SERVING THE
OF ALL LEARNERS
WESTSIDE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
Mission and Beliefs

The mission of the Westside Community School District, as an innovative educational system, is to ensure academic excellence and to serve the unique needs of all learners.

Beliefs, as used in strategic planning, are statements of an organization’s fundamental values: The beliefs listed below describe the ethical code and convictions of the District. They were developed by community members, teachers, administrators, and students who served on District Strategic Planning Teams.

- The Westside Community School District is a keystone of our community, and therefore has the obligation to be a major resource for enhancing the quality of life for all its citizens.
- The Westside Community School District holds an uncompromising commitment to excellence.
- Public education is fundamental to the preservation and advancement of individual freedoms, democracy and an effective free enterprise system.
- Education is the responsibility of the entire community.
- Learning is a lifelong process.
- The unique cultural heritage of each student should be respected in the educational process.
- The educational process should prepare students to live with and affect change.
- Every student can learn and should be provided with the best opportunity to acquire knowledge, to develop personally, and to experience success.
- A positive self-concept and respect for others are fundamental to teaching and learning.
- Each student shares the responsibility for learning and, depending on maturity and capability, must be involved in the planning of his/her education.
- Each parent is responsible for being actively involved in the education of his/her child.
- Quality improvement must be client-oriented and data-driven.
The Next Generation of Westside Community Schools

Introduction
Imagine a school district where students and teachers are fully engaged in the learning process. A place where students design and drive their educational experiences under the guidance of qualified staff. A school district where students and staff pursue their passions and where they develop their strengths and talents to find success.

Is it possible for a school district to seize the opportunity to build upon its strengths to create such a student-centered environment? I believe it is not only possible, but also imperative that we do this for our young people. It is clear that students today want more freedom to design their own educational experiences. Our profession needs to create school cultures that respect students and their abilities and skills; we need to trust our students. We need schools that are designed for knowledge work and that do not mimic factory work. We must leave the industrial model of education behind or risk young adults becoming disengaged with their schooling.

It is my sense that public education is at a crossroads nationally and is in flux in the Metro area. Our challenge is to create student-driven learning environments. Our goal is to prepare our next generation of learners to confront a rapidly changing global society. Our work is to create a vision for the future and to develop a set of policy recommendations and implementation strategies to accomplish our goal. It is important and critical work.

This document will include:
- The context of change in society
- The current state and historical perspective of public education
- The future trends in public education
- The local context
- A set of observations from my transition work
- A set of recommendations outlining initial steps for the future of Westside Community Schools

The context of change
Otto Scharmer in his book Theory U explains that systems such as healthcare, public education, world politics, finance, and environmental systems are not providing the results we expect or want locally, nationally, or globally. All systems are changing. For some reason society is unable to identify and understand that change is constantly occurring. Consequently, people tend to deal only with the symptoms of change due to short-term thinking, never taking the long-term view of an evolving society.

The following two examples demonstrate the disruptions felt in society. Our profession is not immune to these types of distractions.
In Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat*, he describes the impact of globalization. Many people feel that America lost its business edge, but in reality, the rest of the world began to catch up with American businesses as globalization occurred. The auto industry is a great example of this globalization. Fifty years ago an American auto company made nearly every car on the road. Today, they are a fraction of the market. Our students must be prepared to live and work in this global village.

Another important disruption to society is found in past and present technological advances. The silicon chip and laser technology have led society to a new frontier in the area of computing. Its impact on education is initiating new ways of knowing and learning that are causing us to rethink our profession.

In fact, two disruptions occurred in education that signaled to educators that industrial model was beginning to fail. The first was the space race and the Russian launch of Sputnik. The second was in 1983 when the *Nation at Risk* report was published, but more on that later.

**The current state of public education**

Today’s schools were designed at the turn of the century, albeit the 20th century. That model served our country well for 50 to 70 years. At that time, the mission was to prepare students for factory work; schools were designed to imitate that work environment. The expectation was only to finish high school; just 13 percent of students went on to complete college. Consequently, many students dropped out prior to graduation and were employed in factories of that era.

