

Abbott School's Cree Extended Alternative Program

Introduction

In keeping with its practice of site-based planning and a focus on innovation, the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) has balanced financial pressures with community aspirations and created a flexible, dynamic system. It has instituted 39 alternative programs since 1971 including second language instruction, arts, science and learning specialty programming. Its second language instruction programs include French, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Cree, German, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin.

In 2008, the Board decided to create a Cree Extended Alternative Program, separate from the Cree Language and Culture (Awasis) initiative it launched in 1977. The story of why and how a second Cree program was instituted and the lessons learned in only two years of operation provide insights into the continuing challenge of addressing children's educational and cultural needs.

Location, location, location

Abbott Elementary School, population 226, serves children in kindergarten to Grade 6 in Edmonton's northeast region. Nearby R.J. Scott Elementary (108 students), previously twinned with a junior high school, was re-twinned with Abbott in 2008. R.J. Scott was experiencing declining enrollment and both schools serve a similar population. Separated by a major avenue, families on the R.J. Scott side are a little better off financially. They are less transient and a little less dependent on school-based social services than Abbott families.

This story is part of a project carried out by the Program Unit of the Edmonton Public School Board and Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. Its purpose is to understand the ecology for innovation and collaboration in the Board's schools by exploring the experience of four schools or school collaborations. The Caledon Institute is publishing two community stories as part of this effort: one on the Cree Language Program at Abbott School and a second which describes the emergence of a transition program for immigrant students which was influenced by work done at Balwin School.

Principal Brad Mamchur administers both schools and brings a background in special needs programming to his work. His experience teaching high school and an affinity for children who learn differently led him to advocate for alternatives to the Board's traditional approach of resource room removal¹ for secondary students. High rates of school leaving convinced him that special needs programming had to be coordinated and integrated into regular classroom instruction. His successes and the work of other, similarly-inclined educators led to the establishment of Special Needs Departments in many Edmonton high schools. Says Brad: "We are coming to the point where our most capable teachers want to take on the challenge of teaching our most difficult students. They understand that we have to connect with our students as individual learners first. Curriculum comes second."

That philosophy went with Brad to Abbott Elementary in 2005. In 2000, (then) principal Dean Michailides had established the board's second Partners for Kids (PFK) program at Abbott. (Principal Sandra Woitas helped develop the first PFK at Norwood Elementary School in 1997). The Abbott community includes many Aboriginal peoples, single-parent families and people living on low incomes. The impacts of family violence, drug and alcohol abuse and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome are among the difficulties faced by many members of the community. The PFK program provides one-on-one mentorship for students, meal and snack programs. An on-site Family Centre offers resources for parents, including access to a family therapist and an in-home support worker. PFK helped lift some of the weight from staff members' shoulders of meeting students' needs. Says Brad: "Within two years, PFK and new staff brought in by Dean had helped transform Abbott from a default school – where children and staff were obliged to go – to a place they wanted to go."

Even with the improvements brought by PFK, Abbott has struggled for the last five years with high rates of transiency; 45 percent of the student population turns over each year. Pressures associated with high levels of immigration, poverty and transience are increasing the stresses on families at Abbott. Many residents in the community's 800 multi-family dwellings are doubling up on occupancy in order to keep living costs low.

As the social fabric around the school continued to deteriorate, Brad and his staff sought ways to support families both inside and outside the school. The usual invitations to meet-the-teacher and student-led conferences were not bringing many people into the building, so in 2008, a researcher began a program of speaking with parents in their homes. That same year, the school held a focus group in partnership with Edmonton's Family Centre and two researchers from the University of Alberta. Parents were asked three questions:

- What kept them from coming to the school?
- What stopped them from taking an active role in their children's education?
- Why did they not support the school outside of school hours?

Expecting to hear that families' own unsatisfactory histories with institutions was the source of the problem, they were surprised to hear that the answer was rooted in the issues of poverty and transience: Some people did not want to get to know their neighbours. They feared that once

neighbourhood connections were made, they would have to fend off requests for child care or the loan of household items. Since they planned to move within a short time, connections were something to avoid.

Over the past two years, this insight has been further clarified as school staff learn more about the differences between urban- and reserve-based Aboriginal peoples. Reserve-based Aboriginal peoples are more apt to move back and forth from the city to the reserve, and many perceive themselves as transient.

