

New Paths to Success for Aboriginal Students:

Creating a sense of belonging in Peace River South School District

The facts are hard to argue: in the past ten years, the outcomes for Aboriginal students in Peace River South have changed dramatically, with improved attendance, fewer dropouts and suspensions and better literacy and numeracy scores. Aboriginal graduation rates increased from 46% in 2009/10 to 64% in 2016/17 and in one school, the Aboriginal students that were once struggling are now outperforming the non-Aboriginal students.

After ten years of work, it's clear that results don't happen overnight but District 59 is within sight of its goal: ensuring that Aboriginal students in Peace River South are as successful as non-Aboriginal students.

Building Belonging

One of the keys to this success has been making sure that school is a place where every Aboriginal student feels as though they belong. To build a better school experience for Aboriginal students, school and district leaders first had to better understand what Aboriginal peoples perceived as welcoming. They reached out to local First Nation communities, building a respectful dialogue and listening to the tribal Elders' about the ways Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communication and learning styles differ. One thing that became obvious in these conversations was the critical importance of trust.

Equipped with that knowledge, and a [new pedagogical approach to Indigenous learning styles](#) developed by Dr. Russel Bishop of New Zealand, Peace River South schools began building stronger connections with their Aboriginal students, working closely with the students and their families on goal-setting and ensuring a First Nations support worker and coach mentors was available in every school to help students manage challenges that cross boundaries between school, family and community.

Peace River South also redeveloped the classroom experience by creating environments and class discussion styles that more closely modelled those of Indigenous communities. Having the tools to take control of their own educational success has really shifted student engagement.



“Goal setting is the best! It reminds us that we are never finished until we are finished! We can always work at things and make them better. Also, FAIL means our first attempt! Always try again! It is always nice to talk about what we’re thinking about working on. It means someone is cheering us on!”

- Nevada, Grade 5, Parkland Elementary

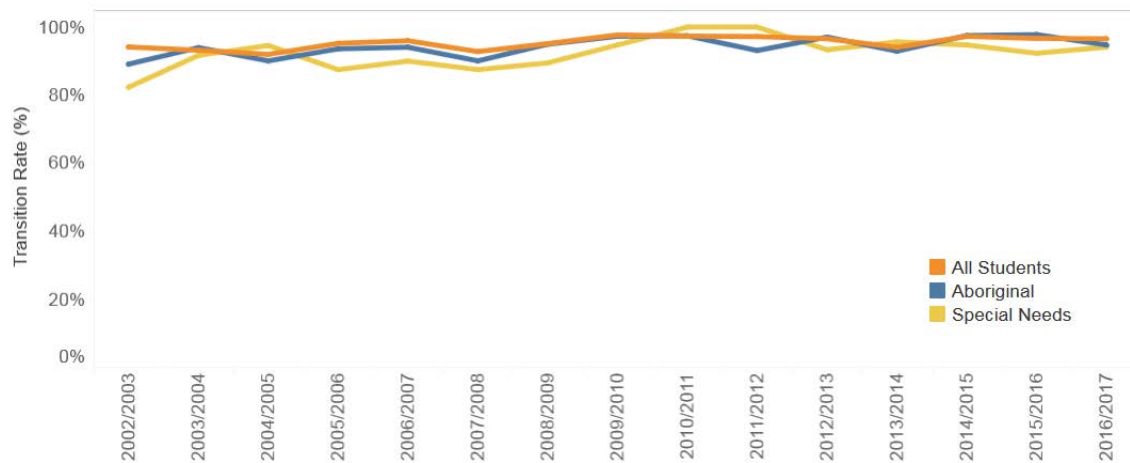
Deep Inquiry Finds Better Solutions

Keeping a clear eye on the evidence of success has also been important. Working with the Ministry of Education, the district has been using a new tool called the Aboriginal Equity Scan to pinpoint areas that needed work. Looking at grade to grade transitions, for example, the team noticed that transitions between Grades 8 and 9 were the same for almost all students, but the rate after Grade 10 dropped farther for Aboriginal students than it did for non-Aboriginal students.

