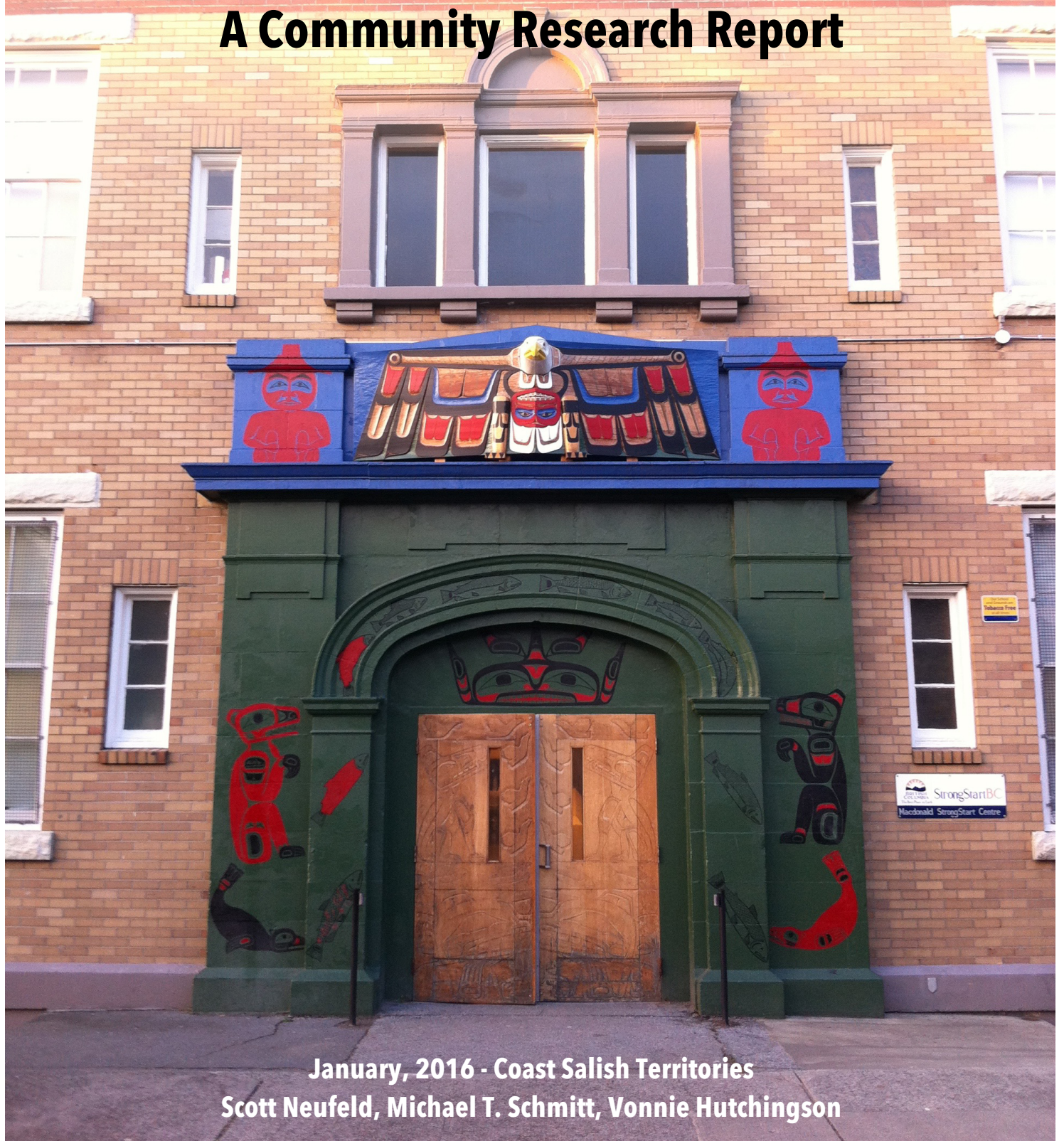


The Aboriginal Focus School Vancouver, BC

A Community Research Report



About the researchers:

Scott Neufeld is a Master's student at SFU, a settler living on Coast Salish territories and a neighbour of the school. He is passionate about community-based research built on good relationships. As an undergraduate at McGill University he helped develop an identity-based approach to enhancing academic goals with a group of Inuit college students. He draws inspiration from Indigenous peoples who have resisted colonization for centuries while protecting and maintaining their traditional cultures.

Michael T. Schmitt is a professor of social psychology at SFU, a settler living on Coast Salish territories and a neighbour of the school. He has 20 years of experience conducting research and teaching on topics such as prejudice, social groups, and identity. He initiated this project because he is interested in ways of using his expertise to support Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in his community.



From Left to Right: Scott Neufeld, Vonnie Hutchingson, Michael T. Schmitt

Vonnie Hutchingson is a member of the Haida and Tsimshian First Nations and was the first principal at the Aboriginal Focus School. She has 30 years of experience working in Aboriginal education in BC and she has been a teacher, an Aboriginal coordinator at a district level, a principal in three school districts and a director within a school district and at the Ministry of Education. Vonnie has initiated and coordinated the creation of materials for the Tsimshian language, Sm'alg yax. She speaks the language of the Skidegate Haida, Hlgaagilda Xaayda Kil. Vonnie has a deep respect for Indigenous knowledge, language and culture.

Note: Front cover photo was taken by Scott Neufeld and depicts the front entrance of the Aboriginal Focus School, carved by Elder Henry Robertson from the Haisla Nation.

In this report we summarize our research on community members' perceptions of the Aboriginal Focus School (AFS), a new elementary school program run by the Vancouver School Board (VSB) for students in Kindergarten to Grade Five. To conduct this research effectively and respectfully, our collaboration combined the expertise of Michael T. Schmitt and Scott Neufeld in social science research, with Vonnie Hutchinson's expertise in Aboriginal education and experience as a member of First Nations communities. We first consulted with key members of the Aboriginal community in Vancouver and at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in order to develop this project in accordance with Aboriginal protocol. The feedback and advice we received were influential throughout the research process. We received approval for this project from SFU's Office of Research Ethics and the VSB's Research Committee. We presented the initial results of this research to the study participants in July 2014, to honour their contributions to the research and to solicit their feedback on our initial analyses. In February 2015 we presented an early version of this report to the senior management of the Vancouver School Board (VSB) and in April 2015 we presented this report to staff and teachers at the Aboriginal Focus School.

