PREPARING TO APPEAR: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT ACTIVISM

by

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to understand how it is that high school students come to participate as democratic citizens in the public sphere. A great deal of time and effort goes into providing students with the opportunity to participate in making decisions that affect their education and their lives in schools. Student Voice is the term often used to describe those attempts. In most cases, a small minority of students participate and most of the decisions that students are involved in relate to planning events, fund raising activities or serving on Student Councils. The provincial government has attempted to provide an opportunity for student voices to be heard through School Planning Councils. Each high school in the province is required to have a student representative on the School Planning Council whose mandate is to set goals for improvement in student achievement. Students participate, usually at the request of the principal, but their influence is limited. How is it then that students come to be involved in influencing decisions that directly affect their education? This study is an attempt to find out.

This is a qualitative case study of a group of high school students who became involved in campaign to prevent their high school from being reconfigured into a middle school. Their campaign spanned a period of ten months and included presentations to the Board of Education, letters to the editor, protests, and appearances on radio and television. As a participant observer, I kept notes of all the activities that students were involved in. Through focus groups and interviews, I tried to gain a better understanding of why students decided to get involved and how they made decisions about what actions they wanted to take.
What I learned was that the students valued their school and wanted to engage in a dialogue with trustees about what was important to them. When the trustees used the power of their position to attempt to silence the students, the students decided to take their concerns to the broader community, to participate in the public sphere. They engaged in dialogue and planned activities in private. When they were ready, they ventured into the public sphere. They were unable to influence the trustees' final decision, but they garnered a great deal of community support. They learned that communicative action generated a power of its own that made an impact on what came to be discussed in the public sphere.

The findings of this research study will be useful to educators willing to support students in their attempts to be involved in the democratic process either in their classrooms, schools or the wider community. Creating private spaces for this kind of dialogue is a challenge for all of us in public education.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** ........................................................................................................ ii

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** .................................................................................... iv

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ................................................................................... vi

**DEDICATION** .................................................................................................... vii

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION** ................................................................. 1

**CHAPTER TWO: A STORY BEGINS** ............................................................... 9

  * A Story Begins ............................................................................................... 9
  * Part One: The Provincial Setting ................................................................ 9
  * Part Two: The Local Setting ...................................................................... 15
  * Part Three: The Stafford Story .................................................................. 35
  * Chapter Summary ....................................................................................... 39

**CHAPTER THREE: STUDENT VOICE: RECOGNIZING AND
CHALLENGING THE MASQUERADE** .............................................................. 40

  * Student Voice: Some Attempts .................................................................. 40
  * Student Voice: A Masquerade ................................................................... 44
  * Student Voice: Actualization ..................................................................... 49
  * September: Return to School and Return to Participation in the Public Sphere ........................................................................................................... 56
  * Chapter Summary ....................................................................................... 68

**CHAPTER FOUR: FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS
PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS VOICES TO BE HEARD AT LAST** ................................................................. 69

  * Research Plans Get Derailed .................................................................... 72
  * Getting Started .......................................................................................... 74
  * Information Meeting .................................................................................. 76
  * Focus Groups .............................................................................................. 79
  * Interviews .................................................................................................. 83
  * Beginning the Analysis ............................................................................. 87
  * Participant Feedback .................................................................................. 89
  * Chapter Summary ....................................................................................... 93
CHAPTER FIVE: STAFFORD STUDENTS SHARE THEIR STORY ................................................................. 94

Chapter Summary ....................................................................................................................... 121

CHAPTER SIX: MY STORY .......................................................................................................... 122

Helpful Theory .......................................................................................................................... 125
Owen’s Story ............................................................................................................................. 128
Helpful Policy ............................................................................................................................ 133
Leading in Difficult Times .......................................................................................................... 137
Decisions, Decisions .................................................................................................................. 145
Chapter Summary ....................................................................................................................... 146

CHAPTER SEVEN: STUDENT VOICE WORKS WHEN STUDENTS DECIDE ON THE AGENDA .................................................................................................................. 148

Implications for Future Research .............................................................................................. 155

POSTSCRIPT: THE 2008 MUNICIPAL ELECTION .................................................................. 159

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................. 161

APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS ............................................................................ 169

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .................................................................................. 170

APPENDIX C: BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD:
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL ................................................................................................. 171
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Most of all, thanks to my husband Karl. You have challenged, accepted and loved me all at the same time.
Dedication

To my husband, Karl Moser, who has been my partner throughout this journey; and to my daughters, Gabrielle and Bridget, who continue to inspire me with their passion for learning and zest for life.
Chapter One: Introduction

“Schools in democratic societies have the special responsibility to prepare the young for citizenship, which, in essence, involves the capacity to engage others about how they will live together” (Benhabib, 2008, p. 101). What does this mean? Citizenship is about engagement. To engage with others means to have the opportunity to engage in dialogue, to use language to share ideas, to express a particular point of view. It is through this dialogue that we are seen and heard; we begin to appear to others. By appearing, we begin to determine who we are, who we wish to become; we begin to shape our identities. “In effect, to be a person is to be present to others, to be perceived by them, to be in communication with them” (Benhabib, 2008, p. 101).

For young people to consider taking the risk of appearing to others, “schools need to be safe, private places for children to construct their own identities with trusted others” (Coulter, 2002, p. 27). “For some children (and young people), this sometimes happens in classrooms. For others, it occurs on playgrounds, in corridors, band rooms and gymnasiums” (Coulter, 2002, citing Cullingford, 1993, p. 27). It is within these private spaces in the school setting with the support of teachers or other trusted adults that children/young people have the opportunity to think about ideas, to share them with others, and to come to some kind of common understanding. It is in these private spaces that young people appear to one another. According to Benhabib, “the common space aspect of the democratic public depends on the prior possibility of people being able to appear to one another” (2008, p.102). Arendt states, “The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action and therefore
precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government” (1958, p. 199). In essence, appearance precedes the formation of the public realm.

“The public arena is not only a place where ideas are debated and perspectives exchanged but also a space of appearance in which individuals and groups appear to one another, in the process creating their identities” (Benhabib, 2008, citing Arendt, 1958, p. 102). Schools can create private spaces for dialogue. At the same time schools can be very public spaces where there is greater risk involved in appearing to others. For young people to appear in the wider public realm, they need an opportunity to prepare for that appearance in private with the support of caring adults. In order to debate thoughtfully and present perspectives clearly, they need to be well prepared. “Public appearance and public performance must reflect personal excellence” (Wiens and Coulter, 2008, p. 305). Young people also need to know that given the risks involved in appearing in the public realm that they can place their trust in institutions, that previously agreed upon rules will be followed. “Trust in people in private must become confidence in institutions in public” (Wiens and Coulter, 2008, citing Seligman, 1997, p. 304). In other words, young people should be confident that they will not be caught off guard by surprises such as changes in rules or procedures.

Young people may choose to venture into the community, the broader public realm, to share their perspectives on issues of importance to them. The broader public realm sometimes presents greater risks than those found in schools. And in the broader public realm, adults are not always willing to recognize youth as equals in terms of citizenship. Young people need advice and support from trusted others and an
opportunity to prepare for the public sphere in private. They should also be able to place their trust in institutions should they choose to venture into the wider public realm.

Schools need to develop a greater understanding of private and public spaces for dialogue in order to support their students as they make their way from the private spaces in the school to the public arena, whether that public arena is in the school or the greater community. This is critical to the development of citizens who are prepared to participate in a democratic society. "Without public speech, the public dies... we are left with nothing we can reasonably speak of as public education, public service, or public life..." (Wiens and Coulter, 2008, citing Green, 1999, p. 300). Students, teachers and parents all need spaces for dialogue in schools to share ideas, talk about concerns, resolve conflicts, and to come to understanding with one another. They need to appear to one another and when they are prepared, to appear in the wider public realm to share perspectives, influence elected officials, perhaps change policy, and all manner of things that lead to living a good and worthwhile life together in a democratic society. In my view, these are the essential components of deliberative democracy, a concept I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two.

Creating opportunities for this kind of dialogue is no easy task. But tackle it we must for there is so much at stake – our futures together as democratic citizens. How do we accomplish this? Through dialogue, sharing ideas and learning from one another. Sharing this study is an attempt to do just that.

By engaging in this study, I hoped to gain some insights into how it is that a group of *high school students came to participate in the public sphere as democratic citizens.* Fine and Weis (2001, p. 520) state that one of the dominant topics in
educational research over the past thirty years has been an analyses of reproduction and later resistance in schools. It is time, they assert, “for analysis that reveal where, under what conditions, and with what effect schools are promoting extraordinary conversations for and by youth.” Michael Fielding (2007, p. 308) expresses concern about “the almost complete absence of the development of public spaces where the voices of young people can engage in conversation with each other and with adults who make up the internal and external community of the school.” This, he says, “is in spite of the work in political theory done by people like Seyla Benhabib (1998), Nancy Fraser (1997) and Maxine Greene (2000).” He says, “the enormous intellectual and grounded potential of this aspect of democratic education is virtually ignored” (p. 309). This study is one example of how students and caring adults came to be involved in exactly those kinds of conversations. By sharing this study, it is not my intention to be prescriptive, but to add to the conversation about ways in which adults can work along side youth in schools today to create opportunities for democratic education.

This is a case study about a group of students at H.D. Stafford Secondary in Langley City, British Columbia, who organized a campaign in an effort to prevent their high school from being closed and reconfigured into a middle school. Their dialogue began in private spaces within the school, on Facebook, and in their homes. They shared ideas with one another and with some of their teachers. They appeared to one another. When they had come to a common understanding and felt that they were ready, they entered the public realm, both within the school and in the wider community, to present their point of view. They asked trustees to listen, to visit their school, to thoughtfully consider their perspective on why their school should not be closed. They invited trustees
to engage in a dialogue with them. These students had discovered what Habermas has described as communicative action, the use of language to come to an understanding with others. Communicative action is capable of generating its own power. That power is created collectively when people, in this case students, enter into public dialogue generating collective agency. The students had a common will: they wanted to preserve their school as a secondary school. They had achieved this through "uncoerced consensus" (Coulter, 2008, p.19). They held meetings on their own in private and had come to this decision together. And they wanted the dialogue to continue in the wider public sphere.

The majority of the Board of Education used administrative power to silence the students. Administrative power, according to Habermas, is about the use of money and power itself to dominate human communities. Through the use of administrative power, both the public and the private disappear. Instead of establishing their own identities, people are defined by categories: teacher, student, parent, etc. In the case of the H. D. Stafford students, the Board described them as "little people," not capable of making decisions about their futures. When the trustees refused to enter into dialogue with them, the students took their story into the wider public realm and organized political protests to gain the attention of the public and the media. Their campaign spanned a period of ten months and included protests, letters to the editors of the local newspapers, letters and e-mails to trustees, presentations at Board of Education meetings, and appearances on radio and television. They received accolades from the press for their excellence in: presentations at meetings, well written materials for the submission to newspapers, and for their behavior in the public realm. Through their campaign, the students received a
lot of attention from the media and support from the community, but were unable to gain enough support from trustees to affect the final decision. In the end the majority of the Board voted to reconfigure their school. Not surprising given that when administrative power is used, conflicts are resolved through “contests of power between institutional roles” (Coulter, 2008, p. 9). Through their experiences, the students said that they became educated about what it means to participate as citizens in a democracy. They said that they also learned about power. And they understood, as both Arendt and Habermas believe, that “making a difference in the world involves going into the public realm” (Coulter 2008, p. 19). This study tells their story.

Chapter One includes a review of policy developed by the provincial government since their election in 2001. The Liberal government has made the claim that the public education system is facing a problem of declining enrolment province wide and that funding needs to be reduced to reflect the fewer number of graduates leaving the system. The government adopted policy that would enable local Boards of Education to close schools, amalgamate or reconfigure others, and sell properties surplus to their needs to generate extra dollars for education in order to deal with this issue. Since 2001, five schools have closed in Langley and eight others have been reconfigured. Some school communities resisted the changes; others did not.

Chapter Two includes a review of student voice, the term used to describe student involvement in decision making in schools, and some attempts to implement the concept in schools throughout the province. It is one of the ways that schools attempt to educate students about citizenship. I also include a discussion of the literature on the topic of student voice. The chapter ends with a description of the activities/protests that the H.D.
Stafford students organized in the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary. Their campaign was an effort to have their voices heard through channels other than those usually offered to youth in schools today. They chose to appear in the public sphere.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology that I used to try to come to discover the answer to my question, "How do high school students come to participate in the public sphere as democratic citizens?" I was a participant observer in this study and kept field notes of all the meetings I attended and of the observations I made. I also analyzed ministry and district reports, minutes from Board of Education meetings, and collected newspaper clippings. Student volunteers participated in focus groups and paired or individual interviews. After I had done an analysis of the data, I met with students to share my findings and to get their feedback.

Chapter Four describes what I discovered as a result of this study. Student participants were very clear that they valued their school and their relationships with their teachers. This was the main reason that they chose to act. As they got involved in the political process, they were surprised by the treatment they received from some of the trustees and the trustees' unwillingness to consider their point of view. It was at that point that the students decided to involve the public and to seek their support. Although they were unsuccessful in affecting the final decision, the students shared what they believed they had learned from their experience.

In Chapter Five, I describe my own experience as the principal of the school and the difficult decisions that I needed to make as the students became more involved in the democratic process. I discuss the theory and policy that enabled me to stay focused on what I believed was the right thing to do in each instance.
Chapter Six is the final chapter, which provides an overview of the entire study. It has been an interesting and at times, a challenging journey for everyone involved. But then, “Creation of democracy is not a simple matter” (Levin, 1998, p. 60).

I hope that those who read this are inspired in some way to continue to meet the challenge of creating possibilities for democratic schools, schools where educators create private spaces for dialogue; where students come to understand who they are and what is important to them; where educators provide support as students venture into the public realm to debate and discuss those perspectives with the aim of living a “good and worthwhile life.”
Chapter Two: A Story Begins

This is a story about H.D. Stafford Secondary and a group of its students and their efforts to save their school from closure or reconfiguration by the Langley Board of Education. The story began in January 2007 with the Board of Education presenting recommendations to be considered; and concluded in November 2007, when the Board of Education made its decision. The Board’s decision did not provide a happy ending and for some of the students, the story continues as they struggle with decisions about their future. This is the story of H.D. Stafford Secondary, but it could be the story of many high schools in British Columbia. It is a cautionary tale and one that everyone committed to public education needs to pay heed to. To understand how this could happen, it is important to start at the beginning.

Part One: The Provincial Setting

In the provincial election in 2001, the people of British Columbia elected the Liberal Party to form the government. The Liberal plan for education was to run the Education Ministry and the province’s schools more like a business with a focus on cost-efficiency. Since then, and through a subsequent election, they have not strayed from that agenda. In the 2007 Speech from the Throne, the government made the commitment “to improve quality, choice, and accountability in education” (Ministry of Education, 2008/09 – 2010/11 Service Plan). To quote Deleuze and Guattari (in Smyth, 2006, p. 280) “the boundaries of schooling are invaded by big business with its corporate ideology of consumerism, benchmarking, standards, competitiveness, ranking, rating, and testing.” Radwanski (in Osborne, 2001, p. 40) adds that “education is now seen, not as a
training ground for democratic citizenship, but as the paramount ingredient for success in the competitive world economy. Policy makers in education think in terms of producing workers, not citizens.” The Liberal government introduced many changes to policy regarding the public education system in British Columbia, but there are several closely linked policy changes that, when implemented at the local level, had an impact on H.D. Stafford Secondary.

