

Welcoming Atmosphere

Jurisdiction: Prince Edward Island

Contact: Roberta Clark

Level: K-12

Theme: Classroom-based practices

Description of Practice: Welcoming Atmosphere for All

On Prince Edward Island the children and youth from one First Nation are educated from Grades 1-12 in the public school system. There is no First Nation school available in any of their three home reserve communities. The elementary school where the majority of First Nation students living on-reserve in Eastern PEI attend has been working diligently over the past three years to enhance the educational opportunities for all students, and especially for Aboriginal students.

Background:

Students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, were experiencing problems with learning due to poor attendance, feeling hungry or uncomfortable due to low socio-economic factors beyond their control, and problems completing homework at home. As well, parental involvement from the Aboriginal community was low and segregation was evident on the playground and in the general school community. Under new leadership, this school staff goes out of their way to ensure each student and their family is on an equal footing when it comes to feeling welcome, comfortable and safe in their school setting.

Development:

The school has developed special fundraising events to supply food, school supplies and clothing for all students in need. The local Home and School Parent Association and First Nation community may also offer financial support for some local programming needs and purchase of additional educational resources.

An Aboriginal liaison worker hired by the First Nation assists with transportation to and from school as required and offers in school supports on a daily basis. With the assistance and expertise of the Aboriginal Liaison worker, this school uses their Locally Determined Time to incorporate Mi'kmaq language and culture into their scheduled classes. Literacy, numeracy and technology are key components of strengthening programs at this school. Earning a \$30, 000. federal grant from the Network of Innovative Schools allowed for the purchase of computers, a SMART Board and software to motivate the students and teachers in the use of technology in learning.

After school programs such as Drama, Homework Club, Computer Club and after-school sports are offered; when transportation is not a problem, participation rates go up.

Parents are called each morning when students are missing and with parental permission, a staff member will go to pick up the student. Special arrangements are made by personal invitation when necessary to ensure parents are informed of their child's progress.

Evidence:

Parental involvement is increasing and this school now has almost 100% participation for parent teacher interviews. Students are now on a more level playing field when it comes to being ready to learn and academic outcomes are showing signs of improvement. Students and families of all cultural backgrounds are getting a chance to gain a stronger appreciation of Mi'kmaq culture and traditions. Aboriginal families are actively participating more in school community initiatives and a sense of self-confidence, pride and strengthening identity are more evident in home and school communications.

Adaptability:

Any school can accomplish gains in providing a more welcoming environment for students and their families by treating everyone as equal. You may need to go out of your way to gain the trust of parents who have negative experiences from their own years of schooling, but the cycle can be broken by taking the “notion” of caring to a higher level, well beyond the emotional level, to the physical, spiritual, and social levels. Everyone on staff must eventually buy into this concept because the school community can not be strong if the staff is not committed to a common vision of equality.

Further information:

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