

**STRATHCONA-TWEEDSMUIR SCHOOL  
CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING  
WHITE PAPER EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



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## **Introduction**

Against a backdrop of a significantly changing global landscape evinced by the rapid enhancement and proliferation of technology and the growing interdependence and contact between different peoples of the world, the Board of Governors, with the assistance of the Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School community, embarked on an ambitious strategic planning exercise to position the School as a centre for educational excellence within the independent school community both nationally and internationally. In order to achieve the goal, the Strategic Plan outlines both Key Performance Indicators and specific outcomes for each of the strategies connected with Goal 3: Centre for Excellence – Positioning Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School as an institution providing advanced, research-based teacher education for STS faculty and other teachers.

### **Rationale – Why a Centre for Excellence?**

Dramatic leaps in innovation have significantly impacted both knowledge production and distribution, revolutionized research and produced information at rates unprecedented in human history. Rapid advances in the fields of brain research and teaching and learning require practitioners to be simultaneously teachers in the classroom and students in their own rights. Where once an undergraduate degree may have marked the end of an individual’s formal education, the current reality could not be further from this notion. An evidence-based approach to teaching and learning, one that relies on the best research, is increasingly becoming the expectation and not the exception among parents who value and take a keen interest in their children’s learning.

Exceptional faculty, who embrace best practice pedagogy, have choice as to where it is they would wish to teach and learn. In Canada, faculty can apply to work in CAIS (Canadian Accredited Independent Schools) schools that apply best practices in all areas of their academic programs and operational procedures. Each of these schools seeks to foster in their students the values of lifelong learning, leadership and citizenship. Each of these schools also seeks to recruit and retain the best teachers – those committed to continuous personal and professional development and whose teaching employs best practice methodologies. As schools bring on board excellent faculty, they also become more attractive to discerning parents seeking the best education for their children. The more students a school is able to attract, the more likely it is that it will continue to have the wherewithal to continue to recruit exceptional teachers.

Ultimately, exceptional teachers are able to foster scholarship, leadership and character to enable students to live a life of purpose because they themselves both embody and exemplify these qualities. Fortunately, as the alumni of the Strathcona-Tweedsmuir readily attest to, the school has provided students with tremendous learning opportunities. However, Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School cannot afford to rely only on past success to ensure future growth. The School’s vision to be recognized as a leader, both nationally and internationally, in providing students with an exceptional, well-rounded education and an enduring sense of community places a heavy responsibility on the school to continue to strive towards benchmarks of excellence that are ever-moving targets given the growth of understanding regarding best practice pedagogy.

## **Progress toward positioning STS as a Centre for Excellence - Highlights**

### **Environmental Scan**

An initial step taken in 2012 toward achieving the strategic goal of positioning STS as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching was to engage an experienced educator, researcher and author to conduct an environmental scan of similarly mandated teaching centres in North America. In conjunction with staff visits, the consultant authored a paper for STS which has set the stage for the thoughtful initiatives that have followed.

### **The STS Critical Friends Group**

During the 2012-2013, fourteen members of faculty from the three divisions participated in internationally recognized training to become Critical Friends Group coaches. The training, which occurred in November and January, was conducted by a facilitator from the National School Reform Faculty, who led the coaches through various protocols *or sets of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning* with the larger aim of *forming professional learning communities committed to improving practice through collaborative learning*. During the 2013-2014 academic year, the coaches have introduced faculty to various protocols to facilitate discussions on assessment during Professional Development Days which have enhanced student learning outcomes and promoted teaching collaboration.