Prior to the 2001 election, the public school system had begun to experience a modest decline in enrolment. In 1997, the enrolment in provincial public schools was 607,481 students. By 2002, the enrolment was 583,877, a decline of 23,604 students. Ministry projections indicated that the decline would continue and it has. In the 2007–08 school year, the Ministry reported a total enrolment of 550,000 students attending public schools in the province, a further decrease of 33,877 students. (Ministry of Education, Enrolment Report, October 2007) In addition, some school districts, particularly urban ones, were experiencing growth in some communities and decline in others. The overall effect in some of those districts was a decline in enrolment, but much less dramatic than in rural districts. Declining enrolment in and of itself did not present a major problem for school districts. The Funding Allocation System, which generated funding for school districts until the Liberals were elected and had been in effect since the early 1980’s, was based on the consideration of many different criteria. These included: the total number of students; the number of students in special programs; geographical location; climate; distance between major centres; transportation costs; maintenance costs; and the number and kinds of schools in the district (B.C.S.T.A., School Closures in British Columbia, 2007). The Funding Allocation System enabled
districts to keep schools open in spite of empty classrooms. Those empty classrooms sometimes came to be used by the school as additional Learning Assistance Centres, seminar or meeting rooms, or were sometimes rented at low cost by community groups to provide daycare, preschool or other services. Declining enrolment was, however, of concern to the new Liberal government. Maintaining the level of funding with fewer graduates leaving the public school system did not make good business sense.

In March of 2002, the Minister of Education introduced a new Funding Allocation System for the school districts in the province. The new funding system moved from funding space and infrastructure to funding based on the total number of students in each district. This meant a reduction in funding for most school districts beginning in the following school year. For the 2002-03 school year, the government provided school districts with a one time only Formula Buffer Grant to offset any negative effects of the new student based funding formula (Ministry of Education, Operating Grants Manual, 2002/03, p.1). The Formula Buffer Grants were phased out in the 2003-04 school year in consultation with school districts. Since then, operating grants to school districts have been based on student enrolment. Because of the continued decline in student enrolment, funding to most school districts has been reduced.

In addition to the new Funding Allocation System, the Liberal government adopted Bill 34, the School Amendment Act. Included in Bill 34 was a School Opening and Closure Order. Prior to the adoption of this Order, Boards of Education were required to apply to the Minister of Education to open or close a school. This Order gave Boards of Education the autonomy to open or close schools at the local level. It also kept the provincial government at arm's length from these sometimes very emotionally
charged political decisions. As part of the process, the Order required Boards to develop and implement a policy that included a public consultation process for permanent school closures. In addition, a Board of Education could only approve the closure of a school through the process of a by-law. The by-law process requires three readings: two at the first meeting and the third and final reading at the next meeting of the Board.

In early 2004, the Ministry also conducted an assessment of schools in high-risk seismic zones in the province. High-risk seismic zones were those defined as "vulnerable to significant earthquake activity" (Capital Planning Branch, Capital Plan Instructions, 2004/05, p. 5). The assessment identified 750 schools in 37 districts as being moderate to high risk. Langley was one of those districts. In November 2004, the Liberal Government announced a 1.5 billion dollar, fifteen-year plan to reduce "the life-safety risk to the occupants of those schools" (Ministry of Education, Funding Department, Seismic Mitigation Projects, 2005, p. 3). The plan included guidelines for school districts regarding application for funding, establishing building project priorities, and timelines. The application for funds was to be included with each district's submission of its Annual Capital Plan. The plan also stated that the costs of seismic upgrades would not be provided for schools operating under capacity. Capacity was defined as "the operating capacity of each school, which is a function of the nominal capacity, grade configuration and class sizes" (School Funding and Allocation Department, Capital Plan Instructions, 2004/05, p. 6). At the secondary level the operating capacity for grades 4 to 12 is based on the nominal capacity, which is 25 students per classroom. At the elementary level, the nominal capacity is 23 students per classroom. The Ministry reviews school district data and sets the capacity for each school in the province. So if
the enrolment in a school is below the Ministry stated capacity, the seismic projects would not be approved. If the costs of seismic upgrades exceeded 70% of replacement costs of a particular building, Boards were also encouraged to consider other alternatives such as: securing other sources of funding; closing the school and relocating students to a school with a lower seismic risk; or be faced with demolition of the current building.

In the same year, the Ministry revised its policy regarding Capital Plans for schools districts. Capital Plans include new buildings and replacement or renovation of existing buildings. The new Capital Planning policy requires districts to shift from a Three Year Capital Plan to a Five Year Capital Plan based on 5 to 10 year enrolment projections. This was a prudent move for the government, it would seem, given that the enrolment was continuing to decline, the capital costs for seismic projects was a significant increase in funding to districts, and the cost of labour and materials for building projects continued to increase. In addition, for any new building projects to be approved in areas of growth, three criteria had to be met:

1. the over-all enrolment in the district must be increasing over a 5 to 10 year period.

2. capacity requirements must be fulfilled. (Capacity requirements, as defined by the Ministry, meant that in urban areas, elementary schools should be operating at 100% of their capacity; secondary schools should be operating at 110% capacity; or the district should have an average capacity of 95%). The percentages were adjusted downward for rural areas where “travel distances were significant” (Capital Planning Branch, Capital Plan Instructions, 2004/05, p. 7).
3. A review of a family of schools (those within a geographic area) must be done to determine if consolidation of schools would accommodate the need for additional space. A family of schools was defined as those within a 3 kilometre radius for elementary schools and those within a 5 kilometre radius for secondary schools (Capital Planning Branch, Capital Plan Instructions, 2004/05, p. 5).

These changes placed a great deal of responsibility on local Boards of Education and created strong incentives to close certain schools. The government’s explanation was that this new policy direction would allow Boards to “be more responsive to the needs of their communities and to be more creative in seeking solutions” (Capital Planning Branch, Capital Plan Instructions, 2004/05, p. 1).

The Liberal Government was also an advocate for choice within the education system. The Statement of Education Policy Order, adopted in 2001, includes a section entitled “Diversity and Choice,” which states “In an effort to accommodate varying parental and student expectations of school services, public schools, within available resources, will provide parents and students with choice of programs” (School Act, p. D-88). In addition, parents were given the option of not attending their neighbourhood school and given the right to “enrol their children in a public school or in any independent school of their choice” (School Act, p. D-89). Boards of Education were also encouraged to consider developing “specialty schools that would serve the larger community” (Capital Planning Branch, Capital Plan Instructions, 2004/05, p. 7). In times of enrolment growth, this policy might not be seen to be detrimental to the health of the public education system. With the current reality of declining enrolment in most districts, this policy has, in fact, pitted schools against one another, competing for
students to gain the necessary funds to maintain programs and to provide quality education.

In sum since their election in 2001, the Liberal Government has introduced several closely linked policies which, when implemented by Boards of Education at the local level, have had an impact on schools and communities. These policies have caused Boards of Education to close schools, move students, and consider the sale of surplus facilities to finance public education. Between 2002 and June 2007, 150 public schools were closed in the province of British Columbia and 22,000 students were affected, either by reconfiguration or closure of their schools (B. C. Teachers' Federation, School Closures, 2008). To better understand the impact on schools and communities, one needs to take a closer look at the implementation of these policies at the local level.

**Part Two: The Local Setting**

The Langley School District offered its first program of choice in 1978. This was the Fundamental Elementary School Program. It was established by the Board at the request of a group of parents and educators from the community who wanted a “back to basics approach to education that would emphasize basic skill development, the development of good character and an instructional pedagogy emphasizing a clearly defined set goals and objectives” (Report to Trustees, November 2005). The program was initially established in two older elementary schools, Langley Central and Langley Prairie Elementary Schools, located in the city of Langley. The Fundamental Elementary Program was established as a District Program of Choice, which meant that it was open to any student in the Langley School District and to students outside the district as long as
there was available space. A new elementary school was constructed in 1995 and at that time, the students from both locations were moved to the new facility. The new school became home to 650 students in grades one through six. In 1998, a middle school program was added at a former elementary school, Anderson Elementary, and 250 students in grades seven through nine began attending there. Portables were added but could not keep pace with the demand for access to the Fundamental Program from parents in the community.

A group of parents and educators expressed interest in establishing another Program of Choice, a Fine Arts School, in Langley in 1984. The purpose of the Fine Arts School was to “provide a comprehensive education for students while focusing on the development of aesthetic intelligence through programmes in the Visual Arts, Dance, Drama, and Music” (Langley Fine Arts Proposal, 1985). The Fine Arts Program was also established as a District Program of Choice. The Fine Arts School opened in available space in Fort Langley Junior Secondary in the fall of 1985. In the first year, the school had one class each of grades one through five. Fort Langley Junior Secondary continued to offer courses for students in grades eight, nine, and ten. The school had one administrative team for both programs, but each staff had its own budget. The Fine Arts School was located in one wing of the school, but shared the library, gym, lunchroom and office with the junior high school. By 1990, the Fine Arts School had grown and included grades one through nine with the addition of portables on the site. At that time, a new secondary school had been built in the neighbouring community of Walnut Grove. Some junior high school students who had been attending either the Fine Arts School or Fort Langley Junior High School made the decision to transfer to the new high school in
Walnut Grove, creating more available space. In the following year, the junior high school program was phased out and the Fine Arts School added grades ten through twelve. Over the next decade, the Fine Arts School received a lot of interest from educators and was profiled in the media and a research study (The Exemplary Schools Project) of the school was undertaken by Dr. Jane Gaskell of the University of British Columbia in 1993. Students from within the district and some from other districts began applying to attend the school, resulting in a fairly lengthy wait list.

In December of 1985, the Board of Education had adopted a policy regarding programs of choice. The policy stated, “Public education must serve the needs of students who represent a broad spectrum of interests and beliefs” (Langley School District Policy 5083). The regulations defined the application process, the need for community support, and the availability of suitable space before the program could be established. The policy was amended in 2002 to include “the possibility of a program of choice within a classroom, a school within a school or at more than one site.”

In the spring of 2003, the Langley Board of Education established two other District Programs of Choice. Langley U-Connect was an educational program that made extensive use of computer technology. In its first year the program was set up for students in kindergarten to grade ten and expanded to grade twelve in the following year. The second was the Montessori program which opened with one class, a kindergarten/grade one split class. The plan was to expand the program as students progressed through the elementary grades. These programs were established again, at the request of parents and educators in the district. These programs continue to be well subscribed, but are not experiencing the long wait lists seen at the Fundamental or Fine Arts Schools.
The Langley School District began to experience declining enrolment in 2001. Until then, the enrolment had shown an increase each year. The enrolment as of September 2000 was 19,572 students (Langley School District Enrolment Report, 2007).

The enrolment data as of September each year since then are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>19,448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>19,114</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>18,736</td>
</tr>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>18,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>18,571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>18,155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>18,193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From September of 2000 to September of 2007, the district saw a total decline of 1,379 students. (A slight increase in September 2007 was due to the arrival of a large number of refugees from Myanmar, previously Burma, who began attending one elementary school.)

Ministry projections for September of the following years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>18,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>17,785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>17,727</td>
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</table>

According to Ministry projections, the Langley School District could experience a further decline of 466 students for a total of 1,845 students by 2010. This was a concern for the district given that funding was allocated on a per pupil basis. The steady decline in enrolment meant a corresponding decline in funding each year.
In March of 2003, in compliance with Ministry policy, the Board of Education adopted a School Closure policy. It stated that the Board had the authority to close a school for reasons, which included:

1. declining student enrolment such that the school is no longer economically or operationally viable;
2. restructuring of educational programs, consolidation of operations and relocation of students to other schools in the school district, which results in the school being deemed surplus to the district’s educational needs.
3. the school is being replaced with a newly constructed school.

(Langley School District Policy 5029)

The policy included regulations regarding public consultation over a time period of sixty days and for students to have the option of attending a school of their choice as a result of the closure of their neighbourhood school. This policy was closely linked to Policy 7008 Attendance, which was adopted in May of 2003 to comply with the School Act. It stated “The Board of School Trustees recognizes that a school age resident of British Columbia may enroll in an educational program in any school district and attend any school, providing there is space available and an appropriate program can be provided at no extra cost to the Board.” The accompanying regulations outlined the process and timelines for application to a school other than the student’s neighbourhood school.

In 2004, the Langley Board of Education voted to close Otter Elementary, which had an enrolment of 102 students. In 2006, the Board voted to close South Carvolth Elementary which had an enrolment of 98 students and in 2007, the Board voted to close
Bradshaw Elementary and Aldergrove Elementary. Bradshaw had an enrolment of 158 students and Aldergrove an enrolment of 223 students. None of these schools were operating at the required capacity of 100%. The communities surrounding each school appealed to the Board to keep the schools open during the sixty-day public consultation process, but the appeals were ignored by a majority of Board members. In the end, all four schools were closed, impacting 581 students.

The Seismic Assessment completed in Langley in 2004 indicated that there were a total of thirty-two schools requiring seismic upgrades. Of these, three were rated high priority; fifteen were rated moderate/high priority; nine were moderate; three were low/moderate; and two were low. The Ministry made the commitment that those schools rated high and moderate would be the priority for seismic upgrading. (Funding Department, Ministry of Education, 2004) As of February 2008, the Langley Fine Arts School has completed Phase One and funding has been allocated for Phase Two. The Fine Arts School was deemed at high risk and was operating at 104% capacity. Other schools on the list were not at capacity and that fact needed to be considered on an annual basis as the School District developed its Capital Plan.

In the spring of 2003, the Board of Education in its concern over the continued decline in student enrolment and the corresponding budget shortfall, had directed Senior Management to develop a report with recommendations that would provide a solution to the problem. The report, entitled The District Facilities Review 2003, was presented to the Board of Education in September 2003. The report was intended to guide the district over the next five to ten years. The report noted that although the overall enrolment in the district was declining, there were communities that were stable or showing growth. It
also reaffirmed the Board’s commitment to Programs of Choice. The report included an analysis of the actual enrolment and capacity of all the schools in the district. The District had an overall capacity utilization of 95-96% or a surplus of forty-six classrooms.

The report recommended “subdividing the district into three regions for the purpose of evaluating capacity” (p. 5). This approach would permit the district to deal with the areas of growth and areas of decline separately. The three areas were: the north including Walnut Grove and Willoughby; the south and central area which included the City of Langley, where H.D. Stafford was located, and Brookswood; and the east which included Aldergrove and the community surrounding D.W. Poppy Secondary. This regional organization, which had been approved by the Ministry according to the report, would allow the district to apply for site acquisition and construction of new schools in the Willoughby area which was experiencing growth, while finding solutions for the declining enrolment in the City of Langley and the Aldergrove region.

The report also recommended the expansion of the Elementary Fine Arts Program in an effort to boost enrolment by finding space for students from outside the district. The report recommended Blacklock Elementary as the site for a second Fine Arts Program. There was a recommendation to expand the Fundamental School Program to grade 12 as well in an effort to increase the over-all district enrolment. Because the district wasn’t able to provide the program beyond grade nine, some families were choosing to leave the district to attend Fundamental Programs in Surrey or Abbotsford. The report recommended establishing “a school within a school model to house a grade 9 to 12 Fundamental Secondary Program at either Langley Secondary School or H.D.Stafford Secondary School” (Facilities Report, 2003, p. 13). A school within a
school model was defined in the report as “a smaller school within a larger school. Both schools would have a degree of autonomy and yet both schools share and make use of the same facility” (p. 14). Cited in the report as a successful example of a school within a school model was the shared use of the Fort Langley Junior Secondary facility as the Fine Arts School developed. The report suggested that expanding the Fundamental Program would increase enrolment in the district through retention of current students and by attracting others from private schools, home schooling, or other districts. Both H.D. Stafford Secondary and Langley Secondary were operating at 75% capacity at that time, and this plan would increase the enrolment so that one of the schools was operating at or above capacity. Both secondary schools were located in the South/Central Region of the School District. Although the report didn’t spell this out, it would also increase the district’s chances of getting new school buildings approved in the Willoughby area where new housing developments were being constructed at a fairly rapid rate.

