

School District 63 Saanich

A Vision for Public Education Board Motions – June 11, 2008

On June 11, 2008, the Board of Education, School District 63 Saanich, received a report entitled A Vision for Public Education from Superintendent of Schools Dr. Keven Elder.

This report was prepared as an outcome of a four month visioning process, facilitated by Peter Norman, which used a process of appreciative inquiry. Between February and May, two hundred people participated in four full-day or evening working session, and hundreds of others participated through strategic connections initiated by the participants. With appreciation to all involved, the Board passed the following motions:

1. That the Board adopt the following themes as part of a vision framework:
 - Society: Inclusive, honouring and respectful
 - Public Education: Responsive, relevant and resourced
 - Education and Society: A pervasive partnership
 - Learning Experiences: Success for each child, constant learning for all
 - Learning Environments: Innovative, and building from strengths
2. That the Superintendent be directed to prepare a document that captures and aligns the district's values, beliefs, mission, goals, strategies in support of those goals, vision, and plans to attain that vision, incorporating as well the findings of the Commission on Public Education.
3. That the Board support the district's involvement in research related to engaged adolescent learning, beginning with participation in the Canadian Education Association's "What Did You Do in School Today" project of Doug Wilms and that the Board support the ongoing work of secondary school renewal, particularly as it relates to ensuring high quality neighbourhood programming in partnership with distributed and alternate schooling.
4. That the Board request staff to develop a comprehensive technology plan.

The full, 14-page report is attached.

Questions or comments may be directed to the Office of the Superintendent of Schools at 250-652-6332 or by email at super@sd63.bc.ca.

A Vision for Public Education

Summary Report of the District Appreciative Inquiry Visioning Process

School District 63 Saanich – February to May 2008

Submitted to the Board of Education on June 11, 2008

Dr. Keven Elder

Superintendent of Schools and CEO

Report available to the public via www.sd63.bc.ca

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History and Context

School District 63 Saanich, through the leadership of the Board of Education, has a long history of collaborative inquiry, both internally and in partnership with community. It is widely known that there is a “Saanich Way” that is characterized by strong relationships and a commitment to working with employees and partner groups to generate collective wisdom from collective wonder.

Over the past five years, those collaborative processes have included:

- Public forum events on topics ranging from safety in schools to corporate partnerships to the future of public education;
- Open collaborative budget processes led by the Budget Advisory Committee;
- Thorough and open community and partner consultations regarding declining enrolment and the need to maximize funding for programs and services through closure and amalgamation of schools;
- Trustee and district leaders being actively engaged in ongoing processes with community agencies and local municipalities;
- The Board’s Commission on Public Education of 2006/07, a process that led to affirmation of the Board’s values, beliefs and priorities (see section entitled “Values and Beliefs as a Backdrop for Visioning”).

The work of the Commission proved to be a watershed for the Board. Not only did it provide significant connection with and input for partners and community, but it did so in the critical area of values and beliefs. These public declarations of what matters most to the Board in support of public education, coupled with an affirmation of the Board’s priorities in the areas of programs and services, provided a strong foundation from which to create a preferred future.

Clearly though, facing the challenge of building from a strong present to a preferred future, begs the question of “what is our preferred future . . . what is our vision”? This question provided the impetus for the creation of a visioning process.

Board Motions Arising from the Commission on Public Education

The creation of a visioning process was embedded in a set of Board motions in April 2007:

1. That the Saanich School Board focus its energy on supporting programs and services that increase children's chances for success during and beyond school, and do so within a flexible and relevant system, by:
 - 1) Allocating staff and resources to programs and services that have demonstrated improvement in children's chances for success;
 - 2) Focusing on effective ways to support the academic and culture success of the WSÁNEĆ, other First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples through the Education Enhancement Agreement.
2. That the Saanich School Board engage with community members in ways that will allow for the voice of all citizens to be heard in the future of public education by allocating resources to:
 - 1) Engaging in community focus groups with specific attention to reaching those whose voices are not normally heard;
 - 2) Holding community forums as appropriate to address issues that impact on the schools.
3. That the Saanich School Board continue to work with students, employees and parents so that those who best know the day-to-day experiences within the system are heard with clarity and respect by:
 - 1) Structuring ways for the Board to consult with students as appropriate on timely issues affecting their education;
 - 2) Structuring ways for the Board to be more deliberate about engaging with our parents, employees and partner groups to better understand their experiences in the system (e.g., through liaison processes, focus groups, surveys, etc.).
4. That the Saanich School Board advocate in every way possible and lobby, with support from district partners and community members, for public education in general and the Saanich School District in particular by allocating resources in the budget to develop a communications strategy that focuses on protecting and

