

# **Modernizing Secondary Education: Saanich Students Have Their Say**

## **“What Is, What If and What Now”**

This paper represents the consensus view of 100 students from five secondary schools in School District 63 Saanich and is based on thoughts compiled during a day-long student forum on May 27, 2010. Following the forum, five students gathered to review the outcomes of that day and to create the themes that form the basis of this paper. For a list of authors and contacts please refer to the end of the paper.

### **Context:**

In February 2010 the government of the province of British Columbia promised through its throne speech to “modernize the education system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” This commitment has garnered vigorous and enthusiastic debate and dialogue, particularly in relation to secondary education.

One reason for that response is that educators and researchers have been working for decades on various aspects of secondary renewal, always with an eye toward relevance and engagement for students. Pilot projects have come and gone, reforms have been introduced with varying degrees of success, and technology has made its way fully into the everyday world of teaching and learning. And now the idea of “modernizing” secondary education has become an urgency for government.

In Saanich, the chance to engage students in the work of modernizing secondary education came through a day-long forum held on Thursday, May 27, 2010. 100 students from all five Saanich secondary schools attended that session. Importantly, those students came from all walks of life and included students from neighbourhood, alternate and distributed learning schools. The group included a combination of students who are highly successful in the current system and others who have been disenfranchised by that same system.

It should be noted as well that the adults in Saanich have been engaged through presentations and discussions at each secondary school, district Parent Advisory Council meetings and board and district committee meetings. No paper has been written to represent the consensus thinking among the adults, or groups therein, but all have been encouraged to share their thoughts with government or with the Ministry of Education as they see fit.

### Student Forum – May 27, 2010:

The forum began with a presentation designed to inform and energize participants. First we reviewed Saanich values and vision, B.C.'s vision of an educated citizen and the constraints and opportunities in the current system. Students were then presented with provocative ideas from experts including Valerie Hannon, Andy Hargreaves and Sir Ken Robinson and from a trailer for the documentary movie *We Are The People We've Been Waiting For*.

Following the presentation students engaged in facilitated discussions about:

1. The current state of education (what is);
2. A desirable system of the future (what if); and,
3. Advice for government in relation to its commitment to modernize (what now).

Words attached to that day by students afterwards included: *Great day, enthusiastic, inspiring, exciting, motivating, fascinating, overwhelming, invigorating, empowering, concerning, thought-provoking and timely*. Following are the key themes and message that came from that dialogue.

### “What Is” – The Current Status of Secondary Education in BC:

Overall, students indicated satisfaction with many aspects of the current secondary system in Saanich and B.C. They recognize that our schools are:

- high performing and innovative;
- becoming more relevant in our increasingly complex world;
- full of opportunities for students to pursue their passions;
- providing connections to the community and the planet; and,
- populated by teachers, support staff and administrators who care about them and their successes.

Students were also clear and apparently unanimous in their assertion that as change is contemplated, including moves toward more flexible, independent and problem-based learning, schools and teachers should not be victims of the modernizing agenda. They all spoke, in various ways, of the need for **a place called school** where young people could gather with expert mentors and teachers to learn, socialize and grow. Students from all five schools, representing alternate, distributed and neighbourhood education, spoke of real **pride** in their schools and of that being important to their commitment to education and their engagement in learning.

They also spoke of schools as places where First Nations culture can be celebrated and shared. Another element that students clearly value and want to retain is the **inclusive** nature of public schooling, where all are welcome and celebrated. They believe that with all students included fully in classrooms, other learning environments and schools in general, everyone benefits including those with and without obvious challenges.

Students spoke of the need for **structure**, saying that even as the system moves to one which offers more flexibility we should not swing the pendulum too far. Even with 24/7/365 personalized learning, with inclusion and high quality assessment, there will be a need for a predictable, scheduled core time of operation. For example, there could be a core time of 9:00 to 5:00 Monday to Friday, with organized blocks of time. Still, students saw a need for increased flexibility and responsiveness within that core block of time, and of the need to legitimize learning well beyond those times and days and well beyond the school.

Students also spoke of the improvements that have come to their schooling through **integration of technology**, particularly in terms of their ability to access and synthesize information, to use productivity software to create high quality documents and presentations relatively easily and quickly, and to connect with peers and mentors locally and worldwide.

