

*Attainment of Our Vision*  
Discussion Paper Responses

August 2003

Final Report



## **Attainment of Our Vision Advisory Committee**

The Attainment of Our Vision Advisory Committee was established to allow representatives from all employee groups and parent groups to complete the following:

- Task #1      Review and analyze gathered response data from Attainment of Our Vision Discussion Paper 2002 (Please note: Committee Members were asked to honour the accuracy of data through the analysis process)
- Task #2      Suggest implementation measures to address refinements to the Attainment of Our Vision process.

Membership of the group was established by requesting each employee group and district parent group to recommend one person who would be willing to sit on this committee. As a result, the committee took on the following membership and representation:

- Joyce Bennett (Trustees)
- Bill Tucker (Superintendents)
- Larry Sales (OPC - Elementary)
- Martha Foster (OPC - Secondary)
- Sharon Phillips Ridley (CUPE)
- Barb Lawson (ETFO)
- Wendy Hirshegger (OSSTF)
- Sharon Dawson (Managers' Association)
- Don Bradford (AAPSP)
- Sandra Miller (PSSP)
- Margaret MacPherson (District School Council)
- Vanda Braunton (Home & School)

The committee was chaired by Gregg Bereznick (Attainment of Our Vision facilitator & Thames Valley Principal). Steve Killip (Research & Assessment) provided his support in regard to the management and interpretation of data. The committee participated in three meetings in which they accomplished the following:

1. an orientation session (Attainment of Our Vision)
2. review and analysis of the data
3. suggest implementation measures to address discussion paper recommendations

Further work was done by four members of the group (Margaret MacPherson, Gregg Bereznick, Steve Killip, Martha Foster) to clarify the findings of the group.

## Committee Findings

### **Task #1      Review and analyze gathered response data from Attainment of Our Vision Discussion Paper 2002**

*(Below is a detailed summary based on group findings which was compiled by a Parent Representative in the group.)*

There was a general consensus of the committee members that the data is rich with information and requires careful consideration in generating a report that respectfully and aptly reflects the content. A report should be sent out to the Thames Valley school community to demonstrate a commitment to reciprocity of process, in other words, that information flows both ways. This shows two things:

- a) that filling out a survey has impact – people do read it and care about the content
- b) that it is important to understand, or to provide the opportunity to understand, how one survey response fits into the whole of responses.

It was stated by various committee members that the consultative process is seen as informative and valuable – both for the advisory committee as well as for the respondents to the discussion paper - and that everyone who took the time to participate deserves to be heard.

#### Initial Data Analysis

The central themes emerging from the data do not vary much between the questions and can be categorized under three broad headings:

1. Communication
2. Action
3. Resources

Each category can be further broken down into distinct issues.

#### 1. Communication

- Language – must be shared, clear, consistent and free of jargon. There are a number of Vision terms currently being used that are not clearly understood.
  - The relationship between the Caring Learning Community and improved student learning is unclear – there are concerns that the shift in focus denotes a loss of one for the other or that the well being of the ‘whole’ child will no longer be considered as important as measurable academics.
  - Use of the word “improved” in “Improved Student Learning” is seen by many as insulting and dismissive of what teachers already do
  - Quality Learning vs. Improved Student Learning – are the terms interchangeable?
  - Coaching/Mentoring – some confusion with the term coaching and the sports connotation