We asked two questions:

How do parents, staff and teachers at the Aboriginal Focus School describe their experiences so far?

How do parents in the surrounding community perceive the Aboriginal Focus School?

Brief Summary of Report

Our findings suggest that the Aboriginal Focus School has already delivered positive outcomes for enrolled students, including fostering a strong sense of Aboriginal cultural pride. Nevertheless, parents at the school, staff and teachers agree that more robust support for the program from the VSB is needed for the school to flourish. Our findings also suggest that relatively few people in the surrounding community had accurate information about the Aboriginal Focus School. Those who had heard of the program often erroneously believed it was a segregated program for Aboriginal students only, and either anticipated it would provide a substandard education, or could not see the relevance of the program for their children. Based on these findings, we recommend that the VSB take steps to improve engagement with the Aboriginal community, increase Aboriginal representation in the AFS, increase Aboriginal content at the AFS, increase general awareness about the school, and actively promote the school to non-Aboriginal parents.

The Aboriginal Focus School: The First Three Years

In early 2011, the VSB began a period of community consultation¹ that led to the creation of an Aboriginal Focus School Steering Committee (which included representatives from the VSB and an Aboriginal caucus made up of members of the Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council) to guide the development of the Aboriginal Focus School. The steering committee made the decision to place the program at Sir William Macdonald Elementary school and the AFS officially opened in Fall of 2012. The program started with 13 students in Kindergarten to Grade 3 with just one teacher, operating as a mini-school program within the larger Macdonald Elementary school. The purpose of this new program was to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal students by creating a culturally responsive learning environment at the school. The vision of the school includes a strong emphasis on academic competencies of reading, writing, numeracy and thinking skills, as well as support in the social and emotional domains. The school's vision of success for learning is for each student to have a positive perception of self as a capable learner and an honest pride in each of their ancestries. Partnerships with Aboriginal organizations and key Aboriginal community members enabled the school to gain access to additional educational funding as well as to develop capacity amongst staff and students regarding Aboriginal languages and cultures. These partnerships also enabled the development of curriculum for the school that:

- Respects local First Nations
- Represents the shared values, experiences and histories of all Aboriginal peoples as well as the aspects that make each nation unique
- Reflects a strong ethos of stewardship of the land and waters of British Columbia
- Reinforces the unique cultural identities of each child (including non-Aboriginal children) and contributes to a positive perception of self.

The school also partnered with non-Aboriginal community organizations who provided training for staff at the school and also funded additional personnel at the school to support the social and emotional needs of students and families. In keeping with the vision of the Aboriginal Focus School, structured school-wide numeracy and literacy programs were implemented across all grades which enabled the flexibility of providing instruction at each student's level. An important component of the literacy program is the understanding that oral language is foundational to Aboriginal cultures, and literacy in general. Assessments at the school helped to gauge the effectiveness of these programs. In addition to these structured academic programs the school also incorporates opportunities for creative expression. For example, students developed their musical and literacy abilities through participation in a school choir and partnerships with two local music schools. The school continues to work in partnership with many community organizations and volunteers who have contributed to the academic, social and emotional success of students. The successful transition to an Aboriginal Focus at the school was made possible by the diligent efforts of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff. Many visitors to the school have commented that students seem happier and the environment more positive since the introduction of the Aboriginal Focus School.

¹ A report summarizing these community consultations by Jo-ann Archibald, Allyson Rayner and Ramona Big Head is available here:
https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/11April18_sp_op_commlil_item1.pdf

Aboriginal Focus School:

Quick Facts

Planning for the school began in 2011 and was initiated by the Vancouver School Board (VSB) with an Aboriginal Focus School Steering Committee made up of representatives from the Vancouver Aboriginal community and the VSB.

Located in East Vancouver at Sir William Macdonald Elementary on the corner of East Hastings Street and Victoria Drive

The Aboriginal Focus School has no associated catchment area. Students from the Metro Vancouver area and beyond can enroll.

The school is inclusive of all students and aims to represent the cultural diversity of Vancouver. As of September 30, 2015 there are 40 Aboriginal and 10 non-Aboriginal students enrolled in the Aboriginal Focus School.

The school's curriculum fulfills BC Ministry of Education requirements. The Aboriginal Focus School has a mandate to be respectful of local First Nations, emphasize the shared values, experiences and histories of all Aboriginal peoples as well as the aspects that make each First Nation unique, acknowledge the shared history between Aboriginal peoples and Canada, and recognize a shared worldview between Aboriginal peoples and environmentalists.

The school has been in operation since Fall 2012 and currently enrolls students from Kindergarten to Grade 5 with plans to expand to Grade 7 contingent upon enrollment.

For more information on the programs and activities in place at the school please consult the most recent "School Plan" on the school's website at <https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/school-files/03939033.pdf>

Who participated in this study?

In April and May 2014, we interviewed 71 people, including parents, teachers and staff, both one-on-one and in small groups. Participants filled out a short questionnaire before the interview began. We then asked participants what they knew about the Aboriginal Focus School, how they had heard about it, and what they thought about the program. Over 22 hours of recorded interviews were analyzed systematically and then summarized into prominent themes. In writing this report we also considered what we learned from a variety of sources including our informal conversations with parents and staff at the school (including members of the Parent Advisory Committee) and in the surrounding community, information about the Aboriginal Focus School available on the school's website (macdonald.vsb.bc.ca) and feedback from community presentations of our research.