Further recommendations in the report included expansion of Programs of Choice. These included consideration of new programs such as: Global Education, Environmental Education, and the addition of a Sports Academy at the secondary level. The final recommendations included the relocation of the Alternate Secondary Programs and the sale of up to five surplus assets. These assets were either properties owned by the district but no longer in use or could be consolidated at another site for shared use.

The Board Of Education chose to pursue: the expansion of the Elementary Fine Arts Program; the school within a school model for the Fundamental Secondary Program at either H.D. Stafford Secondary or Langley Senior Secondary; and the possible closure of the three small elementary schools. The Fine Arts Program to be located at Blacklock
Elementary was approved in the spring. The parents and staff at one of the small elementary schools applied for designation as a Fundamental Elementary School. This was approved by the Board of Education in June 2004. The enrolment at the school has increased and it remains open. The recommendation to expand the Fundamental Program through “the school within a school” model created a great deal of controversy in both the Stafford and Langley Secondary communities.

The Board of Education directed senior management to consult with the three schools affected by the recommendation (the Fundamental School, H.D. Secondary School and Langley Senior Secondary School) and report back. Each school was asked to form a Steering Committee composed of parents, staff, and students. Each Steering Committee was directed to meet with senior management or meet together to discuss how this recommendation might come to fruition.

The Steering Committee for the Fundamental School Program consulted with the parents at that school and came to consensus that they would prefer “two equal and autonomous schools who would each utilize a portion of the building for themselves and share other common facilities such as the gym, cafeteria, and library.” Further to that, the Fundamental School community wanted a dress code, no inappropriate language, and no “public displays of affection” in their area of the school (Report to the Board of Trustees, January 2004). The Fundamental Steering Committee shared their preferences with senior management and then with the Steering Committees at H.D. Stafford Secondary and Langley Senior Secondary. The consultation process continued until December but did not go well. The Steering Committees at H.D. Stafford and Langley Secondary took exception to some of the requests from the parents at the Fundamental School.
Senior Management staff decided to take a different approach and organized a public forum to discuss the issues of declining enrolment, capacity, and the expansion of the Fundamental School as a solution to the first two issues. Community members from all three schools were invited to attend. The Mayor of the City of Langley chose to attend the meeting as well. After the forum, Senior Management asked students, parents, and staff to complete surveys. The results of the surveys were collated and shared. It was reported that the Fundamental School community “felt that in order to be unique, the fundamental school had to be separate” (Survey Results, January 2004). The H.D. Stafford and Langley Secondary communities had concerns about the loss of programs and identities as comprehensive neighborhood schools. The Mayor of the City of Langley expressed her support for maintaining the city’s only high school, H.D.Stafford Secondary. After lots of discussion, a forum, and a survey about programs, curricula, enrolment data, capacity issues, separate entrances, building of additional walls, and codes of conduct, the Board decided that “a school within a school” model was not a viable option at either location.

The Stafford school community came together through this process and seemed quite amazed at their success in defeating the proposal. They also found the Steering Committee to be quite a democratic way to function and as of February 2008, it continues to meet monthly to provide direction for the school. Membership is open to anyone (students, staff, parents, and community members) who wishes to attend. Based on their experiences, I believe that members of the school community are what Maxine Greene describes as “morally wide awake” and have a sense of their own agency (1978, p.43). Being “morally wide awake” means that they pay attention to decisions being made at
their school and on behalf of their school by their locally elected trustees. Their sense of agency came about as a result of their opportunity to change the direction the local Board of Education was choosing in regard to the expansion of the Fundamental Program.

After the decision was made to keep the two secondary schools as comprehensive neighbourhood high schools, the Board of Education challenged the two school communities to "re-invent themselves" (Board Chair, June 2004) in order to increase enrolment. A further motion was adopted, that for the duration of this Board's tenure (until the municipal election in November 2005), the two secondary schools would retain their comprehensive neighbourhood school status. The motion stated: That the Board of School Trustees, District #35 (Langley), states that in the remaining two years of its political mandate (school year 2004/2005 and 2005/2006) the District will not entertain or exercise its option to close either H.D. Stafford Secondary or Langley Secondary schools and reaffirms its commitment to support and assist these neighbourhood schools in their attempts to address student retention/acquisition and capacity issues (School Board Meeting Minutes, January 27, 2004). Langley Senior Secondary School community chose to add a sports academy offering elite hockey and soccer programs. At H.D. Stafford, the Steering Committee met and developed some recommendations, which were taken to students, parents, and staff, for approval. The first recommendation was to retain H.D. Stafford as a comprehensive neighbourhood high school. The second recommendation was to build on the success of the Fine Arts Program, which staged a Musical Theatre Production each year, had an annual Art Show attended by members of the community, and a strong music program, by creating a Fine Arts Focus. The Steering Committee also hoped that a strong Fine Arts Program would attract the students
from the new Blacklock Fine Arts School. Blacklock was one of Stafford's feeder schools, but this would ensure continuity of programming for those students if they chose not to attend the Fine Arts School in Fort Langley. The Steering Committee also recommended the addition of a dance studio to the school to enhance the Fine Arts Program. After consultation with students, parents and staff and reaching consensus on the recommendations, the Steering Committee submitted the request to the Board. In early July, the Board of Education supported the recommendations and the dance studio was completed the following spring (2005).

In the fall of 2004, the enrolment at both secondary schools began to show a modest increase, but the overall capacity in the district remained at 95%. This continued to be of concern to the Board of Education. In November of 2004, the parents from the Fundamental School Program appeared as a delegation at a School Board meeting. Once again, they made a request for expansion of the program up to grade twelve. In February 2005, the Board of Education made the following public statement: "The Langley School District is committed to expanding the current K-10 Fundamental School Program to a full K-12 program for September 2006" (Statement—Commitment to the Program, May 2005, p. 1). In order to accomplish this, the Board had entered into an agreement to purchase a private elementary school, which would become the new home for kindergarten to grade five. The current Fundamental Elementary School would be renovated to become the Fundamental Middle/Secondary School for grades six through twelve. The renovations would not provide all of the classroom space required for electives such as technical education or home economics, so the students would be bussed to a neighbouring high school for those courses. The purchase of the private
school for this expansion was being funded through “the sale of properties surplus to the
School District’s needs” (School District 35 Langley, Information Release, October 2005). The Information Release went on to say that the “full complement of the three
Fundamental Schools at capacity would be 1,560 students.” Students moved into their
new schools midway through the 2005-06 school year.

The Board of Education conducted a School Boundary Review in May 2005. A
new elementary school had been approved in the expanding Willoughby area and was
under construction in the north end of the district and a catchment area had to be
determined for it. In addition, some changes to catchment areas for secondary schools,
which were operating below 100% capacity, were made. Catchment areas were adjusted
for three secondary schools: Langley Secondary, D.W. Poppy, and H.D. Stafford.
Consultation meetings were held with the communities affected, with the changes taking
place in the fall of 2006. Although this was an attempt to increase enrolment in those
three schools, it had limited impact given that families were not required to attend their
neighbourhood or catchment areas schools and could apply to attend the school of their
choice, which they did.

In the municipal election of November 2005, five of seven trustees were returned
to office. Each election, two trustees are elected to represent the City of Langley and five
are elected to represent the Township. Of the two City trustees, one had chosen not to
run for re-election. A rookie trustee replaced him. In the Township, one trustee was not
re-elected. Another candidate who had been a trustee in the past, garnered more votes
and was elected instead.
In April of 2006, the Board of Education capped the enrolment of the three secondary schools that were operating at more than 100% capacity. The rationale for this was to “maximize the use of as many of our facilities as possible and provide for future approval of needed capital construction” (Secondary Enrolment Report, April 2006, p. 2). This referred to the Ministry of Education requirement that secondary schools should serve as least 110% of their capacity in order to be considered full and before a district could apply for capital funding for school expansions or new buildings. One secondary school was capped at 120%, the other two at 108%. Because the enrolment was capped, there was no further available space, and new students could not choose to attend those schools. The expectation was that this would encourage students to attend their neighbourhood schools. In June 2006, the superintendent who had served the district for five years retired. The Board selected one of the Assistant Superintendents to succeed him.

In June 2006, the Board of Education adopted a report entitled *Community Discussion on Enrolments* and its accompanying recommendation. The recommendation directed senior staff to develop a plan which would allow the Board to consult with various communities within the school district regarding enrolment, capacity and enhanced service. The accompanying rationale pointed out that the enrolment in the district had declined by 1,300 students over the previous five years. The district was funding seats that were no longer needed. The report recommended that the school district needed to consider “surplusing more unused instructional spaces in order to free up additional funds for instructional support” (p. 2).
In November 2006, the Board of Education received a report entitled *Educational Opportunities and Related Facilities Planning* (November 2006). The recommendations were intended to:

1. increase the use of existing facilities by upgrading space in a cost effective manner.
2. strengthen the District’s case for provincial government funding for new schools to serve the rapidly growing Willoughby Slope region by maximizing the use of existing schools.

*(Educational Opportunities and Related Facilities Planning Report, November 2006, p. 1)*

The Report included recommendations for moving Alternate Programs to available space within schools elsewhere in the District. Apex Alternate Secondary School would be closed and moved to Otter Elementary School, which had been closed in 2004. The Apex site, valued at $5 million, would be put up for sale. Langley Education Centre would be moved to Langley Secondary School, which was operating at 70% capacity. Langley Education Centre would be vacating a leased building, saving money for the district. A third alternate program, the PASS Program would be moved from its site on 32nd Avenue to the site vacated by the Fundamental Middle School. The 32nd Avenue property would also be put up for sale. On Friday, March 14th, 2008, the *Langley Times* announced that the Apex site had been sold to the City of Langley. The selling price was not disclosed but speculated to be in the $5 million range, and the article stated that the sale of the property “allows the district to use the revenue from the sale for other priorities.” Seventy-five per cent of the proceeds from the sale can be used for capital
projects, which require Ministry approval. The remaining 25% can be used at the Board’s discretion. This is a sad commentary on the province’s commitment to public education when School Districts find themselves in the business of selling real estate in order to secure sufficient funding to provide quality education and retention of programs for students.

A review of the District’s Five Year Capital Plan developed in 2005/2006 shows seismic upgrading being requested for six schools in the third year of the plan or the 2007/2008 school year. Funding was also being requested for an addition to Mountain Secondary to increase capacity from 725 to 1,000 students for the same year. And site acquisition costs were being requested for a new elementary school and a new secondary school in the same area, the Willoughby slope or the North Langley Region. Given that there were still some schools in the district not operating at capacity, it seemed unlikely that the Ministry would fund the site acquisition for new schools unless something was done.

Enter Mike McAvoy, the author of the latest chapter. Mr. McAvoy, former Superintendent of the Vernon School District, was hired as a consultant, to assist in the Community Discussions on Enrolments, as per the recommendation adopted in June 2006. He was asked by the Board of Education to prepare a report and recommendations to deal with the problem of surplus instructional space. His first task was the Aldergrove Region. He reported his findings in December 2006. The second task was in the South/Central Region of the Langley School District, which included H.D. Stafford. Mr. McAvoy conducted three community meetings. The first, held on January 18 provided information on national and regional demographic trends, provincial and local student
enrolment data, financial challenges faced by the district, and the academic achievement levels of students in the schools in the region. Participants discussed this information in small groups. The notes from the discussions were posted on the school district website. The second meeting held on February 8, was an opportunity for participants to discuss their opinions, suggestions, and goals for the future of their schools. This was done through small group discussions and the results were again posted on the district website.

At the final meeting held on February 22, Mr. McAvoy presented his recommendations for school and program consolidations. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions of Mr. McAvoy, trustees, and senior management staff. His report contained eleven recommendations, three of which directly affected H.D. Stafford. Those were:

#8 That senior staff develop a plan, with community discussion, regarding the establishment of a grades 6-8 middle school at H.D. Stafford School for September 2008, including the resulting implications for elementary schools, to be brought forward for Board consideration no later than October 2007.

#9 That senior staff develop a plan, with community discussion, regarding the establishment of a grades 9-12 secondary school at Langley Secondary School for September 2008, including the resulting implications for elementary feeder schools, to be brought forward for Board consideration no later than October 2007.

#10 That the middle and secondary schools in the South and Central area develop compatible timetables for September 2008, allowing for the greatest possible maximization of staff and student resources and opportunities and that the compatibility take into account similar timetables elsewhere in the School District.
The McAvoyn Report had considered the closure of H.D. Stafford Secondary School, but recommended a reconfiguration to a middle school instead because “the community valued the school” (Building for the Future prepared by Mike McAvoyn). If these recommendations were approved in October of 2007, then Stafford would become a middle school by September of 2008; Stafford students would have to be required to go to Langley Secondary for grades 9 through 12. All of the elementary feeder schools for both Langley Secondary and H.D. Stafford Secondary, all seven of them, would become kindergarten through to grade 5. Some of these elementary schools would be operating at 50% capacity or less. The secondary schools in the South/Central Region, which includes Langley Secondary, Stafford, and Brookswood Secondary, would be required to develop a common time table by September of 2008. It should be noted that this was the only area in the school district that would have this grade configuration. Although Brookswood was included in this consultation process, it was not affected, nor were its feeder elementary schools. Those are all remaining as elementary schools from kindergarten to grade seven.

Stafford students, parents, and staff were quite concerned about the potential loss of the neighbourhood high school and raised that concern at the meeting. The other concern expressed by the community was that the process was far from democratic; participants (parents, students and staff) said that they felt that they had not been listened to. The report and recommendations did not accurately reflect the comments made during the consultation process. “Unless the product of their deliberation is seen to be connected to policy making, citizens are unlikely to feel more efficacious or empowered, or to be more trusting of governments over the longer term” (Laforest and Phillips, 2007,
p. 79). In this case, the community at H.D. Stafford did not believe that they could trust their local Board of Education and began to take steps to have their concerns addressed. The school community began to attend meetings making presentations and writing letters to the editors of both local papers. By the time the final decision was made by the Board of Education on November 1, 2007, students, parents, and staff had attended eight formal Board of Education meetings, three Community Consultation meetings, five additional meetings to discuss alternative options, two middle school forums, and an evening for anyone in the community to appear before the Board before they voted on the recommendations. The final report from the superintendent stated:

> From the outset the district has recognized that this report may result in anxiety and strong reactions from some communities and individuals. However, unless the district manages enrolment decline by reconfiguring, consolidating and coordinating programs and services there will be deterioration in the quality of education received by all Langley students. (2007, p. 6)

**The Board of Education approved the recommendations on a vote of four to three.**

A transition team chaired by one of the Assistant Superintendents was established at H.D. Stafford Secondary in December and the work to reconfigure the school began in January 2008.

**New Policy Too Late for H. D. Stafford**

By June 2008, a total of 177 schools had been closed in the province since the election of the Liberal government in 2001. In June, the Education Minister made an
announcement that “school boards should think long and hard before shutting more
schools. In the interests of making B.C. the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on
the continent by 2015, the Ministry was considering expanding early childhood
education.” (Vancouver Sun, June 25, 2008, p. 15) School districts will need any and
all empty classrooms if the Ministry approves the early childhood education programs or
expanded kindergarten programs in the near future.

Then on September 3, 2008, the Premier held a press conference to announce a
three year, thirty million dollar pilot project entitled Neighbourhoods of Learning.
Three Vancouver schools and two schools in rural areas (to be announced) have been
selected to participate in this project. The Premier said that “this government has a vision
for education in B.C. – one where schools and community organizations can create
Neighbourhoods of Learning where people can access education and community services
under one roof” (Office of the Premier, News Release, September 3, 2008). The
expectation is that schools throughout the province will be able to adopt this model in the
future “to best meet the needs of their students and communities.”

