

# Hwunitum and Hwulmuhw or My Experiences in an Organizational Change Project

*Ted Cadwallader*  
*Cowichan School District #79*

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*In May 2001 the Cowichan Valley School District signed an Aboriginal Education Improvement Agreement with the British Columbia Ministry of Education and the First Nations on whose traditional territory the District is situated. This Improvement Agreement was the result of the collaborative work of many people over many years. Through the eyes of one person this article looks at the process involved in changing the culture of an organization to become more receptive and aware of the needs of Aboriginal students through including Aboriginal people more fully in the decision-making processes.*

In November 2000 I was hired as Curriculum Coordinator (Aboriginal Education) for School District 79 (Cowichan Valley) in British Columbia, Canada. The School District is located on southern Vancouver Island in the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people. When I was hired I was taking a master's degree course at Royal Roads University focusing on developing leadership skills to facilitate organizational change. Immersion in the ideas of Senge (1990), Secretan (1997), and others raised my expectations about what an organization can be and do. I wanted to be part of something that put these ideas into practice. I wanted to experience team learning and shared visioning. I wanted to see if Senge's system's archetypes were indeed reality. When Secretan wrote of searching for higher ground as a moral imperative in leadership, I wanted to put this perspective into practice. When the opportunity came to apply for the Aboriginal Education Curriculum Coordinator position, I was fortunate enough to be selected for the job.

At this time a great transition was beginning in our District, although not everyone was aware of it. There would soon be governmental change provincially, the local school board had recently had elections with many members running on a platform of change, and there was a corresponding awareness of a need for change in how our schools served Aboriginal families and students.

Until this time most Aboriginal students had not experienced success at school. They did not find school a nurturing, supportive place to learn. The data used in our School District reflected a likelihood that 75% of Aboriginal children entering grade 8 would not graduate within the next

six years or perhaps would not graduate at all. An inordinate number of Aboriginal students were in special education programs relative to the percentage of the total student population. Aboriginal students accounted for twice as many severe behavior designations as non-Aboriginal students, but were only 11% of the school population. Many students who were seen as bright and capable in elementary schools were dropping out in middle school. The overall satisfaction of the Aboriginal community with the education system was not good, and a prime concern was racism. Attendance rates were lower; grade-to-grade transition was lower; graduation rates were lower. There were few if any areas where Aboriginal students were succeeding nearly as well as non-Aboriginal students.

Our School District, like most in the province, has an Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee, which provides advice and direction to the School Board in matters of Aboriginal education. It comprises representation from the eight First Nations on whose traditional territory the district is located, the local Métis Association, the School District, and the teachers' union. Its history in influencing decisions made by the school district has not been one of cooperation. According to many who participated from the First Nations communities, the School District did the talking and the Aboriginal members listened and left. This committee was also going through a transition period. Members involved in 2000 were more willing to ask questions and provide advice and suggestions with an expectation that these would be acted on and to seek a better way of proceeding into the future.

The School District had assigned the portfolio of Aboriginal education to the Director of Adult Education, Eric McMahan. Eric was an exceptional person to have in this role at the time, and although it was not apparent to the school district, it was apparent to the members of the Advisory Committee. He was in charge of many portfolios, but most of his time was spent with issues dealing with Aboriginal education. He was passionate about making a difference in how the School District conducted itself and in how Aboriginal students succeeded at school. His willingness to ask uncomfortable questions, to listen to opinions and points of view he did not necessarily agree with, and to become deeply involved made him able to guide the district and the Advisory Committee through some rough stretches.

I was hired to work with Eric and the members of the Advisory Committee in developing a strategy for the District to improve the success rates of Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal Education Improvement Agreement was eventually developed and signed in May 2001 at the Somena Longhouse on the traditional territory of the Cowichan people. At this time there were three other Improvement Agreements in the province, all dedicated to improving the school success rates of Aboriginal students. The British Columbia Ministry of Education encouraged school districts to

pursue these types of agreements as a way to increase success rates collaboratively with the Aboriginal people in their area. In our area the process of the development was intense, invigorating, exciting, and exhausting, always with the promise of being able to effect real change for students who desperately needed and deserved better.

The process that we developed over the course of the next seven months when put on paper does not in the least reflect the emotions and intensity of being in the middle of it. Simply put, we did the following.

- Outlined the current state of affairs in Aboriginal education in the School District by hiring a consultant to survey all stakeholders on their perspectives;
- Set goals and targets for the next five years;
- Aligned the School District processes to support the goals;
- Implemented the goals through support programs.

The School District is currently in the third year of the five-year agreement. A baseline of data has been established in all areas of the agreement, and at the end of this school year (2003-2004) comparative data will be available to indicate any improvement. The data, however, do not tell the whole story, but give an indication that the School District is improving in supporting Aboriginal students much better than in the past. I outline in the following sections the process and procedures that enabled the Aboriginal Improvement Agreement to become a living document and how the process transformed the relationship between the District and the Aboriginal communities.