- enhancing public education as well as increasing funding to levels that adequately support the BC public education system.
5. That the Saanich School Board direct the Superintendent of Schools to initiate a long term planning process (using Appreciative Inquiry) to clarify a vision for the future of public education in Saanich School District and develop a strategic plan for attaining that vision.

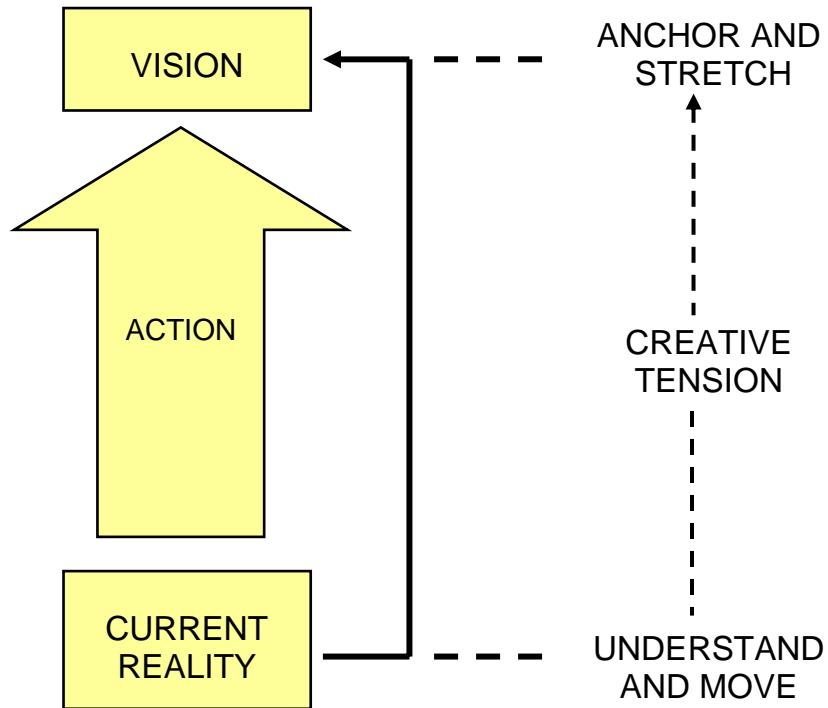
The Need for Vision

Successful organizations are well known to be those with clear understandings of their core work, their culture, their successes, their challenges and their vision for a preferred future. An Internet search on the term “organizational vision” generates half a million hits, with references to the need for “an inspiring statement of what an organization intends to become” and “a compelling image of how an organization intends to grow.”

Robert Bellman speaks of vision in terms of a commitment to a compelling unknown, about facing the future ready to learn, and about “taking a grand leap.” Saphier and D’Auria write about “rallying behind a few important, commonly prized outcomes.”

Every educational researcher of high regard, from Fullan to Dufour, are clear on the need for a commonly understood, clear picture of the road ahead, without which current successes are celebrated in isolation and emerging challenges are faced without a clear sense of the context within which those challenges can be seen as opportunities.

As important as it is to have a vision for the future, it is equally important to anchor that vision, to commit to it clearly, publicly and absolutely, or else the dynamic tension that exists between current and future will pull an organization back to the present every time that organization tries to grow. This idea of anchored vision applies to school districts, and to schools, particularly given that our system has naturally tended toward steadfastness. This need to anchor a vision and be pulled toward it through creative tension is captured in the following graphic.

