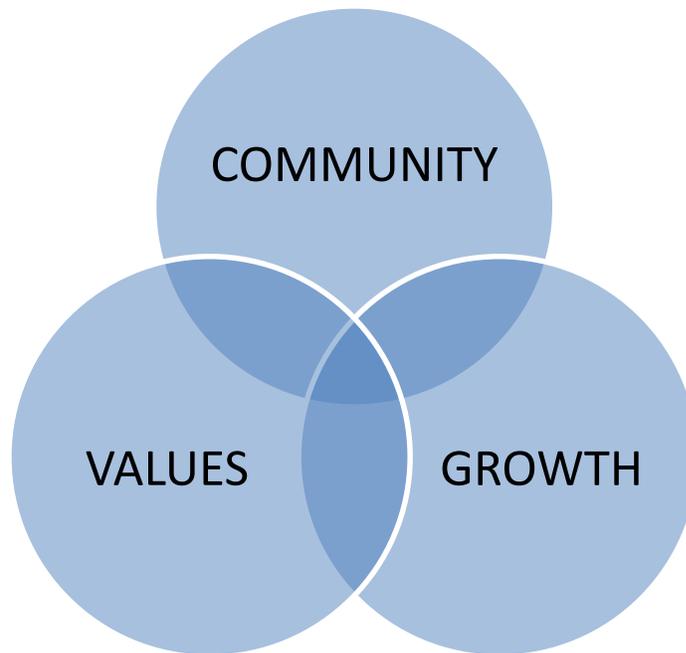


Aurora Academic Charter School

STRATEGIC PLAN

2018 – 2023



Report to the Board of Directors

October 16, 2017

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Aurora Academic Charter School

Draft Five Year Strategic Plan Report

2018 - 2023

Overview

Following the 2016 Annual General Meeting, the Board of Directors initiated a project to engage Aurora School’s stakeholders in planning for its intermediate future. The project was organized early in 2017 and information was gathered during the spring. The input was reviewed and developed into this plan in September and October, for presentation to the 2017 Annual General Meeting (held in November).

The purpose of this plan is to help set priorities, focus energy and resources, strengthen operations, and align stakeholder efforts toward common goals that will contribute to Aurora Academic Charter School (AACS) future success through the next five years.

Process & Input Activities

The “Aurora Voices” project was organized to inform this plan. It involved facilitated activities under the guidance of a Steering Committee representing stakeholders, set up by the Board. This committee advised on and assisted with the “Voices” process, reporting, and plan development.

Input was mainly by a series of semi-structured face-to-face small focus-group conversations around a discussion paper that identified major topics of interest and concern to the Board and included an open-ended component. A total of thirteen focus group meetings were conducted between March 15 and May 12, 2017. In total there were 115 participants, comprised of 51 parents, 19 students and former students, 36 teachers and 9 support staff. This input was augmented by information and perspectives provided by senior administration, board representatives and steering committee members.

Key Findings

1. There was considerable satisfaction with the core values, maybe with some modernization of the language. There was substantial consensus among all the participant categories that the statements of Aurora’s core values are generally appropriate, particularly the academic focus and teacher-directed pedagogy. While some updating of language was suggested, there was no impetus for fundamental change or extensive revisions.

2. With a 5000 name waiting list, growth is a major consideration, constrained by government policy, facility availability and stakeholder perspectives. Views were divided on implementation of a high school program. Within the participants who responded through the Voices groups, a large majority, but not all parent respondents were favourable. Teachers, staff and students, however, were unsupportive. Views tended to be quite strongly held, both pro and con, but more notably so by those opposed to establishing a high school. Staff comments reflected concern over re-direction of resources, while the adolescent students reflected a desire for new experiences.
3. Only a limited capacity for inclusion of students with special needs within the scope of the core values was recognized – a reasonable accommodation approach. The consensus was that a fully inclusive approach is not really viable given the structured, academic program. There was also concern about potential disruption of direct instruction. Accommodation of special needs was supported to the extent this can be done within the core values and academic focus of the school.
4. An improvement in Board communications was recognized. Many of the parent participants noted recent improvement in communication activities, but the diverse and dispersed nature of the parent community, along with English as a second language for many, continues to present challenges. These circumstances gave rise to various suggestions for innovative measures to improve engagement.
5. Lack of transparency was a concern particularly the difficulty, or perceived difficulty, of accessing governance information. It was also emphasised that more complete explanations of major decisions could often be provided.
6. In the same vein there was a desire for better engagement in decision making. The substantive issue that emerged in this discussion was a widely held perception that the board's process for making major decisions was still very 'top-down' and that meaningful consultation was sometimes lacking.
7. Rapid growth and changes in structure and organization have been difficult for many staff. The traditionally collegial relationship with the Board has weakened and it is recognized that its regeneration is desirable.

