



Transformational Change in the Cowichan Valley

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Duncan Christian School has undergone a major demographic transformation since implementing changes to the DCS admissions policy in 2009.

My action project sought to examine how changes to the admissions policy in 2009 have impacted Duncan Christian School. I analyzed the admissions policy in light of our current demographics and school culture, and worked with the school board to rewrite parts of the policy in order to nurture and protect the mission and vision of Duncan Christian School as we seek to develop disciples of Jesus Christ.

Additionally, I have coordinated a secondary library and learning commons building project that will begin in June 2016. This \$250,000 (CAD) project was commenced in response to our analysis of demographic changes since 2009 so that we can better support the diverse learning gifts of all students.

Lastly, my action project identified challenges the school now faces and addresses those challenges through specific courses of action.

First, a Bit of History

The school's history began with its inception in 1960 by hard-working, primarily Dutch farming immigrants who arrived in Canada post-World War II. The new Canadians desired to retain their reformed philosophy of Christian education and church, resulting in their starting of the Duncan Christian Reformed Church, and not long after, Duncan Christian School.

The first DCS building was constructed in 1962 by a crew of volunteers on the property of Duncan Christian Reformed Church. In the 1980s an eight acre property was purchased in Duncan, BC and the school was cut in quarters by chainsaw wielding supporters, tracted across the street to its current location, and reassembled as a K-7 campus. Since then more building additions have taken place, including the construction of a secondary school for grades 8-12 in 1989, and most recently the construction of a large and modern secondary gymnasium, fitness room, and computer lab in 2010 (\$3.5 million project).

Duncan Christian School began with a handful of students from families at Duncan Christian Reformed Church (CRC) but almost immediately began accepting Christian, church-going families from outside the CRC denomination. Up until 2009, in the tradition of the majority of Christian schools in BC and under the umbrella of the Society of Christian Schools in BC (SCSBC), the admissions policy restricted enrollment and association membership to families understood to be coming from Christian homes who were able to provide a reference letter from a pastor.

While in practice this 'covenantal' admissions policy helped to ensure the vast majority of students shared the same values, or at the minimum their parents did, the school board found that despite the covenantal, or closed, admissions policy non-Christian families who rarely attended church had in fact been admitted to the school. Some of these students entered under the guidance of church-going grandparents who over time lost influence in their grandchildren's lives. Others were admitted because generous pastors provided letters of reference in spite of the family's lack of church attendance, or because it can be difficult to accurately monitor church attendance.

What emerged from these discussions was the desire to provide Christian education to families who had not grown up in the church as a missional outreach within the Cowichan Valley.

Changes in Admissions Policy

In 2009 the Duncan Christian School board approved changes to the admissions policy that allowed families to enroll at DCS who could provide a reference letter from a Christian pastor or a Christian friend/mentor. The policy was rewritten to state that parents must be in agreement and “support” the Christian tenets of the school and the integration of Christian teachings into all parts of school life, even if they were not believers themselves.

These sweeping changes were intended to allow for a missional component to the school so that the gospel message could be shared with families new to the faith, or unsure of their spiritual direction, but desiring to be in a Christian school environment.

The results of these changes were dramatic. Within seven years of the admissions policy changes the school grew from 243 students in 2009 to 350 students in 2016, and unexpectedly, the vast majority of growth was from First Nation (Aboriginal) families.

Reconciliation And Relationship Building

The community of Duncan is centred in the Cowichan Valley, which is home to the largest First Nation band in British Columbia, Cowichan Tribes. DCS policy changes in 2009 allowed for a large increase in enrollment of First Nation students into the school. The majority of these families desired Christian education because they sensed that the staff “care about my kids”, the school is “welcoming”, and teaches Christian values. Cowichan parents also made comments like, “At DCS my kids will learn to read and will graduate”.

The First Nation people in the Cowichan Valley place great importance on the concepts of living in community, hospitality, and spirituality. Many of the First Nation parents or grandparents new to the school grew up in the local Catholic church and were familiar with the basic foundations of the Christian faith. Some had endured tragic and scarring experiences within Canadian ‘indian residential schools’ during the mid 20th century, a time when children were often forcibly removed from their homes and educated to a minimal level in government funded boarding schools, often run by missionaries from a variety of Christian denominations.

These residential schools were intended to help the First Nation people conform to European norms of governance, lifestyle and religion. In practice, they largely stripped the First Nation people of their native language and culture. Multiple accounts have come forward of abuses the aboriginal children suffered while in the care of the residential school, and the result of this is many open wounds still present within the local First Nation people. Residential schools and the wounds resulting from them have contributed to issues of poverty, substance abuse, suicide, and broken families within Cowichan Tribes.

