

## Increasing BCSSA's Influence Profile: A Framework for Discussion

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### Background

In 2006 the BC School Superintendents Association developed a "Strategic Look" entitled "Leading the Way".

That document told the story about the association's history, purpose, and strategic direction, setting the framework for more detailed planning. The story defined the purpose and strategic goals of the association as follows:

We believe that a dynamic and successful public education system is fundamental to a democratic society. We believe that our public education system in Canada must provide our children and youth with an inspiring foundation for lifelong learning and citizenship. We believe that leaders in public education should work together, and with others, to ensure that we have the very best public education possible.

We are an association with a passion for creating environments that nurture learning and achievement. We inspire, develop and support leadership in public education in British Columbia.

- We provide a compelling leadership vision and a strategic and principled voice on issues affecting public education.
- We advocate strongly for high quality public education that supports the children and families we serve.
- We work strategically with others to strengthen public education and leadership.
- We create dynamic learning opportunities for leadership development.

It has now been several years since the Strategic Look was adopted. During that time the association has made significant progress on a number of fronts, en route to becoming, as researchers/writers Jim Collins and Jerry Porras label the best professional associations, truly “remarkable” .<sup>1</sup>

While the direction of the original Strategic Look is still relevant, recent changes in the association’s leadership have led the BCSSA executive to the conclusion that it makes good sense to take a “look” at the “look” and, in particular, the elements of the plan that focused on increasing the influence profile of the BCSSA.

The focus of this framework is therefore on the first two broad goals cited above:

- We provide a compelling leadership vision and a strategic and principled voice on issues affecting public education.
- We advocate strongly for high quality public education that supports the children and families we serve.

### **What do we mean by a “principled voice”?**

By principled voice we mean aligned with its vision of leading the way, the association provides informed, objective, evidence-based thinking on critical issues affecting public education to those who shape public policy on those issues.

The second broad goal, advocacy, means that the association ensures that its voice is heard, respected, and has a positive impact on the education we provide for our children in this province.

Having a principled voice means:

1. Understanding which issues affecting public education are high priority for members of the association.
2. Understanding which issues affecting public education are high priority for the provincial government.
3. Staying current with issues affecting public education beyond British Columbia and their implications for the local scene.
4. Producing cogent, objective, and compelling thought papers and other types of presentations on key issues reflecting the best evidence, practices, and experience to be found in BC and beyond.
5. Ensuring that members of the association and key policy makers and decision-makers are provided with balanced, objective, and timely information to assist them in creating policy and in making informed decisions.

This framework is meant to help BCSSA determine how it might best perform the following functions with respect to key issues affecting public education in British Columbia:

- Issue identification.
- Issue research to identify best practices and distill experience.
- Production of “thought papers” and other presentations.
- Ongoing dialogue and advocacy with policy- and decision-makers and others.

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<sup>1</sup> *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer. Monograph.*  
by Jim Collins, 2005

## Questions to think about

The BCSSA currently produces thought papers on key issues, e.g. class size, but does so mainly on an ad hoc basis as pressing issues arise. Should it be more proactive in identifying emerging issues and producing thought papers about them?

BCSSA gathers information on pressing policy issues from its members and from government through regular formal and informal meetings and conferences. BCSSA also meets, though perhaps not as often as it might, with key government officials responsible for setting educational policy. Should it accelerate its efforts in these areas? If so, what resources will be required by the BCSSA to take on what would surely be an increased workload?

And finally, what about BCSSA's role in balancing representations to government by other groups who may bring other, less evidence-based perspectives? Informal comments by some government officials suggest that in addition to the information and perspectives they receive from other professional associations they would also welcome BCSSA's informed and proactive input on public education matters.

## Framework Purpose

The framework proposed in this report is designed to:

1. Document the extent to which BCSSA's members, and key government representatives, perceive that the association does indeed have an influence problem and, if so, to describe it in detail with respect to its size and scope.
2. If there is a problem, describe as clearly as concisely as possible a vision of a more successful influence profile for the BCSSA.
3. Develop options for action to close the gap, if any, between the vision of a more successful influence profile and the BCSSA's performance today. Some options that have been raised in discussions so far include:
  - a. More systematic information gathering from members about public education issues requiring the association's focus and attention, including surveys and more frequent attendance at local meetings by BCSSA leadership.
  - b. Better ways to inform policy and decision-makers about the BCSSA's perspective through the proactive and more frequent production of thought papers on key issues.
  - c. Increasing the BCSSA's organizational strength to enable its leaders to spend more time both with members and in discussions with government, e.g. by having a full-time paid president and/or adding more research capability so it could produce thought papers on key issues on a more frequent basis.

