# Involving and Engaging our Students

A Conversation about Educational Priorities and Directions

*Fraser Valley Student Forum, 2013*

# Summary

O N MONDAY, APRIL, 29, 2013, the six school districts comprising the Fraser Valley region of the BC School Superintendents Association (Fraser/Cascade, Langley, Abbotsford, Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows, Chilliwack, Mission) provided an opportunity for 175 student representatives to discuss three key questions about the future of education.

**1**  What changes in schools do you think need to be put in place in order to better serve students in the future?

**2**  What classroom changes do you think need to be put in place in order to better serve students in the future?

**3**  What types of things get you personally engaged as a learner?

This summary report provides a synopsis of the day's proceedings and an analysis of the students' responses. It is intended to contribute the student voice to the dialogue around future directions for education in British Columbia, and to help engage school staff in planning for growth, change and improvement.

Each school district was invited to make a 20 minute presentation which was followed by 10 minutes of conversation. Students documented their thoughts and ideas using twitter feeds, and the more traditional method of chart paper and post-it notes.

Students were very candid in their comments, acknowledging the positive attributes of their schools and identifying areas where the nature of the learning experience in their schools and classrooms could be improved. They spoke with passion about their schools and described teachers who had inspired them and had a personal impact on their lives.

Responses to the questions were very consistent across tables. Students incorporated multiple forms of presentation and audience engagement – powerpoints, video clips, vignettes, skits, music, role play, demonstrations, interactive polling using technology, direct responses to questions (roving microphone), mass participation, wordle, group work, and think/pair/share. It was apparent that they were modeling many of the kinds of learning experiences that engaged them as learners.

> "Kids growing up in a digital world are being exposed to new kinds of input from digital experiences for sustained periods of time on a daily basis. Consequently, their brains are reorganizing to handle the digital environment more effectively. Kids are quite literally thinking differently than those who teach them."
>
> *-- F. Kelly, T. McCain, I. Jukes*
> *Teaching the Digital Generation (2009)*

# 1 What changes do you think need to be put in place in schools in order to better serve students in the future?

PRESENTATIONS AND discussions around this question were wide ranging and touched on issues pertaining to school organization, relationships, technology, curriculum, choice, reporting and rethinking the concept of excellence.

## School Organization

Students indicated a preference for a more flexible school schedule, which allowed for more choice in terms of electives, honours and advanced placement courses, and other challenging and engaging learning experiences. They wanted fewer situations where they might be "assigned" to electives that do not address their needs and interests.

## Curriculum

Students indicated a preference for more depth over breadth in terms of curriculum offerings. Less emphasis on "coverage" and more in depth study of concepts and their relevant application to real world issues was seen to be an effective way to promote greater engagement of students with their learning.

## Extending Learning Beyond the Classroom

Students commented on the need to have greater involvement in their community and the learning opportunities that this could provide. They cited opportunities to be involved in community service as

valued learning experiences and welcomed opportunities to demonstrate leadership in resolving local community issues.

Work experience, job shadowing, and internships were recognized as valuable ways of acquiring necessary life and workplace skills, and as opportunities that better positioned students to make prudent decisions about post-secondary and career options. Students suggested that these opportunities be expanded.

Students also proposed extending learning beyond the classroom by leveraging technology to reach out to students in other classes, schools, and educational jurisdictions with a view toward collaborating on joint projects and other appropriate learning activities.

> "The more connected we are to the school and community, the richer our experiences, the more attachments are formed, the greater the chance for success."
>
> *- Fraser-Cascade students*

## Relationships

Students highly valued the relationships that they had with their peers and, especially, with their teachers. They saw a school that offered a welcoming, accepting environment and a sense of belonging to a school community as a necessary component to fostering student engagement.

Although students saw extra-curricular activities as important to building relationships and connectedness to community, they indicated that more personal connections between students and teachers played a greater role in fostering positive and productive working relationships.

## Report Cards

Students indicated that current paper-based report cards with grades and "canned" comments did not add value to the learning experience. They advocated for moving toward an electronic method of reporting with more relevant and informative commentary about why they achieved the grade that they did, what they are doing well and where they could improve.

