

Building Human and Institutional Capacity for ESD in the Richmond School District, British Columbia

Passion, vision and a team of irrepressible students, staff, parents and community partners are at the core of the Richmond School District's sustainability initiatives. Over the past decade, the District has aimed to enhance student engagement and build organizational capacity for change with a focus on social responsibility, global citizenship and environmental stewardship.

It all started with large-scale energy efficiency improvements introduced by the Secretary Treasurer to reduce cost. Now, thousands of individuals annually participate in learning events and action initiatives, which often dovetail with community sustainability goals. Strong leadership and an emerging alignment of values have created a readiness within the school system to now move forward with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

“Much of what we have done is seek an alignment among people, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise, and giving initiatives extra prominence and support to ensure their success,” explains Bruce Beirsto, Superintendent of Schools and CEO, Richmond School District. “It’s been a matter of creating a school culture that fosters particular values, and looking for opportunities related to staffing, government initiatives, funding programs and so on. In our case, a little of each has served as a catalyst to greater things.”

The benefits of this approach have been far-ranging, including enhanced student leadership, staff engagement and community

involvement, and an improved ability to manage operations and facilities in ways that reap both environmental and financial rewards. The establishment of a Sustainability Secretariat in 2008 signals the District's intention to formalize its commitment and set a strong strategic direction for ESD across the system.

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Nurturing Student Leadership and Social Responsibility

Long before it formally embraced ESD, student leadership and social responsibility figured prominently in the Richmond School District's policies and programs. Beginning with the Student Leadership Initiative over ten years ago, the District established The Association for Building Leadership Excellence, a secondary school student organization known as TABLE 38.

Run by high school students with the assistance of District Administrators Glenn Kishi and Wendy Lim, TABLE 38 meets monthly to promote student leadership and social responsibility throughout the District's ten high schools. Each school takes a turn hosting a meeting where students share ideas, skills and experiences. Upon returning to their respective schools, the student representatives work with school Leadership Teams to develop and implement action plans that will build community and advance their particular leadership goals.

“We have embedded a system of leadership across the schools,” remarks Ms.Lim. “We see our role very much as nurturing student voice so that students can provide input, for example, into school policies and decisions that affect them.” Complementing the efforts of TABLE 38 and the school Leadership Teams are a District student newsletter Team and a Richmond Student Leadership Conference Committee. Organized by a committee of more than 45 elementary and secondary students, the conference is for students from grades six to 12, who take part in workshops on topics such as leadership, social responsibility, critical thinking and ethical decision-making.

In 2002, partly as a result of seed funding made available through energy savings, sustainability surfaced as a theme of interest among the leadership activities, and since then has added momentum and direction to ongoing efforts. “The sustainability focus has brought substance, import and enthusiasm by giving the students a purpose, something to be leading *about*,” explains Mr. Beairsto. “It is not just leadership *per se*; it is leadership towards an end. If you add a moral purpose to all that youthful energy and intention, you can get something really profound.”

Today there are Richmond Student Sustainability Action Teams (RSSAT) at about half of the high schools across the District, engaging secondary students in sustainability workshops and projects. Projects to date have addressed waste reduction, recycling, reduction of greenhouse gases, community gardening, school ground greening initiatives, composting and anti-idling campaigns. Members of RSSAT raise community awareness of these issues through presentations to community groups and exhibitions at community events.

The District has developed an environmental sustainability course for grade 10, 11 and 12 students involved in the Richmond Student Sustainability Action Teams. As part of the coursework, students implement sustainability action plans in their local school community demonstrating the achievement of course objectives. Complementing these projects, the course provides a theoretical framework through which students reflect on and learn from their experiences, and discuss topics such as sustainability, climate change, social responsibility and global citizenship.

To support their work, the District offers grants of up to \$1,000. The grants focus on community-based action learning, with the expectation that, over the course of their projects, students, staff and the school community will learn how to define, measure and evaluate the project's impact. The Teams produce a final report and present the results of their projects at Eco-Fest, an annual student-organized community conference and tradeshow held on Earth Day, and/or at the Green Gala, a sustainability networking event held in May. Student interest in these projects is strong,

with the number of grant applications doubling in 2007/2008, when 26 grants were approved. Funding for the grants comes from within the Facilities Management budget, allocated on savings realized through the District's energy conservation programs.

