



EFFECTIVE PRACTICES in Special Programs

No. 7 Winter 2004

FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

The Government of Alberta is committed to enhancing the well-being and educational opportunities of Aboriginal people in the province of Alberta. In 2002, Alberta Learning released the *First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) Education Policy Framework* (www.learning.gov.ab.ca/nativeed/nativepolicy/).

Through the *FNMI Education Policy Framework*, Alberta Learning is committed to proactive collaboration and consultation with First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents and communities. Together with other key education, government, and community stakeholders, Alberta Learning is focusing on the implementation of learner-focused strategies that will:

- increase and strengthen knowledge and understanding among all Albertans of First Nations, Métis and Inuit governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal rights, lands, cultures and languages
- provide First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners with access to culturally relevant learning opportunities and quality support services
- meet the unique education needs of students with special needs.



This issue of *Effective Practices in Special Programs* will highlight programs within the Kainai Board of Education (Kainai) and Parkland School Division. Both sites have successfully incorporated a cultural perspective when developing programs for students with special needs.

The Kainai program has fostered and implemented locally developed cultural learning opportunities (i.e., learning activities focused or based on the cultures, histories and experiences of the Blackfoot).

Parkland School Division has developed a program that provides strategies to address the needs of Aboriginal students attending a mainstream school.

Gift or Disability?

Traditional Aboriginal education is based upon a holistic process where learning takes place in all four spheres of human experience: spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental. Spirituality, relationships and the expression of traditional values are at the heart of Aboriginal education.

Aboriginal worldviews recognize that each student has a unique pattern of learning. The concept of disabilities does not fit into the holistic framework of Aboriginal education. A disability identifies only the part of the child that does not function well as a learner within the education system.

Rather, each individual student is seen to have a gift. The whole community helps

individual young people determine how to use their gifts to serve the community and how to use their strengths to support their gifts.

Effective programming for Aboriginal students

The following school-based and district-based strategies have been found to be effective in producing positive student outcomes. Schools considering developing Aboriginal programs might wish to incorporate some of the following elements into their planning:

- a strong focus on academic learning
- a program based on current educational research and incorporating research-based instructional practice
- incorporate the foundational worldview of Aboriginal societies that reflects traditional values and guiding principles
- utilize FNMI materials, resources, perspectives and cultural understandings
- involve parents, elders and/or other members of the community in both planning and implementation stages
- recognize and honour cultural diversity
- provide professional development and in-service for teachers and support staff
- have a process in place to determine the effectiveness of the program.



KAINAI BOARD OF EDUCATION Blood First Nations, Stand Off, AB

Kainai Board of Education has a student population of 8,000. Students are enrolled in programming from the Head Start program to Grade 12.

The Kainai Board provides academic and traditional cultural support for all students of

Aboriginal ancestry to help them achieve their full potential.

Why is the Blackfoot culture included in student programming?

The Kainai education system is unique in that it infuses Blackfoot culture and language at all grade levels, and it is dedicated to the life-long schooling of its community members. “Kainayssini”, or tribal philosophy, is the preservation of the Blackfoot language and culture. Students benefit from the incorporation of traditional knowledge and teachings from elders along with mainstream education practices. Elders are a key component of the learning system because they are highly respected and regarded as a primary source of cultural knowledge. They possess the wisdom, values and life experiences of the local culture and are willing to pass their knowledge on to future generations. The traditional knowledge and teachings of elders is a priority for the Kainai Board of Education.

How is the Blackfoot culture included in student programming?

Some of the inclusive strategies are listed below.

- Blackfoot culture and language are included in the curriculum and all programs.
- A team approach is used to design programming and implement Individualized Program Plans (IPPs). The team includes parents, guardians, elders, school counselors, teachers, school-based administration and other members from community programs.
- All teachers must become aware of the Blackfoot culture by taking at least three courses for credit in native studies or by being of First Nations descent. Effective cultural practices include teacher training in local FNMI history and customs from a certified institution.