### **Mentorship Program**

The STS Mentorship Program, currently in its seventh year and recognized provincially, articulates a clear and context-specific model for induction and mentorship at STS and incorporates mechanisms for assessment and feedback designed to assist mentors and new faculty in aspiring to that goal. Mentorship is a means of integrating new faculty into the STS community and constructively guiding their development both professionally and culturally. At its best, formal mentorship of new teachers to STS should ensure and accelerate their:

- Adoption and practice of the aims and goals inherent in the School's mission statement
- Meaningful communication strategies with students, colleagues, administration and parents
- Development of effective teaching practices and effective evaluation methods
- Cultivation of positive collegial relationships
- Immersion into the robust STS co-curricular program
- Orientation to the values, culture, traditions and expectations of the STS community

### **Gordon Freight Excellence in Teaching Grant**

The Gordon Freight Excellence in Teaching Grant was established by Mr. Freight at the time of his retirement after 40 years of service to Strathcona School for Boys and Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School. The grant provides funding for unique professional development opportunities that advance teaching expertise in individuals and the faculty as a whole. While the initial fund was seeded by Mr. Freight, the intention is to extend the funding through annual donations from within the STS community.

The objectives of this special grant are to:

- Provide unique professional development opportunities to members of the faculty on an individual and in-depth basis above and beyond STS professional development days and regular conferences and workshops.
- Offer incentives to research and acquire new teaching techniques and/or develop resources to support curriculum development and enhance learning.
- Enlighten colleagues by sharing new knowledge and expertise gained through the aforementioned activities.
- Showcase teaching excellence and Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School in the broader community.

### **Creation of the Student Success Centre**

In an effort to better meet the differentiated learning styles of students, the Student Success Centre was created in 2010 with furnishings to model the 21<sup>st</sup> Century classroom. High demand from students and suggestions from faculty resulted in further renovations in July 2013, adding four individual study carrels to the four existing carrels. Flexible work areas within the Student Success Centre enable group work, programs like peer tutoring, quiet, independent study and also meet the needs of students who require extra time on examinations.

### **Professional Development**

Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School is committed to supporting the on-going professional development of faculty. While the School's operating budget has always included funding for faculty and coaches to attend an array of workshops, training sessions and clinics, donor funding, over and above the operating budget, allows world-renown facilitators to come to STS to work with faculty, focusing on topics such as brain-based learning, concept-based instruction, and assessment for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; these facilitators not only present new ideas to faculty, but work with them in a hands-on manner through whole-day workshops and seminars.

#### **Adam Cox, 2011**

- Dr. Cox works with schools and community groups to redefine how we understand childhood syndromes such as ADHD, learning disabilities, and autism-spectrum disorders. He is the author of *No Mind Left Behind: Understanding and Fostering Executive Control – The Eight Essential Brain Skills Every Child Needs to Thrive* and *Boys of Few Words: Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect*.

#### **Lynne Erickson, 2012**

- Dr. Lynn Erickson is a private consultant assisting schools and districts around the world with curriculum design and instruction. During the past seventeen years she has worked extensively with K-12 teachers and administrators nationally and internationally on the design of concept-based classroom and district level curricula and concept-based instruction.

#### **Louis Marchesano, 2014**

- Currently an IB Workshop Leader, Team Leader for authorization and evaluation visits, and consultant for the MYP and an Assistant Examiner for DP Language A English, he also serves as an Independent Consultant for all three IB Programs for schools and districts internationally. His current work centres on criterion-related assessment, teaching understanding through a conceptual framework, increasing access for under-represented populations of students, and general implementation of the IB from a systemic approach.

## **Fine Arts PD Day**

On Thursday, February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School's Fine Arts Department hosted a Fine Arts Day. Bringing together 50 educators from across Southern Alberta, participants worked with nationally-recognized facilitators in discipline-specific sessions in the areas of Art, Band, Drama, Elementary Choral and Elementary Music. The keynote speaker, Dr. Dale Lonis, an international conductor and consultant for professional orchestras and a designer and developer of distance learning models for universities throughout the world, focused on how mentors play an important role in the lives of educators and how lessons learned from mentors can inspire students and contribute to their success. Some of the other sessions focused on Inspiring Students to Perform with Passion and Assessing Students' Skills. The conceived concept of the Centre for Excellence was born out in this inaugural region-wide professional development, which showcased our school and our commitment to programs which may attract talented faculty to STS in the future.