In today’s fast-paced global world we can no longer accept students leaving school prior to graduation or becoming disengaged while in school. The stakes are too high for our children who now exist in a very complex world that is competitive and changing rapidly. We no longer have plentiful employment available for those who drop out of high school. Today’s educational opportunities are not consistently meeting the expectations of this or future generations and their employers.

Yet, our schools remain entrenched in this industrial model of the 1890’s. Reformers continue to tinker around the edges of educational institutions bound by the legacy of this outdated model. Schools are now expected to educate every child to take his/her place in a global society. No matter how hard we work or how committed we may be to our students, the current configuration cannot be easily reformed. We need to design a system that works for today’s learners.

The cavalry is not coming to our rescue; educators must take the lead in designing and sustaining engaging teaching practices. Since no new money will be forthcoming in the short-term, educational leaders will need to use current funding efficiently to transform their systems. It may mean that schooling looks different than what we remember from our experiences. It may mean the roles of educators are less about knowledge acquisition and more about navigating this knowledge with students.
may mean that we educate kids in ways that they learn best individually to ensure that all students are at or above grade level by fourth grade. By focusing on PK-4, we may avoid the high cost of remediation. Districts may reallocate funds to support individualization now labeled personalized learning.

**The historical perspective**
In many ways, I feel public education lost its way after the *Nation at Risk* report was published in 1983. The report’s recommendations focused on reform of an outdated system incapable of meeting the needs of today’s society. As a result, we seemed to chase reform after reform, finally landing on this idea of high-stakes testing as the Holy Grail of accountability and student progress. We did more of the same in hopes of different results. Sadly, we missed a great opportunity to redesign our educational system.

Public education must remember why it emerged in our democracy if we are to educate and engage all students who enter our classrooms. Each generation of learners is asked to acquire knowledge, skills and habits to contribute to society. They are found in the following*:

- Develop the whole child academically, socially, and physically
- Nurture ethical citizens and leaders who contribute and thrive in a global society
- Promote cultural literacy
- Foster creative, collaborative, adaptable, curious, self-motivated, critical thinkers
- Develop skills to enable economic self-sufficiency
- Instill the democratic values, principles and beliefs on which our society exists
- Educate for life, not merely more school


Additionally, we cannot forget the historical roles that schools have played in society. The roles identified through a review of the historical functions of schools are the following: **educational, custodial, community building/enrichment, and economic**. These identified roles must be addressed as we transform our schools for the new mission of engaging all students. (CESA #1, 2010).

However, we cannot merely implement reforms to the current system, we must design future educational experiences by taking the best from today and by using those practices to shape the emerging future of public education and specifically the Westside Community Schools. **It is achievable if we build an educational future for all children that we would want for our own children.**

**The future trends of education**
In 1920, John Dewey, noted educational leader, remarked, “we don’t know what kids will need to know in 1944.” Every generation of educational leaders grapples with
educating current students for the future. Westside’s current kindergarten class will graduate in 2025 and retire in 2082. We are faced with designing educational opportunities in a world that is constantly changing, challenging us to educate every student for an unknown future.

The drivers of change are seen throughout all sectors of public and private industry. Educators must learn from other sectors so that we may redesign our system where appropriate. The status quo will not be acceptable for our children as they step into a world that is very different than the one their parents entered.

Fortunately for us, the technology already exists in other sectors of society that will allow us to personalize/customize the learning of our children and our staff. Companies such as Amazon Books know what genres of literature we like to read and then offer us similar selections to purchase. Pandora Internet radio allows us to customize the music we want to listen to on our computer. Social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are changing how and with whom we communicate/network through customization.

Today, Apple is developing the ability to place textbooks on an iPad “virtually” replacing the traditional textbook at affordable prices. I recently “enrolled” in an iTunes U class that facilitates anywhere/anytime learning. I was able to customize the class and chose the materials and resources I wanted to use for my learning.

Further, companies like Cerner Health Information Technology customize and personalize healthcare by integrating and managing electronic patient records. A doctor is able to order a procedure that is now tracked into the system. It creates a common patient profile so that physicians may consult from various locations to make healthcare decisions for that patient.