To support the formal learning of RSSAT members and give participants credit for their learning, the District has recently developed a new environmental sustainability curriculum. An option for grade 10, 11 and 12 students, the course is taught 60% on line and 40% through face-to-face meetings. Complementing the projects undertaken by the students, the course provides a theoretical framework through which students reflect on and learn from their experiences, and discuss topics such as sustainability, climate change, social responsibility and global citizenship. As part of the coursework, each student implements sustainability action plans in their local school community demonstrating the achievement of course objectives.

The emergence of leadership and sustainability as central themes has been intentional, although not driven by a formally vetted Board or senior management vision. Instead, Mr. Beirsto has been careful to leverage the talent and personal interests of staff by recognizing and nurturing individual and collective aspirations. He views every hiring occasion, staff reassignment and promotion as an opportunity to advance the leadership and sustainability agendas. The result is an impassioned and aligned team. The selection of Glenn Kishi and Wendy Lim as leadership and sustainability coaches illustrates this approach. "Glenn showed a compelling passion and vision for student leadership and Wendy felt equally as strong about leadership and the environment,"

remarks Mr. Beirsto. "Although their original job descriptions may not have completely reflected these roles, I encouraged them to take leadership. The result has been remarkable."

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In addition to this approach to reinforcing the work of emerging leaders, the District reaches out to staff more broadly through an annual Sustainability Kickoff meeting, the Sustainability Showcase, the Sustainability Network and the Inspiring Student Leadership Development Network. These events and initiatives provide critical support and professional development for teachers and staff across the District so that they can better promote student leadership and engagement. At the Sustainability Kickoff meeting, teachers and staff share ideas and experiences about School Sustainability Action Plans. At the Sustainability Showcase, also held in the fall, teachers, staff and students come together to discuss sustainability projects and services within the community and local businesses; guest speakers are often invited, and over 70 teachers and staff attend this event annually. Ongoing opportunities to meet, discuss projects and explore issues are provided through the Sustainability Network, open to students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members. And finally, professional development for teachers and administrators who work as leadership advisors is offered through the Inspiring Student Leadership Development Network. "These programs help teachers and staff to understand and implement the principles of effective student leadership development," comments Ms.

Lim. “It’s professional development geared to enabling learners to use critical thinking to solve problems, make informed decisions and take appropriate action for student leadership enhancement whether that be school spirit, global citizenship or sustainability.”

Creating an Institutional Framework to Enable ESD

As with the student leadership and sustainability initiatives, official support for ESD within the District has been growing and evolving over the past decade. In 1998, the Board of Trustees passed an Environmental Stewardship policy, which outlined the Board’s commitment to integrate environmental education into the curriculum, to conduct its affairs in an environmentally responsible manner and to provide professional development for staff regarding environmental concepts, principles and practices. With respect to environmental education in particular, the policy highlighted the importance of interdisciplinarity, experiential learning, critical thinking and student empowerment.

The Board remains firmly committed to the policy and to the programs and initiatives that it has enabled. Board Chair, Linda McPhail, underlines the role that the Board can play in elevating the profile of sustainability initiatives, for example through active participation in events and through official (mid-year and end-year) reports. “As Trustees we need to empower the staff, teachers and students involved in these initiatives,” she observes. “It’s been ten years since we passed the Environmental Stewardship policy, and we have had to be patient, supportive and willing to enable people to make a difference and follow their passions. Our programs are an investment,

and we are starting to see the results of our efforts.”

Prior to the formation of the 2008 Sustainability Secretariat, the District’s vehicle for managing a coordinated, interdepartmental approach to sustainability was the Richmond Sustainability Action Team (RSAT). The team was comprised of the Manager of Facilities, the District Administrator responsible for professional development, an elementary school teacher, and the teacher consultant responsible for environmental sustainability and science. The group met regularly and was responsible for guiding and carrying out the District’s sustainability initiatives.

One of the first major projects taken on by RSAT was a joint initiative with the City of Richmond and the Vancouver Airport Authority in 2004 on the federal government’s One-Tonne Challenge. This program, which challenged individual Canadians to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by one tonne each year, was a significant catalyst for the District’s sustainability activities. The District received a grant for community outreach and curriculum development. As part of the outreach program, student teams learned about climate change, social marketing and making effective public presentations. They also participated in community events. This action-based approach to learning left a profound impression on the students involved, as suggested by the words of one student: “Every time I watched the shocked reaction of strangers as they learned about the human impact on the earth I felt a sense of satisfaction with myself. Can my words truly influence the attitudes and actions of people? The social studies teacher at my school used the expression social responsibility. As an RSSAT Ambassador

for my school I have since learned to appreciate these two words.”