Themes

The input process gathered information and feedback on a wide range of issues, some but not all strategic in nature. Some are more operational and while not dealt with directly in this plan, will contribute to other governance and administrative activities. Three strategic themes emerged: growth, values and culture, and community building.

Growth

While there are complex challenges to deal with, Aurora parents think the time has arrived to push hard for realization of the high school initiative. Circumstances favour continuing to evolve Aurora: to grow

the program upward (high school), then perhaps eventually outward (by establishing additional K – Gr. 9 capacity) in a future plan.

Expanding the program to include a high school has been an aspiration since Aurora School was first established, and as the school has grown and matured action on this has become more acute. At the same time the high level of parent interest in enrollment presents pressure for horizontal expansion of the current K – Grade 9 program. A high school would receive some support from the existing student cohort, but would need to include access for outside students seeking the kind of program it would provide.

Values and Culture

It would be desirable for the core values to be better understood. There are two important areas for updating. Inclusion – the accommodation of students with special needs and the admission policy are key areas for refinement. The present wait list rules are increasingly dysfunctional over time and may constrain the realization of Aurora’s potential for development.

Community Building

Aurora school brings together a unique community of parents, teachers and staff. The quality of the relationships among the members of this community can have a big impact on the school’s success. There is a paradox with the Aurora community: while some parents and other stakeholders seek more involvement in decision making, many choose not to participate even when provided with opportunity such as the Voices focus groups.

The discussion around communications and the related issues about decision making present an opportunity to develop a more engaged school community. Shared commitment to Aurora’s approach to education has the potential to involve all its stakeholders in a community of practice that creates a sense of membership built around the ideas of excellence, merit and effort. It could become more of a ‘level’ structure than a ‘top down’ one, able to effectively sustain trust among participants in the context of considerable rapid change. Such a community would reflect a common passion for Aurora’s core values and regular interactions around how to implement them to the best possible outcomes. There is also an opportunity to develop better shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all the stakeholders.

Strategic Priorities and Goals

The Board and senior administration have reviewed the input in the context of provincial expectations for charter schools, particularly AACs, and the present operating environment to develop the following foundational priorities and related goals and objectives.

1. Growth: the Board is committed to moving toward the continued growth of AACS, to keep evolving the school first with the addition of an appropriate high school program and subsequently with additional Kindergarten to grade 9 capacity. To realize this priority AACS will:
 - 1.1. Develop a detailed prospectus and business plan for a high school, describing how the first 3 years would operate in order to provide comprehensive decision-making information to prospective students and parents.
 - 1.2. Be prepared to act in a nimble manner to establish a high school – to take an opportunistic approach – by pursuing available infrastructure and securing the required ministerial approval for increasing capacity.

2. Values and Culture: the Board will build on the school’s core values, refining and re-focusing them to ensure ongoing strength in the future. To advance this priority AACS will:
 - 2.1. Develop and provide mentorship for both parents and staff new to the school about its core values.
 - 2.2. Undertake appropriate amendments of the school corporation’s articles of association. In particular in this regard, AACS will:
 - 2.2.1. Revise its current Special Education Policy statement to reflect reasonable accommodation & enrichment.
 - 2.2.2. Consider reviewing and revising its wait list rules to provide for some local community enrollment.

3. Community Building: the Board seeks to establish a more engaged school community built around shared commitment to the school’s approach to education and an ongoing discussion of improvement. To strengthen the community and build trust among all the stakeholders AACS will:
 - 3.1. Engage its community members in ongoing discussions and shared responsibility across various key areas – communication, technology, leadership, governance.
 - 3.2. Undertake regular activities to promote and encourage increased interaction among all the stakeholders.
 - 3.3. Pursue ongoing conversation about the evolution of the school’s program to remain current within the scope of the core values.

Conclusion

The themes, priorities and goals identified in this plan present complex challenges that can contribute greatly to Aurora school’s future success, but it is a big job. To do this the Board seeks and invites your participation in helping make progress on the goals that have been set out. In particular parents will be invited to volunteer their feedback at open committee meetings which will be advertised in the school newsletter and through the School Council.

Appendix 1: Steering Committee

S. Mukhi, Board Chair; steering committee chair

A. Huhn, Board member

E. Fung, School Council Chair

A. Raju, Student Council President

D. Bischoff, Superintendent

J. Harman, School Administrator – Elementary

J. Rockwood, School Administrator – Middle School (P. Dang, alternate)

M. Healy, Teacher rep. – Elementary

K. Laffin, Teacher rep. – Middle School

D. van Tamelen, Facilitator

S. Mallory, Board Secretary; special acknowledgement for focus group organization and support

Appendix 2: Discussion Guide

Note: this appendix is the discussion guide used with parent groups; it was modified slightly for use with staff groups (by inclusion of a question about best practices) and for use with students (by exclusion of the sections on Inclusion and Communications).