Imagine that each student could examine his/her learner profile and collaborate with his/her teachers and parents to design specific learning opportunities that maximize the learners’ strengths. This profile helps parents and teachers assist students with educational decisions. But more importantly, the students know how they learn best and begin to take ownership in their learning choices. By increasing student ownership and meeting the individual needs of each student they become more committed to their own learning. We shift from a culture of compliance to that of a learner committed to his/her learning experiences.

Most likely this shift from learner compliance to learner commitment will blend face-to-face instruction with that of on-line learning. Many predict that nearly 50 percent of all high school classes will be taught on-line within this decade. Teachers will assist children as they excel in solving complex real-world problems and in developing skills such as creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Students will engage in activities that are personally relevant and meaningful to them as they become proficient with these skills.
No longer will teachers be bound to the inch deep and mile wide approach to learning. Teachers will build stronger relationships with students, fully engaging students and teaching them how to go about this work without an educator constantly directing them. These personal relationships will be very beneficial for students who depend on the student/teacher relationship to build engagement and persistence leading to academic success.

This transformation is about designing learning activities based on our students’ strengths, interests, and passions. Teachers will work with students to find each learner’s “sweet spot,” where instruction is sufficiently challenging to each student. Studies show that students should have a reasonable hope of success or risk becoming disengaged because their persistence wanes.

The following list contains examples of transformative practices that could be explored and/or improved within a rigorous curriculum to better meet the needs of unique learners in District 66*.

- Learning and/or progress based grouping
- Small, collaborative, flexible learning communities
- On-going, embedded and dynamic authentic formative assessments
- Mobile learning systems that incorporate anywhere/anytime learning environments
- Student-centered, relational staffing featuring professional partnerships with experts, certified staff, community resource people and mentors, with the emerging new roles of educators
- Learning plans that recognize and integrate the “whole child” range of social, emotional, and physical needs through “real world” project based learning opportunities. *Adapted from CESA #1, (2010).

**The local context**

The good news for the Westside Community Schools is that a culture of individualization and personalization has existed for nearly two generations of learners and several Boards of Education. The District’s 50 Years of Excellence book highlights this when, in 1972, then Superintendent H. Vaughn Phelps explained the importance of the District’s emphasis on individualization and personalization of learning. He stated:

*The real purpose of education is to provide an opportunity for young people to grow and to develop into the finest kinds of human beings possible. Individualization is important because each human being is important as an individual, with his own learning strengths and weaknesses... A child should never be bound by the capacities of other students (Boyd, 1997).*

During the past 65 years, the District has followed this philosophy to create opportunities for students to reach their full potential. District 66 implemented many innovative instructional initiatives that promoted individualized student learning. The curriculum was individualized in varying degrees in math and reading with other content areas following suit. Further, flexible scheduling was
implemented throughout the District. However, the two most important initiatives that supported this approach were implemented in 1967 and 2004.

First, the modular schedule, implemented in 1967, provides time in a teacher’s schedule to work with students individually. The beauty of the modular schedule is that teachers are able to “call back” students for additional help or to complete an independent study in an area of interest or passion. This time devoted to personalized learning is one key for the future of the District.

Technology is the second key for the future of the District. The grade 8-12 laptop initiative approved by the Westside Board of Education further opened the door to individualization. By granting technological access to all students and connecting them with the potential of the computer, students and teachers could begin to experiment with anywhere/anytime learning and other transformative opportunities. These technological innovations are available to younger students as well. For instance, in our kindergarten classes, students use iPads to facilitate their learning.

These initiatives were accomplished by inviting the community, the staff, and more importantly the students, into the conversation. These initiatives would not have been sustained without the support of these key stakeholders.

The District is now ready to take the next step in the evolution of individualization by using current technology to customize learning for every student and meet the needs of unique learners.

We need your help and your advice as we move forward to fulfill the words of H. Vaughn Phelps. “...Education in the future will be a continual process of improving and renewing for the individual. If the past 25 years are any indication, by 1997, continuing education will have arrived; there will never be a formal end to school” (Boyd, 1997).

Observations and recommendations
During the past several months I have observed and listened to the District and its key stakeholders. Please let me share those observations and finish with a series of recommendations intended to move the Westside Community Schools forward.