The latest development in terms of official recognition and support for ESD was the creation of the Sustainability Secretariat in 2008. Established in response to new municipal waste disposal fees and a new provincial requirement that school districts be carbon neutral by 2010, the Secretariat will provide coherence to the District’s sustainability initiatives and develop long-term strategies to enhance its environmental stewardship and ensure compliance with the new regulations. “The Secretariat will formalize all that has been happening over the years in terms of facilities and operations, professional development, student leadership and curriculum development,” remarks Ms. Lim. “I’m confident that it will establish the institutional framework needed to engage the entire system in moving forward with ESD.” While the District has yet to determine the structure, mandate and authority of this new body, in the interim the District Superintendent and the Secretary Treasurer will serve as co-chairs.

Managing Facilities and Operations

Even prior to the 1998 Environmental Stewardship Policy, the District had been investigating and trialing environmentally responsible approaches to facilities management. The first of these efforts involved a geothermal system to heat and cool one of the new schools. Soon thereafter the District engaged in a multi-year, District-wide energy conservation project with BC Hydro. The timing was opportune, since BC Hydro was seeking a pilot site for the re-launch of its PowerSmart program and natural gas prices had soared from \$4 to \$20 per cubic foot. In 2001, the District

invested \$5.4 million in new heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems and energy upgrades and received \$1,000,000 in funding incentives through the BC Hydro program and from Natural Resources Canada. It later received additional funding from these agencies for further energy conservation projects and lighting upgrades. The resulting energy savings were so substantial that the loan acquired to fund the original project was discharged several years earlier than anticipated. Today, the legacy of these projects continues to be an annual energy savings of about \$1 million per year.

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Meanwhile, changes in provincial policy were also critical in driving the District’s decision to pursue energy savings. In the late 1990’s the Ministry of Education gave school districts more control over their capital budgets and thus over the size and scope of energy conservation projects. At the same time, the Ministry moved away from funding districts on the basis of square footage of facilities to a model where funding was provided on a per student basis. In the face of declining enrollment, this strategy of loosening the reins of control on one hand and tightening funding on the other, forced the District to reexamine its maintenance and energy costs. Because funding was based on the number of students per school, and not on the actual costs of energy and maintenance, there was a real incentive to lower costs through conservation measures. “Before, costs flowed through our organization to the

Ministry. Once the Ministry changed the funding formula we saw the need to make changes,” notes Eric Thorleifson, Manager of Facilities and member of the Sustainability Action Team. The District has had to make tough decisions to close some schools and upgrade others, while taking advantage of opportunities to be more innovative in facility design and construction. One of the latest additions to its schools is being built to a LEED[™] gold standard.¹

Increasingly, it makes financial sense to implement sustainability measures. For example, Metro Vancouver’s Regional Waste Facilities recently implemented a policy banning recyclables and garden waste from its landfills. The District now faces a 50% surcharge penalty on tipping fees where loads have more than 5% of these materials. In addition, the provincial government has passed legislation requiring public institutions to be carbon neutral by 2010 and to reduce carbon emissions by 33% by 2020. These factors, coupled with rising electricity costs, put pressure on the District to step up its focus on sustainability while leveraging student engagement and staff leadership as part of the solution. Mr. Thorleifson is up to the challenge. “Because of RSSAT, we have the capacity to build interest throughout our schools in waste reduction and recycling. These are very much activities that schools can rally around, and something that kids can apply at home and in their communities,” notes Mr. Thorleifson. “With recycling and waste management, schools have to walk the talk,”

¹ LEED, which stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a Canadian Green Building Council rating system that assesses the design, construction and operation of ‘green’ buildings from a whole-building, life-cycle perspective. Rating criteria take into consideration sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality.

he adds. “If we do not follow our own advice, we lose credibility. Kids need to see that the school is doing its part. This goes beyond the bottom line – fundamentally, it’s about how and what we teach our kids.”

Lessons Learned

For over a decade the Richmond School District has aimed to nurture leadership and encourage environmentally responsible behaviour, taking advantage of funding opportunities and financial incentives as they have arisen. At one level, there has been a consistent focus on building human capacity, and at another, growing institutional support in the form of policy and interdepartmental coordination and decision-making. With the creation of the Sustainability Secretariat, the District is now poised and ready to implement ESD across the system.

