

Final Project – The Van Lunen Center

Project Title: *3 Initiatives to Enhance the Educational Experience of High School Students*

Name and Position: Chris Steenhof, Principal

Name of School and Location: Bulkley Valley Christian School, Smithers, BC, Canada.

Name of Consultant: Greg Gerber, EdD, SCSBC

Overall Summary: As the basis for my project, I introduced three new initiatives at the high school. The impetus for these initiatives stem from two sources: the new BC Education Plan, a far-reaching and progressive new curriculum implemented by our provincial government; and our own 5 Year Strategic Plan, a comprehensive document that lays out the direction for Bulkley Valley Christian School in a number of strategic areas. While these two sources provided the rationale and impetus for employing these three plans, our high school staff have been considering ways in which to move in this particular direction over the last two years.

Bulkley Valley Christian School (BVCS): BVCS is located in Smithers, British Columbia, Canada. It's nestled in the beautiful Bulkley Valley, on the east side of the coastal mountain ranges of the province. BVCS has a rich history in Smithers, one of many schools in BC started by Dutch immigrants in the 1960s. Currently, BVCS has 185 students in Kindergarten to Grade 12, 45 students in a distributed learning program, and 20 students in pre-school. Over the last ten years, it has undergone significant demographic change, becoming more interdenominational and ethnically diverse. Presently, the school is almost 20% visible minority, including a significant African-Canadian population.

BVCS receives government funding in the amount of 50% of the operating costs per student of our local public district. This works out to approximately \$5000 per student. The rest of the budget comes from tuition and donations. Independent schools in BC that receive government funding are required to follow government curriculum and learning standards but are allowed to infuse their own faith perspective.

Administratively, BVCS is governed by a board. I currently serve as principal of both the DL school and the Bricks and Mortar Campus. Part of my responsibility is overseeing the high school program, where all 3 of these initiatives took place. The high school program works on a semester system with 3 academic blocks meeting 6 hours a week and 2 elective blocks meeting 3 hours a week.

Our student body at the high school level is currently 73 students but we anticipate growing numbers in the next few years. We have a teaching staff of 5 teachers, most of whom teach at the high school level full-time. Despite our small numbers, we have managed to offer many different options to our students by using our DL campus, non-traditional instruction, and other creative solutions. We also have a strong emphasis on

experiential education, taking advantage of local opportunities for learning (a trip to the island of Haida Gwaii for example) and government programs – government program sponsoring travel to Victoria, the province’s capital, and *Encounters with Canada*, a program fostering travel to the nation’s capital to learn about the history of Canada.

The BC Education Plan: The BC government, after a number of years of consultation with parents, teachers, and professionals, implemented a modified curriculum for all public schools and funded independent schools in the province. Implementation of the program began this school year for Kindergarten to Grade 9. The implementation for Grade 10-12, the point where students begin to gain credits, begins in 2018-2019 but schools are strongly encouraged to start transitioning in the 2017-2018 school year.

The modified curriculum involves major changes in both curriculum and pedagogy. Overall, it emphasizes preparing students for a changing world. It gives freedom for schools to be innovative and creative by deemphasizing the accumulation of facts and knowledge and emphasizing process, the synthesis and application of knowledge, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and personal and communal responsibility.

At the high school level, implementation of the plan includes significant change for individual teachers in all areas of the curriculum but also will involve structural changes and innovative thinking that will allow students to experience learning in different formats and a variety of settings. As the educational leader of the school, it is my task to facilitate and imagine how this change will be realized at BVCS.

Our Strategic Plan: Our strategic plan was released in October 2016. It was created by a taskforce of our board of directors which included teachers, board members, parents, and administrators. I was pleased to chair this taskforce and guide the process. We garnered input from all stakeholders in the school through interviews, surveys, group discussions, an external learning and curriculum review, etc. We then spent time drafting, editing, and finalizing the document.

The plan has several sections but the relevant sections for this project were under the heading of education. This section included the following bullets that I felt were connected to the three initiatives:

- encourage the development of experiential learning;
- examine education structures to allow for a diversity of learning opportunities;
- emphasize variety, student choice, and flexibility in the high school program to better facilitate helping all students find and develop their gifts; and
- ensure teaching practices enhance student engagement, include individualized and differentiated instruction, and allow for student choice.

Initiative #1: An Integrated and Experiential Approach to Humanities

This initiative involved developing a humanities approach to teaching English and Bible at the Grade 10-12 level. The rationale for this initiative included more emphasis on integration, student choice, team-teaching, and flexibility. In terms of scheduling, all students in Grade 10-12 were blocked together with two teachers (I was one of the teachers as I teach Senior English) for 6 hours a week all year long. The teachers developed a schedule that included the following:

- each student would choose 4 of 8 English blocks;
- each student would choose 4 of 8 Bible blocks;
- each student would take a mandatory English block and a mandatory Bible block;
- a team-taught unit for all students on Career Preparation and Healthy relationships; and
- a variety of opportunities for guest speakers or special learning opportunities related to either Bible or English.

The choice blocks were designed to give students a limited range of choice – for example, in English, students were still required to study poetry but one unit emphasized spoken word poetry while the other unit emphasized more traditional poetry. In Bible, students were required to choose one of two Biblical book studies.

Assessment was separated by subject with students receiving a unit mark which contributed to their final mark in that subject. We originally planned some differentiation between grade levels in terms of assessment but we quickly realized that this was difficult and often unnecessary.