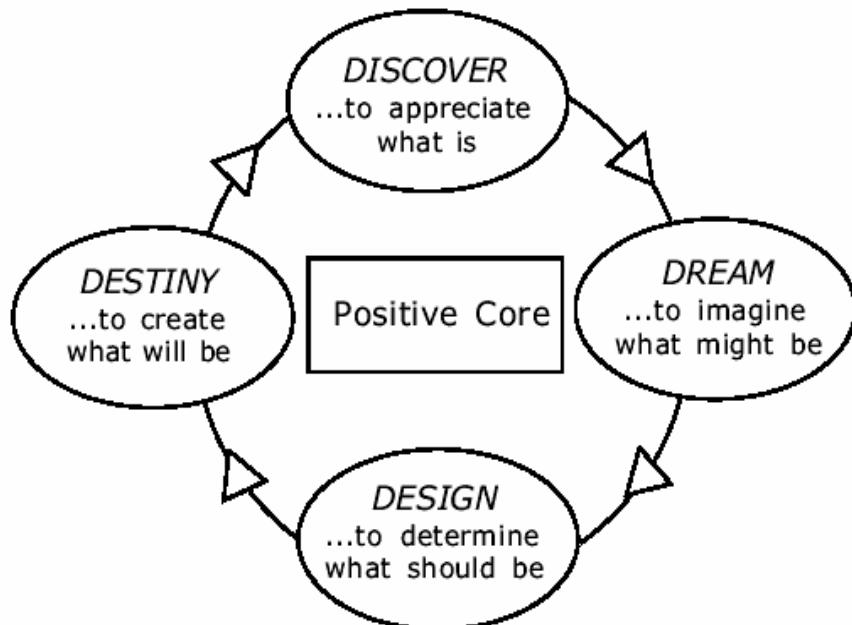


A Visioning Process – Appreciative Inquiry

Subsequent to the Board having passed its visioning motion in April 2007, a committee was struck to explore the appreciative inquiry (A I) methodology and determine both its suitability for use in Saanich and how such a process could be activated. The committee, with broad system-wide representation and chaired by the Superintendent, attended a number of workshops, consulted with experienced users of the process, and liaised with school districts that had pioneered the use of A I in our province, most notably the Vancouver School District.

Appreciative inquiry is just what its title would imply. It is a strengths based approach to understanding and reshaping a system. It takes prolonged commitment to and engagement in process, because it starts with deep understanding of and appreciation for what is currently working and builds from that into thoughtful consideration of what might be. These two phases, known as discovering and dreaming, precede phases of designing (akin to strategic planning) and destiny, or creation of a new reality. Our work in the visioning process was primarily focused on the first two of the “four Ds” of Appreciative Inquiry.

The 4D model is shown below.



4-D Model: www.lakeshorepublishers.com, 2004

As described by one of the principle designers of A I, David Cooperider, appreciative inquiry is a generative process that “involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential . . . the mobilization of inquiry into possible futures.”

For those who might think of appreciative inquiry as overly focused on the positive and short on action, we were reminded by Gervais Bushe, Simon Fraser University partner to the Vancouver School District, “maybe we ought to start calling it generative inquiry. Generativity occurs when people collectively discover or create new things that they can use to positively alter their collective future.”

As we came to understand appreciative inquiry and its suitability for our visioning purposes, we determined a need for an expert, experienced facilitator, and found that person in a long time friend of Saanich, Peter Norman.

Values and Beliefs as a Backdrop for Visioning

In launching our appreciative inquiry process we realized that of the many strengths from which our district was building, one was that our Board had clarified and affirmed its values, beliefs and priorities through the work of the Commission on Public Education.

Values:

- Compassion – being sympathetic and helpful
- Honesty – being truthful and sincere
- Fairness – being just and impartial
- Respect – being reliable and accountable
- Responsibility – being considerate and appreciative

Beliefs:

- Public education is fundamental to society and schools must prepare young people as citizens
- Public education is the responsibility of the whole community
- Healthy relationships are the foundation of a successful public education system

In addition to values and beliefs, the Report on the Commission on Public Education, entitled Shaping our Future – Finding the Balance in Public Education (available upon request), affirmed a set of 46 priorities. These included putting the learner at the centre of decision-making, nurturing critical thinkers, supporting diversity, offering a broad range of educational programs, supporting parent involvement, advocating for adequate funding, and ensuring fiscal responsibility.