An emerging response

Forty-five percent of Abbott's students are First Nations, and the majority of those are Cree. Focus group insights and one-on-one conversations at people's homes led Abbott staff to the conclusion that providing a Cree-focused program option would address previously unacknowledged cultural differences. Though this approach might appear to favour one culture among the many First Nations populations in the neighbourhood, it was hoped that the lessons learned might provide a platform for cultural learning at a later date for other Edmonton Aboriginal groups.

Developing a targeted program would also make it easier to draw support from the School Board. By defining the Cree cultural curriculum as an 'extended' program, Abbott would be eligible for more student funding and would be able to draw in more outside human resources – e.g., elders and Central Services staff.

In the fall of 2008, a kindergarten extended class opened and 17 students enrolled.

Developing an idea on the ground or building the road as it is travelled

Formulating an idea and sketching out a model of how it might play out in reality are only the beginning in developing a new way of educating. Embedding the idea into a functional program – using a process of experimentation, trial, error and adaptation – is quite another.

The teachers and administration at Abbott and the EPSB program unit staff have continued to modify the curriculum and delivery model as they learn more about how it operates in practice.

Figuring out how to get parents and students more engaged in the program and in their children's education – a key component of academic success – was the first step. Says Brad: "Since my arrival in 2005, we had been unsuccessful in bringing parents into the school, but we now realized that the right invitation is crucial. In the fall of 2009, we built three teepees in front of the school and had an evening where we prepared and roasted fish, cooked bannock and listened to stories – all as a celebration of learning. Many of our students are affected by hyperactivity disorder and find it very hard to sit still in a classroom, but that evening they all sat in rapt attention until midnight."

Balancing the twin goals of cultural education and literacy and numeracy is another key step toward academic success. It takes time to forge the relationships and develop the program elements that truly reflect Cree community values while also satisfying the educational expectations of the Board and Education Ministry. Grade 1 students spend the first 30 minutes of their day with their kindergarten classmates in a smudging and circle activity, then are integrated with the school's other Grade 1 students for a morning literacy activity. Before lunchtime, they return to the Cree extended class, missing out on the regular programming that extends the morning's lessons. By day two, the Cree-focused students are already slightly out-of-step with their grade peers.

Meeting the diverse expectations of children and families is yet another challenge that affects the work. One program cannot suit the needs of every person or family. In the Abbott community, the urban- and reserve-based Cree each have their own ideas about education. So what are the implications for program design and delivery?

Staffing the new program presented its own set of challenges. The pressures on a relatively inexperienced teacher charged with introducing a fledgling program with a new group of learners were very heavy. In hindsight, it would have been more reasonable to support a group of teachers and community elders with the work of launching this new initiative.

Early signals are mixed

The program's impact on student learning and progress are mixed. Trust has been built among students and teachers, and there is a solid sense that children are engaged in their learning activities. Having a group of adults available to provide in-class assistance has accelerated the development of supportive relationships. Children are now able to meet adults' eyes and ask for help. They appear confident that their teachers will be able to provide what they need.

These examples of progress have not yet translated into improvements in academic performance. The majority of students are unable to meet the expected literary and numeracy standards. Teachers, administrators and specialists have acknowledged these concerns and are recommending additional support for this cohort of children.

Same intent, different manifestation

The curricular and cultural complexities of offering the Cree extended program are not easily resolved and the academic progress of the learners has been slower than anticipated. But Brad Mamchur is certain of one thing: The program provides his students with a base from which they can learn. Says Brad: "English Language Learning programming supposes that children have a solid home language but, with our Cree children, neither their Cree nor their English is strong enough to support concept learning. We are dealing with issues of culture, poverty, transience, a highly politicized community and the educational difficulties associated with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The cultural elements we're offering may be the best and only solution for connecting children to their teachers,

their school and their educational futures. Without some kind of attachment and success in learning, we know we will lose children to a different kind of family – our street gangs.”

Still pursuing the goal of using Aboriginal language and culture as the means to increase the confidence and capacity of vulnerable children to learn, those involved with the Abbott experiment have made important modifications to their model. Next year’s programming will be provided to any students in kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 that desire greater knowledge of Cree culture and language. A teacher who is fluent in Cree will provide language instruction for 45 minutes a day to each of three levels during the afternoon learning blocks. In the morning, that teacher will be integrated into other classes and support those involved in the language program and any others requiring help in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

The cultural tenets of the program will still hold true:

- Cree values – kinship, working cooperatively, sharing
- nature-based program – Aboriginal worldviews recognize the interconnectedness of all living things and the spirit that exists within each
- community involvement – welcoming the extended community into the school such as parents, Elders, grandparents and other community members
- extended use of Cree language – primary focus of the afternoon classes.

