



10 Ways to Improve Transitions for Indigenous Learners



A three-year research study involving schools from across the province identifies 10 practical strategies educators can use to help Indigenous learners successfully transition to the next stage of their education or beyond school.

Transitions are often times of great change for learners. Without support, those who are moving from one school to another or who are graduating from Grade 12 into a world of work or further study may struggle to feel a sense of belonging in their new environment and become disheartened and disengaged.

Indigenous learners are no exception to this. While outcomes are improving, Indigenous learners have historically not felt the sense of belonging in our learning communities that is foundational to being engaged in school, making successful transitions and having a sense of cultural pride. In 2016, a team of BC educators came together to change that.



The Team, the Objective

Drs. Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser are co-directors of the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN), an organization dedicated to bringing school communities across the province together to better serve Indigenous learners. In 2016, Halbert and Kaser invited Dr. Catherine McGregor from the University of Victoria's Faculty of Education to investigate how an inquiry-based focus on student transition (elementary to secondary, middle school to secondary school, secondary school to post-secondary school, secondary school to employment) would help better support Indigenous learners and equip them for purposeful and successful lives. An advisory team made up of AESN-affiliated educators Debbie Leighton-Stephens, Lynne Tomlinson, Heidi Wood, and Andrea Davidson, and Jo-Anne Chrona from the First Nations Education Steering Committee, provided valuable support.

Participating Schools

Teams of teachers from 10 schools across the province participated in the project. These teams committed to work through a disciplined collaborative inquiry process (the [spiral of inquiry](#)), participate in coaching conversations with the advisory group and share their findings with the larger group at a symposium.

Each school team developed an inquiry that focused on improving transitions for Indigenous learners. Questions they asked included:

- *Ballenas Secondary, Parksville*
- *Charles Hays Secondary, Prince Rupert*
- *Dover Bay Secondary, Nanaimo*
- *Eke M-Xi Learning Centre, Port Hardy*
- *Frank Hurt Secondary, Surrey*
- *Gudengaay Tlaats'gaa Naay, Masset*
- *Peace River North School District*
- *Smithers Secondary School, Smithers*
- *Southern Okanagan Secondary, Oliver*
- *WL Seaton Secondary, Vernon*

- ⇒ *How can we best create and foster learner-responsive school structures to support Indigenous learners make successful transitions?*
- ⇒ *How can we best support students in connecting the skills used and developed in school with the skills needed as they transfer to life outside of school?*
- ⇒ *How can we assist student transitions through creating connections to the core competencies, integrating Indigenous understandings and increasing student ownership of learning?*



Different Schools, Different Ways of Supporting Indigenous Learners



“One of the things we found through our discussions with the teams was that the schools used a variety of different but often overlapping approaches to supporting Indigenous learners through their transitions,” says Kaser. This included structural strategies, such as creating new programs or classes specifically designed for Indigenous learners. For example, the Eke Me-Xi Learning Centre team in Port Hardy took an interdisciplinary, land based, and culturally informed approach that integrates language learning (Kwak’wala), science, literacy and health related activities into their course offerings. Another common structural approach at many of the schools was creating a resource room, or a dedicated space specifically designed to support Indigenous learners where they can connect with teachers, Indigenous support workers, community members, Elders or other students of Indigenous descent.

A key strategy employed by all the schools was a focus on building strong and authentic relationships with their Indigenous learners. As Halbert notes, this began by listening to the students:

It wasn’t a case of asking “what do these kids need?” but rather “who are these kids?” When the teams of teachers got to personally know their young Indigenous learners, it changed their thinking. They could then develop really interesting and unique paths to support learners.

For several schools, that meant involving Indigenous students in the co-construction of their learning to ensure it speaks to them. At South Okanagan Secondary in Oliver, for example, the transition team has put learners into the role of teachers, mentors and leaders in its EPIC program. The Ballenas Secondary



team in Parksville also recognized the importance of student agency and, in the next iteration of their inquiry, will involve their Indigenous learners in the design of lessons so they will be partners in a process of Indigenizing their school's curriculum.

