

Ethical School Design

Hanover School Division is located southeast of Winnipeg and is now Manitoba's largest rural school division, with 7,500 students in 17 schools. A recent wave of immigration has led to rapid growth in both numbers and diversity, and the recent planning and construction of a new middle school in Steinbach is providing plenty of opportunities to practice "ethical leadership" at the district level.

Through participation in a cohort of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, my colleagues and I have had the opportunity to work through issues of ethical leadership with the facilitation of Robert Starratt and others. This has equipped me to consider my practice through the ethical lenses of care, justice, and critique and to gain a deeper understanding of my responsibilities as an educational leader.

Robert Starratt (2004) believes that ethical educational leaders "have a major responsibility for cultivating a rich, stimulating learning environment for all students, an environment that is flexible, responsive, encouraging and diversified."¹ This environment fosters authentic learning that is interesting to the student, connected to something meaningful in the community, and important in the life of the student and the community. The responsibility to provide such an environment carries with it some important ethical implications for the planning and design of a new school building and site.

Rapid growth in Hanover, along with the urgent need to move students from portable classroom villages into permanent space, could have favoured practicality and expedience over imagination and possibility, thereby short-circuiting the ethical deliberations needed to ensure that the new school would support a flourishing "lifeworld" characterized by authentic and meaningful learning. Instead, we determined that our foundational decisions should be ethical in nature. In order to meet our responsibility to students, to our community, and to the environment, we committed to adding complexity, time, and cost to an already urgent and expensive undertaking.

From the beginning, the school division, the Public Schools Finance Board, and the architects agreed to pursue the Leadership in Energy and

Environmental Design (LEED) Gold standard. This involved using the Integrated Design Process (IDP), a highly collaborative process allowing as many voices as possible to be heard. Principals and teachers attended focus sessions, and a community forum was held. Students spent an afternoon designing their school in multi-grade teams, putting together true-to-scale cutouts of all the spaces in the school. They then placed their school on a site plan laid out on the floor and presented their design to the project architect.

We identified stewardship and social responsibility as our guiding principles, with project drivers of sustainability and durability, livability, engaging and flexible learning spaces, and a strong connection to the community. The result will be a healthy and safe building with natural and full spectrum lighting, appropriate acoustics, and low emitting materials that are regionally produced or recycled and environmentally friendly throughout their lifecycle, including cleaning and maintenance. Instructional areas will be clustered to create smaller communities within the school, with guidance, resource, and grooming rooms within each cluster to facilitate full inclusion of all students. Flexible learning spaces will include "street corner" alcoves in each classroom cluster and a town square with bleachers at the entrance to the main street, which runs the length of the school.

Bicycle storage and shower facilities will encourage alternative transportation, and landscaped paths will integrate the school and site into the community and promote walking to school.

The LEED report card offers an innovation credit for designing the school to be a learning tool, itself. Mechanical and electrical systems will optimize energy performance, and students will have easy access to monitoring systems that will provide data for their authentic learning. Cut-outs will allow students to observe working mechanical systems. Structures will be left exposed in strategic places and labeled for student reference. The school itself will become a walking field trip destination for other division students and will serve as a rich resource for many areas of the curriculum.

A master landscape plan for the school site envisions a variety of outdoor learning areas that will be developed by students and staff as authentic learning tasks. Water efficient landscaping will promote on-site storm water management, while fostering natural insect and bird life.

The new school will enrich our understanding of social responsibility with a new focus on education for sustainable development. We hope that it will contribute to a broad, overarching vision for students, teachers, support staff, and all members of the school community to become responsible and active community and world citizens and that it will serve as a model for responsible and sustainable use of resources and a commitment to healthy living.

More than 50 years ago, Hannah Arendt made one of the clearest and most compelling ethical connections between education and sustainable development when she wrote:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from the ruin, which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. Education is the point at which we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them for the task of renewing a common world.²

For pictures, videos, and information on this project, see www.hsd.ca/schoolsofthefuture/index.php

A wiki will provide an interactive site for teachers and students to share their learning as the project unfolds. Our hope is that learning related to this project will go far beyond what we have even imagined.

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Notes

- 1 Robert J. Starratt, *Ethical Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), 60
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1954).