- Professional Development - as the vehicle to communicate main ideas, goals and foundations of the Vision
  - Needs to consistently clarify and align with the Vision in order to build shared meaning and commitment to it
  - Should be ongoing and available to all
  - Recent PD sessions on the work of Dufour and Daggett do not yet appear to extend beyond the Principal group responses.
- Pathways – communication pathways need to be developed so that information can flow both ways in the organization (top to bottom and bottom to top) as well as between the diverse groups. There is an assumption here that such two-way communication is necessary and desired. The discussion paper itself provides a forum designed to facilitate listening/speaking and the mutual exchange of ideas. This is seen to better solicit wider participation and buy-in. The capacity to listen and the opportunity to speak is considered key to building strong relationships among the various stakeholders.
- Inclusion – the model of the Caring Learning Community is widely understood to require the inclusion and participation of All members of the TVDSB if it is to be meaningful.
  - Departments not directly involved in student learning indicate a distinct problem with understanding how their work impacts on students.
  - There are numerous references throughout the data to the uniqueness of each school environment/classroom/student and the need to allow for difference in any collective action.
  - It should be acknowledged that people are at very different stages in their understanding of the Vision and that different kinds of communication is required.
  - The first recommendation for refinement suggests that the shift to improved student learning follows from “attaining” a Caring Learning Community - yet a significant number of respondents to the paper question the reality of attainment. Emphasis should be placed on the Caring Learning Community as a growing, evolving and living entity constantly in need of individual and collective renewal and commitment.
- Achievements – how can we better communicate our achievements? Specific suggestions included using video to demonstrate success stories.
- Time – it is critical that there is time allowed to incorporate and implement the Vision and that there is value accorded to process.
- Visuals – there are other suggestions as to the visual schema of the Vision that should be considered in the refinement process. Concerns include:
  - make the graphic more stylistic so as not to represent something else

## 2. Action

- Placing students at the center of the Vision schematic is seen as positive and unifying. The contention is around the language (use of ‘improved’) only.
- Activities that encourage ownership and input should be generated at all levels of the organization to facilitate a bottom-up engagement with the Vision. These activities should not be imposed but rather invited.

- There needs to be tangible and concrete links made to the daily work people do and how that work is aligned with the Vision. People want to understand how what they do makes a difference.
- There should be training for parents/students and the wider community with respect to the Foundation Principles.
- Model accountability to and for all. The goal of continuous improvement requires also continuous assessment and review. This ties into the need to develop pathways for communication to travel so that results can be shared.
- Consideration of measurement – what will we measure? There is concern expressed about losing sight of the whole student. How do we measure the ‘soft’ results of working toward the Vision?
- Visibility of the Vision and Goal – suggestion was made to provide a visual referent for every classroom.

### 3. Resources

- Professional Development is seen as key to promoting the Vision and generating buy-in.
- Value must be given to process, not just measurable products, and should be reflected in the financial resources. Time to think, talk and try new approaches must come to be valued as significant and worthwhile aspects of daily responsibilities.
- Consistent issues that teachers request are help with class size, EA support, and special education.

### Overall

Overall, respondents to the discussion paper support the concept of the Vision and the recommended refinements. Critical response primarily shows two issues:

1. The Vision could be seen as rhetorical only. Consequently, there is the need to translate the concept of the Caring Learning Community into meaningful practice that impacts the individual classroom, teacher and student.
2. There is a sense that teachers are being overlooked – that they already place student learning at the center of their work but are unrecognized in their efforts.

The critical commentary is concentrated in the teacher responses. It is an oft-repeated sentiment (both in the data and by the advisory committee) that teachers need to buy-in if the Vision is to develop and grow. For this reason, it seems important to attend carefully to the content of the criticism and perhaps to find tangible ways to respond to it.

Staff and volunteers across the board stress the importance of working conditions, although this variable is controlled to a large extent by government funding.

## **Task #2      Suggest implementation measures to address discussion paper recommendations.**

*(Below is a detailed summary based on group findings which was compiled by a Parent Representative in the group.)*

### The Big Picture

The question was raised early in the discussion, “do we actually share a vision?” This question reveals the necessity of developing strategies, policies and procedures that facilitate sharing ideas to garner ‘buy-in’ from all participants across the Board. What actions will promote more inclusive individual participation? While the data suggests that the majority of respondents support the Vision in theory, a significant percentage of people look to see the concepts modeled consistently throughout the system by all board employees.