All of this served as a foundation for the appreciative inquiry process. The planning committee, under the leadership of Peter Norman and using its newfound expertise in A I, developed a visioning process and launched it in February 2008.

Our Work in Community – The Future We Want

Over the course of three months, a series of events occurred that led over 120 participants through the discovery and dreaming phases of the A I visioning process. Participants for the first three events included trustees, parents, teachers, CUPE staff members, district leaders, students, representatives of community agencies or businesses, partners from post-secondary and representatives of municipal councils. The fourth event had many of those people join 80 students from our five secondary schools in addressing the same overall question of “what is your preferred future in terms of society, public education in general and schooling in Saanich in particular?”

The events were as follows:

Saturday, February 16, 2008 – Full Day Session: Discovering What Works

- Working session on Saanich values as lived experiences
- Activity related to Celebrating What is Right with the World (Dewitt Jones)
- Discussion regarding what is currently working for students and for the community
- Commitments to follow-up community interviews regarding what's working

Monday, March 10, 2008 – Dinner and Evening Session: Community Voices

- Use of “Reader’s Theatre” format to review themes from February 16
- Use of “Courtyard Café” format to discuss themes of pride, options and hope
- Creation of “Provocative Propositions” in describing a preferred future

Monday April 7, 2008 – Full Day Session: Moving Forward (Dreaming)

- Working session to review themes of pride, options and hope
- Student panel to provide context for participants regarding the future
- Working session on turning provocative propositions into themes

Wednesday, April 9, 2008 – Full Day Session: Student Forum

- Activity to describe the best things about our community
- Activity to describe what occurred during profound learning experiences
- Working session to define learning, schools and schooling in a preferred future

The Data Trail

As can be imagined, a mountain of data and input were collected over the course of the four working sessions. Every question and every conversation resulted in the creation of chart paper records, sticky notes and electronically filed summaries and overviews. It was only through the combined efforts and genius of two of our province's leading educational thinkers, Peter Norman and Dr. Milt McLaren, ably supported by members of the planning committee, that thematic sense began to emerge.

The core data from which the themes emerged was a set of hundreds of provocative propositions, all of which were built from a strong sense of what our current strengths are (the discovery phase). Those propositions were of the type:

- What if everyone in the community believes strongly in and commits to the engagement of learners in public education?
- What if every student has the opportunity to direct his or her own learning and make connections, with less content and more time to go deep?

Themes and Vision Statements

The provocative propositions clustered around five strands or themes.

1. **Society:** Inclusive, honouring and respectful
2. **Public Education:** Responsive, relevant and resourced
3. **Education and Society:** A pervasive partnership
4. **Learning Experiences:** Success for each child, constant learning for all
5. **Learning Environments:** Innovative, and building from strengths

Each of those five themes came with a set of consensus statements. Those are as follows:

1. The Society We Want . . . what if . . .

- Diversity is viewed as a community asset
- There is pervasive honouring of First Nations culture and history
- Society is safe, with united neighbourhoods and open relationships
- There are accessible, high quality services – health, social, educational
- There are opportunities for all, especially for youth, to serve and to thrive
- Everyone felt that we had a “small town feeling with big city opportunities”
- Society were truly inclusive – where all people belong, and they know it
- We lived in a truly community of respect for self, others and the environment

2. Public Education – Realizing the Ideal

- Serving all learners with equal vigour and quality
- Meeting developmental needs of all children
- Providing relevance and meaning for all learners
- Being responsive to the needs and aspirations of society
- Celebrating cultural differences
- Leading the world toward peace
- Demonstrating constant environmental stewardship
- Being a truly “public system”, serving all people, governed accordingly