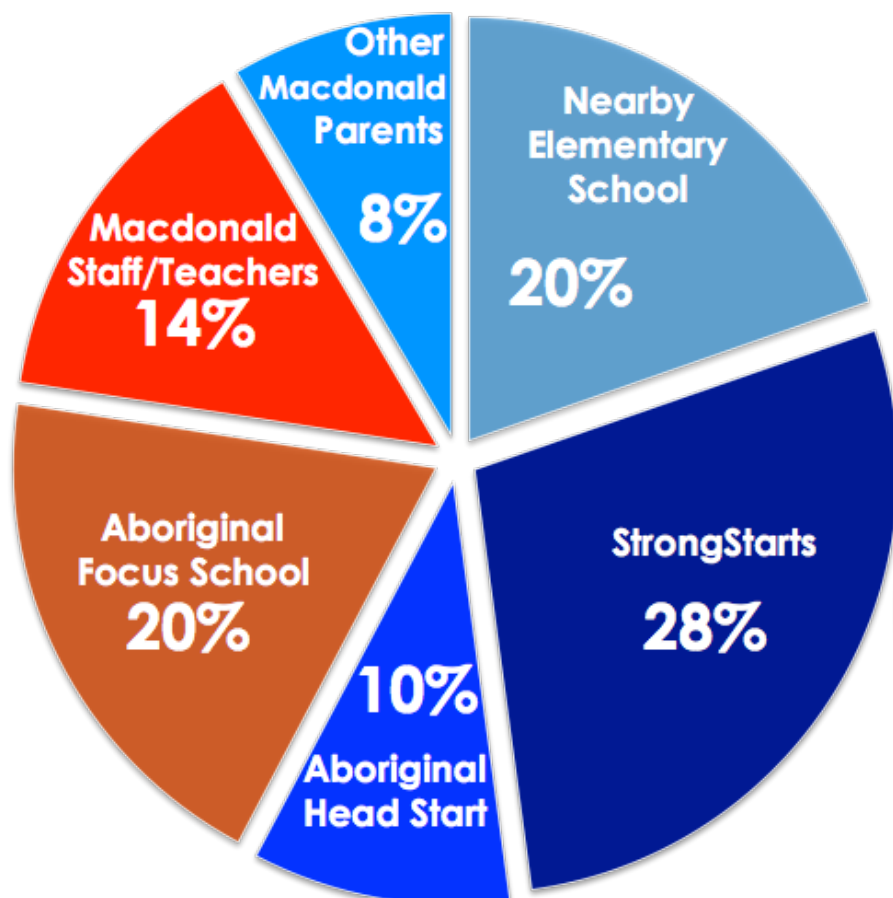
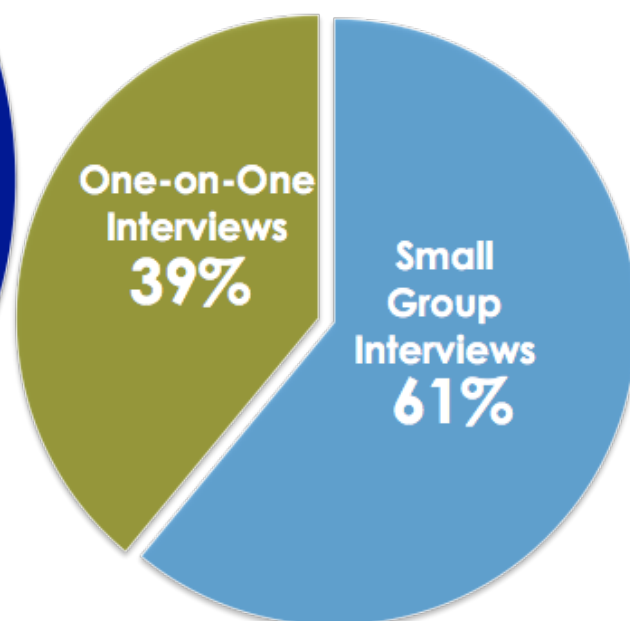
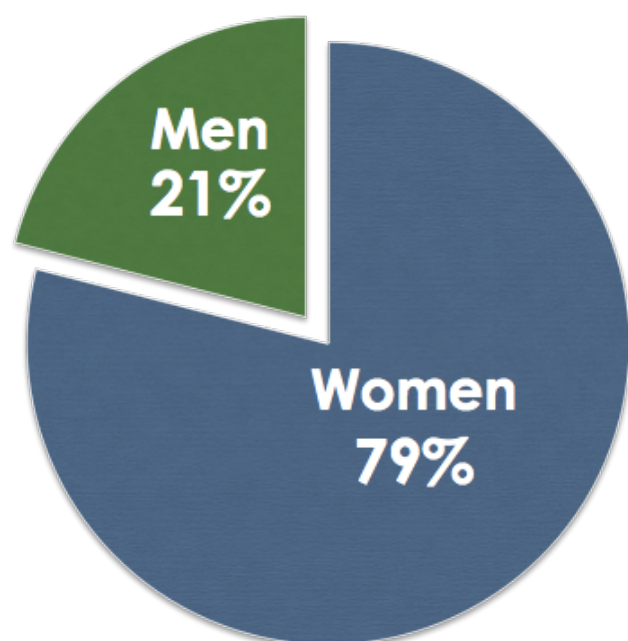
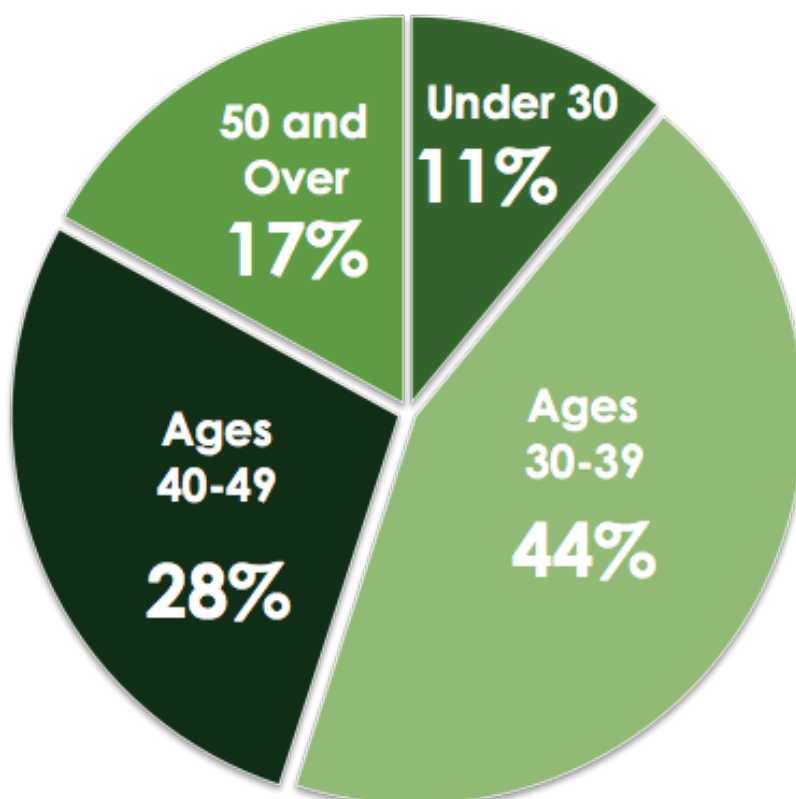
non-Aboriginal
48%