## Rationale

Do we have a problem? If so, how much of a problem is it...or is it really an opportunity in disguise?

We understand from discussion with some government officials, and at recent association conferences, board meetings, in the hallways, and in other settings that the BCSSA's influence profile, especially with government, is not as strong as it might be. This framework is meant to test the validity of what we are hearing and, if changes are required, to ensure that they are based on solid ground.

For example, several legislative changes have taken place over the past few years that have negatively affected our members. Could some of those changes been more effective and less onerous? Could the BCSSA have done more to ensure that the government relied more on our expertise and experience before moving ahead?

Do we have a window of opportunity here to raise our profile and establish a more active and respective leadership role in public education policy for BCSSA and its members?

*Problem or opportunity. . . what should we DO?*

We can blame government for not consulting with us more often, but is that really going to get us where we need to go? Perhaps, as an organization, it is time to take more responsibility for our influence, or lack of it, by answering the question "What can and should BCSSA do to play a more influential role in helping BC's government shape policy and legislation affecting public education?"

*We want to take action, but we want to check with you first.*

Some BCSSA directors believe strongly that we should hire a full-time paid president. Others believe that we might just as effectively increase our influence profile by other means. Some believe we should do both, while others believe we are doing just fine as we are.

We want to know more about what our members think and will support before we make any changes. And, at the same time, we do not want to study the situation to death either.

*We need to take our changing membership demographics into account, whatever we do.*

Our membership is growing and changing, and we must be sensitive to those changes. The attached table on membership demographics over the past five years shows a growing and increasingly diverse membership base. This provides an increasingly broad base of information and experience upon which to base our thinking. Are the ways in which we identify and priority key public education issues working as well as they should? What methods should we be using to gather that information both from our members and from experts beyond BC and, where relevant, to translate it into practical, objective, timely information that policy makers can readily access and use in their deliberations?

## **Proposed Process and Timing**

Beginning early in 2009 we propose to gather information from members issues in two main ways. Once we have that information and collect your feedback on what we have found, we will come to you with recommendations about how BCSSA should raise its influence profile by our next AGM in November 2009 or at an extraordinary meeting called for this purpose.

### **1. January-May 2009: Regional Focused Discussions**

We propose that there be systematic discussion of these issues, using a structured and facilitated focus group approach, at regional meetings scheduled over the next several months as follows:

- Vancouver Island, January 29-30 (Tofino)
- Okanagan-Mainline, February 12-13 (Revelstoke)
- Fraser Valley, March 26-27 (Harrison)
- Metro, joint meeting with FV on March 26-27
- North, April 30-May 1 (Prince George)
- Kootenay-Boundary, May 13-14

The structured focus groups, each led by the regional chapter director, will ask members questions (subject to some fine-tuning) like:

- What public education issues do you feel are most important (a) to your region; and (b) the province as a whole, that BCSSA should address over the next two years?
- What is your understanding of what BCSSA currently does to (a) determine which issues to address; and (b) convey the association's thinking on these issues to government now?
- How would you (individually, then as a group) rate BCSSA's effectiveness in influencing public policy (1 to 10 scale, 1 being extremely ineffective, 10 being extremely effective, with appropriate anchors in between).
  - o Please comment on the rationale for your rating.
- What changes to its structure, governance, or anything else do you think might enable BCSSA to raise its influence profile even further in the future?
  - o Probe, if required: thought papers, adding new positions to the organization for research, paid president, etc.
- If BCSSA were in fact to improve its influence profile, what would you take as tangible, measurable evidence of its success? In other words, if we invest more time and money, how might we know that know our investment has paid off?

## **2. March-April 2009: Survey**

To ensure we receive input from members unable to attend regional meetings or who wish to provide additional input, we propose to conduct a confidential on-line survey in March-April.

## **3. May-June 2009: Further Feedback**

Once we have gathered your thoughts on these issues, we will provide members with a feedback report before the end of June on what we have heard. We will then solicit your feedback once again on more concrete proposals about what actions the BCSSA might wish to take to improve the situation.

## **4. November AGM or an Extraordinary Meeting**

It is anticipated that a final report, with recommended actions, if any, requiring a vote by the membership would be ready in time for the AGM in November 2009 or at an extraordinary meeting of the membership held for this purpose.