Teachers then incorporate this knowledge in the classroom.

These factors contribute to the creation of a welcoming environment for all students.

Research on preparing teachers to teach culturally diverse student populations shows strong links between an educator's understanding and sensitivity towards a student's cultural background and the successful academic performance of that student. Using knowledge about student differences, teachers can choose curricula and teaching strategies, and design the most inclusive classroom environments to meet students' learning needs and abilities.

How is the philosophy of inclusion of students with special needs promoted in Kainai?

At Tatsikiisaapo'p Middle School (Gr. 5-8), special education is acknowledged with a Handicap Awareness Day at the beginning of the school year. The Family, Community and Support Services agency, elders, and parents of students with special needs present information to students and staff. This day helps promote and develop a culture of understanding, caring and compassion for people with disabilities in the school and community.

Teachers and parents receive professional development on special needs education. A booklet that outlines the uniqueness of the various special needs of students was developed by the school board, parent advisory committee and other community agencies, and is shared with the school community.



What programs are available for students with special needs at Tatsikiisaapo'p Middle School?

Students who have mild, moderate or severe disabilities are included in numerous programs within the school environment. Tatsikiisaapo'p offers the Ayaaksima Riding Program and the Aisimohki Program (Healing Circle).

Ayaaksima Riding Program is a therapeutic equestrian riding program that includes elder mentoring and the support of community members and school social workers. Eight to twelve students participate in eight sessions during October and November where they spend time with elders who teach them traditional values such as responsibility, respect and patience.

The students also attend regular programming in their schools where they learn basic living skills through various modules in the Career and Technology Studies program, the Personal Living Skills program, and the Culture program. The Culture program promotes an understanding of social values by teaching students how to play a drum, sing traditional songs and beat traditional patterns.

"We had a child who could not speak in full sentences and lacked basic social skills enter grade 5. By the end of the school year, this child could speak in full sentences, greeted people by shaking their hands, and could be trusted to ride the school bus. This child made sure all students in the drumming program paid attention to the instructor as he liked to drum and sing."

— Linda Weasel Head, Principal

Aisiimohki Program (Healing Circle)

In the Blackfoot language, Aisiimohki means “to discipline”. This program uses a process designed to help students who are experiencing problems with drugs, alcohol, smoking, or who are bullying others.

The program was adapted from the Blood Sentencing Panel, a community options program operating under the Blood Tribe Department of Health in conjunction with Alberta Justice and Attorney General Criminal Justice Division.

The process involves a school coordinator, an elder, the student and his/her parents, and individuals from the community, such as a police officer and a social worker. Using the guidance and knowledge of the elder, the student reflects on what he/she has done wrong and learns the importance of taking responsibility and ownership for his/her behaviours. The remaining members provide information about the consequences of the student’s behaviour and offer support. The elder then offers solutions and alternatives for the student’s behaviour.



How is student success measured within these programs?

Program success is measured by the number of students who begin and complete the programs, and the examination of teacher’s records of specific behavioural developments. These records include the input of all staff and community members involved in the education of these students.

Celebration of school success is very important. Parents, elders, community

members and staff participate in these celebrations.

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SEBA BEACH SCHOOL (K-9) Parkland School Division

Seba Beach School is a school for students from the village of Seba Beach and surrounding rural areas. The Paul Band First Nations reserve lands fall within its attendance area. In recent years, students from the reserve have been coming to the school, bringing the Aboriginal population to approximately 30%. (There are 51 FNMI students within the school population of 153).

In 2000/2001, Seba Beach School combined its Special Education, Early Literacy, and Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) Programs and created the Advantage Learning Laboratory (ALL) program. Combining resources from the three programs funded the start-up and development costs for the ALL program.

The ALL program is housed within the school in a large room equipped with computer terminals and three sections: a large classroom space with student desks and two smaller sections located at the back of the room. The lab is designed to accommodate three groups of learners engaged in different learning activities at the same time.