While supporting much of what is working already, the students levied real criticisms. They implied that in an era of competition for the hearts and minds of students these criticisms should be taken as a call for action. Those themes were:

1. Secondary schooling can be **stressful** and **overwhelming**. While this can be a positive motivator it can also be a serious inhibitor to learning and growth. Stress often contributes to disengagement and disconnection and for many it results in tuning out and leaving school.
2. There is too much **old-fashioned** “stand and deliver” teaching followed by an over-emphasis on paper-based summative tests rather than authentic formative assessments. For some this results in **boredom**, for others, **anxiety**. Another outcome is **suppression**, where students become unwilling to say anything for fear of being embarrassed. Participants said that while this model of teaching is somewhat prevalent in neighbourhood secondary schools it is being seen less frequently as teachers develop more strategies for genuinely engaging students in learning. They spoke of some courses, like Global Studies, lending themselves more to this approach than others. They also spoke of some subjects being so overloaded with content that teachers have no choice but to race through using the more efficient surface-skimming stand and deliver approach. They also said that this suppressive environment is barely evident, if at all, in high quality alternative, individualized and distributed learning environments and in classes of certain teachers in neighbourhood schools.
3. Students spoke with enthusiasm of the teachers who use modern, child-centered approaches that engage students with each other and with learning. But they were clear in their assertion that **some teachers seem to be “putting in time”** and they suggested that these teachers are missing two critical components of teaching – relating to young people and caring deeply about their areas of expertise as teachers.
4. Students questioned the modernity of the **courses** (the right ones?) and **content** (far too much of it). They see some value in the current course requirements, but recognize that those requirements may be past their due date. If the skills of the future are a combination of the “3 Rs” and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as described by the experts, then it is time to reconsider what we require students to learn. And even if some of the course requirements are appropriate for this millennium, the content needs to be brought in line with the forces shaping our planet.

As importantly, outcomes need to be reduced and clustered to facilitate deep learning and the making of real meaning.

In general, forum participants saw the system as having many strengths that should be retained in any modernizing initiative, and believe that many of the changes that are being proposed by the experts are already becoming evident in schools today. They see a need to innovate from strengths, rather than tearing down and starting over.

### **“What If” – A System Imagined:**

Following working sessions in which participants learned from experts who have real vision about the future of learning then discussed their own perceptions of the current state of secondary education, participants engaged in discussions about the future.

Working in groups students considered the question “starting from the provocative ideas we encountered earlier today, if you were to re-design the secondary education system to better fit the 21st century, what would you change and what would you leave the same?” The consensus outcomes of those discussions were that secondary education of the future should include the following features:

1. The education system would do well to stay with much of what is currently described by way of “**the educated citizen**” as defined by government in 1989. It will also be important for a system of the future to capture outcomes for graduates that are more current, focusing on what some are calling the **7 C’s** (collaboration, connection, etc.).
2. The **strengths of the current system** as described previously, including a **sense of community** within learning groups or classes. This may not require any structural changes and may be more a function of the disposition and strategies of teachers.
3. More opportunities **for individualized or personalized learning with attention to individual learning styles**, with **teachers as advisors and facilitators**. Students could be in school on schedules that are of their choosing based on scheduled and accessible (as opposed to mandatory) classes, presentations, seminars and tutorial sessions. **Students would still be required to attend** certain teaching and learning events either in person or electronically and would still be required to complete **mandatory and elective elements of learning**.
4. The “elements of learning” noted above could be courses **organized by subjects** as exists in the current model or they could be **organized in “learning domains”** that are not necessarily taught in sequence within subject areas. This speaks to the desirability of a model that is problem- or project-based, where competencies in subject-specific learning outcomes are demonstrated within those projects rather than lock-step within a classroom. Teachers would serve as subject experts but not always with same-age, same-location classes. Participants suggested that ideally there would be a **hybrid of classes organized by subjects and more natural just-in-time learning that occurs through projects**. Each student would choose or

be advised into the model that works best for him or her and would be supported in navigating through different models based on what will be most relevant and engaging.

5. More **community based learning**. This was discussed initially from the perspective of “more field trips” but participants also spoke of the need to have more seamless connections to the community with credentialing coming from those experiences. Students were clear that this should not be, or even appear to be, the work of teachers being done by non-trained community partners. Where these community experiences are being credentialed it must be in partnership with teachers, much as occurs now with work experience and apprenticeships. Some spoke of this as **expanding the current apprentice model** to incorporate ideas such as cognitive apprenticeships that can occur in person or electronically.
6. Learning credits gained across disciplines, or within **interdisciplinary programs or approaches**. As students said, if learning outcomes or skills are demonstrated in one subject they should be counted in others. And they wondered, what if there were to be a refocusing away from subject specificity? Could those learning outcomes be disconnected from “subjects” that explicitly cover outcomes for all students coincidentally (if it is March 7 then we must all be ready to study the origins of World War II). Perhaps, if a certain outcome is deemed important in a modernized system it could be “covered” or mastered through an interdisciplinary project.

Note: Many students spoke as well of the desirability of same-age, same-subject cohorts. While it may be desirable to be in a multi-age problem-based learning environment, there is also an important social and learning dynamic that occurs with same-aged cohorts (one example given was outdoor education).