The premier went on to announce a new School Building Closure and Disposal
Policy effective immediately. He explained that this new policy would require Boards of
Education to seek permission from the Minister of Education prior to closure or disposal
of school property. In addition, available school space (empty classrooms) should be
made available for alternative community use. This community use includes: early
learning, child care services, adult and industry training education programs, family
resource centres, seniors’ centres, public libraries, health care and therapy services, local
social services, and community recreation programs. To determine community use, the
Board of Education is required to consult with local government, community organizations and the public. According to the new policy, the consultation process must include:

- consideration of future enrolment growth in the district, including kindergarten to grade 12, adult programs, and early learning;

- consideration of alternative community use of surplus space in school buildings and other facilities; and

- a fair consideration of the community’s input and adequate opportunity for the community to respond to the board’s plans for the school.

It would seem that the Liberal Government has heard from the voters – there have been too many school closures in the province. Hence, the change in policy eight months prior to an election. It comes too late for H.D. Stafford and too late for the other 176 schools in the province that have already been closed.

**Part Three: The Stafford Story (including some interesting characters)**

H.D. Stafford Junior Secondary was officially opened in November of 1971. It was built on what was known as Pleasantdale Farm. The school was for grades 8 through 10 and had an opening enrolment of 450 students. Students transitioned to Langley Senior Secondary for grades 11 and 12. The school was named after Harold Dunlop Stafford, a former superintendent of the Langley School District. His contributions to the School District and the communities of Langley are remembered by many of the old timers in the community. The H.D.Stafford Citizenship Award is presented annually to
someone in the community who volunteers their time and/or provides leadership for a variety of worthwhile causes.

In 1989, Superintendent Emery Dosdal recommended to the Board of Education that the educational program at H.D. Stafford be expanded to include grades 11 and 12 by September of 1990. The accompanying report indicated that all other secondary schools in the Langley District were of that grade configuration and that H. D. Stafford should “cease to be an anomaly” (Dosdal, 1989, p. 2). Classrooms, a new library, a second gym, and an extension to the shop wing were added. Enrolment was expected to be 800-825 students.

H.D. Stafford is located in the City of Langley, near the downtown core. It is the city’s only high school and the mayor and councilors have been very vocal about their support for public education and their desire to retain the city high school (grades 8-12) and the feeder elementary schools (kindergarten-grade 7). In fact, the City’s Economic Development Plan cites the strong public education system as one of the reasons businesses and families should locate there.

The capacity of the school according to the Ministry of Education is 850 students. Twelve per cent of the students are identified according to the Ministry of Special Education criteria as having special needs. Another fifteen per cent have Aboriginal heritage. Between forty and fifty International Students attend the school each year.

The most recent Census data show that out of the 21 cities in the Greater Vancouver Regional District, Langley City has the highest percentage of single parent families; the fifth highest percentage of low-income families; and the highest rate of adults without a high school diploma (Government of Canada, 2001). In spite of these factors and their
accompanying challenges for teachers, H.D. Stafford student achievement in literacy and numeracy on provincial exams in grade 12 are always above the district and provincial averages.

The school has always been overshadowed by Brookswood Secondary School, which has an enrolment of 1,200 plus students each year, a Film Program and provincial championship basketball teams. Because of the option that families have for their children to attend the school of their choice, many students who live in the Stafford catchment area choose to attend Brookswood. Stafford staff, students, parents, and community members have worked hard to change the perception of the school in the community in an effort to attract more students. The teaching staff has worked very hard to improve student achievement. The school adopted a semester system in an effort to support students. Before Portfolios were provincially mandated the school developed a Portfolio Program where all grade 12 students were expected to complete a Portfolio as part of graduation requirements and that continues today. The school developed a Fine Arts Program offering Intensive courses, which are akin to Honours courses in math or science. The teaching staff elected to take two of their professional development days and use the time to provide collaboration time throughout the year. The time is used on eleven Wednesday mornings throughout the school year for teachers to meet in departments to work together. Students have a late start on those mornings. Students often come to school at the regular time to complete homework, hold Student Leadership meetings or to practise in the gym or music room. The school also adopted a calendar change that added sixteen minutes on to the school day. In return for those minutes, there are ten additional days throughout the year when school is not in session. Many Stafford
students have to work to support themselves or their families and these additional days gave them more flexibility to manage school assignments and their hours at work. At the request of parents in the community, H. D. Stafford began a football program. The first year, the school fielded a grade eight and a junior varsity team. In the second year, a senior varsity team was added. In addition, the school applied to become part of the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) Research Project funded by the Ministry of Education. The school was accepted and is in the fourth year of the project with three AVID classes currently underway. Half of the staff members have attended AVID training, which consists of professional development workshops on the best instructional practices according to the latest research. H.D. Stafford was also selected by the district to be part of a Student Teacher Module for the University of British Columbia. Each year, four to six student teachers are placed at the school to complete all their practica. It has been beneficial to the staff because it is another vehicle for examining their professional practice. The Steering Committee continues to meet to provide direction for the school and the school community values the opportunity to meet in what they view to be a democratic organization.

The enrolment at H.D. Stafford, although below capacity, was above projection each year and was predicted to increase over the next five years, according to District projections. The school community had established a practice of working together to solve problems and to implement creative solutions in support of their neighbourhood high school. The school community had worked hard to do what was asked of them by the Board in 2004, so the Building for the Future Report and Recommendations came as
quite a surprise. No one was more surprised than the students who valued their school and the educational program they received there.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this chapter has provided an outline of some of the educational policies adopted by the Liberal government after its election in British Columbia in 2001. These policies, through their implementation at the school district level in Langley have had quite an impact on schools and communities. In Chapter Two, I describe the attempts by students to influence the democratic process in schools by reviewing the literature and describing the actions that the students at H.D. Stafford Secondary took to try to retain their secondary school.
Chapter Three: Student Voice – Recognizing and Challenging the Masquerade

In British Columbia’s public education system, educators believe that we do our utmost to support students in their development as democratic citizens. In fact, the work that is done in this area, although not harmful, does little to ensure that this occurs. In this chapter, I review the provincial policy that has been developed and examine the history of Student Voice, a term that is often used to describe student involvement in decision making in schools. I conclude the chapter by describing the work of some students at H.D. Stafford Secondary in the Langley School District and their efforts to impact the political process as democratic citizens in their community.

Student Voice – Some Attempts

The School Act states that “the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy” (p. C-11). Goal One of the 2008/09 – 2010/11 Service Plan developed by the Ministry of Education is Improved Student Achievement. The goal statement reads: “Continuous improvement in student achievement refers to both academic achievement (including reading, writing, and numeracy) and non-academic achievement, such as learning to make responsible choices related to health and safety and demonstrating the qualities of good citizenship” (p. 1). Neither statement provides a definition of democracy or a description of what it means to be a good citizen. It would seem then, that the expectation is that students learn about one common view of democracy which is to see it as “formal politics: voting,
elections, and developing an understanding of the various political parties” (Levin 1998, p. 58).

Another sense of democracy, much more common in education, is participatory democracy. The central idea is that “people should be closely and extensively involved in making decisions that affect them” (Levin, 1998, p.58). Student Voice is a term used to describe student involvement in decision making in schools. “Student voice focuses on the many ways in which youth can actively participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra, 2006, p.314, citing Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000). Most of the time, these opportunities focus on decisions related to organizing social activities and have very little to do with educational decisions or issues of particular concern to adolescents.

In British Columbia some attempts have been made to include students in decision making in their schools and in impacting policy development at the local and provincial levels. In 1990, the British Columbia Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association launched a provincial organization called B.C. Student Voice. The Ministry of Education supported the initiative and continues its support today through grants and by attending the Student Voice biannual regional meetings. Other organizations such as the Insurance Co-corporation of British Columbia and the Royal Canadian Legion provide funding from time to time.

B.C. Student Voice is supported by adult advisors, usually principals, vice principals, or teachers, and is organized on a regional basis. “Our vision is for all students in the province to be heard in matters affecting their education,” states the brochure on page 2. Students meet regularly at their schools and in their regions. Twice
a year, the B.C. Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association hosts a provincial meeting, where students from around the province come together to discuss issues of concern and to develop leadership skills. Sometimes the Ministry asks for feedback on specific topics such as bullying and harassment, portfolios, school planning councils, or daily physical education or asks for volunteers to sit on various government committees (S. Cutcliffe, personal communication, March 2008). Based on a review of the B.C. Student Voice newsletters, activities at the school level include fund-raising for various initiatives to organizing school dances and noon-hour activities. Although worthwhile, these activities do little to contribute to the development of democratic citizenship.

Another attempt to involve students in decision making was initiated by the B.C. Ministry of Education in 2003. The Ministry introduced School Planning Councils. The Councils were to include three parents, a teacher, and in secondary schools, a student, and the school principal. The student can be either a volunteer or can be appointed by the principal. The teacher representative is elected by secret ballot as are the three parent representatives. The School Planning Council’s mandate is to review school achievement data and to prepare an annual School Plan designed to improve achievement results. Students serve on the School Planning Council for a variety of reasons: the principal invites them to participate; it is a good credit for a resume; they think it may benefit the other students in the school.

In 2007, the Ministry hosted the first Student Congress. The Student Congress was set up to complement the Parent Congress, the Teacher Congress, and the Learning Roundtable. These are all vehicles, according to the government, for stakeholders to have their voices heard. One hundred twenty students were chosen randomly from
almost 400 applications, based on regional representation and whether students attended public, independent or band-operated schools. According to a press release from the premier’s office, “The students and the education minister will work together throughout the day to create a Student Leadership Plan, which will outline the next steps that government or students can take in schools and communities to help improve student achievement” (Office of the Premier, April 2, 2007). According to a Ministry representative, the Student Leadership Plan did not get developed and is currently a “work in progress.” In addition, there were very few applications for this year’s Student Congress – April 4, 2008 (S. Cutcliffe, personal communication, March, 2008). The B.C. Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association was asked to send some representatives from B.C. Student Voice. The involvement of students has had very little impact on the policy formation process so it is not surprising that youth are not volunteering to participate this year. Laforest and Phillips describe this as an attempt at “citizen engagement based on the principles of deliberative dialogue” (2007, p. 67). The goal of citizen engagement is to produce better policy and “more active, better citizens” (2007, p. 67). In order for the deliberative process to be effective, “participation must link back to decision making” (Laforest and Phillips, p. 78, citing Fischer 2003; Fischer and Forster 1993; Healey 1997).

At the school level, teachers and administrators have looked for ways to involve students in what they thought were meaningful ways. One form of involvement is through Student Government. In schools, educators also offer students a voice through Grad Councils, Focus Groups, Leadership Retreats, or on committees that have the responsibility for the organization of specific events or activities in the school. Some
students participate willingly; schools ask teachers to nominate students; and students sometimes encourage one another to become involved.

**Student Voice — A Masquerade**

Over the past decade and a half there have been numerous calls for what has been called student voice in education. It began as an attempt to involve students in some form of democratic participation in schools. This originally came about as a reaction against “the traditional exclusion of young people from dialogue and decision making about issues of schooling” (Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 391). Kozol (2007, p. 361) stated, “The voices of children have been missing from the whole discussion of education and educational reform.” Levin (2007, p. 361) argued that the “most promising reform strategies involve treating students as capable persons, capitalizing on their knowledge and interests.” Over time, as well, student voice has become something much more narrow in definition. Governments and policy makers mainly interested in school reform suggest that giving students a voice will lead to improved practice in schools and better results in student achievement. “School improvement is probably the dominant justification for student consultation and participation in the present performance-dominated climate” (Ruddick and Fielding, 2006, p. 223).

How can students fully participate in the conversations that occur in schools and influence the decisions that are made? Cook-Sather (2007, p. 394) states that defining student voice is difficult but essential. Student Voice is “having the opportunity to speak one’s mind, be heard, and counted by others, and, perhaps have an influence on outcomes.” bell hooks (1994, p. 11) would add that an engaged voice “must never be fixed and absolute, but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world
beyond itself.” According to Lincoln (1995, p. 89) “exercising voice in the duties of citizenship” requires the skills of critical thinking, evaluating and synthesizing information about important social issues, and finding one’s voice. These are what she calls the intellectual “habits of the heart” that can be acquired in the process of schooling, but often are not. Active listening requires “not only open eyes and ears, but also open hearts and minds” (Delpitt, 2007, p. 380). According to Lincoln (1995, p. 89). “Children and adults combine power and create new wisdom when they explore learning together.”

According to Weis and Fine this kind of work does take place in schools, but in individual classrooms because dedicated educators are determined to challenge “the reproductive instincts of public education and create spaces in which youth can engage in intellectual and political projects that are counter-hegemonic” (2001, p. 499). These projects take place because of courageous educators working on their own.

Fine and Weis suggest that educators truly interested in student voice “work on individual development and community building at the same time.” That is, they “educate toward individual growth but also toward a sense of community interdependence and collective responsibility” (2001, p. 251).

Nancy Fraser (1997, p. 97), on the other hand, prefers the concept of a public to that of community. Community, she says, suggests “a bounded and fairly homogeneous group, and it often connotes consensus.” Public, however, “emphasizes discursive interaction that is in principle unbounded and open-ended and this in turn implies a plurality of perspectives.” Kelly (2003) building on Fraser’s conception of an alternative public, shows that “school-sponsored programs and extracurricular activities sometimes
create a relatively safe and private discursive arena where members of subordinated groups can explore who they are and want to become and can prepare to voice their needs, concerns and issues in wider public realms” (p. 125).

Orner (1992, p. 75) reminds us that we may actually “perpetuate relations of domination in the name of liberation.” Silva and Rubin (2007, p. 393) caution educators that there can be no “single student voice.” Young people come to school with a range of needs, interests, and points of view. However difficult, it is important that as many different voices as possible are heard. Lorde (2006, p. 362) reminds us that using the term voice to reposition students in educational reform issues runs the risk of “denying the potential power of silence and resistance.” And it is not possible “just to do student voice without thinking and rethinking – and most likely changing – one’s larger political framework” Cook-Sather (2007, p. 382).

“Overly narrow (e.g., Eurocentric) curriculums and various other institutional practices—standardized testing, ability grouping and tracking, in-grade retention, repeated failure, suspension, and expulsion—selectively discourage, stigmatize, and exclude young people from school” (Kelly, 2003 p. 124). To truly listen to the voices of students and respond in order to effect educational change challenges that structure. Teachers, administrators and policy makers need to resist those patterns of domination and consider the notion that education is a process based on rights and relationships. This is the change in one’s political framework that Cook-Sather is advocating. It is necessary in order to “tell a different kind of story of what schooling can be” (2007, p. 382).

Because the term student voice has been co-opted by both the political right and left for different reasons in the education system, it is time to revisit its original intent.
Student voice was a term originally used to define what was missing in education: the voices of students. There have been many attempts to involve students in decision making in schools; to seek their perspective about what matters in education; and to engage them in learning. Over time, the term has been co-opted by the political right to support their Accountability Agenda, now changed to Achievement Contract, and to maintain control in schools. Osborne (2001, p. 40) states that those advocates of reshaping schools to serve the global economy have “largely captured the vocabulary of education: effectiveness, excellence, accountability, standards, quality” and that “those of us who value democratic citizenship need to recapture and redefine them.”

In my view it is also time to reclaim student voice or to move beyond that concept of participatory democracy in order to create greater possibilities for democratic schools. Elshtain (1993, p. 89) says that “to live ‘within the truth’, as Havel calls it, is to give voice to a self, and a citizen, that has embraced responsibility for the here and now” (italics mine). With rights, comes responsibility. If students are to have a voice, to participate as citizens, they must also take a shared responsibility for the outcome of their actions. Through dialogue with others, we begin to establish an identity, the person we want to become. Because we are citizens in a democracy, we have a responsibility to consider how our actions affect others. Citizenship in a democracy is a “fusion of freedom and responsibility” (Elshtain, 1993, p. 89).