#### *Outline of the Current State of Affairs*

The Hwulmuhw Mustimuhw Education Advisory Committee is the Advisory Committee to the School Board of Trustees on issues that deal with Aboriginal education. On this committee are the education managers for each First Nation, the education liaison of the Métis Association, and district and teacher representatives. The only members who can vote on this committee are the Aboriginal representatives. The chair of this committee is Cecelia Harris, Education Manager for Penelakut Tribe since 1995. Along with Irene Seward, Education Manager for Halalt First Nation since 1999, she asked, "Which programs for Aboriginal students are working, and which are not?" This sparked the initial critical part of the entire process. Glenn Goring, an educational consultant who had worked for the Adult Education Department assessing a program related to delivering curriculum to a remote Aboriginal community, was hired to answer this question. The reason Glenn was successful in gathering the information needed was primarily because of who he was, not because of what he could do. Glenn's willingness to listen, to ask, and to be respectful at all times allowed him to be welcomed into the Aboriginal communities, classrooms, offices, and homes. He is a quiet, thoughtful man with a ready smile and a wealth of experience in education.

With the help of the education managers, Glenn met with parents, elders, councillors, and chiefs. With my assistance he met with students, school staffs, and district staff. He contacted and met with community organizations involved in education such as the House of Friendship, an organization that supports Aboriginal people living off their reserve. From these meetings Glenn compiled a picture of the state of Aboriginal education from multiple perspectives. His final report, *Review and Assessment of Aboriginal Education in School District 79 (Cowichan Valley)* (Goring, 2001) provided the basis for much of the work that followed. Some of the most telling responses came from parents and students. One quote from a student carried a clear message: "The things that are important are reading, writing and all the other basic stuff. But I'm failing to learn about my culture, language and history." A parent echoed the Aboriginal peoples' high regard for education and also the importance placed on language and culture:

I want my daughter to graduate, not with a School Certificate [showing course completion], but with the real thing [a Dogwood Certificate showing academic achievement]. I want her to have self-esteem and I want her to know our culture and language.

During the beginning of Glenn's work, Eric would often ask, "Are we working in a vacuum?" We were continually aware of the need to promote what we were doing, to bring a sense of transparency to the entire process. We knew that if the process was to be successful as an organizational change initiative, it could not be seen as a directive from the School District. The process needed to be as inclusive as possible without losing the integrity of the goal of increasing student success at school. To help keep the process open and to address our concerns about working in isolation, a community forum was planned and initiated, held at the conference center on Cowichan traditional territory.

This fall conference was conducted with the Aboriginal community in mind. A fluent Hul'qumi'num speaker was hired to translate all English to ensure that the Elders could understand what was happening and could ask questions and provide guidance. Witnesses were called in the Coast Salish traditional way. In the oral tradition of the Coast Salish people, witnesses are called to be the memory of the event in question. They speak on what they saw and heard, thus preserving the knowledge presented at the event. Food was provided and guests were invited. The gathering provided the Aboriginal community as one of the stakeholders in the process with a feeling of input and ownership. The School District participants also had the opportunity to meet with the Aboriginal community in a way that had not happened before. Glenn was able to meet with people and seek their input. Many of the guests were representatives of other school districts, other Aboriginal communities outside of the School District boundaries, or interested community members. The Ministry of Education was represented at this meeting, as it too was a partner in the

process. To ensure the transparency of the process another community forum was held the following spring to announce the implementation process. At this fall conference the idea of an Improvement Agreement was put forward as a way to work together. John Frishholz, one of the people instrumental in putting an earlier agreement in place in another school district, made a presentation on the positive effect of the process. A panel made up of Advisory Committee members fielded questions from the audience. At the end of the one-day session the Advisory Committee members felt that the process had been successful in providing the community with the necessary information.

After two months of research, Glenn provided the Advisory Committee and the School District with a report, *Review and Assessment of Aboriginal Education*. As mentioned above, this report was an excellent resource in guiding decisions that eventually led to the Improvement Agreement. It was used along with the School District data and the Ministry data I had compiled in a process that formed the five goals and their targets. Without the information that Glenn had gathered and presented the process would have been in danger of being yet again another report on the poor state of Aboriginal Education that sat on the shelf of administrators, perhaps to be used in research projects on the same topic. Instead, Glenn was able to frame the thoughts and comments of a wide spectrum of stakeholders into a powerful commentary on the current state of Aboriginal education and the direction it should go in the future if real change was to occur.

