal students are graduating from high school and moving forward into post-secondary studies. Graduation rates can't be the only measure of success though. Not too many years ago, a high percentage of Aboriginal students dropped out of school for a variety of reasons before even making it to high school.

Adaptability:

It must be noted that Union support for First Nation employees working to support student and staff needs has been instrumental in success for ongoing support for Aboriginal students. Union leaders have been excellent partners in the process because they see the benefits for the students and realize the alternative may be no support at all.

Further information:

Roberta Clark, Aboriginal and Diversity Education Specialist, Phone: 902 368 6344, email:

rdclark@edu.pe.ca