

August 20, 2012

Cowichan Valley Community Members:

As you may know, I was appointed Official Trustee for the school district on July 1, 2012 by Order in Council signed by the Lieutenant-Governor, having been asked to take on this role by the Minister of Education following the dismissal of the previous Board of Education on the same day. In accepting the appointment, I recognized that the significant governance and operational challenges facing all school districts are fully represented in the Cowichan Valley. I also appreciated the Minister's belief that my experience in B.C. education will be helpful to the Cowichan Valley context, even given the reality of my limited on-site contact with staff and community as I continue to fulfill my duties in Surrey School District as its Superintendent and C.E.O.

With that said, I look forward to working with the community and with the skilled professionals in the district to ensure that Cowichan Valley students receive the best education possible. It is true that we face an ongoing declining enrolment trend, well-documented facilities deficiencies, competing priorities that exceed our funding level and the challenge of developing a long-term comprehensive strategic plan that effectively addresses the district's issues and keeps student learning as the priority focus. While these issues are not unique to the Cowichan Valley School District, they are, in combination, particularly complex. They need to be considered and decisions must be made in a timely manner. The status quo is not an option. Success is achievable and I am committed to doing what I can to help.

Along with matters of funding and service levels, there is a need to review and renew public and partner group consultation processes. Collaborative efforts build public confidence and help us to arrive at the best possible solutions. I am committed to engaging in productive dialogue to help us move along the continuum from awareness of priority issues to engagement in various resolution options to responsibility for action to help us achieve the core reason schools operate: student success.

Following is an update on some of my work to date and the commitments I am able to make as we prepare for the 2012/13 school year and for the policy and governance decisions facing the district for the coming year and beyond. This report is not filled with detail. Rather, it references several documents commissioned by the school district and/or the Ministry of Education since 2005. Those Reports have informed my comments and are on the District's website. It is hoped that the complete documents will be helpful to those seeking a more fulsome background and rationale for the directions being considered as we move forward. Key points from those reports emerge in the plan of action I am sharing at this time.

1. The Learning Agenda:

As noted in reports written from 2006-2008 (Rubadeau/2006, Dunham/2007, Southern/2008), student achievement results have been a cause for concern over several years.

Overall student success levels

The purpose of a public education system is to build strong capacity in the next generation. That includes foundational/fundamental learning of basic skills, the development of curiosity, problem-solving skills, a love of learning and the ability to meet challenges by activating a number of effective strategies. There is a need in School District #79 to build on areas of demonstrated success and redouble its focus on:

identifying and activating key instructional strategies;
using evidence (data) to inform teaching and learning strategies for individual students, for classroom cohorts and for schools;
and staying focused on priority directions rather than attempting to implement too many competing programs or initiatives.

The recently adopted Achievement Contract, available on the District's web site, identifies early intervention and transition as two areas worthy of priority attention. District staff will work with schools to ensure that classroom professionals have the tools to support efforts in those areas and that district resources (personnel, funds and activities) are aligned to fully support the learner-focused work inside the school house doors.

Aboriginal learners

These young people face many obstacles to success in most districts in the province; however, there are particular challenges in SD #79. This is significant for individual children and also for the large and growing Aboriginal community served by Cowichan Valley schools. Full engagement with a comprehensive plan for Aboriginal student success is an essential element of the learning agenda for the coming year. Such a plan will be articulated in what I hope can be an Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement developed by staff working in concert with the HwulmuhwMustimuhw Education Council (HMEC) as soon as possible. Such a plan will identify achievable short-term gains and long-term sustainable commitments that will be well understood by staff, parents and the community in general. It is important to acknowledge and honour the effective engagement between the district and HMEC in recent years and I hope we can build on that success to support greater and greater Aboriginal learner success.

