

## Small Secondary Schools Think Tank 2015: ERS Case Study

### Introduction: Challenges and Concerns

Eagle River Secondary's (ERS) educational team (a full-time principal and 12 teachers) identifies as being agents of change. Over the past three years, the team has designed and developed a long-term *organizational structure* of curricular reinvention to address low enrolment, Cross Curricular Competencies, 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning skills, and BC's new curriculum with *topic-based inquiry options* reflecting the current students' needs. Current team members demonstrate

1. a willingness to work towards a common goal that is beneficial for students and
2. to think 'outside the box' when addressing issues.

Often considered to be "movers and shakers", ERS has attracted a high percentage of teachers who have more than eight years in the K-12 system and are looking for new opportunities to enrich their previous teaching and learning experiences. Currently, many staff members have obtained, or are in the process of obtaining, graduate certificates and degrees. Within this environment of learning professionalism and willingness to engage in new practices, the team feels the excitement of things to come. One common professional development requirement the team has identified is the need to deeply understand inquiry-based teaching and learning. Given a choice, these dedicated individuals would choose to stay at ERS; however, given declining enrolment numbers this choice may not be possible.

### Goal statements

The ERS team have designed and developed the following goal statements:

- To design and develop *sustainable innovations* to address the challenges and limitations inherent within a traditional high school timetable, specifically for a rural secondary school (grades 8-12) facing declining enrollment.
- To have more freedom and flexibility for the school, teachers, and students.
- To provide more authentic and personalized learning opportunities for students to graduate as Educated Citizens.
- To increase the number of choices in academic and electives based on passions/interests in the system.
- To promote the development of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills, aptitudes and core competencies.
- To meet graduation requirements in innovative ways.
- To promote active learning through inquiry and hands-on experiences.

To achieve these goals, the team feels that any additional member to the team needs to be a progressive thinker and willing to adapt to an environment with new teaching/learning activities focused on *student growth and engagement*. At the same time, the team fears that the continuous process of keeping up to date with rapidly evolving teaching practices, as well as creating and implementing new

courses and assessment strategies, may lead to teacher burnout and, in turn, apprehension to take risks in their classrooms.

### **Key Concepts** (*italicized throughout the case study*)

- ❖ Signature Pedagogy
- ❖ Organizational Structures
- ❖ Relationships
- ❖ Sustaining Innovation
- ❖ Student Growth and Engagement
- ❖ Place-Based Pedagogy
- ❖ Topic-Based Inquiry Options
- ❖ Culture
- ❖ Flexible Learning Environment

### **Narrative: Background, Situations and Details**

The student population consists of 130 students in grades 8-12. Our school runs with a staff of 11.429 FTE spread over 12 teachers and one full-time principal. The school has two full-time and one part-time Certified Education Assistants supporting categorized students (22% of students). We have a large aboriginal student population (28% of our students with identified heritage). The differences between grades are such that timetabling becomes a challenge (i.e., 11 grade 8's versus 32 grade 10's). Our large geographical catchment area consists of 5 different communities; 39% of our students require bussing and over 50% of those students living further than five kilometres from town. ERS has one feeder school, a K-7 elementary school with a stable population. Last year our graduation rate was 87.5%, above both district and provincial averages.

Our projected enrolment for next year is 126 students in grades 8-12. Historically, ERS loses enrolment to a larger school (population 1,200) in Salmon Arm due to increased opportunities that a large school is **perceived to offer**. Our community is economically depressed with many jobs being seasonal. Due to the lack of stable jobs, our community is losing many young families compounding the effects of declining enrolment. Many families are single parent, or with unofficial guardians. Statistics Canada (2006 report) states

- The average 2006 household income in the area as \$24 042. This amount is expected to be higher in future reports.
- Approximately 9% of the adult population has not completed Grade 9 and over 36% of the adult population has not completed high school.
- On the other end of the spectrum, 14% of adults have completed some form of university and 18% have completed trades training.

As student enrolment drops, staffing decreases have made it difficult to create a regular master timetable and maintain the team's goals.

The administration and staff at ERS, both past and present, recognize the critical need for improving *student growth and engagement*, which will hopefully result in increased graduation and post-secondary schooling. There are multiple studies that show that increased education results in increased financial stability and employment. We hope to increase our graduation rates, as well as support our students' transitions to post-secondary education. We believe these goals will be met through different ways of teaching/learning 21<sup>st</sup> Century curriculum that allow students to follow their passions/interests through inquiry or project-based learning.

To meet these challenges and align our goals, we have innovated out of necessity. With permission from the BC Education Plan and the support of our superintendent, we have changed our *organizational structure* to counteract these pressures. We have designed and developed an innovative timetabling system that allows for greater learning in and around the community, known as *place-based pedagogy*.

In the 2012-2013 school year, we implemented a new timetable with new elective courses based on passions/interests and experiential learning. The following year we accommodated further changes to alleviate unforeseen problems and limitations of these new internal structures. Due to staffing cuts that year, further adjustments were necessary. The team recognized that *flexible learning environments* in education are not restricted to traditional methodology and views, nor set within brick and mortar. Therefore, these changes and adjustments resulted in the team at ERS adapting their mode of course delivery to reflect upcoming changes in the BC Curriculum through inquiry, *place-based pedagogy* and competency-based assessment.

In *place-based pedagogy*, *relationships* are important. The ERS team is happy to report that we work as an inclusionary family both between staff, and with and between students. With our outreach to the parents and community members, they have responded by being more involved in learning within the building. This has resulted in additional *relationships* with business leaders, the mayor and council, and community groups.