Tragically, for some DCS parents and grandparents, a Christian school or church is a symbol of repression, a place where one’s identity and heritage was stripped away; a place of humiliation and abuses. Many tears have been shed during admissions interviews in which these wounds are expressed in heart-wrenching stories. For some, sending their children or grandchildren to DCS is their first time setting foot in any form of Christian institution since residential schools. We believe the Holy Spirit is at work in this place and we invite Him to provide deep and powerful healing for these families.

Many of the Cowichan Tribes students that DCS serves have come from a background filled with brokenness and trauma, and are seeking to break the cycle of poverty, substance abuse and brokenness through education and spiritual formation. These families see DCS as a place where their children are loved, cared for, and provided with a quality education that can lead to a better life. They view DCS as a place that values the whole child, and welcome the Christian teachings of the school.

DCS now serves the largest population of First Nation students in any independent (private) school in BC, and likely the largest in western Canada. In 2015-2016, 135 of 350 students registered at DCS were from Cowichan Tribes. Although this change in demographics has presented significant challenges, powerful stories of transformation are emerging. Placed within a loving and relatively small school environment that invites the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of all students and staff, many students are being changed. The

relational nature of the staff has helped students to feel safe and cared for as a whole person. Previously disengaged and highly at-risk students are beginning to engage in their education, complete school work, receive and give respect to staff, and adopt the culture of love at Duncan Christian School.

Adults are being changed too. Those same Dutch immigrants who started the school are now seeing first hand the need to work towards reconciliation with our First Nation community members. Some are providing milk, oatmeal, pots and pans for our newly developed breakfast and lunch program which feed needy children and relies entirely on volunteer support and donations.

The unexpected benefit of our Cowichan Tribes student population growth has been the relationships that are growing and strengthening between Cowichan parents and DCS staff members, as well as DCS administration and those who work in the Cowichan Tribes band office. Meaningful reconciliation and community building are taking place.

We believe that God is calling us to a time and place in which we can share His love with those who may not know it, and to invite the Holy Spirit to heal deep and lasting wounds within individuals and between cultures. We have an opportunity to be a place where communal shalom is built, where students are building cross-cultural relationships and a better understanding of the diversity that exists within Creation; a place of healing and a place of hope.

A Challenge

Our Cowichan families indicate support for the biblical foundation of the school as well as the weaving of biblical concepts into every curricular and co-curricular activities. However, a significant percentage of Cowichan and other DCS families may not be actively practicing the Christian faith today, and may have lifestyle practices that are a hurdle to faith formation. Some students come from such significant brokenness within the home that simply showing up to school is a major accomplishment and doing homework becomes a completely unreasonable expectation.

These dynamics create challenges within the culture of the school. Students who are new to the faith or come from homes that do not regularly participate in disciplines of the Christian faith take time to adjust to the school culture, a culture that one parents described as being “Kingdom-oriented”, a culture we desire to nurture and grow.

The admissions policy of 2009 placed no restrictions on the number of unchurched families who were permitted to enroll at DCS. In short, if families verbally supported the biblical tenants of the school, the school had no solids grounds to deny entry unless learning needs were so significant and obvious that the school was unable to support them.

As a result, the school has grown from having a small percentage of unchurched families prior to 2009, to having approximately 35% in 2016. It is evident that God is at work, changing lives and working through the hands and feet of the DCS staff. Many exciting things are taking place at DCS and the importance of strengthening relationships between Cowichan Tribes and DCS cannot be overstated. This is a Kingdom impacting work, and a wonderful opportunity to share the Gospel message of Christ’s love! With much prayer, the board and staff of DCS have taken a leap of faith and trust God to continue His faithfulness to DCS. However, the road has not been an easy one.

Moving Forward

The admissions policy of 2009 succeeded in its goal to integrate unchurched families and/or non-Christian students into DCS as part of a missional outreach. However, the policy makes it difficult for administration or the school board to deny entry to a family if the parent simply states support for the biblical principles of the school, as written in the registration paperwork. In some grade levels this has led to an imbalance of churching and unchurched students and/or an imbalance of students with significant learning needs.

I have worked closely with the DCS school board to address several significant needs:

1. Revising the admissions policy to strengthen the school's ability to admit or deny enrollment or re-enrollment based on the balance of children in each grade level, and to encourage new admissions from Christian families. The new policy was recently passed by the board in May 2016.
2. Balancing debt repayment and investment in building upgrades to an aging facility so that we are better able to provide fantastic academic programs for students, including coordinating a \$250,000 renovation project of the DCS secondary library and foyer into a modern library and learning commons during the summer of 2016.
3. Creating organizational clarity regarding the school's vision for admissions at DCS through my meeting with various stakeholders, including parents, alumni, supporters, grandparents, staff, and committees.