This approach achieves a better balance between literacy and numeracy, and the teaching of Aboriginal language and culture. It further extends appreciation for Aboriginal traditions to the entire student body.

Will the tentative roots hold?

Brad’s tenure at Abbott is due to end in 2010, well before the Cree extended program rolls out to serve students from kindergarten to Grade 6. If the Board chooses to continue the program beyond its first three years, it will be fully operational by 2014. Finding the right principal to continue Brad’s work will be crucial to the program’s survival.

As of late May 2010, the new principal for Abbott has not yet been selected. In order to see a continued evolution of the program, the new administrator will need to have a genuine belief in the value of the work. Those involved must be adept at fostering a respectful, inclusive school culture that honours the community’s diversity – Abbott’s defining characteristic. The new principal must be able to communicate that, with high aspirations, every child can lead a successful, healthy life.

Lessons about collaboration and innovation

The story of Abbott highlights several important lessons about social innovation.

Getting the right people on the bus

In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins argues that the central challenge in building organizations that perform consistently well is to “get the right people on the bus” – those with appropriate skill, passion and networks for the work at hand [Collins 2001].

The same thing is true in social innovation. After reviewing student outcomes from the project’s second year, administrators realized that their initial view of the critical competencies for the ideal Cree program teacher had been completely reversed. Originally, they felt that language fluency and cultural competency ranked ahead of good curriculum and strong pedagogy. By the end of year two, the learning gap between Cree program Grade 1 and regular Grade 1 students had widened dramatically. Administrators now feel that the most effective teacher would be one with many years of experience. Teachers need strong pedagogy and a deep grounding in standard and adapted curricula. While cultural competence and language fluency are still important elements of the program, this is an area where community members can be employed to enrich and extend a strongly supportive learning environment.

Brad Mamchur’s continued presence at Abbott is also seen as critical to student success. His understanding of the issues, commitment to the program and relationships with key people are necessary ingredients for either continuing the Cree program or for reintegrating its students back into the regular program stream. The board’s current practice of regularly moving principals from one school to another can disrupt fledgling programs; consideration of longer principal appointments may be appropriate in particular circumstances.

Customized – rather than cookie-cutter – responses

When the Board originally considered Abbott’s request for a culturally-enriched program, it recognized the situation as a new second language site. It had, after all, already instituted eight other language programs and had developed significant capacity in that area.² The Cree program at Abbott appeared to be a ninth language program.

Over time, Abbott staff and students learned that the Cree language is not the same ‘mechanism’ for improving learning as it is for other second-language speakers: Many of the Cree children at Abbott had no heart language (Balwin School’s term for a child’s first language) upon which to build. They typically do not hear the language at home because their parents and grandparents – often survivors of residential schools or preferring assimilation over acculturation – never learned it themselves. Part of the challenge of learning for many Aboriginal children is about acknowledging, understanding and embracing their Aboriginal heritage. Language learning is only one part of the heritage issue.

A better understanding of how children learn reinforces the need for a well-delivered curriculum with community supports in place to strengthen cultural learning. The Board and Abbott can build on the strong record of language programs, but must treat the Cree Extended Alternative Program as something more than the ninth second-language program in Edmonton Public School Board.

Prototype versus pilot project

The term ‘pilot project’ has become so ubiquitous that people assume they know what it means when they hear it. But there is a big difference between trying out a field-tested model (pilot project) and stepping off into unknown territory (prototype project). The two types of projects should be funded, managed and evaluated differently.

Prototypes can be thought of as “learning with your hands” – trying out an idea, building experience and learning, and then stepping back to evaluate what worked and what didn’t. Prototyping is industry’s way of trying new ideas and building the ones that work into a workable model. There are no real expectations of outcomes, but there are high expectations of risk and creativity.

Abbott’s curricular model evolved as the project’s first year unfolded, so was a prototype program. Its purpose was to allow principal, teacher and board personnel to learn and generate new knowledge that could inform program design. It might be useful for Board personnel to reflect on whether their expectations of Abbott’s Cree program were based on their view of the work as a prototype or a pilot project. Such an examination might also be worthwhile for other board pilot projects that might be subsequently reclassified and reviewed as prototypes.