Aboriginal
52%

Size
of the
word
shows the
frequency
of that
identity



Many
people
identified in
multiple
ways

**Research Sites****Interview Type****Gender****Age Ranges**

Experiences at the Aboriginal Focus School

Academic improvement at Macdonald Elementary

Many parents from the community outside of the school, some parents who had children enrolled at Macdonald, and staff who worked there told us that historically Macdonald has had a negative reputation for low academic achievement. However, in conjunction with the opening of the Aboriginal Focus School in Fall 2012 several school-wide academic interventions and assessments were put in place to address these challenges. These interventions have included school-wide structured numeracy and literacy programs and are already having positive effects on academic performance. For example, recent data² from all students in grades one to seven at Macdonald Elementary (including students enrolled in the AFS program) demonstrate marked improvement in numeracy. In June 2013, 5% of students were performing in the top 25% of Canadian students in their grade level, which increased to 17% for the same group of students by June 2014. Ongoing assessment of academic performance at the school will continue to provide important information on what is working at the school, ensuring a strong continued focus on academic rigour at the school. These improvements are important to note because, as we detail later on in this report, many parents from outside the school are concerned that culturally focused programs like the Aboriginal Focus School sacrifice academic rigour in favor of cultural content. On the contrary, these preliminary data suggest that the start of the Aboriginal Focus School has coincided with gains in student academic performance at Macdonald Elementary.

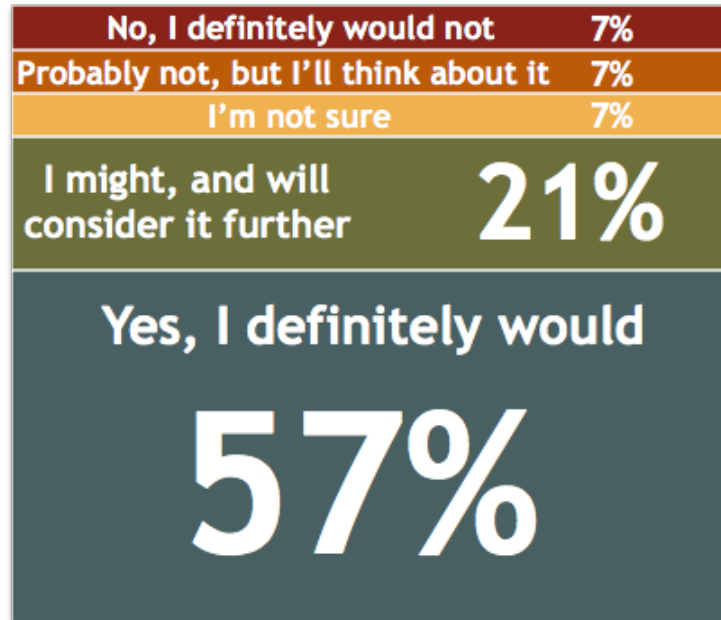
What we heard from parents with children in the AFS

A majority of parents at the AFS reported that through many different activities (e.g. singing traditional songs), their **children were learning more about Aboriginal cultures and strengthening their sense of Aboriginal pride**. Several parents spontaneously told us that **their children were now teaching them about Aboriginal cultures**, causing one parent to say “We’re learning [our culture] off our son”. Research³ in social psychology suggests that Aboriginal students will benefit both emotionally and academically by studying in a space like the AFS that supports a positive cultural identity and honours their heritage. The benefits of a culturally supportive environment might be one reason why over half (57%) of the parents with children in the AFS said they “definitely would” send another child to the school, and another 21% said they would “consider it”.

² These data come from the numeracy section of the Wechsler Fundamentals: Academic Skills Test. Pie charts which visualize these data were accessed from the school’s website on August 2015 in the 2014-2015 School Plan at <https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/school-files/03939033.pdf>. However, they were replaced by the 2015-2016 school plan and are no longer available at that URL.

³ For example, a 2014 study by Corenblum in the Journal of Youth Adolescence shows evidence that First Nations children who have a strong sense of ethnic identity have higher self-esteem.

**Imagine you had
another child and
were deciding
where to send
that child for
school next year.
Would you send
that child to the
AFS?**



Note: Due to rounding error, percentages may not add up to 100

Parents (14) whose children attend the Aboriginal Focus School

The fourteen parents we interviewed who had children enrolled at the school identified with twelve unique First Nations (four people identified with multiple First Nations). Almost all of these parents expressed that **they were happy their children were connecting to a wide range of Aboriginal cultures and practices in the classroom, even ones that were not their own**. These parents expressed a broad sense of Aboriginal cultural pride. Beyond connecting with the heritage culture of their own family, they found it meaningful for themselves and their children to connect with both a broad “Aboriginal identity”, and the cultures of Aboriginal groups other than those of their families. Therefore, the multiplicity of Aboriginal cultural heritages represented amongst students at the AFS did not prevent parents from feeling like their children were connecting with Aboriginal cultures in a way that was meaningful to them. In fact, rather than Aboriginal cultural diversity representing a barrier to culturally-focused education, **parents at the school appreciated the diversity in the program**. Finally, almost half of the AFS parents reported that they believed **their children had become more engaged in school and improved academically as a result of their participation in the program**. These parents were impressed with their children’s newfound excitement for school as well as the improvements they had made in reading and oral language.