Assessing this Initiative:

There were many positives of this initiative. One of the unexpected benefits was the cross-graded relationships between students that formed inside and outside the classroom. The barriers between grade levels dissolved quickly in the classroom environment. This initiative also broke down some established classroom dynamics and cultures in a positive manner. Other positives included allowing student choice within parameters while still maintaining a certain structure to the curriculum, team teaching that provided opportunities to brainstorm pedagogies, and curricular choices that provided excellent learning opportunities for students.

Some things to address going forward:

- allowing for differentiation in terms of expectations for different grade levels;
- allowing for differentiation in terms of assessment;
- ensuring literacy skill development runs throughout the year;

- rethinking current evaluation model;
- allowing more opportunity for team teaching and cross curricular learning;
- the place of exams or final assessments; and
- a long range plans to ensure that students over the three years will meet goals of the program.

Going Forward:

We plan to continue this initiative for the next school year and will address the concerns listed above.

Initiative #2: Flex Blocks

This initiative involved adding blocks into our schedule to allow for experiential, cooperative learning, student choice, and the ability to insert other learning opportunities into our schedule. The purposes of the flex blocks were as follows:

- allow students to work on projects developed by teachers in the three academic blocks that emphasized collaboration, experiential learning, and student choice;
- allow students to study, get extra help, or work on assignments from their three academic courses;
- allow students to work on any distributed (online) courses they were enrolled in;
- allow teachers to use these blocks for learning opportunities that did not fit within the regular blocking;
- allow staff to schedule school-wide events such as special speakers, seminars, etc.; and
- allow a small group of students to access trades training at our local community college.

We reduced each of our academic blocks by one hour a week and created a two hour block of time on Wednesday afternoon and a one hour block of time on Friday afternoon. These flex blocks took effect in the second semester.

Planning around these blocks included communicating the purposes of the blocks to parents and students, communicating expectations to students, planning for supervision by teachers and SEAs, and discussion in staff meetings around planning activities in the various courses.

Assessing the Initiative:

This initiative took on a life of its own. Due to various factors including the nature of our graduating students and the busyness of many of our students in the second semester (we had successful sports teams heading to provincials, a major class trip to Ottawa, and many other events), the flex blocks became more of a “catch-up” or “finish my

homework” periods. Most students worked hard during the blocks but often on course work that was not intended to be completed in the flex blocks. As well, some teachers did not plan for activities in their courses to allow for collaboration and experiential education, two elements we were looking for in the flex blocks. The opportunities for learning activities as a result of the Flex blocks (French 11 and trades education) were positive learning opportunities for students. Teachers have expressed a desire to re-evaluate the flex blocks at the end of the year, something we plan to do.

Some things to address going forward:

- How do we ensure and plan for teachers to include projects/activities that encourage collaboration and innovative learning so that flex blocks can be used for the purposes intended?
- Do we structure the flex blocks differently so that these purposes can better be met?
- Do we eliminate student choice (students can choose what to work on) so that our other purposes can be met more effectively?
- Can we communicate better with students and parents regarding the purposes of flex blocks?
- How do we allow our flex blocks to support our professional development goals and the direction of the BC Education Plan and our 5 Year Strategic Plan?

The Plan:

We will continue engaging the flex block structure next year, probably only in the second semester, but we will need to spend time in the first semester reflecting and improving teacher induction to the philosophical and pedagogical frameworks required to better engage student learning.

Initiative #3: Exploratories: Discovering and Exploring New Areas of Inquiry

This initiative involved taking a six week period at the end of the school year and providing more choice for students in their elective blocks, giving students the opportunity to discover and explore areas of inquiry relevant for life in Smithers. These new electives included numerous options we were able to offer by using instructors from the community, teachers, and other school staff. Students were given choice as to which elective to choose, but were encouraged to choose electives that they had not experienced before. We also opened up these options to parents. These electives included:

- Introduction to Photography – learning the basics of a camera;

- Choir – This choir was a combination of high school students and senior citizens from our community;
- Textiles – an introduction to the basics of sewing;
- Outdoor Education – an introduction to recreational water activity involving weekly trips to local lakes;
- Introduction to Dance – An introduction to different genres of dance; and
- Visual Arts.

Assessing the Initiative

At the writing of this report, this initiative is only at the halfway point of implementation. Feedback from teachers, students, and parents so far has been excellent. Students are excited about the range of opportunities and are enjoying exploring a new activity or skill.

Some things to address going forward:

- Do we extend this next year for the entire second semester and give students two choices?
- What are some of the different activities that students would choose if given the opportunity?
- How do we report learning to parents and the school community?
- Can we have common themes that run through the different sessions – for example – creativity, self-expression, service, etc.?

Overall Reflection: Three Things I Learned:

- 1) Communication with all stakeholders is very important for something to be successful. Getting staff, students, and parents on board is important to any initiative.
- 2) Experimentation and vision sometimes results in temporary failure. Failure can mean abandoning an initiative but this should only be after adequate reflection. Sometimes tweaking these educational initiatives may result in success. I'm hoping this will be the case for initiative #2.
- 3) Visioning involves change and change is hard for some. It's important to point the way forward and to assure stakeholders that changes will not result in catastrophic failure.

Did the Initiatives Make a Difference to Student Learning?

I sincerely believe the answer to this is YES!