



Transformational Change in the Cowichan Valley

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Duncan Christian School has undergone a major demographic transformation since implementing significant changes to the school's admissions policy in 2009.

First, a bit of history: The school was formed 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. DCS was started as a school for Christian families who regularly attend church.

Changes in Admissions Policy: In 2009 the Duncan Christian School board approved changes to the admissions policy. These sweeping changes integrated a missional component so that the gospel message could be shared with families new to the faith but desiring to be in a Christian school environment and supportive of the school.

The results of these changes were dramatic. Within six years of the admissions policy changes the school grew from 243 students in 2009 to 350 students in 2015-2016. Unexpectedly, the vast majority of growth was from First Nation (Aboriginal) families, coming from the largest First Nation band in BC: Cowichan Tribes.

Reconciliation And Relationship Building: Tragically, for some DCS parents and grandparents, a Christian school or church is a symbol of the repression they experienced as part of the 'indian residential school system' in Canada during the 19th and 20th centuries; a place where one's identity and heritage was often 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. What a leap of faith and trust! We pray that the Holy Spirit provides deep and powerful healing for these families and reconciliation between cultures.

DCS now serves the largest population of First Nation students in any independent (private) school in BC. 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 Christian school environment many student and adult lives are being changed.

Moving Forward: The admissions policy of 2009 succeeded in its goal to invite unchurched families and/or non-Christian students into DCS as part of a missional outreach. However, the policy makes it difficult 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 churched 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 with 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.

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.