Parents also expressed some concerns. In particular, five of the fourteen parents said that **there was not enough Aboriginal content in the classroom**. Parents spoke about their expectations that the AFS would provide more hands-on forms of traditional cultural learning in the classroom, for example having an Aboriginal elder come in to share a traditional teaching or story with a class. They suggested that the **VSB should provide more opportunities for the Aboriginal community in Vancouver to be involved** in contributing to the Aboriginal content of the school. Several parents further emphasized how important it was that staff and teachers at the school be adequately knowledgeable about Aboriginal cultural traditions and **felt that it would be best if more staff and teachers were themselves of Aboriginal heritage and active participants in their cultural communities**. These concerns with Aboriginal staffing were also expressed in a campaign in support of the AFS that began in June 2015 and was led by the school’s Parent Advisory Committee (PAC).

What we heard from parents with children at Macdonald Elementary, but not in the AFS

Within Macdonald Elementary there are also two classrooms that are not a part of the Aboriginal Focus School. In order to hear perspectives on the Aboriginal Focus School from parents who had close contact with the school but did not send their children there we also interviewed a total of six parents (three who identified as Aboriginal, three who did not) who had children in these classes. These parents spoke enthusiastically of the supportive and friendly environment, highly committed staff and flexible teaching strategies at Macdonald Elementary, and they felt this contrasted with the negative reputation of the school in the surrounding community. An interview with a small group of Chinese Canadian parents at the school summarized the school's flexible approach with a Chinese proverb: "Teach to the child's ability." **Parents appreciated how Macdonald Elementary school as a whole meets students at their current skill level**, as demonstrated by the adapted reading programs and school wide math program recently put in place at the school. The three Aboriginal parents also expressed their skepticism of the VSB's commitment to the AFS and questioned the thoroughness of the initial VSB consultations that informed the development of the school. They felt this consultation process had missed the "grassroots people." **Aboriginal parents especially spoke of the need for a new relationship between the Aboriginal community and the VSB that was built on mutual understanding and respect.** Despite these reservations, when asked about whether they would enroll their child in the AFS, all but one of the six parents with children at Macdonald Elementary (but not the AFS) said they "might and would consider it further" or would "definitely" put their child in the AFS.

What we heard from staff and teachers

We interviewed three teachers and seven support staff at Macdonald Elementary, some of whom worked in the Aboriginal Focus School classrooms and some who did not. **Staff and teachers pointed out several strengths of the school**, including how well students from different cultural backgrounds get along, the lively collection of afterschool activities and support programs surrounding the school, and the flexibility of the school's programs and staff in meeting the needs of its students. Staff and teachers at the school acknowledged that **the school was still transitioning into a full-fledged Aboriginal Focus School**, and that **more Aboriginal content was needed**. Like the parents, teachers and staff reported that they wanted to bring Aboriginal guests into the classroom and purchase materials for traditional Aboriginal crafts more frequently, but said they **needed more funding** to make this happen; a regular classroom budget was not enough.

The Aboriginal Focus School has received some external funding, but these funds had specific allocations that were not necessarily in line with the priorities of parents, staff and teachers. For example, in 2012 a special grant from the federal government (not the VSB) brought approximately \$80 000 in funding to the Aboriginal Focus School. These funds supported the purchase of a large collection of Aboriginal art for the school (including an updated Aboriginal door carving for the school's entrance), some curriculum development and a library of Aboriginal resources housed at the school. The art at the school contributes to the overall feel of the school in making it an "Aboriginal space" and may help students in the school develop a sense of cultural pride. However, parents and teachers were more concerned about **funds that would enable students to directly engage with the Aboriginal community**, and Aboriginal cultures, in the classroom, and felt more support

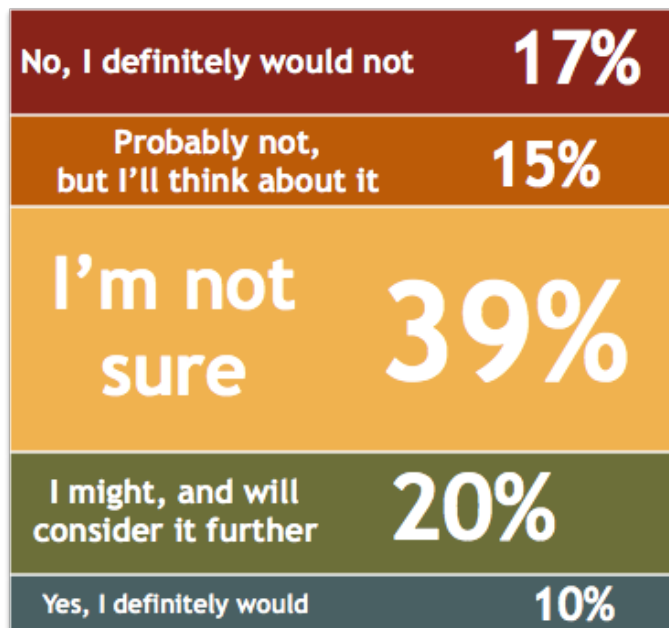
should go into these initiatives. In particular, parents, staff and teachers felt that more of these funds should come from the VSB.

Teachers and staff also noted there is **a need to develop more Aboriginal curricular material that engages deeply with the richness of Aboriginal cultures**. Teachers felt that this necessary curriculum development could not fall entirely on them in addition to their full-time teaching duties. The recognition that more Aboriginal content was needed at the school was related to wider **perceptions amongst staff and teachers that the VSB has not supported the Aboriginal Focus School** to the extent that would be needed for the school to flourish. For example, several participants spoke of how a bus system for the school would help many more parents get their children to the school.