These are just some of dozens of examples of how students have been put at the centre of the learning process with the support of a dedicated team of teachers, administrators, parents, community members, Elders and knowledge holders.



Ten Ways to Improve Transitions for Indigenous Learners

In January 2019, a [report](#) was published summarizing the results of the three-year school-based inquiry project. The report includes a list of 10 strategies that had the most impact on teams' success in supporting student transitions.



These Indigenous transition strategies are likely to work in other contexts too, so we offer them here for your consideration and use:

1. **Relationships matter, and matter most** – Building strong relationships within inquiry teams, the school staff, the broader community and Indigenous learners will lead to powerful results.
2. **Create interdisciplinary pathways** – Applying the inquiry-based approach across subject areas (and even to activities that students engage in outside of school hours) results in persistent and meaningful change.
3. **Adjust your risk meter** – Articulating the positive benefits that can emerge from a proposed change and suggesting initiatives that challenge the norm can have a ripple effect, with others becoming more willing to support the new approach.
4. **Question your bias and privilege** – For those who are not Indigenous, working as allies and ally-informed practitioners requires continuously reflecting on assumptions and biases.
5. **Listen to and honour all learners** – Considering the perspectives of others is paramount – including the perspectives of those outside the school, such as Indigenous communities and Elders.
6. **Connect head, heart and hands** – Tending to the emotional side of learning will engage students' passion and purpose.
7. **Become an ally-informed partner and leader** – Working with colleagues from a perspective of humility is essential to transform schools into places where Indigenous learners feel included, valued, respected and honoured.
8. **Practice professional vulnerability** – Moving outside your comfort zone – and sharing the limits of your knowledge or professional practice – can lead to new learning and a renewed teaching practice.
9. **Share stories that connect and inspire** – Sharing stories from your practice is a way for others to become inspired and called to action.
10. **Talk with knowledge holders and Elders** – Taking the time to learn from local Indigenous communities creates space for dialogue, opens up new perspectives and reveals how learning can emerge from land-based activities and cultural events.



The Power of Belonging, Being and Becoming



This diagram shows the different emphases the school teams brought to their inquiry practices. This learner-centred transition framework emphasizes the central importance of belonging, from which successful growth, change and transition can emerge. Lead researcher Catherine McGregor explains how the diagram evolved:

What we saw is that when inquiry teams focused in on listening to their learners, the focus became much more to do with [the] learner's social and emotional sense of self – issues of belonging, being, and becoming. When students' perspectives are put at the centre of the strategy, the strategy shifts away from institutional solutions to learner-centred interventions, and in each case the strengths and systems from the entire community were accessed [and] the focus on a more holistic approach to transitions became possible.



Impacts in and Beyond the Classroom

The inquiry-based student-centred approach led to transformative change. Teams reported increased student attendance, stronger academic achievement and higher graduation rates; students reported a greater sense of belonging, heightened cultural pride and greater interest in school activities. A school satisfaction survey at Smithers Secondary School showed that for the first time ever, the number of Indigenous learners who reported a connection to one or more adults in the school community surpassed that for non-Indigenous learners.

Hagwilaan (Walking Slowly)

Charles Hay Secondary in Prince Rupert used the concept of Hagwilaan (walking slowly) to guide the team's work as they listened carefully and built meaningful relationships with learners and the community. As the report notes, Hagwilaan is both a metaphor and practice for the deep and deliberate learning that needs to occur as we walk slowly together to support Indigenous learners in all aspects of their educational journey.

"This work is just the beginning," say Kaser and Halbert. "A new cohort of 10 secondary schools will be launched this spring and their challenge will be to apply and extend the learning from this first study. Our collective work will not be finished until every learner in BC crosses the stage with dignity, purpose and options."

Learn More

- › Read the full AESN report: [Improving Transitions for Indigenous Learners through Collaborative Inquiry](#)
- › Review the [First Peoples Principles of Learning](#)