

Communication and Stakeholder Engagement at Brighthouse Elementary

By Robert Drew

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Neighborhood of Learning Centre

The Samuel Brighthouse Elementary School, located in Richmond, BC, a city adjacent to Vancouver on the west coast of Canada, is a five-hundred student elementary school. When completed in September 2011, it will replace an existing older school on the same site. This project was identified early on as an opportunity for the Richmond School Board to promote sustainability and use the completed school as a teaching tool. The older facility was subject to a seismic upgrade study that determined it would be too costly to upgrade the existing building. The new school will implement a number of new and evolving priorities mandated by the school district, including new approaches to educational planning and sustainable design and operations.

The School design was developed through a collaborative methodology – one that brings together the perspec-

tives of the students, parents, educators, staff, administrators, school district, the policy makers, the municipality, the neighbours, and the consultants, providing the most direct path to achieve responsive and successful design solutions.

“It takes a village ...”

Eric Thorleifson, manager of facilities of School District No. 38 (Richmond), believes engaging in a design methodology centered on collaboration is key to ensuring that a highly functional school design will be developed and delivered. He represents a growing number of project managers who are turning to firms to deliver designs that represent a shared vision between the various stakeholders in a project. Approval to proceed with the design and construction of a new school afforded Mr. Thorleifson an opportunity to work with

Perkins+Will to expand the boundaries of collaborative design.

Process Overview – Establishing an ethic of inclusion

The story of collaboration begins with the formation of the project’s steering committee. The school district invited representatives from the district, the school itself, the municipality, the parent advisory committee, as well as representatives from the union and teachers’ association to participate in the design process for the new facility. While steering committees are typically formed for new school projects, this is the first time the school district formed a full sixteen delegate committee for an elementary school. The steering committee met once every two weeks during the programming and design phases of the project, working with the consultant team to develop an inclusive design for the school.

While the architectural firm did not have an extensive portfolio of local elementary school experience, it had developed a successful methodology of integrated design founded on establishing collaborative design teams that work together throughout all phases of the project. The collaborative design team was comprised of steering committee members and knowledge leaders in K-12 school design. Working with the school district, they developed an organizational structure around clear communication, developing a vision, establishing clear project goals and committing to a schedule of face-to-face meetings.

Visioning Charettes – Checking pre-conceptions at the door

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Project Vision Statement

Three visioning charette workshops were scheduled and held during the programming phase of the project. Facilitated by Wendell Vaughn, AIA, LEED AP, Perkins+Will’s K-12 Western Region Practice Leader, each day-long workshop was framed around collaborative discussion of project scope and vision. Each workshop explored, in increasing detail, the dynamic interplay between the analysis and synthesis of ideas. The objective of the charette process was to develop a programming document and vision for the project that would inform the design process moving forward.

It should be noted that, in addition to their ability to lend specific expertise to the process, the members of the collaborative design team were also selected because they were good listeners, listeners who welcomed and respected contributions made by each group. This prompted meaningful

participation of all those in attendance, and perhaps most importantly, encouraged building strong relationships that would ensure the completed project met the goals established during the charette process.

The first visioning charette set out to explore broader concepts surrounding learning environments and educational space planning. Preliminary programming and planning goals supporting the client’s educational priorities emerged from the discussions, as did the affirmation of several core values including sustainability, inclusion, identity, engagement, and community.

Shortly after the first charette, the school’s principal assembled a group of primary and intermediate students. Each student was asked to think about what features or qualities he or she would like to see in their new school, and then to present it in a drawing. They were encouraged to select words that represented their ideas and include them in their drawing. The work generated was informed, dynamic, diverse and in many cases very progressive - demonstrating a relatively well-developed understanding of spatial relationships and environmental design for such young students. The school principal captured the students sharing their ideas on video. The students then presented their ideas to the design team in the format of a mini charette. Ideas proposed by the students included the desire for lots of windows, colour, recycling bins, gardens, a cafeteria, touch screen displays, a hot tub and environmental stewardship. This exercise was an invaluable contributor to the design process and was later used to substantiate many of the decisions made during the design process.

The results of the student mini-charette became a key resource to help shape the project and planning goals established in the second visioning charette. During this workshop the vision statement for the project was drafted and programming development continued. Site planning strategies and the challenges and opportunities associated with a single storey

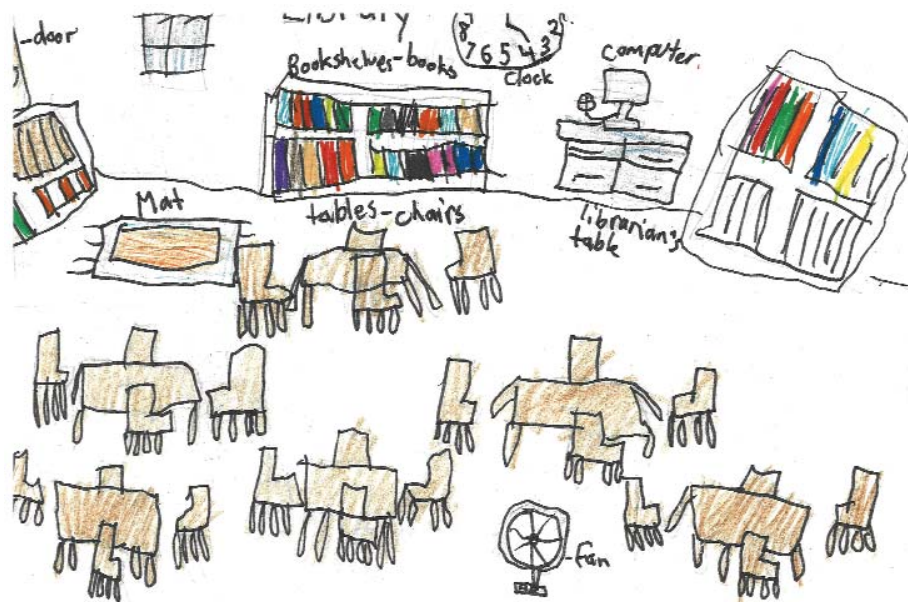
building versus a two story building were discussed at length, as was the desire for collaborative project areas. Sustainable design remained central to all discussions.