Parents From the Surrounding Community: Lack of Information and Misperceptions

One of the most striking things we learned from interviews with parents in the surrounding community was that **of the 41 people outside the school we spoke to, nearly half had never heard of the Aboriginal Focus School**, even though they sent their children to preschools or elementary schools that were all within a 25 minute walk of the school. There were also **many misperceptions about the school**. For example, despite the fact that the Aboriginal Focus School is open to students from all backgrounds and there are ten students currently enrolled who do not identify as Aboriginal, **most parents wrongly assumed that the school was for Aboriginal students only**. These findings suggest that a properly-conducted public outreach campaign by the VSB that increased awareness of the school and dispelled many of parents' misunderstandings could result in higher enrolment in the AFS. Nevertheless, despite not knowing very much about the AFS, nearly 30% of parents outside the school reported they were interested in the school, and said they either "might and will consider it further" or "would definitely" send their child to the school. A significant portion (39%) said they were unsure, which is not surprising given the number of participants who had not previously heard of the school.

Would you send your child to the Aboriginal Focus School?



Note: Due to rounding error, percentages may not add up to 100

Parents (41) whose children do not attend Macdonald Elementary or the Aboriginal Focus School

Aboriginal Parents From the Surrounding Community

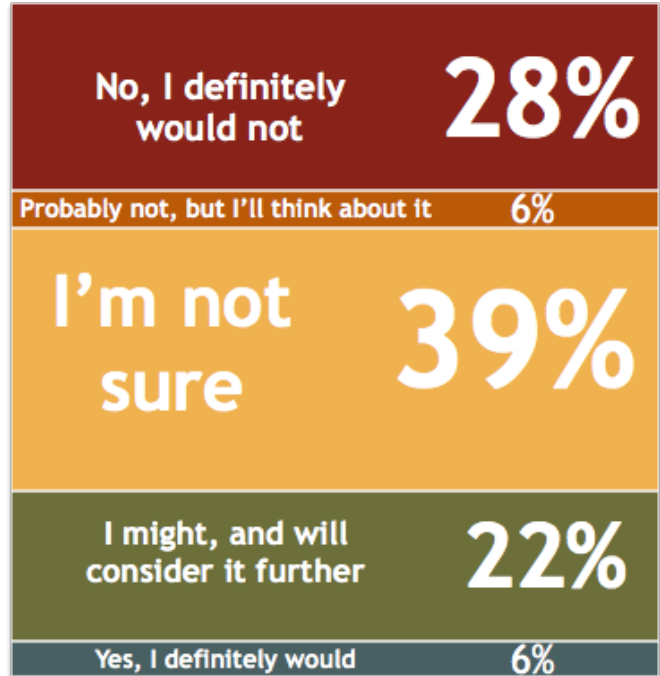
Almost all of the Aboriginal parents we spoke to who did not currently have their children registered in the Aboriginal Focus School or Macdonald Elementary **reported feeling disconnected from their Aboriginal cultures and traditional communities.** Parents told us that they had not had the opportunity themselves to learn about their nation's traditions and culture, sometimes as a result of residential schools, and felt unable to teach their children even though their cultures were very important to them. **These parents saw the Aboriginal Focus School as a potential opportunity to reconnect themselves and their children with their cultures.** Nearly one third (28%) of Aboriginal parents we spoke to outside of the school were interested in the AFS and said they either “might and will consider it further” or “would definitely” send their child to the school. Like parents at the Aboriginal Focus School, **the majority of Aboriginal parents we heard from outside of the school supported a view of Aboriginal culture and identity that is broader than any single nation or group.**

For example, parents were interested in opportunities for their child to learn about their own heritage culture as well as the unique cultures of other First Nations.

However, there were also many concerns about the program. In fact, 28% of the Aboriginal parents we interviewed outside of the school said they “definitely would not” send their child to the AFS. Aboriginal parents in three of four small group interviews outside of the school reported that **the Aboriginal Focus School reminded them of residential schools, because it seemed to be targeted specifically at Aboriginal students.** In all four small group interviews and two one-on-one interviews with Aboriginal parents in the surrounding community there were concerns that the AFS program would be “segregated”, either because parents thought only Aboriginal students were allowed to register, or because only Aboriginal students would choose to enroll. Parents expressed that they wanted their children to learn in a multicultural environment, not one comprised of exclusively Aboriginal students, and worried an Aboriginal Focus School would not prepare their children for the “real world”. **This misperception that the Aboriginal Focus School is a segregated program was common,** even though the school is open to anyone and there are currently ten (out of fifty total) non-Aboriginal students in the program.

In addition to residential schools, **Aboriginal parents connected their expectations for the AFS to their negative past experiences with other Aboriginal education programs.** They felt these “alternative” Aboriginal education programs had disadvantaged them by providing a substandard education. Aboriginal parents in all four small group

Would you send your child to the Aboriginal Focus School?

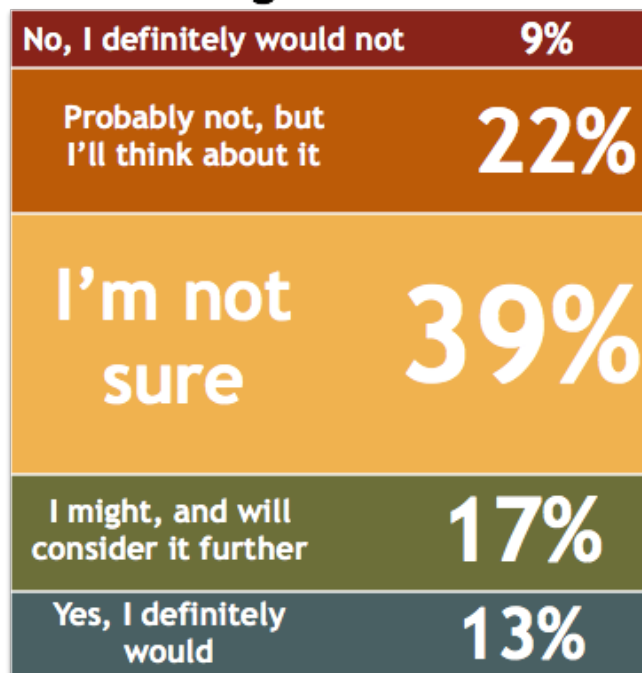


Note: Due to rounding error, percentages may not add up to 100

Aboriginal parents (18) whose children do not attend Macdonald Elementary or the Aboriginal Focus School