In schools it is possible, I believe, to involve students in a model of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is “a process that creates a public, citizens coming together to talk about collective problems, goals, ideals, and actions” (Young, 1996, p. 121). In deliberative democracy, participants come together presumably as equals,
understanding that one of the purposes of dialogue is to become better informed. Participants are free to test and challenge the ideas presented and argued by others. They are also “prepared to be moved by reasons that may conflict with their antecedent preferences and interests” (Cohen, 1996, p. 100). In addition, democratic processes are oriented toward discussing “the common good rather than competing for the promotion of the private good of each” individual (Young, 1996, p. 121). The boundaries of public and private are also the subject of public deliberation. Deliberative democracy “promotes a conception of reason over power in politics” or perhaps, in schools (Young, 1996, p. 122). It is a dialogue about all manner of things that lead to living a good and worthwhile life together in a democratic society.

In order for deliberative democracy to find its place in schools, educators need to create opportunities for both private and public dialogue. Students need an opportunity to share ideas with others in private before presenting them in the wider public sphere. It is in the public sphere that opinions and ideas are to be tested, to be debated, to determine if they hold up under scrutiny. All students need to be afforded the opportunity to present their views. This is not always easy given how diverse the student population is in most schools today.

“On the one hand, schools must help people articulate who they are, who they want to be, and how they want to live with others. On the other hand, schools must help people learn to take the standpoint of others into account, to reverse perspectives and see the world through different eyes. The former requires preparing people to appear in the world; the latter involves helping people learn to let others appear” (Benhabib, 2008, p. 48)
This thesis explores how a group of young people struggled to learn these capacities—despite the efforts of the schooling system. This is their story.

**Student Voice – Actualization;**

*Actually, Students Come to Participate as Democratic Citizens*

*Whersoever you go, go with all your heart.*

-Confucius

This was the quote at the top of the bright yellow flyers stuffed into each and every locker, over 800 of them, as I came into school on a Monday morning in May 2007. The flyers went on to announce a student protest walk to Langley Senior Secondary School on Wednesday, May 30, at 7:15 a.m. The purpose of the walk, stated the flyer, was to demonstrate to the public the risks that students would be taking by walking that distance (4.8 kilometres) every day, beginning in their grade 9 year. The flyer encouraged all students to participate. The quote was appropriate, I thought, because adolescents do lots of things “with heart.” They play on sports teams, act in theatre productions, serve on Student Councils, prepare for exams, engage in debates, challenge authority, experiment with hair colour, and volunteer in their community—often with a great deal of heart. But this was more than heart. This was about political action, participation in the public sphere, courage, intellect, and heart. And this was the third student-organized protest since February when the McAvoy Report and Recommendations were presented to the Langley Board of Education.
I watched students as they began to arrive at school. They pulled the flyers out of their lockers and read them. Some tucked the flyer into a binder, an agenda or back into their locker. Others read the flyer and threw it away. There was the usual early morning conversation as they prepared for their day at school and the flyer seemed to be an accepted part of the day’s activities. I have observed these events and the students’ involvement in them with fascination. There is certainly a passion for their school and a kind of resolve that permeates everything they do. And I wondered how they have been so successful; to organize so well; to get such large numbers of students to participate; to engage the community; and to do the research necessary to make presentations at Board of Education Meetings. I know that they communicate with one another via e-mail, posters, flyers and conversations in the hallways. I know that they consult with their teachers and their parents. And I know that they have done extensive research on the Internet or have used what they have learned at Leadership Conferences, Focus Group Training, or Restorative Action Workshops. And they keep me informed in their own way, through brief conversations in the hallway, a note in my letterbox, or by e-mail.

I wondered what it was that they were actually protesting. Was it the possible closure of their school? Was it about the way that they were being treated by some of the school trustees? Was it about the consultation process and the manner in which they had been excluded? Or all of the above? I wondered what role the adults in their lives, particularly their teachers, were playing in the whole process. And it seemed to be somewhat of an act of defiance directed not at their parents or their school, but at those in power in the School District. What was clear to me was that my students were engaging in preparatory conversations and activities within the relatively private realm of the
school. It was a safer place for them to engage in debates, gather information, share ideas, and seek advice from adults in order to be well prepared for a foray into the more public realm. And stepping into the public sphere is no easy task for anyone, least of all adolescents. In Hannah Arendt’s view (in Peter Baehr, 2000, p. 199) these protests were their opportunity to appear in public—"to be seen and heard by others as well as by themselves." To be seen and heard by the wider public was important to them; the majority of trustees and members of the senior management team had so far ignored them. In order to be heard, to influence the elected officials as they made decisions about their school, students needed to appear. It was an important step in their participation as citizens in a democracy. Elshtain (1993, p. 114) describes democracy as “an institutional, cultural, habitual way of acknowledging the pervasiveness of conflict and the fact that our loyalties are not one, our wills are not single, our opinions are not uniform, our ideals are not cut from the same cloth.” She also says that democracy “requires laws and constitutional procedures, but it also depends on the everyday actions and spirit of the people” (1993, p. 4). In this case the “people” were the students in the school.

This exclusion of my students from participation in the public sphere has, I believe, prompted them to constitute what Nancy Fraser (1997, p. 81) has described as a counterpublic. Counterpublics are “discursive arenas where members of social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1997, p. 81). In this case, the counterpublic consisted mainly of youth, supported by adults. The counter-discourse seems to be one of resistance and a desire to influence the democratic decision
making process. Counterpublics also have a dual character in that they provide spaces for "withdrawal and regroupment" and they act as a "base and training ground for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (1997, p. 82). After each protest, the students would return to the school, the more private realm, to withdraw and regroup. As they did so, it seemed that they monitored the response from the wider public and began to plan new strategies. The counterpublic was their base for planning further agitational activities. Those agitational activities included letters to the editor, presentations at Board meetings, making posters, and further protests. In Fraser's view, these counterpublics "offset, but do not wholly eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies" (1997, p. 82).

Another view of public and private spheres is provided by Coulter (2002, p. 33). "Consistent with the idea that public and private spheres are networks characterized by different conditions of communication, deciding publicity or privacy depends on the purposes for communication." He discusses public and private as the "necessary conditions to sustain different kinds of dialogues or discourses--pragmatic, ethical and moral" (2002, p. 33). The three are not separate from, but enmeshed in one another. Pragmatic discourse is mainly about accomplishing goals and tends to be more public. Pragmatic discourse needs to be supplemented by ethical and moral discourses. Put quite simply, ethical discourses are concerned with issues of "self-understanding and identity" and need to be "sheltered or hidden from the glare of publicity" (Coulter, 2002, p. 34). Moral discourse is used to describe the need to "judge the goodness of various lifeworlds or communities" (Coulter, 2002, p. 36). In the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary, the students conversations about goals and events to achieve those goals were much more
public. Their struggles with establishing identity, the risks they were taking in the process, and how much to involve their teachers were discussions of a more private nature.

Teachers were involved in dialogue with their students as the months progressed. These opportunities for dialogue did not appear to happen in the classroom. There, teachers are focused on teaching a lesson and on maintaining some sort of order so that learning can take place. Students are involved in doing what is asked of them. Classrooms are comparatively very public spaces and it is not always safe for some students to speak candidly about issues of concern to them. There is always a power imbalance present between students and teachers. And there is the Achievement Contract developed by the School District with targets for improvement in student achievement in various academic subjects, in transition rates to post secondary institutions, and/or graduation rates. The Achievement Contract attempts to hold teachers accountable for results and has an impact on what goes on in classrooms. Where this kind of dialogue took place I believe, is between classes, on a walk down the hallway, after school, or in some other unstructured situation within the relatively private sphere of the school. It is "the gaps and rupture in practice – the breaks, confusion and contradiction that are always a part of the interplay in teaching – that offer the greatest insight and possibilities for change" (Orner, 1992, p. 84). There is a need, I believe, to create more opportunities in schools for this kind of dialogue that leads to students' democratic participation in ever wider public spheres.

After the McAvoy Report was made public, the students tried to communicate their concerns: the loss of their small neighbourhood high school; the concern that the
whole district wasn’t included in this consultation process at the same time; and that other options should be considered; and they had proposed many. They attended Board meetings and made presentations; wrote letters to the editors of the two local papers (Closure is ‘ridiculous’-student, Langley Times, April 11, 2007; Students interests ignored, Langley Advance, May 18, 2007); and e-mailed trustees to request a meeting; to no avail. So they had organized protests. The first was an after school rally on the front lawn of the school. It was attended by over 250 students, three trustees, a member of the BCTF executive, members of the executive of the Langley Teachers’ Association, community members, parents, teachers, support staff at the school and the local press. The Langley Times carried a photograph of the protest with the following description: “Students waved a variety of signs calling for H.D.Stafford Secondary to remain open as a high school, during a rally outside the school Friday afternoon. Students, B.C. Teachers’ Federation representatives, Trustee Sonya Paterson and the present and past Langley City mayors told the crowd to continue to put pressure on the school board to reverse a decision exploring the option of Stafford becoming a middle school” (April 22, 2007, p. 5).

The second protest was a walk to the School Board Office during their lunch break followed by a sit-in in the foyer for the duration of what would have been their afternoon classes. This was described as a Silent Protest because the students felt that their voices had been silenced. Close to 300 students assembled on the front lawn of the school and walked together to the School Board Office. Trustees, parents, and community members joined them again. Two television stations interviewed students and followed them to the School Board Office. At the School Board Office, all the doors
were locked except one and the students were greeted, politely, by four R.C.M.P. officers. Apparently, senior management and some members of the Board felt there was a need for security. At the conclusion of the protest, the students used garbage bags they had brought along to clean up the foyer and the front lawn at the School Board Office. Their story was on the evening news (Students with a Mission on Global T.V.; Student Walkout on C.T.V., May 25, 2007).

The third protest was a walk to Langley Secondary School early one morning. Close to 200 students assembled at 7:15 a.m. with the walk beginning at 7:30. Trustees, members of the Langley Teachers' Association executive, and parents joined them. The Langley City mayor gave them a rousing send-off. In late May, they added an On-Line Petition. The petition states: “We do not support the recommendation to reconfigure H.D.Stafford Secondary into a middle school. KEEP STAFFORD SECONDARY.” As of today there are over 1, 200 signatures on the petition. The students and associated adults seem to have created the kind of counterpublic that Nancy Fraser theorized. And they have had an impact. In the beginning, the Board of Education supported the recommendations in a vote of 6/1. In May 2007, one of the trustees moved that the recommendations be reconsidered. The vote changed to 4/3 in favour of the recommendations. The students knew they only needed one more trustee vote. June was busy with graduation, year-end activities and final exams.

In June, an editorial in the Langley Advance confirmed how the students and the community were feeling about this whole process. “At many of the meetings, board staff have spent a lot of time lecturing people. A lot of infodumping was necessary, to get parents up to speed on the district’s problems. But the tone was often one of smug
superiority. We know best, now agree and go home, was the unspoken message.” A further comment was made about the students’ involvement in the process. “Through all of this, the students have been the best behaved group and often the most articulate” (Langley Advance, June 1, 2007, p. 8). The students went away for their summer holiday and a well-deserved break.

**September: return to school and return to participation in the public sphere**

The summer came and went. I think the majority of the trustees hoped that the students’ enthusiasm would have died down over the holiday. Instead they came back rejuvenated and ready to go, with more plans in mind.

In September 2007, the Board of Trustees issued a Statement regarding Public Board Meetings for the Fall. It stated:

- Public Board meetings will be held at the School Board Office with overflow space provided on an as-needed basis.
- No placards or noisemakers will be permitted in the building.
- Unless the Board unanimously agrees to an extension, public meetings will end at 11 p.m.
- Up to five delegations of 10 minutes each may be scheduled at the beginning of the public Board meetings. Additional delegations will be heard after the business portion of the meeting until the meeting concludes at 11 p.m.
- The Board welcomes written submissions at any time.
- The Board will hold a special South/Central Delegation Night on October 16, from 6:30 – 9:00 p.m. at R.E. Mountain Secondary School, using the following procedures:
  - Delegations will have up to eight minutes.
  - Paper handouts or electronic presentations must be submitted by 10 a.m., October 16 for preparation.
  - Delegations must sign up by 4 p.m. on October 12.

Langley’s Board Of Education welcomes people to its public meetings and believes these measures balance the need for a respectful, business-like environment with its desire to accommodate attendance and participation. (Statement from the Board, September 2007.)
During the previous winter and spring as the Consultation Meetings were held and the recommendations from the McAvoy Report came forward, students, parents, and teachers began attending meetings in large numbers. They carried signs and placards and one woman brought a bullhorn. They appeared as delegations, to speak on a variety of issues. The public Board Meeting was often moved to one of the high schools to accommodate the large crowds. During question period, which was typically held at the end of the public meeting, people began lining up to try to get answers to their questions. The decision about the future of any neighbourhood school is usually an emotional issue and this one was no exception. Tempers flared and meetings became loud and noisy. All of this led to some very lengthy meetings. This Statement from The Board said it was “an attempt to return a business-like environment to public meetings.” It simply made matters worse. People in the community saw it as an attempt to stifle their voices. “Stafford PAC president Graeme Shepherd said the rules will stifle public input when it is needed the most” (Langley Advance, September 18, 2007, p. 6)

At the first Board of Education meeting in September, as the public arrived, they were greeted at the entrance by security guards. Students arrived wearing t-shirts with large slogans printed on them. These were, they told me, in response to the new policy regarding placards no longer being permitted at public Board meetings. The slogans said: “HDS is my choice”; “Hear my voice”; “Placards are not weapons”; “Langley City needs a high school”; and several others. One H. D. Stafford student appeared as a delegation and voiced her “concerns about the lack of student input regarding the South Central Community Consultation” (Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the Board of Trustees, 07-
There were no bullhorns or disruptive delegations and the meeting adjourned at 11:03 p.m. according to the minutes.

At the next Board of Education meeting at the beginning of October, the students arrived wearing clothing with the H.D. Stafford logo. Again there were security guards at the door. A room upstairs with a video feed was opened to accommodate the overflow crowd. A number of adults and students were standing at the back of the room. There were five delegations at the beginning of the meeting as permitted by the new policy. One of those was a Stafford student who talked about the Ministry and District policy regarding choice of schools. She went on to say that the school of her choice was being taken away from her and she talked about the impact that that was going to have on her future. A former school trustee was part of one of the other delegations. She told the Board in all the years that she had lived in Langley, she had never seen such a huge public outcry about a proposal coming forward from a Board of Education. She found that the Board Chair was less than attentive and said, “I wish the chair would look at me when I’m speaking.” His reply was that he needed to take notes.

Later in the meeting the superintendent presented the Report on the Proposed Reconfiguration of H.D. Stafford Secondary and Langley Senior Secondary and asked that it be received for information. It was the Board’s intention to vote on the recommendations at the end of the month. Three of the trustees indicated that they would not be supporting the report and suggested that the Board ought to be listening to the community, particularly the students. At that point, the Board Chair asked for the Fire Marshall’s recommendations regarding standees in the room. At that point everyone
standing at the back of the room, sat down on the floor, including the Stafford students. The receipt of the report passed by a 4/3 majority.

The Delegation Night, where the public was invited to make presentations about the possible reconfigurations of the two high schools and their feeder elementary schools, was held on October 16. There were twenty-eight people who had asked for an opportunity to speak. Because of the high number of requests, each speaker was allotted six minutes. The meeting was held at R.E. Mountain Secondary, which was in the north end of the Langley District. A number of parents asked for the meeting to be held in the South/Central Region where the schools that were affected were located. The request was denied. According to the agenda, there were delegations from all of the schools affected; H.D. Stafford, Langley Secondary, and the feeder elementary schools. Police and security guards were on site when everyone arrived for the meeting.

Students from H.D. Stafford rallied at the front of R. E. Mountain an hour before the meeting was scheduled to start. They carried signs and placards that said: “Keep Stafford Secondary”; “Stafford is my Choice”; “I’ll go to Surrey”; “97% Capacity – What more do you want?”; and more. Just before the meeting was about to begin, they put the signs away and entered the gym and took their seats. They participated in a number of delegations. The first was a mock trial of middle schools. Using research that they had gathered, they found the middle school concept guilty as charged: “impractical and unworkable.” The next delegation was titled: “Student Voices.” A total of fifty-two students lined up at the microphone and delivered one-sentence statements about their concerns. Some of these were:

-It’s not about the numbers; it’s how it affects the lives of people.
- We are not opposed to positive changes; we are only opposed to bad ideas.