Aurora Academic Charter School
Aurora Voices: Building a 5 Year Strategic Plan
Discussion Guide for Parent Focus Groups

Introduction & Purpose

Planning for a successful future – strategic planning as a process that sets priorities, focuses energy and resources, strengthens operations, and aligns stakeholder efforts toward common goals. This discussion paper summarizes key issues that the Board believes the Aurora community needs to consider as it grows together for success. The scope of this activity is to plan for the next five years.

The following important issues are presented in no order of priority:

Core Values

We believe it is important to reflect on our values. Some aspects, as reflected in policy and the Articles of Association, may be due for review and some others, particularly around decision making processes and meeting procedures, may no longer be appropriate to current circumstances.

Current policy:

- It is the philosophy of Aurora School that average children, when presented with an orderly and structured environment, and in the presence of properly sequenced teacher-directed classroom instruction, can excel in an academically-oriented program.
- Aurora School will provide a traditional approach to student learning. Aurora School’s program will be knowledge-based, systematic, sequential, and will provide an enhanced curriculum. This will be done in whole-group, teacher-led classrooms, supported by a structured and disciplined learning environment. From this learning context, Aurora School will provide innovative ways to address student learning.

These values are reflected in topics such as homework, after-school study period and the academics/extracurricular (athletics, etc.) balance.

Are these statements still appropriate? Are there other core values that should be articulated; if so, what are they?

Growth – implementing a high school program

We are now faced with charting where the school goes next. An on-line survey of parents on further expansion of Aurora’s program and facilities was conducted in October 2016. The responses show there is strong support for a high school as the priority for parents, but just what this means and the depth of commitment are still unclear. What do you think? If a high school program is developed what kind of program should it be?

Inclusion - students with special needs

Aurora’s policy is that special education programming is not offered, but Alberta Education’s expectations have evolved toward greater inclusion of students with special needs. The provincial context now speaks of inclusion rather than special education. What is appropriate for a school with Aurora’s charter and focus? How might the instructional program be modified to provide more diversified programming for students so they can learn and meet the ministry’s standards of education in a variety of ways? Can this be accommodated through a policy change or does the charter need to be revised?

Communication processes

Aurora is seeking to improve the way information about issues and decisions is communicated. This applies both to communication “out” from the Board and communication “in” from stakeholders. What, if anything, needs to change?

Other Issues:

Are there other matters that you believe the Board of Directors needs to address; if so, what?

Wrap-up: the “big picture”

What is one thing we must preserve at all cost in our future?

What is one thing we must change to increase our success?

Appendix 3: Summary of Aurora Voices Project input

Aurora Academic Charter School
Aurora Voices Strategic Planning Project
Summary of Focus Group Comments and Feedback
June, 2017

Introduction

To gather information for planning, a total of thirteen focus group meetings were conducted between March 15 and May 12, 2017 (pilot group in March, the rest in April and May).

The participants categories were: parents, six groups – five of parents at-large and one of board members; students, two groups – one of the student council members and the other a group of alumni students; teachers, three groups; and staff, two groups – one of site administrators and the other of support staff. Total participants: 115, comprised of 51 parents, 19 students and former students, 36 teachers and 9 staff.

The focus groups were semi-structured following a discussion guide with an agenda and ground rules, all of which were developed in consultation with the project steering committee.

This report is a consolidated summary of the project's focus group data.

Core Values

There was substantial consensus among all the participant categories that the statements of Aurora's core values are generally appropriate, particularly the academic focus and teacher directed pedagogy. While some updating of language was suggested, there was no impetus for fundamental change or extensive revisions.

The main concern was about watering-down the standards. This was attributed to several factors:

1. Parents don't realize what they are getting into and then respond to difficulties encountered by their children by pressing for relaxation of standards. Homework requirements were suggested as indicative of this.
2. Increased teacher workload and breadth of assignments.
3. Roll-over of teaching staff – new hires not understanding the nature of the program as fully as the personnel they are replacing.
4. Pressure to accommodate what others want or are doing.

The terms most commented on as problematic were 'traditional' and 'average students'. The inclusion of both 'traditional' and 'innovative' in the same statement was noted as discordant.

Respectfulness, citizenship, creativity and attendance were suggested as additional values that might be reflected in the statements.

Growth: High School

Comments on this topic were divided. Most, but not all parent respondents were favourable. Most teachers and support staff were not. Student focus group participants were clearly opposed. Views tended to be quite strongly held, both pro and con, but more notably so by those opposed to establishing a high school.

Main points raised in support of a high school program:

1. Continuing the values and 'school culture' – a secure, quality learning environment for students through their high school years.
2. Providing additional academic high school capacity; which is perceived as limited in Edmonton at this time – improved opportunity for Aurora students to continue in a strong academic program.
3. Providing additional high school space, which is projected to be in short supply in the future.
4. A natural next step in the development of Aurora's program.