interviews and two one-on-one interviews **worried that the AFS would also have lower academic standards**. They felt that teachers and school staff, would decrease their academic expectations for their children at the AFS based on negative stereotypes about Aboriginal students and education. This is what many of these parents had experienced in other education programs designed for Aboriginal students and they worried this would also happen at the Aboriginal Focus School. This contrasts with the observation by nearly half of the parents with children at the Aboriginal Focus School that their children were in fact *more engaged* in school now and performing better academically in the AFS program. In fact, the AFS has led to increased rather than decreased academic standards. Rigorous academic interventions (described on pg. 4) were implemented at the same time as the Aboriginal Focus School and have already begun to improve student academic achievement at the focus school. Finally, parents in two of the four small group interviews **discussed their lack of trust in the school board, and expected institutional barriers to the success of the school**. These parents anticipated the program would face several challenges including ensuring adequate funding, securing a long-term commitment to the AFS from the school board, and hiring qualified Aboriginal teachers and staff. Parents spoke of **the need for an ongoing process of engagement and consultation with the Aboriginal community about the Aboriginal Focus School**, and were concerned this was not happening.

Would you send your child to the Aboriginal Focus School?



Note: Due to rounding error, percentages may not add up to 100

Non-Aboriginal Parents From the Surrounding Community

Almost all of the non-Aboriginal parents we heard from in the surrounding community were supportive of the Aboriginal Focus School when we told them about the program. However, many of these parents said they would not send their children to the AFS because **they did not see the relevance of the school for their non-Aboriginal children**.

Non-Aboriginal parents had many questions about the school, including whether their children would be welcome if they were not Aboriginal, what the value of the program would be for their children, and what the differences would be between the Aboriginal Focus School and a regular school. Nevertheless, nearly one third

non-Aboriginal parents (23) whose children do not attend Macdonald Elementary or the Aboriginal Focus School

(30%) of non-Aboriginal parents outside of the school were interested in the school and said they either “might and will consider it further” or “would definitely” send their child to the school. **Many of these parents expressed an admiration for Aboriginal cultures**, and were attracted to the Aboriginal Focus School because they thought it would be a unique

opportunity for their children to expand their worldview by learning in a different way. Research⁴ in social psychology supports this view and suggests that non-Aboriginal students at the Aboriginal Focus School could develop enhanced creativity and problem-solving skills by studying in a culturally-rich environment. Furthermore, research has also found that contact between members of different groups in a supportive environment (like the AFS) can help promote tolerance and respect for diverse cultural groups.

Finally, it is not only Aboriginal students who have an opportunity to enhance their sense of identity at the Aboriginal Focus School. One of the shared values of many Aboriginal cultures is the importance of being firmly grounded in one's own identity and web of family relations. Therefore, at the AFS all students are provided with the opportunity to strengthen their connection to their heritage culture, whether they identify as Aboriginal or with another cultural background. When we asked both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents in this study if it was important to them that their child was connected to their heritage culture, 72% said it was "very" or "extremely" important to them. With its focus on connecting students with their unique heritage cultures and identities, the Aboriginal Focus School could benefit students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.



This banner was created by students and depicts the cultural diversity of the school

⁴ In a 2010 study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, social psychologists Maddux, Adam and Galinsky showed that multicultural learning experiences facilitate creativity, enable individuals to take the perspectives of others more easily and promote seeing a variety of solutions to a problem.

Conclusions

The Aboriginal Focus School offers clear benefits to a wide range of students. The school has the potential to empower urban Aboriginal students in Vancouver by enhancing their connection to their heritage cultures and helping them learn more effectively in the classroom. The AFS also has the potential to provide non-Aboriginal students with opportunities to learn more about Aboriginal cultures, foster good relationships with their Aboriginal peers and gain a deeper connection to their own cultural heritage. Furthermore, the Aboriginal Focus School in Vancouver is the only Aboriginal focus elementary school in British Columbia and has the potential to become a model for Aboriginal education in the province. Such models of successful Aboriginal education are desperately needed given the disparity in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in BC in general, and Vancouver in particular⁵.

We completed all of the interviews for this research in May 2014. We feel confident that enthusiasm for the Aboriginal Focus School amongst students and parents has remained strong since then. For example, the school's Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) is now actively engaged in advocating for more support from the VSB for the AFS. However, the Aboriginal Focus School has yet to reach its full potential. While the future of the Aboriginal Focus School is promising, its continued success depends on robust support for the school from the Vancouver School Board, and strong partnerships between the school and the community. The need for a renewed partnership between these groups has been affirmed recently by the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, which include numerous recommendations for improving Aboriginal education in Canada⁶. After pressure from the school's PAC^{7,8}, the Vancouver School Board passed three motions in October 2015 to support the Aboriginal Focus School: 1) protecting the school from closure until at least 2020 to give it time to grow, 2) prioritizing the school's seismic upgrading, and 3) beginning a process to change the name of the school to respect Coast Salish First Nations. Furthermore, in November 2015 the board voted in favor of a motion to, "...re-commit in the spirit of reconciliation to working with parents and the community to support the success and growth of the Aboriginal Focus School"⁹. These motions are a good start toward the VSB building more positive relationships with parents and with members of the Aboriginal community. The findings of this research report suggest additional ways the school board can increase its support for the Aboriginal Focus School.

⁵ Annual "How are We Doing?" data on Aboriginal education outcomes in British Columbia: <https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/perf2014.pdf>

⁶ A preliminary analysis of how these "Calls to Action" relate to Aboriginal education in the VSB: <http://tinyurl.com/VSB-TRC>

⁷ June 17, 2015 open letter from the AFS PAC to the VSB available online as of November 2015: <http://tinyurl.com/open-letter-june17>

⁸ Oct. 21, 2015 letter from the AFS PAC to the VSB advocating a vote in support of three motions: <http://tinyurl.com/buckman-letter>

⁹ Vancouver Board of Trustees meeting minutes, Nov. 9, 2015: http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/minutes-files/15Nov09_op_board_minutes_3.pdf

Recommendations

Based on what we have learned, we make five recommendations for how the Vancouver School Board could build on the successes of the Aboriginal Focus School over the past three years. These recommendations suggest concrete ways the school can better meet the needs of parents and students in the community, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. It is important to note that the BC Ministry of Education also has a responsibility to work with the VSB to facilitate the success of the Aboriginal Focus School. The success of the Aboriginal Focus School requires a partnership between parents, family and community, teachers and staff at the school, and the Vancouver School Board. We believe this will require the VSB to implement the following recommendations. Ultimately, strong continued advocacy from parents, family and community will play a critical role in whether the school receives the support it needs to flourish and grow.