In getting to this point, there has never been a clear map to follow forward. Rather, the change process has evolved organically, driven by leaders distributed across all levels of the system. “We have intentionally sought out people who are keen to make things happen,” remarks Susan Tse, Vice Principal and former teacher consultant for sustainability initiatives. “Our maxim is ‘go with the goers.’ Whether these people are students, teachers, custodians or retired teachers, we want to support them so that they in turn can coach and mentor others.”

Those who have embarked on this open-ended learning journey have been guided by a few key convictions, including the importance of action-based learning, social responsibility and student leadership and engagement. Partnerships with community groups and businesses have given all involved a chance to see how learning can be part and parcel of projects that make a

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tangible difference in the world, whether in terms of greenhouse gas reduction, school ground greening, energy conservation or recycling. Because of the relationships forged over the years, the District now works with the broader community on such initiatives as a matter of course. From a pedagogical perspective, benefits include enhanced skills and competencies for communication, collaboration, problem-solving, critical reflection and civic participation, as well as a renewed interest in and motivation for learning. As one student notes, “I finally had the opportunity to make a difference in something I cared about. The passion of other students and instructors motivated me and together we spread that passion.”

The focus on student engagement and leadership has translated into a readiness at the grassroots for seizing opportunities as they arise. The District’s ability to participate in the One-Tonne Challenge and to take advantage of related funding opportunities, for example, was possible because the District had the leadership capacity to mobilize quickly. “It was perfect timing,” recalls Ms. Lim. “We had already come a long way at the time, and receiving the grant [for the One Tonne Challenge] allowed us to pull it all together.” In the face of new and often unanticipated social, environmental and financial pressures, the

District’s growing capacity for ESD should enable it to respond more effectively.

Future Directions

Despite its many successes to date, the District currently faces a number of challenges in moving forward. One is the vulnerability of programs to ongoing turnovers in staff and student leaders. Many of the initiatives and community relationships are associated with particular individuals, and when these individuals move on – when students graduate, for example – their departure leaves a void within the leadership and sustainability teams. “One thing that is hard to get across to student leaders is the need to mentor others,” notes Rosalind Poon, Teacher Consultant, Science and Sustainability. “Succession planning among our students is key to keeping the momentum going in student-led processes.”

Mr. Beirsto recognizes a similar vulnerability with staff turnover and underlines the need for more planning at the organizational level, so that programs become part of a formal, documented strategy with an allocated budget. “So far, we have followed the people with the drive to make things happen, but this needs to coalesce into an explicit organizational objective,” he remarks. To better understand and explore what was needed, Ms. Lim and Mr. Thorleifson attended the inaugural seminar of the Sustainability and Education Academy in Toronto in 2007. There they identified several key steps to take in the planning process, including: 1) compiling an historical record of their accomplishments, 2) documenting financial pressures related to energy use and waste management, 3) conducting a “gap” analysis of current programming to identify needs and priorities, and 4) exploring funding models

for sustainability programs. “I would like to look at options that directly reward schools where energy and waste savings have taken place,” comments Thorleifson. “But we need to find a system that is fair, since a school that is older may not be able to benefit as much as a new school.”

The District acknowledges the need to move beyond its current environmental focus and explicitly embrace the concept of sustainability more fully. Programs already address many of the social and economic aspects of sustainability, but these need to be brought to the fore.

In addition, the District acknowledges the need to move beyond its current environmental focus and explicitly embrace the concept of sustainability more fully. “Whether it is the One-Tonne Challenge or school-based projects, the main idea is a sustainable future,” notes Lim. “Our programs already address many of the social and economic aspects of sustainability, but we need to bring them to the fore and label them as such.”

Currently, 22 of the District’s 48 schools have organized sustainability initiatives, and the hope is to roll these out more broadly. Integrating ESD into the curriculum and into activities that take place during regular school hours will help ensure broader outreach, particularly for elementary students unable to participate in after-school initiatives. “We need to move sustainability programming up through more schools and involve more teachers and students,” maintains Mr. Thorleifson. “We need to raise the bar, communicate the vision and help people see how to incorporate ESD into everyday decisions about operations, teaching and learning and into the delivery of their core mandates.” Clearly, the new Sustainability Secretariat will be an

important forum for enabling the accomplishment of all of these objectives.

Acknowledgements

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Web Resources

- LEED Certification:
http://www.cagbc.org/building_rating_systems/leed_rating_system.php
- Richmond School District’s Website:
<http://www.sd38.bc.ca>

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About SEdA

The Sustainability and Education Academy (SEdA) is a collaborative response to the UN Decade for ESD involving the Faculty of Education and the Schulich Business School at York University and the non-governmental organization Learning for a Sustainable Future.