Some of the points that stood out and helped guide further discussion were:

- Support be given to early intervention strategies such as full-day kindergarten and early reading programs;
- The schools consider restructuring parent-teacher conferences to be more in keeping with Aboriginal customs;
- The First Nations and the School District continue efforts to provide Hul'qumi'num (Coast Salish language) as a second-language option;
- The schools work to augment resources about Métis culture;
- Consideration be given to ways of establishing strong First Nations presence in each school such as regular visits by Elders to reinforce First Nation values.

The complete document can be seen at [www.sd79.bc.ca/programs/abed/District%20Assessment.html](http://www.sd79.bc.ca/programs/abed/District%20Assessment.html)

### *Setting Goals and Targets for the Next Five Years*

I recall sitting in the School District annex, a portable trailer on the District Office site, with all the walls filled with flip-chart paper. A subcommittee of the Advisory Committee was assigned the task of compiling all the information into a recognizable, workable document. Many hours were spent with this information. Incredibly, it seemed to come together into

themes without much effort. We grouped and classified comments and data into common themes and areas until they were all listed under specific titles. We felt exuberant when Eric wrote the title of each theme at the top of the groups. It all came together: Academic Preparedness (Elementary Academics); Academic Achievement (Secondary Academics); Aboriginal Culture, Language, and History; Attendance; and Technology. The direction and perceived needs in Aboriginal education as seen by the stakeholders were subcategories under each of these topic areas. For example, from Glenn's report and the data we had collected, there was definite support from all respondents for academic improvement. The Elders, parents, and students had responded with a request that Aboriginal language, culture, and history play a larger role in the schools. The school staffs reported that attendance of Aboriginal students needed to improve if academic achievement was to improve. Recognizing that technology skills played a role in job opportunities and academic opportunities, access to and skill level in the use of technology became an important goal area.

When I was working on my master's degree, we would often speak of the elusive characteristic of synergy. We had all experienced this in our lifetimes: some in our jobs, many while playing music, and even more when participating on a sports team. It was mentioned in many of the books on developing organizations that develop a capacity to learn. Covey (1989) and Senge (1990) both mention its effect on teams and their effectiveness. It was a feeling of synergy when our work on the Improvement Agreement seemed to crystallize into five goals on the flip charts taped on the walls around us. I distinctly remember someone saying, not for the last time, "Well, now the work really begins."

With our goals in mind, we needed then to construct a method of measuring the progress and setting targets. It was crucial to us that we not put extra work onto teachers, that we use as many existing data-collection systems as possible. Dovetailing our efforts with the existing system processes was important. We needed to find ways of using data-collection processes, decision-making processes, and information structures currently in use. If the Improvement Agreement was seen to be another layer of bureaucracy, it was unlikely that it would be sustainable. We found, however, that dovetailing would not always be possible because of how data were collected and collated. Some of our goals areas—particularly technology, and culture, language, and history—did not have existing structures in place to measure the progress of students. To this end we needed to develop our own home-grown methods. Later, in the implementation of the Improvement Agreement, solutions to gathering qualitative data through surveys and online reporting procedures were developed. These locally developed procedures would later be used by the Ministry of Education as a provincial tool to gather parents' and students'

satisfaction results. At first, though, we used data that the Ministry of Education supplied to our district, and we used quantitative data that existed in our data-collection system. The targets were based on closing the gap in performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students over a five-year period by 10% or 2% per year. This 2%-per-year target came from a statement made by the then Aboriginal Education Branch Director Vonnie Hutchingson. She said that the disparity in performance between the two groups of students was a direct result of the previous 50 years. If it took 50 years to create the gap, it would take that long to close it. We needed to start today.

#### *Aligning the School District Processes to Support the Goals*

Before this time the Advisory Committee had input on programs, but had not had direct input on budget allocation of targeted Aboriginal funding. One change made was to open dialogue on budget development between the School District and the Advisory Committee, which strengthened the partnership. The Advisory Committee members could see how the funding was disbursed and how it supplemented and enriched programs in the district. Decisions about redistribution funds could be made in an atmosphere of collaboration, and these decisions were based on reliable data and specific goals. Suggestions were received from principals on programs in their schools, but the District team and the Advisory Committee ultimately decided how the funding would be allocated. The School District Finance Committee reviewed the budget, and the School Board of Trustees passed it.

With budget allocation processes aligned to support the goals, next came the alignment of School Improvement Plans to include Aboriginal goals. This was fully supported—in fact demanded—by the provincial accreditation process then in place. It was not difficult for schools to recognize the need, and it occurred as a matter of course. Each school was allocated a certain amount of Aboriginal support worker time depending on their Aboriginal student population. Each support worker's job description was changed to reflect the five goals of the Improvement Agreement. Previously, Aboriginal support workers had worked in their schools without coordination. They had no regular meeting or planning times and were unsure of their roles. With a new job description, a common purpose centered on improving the success of students in the five areas outlined in the Improvement Agreement and in their job descriptions. Monthly meetings were arranged for debriefing and planning. A budget was made available for the support workers to plan and support events and activities for their students that were designed to increase achievement in the goal areas.