#1 - Commit to Sustained Community Engagement

Efforts to promote the school could be enhanced with an increased recognition that Aboriginal parents' expectations of the AFS are influenced by their negative past experiences with other Aboriginal education programs. To build trust, there is a need for ongoing engagement between the school, the VSB, and the Aboriginal community in Vancouver to alleviate parents' concerns about the school, and promote accurate information about the success of the school so far. As one Aboriginal mother suggested: "The VSB has an opportunity to do something really great [with the AFS]...I think the VSB needs to be thinking of this more as a collaboration." She later went on to say that she wished the VSB could "put behind all their assumptions about who we are, and come to the table, with an open heart, and being able to be receptive, and actively listen." Aboriginal participants in many of our small group interviews repeatedly expressed the need for a more meaningful and ongoing relationship between the Aboriginal community and the VSB. In line with our participants' concerns, the AFS PAC has recently recommended that the VSB recognize parents as "stakeholders" in decisions about Aboriginal education and revive the Aboriginal Focus School Steering Committee¹⁰, with representation from parents at the school. Aboriginal parents whom we interviewed also expressed that they want "real" community engagement and opportunities to provide input into all decisions about Aboriginal education in the VSB, not only at the AFS. One additional way to facilitate community engagement might be with an Aboriginal "advisory committee" that has significant influence on the VSB's Aboriginal education policy and input into how Targeted Aboriginal Funds are distributed. An empowered Aboriginal advisory committee can enable successful partnerships between school boards and Aboriginal communities. Such committees already exist in several school districts around the province. This advisory committee should represent the diversity of Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver and its members should be actively engaged in the Aboriginal community.

¹⁰ This steering committee was formed in 2011 to make decisions about the Aboriginal Focus School during the development process, but it was disbanded once the school opened in Fall 2012. This committee included members of the Aboriginal community in Vancouver (from the Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council) and representatives from the VSB.

#2 – Increase Aboriginal Representation in the AFS

Parents at the AFS suggested the VSB could do more to facilitate the Vancouver Aboriginal community's involvement in the school and that partnerships with outside groups could bring more cultural activities to the school. For example, an Aboriginal Focus School Steering Committee could recommend knowledgeable elders and indigenous scholars who can provide ongoing support for the cultural content in the school. As the school grows, it is also crucial that the VSB work together with the Aboriginal community and the relevant unions to develop a plan for increasing representation of Aboriginal teachers, staff and administrators at the Aboriginal Focus School. Not only would this be in line with parents' expectations of the school but it would ensure that teachers are more adequately equipped to teach students by drawing on their own cultural backgrounds and experiences within Aboriginal communities. Students at the school would also benefit from seeing more Aboriginal role models within the school. This would also create more opportunities for students to benefit by observing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff working together.

#3 - Increase Aboriginal Content in the AFS

Teachers, staff and parents at the school suggested more Aboriginal culture-focused curricula should be collected or developed and integrated into the classrooms at the AFS. One way to do this might be to create a position for someone with experience in Aboriginal education to gather Aboriginal-focused curricula from Aboriginal schools and programs across Canada and adapt them for the AFS. This person could also work with teachers at the school to produce more Aboriginal-focused materials that are uniquely suited for use in their classrooms. This would remove the burden of curriculum development from teachers' already heavy workload while at the same time respecting teacher autonomy. The AFS could become a center for Aboriginal curriculum development and distribution for the VSB and beyond. The level of Aboriginal content in the classroom also depends in part on the level of Aboriginal cultural knowledge of the teachers and staff at the school and this should be facilitated by making additional training available to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff at the school.

#4 - Increase Awareness About the AFS

More people could be made aware of the school through a well-executed public outreach campaign that includes direct mailings to parents, targeted media exposure, and community engagement, both in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. However, mere awareness is not enough. Widespread inaccurate information about the Aboriginal Focus School could be countered by making a detailed description of the school readily available for prospective parents, perhaps on an updated and comprehensive website that also emphasizes and celebrates the successes of the school. The VSB could also create opportunities for interested parents to visit the school itself. Many of our participants suggested they would be interested in attending an open house at the AFS to see the school in action, that they would like to hear "success stories" from satisfied parents with children at the school and would like an opportunity meet with teachers and learn more about how the AFS delivers its unique program and maintains academic rigour.

#5 - Reach Out to Non-Aboriginal Parents

The VSB could work to ensure the school does not become segregated by doing more to attract non-Aboriginal students to the school. One non-Aboriginal parent at a StrongStart said she would need to know what the benefits of the AFS would be for her child before she would consider it. The VSB could develop a clear message about the relevance of the school for non-Aboriginal students and provide opportunities for non-Aboriginal parents to see what the Aboriginal Focus School could offer their children. Potential benefits for non-Aboriginal students include the opportunity to build positive cross-cultural relationships with Aboriginal peoples, enhanced creativity and problem-solving skills from learning in a culturally diverse environment, and the value of a program that encourages all students to connect more deeply with their own heritage cultures.

In a recent interview, school board trustee Joy Alexander said, “If this [Aboriginal Focus School] doesn’t succeed, we don’t want it to be because of something we didn’t do.” We believe these recommendations, based on interviews with parents, families and community members, provide clear guidelines for what the school board can do to support the AFS.

We hope this research project has provided a valuable opportunity for parents and community members to engage in discussion about the Aboriginal Focus School, and their hopes for their children’s education. We also hope this report can inspire action from a wide range of people that will help the school, and the community, to flourish.

Thank You

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