

February 2010

Superintendent's Message – Challenge and Change

Dear Parents and Staff,

*If your plan is for a year, plant rice.
If your plan is for a decade, plant trees.
If your plan is for a lifetime, educate children. Confucius*



I have been “on the job” for about 6 weeks now and want to report on what I have seen and heard. These first days in Vancouver have been consumed with school visits. My intention has been to get out and meet as many of you as I could. I wanted to get a real feel for the people who contribute on a daily basis to the well-being and life opportunities of our students. I have visited schools and alternate programs throughout the district and spent time with staff and students. I have spoken and met with many employee groups including the leadership of our stakeholder groups, teacher-librarians, technology educators, music educators, alternate education teachers and more. What should not be a surprise and what is most reassuring is that no matter where I go, I am consistently inspired and energized by the commitment, hard work and dedication of our staff, and the strength and willingness of our students to do exceptional work. When circumstance and condition places hardship and challenge on our most vulnerable students, their refuge and place of safety, comfort and support remains the schoolhouse. It is so important for us to preserve the sanctity of this place called school. It is so important that we maintain and build upon this locus of learning to enable success for *all* students.

As we enter into some of the most difficult times ever experienced by this district, the primacy of student success must be paramount. Education *is* a human endeavour and yet, or perhaps *because* it is so, we will face unprecedented employee layoffs as a result of the budget challenge. Reaching out for limited solutions to gain efficiencies and mitigate such inevitabilities, school closure becomes one of the harsh realities of these times... and it is time to consider such a reality. While no-one goes into education with a thought to closing neighbourhood facilities, it has come to this. As with most other school districts, the grim spectre of closure is upon us.

We will also need to be creative about time and the temporal biorhythm of the school day and school year, to which we have all become accustomed. The familiar place called school is changing. Students are able to achieve success and gain their education in many ways and in many places. As a result, the traditional four walls of school, the industrial model of school scheduling and the agrarian calendars of bygone years will be the topic of many conversations and will necessitate change as solutions to some of the pressures we face.

The district continues to review our facilities and the comprehensive educational programs, which we offer in anticipation of changing educational priorities and pressing economic uncertainty. How we conduct business and provide service outside of the classroom may also require changed practice, shared approaches and alternate models. Before contemplating any change, our continued dialogue and on-going conversations with partner groups will be crucial. What is becoming clear is that practices we have known will not be able to continue at the same pace and in the same way as in the past.

Both as individuals, and collectively, we will be asked to make even greater sacrifices, to ensure continued support for teaching and learning. In the coming weeks and months, you will hear about the financial pressures faced by this school district and by every other district. These are indeed challenging times for us all. We are all wondering what the outcome will be.

In this uncertain world, we face progress and change in all aspects of our lives. The challenges before us are not easy. The choices we make and pathways we take are fraught with uncertainty. Rather than dwelling on those trials and tribulations of which we have become all too accustomed, I want to celebrate the exciting opportunities as our school district moves ahead leading the way towards 21st Century Learning for *all* students. But what is this concept? After all, we are 10% through this century.

The *21st Century Skills Initiative*ⁱ proposes a move to (1) **Interdisciplinary Themes** (Global Awareness, Financial, Economic, Business and Entrepreneurial Literacy, Civic Literacy, Health Literacy); (2) **Learning and Innovation Skills** (Creativity and Innovation, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Communication and Collaboration); (3) **Information, Media and Technology Skills**; (4) **Life and Career Skills** (Flexibility and Adaptability, Initiative and Self-Direction, Social and Cross-Cultural Skills, Productivity and Accountability, Leadership and Responsibility). Similarly, the Canadian Education Associationⁱⁱ (CEA) reports that we must engage our students by making learning relevant and meaningful. David Hargreavesⁱⁱⁱ (UK) calls for a renewed focus on “*Personalized Learning*” and Valerie Hannon^{iv} (UK) advocates for deep, authentic and motivational learning.

This is a clear and common message for us all -- to focus attention on truly engaging our students in their learning and redesigning our system to meet *their* needs and not our own – these concepts will remain at the core of our conversations throughout the year and beyond. A central direction for moving our education system forward so that students can personalize their learning and access 21st century skills is to provide the technology necessary to enable them to dream, explore, research, design, collaborate, create and communicate. In spite of our challenges, the district needs to enhance technology for teaching and learning.

We watch the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games and marvel at the amazing achievements of so many. Our Canadian athletes continue to make us proud. They are achieving their personal bests. This is what we seek in our colleagues, ourselves and in all of our students - the encouragement and support to surpass expectations and to succeed well beyond one's personal aspirations. This is our role – no matter what we do in our jobs; it is to work as a team to help one another and to ensure success for all. I look forward to ensuring that we all continue to achieve personal bests.

The Vancouver School District has a remarkable record of strong academic achievement along with outstanding Athletics, exemplary Fine Arts programs, and exceptional Career Education opportunities – and we support choice and flexibility through an incredible array of school and district programs.

It is truly remarkable to know that we have so many talented and skilled students before us – these students will become the citizens in our community and the leaders of tomorrow. They are our future. No matter what your role in the district, you contribute to this outcome. In an opinion piece in the Vancouver Sun, the authors commented that:

Teachers play an important role in our future well-being. In a culture that emphasizes the present, teachers have to concentrate on developing future leaders... Teachers, who typically spend more time with kids than anyone else... play a profound role in society... indeed, teaching is the one profession that truly stands outside of time, that is capable, not of predicting the future, but of creating it. This often goes unacknowledged, as does the importance and inestimable value of teachers. (Vancouver Sun, August 22nd 2009, C3)

I wish everyone the very best for the coming months. It will be tough going, but we must support each other, seek collaboration and not confrontation, search for solution and advocate for what is right. We must join together and acknowledge the incredible efforts of each and every person. I concur whole-heartedly with the quote above and recognize the inestimable value of every employee.

Steve.

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i <http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/route21/>

ii <http://www.cea-ace.ca/res.cfm?subsection=wdy>

iii <http://www.ssat-net.net/whatwedo/personalisinglearning.aspx>

iv <http://www.icsei2009.org/presentations/keynotepresentations/HannonValerie.ppt> - long load time

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