Each school was also allocated site-based funding to support their efforts in reaching the targets outlined in the goals. The Advisory Committee was at first reluctant to release funding without specific guidelines to

the schools. They had seen this happen in the past with the results being the poor performance that we were now facing. However, in this case it was a trust-building exercise. The Advisory Committee made it clear that this was an opportunity for schools to have control over how they met the goals in their own unique way. The schools would be accountable for the funding, and it would be measured on how well they met the targets outlined in their own plans and in the Improvement Agreement.

Site-based grants were made available to schools and community organizations to support their efforts in improving student achievement. Site grants had been available previously in the district, and the process of allocating these grants was used to allocate the Aboriginal Improvement Agreement grants that dealt with curricular areas. A similar process was designed by which the Advisory Committee allocated grant funding to support those projects that dealt with culture, language, and history. All these efforts at aligning existing structures and processes, or developing new ones that dovetailed with existing processes, were important in making the system move into a more supportive role than before for students and teachers. Over time, though, more effective ways needed to be developed, and still need to be developed, to collect the data needed to measure the progress toward each of our goals.

#### *Implementing the Goals Through Support Programs*

As mentioned above, some of the support programs put in place were Aboriginal support workers in every school, site-based funding, and site-based development grants. Another grant available was the federally supplied Aboriginal Technology Funds. These grants were used in our district to support the Improvement Agreement goal of increasing skill levels in the use of technology and in increasing access to technology. Other projects that were implemented in other departments also corresponded with the Improvement Agreement goals. One example was to focus a district early literacy program in those schools with large Aboriginal populations. The Ministry had provided funding for early literacy intervention strategies. With four pilot schools, teaching strategies were developed to reinforce students' skills in three areas: again, an example of alignment and support. The district program was aligning two initiatives and increasing the likelihood of success.

Schools used site-based funding to purchase increased teacher assistant time to support students' needs. The site-based grants allowed teachers to implement action research projects to improve student success. These varied from after-school tutoring programs to technology projects designed to increase parental participation to anti-racism. These projects continue today and give teachers, parents, and community members access to funds to implement their own solutions collaboratively.

The District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) took on the issue of increasing Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. One parent be-



came involved with the Provincial Parent Advisory Council and has participated in the last two provincial conferences on Aboriginal education. The DPAC continues to look for ways of encouraging all parents to become more involved, but now feel more comfortable contacting Aboriginal parents, and last year in two of our schools Aboriginal parents were PAC chairs.

### *Summary*

From my experiences in this organizational change process, some important elements stand out. If one is to initiate and implement a sustainable change, attention to relationships is vital. The members of the Advisory Committee met weekly, sometimes formally, but many times for lunch or tea. Through these meetings trust and mutual respect were developed. In terms of Senge's (1990) five disciplines, this was the team learning stage. Dialogue in the true sense took place without anyone relying on preconceived notions of cause or jumping too quickly to solutions before fully understanding the issues.

Another necessity to sustainable organizational change is the development of a clear, shared vision. In the presentation of his report to the School Board Trustees, Glenn Goring stated, "In the future, Aboriginal students will be successful in this district not in spite of being Aboriginal, but because they are Aboriginal." Our vision became that of a successful Aboriginal student and recognizing all the variables that led to that success.

Finally, communication is key to the process and the current implementation. A Web site was developed to keep people informed ([www.sd79.bc.ca/programs/abed/abed.htm](http://www.sd79.bc.ca/programs/abed/abed.htm)). A newsletter was published monthly and distributed to all school sites and Aboriginal education offices. The local newspaper was kept informed and invited to community and school events. Presentations were made to chiefs and councils, parent groups, school staff, and district staff. Phone calls, meetings, e-mails, and faxes kept all the Advisory Committee members in touch with each other.

Implementation continues today. Projects carry on, some more successful than others. One of the most important learnings from the entire process for many teachers is how influential culture is in helping Aboriginal students be successful at school. One of the most important learnings for me is that you never reach a place in the process where you are satisfied that you have made it. Variables always come into the process and provide challenges to continual improvement. Imperative in meeting these challenges successfully is the groundwork that is done at the beginning, the relationships of trust and honesty, friendship, and collaboration. Capra (1996) is a theoretical physicist of some renown, and in his book *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter*, he wrote about the work done in quantum physics. He states, "the subatomic particles cannot be understood as isolated entities but must be defined through their interrela-

tions." I think this is the same in our everyday organizations. As a school district or as an Aboriginal community, we cannot be understood as an isolated entity. Only by our relations with our community can we be understood. The relations built by undergoing our organizational change initiative helped all stakeholders understand one another better and work together to increase student achievement.

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