To support our at-risk students at ERS, we have designed and developed *flexible learning environments* in several programs to ensure the social and emotional well being of our students. We have six itinerant counsellors who come weekly to meet with a small number of students individually. For example, twenty students are 'pulled out' of academic classes for social emotional support. In our timetabling, we also include 'pull-out blocks' for alternative education. Our alternative education 'pull-out blocks' interrupt academic classes for another thirty students on a weekly basis. We chose this alternative education program of 'pull-out blocks' to purposely undermine peer attachment. By 'pulling out' students based on their needs and issues, they experience working with multiple teachers in a variety of small group settings. We believe this method has the potential for students to experience more positive adult attachment by working with multiple teachers. Additionally, a grade eight support group for both boys and girls brings in regular speakers, from the community and beyond, to address the social and emotional well being of our student body. Getting through academic course work with continual 'pull-out blocks' and day-to-day interruptions presents a challenge. However, when the students are not receiving many of the 'pull-out' supports provided, they quickly deregulate and cease to function adequately to succeed in their studies.

Additionally, ERS entered into an affiliation with the Innovative Learning Centre (ILC) at UBC's Okanagan campus in the fall of 2013. This affiliation has helped solidify ERS's *signature pedagogy* which was partially evidenced in two Maker Days (one, an immersive professional development event; the other, an event for students from ERS and surrounding schools). Since those events, courses have been designed and developed to increase offerings in technology and shop classes.

The benefits from these timetabling changes, *signature pedagogy* and parent/community *relationships* were immediate. Student absenteeism dropped; students' success rates in core classes increased. Within this new system, students had a choice of 4 out of 32 possible electives (Grades 8-12) and 12 out of 30 possible academic *topic-based inquiry options* designed and developed through student chosen project based exploration (grades 8-10). Subsequently, each teacher was required to teach both elective and core classes. This change gave teachers the opportunity to teach in their passion/interest areas. Electives are considered to be fluid and available on an annual basis. There is a staff wide commitment to maintaining high academic standings even at the expense of elective opportunities. To achieve this, students falling below 60% are assigned to a study block twice weekly until caught up.

Our school is committed to integrating aboriginal education across the school. We have had numerous school activities and field trips that include the entire school population. The school houses a First Nations room that is inclusive and supportive to all members of the school. The First Nations Support Worker provides curricular support to academic and elective courses.

The unique teaching/learning experiences offered by ERS are available to all students regardless of background and lifestyle. Although students with special needs need to be 'identified' to meet ministry requirements, they are never limited. Money is found for anyone in need, and often fundraising is a class project. Being a contributing member of the larger world is important for our students. As such, ERS is cognizant about exposing students to a wide range of experts in the field, guest speakers and methods for them to get personally involved. Current events and the role they play in the larger picture is a common experience for all students. The lived reality of students at ERS cultivates empathy and openness to ideas, hardships and perspectives beyond the local realm.

Both students and staff report being happier with new offerings. The amount of choice offered to the students increased exponentially. Today, students are more involved, individually and collectively, in sports, intramurals, and outside school time field trips. A large number of students participate in district committees. Our students feel that their voice matters and they feel empowered to make change in all aspects of schooling and community involvement.

It is uncertain whether these innovations will be possible in the near future. Immediate areas of uncertainty include keeping our graduation program, possible changes in administration, and opportunities for key staff to accept positions in other areas within the district. Maintaining a level of staff consistency and continuity is key in maintaining the positive school and staff *culture* already in the building. If enrolment declines, possible loss of staff members is imminent. The remaining staff will be asked to take on even more school responsibilities, continue to develop or design new courses to keep our school innovative, and teach courses these courses without any prior responsibilities being removed

from their workload. Attracting new staff members who understand and believe in our system may take up precious time and resources. The constant stress of change and added responsibilities with each passing year make the possibility of teacher burnout an ever present possibility for experienced staff and a more difficult/less desirable posting for new teachers looking for new positions.

Uncertainty is nothing new to the ERS team. There have been conversations of partial/complete system changes for over a decade. Recently, the ERS team was informed by their school board that some form of change is now inevitable. Before the 2015-16 school year, the school board committee will be deciding on possible restructuring of ERS. One possibility being recommended is the restructuring of ERS to include grades 6-12 rather than 8-12. Another option suggests a K-12 system at ERS within two years.

### **Positioning questions**

1. In a time of continuous change, possibility and complexity, how can small secondary schools remain nimble and relevant in their communities, recognizing the shifts in demographics, the need to personalize teaching/learning environments, and the need to maintain the culture of change?
2. What are the affordances, structures and processes that help to stabilize and encourage innovation in the face of challenges?
  - a. How might we stabilize and encourage innovations in the face of the changes that impact ERS?
  - b. What is the evidence of innovation, engagement and learning of students and staff at ERS?
    - i. And how do we show it?
3. What does pedagogy, mastery and practice look like for teachers in a time of constant change, inquiry and “uncertainty”? As a teacher, who am I; what is my job?
4. How does community relate to, understand, and support schools’ shifting work/learning environment?

### **References:**

School website: <http://www.ers.sd83.bc.ca/>

ERS Journey (Video approximately 13 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1czccdMKAiU>

ITA Sicamous Maker Day (Video approximately 3 minutes):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qfSG7yPJ0Y>

Example of 2 IDS: 1. Film and video editing; 2. Design, building and free-riding:

<http://www.pinkbike.com/news/Corbin-Selfe-Set-In-Motion-video-2013.html>

Shulman, L. S. (2005). Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus*, 134(3), 54-59.