## Technology

Students saw technology as playing a very important role in the learning process, but suggested also that learning shouldn't be totally dependent on technology. They provided some wide ranging suggestions as to how technology could be improved, including:

1. Better connectivity in schools and classrooms with less encumbered access to the internet.

2. More use of podcasting and archived video lessons as a means to provide access to review of lessons when students need it.

3. Better training for teachers in the use of technology.

## Rethinking the Recognition of Excellence

Students did not see qualifying for honour roll using GPAs in the traditional sense as providing a level playing field. They maintained that, depending on the level of difficulty of the curriculum, achieving an A in one course is not the same as in another. Nor is there enough consistency across courses and curriculum areas in terms of how those grades are determined. Students suggested that a system that acknowledges students for specific demonstrations of excellence in terms of what they produce might be a more appropriate direction to pursue.

"A key piece to the puzzle is letting students learn at their own pace with effective prompting only if needed."

*- Student*

"Community connections are so important to student learning. Embrace the learning possibilities that exist outside of the classroom."

"Human relationships are the heart of schooling. The interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are more central to student success than any method of teaching literacy, or science, or math."

- Martin Krovetz,
*Fostering Resiliency (2008)*

**2** What classroom changes do you think need to be put in place in order to better serve students in the future?

Students identified independent, self-directed learning as an essential lifelong skill. They suggested that this skill could be promoted by making learning more personalized and by giving students greater control over their learning agenda.

Within the various curriculum frameworks, students wanted some choice as to what they were learning about, as well as choice in terms of how they would demonstrate their learning. They saw teachers more as facilitators of learning.

Students indicated that they responded best to teachers who were passionate and enthusiastic about what they were teaching, and who helped them understand the purpose of what was to be learned. Within this context, students offered the following additional observations:

- Students recognize that they have different learning styles and prefer a teaching/learning environment that offers a variety of learning experiences. They understand that learning is a social process and value group work and discussions about meaningful, relevant topics and concepts of interest.

- There should be less focus on textbook materials and more relevant "hands on" experiential learning that is more problem- or project-based.

- There are some courses that need to reduce dependency on the use of passive DVD/video based

> "Classes need to be more personalized or students need to have other options that better incorporate their learning styles. Students need to understand the purpose of what they are learning."
>
> *- Student*

> "The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say, 'The children are now working as if I did not exist.'"
>
> *- Maria Montessori*

> "Textbooks from 1996! I used my mom's book in grade 10 so stop complaining."
>
> *- Student*

> "While hard work is a usual part of the learning process, agony does not need to be."
>
> *- Student*

lessons and provide a greater emphasis on more active learning.

- Students saw positive supportive working relationships between teachers and students as fundamental to success in learning. They valued teachers who were approachable and willing to go the extra mile to ensure that their students were successful. They saw this as motivating them to learn.

Students had much to say about assessment practices. They wanted to see less of a focus on marks and more on learning. Students also thought greater fairness and consistency in grading practices (in courses and across curriculum) were areas that needed attention. They offered the following additional suggestions/observations:

- Student participation in the development of assessment criteria or at least advance communion of those criteria is highly beneficial in helping students produce quality work.
- There should be less focus on testing and retention and more focus on applying concepts being learned and demonstrated in a variety of ways.
- Students should be able to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways and should have some choice as to how they might demonstrate their learning.



"GREAT TEACHERS...

- should care for students, have good relationships with them, be positive and encouraging.
- should be involved with their students more than just teaching, they should care for their well being.
- should be accepting of all kids and be creating a very safe learning environment.
- should regularly be sharing life experiences with classes. Kids learn from stories and really listen when there is a life lesson involved."

- Students

"We appreciate feedback that is ongoing and constructive and delivered in a timely manner."
- Fraser Cascade Students

## 3  What types of things get you personally engaged as a learner?

This question encouraged students to capture key ideas or to add to ideas offered in response to the first two questions.

Presentations and table conversations on this topic showed that students wanted a rich and varied array of learning experiences that were relevant to their personal lives.

They wanted to engage in areas of study that were of interest to them and that they were passionate about.

They wanted learning tasks that were challenging enough to be interesting, but not so difficult so as to be frustrating.

They wanted assessment practices that helped them improve on their work.

They wanted more ownership of their learning agenda by being involved in setting goals, choosing learning tasks that fit well with their learning styles, and developing criteria for quality work.

They reiterated the importance of positive working relationships as a foundation for engaged learning.