7. **Teachers chosen by students** based on student learning styles and resonance with certain teachers, without as much concern for numbers in “a class”. Students recognized that this could present serious logistical, contractual and systemic issues for teachers and boards, but wanted to express their desire for some say in the match between teacher approaches and the needs and dispositions of learners.
8. **Pervasive, transparent and appropriate uses of technology** to support learning and teaching. Participants said that for now widespread use of wireless laptops or the equivalent could be the answer, but only with full access to online resources, online learning environments and mentors. However, students also recognized that we are moving toward an era when high powered handheld devices will bring everything a learner needs into the palm of his or her hand. This should be not just allowed but **required** in the learning environment of the future.
9. **More learning from the present than the past**. Students said that it should be a requirement to have done a global studies course or similar to ensure real learning about current global issues as part of a graduation program. They spoke of this as creating a built-in requirement for all students to have studied ethical and moral issues related to key issues of our time. While they were clear about the value of learning history, culture, languages, literature and the arts, they articulated a need for more emphasis on current context.

**10. Refocusing curriculum on large current areas of learning, with fewer discrete learning outcomes:** Without taking the time to examine what all of those larger areas of learning should be, students began their analysis by suggesting at least:

- a. Economics, including global issues and matters of personal finance
- b. Environmental issues and ecology
- c. Social justice and ethics, including ethical uses of technology
- d. Health, medicine, wellness, physical health and life balance
- e. The world of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- f. Social forces shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including religion
- g. Arts and culture, including cross-connections to other disciplines
- h. Critical consideration, analysis and synthesis of information

Participants were clear that regardless of the courses or areas of learning there should be less content (fewer outcomes). That would allow learning to be deeper, with more meaning, relevance and staying power. They also said that we should not abandon many of the current outcomes that are found in subjects, and that even in a new and more flexible model it may still make sense to study some subjects sequentially alongside same-aged peers.

#### **“What Now” – Advice for Government:**

Forum participants have the following advice for government as it prepares to modernize the education system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

1. **Maintain or increase the investment in public education.** Specifically, be prepared to spend more if “modernizing” leads us in that direction. Public education is too important to shortchange, and a more engaging and relevant system, with 21<sup>st</sup> century approaches, will be more complex and probably more costly. Expecting teachers to serve as facilitators, advisors, subject specialists and experts in instruction and assessment will likely mean that we will need more teachers, support staff and administrators than exists in the current system.
2. Still with the economics of education, do a **long-view cost-benefit analysis.** Students believe that if we as a society, through our elected government, spend more on public education now we will reduce poverty (therefore social programs), save on health costs, require less policing, prosecution and incarceration, and create a more eco-friendly and globally responsible society.
3. **Focus on teacher training;** make sure new teachers have these big ideas. Train a new generation with new ideas and be more careful with who is chosen as a teacher. Ensure that all new teachers have passion, content knowledge, instructional expertise and capacity to teach for diversity. Teachers need to be competent, intelligent, committed, passionate, compassionate and sensitive. Have the highest possible standards for all people working in education, and hold them to those standards.

4. Don't assume or judge intelligence or abilities. **Create a secondary education system that honours all learners** for where they fit, allows them to find their way and allows them to demonstrate their learning in ways and at times that make sense to them.
5. **Seek advice**, particularly from students.
6. **Work collaboratively across the province** without political acrimony, particularly if that pits government against any particular group. Focus on the students and their future.
7. **Get on with it, and don't take it back.** Once you have created a new, relevant and properly resources system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have the courage to stick with it even as people complain and call for a change back to the good old days (as is sure to happen).

This paper has been prepared with pride and optimism by students from Saanich neighbourhood, alternate and distributed learning secondary schools. We hope that it can contribute positively to the dialogue on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and that through that dialogue we can all work to create the best possible environments for future learners.

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Credits and Contacts:

Student Authors:

Katie St John – Stelly's Secondary School  
Piper Giles – Saanich Individual Learning Centre (ILC)  
Samantha Burden – South Island Distance Education School (SIDES)  
Tom Kazmirchuk – Claremont Secondary School  
Kim Blair – Parkland Secondary School

Administrative Support:

Vijay Pereira – Vice-Principal, Stelly's Secondary School  
Wendy MacDonald – Principal, Individual Learning Centre (ILC)  
Kevin White – Principal, South Island Distance Education School (SIDES)  
Deb Whitten – Vice-Principal, Claremont Secondary School  
Spencer Gray – Vice-Principal, Parkland Secondary School

Project Sponsor and Contact:

Dr. Keven Elder, Superintendent of Schools  
Office 250-652-7332, [kelder@sd63.bc.ca](mailto:kelder@sd63.bc.ca)