Prototypes and pilots are managed – and evaluated – in different ways. Prototyping is a messy, unpredictable and even risky process, with quick changes and iterations occurring spontaneously based on learning and feedback. These efforts are judged by their ability to reveal new things about the challenge a group is facing and the implications for crafting a workable solution. Developing and managing pilot projects, by contrast, is a more predictable process of refining and improving a well-thought-out model. After the ‘kinks’ have been worked out, innovators then ‘freeze’ the model so that it can be subjected to a formal and rigorous summative evaluation. Formal pilot projects often emerge out of a long process of prototyping in which many diverse elements of a prospective model are sufficiently well developed to initiate a pilot.

Says Director of Programs Gloria Chalmers: “We need to be more systematic in our approach to learning. We have many examples where we have established a program prototype, and then tried to evaluate it a few months later as if it were a pilot project. It’s important that everyone understands what we are trying to achieve in order not to create unrealistic expectations of outcomes. It generally takes three years to establish a new alternative program and it undergoes continuous modification as conditions change.”

A second important transition comes when prototype projects prove their worth and begin operating in a school. New staff and families are introduced to the fledgling program, and each person comes with their own views. What was developed in a more or less a ‘closed container’ is now subject to comment, criticism and new ideas. Sometimes the fledgling doesn’t make it out of the nest. Using a strictly economic lens, the test-and-see process is hard to justify, though it makes perfect social and pedagogical sense.

Innovation at multiple levels simultaneously

Abbott underlines the vital role of well-trained teachers with the cultural and language background required to make the program work. There are very few people in the Edmonton public school system – or anywhere – who have the ideal characteristics sought by Abbott. The same is true for the growing number of programs designed for Aboriginal and English as Second Language speaking students.

To expand the pool of qualified teachers, innovation is required in the way people are trained, recruited and accredited. Board staff feel that teachers' colleges need to be more responsive to the social realities of our student populations. Special education credentials should be developed in collaboration with needs expressed by school boards to ensure that the education system as a whole becomes more innovative and responsive.

The importance of flexibility

Gloria Chalmers is cautious about the notion of 'best practices.' In her words: "Labelling a program as a best practice communicates an assumption that an approach will work in every situation with every child, even when it clearly fails to do so. It might also assume that a program that works in one school or neighbourhood will work in another."

She prefers instead to think about promising practices that allow for differences among learners. Says Gloria: "The same kind of flexibility needs to apply to curricular goals. Just because we say that every child will read by Grade 3 doesn't mean that it will be so. We have to adopt a more open approach to our problems and ask outside advisors to help us fully understand why things fail when they fail. We have seen a far greater awareness of context among rehabilitation medicine and pediatrics practitioners. Education tends to look inward for answers – we need to look outward as well."

Ahead of the evidence curve

The emphasis on evidence-based practice is often at odds with the realities of innovation. Evidence on the effectiveness – or lack of effectiveness – of a new way of doing things is collected over time. It does not simply exist. To demand that an emerging innovation be based on evidence effectively closes the door on innovation and pushes people into doing things in old ways.

While the Board's program unit has demonstrated excellence in collecting and articulating evidence on programming outcomes, Gloria Chalmers' experience tells her that finding one solution to every problem limits student success and – once identified as a best practice – can stand in the way of discovery and innovation. Says Gloria: "Teaching and learning are human enterprises. Research is often poorly or only partially understood. We tend to use research to support what we already believe and ignore issues that are related to the evidence."

Conclusion

The Edmonton Public School Board has continued its course of innovation and program development over a 30-year period. Its commitment to site-based planning and school choice has created a climate of flexibility and ongoing experimentation which is essential in developing new and better ways of educating children in a rapidly changing world.

The challenge for the Board is to build on that structure and keep the spirit of innovation alive. As staff and practices are developed and mature, there is a tendency to go with what has worked in the past and become more risk averse – a tendency which is reinforced by worries over the economic downturn, continuing and increasing stresses on teaching professionals, and funding cuts. Social innovation requires long time lines and a willingness to try and fail; its goal is learning en route to create new and improved ways of tackling the most important social issues in our communities – like helping children succeed at school and in life.

Is the challenge insurmountable? Surely not for a school board that has innovation as part of its DNA.

Anne Makhoul with Mark Cabaj

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Reference

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*. New York: HarperCollins.

Endnotes

1. Resource room removal refers to the practice of taking individual or small groups of students to a separate classroom for small group or individualized instruction. Students who are participate in these sessions have been identified as needing additional instructional support. A resource teacher works with students to address particular skills or knowledge deficits.
2. Edmonton Public School Board second language instruction programs include French, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Cree, German, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin.

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