The Maple Ridge presentation captured the nature of learning engagement very well with three descriptors that the group called "**The 3 Ps of Learning**":

**P**

### Passion
Learning about something you are passionate about makes it more fun.

**P**

### Personalize
Everyone learns differently; one size does not fit all.

**P**

### Purpose
Students want to learn something that they will know will help them.

# Epilogue

The many issues and ideas raised by the 175 student representatives from across the Fraser Valley come as no surprise to the education community. They accurately reflect current and emergent thinking around future directions in education in this province, this country and other developed countries around the world.

In this era of rapid and relentless social, economic and technological change, there is a pressing need to re-examine the very nature of secondary schooling in order to ensure that it continues to serve our students well now and into the future. Our challenge is twofold:

1. To move closer to identifying and creating the kind of learning environment this generation of students needs, wants and expects so that students are fully engaged in their learning until the time they graduate from high school.

2. To ensure that our students become the kind of independent and self-directed learners who can thrive in a postsecondary environment, and to ensure that our students have acquired a broad set of essential skills that will position them well as contributing members of a community in an ever-changing world.

Teachers and school communities have already begun responding to the need for change with many innovations in teaching, learning, assessment, and school organization. The burning question remains: How do we get beyond experimentation and scale up preferred directions for change so that they are more pervasive in all of our school communities?

> "A teacher has two jobs, fill young minds with knowledge, yes, but more importantly, give those minds a compass so that knowledge doesn't go to waste."
>
> *- Mr. Holland's Opus, 1995*

> "Purpose is not something that you just say. You need to feel and experience it."
>
> *- Student*

> "Passion allows students to overcome hardships to achieve a goal that is meaningful for them."
>
> *- Student*

**Q** Questions Seeking Answers

## A Guide to Conversations in Professional Communities Seeking a Way Forward

Offered below is a menu of questions for consideration by school staffs who are preparing to embrace the need for change, to examine current practices, and to determine what needs changing in response to the needs, interests and learning preferences of this generation of students.

## Student Voices

What are your thoughts/reflections/observations about the student perspectives on the future direction of learning in our schools?

**Q** What have we learned from current thinking around educational reform that supports the messages that students are conveying to us?

## School Organization

How might we organize time and space to support the kinds of learning experiences that promote student engagement?

**Q** What are the challenges that are preventing us

from getting there from here and what can we do about them?

**Q** What promising programs, practices or initiatives are currently in place in our school and district that have the potential for serving as catalysts for significant change, and that may be scalable?

**Q** What programs exist in other jurisdictions that we might examine?

## Teaching and Learning

What can we do to move toward a "less is more" depth over coverage approach to curriculum?

**Q** How well are we responding to students' preferred ways of learning?

**Q** How do we engage students in more relevant and contextual-based, problem-based, or project-based learning experiences?

**Q** To what degree do we help students develop collaboration and teamwork skills and leverage technology as a tool for learning?

## Assessment , Grading, Reporting

To what degree do our assessment practices reflect current thinking around the role of assessment in promoting student learning?  To what extent are our grading and reporting practices valid, reliable, understandable and reflect current research and thinking around effective practice?

**Q**  Are students able to demonstrate learning in multiple ways with authentic tasks?

**Q**  Are students provided with specific feedback that guides and supports learning and are students given opportunities to improve on their work?

**Q**  How certain are we that our grading is supported by consistent expectations and consistent application of standards across grade and at every grade level within a curriculum area?

**Q**  Why does our schools' current system of formal and informal reporting look like it does?  Is it because of regulation, long-standing administrative practice, or convenience?  How can this system be changed so that it adds more value to teaching and learning?

## Relationships

In our school, every student is valued and cared for and this is clearly demonstrated through positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students in and outside the classroom.  Efforts to build quality relationships begin from the earliest time that students enter our school. What is our evidence? What do we need to work on?

## Our Commitments

If all of this requires our time, our attention, our creativity and our collective wisdom, what commitments are we prepared to make in our school community to rethink the learning experience we offer our students...

**Q**  In the next three months?

**Q**  In the next year?

**Q**  In the next three to five years?

"Our task is to provide quality education for the kids we have, not the kids we used to have, want to have, or kids that exist in our dreams."
*- Colleen Politano*

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