The third visioning charette saw the vision statement defined, space programming progressed and the initial conceptual design approaches envisioned. Discussions evolving since the first charette had matured. Strong design drivers were developed. Implementation strategies were refined. The results of the visioning charette process were documented in a projects programming document compiled by Perkins+Will. This comprehensive document became a gateway into schematic design and a reference document used to keep the entire team focused and goal-oriented. The strong start encouraged the streamlining of the design and production processes, a welcomed outcome from both the clients’ and consultants’ points-of-view.

Partnering with the Community – A Neighbourhood of Learning

During the third visioning charette, the design team examined the idea of developing collaborative project areas in more detail. They strongly believed that these spaces supported the project goals around collaborative learning, however there was no funding available for them in the approved budget. Perkins+Will introduced the idea of expanding the school program to include a Neighbourhood Learning Centre and allocating a portion of the learning centre program into the school floor area, thus providing the school with its collaborative project areas funded outside of the approved school budget. The Brighthouse Neighbourhood Learning Centre received approval from the ministry to proceed.

Neighbourhood Learning Centres were a new concept to the Province of British Columbia at that time. The Centres, built on school property, are facilities intended to accommodate any number of community-based organizations. In the case of Brighthouse, the



school district collaborated with the City of Richmond and the YWCA to have an adult literacy agency and after school care provider operate out of the facility. Incorporating a Neighbourhood of Learning increased funding from the city and will allow the facility to operate longer hours than a typical elementary school, maximizing the new building.

Engaging the Students - Lights, Camera, Action!

Curiosity is the very basis of education, and the students in the existing school were definitely a curious bunch. As a result, several teachers elected to take advantage of the learning opportunity occurring next door. A decision by one teacher, early on in the construction process, unexpectedly planted the seed for a mutually rewarding collaborative relationship that developed between the school and the general contractor. Likely frustrated with having to compete for her primary students' attention, the teacher invited the students to draw pictures of the heavy equipment working the site. Once the pictures were coloured and signed they were posted on the classroom windows, facing outward, for the construction crew to enjoy. The ice was broken. A second teacher incorporated the construction of the new school into their unit plan on structures. To accommodate the students' "field trip", the contractor worked with their trades to create a safe site by temporarily

suspending construction activities and creating a hazard free zone. Each student was assigned a vest, hard hat and safety glasses before given a tour to highlight the concepts they were learning about in class.

The school principal also seized an opportunity and invited a small group of intermediate students to form a communication committee. Their primary task is to liaise between the collaborative design team and their fellow students. The student's visited Perkins+Will's Vancouver office and interviewed the design team regarding the primary design objectives for the school. They also toured the construction site and interviewed the contractor. The committee then made a presentation to a school-wide assembly, translated the technical language gathered from the interviews into a accessible language more easily understood by their peers. Perkins+Will also developed a blog for the students to keep the community up to date. Posts are developed based on site updates and the progress of the student committee. (www.brighthouse.ca)

The committee members are genuinely excited about what they are learning through their exposure to the design and construction process. Full of seemingly endless energy, the students decided to direct some their excitement into the creation of a video that captures the 'journey' from the old school to the new, through the eyes of

the student body. Realizing that the organisation and management of such a project requires careful planning, the architectural firm offered to lend assistance and mentorship to the group and held a series of workshops. The students gained knowledge of how to research and visualize ideas related to the development of their theme, and how to craft a compelling storyline. They also learned about the importance of time management in anticipation to meeting specific project deadlines. The students quickly generated a conceptual framework for the video and developed a story board, and began filming. The video is expected to make its debut at an upcoming reunion planned for students and staff, past and present, to say "Farewell" to the old school.

Epilogue - Reflecting on the Process

From the perspective of the school district, there is no questioning that the collaborative design process laid the foundation for what is to become a successful expression of ambitious goals established for the project. The school is expected to gracefully respond to the evolving process of learning, and earn its reputation as a memorable place to attend school for generations of students to come.

In addition, the collaborative design process delivered a rich experience to all those involved. The students, parents, educators, staff, administrators, school district, the policy makers, the municipality, the neighbours, and the consultants felt inspired and empowered to share in the generation of ideas and the development of the design. Moving forward, the process that led to a shared sense of ownership by all is expected to be applied to future school projects across the district. ■

Robert Drew, MAIBC, Architect AAA, MRAIC, LEED AP, associate principal with Perkins+Will, acts as Project Architect for the design of the project. Perkins+Will provides an extensive range of consultant services including architectural design, urban planning, programming, and interior design.