What are the goals of the program?

The ALL program provides remediation, enrichment and behavioural support for students in grades 1-9, including those identified with mild, moderate and severe special needs. A significant number of FNMI students benefit from the ALL program. The program also provides enrichment to high achieving students, which helps neutralize a negative stigma that could be attached to the program.

The primary focus of the program is to improve students' reading fluency and comprehension, as well as basic math skills.

"The ALL program provides a warm atmosphere where students can feel welcome, increase their self-esteem, not be afraid to try, and not be afraid to make mistakes."
— Ron Heinrichs, teacher

How are students placed into the program?

The staff has developed a matrix rating score in mathematics and language arts to evaluate students for entry into the program. This rating score also helps monitor student growth. The rating score is calculated using information from the following areas:

- standardized reading tests such as Gates-MacGinitie Reading test, Stanford Diagnostic Math and Reading tests
- Canadian Test of Basic Skills
- previous year's report card
- teacher rating (calculated using student marks in core subject areas)
- marks in language arts and math
- psycho-educational assessment
- parental input and feedback.

The maximum rating score is 25. The higher the score, the higher the need of the

student. Students who have a rating score of 16 or higher enter the ALL program.

What are the program components?

- All students have an IPP outlining their adapted or modified programming.
- The teacher provides direct instruction with follow-up activities that allow students to learn the concept, practice it and receive teacher correction.
- Each student's progress is assessed on a regular basis.
- A variety of reading formats and situations are used which include comprehension, thinking and problem solving.
- Phonics instruction, sight-word development and reading strategies are provided in a sequential manner.
- Program adaptations are provided to students, such as reduced assignment or test length and photocopied board or overhead notes.
- The program focuses on language arts and mathematics instruction.
- One-on-one support and small group support are provided.
- Learning assistants are trained in the program so that they are able to provide follow-up assistance to students who need it.

Who delivers the programming in the Advantage Learning Lab?

A full-time equivalent (FTE) of 1.0 (two teachers at 0.8 and 0.2) and 2.2 FTE teaching assistants (4 individuals) deliver the ALL program. One of the assistants is from the local First Nations community. Having staff with an Aboriginal perspective on the team has helped First Nations students with special needs in their academic, social, emotional and cognitive growth. Effective schools research indicates that some students perform better in groups lead by a teacher or teacher

assistant whom they can relate to culturally as an elder.

When do the students attend the program?

Grades 7-9 students identified for the program attend each morning and are engaged in language arts or mathematics tasks. The timetable for junior high students in the school ensures that all other students are working on language arts and mathematics at the same time. Students from all three of these grades are tested and placed in an appropriate working level group.

In the afternoon, elementary students with special needs in grades 1-6 attend the program and work on literacy skills, language/written skills and mathematics.

How is student progress monitored, reported and rewarded?

Student work and progress are monitored, evaluated and recorded on a daily, weekly and monthly basis and formally communicated to parents three times a year. When necessary, native liaison workers make home visits to report student progress to parents and have them sign their child's IPP.


When students complete eight units of mathematics with an 80% mark, five sequential comprehension (reading) tests with 100% accuracy, and have proficiency in the four areas of language required for their reading level (comprehension, grammar, spelling and phonetics), they advance to the next level in their work. Students are to attain a minimum growth of 6 months to 1 year beyond their assessed reading level as identified by the Canadian Test of Basic Skills.

Students are rewarded daily for good behaviour and for completing daily work by having their names put into a weekly draw.

Improvement in the areas of academic ability, self-esteem and confidence has enabled the students who attend the ALL program to enhance their social skills and increase their demonstration of positive behaviours.

For additional information about the ALL program contact:

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Effective Practices in Special Programs is a newsletter developed in response to the Special Education Review, Recommendations #51-52, identified in *Shaping the Future for Students with Special Needs* (November 2000).

If you would like to share information about your school's effective practices, please contact:

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