3. Education and Society – A Pervasive Partnership

- Constant interconnections for mutual benefit
- A “permeable membrane,” an interface that is constantly bridged
- Experts and mentors engaged throughout schools
- Students engaged throughout the community
- Students involved, heard and honoured as contributors
- Parents involved, heard and honoured as contributors
- Community involved, heard and honoured as contributors
- A “seamless mosaic of life-long learning”
- The public genuinely engaged in public education

4. Learning Experiences – Success for All

- Each child experiences success, on that child's terms
- Each child belongs, and knows it
- Each child is engaged and inspired
- Each student experiences respect, belonging and self-efficacy
- First Nations students are connected, respected and successful
- Vulnerable students are engaged and successful
- There are no more marginalized students
- All children are in and graduating from public school
- Adults are engaged in constant purposeful learning

5. Learning Environments – Focus on the Learner

- There exists a “conspiracy of pervasive caring”
- Innovation is a norm, encouraged and supported
- The system flexes to meet student needs, always
- There are hybrid learning environments (for example, distance and face-to-face)
- There is a clear opportunity for any learning, any time, any place
- We are teaching less content and more depth
- Information/communications technologies are used fully and appropriately
- All forms of learning are honoured and evident
- All areas of learning are honoured and resourced
- Teachers and other staff are passionate, enthusiastic and worldly
- Parents and caregivers are naturally integrated
- Schooling is reconceived from inside-out, bottom-up
- The “green agenda” is ubiquitous and effective
- There are natural connections for early learners (0-5) and adult learners
- The diversity of students is aligned with the diversity of teachers
- Travel and community-based learning experiences are honoured and accessed

Recommended Directions and Actions

The set of vision statements provided above, within the five theme areas, provides a full and rather complex view of a preferred future as defined by 200 people who participated in our appreciative inquiry process. The challenge now becomes what to do with this powerful set of propositions.

The Board of Education has requested that the planning committee develop a set of recommended strategic directions in relation to the outcomes of this process. As was stated frequently during the appreciative inquiry process, those recommendations will need to answer the question, “once we have come to understand our current strengths and our preferred future, what will we do to get from here to there?”

In considering the answer to that question, it became clear that there would need to be two different types of recommendations. Those are provided below as recommended directions for the Board to consider as general guidance in future decision-making and recommended actions that are offered as suggestions for specific, concrete next steps.

Recommended directions

It is recommended that the Board of Education:

1. Continue to affirm its values and beliefs in support of public education.
2. Ensure alignment of Board goals with the declared values and beliefs.
3. Use the vision statements generated by appreciative inquiry as a basis for ongoing communications and collaboration with the community and the broader public.
4. With respect to decision-making, continue to emphasize (a) success for all students, (b) engagement with community, (c) voice for employees, (d) voice for parents and (e) voice for students as described in the April 2007 Board motions arising from the Commission on Public Education.

Recommended actions:

It is recommended that the Board of Education:

1. Consider adopting the vision statements within the five thematic areas as “the Board’s vision for public education.”
2. Direct the Superintendent to lead in the preparation of a document that captures and aligns the district’s values, beliefs, mission, goals, strategies in support of those goals, vision and plans to attain that vision, incorporating the findings of the Commission on Public Education.
3. Support the work of the Director of Information Technology in the development of a comprehensive technology plan.
4. Support the district’s involvement in research related to engaged adolescent learning, beginning with participation in the Canadian Education Association’s “What Did You Do in School Today” project of Doug Wilms.
5. Create a District Green Team to lead in the areas of environmental education and stewardship.
6. Support the ongoing work of secondary school renewal, particularly as it relates to ensuring high quality neighbourhood programming in partnership with distributed and alternate schooling.
7. Continue to support the communications plan in support of advocacy for public education, on the terms of the Board’s April 2007 motion.

This report is submitted with gratitude to all of those who participated in the appreciative inquiry process, and with a sincere invitation to all members of the Saanich learning community to engage in the next stages of our visionary journey. And on behalf of the community, thanks to the Board of Education for its courage and wisdom in undertaking this visioning process and to Peter Norman for shepherding with such expert passion.

Respectfully submitted,
Dr. Keven Elder
Superintendent of Schools