Admissions Policy Changes of 2016

During the 2015-2016 school year I worked together with the DCS school board to make necessary changes to our admissions policy.

Specifically, our rewritten policy states directly that the school will accept a student only if it believes it can "provide a suitable educational environment" and that the school may decide that it "lacks the resources to provide for children with particular needs."

In addition, DCS now explicitly states that the school "reserves the right to not re-enroll a student for the subsequent school year if administration feels it is not in the best interest of the school and/or student" when there is a concern about a family or student's "commitment to honour and support the school's Mission and Vision", or the school's ability to meet the needs of the student.

A much debated change in our enrollment strategy was whether or not to provide a tuition discount for families of local pastors. After much discussion at both the board and finance committee levels, DCS has recently passed a Pastor's Tuition Discount Program. There remains a component of financial need to this tuition discount, although the process is much simpler than our standard tuition assistance application and relies heavily on the honesty and integrity of the pastor. In the end, this measure passed because the school board desires to strengthen partnerships with local pastors and encourage admission of families who can positively contribute to the Kingdom-oriented culture in the school. DCS thanks Nanaimo Christian School for sharing their pastor's discount application with us.

Facility Upgrades and Debt Repayment

Through both debt repayment and investing in building upgrades, DCS wishes to meet the needs of our diverse student population and to encourage admission of families who value Christ-centred academic programs and desire the best in Christian education. This is done to further our mission and vision as we work to ensure a balance of academic gifts within our student population. Both debt reduction and much-needed facility upgrades are helping to achieve this goal while also creating stable financial footing for the future.

In 2010, with a student population of 250, DCS held \$2.25 million in debt because of a newly constructed gymnasium. By June 2016 DCS will have \$950,000 remaining in debt, with a student population of 350, largely due to additional principal payments a result of careful use of financial resources and improved efficiency in staffing due to increased student numbers.

At the same time, since 2013 DCS has invested \$550,000 in new washrooms throughout both the elementary and secondary buildings, installed new flooring in many areas of the school, new heating ductwork, additional playground equipment, integrated new classroom technologies, as well as a completely renovated elementary staff room.

During the summer of 2016 DCS will invest an additional \$250,000 on a major renovation project of our secondary library and lobby, which have been left largely untouched since their construction in 1989. This project will enhance our ability to provide fantastic, Christ-centred scholastic programs for students. Particularly in light of recent changes to the entire curricular program as legislated by the Ministry of

Education in BC, the new library and learning commons will provide a flexible student space that can better adapt to a diverse range of learning activities and student needs.

I have worked extensively throughout the last year, and as part of my action project, on developing the plans for this summer project. This includes working with our board on the original concepts, conferring with the school society to gather input, developing plans in concert with an architect, soliciting feedback from the community, students, and staff, and working closely with a general contractor to turn ideas into concrete plans. We are very excited for work to begin in the coming weeks!

Organizational Clarity

Discussions with the board and the Society of Christian Schools in BC (SCSBC) have led us to examine several questions as we seek to create clarity within the school community about our direction. As a board, we've discussed at length questions such as:

- Where are we headed?
- What has been the impact of our shifting demographics?
- How do we respond to protect and nurture the mission and vision of DCS for the decades to come?
- How have staff responded to changes in admissions?
- How have existing parents and other stakeholders responded?

These board level discussions have been rich and fruitful, but we recognized the need to communicate our vision more thoroughly with current and future DCS families, as well as staff. I made it a priority during the 2015-2016 school year to speak directly and openly about our admissions procedures and challenges in an effort to create clarity of vision among all stakeholders within the DCS community. I've since met with parents of current students, alumni, long-time supporters, grandparents, staff, each of our committees, and potential new families.

I have been thoroughly blessed by these conversations. In providing clarity about our vision, as well as expressing vulnerability in sharing some of our challenges, the level of trust and support from families has only increased. Over and over, parents have shared their positive thoughts about the school, but even more importantly, they've shared some of their questions about admissions and have appreciated the opportunity to be heard by DCS leadership.

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Parents place an enormous amount of trust in the school leadership and board, a trust that I pray is well-placed. May God's Kingdom work continue at DCS in spite of our errors and missteps. We thank God for the opportunity He's provided to direct the hearts of young people to Jesus Christ and to impact children, some of whom may be the first in their family to graduate from school. In all of this, we give thanks to God for His faithfulness and pray for discernment as we navigate a challenging and exciting point in the history of Duncan Christian School.