- I have all my best friends at HDS and I don’t really have a life outside of school.

- HDS is our second home and our second family.

- I want to graduate from my high school – H. D. Stafford.

- Please don’t do it.

The last student said, “You are about to teach us an important lesson in democracy - are our voices being heard?” There was no response from the trustees.

The final student delegation was a presentation of a video created by a grade twelve student. It showed life at school and was accompanied by Michael Jackson’s song *They Don’t Care About Us*. When asked about the video, he explained that he is quite shy and not comfortable speaking in front of large groups. The video was his way of showing support for the cause – Keeping Stafford Secondary.

The Mayor of the City of Langley was also present at the meeting. He suggested that the Board “should slow down, take the time to do it right.” He suggested a provincial mediator be invited to the district to begin a new process with parents, students and staff. Again, there was no response from trustees. At the end of the evening only one delegation out of twenty-eight had spoken in favour of the plans for reconfiguration.

The next day at school, the hallways were abuzz with conversations about what had happened the night before. Many of the students believed that their presentations had been “quite powerful,” and they were hopeful that they might have had an impact. On the same day, the editorial in the *Langley Times* newspaper stated that it would be best for the district to “shelve the plans for a middle school for now.” The editorial went on to say that the consideration of middle schools should be done district wide, not just applied
to one or two areas of the district facing declining enrolment (Langley Times, October 17, p.5). The Friday edition of the same newspaper had photos of the student rally on the front page. A week later a story and a photograph appeared in the Vancouver Sun. The headline read: “School Restructuring Divides Districts”. Janet Steffenhagen cited the Langley and the Comox Valley School Districts as two that were recommending reconfigurations in order to “give students more learning opportunities.” In both districts, she reported, “the communities were unhappy and were protesting, trying to get trustees to change their minds” (Steffenhagen, October 4, 2007, p. B2).

At its meeting on October 30th, the day before Hallowe’en, the Board of Education was going to vote on the proposed reconfiguration of H.D. Stafford and Langley Secondary Schools. In addition, the Board would be voting on the proposal to reconfigure all of the elementary feeder schools for both secondary schools. The elementary schools would lose their grade six and seven students to H. D. Stafford Middle School and have kindergarten to grade five students. Because a huge turnout was expected, the meeting was moved to the Christian Life Assembly Church which had a seating capacity of 1, 800 people. The students had submitted a petition with over five hundred signatures requesting that the meeting be held at H. D. Stafford so that students and their families could attend. The response from the Board was that the Christian Life Assembly Church was more central and could hold more people. (It is actually next door to Langley Senior Secondary School.)

As people arrived they were greeted by security guards and police at the entrance of the church. Stafford students decided that a final rally in front of the church was warranted. What would be better, they said, than a candlelight vigil, given the venue for
the meeting? Over two hundred students gathered in front of the church at 6:00 p.m. They stood together with lit candles and sang songs until 7:30 p.m. and then they went in to join the meeting and await the decision. They entered the sanctuary quietly and took their seats. Some parents had distributed small paper flags, about four by six inches in size, mounted on small wooden sticks. The signs were red and white and read: Keep Stafford Secondary. Everyone from the Stafford community seemed to be holding one. According to newspaper estimates, the church was two-thirds full when the meeting began. The recommendations regarding the reconfiguration came forward for debate. One trustee moved a motion of deferral for one year, stating that more time was needed to develop a financial plan and to plan for the transition of all students. The motion was defeated 4/3. The debate on reconfiguration was lengthy, as each trustee seemed determined to make a public statement. The Chair of the Board was making his comments when someone in the audience (an adult) called out, “Point of Order.” It seemed that the hour of adjournment of 11:00 p.m. had arrived. According to the new policy adopted by the trustees in September, the only way that the meeting could be extended was through a unanimous vote by the Board. All of the meetings since the adoption of the policy had ended abruptly at 11:00 p.m. even if there were people at the public microphone, waiting to ask questions. Several adults began to call out, “Point of Order.” One was the former chair of the Board who had chosen not to run in the last election. He was also a Stafford parent. The current Board Chair directed security guards to remove him from the meeting. Two security guards approached him, took him by the arms and forcibly removed him from the building. The meeting deteriorated after that.
The four trustees in favour of reconfiguration left the sanctuary and went into a smaller meeting room in what seemed to be an attempt to continue their meeting. They invited the press to join them. The three trustees opposed to reconfiguration remained in their seats at the Board table in the sanctuary. Because the adjournment time for the meeting could not be extended without a unanimous vote of all trustees present, the secretary treasurer appealed to the three to join the others in the small meeting room. They refused. The meeting could not continue as a result. The four trustees decided to adjourn the meeting and reconvene on Thursday evening at the School Board Office to make the decision. The secretary treasurer came in to the sanctuary to announce the decision. According to the press, security guards escorted the four trustees to their cars. The other trustees and all those attending the meeting began to leave the building as well.

H. D. Stafford students had demonstrated very respectful behavior throughout the proceedings in spite of how long the meeting was and how poorly behaved everyone else had been. They left the meeting quietly and I spoke with a few of them as I was leaving. The headline for Langley Times editorial later in the week said: “Students Set Example”.

“The hundreds of students there (at the Board meeting), mostly from Stafford, behaved in an exemplary manner. They should be proud of themselves and their school. They set a fine example which, unfortunately, a few adults didn’t follow” (Langley Times, November 2, 2007, p. 8).

The next two days were very quiet at H.D. Stafford. When I spoke to students in the hallways about whether they were going to attend the next meeting, many of them said that they weren’t going to bother. The trustees seemed to have their minds made up, they said, and all the next meeting was going to do was formalize that decision. Some
suggested that they were thinking about possible future action, what they might choose to
do once the decision was made.

The Board of Education reconvened its meeting on Thursday, November 1, at 6
p.m. at the School Board Office. Security guards were posted at each entrance. Once the
Board meeting room was full, the outside doors were locked and no one else was allowed
into the meeting. A few students had chosen to come inside for the meeting. The rest
stayed outside, lit votive candles and placed them on the sidewalk, formed a circle, and
sang songs. At the opening of the meeting the Board Chair reviewed the policies and
procedures for public meetings. The recommendations regarding reconfiguration of the
two high schools came forward and passed on a 4/3 vote. One trustee put forth a motion
that the current grade eleven students at H.D. Stafford be given the option of registering
at the high school of their choice for their last year in high school (the 2008-2009 school
year). The motion was defeated in a 4/3 vote. The Board Chair announced adjournment.
The members of the public began to sing "O' Canada" as trustees hurriedly left the room.
The meeting was over in less than thirty minutes.

The next few days at school were difficult ones. Everyone was quite subdued.
Members of the public, from seniors to the City Mayor, began stopping by the school to
express their concern for the students, the staff, and for the end of what they considered
to be a very good high school. The school counselors were inundated with students
needing to talk. Some of the other students, who didn't need such intensive support,
stopped by my office to talk with me. It was then that I learned that there might be one
more event before this whole thing was over.
The student organizers were planning a sit-in at the school. I suggested that they were protesting against the wrong people. They told me that they wanted to get the attention of Shirley Bond, the Education Minister, to ask for a meeting. The Board had made its decision they said, so now they needed to go to the next level. The sit-in would take place on Thursday, November 22, the day before a Professional Development Day. The students planned to gather in the front foyer and stay there until they got some response from the media or the Minister’s Office. What I didn’t know at the time was that they planned to put up tents on the front lawn and stay all night if that’s what it took.

On the day of the sit-in, students began to gather in the foyer right after school. They came with homework, i-pods, cell phones, and other things to do. There were about sixty students to begin with and the crowd slowly grew to close to one hundred. They filled the foyer and the hallway leading to classrooms. I stayed to supervise, not sure how long this was going to continue. At about 4 p.m., security guards arrived. They told me that they had been hired by the Board to supervise the students if they moved outside. If the students remained inside then they were my responsibility, they said. Then they went outside.

At 5 p.m., as it was getting dark, I noticed tents being put up on the front lawn. I met with the student organizers and asked them what that was about. They told me about their plans to stay the night. I asked about supervision and they said that a number of their parents would be coming. They also said that they were setting the tents up close to the street because that was city property, not school property. They believed that that would eliminate problems with the school district. They told me that they had contacted all the local media and the television stations and they were all expected to show up.
One of the security guards came in to meet with me at that point to tell me that he had directed the students to move the tents closer to the school. He said that the temperature was forecast to go below freezing during the night, that the street might get icy, and that there was a possibility that a car might slide off the road into one of the tents. He said that he would take responsibility for the decision to move the tents on to school property. He told me that he and several of his colleagues had been hired to stay for the night or until the protest ended. I looked outside and could see tents being moved. No one was giving up yet.

At 6 p.m., parents began arriving with hot drinks and food. They were well dressed for the cold weather. Students finished setting up their tents, had some food, and then began singing and playing guitar. The security guards were chatting with the students and things seemed to be fine. A small committee came to me and asked to use the office phones. They were concerned because none of the television stations had turned up as promised and they wanted to call them. I took them inside and gave them access to the office phones. Because it was after business hours, none of the stations were answering their phones. One of the students said to me, “I guess they’re not interested because the decision has been made. It’s not a newsworthy story anymore.” I responded that you never could tell; it might be too late in the day; it might be too far to come from another story that they were covering; to take heart because anything could happen.

A security guard came in to tell me that they had everything under control outside and that if I wanted to go home, that was fine with them. There were a lot of parents helping with the supervision as well. I thanked him and gave him my cell phone number.
and asked him to call me if any emergency should occur. I met with the parents to make
sure everything was all right from their perspective. They told me that they were hoping
to have students shut things down and go home before midnight because it was so cold. I
left at 8:30 p.m. I checked the school at 7:30 a.m. the next morning on my way to a
meeting and the tents were gone and everything had been cleaned up. I called one of the
parents who told me that the students had decided to shut things down at 11:00 p.m. The
parents made sure that everyone had a ride home. She explained that most of the parents
had not been too happy about this protest, but the students were so determined that they
felt that they had to support them.

These young people never ceased to amaze me. Here they were, fighting the
establishment and dragging their parents along with them. There was something at work
here that I wanted to better understand. Of one thing I was sure, they were never going to
be the same after what they had experienced, the decisions they had made, and the
actions they had taken. It seemed that they had some understanding of Elshtain’s
definition of democracy:

Democracy is for the stout of heart who know there are things worth fighting
for in a world of paradox, ambiguity, and irony. This democratic way —
moderation with courage, open to compromise from a basis of principle — is the
rare but now and then attainable fruit of the democratic imagination and, in
action, the democratic citizen. (Elshtain, 1993, p. 90)
Chapter Summary:

This chapter is a review of some of the ways that schools in the province attempt to involve students in decision making in their schools. The story of the students at H.D. Stafford Secondary is an illustration of how students can take political action and participate in the democratic process in their community. The next two chapters describe the research project that was done to gain a better understanding of how the students came to be involved in the public sphere as democratic citizens. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology and Chapter Four describes the results of the study.
Chapter Four: Focus Groups and Interviews Provide the Opportunity for Students' Voices to be Heard at Last

This is a qualitative case study of the students who became involved in a campaign to retain H.D. Stafford as a secondary school when the Board of Education was proposing its reconfiguration to a middle school for grades six through eight. The question I am seeking to answer is: *How do high school students come to participate in the public sphere as democratic citizens?* Taylor defines the public sphere as “a common space in which the members of society meet, through a variety of media (print, electronic) and also in face to face encounters, to discuss matters of common interest.” It is, he says, a “central feature of modern society” (1989, p. 259). Elshtain says that citizen is “the name we give to our public identities and actions in a democratic society” (1993, p. 38).

Denzin and Lincoln define qualitative research as a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (2000, p. 3). According to Merriam, “A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (1998, p. 21). In this study, the case is the group of students who organized events/protests and participated in the public sphere in an attempt to save their school.

As the principal of the school, I had been a participant observer at all of the meetings leading up to the launching of the student campaign and I continued in that role as the students organized all of their events and protests. As the study progressed, I found myself making, as Mehan suggests, a shift from “being a so-called participant observer to becoming an especially observant participant. This means paying close attention to not
only one’s point of view as an observer but also to one’s relations with others (who one is studying and working with) and one’s relations with oneself” (2008, citing Erickson, 1996, p. 7). I believed that the students had the democratic right to protest the actions of the Board so I was somewhat sympathetic to their cause. I also knew that the protests had some risks, but I believed that some things are worth doing in spite of the risks. I believe this influenced the way the students interacted with me and the information that they later felt comfortable in sharing in the focus groups and interviews.

This became almost a year long study. It began with the first community consultation meeting on January 18, 2007 and came to a conclusion when the Board of Education made a final decision on November 1, 2007. I kept field notes of: every meeting I attended; interactions with staff at the district level; conversations with trustees; interactions with students and parents; and some of the conversations with the staff at the school. I have always used a journal to collect information and my thoughts as I attended meetings related to my role as principal. I found it to be a good way to keep organized and it helped me to attend to the things that mattered most to me. I was also better able to track the myriad of deadlines that are a part of the job of the principal. The original format that I used expanded to include broader observations of behavior and the tone of meetings; details of what people actually said and the response from people in the room; and later I would add my own thoughts. I also collected and reviewed Langley Board of Education Reports, minutes from meetings, and press releases. I collected Ministry Documents related to the issues of declining enrolment, school closures, seismic upgrades, as well as capital plan instructions. I kept these documents in colour coded file folders: district documents in one colour, ministry documents in another colour. I
collected and organized newspaper clippings over twelve months. Initially, I was clipping articles from the newspapers and was saving them in a file folder. After a few weeks, I realized that this was not a workable way of organizing them because there were so many articles, editorials and letters to the editor. I decided to keep the entire newspaper and marked the various items with post-it notes so that I could find them easily. Having the entire paper provided greater context as I could see what other events were going on in the community at the same time. I have 145 newspapers from the two Langley newspapers (the Langley Advance and the Langley Times) stored in chronological order from January through to December of 2007. From the sheer volume, it was easy to see what an issue this had become for the community. I also obtained copies of news stories on Global and CTV television stations as well as audiotapes of radio interviews of students and parents by CBC and CKNW radio stations.

I had some ideas about the answer to my question, but I needed to investigate further and more systematically to better understand this phenomenon. I planned to collect further data through focus groups and semi-structured interviews in addition to the analysis of field notes, documents, and newspaper clippings. The original research design included recruitment of students through the school; an initial information meeting; student participation in focus groups; followed by semi-structured interviews, with individuals or pairs of students. After the data was collected and analyzed, I intended to share my findings with the students to get their feedback as I was writing the final report. I had taken an Educational Leave from the School District at the end of the first semester (February, 2008) and actually retired on May 1, 2008. It was my belief that
the students would see me as less of an authority figure as I was no longer attached to the school.

**Research Plans Get Derailed**

Because I intended to recruit students through the school (H. D. Stafford) by posting flyers in the hallways, I was required to obtain the permission of the school district. The Langley Board of Education has adopted an extensive policy and accompanying regulations regarding approval of research projects in the school district. Policy 1380 – *Research Studies in the Langley School District* (amended in January, 2006) states: “The Langley School Board recognizes the value of educational research and encourages the pursuit of well-designed educational research, which will be of benefit to students, employees and the community at large.” The process for approval includes the completion of an application form, which outlines the purpose of the research project and the research design. Copies of all materials to be used in the research project are to be included with the application: flyers to recruit participants, interview scripts, parent permission forms, etc. The application form and accompanying documentation are to be submitted to the District Administrator of Instructional Services for review. According to the policy, the District Administrator then makes a recommendation to the Superintendent, who has the final say in which projects go ahead. The policy requires that the Superintendent keep the Board informed of research projects being conducted in the school district.