### Identified Challenges

- Transition – Developing a methodology based on compassion, trust and mutual respect
  - Shifting from a primarily top-down initiative to developing multiple and diverse bottom-up applications requires a shared understanding that in this transition, everyone is a learner first – there are no pre-existing formulas to follow.
  - It is key to use a common framework in order to think about the changes that are - and need to be - taking place.
  - Trust (in terms of the expectation of consistent behavior) is essential.
  - Encouragement and support for risk taking and innovation should be reflected organizationally.
  - Resource allocations that value Time (and so demonstrate a commitment to change) - time to implement, time to think and time to talk together.
- A **Communication Plan** needs to be developed. The plan should address:
  - Vision goals and ideals expressed in simple shared language and visuals
  - Communication pathways – how does information actually move throughout the Board?
  - Website use
  - How do we include parent groups?
  - Acknowledgment that not everyone is in the same place in their understanding of the Vision
  - sharing of OISE research results
- Alignment that works toward building commitment through accountability:
  - Those who work toward implementation of the Vision must first model the behavior – must have the skills that allow for modeling
  - Embed the Foundations of the Vision into hiring practices
  - Organize performance appraisals around the foundations – the appraisal process to move in a line – from teachers accountable to their principal, the principal accountable to superintendent and so on (however accountability must be two-way as seen in the example of the principal survey shared with the group)

- Board policies and procedures should consistently refer to and reflect Vision foundations and language
- Professional Development that underscores Vision principles and practices should be available to all employee groups
- Measurement and Data Collection
  - Definition of what, how and who we are measuring
  - Development of measurement tools that accurately reflect scope of Vision goal
  - Measurements that take into account education of the whole person
- Past Histories – the need to move from *battle ground* to *common ground*
  - Acknowledgment needs to be given that teachers and other employee groups have been demoralized and hurt by adversarial positioning of the Ontario government.
  - Groups that do not have direct contact with students do not understand the role they play in the Vision.
  - People are generally conditioned to believe that individuals cannot influence or impact a system, the common belief is that individuals are essentially powerless in large organizations.

#### Some Specific Recommendations:

- This advisory committee wishes to meet on an ongoing basis to discuss and exchange information with respect to the Vision development and implementation. The diversity of the group will provide a critical forum for multiple perspectives on Vision activity.
- There needs to be continued acknowledgment from the Board that low morale is an issue for many teachers.
- Some of the Vision language is at issue and needs clarification or rethinking, particularly:
  - Coaching/mentoring
  - Improved student learning – the use of ‘improved’ is contentious
  - The caring learning community as a continued emphasis
  - Quality Learning and Student Learning – are they interchangeable terms?

#### Summary

*(The following is a Summary of key points raised through examination of the data from Discussion Paper responses.)*

The following is a brief summary of data with the numbers in brackets representing the number of similar responses found in the data:

#### Positive

- As a board, we need a common focus or goal. It gives us a unified direction. (56)
- Student learning is the correct focus. (39)

#### Negative

- Not yet seeing the impact on the classroom (65)
- Concerned about possible loss of funding for classroom to support Vision (43)
- Communication is critical to help us better understand this process (17)
- To some extent, seen as top down and Teachers are not involved (15)

## Considerations

- Need PD to move forward to build common understandings. (71)
- Progress must be quantifiable. (21)
- Keep it slow and simple. (19)
- Everyone needs to be aware of their role in the process. (17)
- All board initiatives must align. (12)

## Recommendations (A Summary)

1. Continue with Vision process. The focus on student learning is the correct focus.
2. Need to report back findings of Consultation Process to system to promote integrity and trust.
3. Need to address implementation issues that clearly address improvement of student learning (impact in the classroom).
  1. Goals need to be redefined in a quantifiable manner. Otherwise, we can not irrefutably state if there is any impact.
  2. Need to clarify language so as to make understandable for all.
  3. Need to address issue of linking departmental services to the improvement of student learning.
  4. Need to ensure that all policies, procedures, and in-service aligns with Foundation Principles.
  5. Need to develop a communications plan to clarify implementation steps and improve communication to all stakeholders.
  6. Need continued assessment of the implementation process through internal (Research & Assessment) and external (OISE/UT) assessment vehicles.
4. There is a need for a group such as the Attainment of Our Vision Advisory Committee to meet regularly to allow for the review of implementation measures by all stakeholders. This will promote the refinement of implementation plans and will promote a stronger sense of ownership of the importance of this initiative.