Programs of Choice/District Programs

One of the features of a dynamic public education system is its ability to offer choice to learners and their families. Choice programs have been encouraged by governments over the past several years and interest in choice options has grown in

communities across the province. A significant challenge facing the district is "right sizing" access to choice – both location and variety of programs. In large, urban districts, it is reasonable to have a wide array of choice programs all of which can be easily accessed by students. In a scattered, largely rural district with a small and declining population (Yates/2012), responding to demands for choice programs is difficult. During this year, there will be parameters established and communicated regarding the district's capacity to initiate and sustain its programs of choice.

2. Facilities and Transportation:

Several reports (Low/2005, Milne/2006, Connolly/2008, Southern/2008) point to the urgent need for strategic planning and action related to:

sustainability of small schools;
maintenance program efficiencies;
capacity and accountability to ensure quality learning environments in all schools;
grade configuration;
transportation access to educational programs; and
disposal of excess properties to provide local capital funds.

This is a complex and demanding list of issues but I have been advised that some of those identified in the above-mentioned reports have been successfully remedied while others are works in progress. In providing information to the community prior to consultation processes this fall and winter (see below), it is important that there is a shared understanding of the status of Facility and Transportation issues and the impact of decisions made in these areas on the delivery of quality education services to students within the available budget.

3. Board/Community Consultation:

Reports from Connolly/2008, Dunham/2007, Fleming/2006, and Southern/2008 highlight fragmented and inconsistently understood consultation processes and the various roles of staff, the Board and community members. During the early part of the 2012/13 school year and in advance of the budget planning processes which commence in January 2013, there will be a series of Community Consultations held on Saturdays in the district's various communities. Those consultations will encourage dialogue focused on one or more issue papers prepared and circulated in advance of the sessions. Under a working title of "Alignment, Sustainability and Coherence: Programs and Facilities for Cowichan Valley Students," issue paper(s) will provide the facts facing the district regarding student enrolment projections, funding formula realities and the choices facing the district regarding its ability to sustain its current operational model. Topics including program choice and location, staffing levels, viability of school locations, and transportation services will be identified and discussed.

There have been questions about the status of the Board's Standing Committees. This matter was studied by Fleming/2006 and was referenced by Southern/2008.

Feedback has indicated there continues to be concern regarding the Committee structure and protocols. Given the change in Board governance – with an Official Trustee replacing 9 elected Trustees – there is an opportunity and a need to revisit the Committee structure and the role of employee and partner groups as members of Board committees and/or as members of Advisory groups. Prior to the end of September, I will hold meetings with participants involved in the currently constituted committees and work with them to develop a responsible and responsive way forward as we work to build collaborative and constructive relationships in support of students.

Conclusion

In the complex work we do in public education, it has been helpful to me to reference three principles and one enduring challenge to guide action. I hope they will serve our district and community well.

The principles:

Alignment – we need to ensure that our plans (commitments to action, provision of resources, monitoring and adjusting) are well connected to each other and are focused on the end in mind. We are in the business of student success. Our energy needs to be channeled effectively and relentlessly in that direction;

Sustainability – it is important that any plans made today are going to be sustainable over the long term. Our system loses momentum if initiatives are here today and gone tomorrow. Our decisions this year and beyond have to recognize and adjust for mid-term and long-term projections;

Coherence – governance and operational work needs to make sense. Plans should be widely understood and should transcend the ideology and strategic thinking of any one individual or group so that they can be supported even by those who do not see their personal priorities being achieved. Focusing on student success as the touchstone helps in the development of a coherent strategic direction;

The challenge: If the question is: "How do we responsibly allocate one more (or one fewer) dollar to support student learning?" it becomes apparent that the system needs to make strategic choices. Because there are more good ideas, urgent requests and competing priorities than there are funds and other resources to support them, we must recognize that the answer to our dilemmas goes beyond simply hoping for or even demanding an additional dollar. Yes, we need to advocate for every available resource and commit to using those resources wisely. We also must ensure that we endorse and activate the priorities that can be sustained to make the necessary differences in the lives of student learners.

I look forward to engaging in the dialogue necessary to shape the future our children need and deserve.

Respectfully,

Mike McKay, Official Trustee Cowichan Valley School District