I prepared the application and submitted it on February 27, 2008. The application was forwarded to the legal department for further review. Two weeks later, I received an
e-mail stating that the research could not go ahead due to the power imbalance present in the principal/student relationship. Focus groups would not be permitted either because of concerns about confidentiality. The e-mail suggested that I revise the application, omitting the focus groups and re-submit it at a later date.

I met with my research supervisor and decided to revise the proposal. I chose to change the method of recruitment from posting flyers in the school to Third Party Recruitment: Snowball Sampling. Of the core group of students who organized the campaign to keep Stafford a secondary school, a number of them were in grade 12 the previous year and had graduated. They were in regular e-mail contact with me during the campaign to keep me informed, to clarify policy or to get information. They remain in e-mail contact with me today. Some of them still live locally; others are away at university in cities such as Victoria and Montreal. I planned to contact this core group by e-mail inviting them to “snowball” out to invite other students to participate. Although not part of my original research design, I came to understand that this method of recruitment would ensure a broader representation of students for the study. Students told me later that they paid far more attention to e-mail messages and Facebook communication than they did to flyers posted on the wall. It was also more effective because students had communicated with one another throughout the campaign via e-mail and were used to this form of communication. I also hoped that students would understand that this research study and my role in it were separate from the school as they were being recruited by students or former students, not directly by me or through the school and school district.
Getting Started

I sent out an e-mail and received replies from nine recent graduates expressing interest in being involved. There were two male students and seven female students. Of the nine students who responded, two of them were still away at university but offered to help in any way that they could. Of the remaining seven students there was one who had been a leader or had helped to organize many of the events. She expressed interest in being directly involved. I invited her to join me for coffee and we agreed on the following Saturday afternoon.

As we had coffee, I explained my research project to her. I said that I wanted to understand what it was that caused so many students to get involved in the campaign to save their school. I had some ideas, but I wanted to understand the students’ perspectives. I explained that this study would inform others in education and perhaps change the way students are involved in decision-making in their schools in the future. I also explained that the research project was not associated in any way with the school or the school district. She became quite animated at this point. She felt that there had been no closure for students still at the school; that this opportunity to have a discussion in a supportive setting with friends would be a good thing; the campaign was still a hot topic around the school, she said. And she was relieved that it had nothing to do with the school district. I explained Third Party Recruitment and the role of the graduates in the process. I gave her a copy of the letter inviting them to recruit other students and the flyers advertising the first meeting. I told her that I had the flyer ready, it just needed a date, and I would e-mail it to the graduates to forward to students that they knew had been involved or supported the events that had been held. She volunteered to set up a
Facebook Event page to invite everyone to participate. She said that she had over five hundred Stafford student contacts through Facebook. We agreed that as students expressed interest in the research project, she would forward the flyer to them, inviting them to the first meeting. We also agreed that all e-mail communication between us would have Student Voice as a header or address, that way we would know to follow up fairly quickly. As we talked, she told me how glad she was that she had graduated and was not facing this very difficult year that other students were experiencing as their school was closing. She was attending university and said that she had discussed the Stafford campaign with her new friends there and that they had “been blown away by the stories about the incredible student involvement.”

We agreed on the following Saturday at noon for the initial meeting with students who might like to be involved. She suggested noon because it was late enough that students could sleep in and early enough in the day that they wouldn’t be going off to do other things with friends or go to work. I explained that I’d like to hold the initial meeting and the focus groups at the Timms Community Centre as it was centrally located, had a youth drop in centre, was adjacent to the library and was a neutral site. The interviews would be there or in students’ homes, if they preferred. (This had been laid out in the ethics protocol approved on March 27, 2008 by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board.) At that point she expressed interest in helping me with the research project, by collecting information, arranging schedules, keeping notes, anything I wanted her to do. Her university exams were finished and she would be more than happy to help out, she said. Because the students knew her well and might feel more at ease with her involvement, I gratefully accepted her offer. I gave her a ride home and
then went to the Timms Community Centre to book a meeting room for the following Saturday and for several days in the following weeks for focus groups. When I got home, I e-mailed the letter inviting grads to be involved in Third Party Recruitment and the accompanying flyer to those who hadn’t been at the meeting. I e-mailed my student volunteer and asked her to keep a Journal of all the things that she did and any perceptions she had about events as they unfolded. The next day, she sent out a Facebook Message to the rest of the graduates of H.D. Stafford of 2007, along with the letter inviting them to participate in Third Party Recruitment and the flyer advertising the first meeting. As a Third Party Recruiter, she also created a Facebook Event page for students in other grades who had been involved in the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary. By the middle of the following week, she had twenty-one responses and by Friday, the list was up to thirty-four.

The two students who were away at university were not sure if they would be back in Langley for any of the focus groups or interviews and asked if they could respond to the questions via e-mail. I responded that I would need a parent permission form and student assent form signed first, and then I could forward the interview questions. The student volunteer scanned and sent the assent form to each of them. I delivered the parental consent forms to their parents.

**Information Meeting**

The Information Meeting was held at noon on Saturday, April 5, 2008 at the Timms Community Centre. I provided donuts, juice, iced tea, and water for everyone. It was a beautiful, sunny day and I thanked everyone for coming to the meeting. I
explained my research project to them. I told them that I was interested in something called Student Voice, an opportunity for students to be involved in democratic decision-making in their schools and I was particularly interested in understanding the high level of student involvement in the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary. There had been a high level of commitment on the part of students over an extended period of time and I wanted to know more about that. I also explained that the results of the study would be shared with other educators and that the report might influence the way students are involved in decision-making in their schools in the future. I clarified that the school and the school district were not involved in any way and that we would be meeting at the community centre or peoples’ homes as the project progressed. I also explained that everything that was discussed would be kept confidential and that none of their names would be used anywhere in the report.

I also encouraged them not to talk with anyone other than their families about what might be discussed. I told them that I was a lifelong learner, having chosen to begin a doctoral program at the age of fifty. This research project was one of the things I needed to do to complete the requirements for my degree. I told them that what they told me became the data that I would analyze to complete my report. At that point, I stopped and asked if there were any questions. Everyone said “No”, so I continued.

I outlined the two stages to my research project. The first stage was involvement in focus groups of six to eight students. The focus groups would take from 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The second stage would be an interview, either individually or with a partner. The interviews would take up to 30 minutes. Both sessions would be audiotape recorded I said, to make sure that I captured everything that was said. The
tapes would not be shared with anyone other than the transcriptionist or my supervisor. I emphasized again that everything that was said would be kept confidential. I explained that parent permission forms were required because most of them were under the age of nineteen. There was also a student assent form that they were required to sign. Both forms needed to be returned to me before they could participate in a focus group or an interview. They could also withdraw from the study at any time and any data that had been collected would be destroyed. They were all very silent until this point. Again, I asked if there were any questions. One of the boys said, “This is really cool. I’ve never done anything like this before.” One of the girls said, “Can I sign up for an interview? I’d love to do an interview.” To which I responded, “Yes, you can sign up, but I need that permission form back before you actually do one.” Then someone asked, “How soon can we get started?” “When would you like to start?” I asked. Someone else suggested Tuesday of the following week. “We could start then,” I said. I asked them if they could come to the Timms Community Centre after school. At that point, the student volunteer offered her home for the focus groups because she lived very close to the school. Everyone agreed that that would be more convenient. So we agreed that we would begin on Tuesday after school and continue on Wednesday and Thursday. Interviews would begin on the next Saturday at the community centre. I asked them to sign up for a time that was convenient for their schedule and said that I was hoping for some gender balance in the focus groups.

I asked them about the Facebook Event and if that kind of communication was working. They agreed that it was. The student volunteer said that she would be creating a Facebook Group to share information. She emphasized that it had to be a private group,
which meant only those who had been invited could participate. I asked them to check the Facebook Group and if they felt that someone else should be included to pass their name on to one of the graduates and they could be invited. I asked if there were any other thoughts they wanted to share or any questions that they had. There were none so I distributed the permission forms. Students began signing up for focus group and interview times. They chatted and shared what was left of the donuts and drinks. The student volunteer was involved in a conversation with one of the younger students, paused and then said to everyone, “All of you have something to contribute to this. Participation in any of the events is as important as providing leadership or organizing an event.” I thanked her for that statement and confirmed for the rest of them that this was what I believed as well. I thanked them all for coming and reminded them of the importance of the permission forms. Then we wrapped up.

**Focus Groups**

Focus group interviews give participants an opportunity to reflect on events that they have all lived through and perhaps come to a greater understanding of that experience. Focus groups “address the role of social context and the co-construction of meaning in social interaction” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 12). Kitzinger (1998, p. 117) states that group work ensures that “priority is given to the respondents’ hierarchy of importance, their language and concepts, their framework for understanding the world.”

I conducted four focus groups with the participants involved in this study. There were nineteen students involved in total. Six to eight students had signed up for each focus group, but sometimes only four actually arrived for the meeting. Each group had
both genders represented as well as a representation from most grade levels. In total, there were four graduates, one grade twelve student, nine grade 11 students, four grade 10 students, and one grade 9 student who participated in one of the four groups. There were twelve female students and seven male students who participated. Two of the students had Aboriginal heritage, one was Vietnamese, and another was Taiwanese. The rest were White and of European heritage. All four focus groups were held in the home of my student volunteer. Most of the students had been to the home before and seemed quite comfortable in the family room on the ground floor. I provided Timbits and juice. (The students had informed me at the end of the Information Meeting on the previous Saturday that they preferred Timbits to donuts.) I chose to proceed even when the group was as small as four out of respect for the students who had made the effort to be there. Krueger and Casey (in Munday) comment, “focus groups with four to six participants, often referred to as mini-focus groups, are becoming increasingly popular. They offer distinct advantages, such as greater opportunity for all participants to speak and fully express their views” (2006, p. 96). The high number of grade 11 students who chose to participate did not surprise me. They were the grade 10 students from the previous year and a large number of them had been involved in the organization of events. They had the most to lose – they would be moving to another school for their graduation year. So they had been very active in the campaign to save their school.

At the beginning of each focus group, I collected consent and assent forms. I asked them if there were any concerns expressed by their parents. There were none. I reminded everyone that I would be audiotape recording the conversation in order to ensure the accuracy of the data. Then I did a trial run with the tape recorder to make sure
I had the volume adjusted appropriately. Then I played back what I had recorded so they could hear their voices. Most of them laughed when they heard themselves. I had arranged for the student volunteer to take notes during each focus group and I let the students know that that was her role. Then I explained how focus groups should work. I explained that focus groups are a conversation and back and forth dialogue is fine. It is also all right to ask a question of someone to get clarification about something they have said. It is also all right to state that you disagree with something that has been said.

What everyone needed to remember was that they were discussing an important life experience and that all comments were valued. I asked them to keep everything that was discussed in confidence. I explained that I would facilitate the conversation by asking them questions and I asked them to speak loudly and one at a time. I tried to take notes during the focus groups but found it more advantageous to pay attention to the conversation and the interaction between participants and make notes after the focus group was over, knowing that I had a back up note taker. I used a set of interview questions to guide the discussion (see Appendix A). As I did each focus group I became better at using probes to gain more detailed information. "Probes are also questions or comments that follow up something already asked. Probing can come in the form of asking for more details, for clarification, for examples" (Merriam, 1998, p. 80).

Each focus group had a dynamic of its own. All of them laughed; some of them cried. When someone in the group cried, others would offer up that they had cried at home; at meetings; in class; wherever. All of them were quite animated as they discussed their experiences. Some students have felt this much more deeply than others. Some students said that they were in a state of denial; that they hoped something would
happen to turn this decision around before next September. They talked about their care and concern for their teachers. They talked about issues with their parents as the campaign progressed. They were forthcoming about who really did kick a chair and who egged one of the trustee's houses—all of which I reminded them was confidential and not to be reported out to anyone. At no time did they suggest that they were uncomfortable telling me these things. It seemed to me that I was more accepted and less excluded because of our relationship, having been through all of this together, and because of the fact that I was their former principal. It seemed that we had a very good rapport. They were also considerate and respectful of one another. "The hallmark of focus groups is the data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1998, p. 112). At the end of each focus group, before I had a chance to thank them as a group, someone always thanked me for the opportunity to talk about their experiences.

After each focus group, I made notes about the interactions between participants. I transferred each tape to my computer so that I could listen to it several times. As I listened to each tape, I added to my notes. I read the notes provided by the student volunteer. As I listened to the tapes, I made notes to myself about how to improve the questions in the next session. I also began to listen for any themes that might begin to be emerging. At the conclusion of the focus groups, I took the jump drive (which contained the taped conversations) to the transcriptionist to be transcribed.
Interviews

Some students had provided leadership throughout the Keep Stafford Secondary campaign and I wanted to interview them regarding their perceptions of particular events. I believed that these students felt some urgency to act and therefore may have an understanding of democratic citizenship and what it takes to participate in the public sphere. Through an individual or paired interview, I also thought that they might come to a greater awareness and understanding of that concept. This may, in turn, give them greater confidence to participate in the public sphere in the future. Focus groups and interviews are both qualitative research methods. “Focus group studies have used follow-up interviews with individual participants to explore specific opinions and experiences in more depth, as well as to produce narratives that address the continuity of personal experiences over time” (Duncan & Morgan, 1996, p. 134). According to Kvale, the purpose of a qualitative research interview is “to obtain qualitative descriptions of the life world of the subject with respect to interpretation of their meaning” (1996, p. 124). “Interviews are a form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through dialogue.” (1996, p. 125).

Twenty-one students chose to participate in face-to-face interviews. In addition, four students asked for an opportunity to respond to the questions via e-mail. Three of those students were graduates who had very busy work schedules; and one was a grade eleven student who had a severe learning disability and said that “time to think and respond to the questions was important.” All four were provided with parent consent forms and student assent forms, and when those were completed and returned, I e-mailed them the interview questions.
I conducted the individual and paired interviews at the Timms Community Centre on two consecutive Saturdays and at the student volunteer’s home after school during the week. None of the participants chose the option of being interviewed in their own homes. Of the twenty-one students who were interviewed, ten of them chose to be interviewed with a partner. They said that this was simply because it was more convenient to come with a friend or to share transportation. Thirteen of the twenty-one students interviewed had been consistently identified by their peers in the focus groups as one of the leaders in the campaign. There were three graduates involved, four grade twelve students, eight grade eleven students, five grade ten students, and one grade nine student. There were twelve female participants and nine male participants. Three of the students, one female and two male had entered H.D. Stafford Secondary in grade eleven coming from three different high schools in the district. All three shared that they had had unsatisfactory experiences in their former high schools and had chosen to come to Stafford because of its smaller size and the good things that they had heard about the school from their friends.

At the Timms Community Centre, we were in a small meeting room seated at a small table. At the student volunteer’s home, we sat in comfortable chairs in the family room. I provided Timbits and juice once again. I began each interview by welcoming the participants and checking to make sure that I had a parental consent and assent form for each one. I explained that the purpose of the interview was to follow up on what we had talked about in the focus groups in order to try to get a more in-depth understanding of why students got involved in the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary. I indicated that I would be audiotaping the interviews as well and that everything that we discussed
would be confidential. I reminded them that the student volunteer would be taking notes for me. The participants who came with a partner were not as animated as they had been in the focus groups but were a bit more animated than those who chose to come on their own. All of them were thoughtful and reflective about their experiences. The presence of the student volunteer seemed to put most of them at ease. I used a set of questions to guide the conversation (see Appendix B).