Main points in opposition:

1. Students need the transition to broader learning experience and social environment before the post-secondary level.
2. A high school program needs to be more diverse than the Aurora approach, which is more appropriate for foundations and basic education.
3. Concern about diversion of effort and financial resources away from the existing program, which still needs effort to improve.
4. Aurora provides a foundational program – its benefits accomplished by the end of grade 9.

Discussion about what should characterize a high school if it does proceed indicated a lot of uncertainty beyond the expectation that it would be a narrowly focused academic program. More specific information needs to be developed for parent decision-making.

There was consensus that if developed, a high school should be located at a different site.

Inclusion

There was broad consensus that an extensively inclusive approach is not really viable given the structured, academic program and concern about the potential disruption of instruction. However, accommodation of special needs was recognized as realistic to the extent this can be done within the core values and program methodology of the school.

It was recognized by most respondents that updating the policy statement to reflect limited inclusion would be acceptable, but not to the point of undermining the core values of the program with respect to whole group instruction.

Concern was also expressed about negative effects on esteem of students unable to keep up with the demands of the program.

Difficult implications for teaching practice were recognized, trying to reconcile individualization of instruction with the school's instructional philosophy – concern about making exceptions to the established processes.

Participants indicated this was an important issue to stand firm on, regardless of Alberta Education's current position, based on the purpose of charter school being deliberately different from the mainstream programs.

Communication

Many of the parent participants recognized recent improvement in communication activities, but the diverse and dispersed nature of the parent community continues to present challenges that drew various suggestions for innovative measures to improve engagement.

When asked about what to change, lack of transparency was a concern: the difficulty, or perceived difficulty, of accessing governance information. It was also felt that more complete explanations of decisions could often be provided.

The substitutive issue that emerged in this discussion was a widely held perception that the board's process for making major decisions was still 'top-down' and that meaningful consultation was often lacking. This perception was expressed by numerous parents and staff, and most vigorously and explicitly by the teacher groups. A rushed time frame, frequently without adequate opportunity for discussion and input was also identified as part of this concern.

More use of open-ended processes were suggested: proposed changes should be shared for discussion and feedback before decisions are made.

Presently there appears to be a lack of trust between the board and stakeholders.

Other

Parents raised: greater environmental awareness; balanced focus for board of directors; improvement of operational planning; advocacy for charter schools in the current provincial political context; public relations, marketing and the Aurora brand; student transportation services; supports for students to deal with high expectations; a more proactive curriculum review process; improved accountability for governance and management; more student academic competitions; more attention to academic

excellence; another site – larger and more central; more coordination of professional development activities; ongoing attention to bullying and intimidation; consider holding more family fun activities.

Students: more student based initiatives – clubs around student interests; more opportunity for 1:1 talk with teachers; expansion of gym and physical education capacity; use of personal electronic devices – regulate but not ban; counselling and student support services; changing up class groupings.

Teachers and support staff: developing a better working relationship with the board of directors; improved regard for teachers' professional expertise; need for a guidance counsellor, a part time occupational therapist, and a human resources staff person; maintaining teacher specialization; concern about workload, preparation time and additional expectations; negative effects of the division into two schools, also concern with the middle-school grade grouping; more systematic engagement with parents; improved operational planning; adequate implementation planning and timelines.

Important to Keep

Parents: doing academics well – academic excellence; the discipline and structure of the core values and academic focus; quality teaching; the school's culture.

Students: the good and close student – teacher relationship; the school's diversity; the positive climate; academic excellence and strong grounding in core subjects.

Teachers and support staff: The structure and academics which Aurora is known for; teachers who understand and can deliver the program philosophy; small class sizes; the phonics program.

Important to Change

Parents: making what we have the best it can be rather than further expansion; stop disrespect and disregard toward parent who challenge the leadership; replace 'our agenda' with more transparency; let parents have a meaningful say before key decisions are made; value teachers' advice more; clarify the role of the board and of the administration; provide an orientation for parents new to the school; encourage teaching more focused on academic excellence; improve teacher collaboration; review homework expectations; more selective teacher recruitment to ensure a good 'fit' to school philosophy; more constructive teacher supervision, oversight and mentoring; recognition of work assignment impacts on teaching practices.

Teachers and support staff: improve parent awareness of the school's expectations; beware of uninformed parent input; improve teacher – board relationship; express a unified vision in practical terms; meaningful asks to parents; move beyond the reactions to ATA unionization – rebuild trust; recognize implementation challenges of decisions; slow down on substantive issues - develop a more deliberate engagement approach.

Appendix 4: Summary of exploratory activities for additional site(s)

Pending