## **A Conceptual Map for the Centre for Excellence**

The Conceptual Map seeks to provide a succinct overview of the Centre for Excellence by summarizing not only its foundational underpinnings, but also to frame the work of the Centre within the specific context of the School as both an independent school within the Province of Alberta and as a World IB School offering the Primary, Middle and Diploma Programmes. (See page 7 for the Conceptual Map.) Further, the Conceptual Map outlines the activities of the Centre for Excellence under three broad banners:

- Policies
- Practices
- Programs

Connected to each broad banner is a list of related components, some of which have been realized and others which are possible, but as yet have not been realized. The components were derived from two different sources: the Strategic Plan and input from members of the Senior Leadership Team during its Annual 2013 Fall Retreat following a presentation on the Centre for Excellence made by the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. It is important to note that other components may need to be added to the Conceptual Map as work continues towards the realization of the Centre for Excellence.

Additionally, the Conceptual Map also recognizes that the Campus Master Plan will play an integral role in envisioning appropriate and effective conference and classroom spaces to support the kind of programming that STS can offer when the physical facilities of the Centre for Excellence are completed. Thus while the presence of a physical space directly connected to the Centre for Excellence is a long-term goal of STS, the conceptualization and construction of these spaces do not serve as impediments for STS to be a nationally and internationally recognized provider of advanced, research-based teacher education both for STS faculty as well as other teachers.

In organizing the Conceptual Map in this form, it becomes clear that the Centre for Excellence at Strathcona-Tweedsmuir is not limited to a physical building bearing this name; rather, and much more significantly, *it defines the ethos of the school as described by its policies, practices and programs.*

## **Next Steps**

Over the next two years, the School will be focusing on four key initiatives connected to the Centre for Excellence:

1. The development of a Centre for Excellence website that will, in its initial phase, provide a platform for faculty to learn about and access a variety of professional development opportunities such as conferences, workshops and grants.
2. The creation of an action research and action research funding policy to promote critical pedagogical inquiry among faculty and to promote STS as a teaching and learning institution committed to innovation and best practice pedagogy.
3. The development of an Annual Speaker Series to bring world-class educators and leading thinkers in the field of Education to STS to work not only with faculty, but to share their expertise with parents and the larger professional community.
4. The hosting of a CAIS Leadership Institute (LI) workshop at STS in order to bring outstanding faculty from across the country to STS and to showcase STS's outstanding facilities and unique program offerings on a national stage. The CAIS LI would serve as a precursor to larger conferences such as International Baccalaureate district and regional workshops.

## **Why Donors Matter**

- Investing in teachers and their ongoing development is crucial for advancing STS's mission of excellence in scholarship and student learning, for providing 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning opportunities.
- Funding action research will make it possible for more teachers to explore new frontiers in teaching and learning, helping to create a true school-wide learning community for both teachers *and* students.
- Bringing world-class researchers and thinkers to STS will enable teachers to share ideas and interact with outstanding national and international educators.
- Hosting regional and national conferences provides STS faculty with the opportunity to showcase their innovative practices, attracts experienced, knowledgeable and passionate teachers to STS, and bridges the gap between research and practice.

## **Conclusion**

Over the last three years, significant work has been undertaken towards the successful realization of Goal 3 of the Strategic Plan. However, important work lies ahead. By positioning Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School as a Centre for Excellence providing advanced, research-based teacher education for STS faculty and other teachers, the School demonstrates its resolve to remain on the forefront of change in the field of Education. Through the creation, support and sharing of dynamic *policies, practices and programs*, Strathcona-Tweedsmuir will remain a leader within the independent school community both nationally and internationally.

**STRATHCONA-TWEEDSMUIR SCHOOL CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE CONCEPTUAL MAP**