A culture of innovation exists in District 66 and I sense that staff and community would like the opportunity to continue to build upon past curricular innovations and initiatives to keep the District educationally current and relevant. Additionally, it is clear to me that technology has played a prominent role in the development of this school district and is expected to in the future.

Historically, the culture depended on teacher and staff leadership, student involvement, and community collaboration to educate our children. These groups are more important than ever to the future success of District 66.
District 66 has always belonged to the residents of District 66. In fact, H. Vaughan Phelps defined the District as a community school in 1972. He went on to say:

*The Westside Community Schools were developed as a unique concept, at least in this area, in which community would have a greater involvement in helping decide what their schools were to become. And I hope over the years, that the parents and residents of the community have felt that they have been able to make an impact on the direction of the school system... (Boyd, 1997).*

A variety of themes emerged from my transition work. People throughout all constituencies felt that the District was doing very well. These same people are committed to improving the Westside Community Schools and to helping the District become the best District possible. In my conversations, several areas of concern were identified.

First, that a stronger sense of community must be developed both internally and externally. It was indicated that a shared vision was needed to connect people to something greater than themselves. As an example, one teacher told me “No clear coherent vision for the school district exists, no unifying thread to our work exists.”

Along with that, many people felt that communication could be more open and transparent. Many people did not feel that the District was clear with its direction and others felt that District leadership did not listen very well and that people’s voices were not heard.

Many internal constituents felt that the current governance structure did not encourage innovation or provide opportunities for ideas to bubble up from teachers and principals. It appears that a systemic imbalance between District initiatives and school initiatives exists. In my experience, a positive creative tension usually develops between central office and school sites to create a balance of district ideas with those found within the schools. If this balance is not intentionally developed it may lead to low morale, mistrust and a perceived loss of autonomy. An example of this thinking came from an administrator who told me, “I would like to see more autonomy among schools to make decisions that benefit their department/school.”

People were concerned with the changing demographics of the District. They suggested we needed to examine our current academic practices in light of those changing demographics to ensure that we meet the needs of our unique learners. The following Board Member comment exemplifies the sentiment of a majority of those I spoke with “...that the District accept children/families where they are and help them grow and meet their potential.”

Funding was a concern throughout all groups. They questioned how the District will maintain its rich tradition of excellence in light of the existing gaps between revenue and expenses. Financial stability is critical to the future of the District.
Additionally, a few people expressed concern for our aging elementary facilities and the need to update them to meet the needs of our students.

Finally, many people were concerned about the impending retirements and the loss of leadership throughout the District. The leadership found in District 66 amazes me. To support our leadership transition, retiring leaders are currently mentoring emerging leaders. Additionally, District 66 continues to be a destination district and will attract quality applicants. Finally, the District has historically invested in its people and should continue to do so throughout this current transition.

This work is in line with the systems approach I highlighted at our “back to school” staff meeting. For us to find success, we must collaborate to maintain and to improve our systems in the areas of vision, data/accountability, shared governance, community engagement, and instruction. The following recommendations focus on key initial steps as we begin a journey of transformation.

In the short-term, I am recommending the following:

- Engage in an inclusive visioning process that will align our vision, mission, and core beliefs with a set of strategic goals to guide our school district.
- Work with software firms to create a data collection system, including a learner profile that allows teachers to develop customized student learning pathways.
- Build inclusive governance structures that encourage innovation through collaboration, and result in positive school and district cultures.
- Collaborate with faculty to develop personalized and differentiated professional development opportunities supporting staff as they innovate with student customized learning pathways.
- Examine our current technology infrastructure for future expansion to meet the needs of this transformation of District 66.

The future is filled with ambiguity. I am not yet certain what this means for our current roles or us. I am not yet certain about our students’ educational potential once we have redesigned their learning experience. Yet, I do know that the hallmarks of this school district are its innovation and its vision. Our staff and community are poised to discuss these ideas and to design a school system that is focused on each student and their unique learning needs.

Respectfully submitted,

Blane K. McCann
Superintendent
Westside Community Schools
The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion.

- Abraham Lincoln (1862)