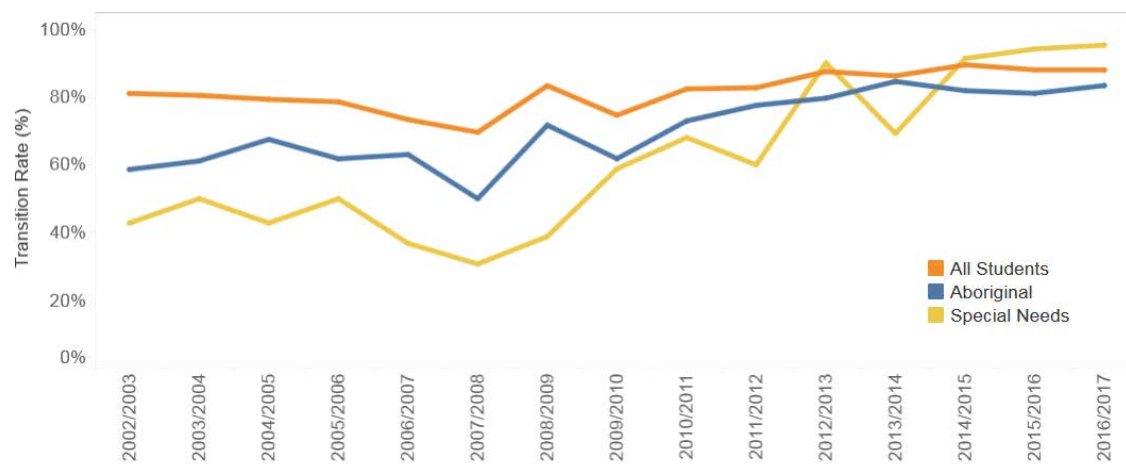
Grade-to-Grade Transitions

School District 59 - Peace River South

from Grade 8 to 9



from Grade 11 to 12



Source: <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/systemperformance/>

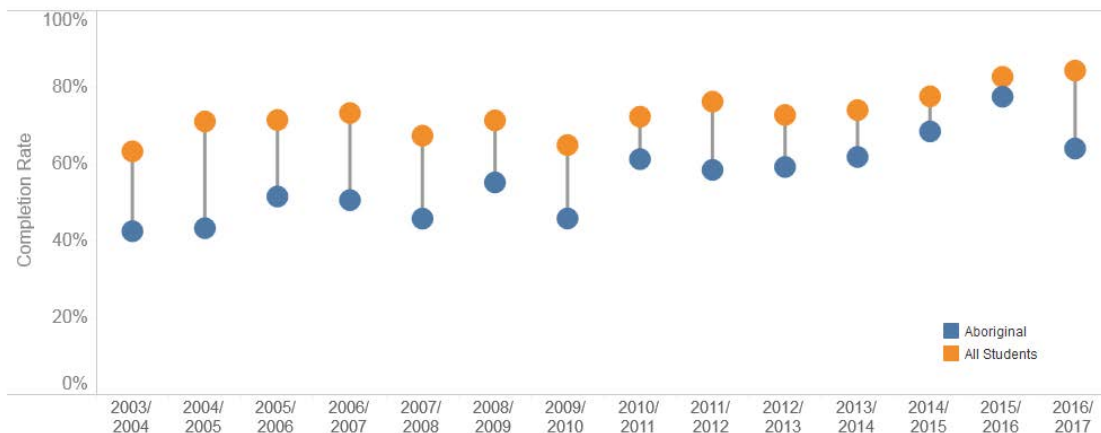
With a close examination, it was clear that a significant number of Aboriginal students were disengaging from the classroom in Grades 8 and 9, setting them up for failure in later Grades.

The team looked at the individual student experience and found that the Aboriginal students who had disengaged had experienced a significant number of program and school shifts over the course of those two years and were likely particularly sensitive to transitions. As a result, the district has increased the amount of support these students have to smooth the transitions, particularly through the First Nations support workers and coach mentors.

Peace River South has also found that analyzing and being informed about negative results can lead to positive outcomes for individual students. While the Aboriginal graduation rate had risen dramatically from 46% in 2009/10 to 77% in 2015/16, it fell significantly in 2016/17 to 64%.

Completion Rate Over Time for Aboriginal and All Students

School District 59 - Peace River South



Source: <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/systemperformance/>

When the district looked at these numbers student-by-student, it was clear that some who hadn't graduated just lacked a few credits or needed a little support to complete a requirement.

The district reached out to those students and now a number of them who had left school are graduating. The process has been so effective, the district and school leaders are now reviewing how every student, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, is tracking toward graduation.

More information

Peace River South welcomes questions about how they got there. If you would like to know more, please contact: Christy Fennell, Director of Instruction (cfennell@sd59.bc.ca). If you would like to know more about the Aboriginal Equity Scan, please contact Ted Cadwallader, Provincial Director, Aboriginal Education, Ministry of Education (Ted.Cadwallader@gov.bc.ca).