Despite what I had observed of the actual campaign, I was surprised at how deeply the students had thought about the whole process and how, on an individual level, they seemed to understand the political process. One student thought that the superintendent was in charge of the agenda; that she directed the chair of the Board of Education and the rest followed blindly. Another grade 12 student had designed a poster with Richard Nixon’s face on it, advertising the Board meeting where the decision about the future of H. D. Stafford was going to be made. I asked him about the poster and he replied that the Board’s behavior reminded him of that era in politics: “manipulating stuff under the radar, not playing by the rules, the whole dishonesty kind of theme.” Another student commented on how much easier it was for the Board of Education to do this to a school like Stafford because it was viewed by some in the community as a “welfare school because so many poor kids attended it.” Another student commented that the Board had suggested that everyone should be happy because they had reconfigured Stafford, not closed it. “The problem with that thinking is I can’t go there any more. That’s the whole problem,” he said. Another student who was very involved in the protests was also applying for a number of scholarships. She said that throughout the campaign, she was always worried. “I was totally worried about whether she (the
superintendent) could have any influence over my scholarship options, my marks, my ability to do anything for my future.” Another student understood the difficult position teachers were in. “I think teachers were silenced. I don’t think they really could do too much in the aspect of actually helping us, but we knew they were there,” she said.

Another student said he felt that as a student body they had done everything they could think of to persuade any of the four trustees in the majority to change their mind. He said he was beginning to think of more drastic measures like lighting fires or blowing things up. “That’s what other oppressed people have done,” he said. And so the conversations were quieter and more thoughtful. It became clearer to me during the interviews that on an individual level they were attempting to process and make sense of their experience.

As the interviewer, I indicated that I was listening and I understood. At the end of each interview, I made notes on what I had heard and what I had observed.

As a participant observer in this study over a long period of time I had come to know some of the students quite well. I also had strong beliefs about their right to express their views in the wider public sphere. This played a role in what I believe are “the richer and more authentic findings than might have emerged from a more traditional study” (Mehan, 2008, p. 84). He goes on to say that “the knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular” (quoting Shweder, 2006, p 3). Of course, given a choice between the three, Shweder would choose incompleteness and Mehan says he would agree.
Later, I transferred the audiotapes to my computer so that I could listen to them several times. As I listened, I would add to my notes from the day. I had all of the audiotapes from the interviews transcribed.

**Beginning the Analysis**

Once I had all the transcriptions from both the focus groups and the interviews, I read them through while listening to the tapes. Then I read the transcriptions on their own. I made the decision to review all the data together because the purpose of the interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of what had been learned from the focus groups.

As I read and listened and re-read, I began to look for categories or themes. As Lather stated (2004, p. 474) “we don’t discover our data under a tree; we construct it.” Sipe and Ghiso go on to elaborate “We don’t discover conceptual categories in our data; we build them” (2004, p. 474). LeCompte outlines ways that qualitative researchers discern patterns in their data. These include “frequency, omission, declaration, similarity, co-occurrence, sequence, corroboration and a priori hypothesizing” (2000, p. 151). I had hypothesized about what had caused the students to organize the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary. So their responses did not surprise me. I had also hypothesized that their teachers were involved in helping them to plan protests and events. So it was a surprise to find that most of the teachers were not directly involved. The frequency of comments about their love for their school and the frequency with which they stated their strong feelings about the way they had been treated by trustees established those categories quite easily. Several students made declarations about how they felt about
the conversations that they had at home with their parents. If they had not shared those
with me, I would not have known that they had taken place. Many of the students were
clear about the need for respectful behavior when they were in the public eye in order to
gain public support. Several newspaper articles stated that the students had, in fact, been
the best behaved group in the whole process, thereby corroborating their efforts to
provide leadership.

I developed a coding system that reflected the themes that I saw emerging. I re-
read each transcript and wrote the codes in the margin of each page. It became clear that
there were four or five themes that were consistent over all of the data. There were some
other bits and pieces that were interesting but didn’t seem to fit anywhere. There were
some themes that appeared in the data more often than the bits but not as frequently as
the major themes. One of these was the concern raised by some students that they were
unhappy about the behavior of some of the parents. I decided to leave it as a minor
theme and wanted to discuss it with the students later. As Sipe and Ghiso stated “The
unexpected, the surprising, the puzzling, and the downright frustrating point in our data
should be prized rather than lamented” (2004, p. 482).

I selected different coloured highlighters, one for each major and minor theme. I
read through the transcripts again, highlighting each piece of data with the appropriate
colour. The visual effect was somewhat helpful in clarifying how strong the theme
actually was. Although some were not as strong, I felt that they could still hold their
own and left them as stand alone themes. Others, I merged into other themes as
subsections. Then I transferred the data onto index cards and taped them onto the wall in
their themes. I read the themes and the data over several times and made a few changes.
I had planned to meet with the students when I got to this stage. I asked the student volunteer to e-mail all the participants and invite them to a pizza lunch to discuss the preliminary findings.

 Participant Feedback

I met with the students on a Saturday at noon at the Timms Community Centre over pizza and drinks. I had arrived early to set the room up. I had arranged the cards on strips of masking tape according to each theme and had attached them to the wall. I chose not to put the title I had chosen for each theme at the top of each list of data. I hoped to get their input about each theme and its significance. As the students arrived, I offered them the pizza and drinks and ask them to consider the lists on the wall while they were eating. Originally, there were eight students who had confirmed that they would attend and there were five who said that they might attend. Six students actually arrived for the meeting. Although a small group, it was fairly representative of the larger group of participants. There were three males and three females. There was one graduate, one grade twelve student, one grade eleven student, and three grade ten students. I explained to the participants how the lists had been generated and the importance of their feedback as I began to write my report. I took notes as we chatted about the themes.

One theme was about their school and why they cared about it so much. They commented that that was the most important theme. One student commented that the school was a community and that teachers cared about all students. Another said that she
felt that the school was a “web of relationships”; that you didn’t know everybody, but you were connected through friends.

Another theme was related to the treatment that they received from trustees when they tried to communicate with them about why they wanted to save their high school. They concurred that their treatment was a sign that democracy wasn’t working. What the experience had taught them, they said, was that they needed to pay attention to their elected representatives and the positions that they took on issues. An example someone gave was the new Code of Conduct that had been adopted by the Board of Education at its most recent meeting. The Teachers’ Association and the District Parent Advisory Committee had stated that they hadn’t been consulted. This had been reported in the local paper and most of them were aware of the issue.

Another theme was related to the events/protests that they organized and their goal in doing so. One student suggested that the protests were done to get “the issue out into the public eye, to get it out from behind closed doors.” Another student commented that it was student activism but it felt like a revolution. “A revolution,” he said, “changes peoples’ mind sets.” They also said that they felt that the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary had been successful in gaining the public’s attention because of the number of signs that went up in the community, the number of letters to the editor in the local papers, the editorials that were written in support of the school and the students, and the expressions of support that came from members of the community.

Another theme was related to the leadership role that students fulfilled. They didn’t have a lot of comments about this theme. They all agreed that it was an important theme, but it was a given. They simply couldn’t stand by and do nothing. They had to
act. According to Flyvbjerg, “The basis for understanding and acting is the attitude among those who understand and act, and this attitude is not based on idiosyncratic moral or personal preferences, but on a context-dependent common world view and interests among a reference group, well aware that different groups typically have different world views and different interests” (2001, p. 101).

There was a theme related to what they had learned through the whole process and one student suggested it should be labeled the “Harsh Truth or Education You Don’t Get in a Classroom.” The rest agreed. I asked them if there were any cards that needed to be moved from one theme to another. They suggested merging the theme about leadership with the theme related to community support (I had them separate). One student explained that the whole purpose in organizing the campaign was to gain community support. Everyone agreed. So the two themes were merged.

I had a theme related to parent involvement off to one side because it had not appeared in the data as often as the themes discussed above. I explained that some students felt that a few parents had behaved inappropriately, and that behavior had influenced their campaign negatively. Some students had gone to a meeting of the Parent Advisory Committee and expressed their concerns quite politely and the inappropriate behavior stopped. The students agreed that that had been an important and risky part of their leadership responsibilities and the theme should remain. So it was left in.

I explained my thinking about each theme and there was general agreement that I had captured what they thought was important. I said I would incorporate their suggestions in my final report.
I also explained that I would be contacting them via e-mail about any particular quotes that I would be using in my thesis to get their approval and to adjust wording to accurately reflect their thinking about the different issues we had discussed. I also asked them to think of a pseudonym that they would like me to use instead of their real name and to send that to me via e-mail once they had made a decision. Over the following weeks, they sent me their choice of pseudonyms.

One of the things I was most curious about was how they felt about working with me as the researcher given my role as their former principal. And so I asked them about it. One of the students replied, “It didn’t matter to me.” Another student responded, “You’re the most unusual principal I know. You were never in your office. You were always out with kids. So doing this project seemed fine.” Others nodded. Someone else said, “You care about kids. Even when you sign report cards, you write something that shows you know us.” Someone else said, “When I was in elementary school and I got called to the office, I was terrified. At Stafford, being called to the office isn’t scary.” They added that I came to a variety of school events, like sports and fine arts – that I didn’t “play favourites.” And because of all those reasons, working with me was not an issue for them. I hoped that these were honest responses, but I would never know for sure as my role as their former principal may have made it awkward for them to be completely forthcoming.

As we were beginning to wrap up, I asked them what it would take to replicate this kind of action another time. The most important thing they said was the school. “If it wasn’t for the school, we wouldn’t have done this,” one student said. Another said, “The conversation begins with the teachers. What they say and do in the classroom
matters.” Then I asked what each of them would do if they were faced with an issue like this in the future. “We’ve learned so much, we’ll do what we need to do and we’ll do it in our own way,” was the response from one student and the rest nodded.

The conversation then turned to what was going on at school and the transition activities that had been planned for them so that they could get to know the students at Langley Senior Secondary. The reviews were mixed and there was a fair amount of concern about what their next school year was going to be like.

Chapter Summary:

This chapter has described the methodology used to investigate how it is that students come to participate in the public sphere as democratic citizens. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with students. In addition, policy documents, reports, minutes from meetings, newspaper clippings and field notes were analyzed as part of the research process. In Chapter Four, I discuss the findings of this study.
Chapter Five: Stafford Students Share Their Story

How did the H.D. Stafford students come to participate in the public sphere as democratic citizens? This chapter provides the results of the study. As a reader you will come to know why the students chose to organize the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary; how the Board of Education’s behavior influenced their determination to continue in their fight; the protests and events that they organized; and what they have to say about their experience. It is an interesting story about courage, intellect, heart, and student activism.

A.) Their school was important

In the beginning, students said, they were concerned about what might happen to their school as a result of the consultation process and the report being prepared by Mike McAvoy. Some of them attended the consultation meetings with their parents and then talked to their friends about what they had heard. As time went by, the loss of their school due to the possibility of its reconfiguration to a middle school became of great concern to them and it was a topic of conversation in the hallways every day. Once the report and its recommendations were made public, the students said that they needed to take action to save their school. When asked about their involvement in the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary, they all responded that their school was very important to them. When asked why, they replied that H. D. Stafford Secondary School was a place where they had relationships with their teachers; a place where they felt a strong sense of belonging and strong connections to friends; a place where they could find their voice and discover the person they wanted to become; and older students mentored younger ones.
We’re trying to fight so hard for something we love so much that it shouldn’t be a bad thing. We’re just trying to show them how much we care about our school. (Judy, grade 9)

The teachers are what make it such a good school. As a teacher, you take on an obligation to help any student; it’s not if they’re rich, if they’re poor, if they’re smart, if they’re dumb. You’re there to help them and not choose which one’s good and which one’s bad. That’s not why you teach, right? So I think at HDS the teachers say, “You’re a student. I’m not going to classify you in groups or whatever. I’m going to teach you because that’s my job.” (Michelle, a graduate)

The Stafford school community is so small, so it seems more like a family. You know, everyone’s face is so recognizable. So you don’t feel left out or you feel like a real part of the school. (Olivia, grade 11)

There is a real sense of family in the school. When I came here, I really felt like this is the first place where everybody meshes so well. (Colby, grade 9)

Because it’s a small school, you can participate in the fine arts program and sports and everything. That way, you kind of find yourself, right. (Sally, a graduate)

Another thing that makes it such a wonderful place is there’s a lot of mentoring too. A lot of the older kids will talk with the younger kids. When I was in grade eight I would go and I would talk to some older students I knew in grade twelve if I needed help with something. Now I can do the same thing for the grade eights because I’m one of the older kids, now that I’m in grade 11. (Lexy, grade 11)

Because H.D. Stafford Secondary is a small school, students had a strong sense of belonging, of being connected to and cared for by their teachers and their peers.

Noddings says that to care is “to act not by fixed rule but by affection and regard” (1984, p. 24) and these students felt cared for. There were also many opportunities for students to participate in sports, in fine arts, and leadership activities in the school. They had opportunities to “find themselves” as Sally suggested, to discover the person they wanted to become. They felt that their teachers cared about their success, both academically and
about their development as human beings. Lightfoot found in her study of six schools that both adults and adolescents want to be part of “a network of relationships and want to feel identified with and protected by a caring institution” (1983, p. 56). Sizer says, “Good schools are thoughtful places. The people in them are known to each other. The units are small enough to be coherent communities of friends. The entire place is thoughtful” (1992, p. 32). The students at Stafford valued their school as such a place and wanted to keep it just the way it was. They told me that if they hadn’t cared so deeply about their school and their teachers that the campaign to save it simply wouldn’t have happened.

B.) The Langley Board of Education Refused to Recognize Students

Students began attending Board of Education Meetings on a regular basis as well as any additional meetings that the Board called to discuss the recommendations or to receive further information. These meetings began in February 2007 and continued until November first, which made attendance quite a commitment on the part of students. Some students appeared as delegations and made presentations, either individually or in pairs. They talked about the strengths of their school and how so many of them had achieved academic success; that they had opportunities to participate in sports and fine arts; and that many of them were volunteers in their community; that its size made it easier to build relationships with teachers and classmates. They invited trustees to come to their school to see things first-hand in order to make an informed decision. Other students attended to observe the proceedings and to support their friends who were making presentations. All of the participants stated that as they began to attend meetings and make presentations, they were quite appalled by the way the majority of the trustees,
particularly the Board Chair, treated them, the trustees who were opposed to the reconfiguration of H.D. Stafford and its feeder elementary schools, and some of the parents and members of the H. D. Stafford community. They said that in the beginning there was a total lack of regard for students, for anyone from the Stafford community, or for anyone supporting the school. There was also an ongoing refusal to recognize students as legitimate citizens in their community. Students were described as "little people who would not be allowed to be involved in the consultation process." (Susan, grade 11) They observed the Board Chair and the Vice Chair passing notes to one another and not making eye contact with any of the speakers from the public.

At first we were told we weren't allowed to go to the consultation meetings, that it was for adults. They said, we'll just let the big people deal with this. These are not decisions for the little people to make. We'll let the big people deal with it because we were too little, apparently, to understand. (Susan, grade 11)

I could see the Board Chair and the Vice Chair passing notes back and forth... For the whole night and I thought "That's really inappropriate. You should be listening to what people are saying, not writing notes about them." (Katreena, grade 10)

Not listening was often cited as an example of this lack of regard shown by trustees.

When asked to describe what listening actually involved, there were a number of responses. This definition, offered by Judy, a grade 9 student, seemed to capture what they were looking for from trustees:

They may hear us but they aren't necessarily listening; whereas, listening means actually taking it into thought, thinking about it for a long period of time, and actually acting on that. (Judy)
And I was reminded of Delpit’s comment about listening from chapter two:

Active listening requires “not only open eyes and ears, but also open hearts and minds” (2007, p. 380).

According to Cook-Sather “Most power relationships have no place for listening and actively do not tolerate it because it is very inconvenient: to really listen means to have to respond” (2002, p. 8). The majority of trustees had demonstrated very clearly to the students that this was about power by calling them “little people” and by refusing to listen to what they had to say. The fact that any recommendations related to the McAvoy Report passed by a vote of 4/3, any motion for reconsideration or deferral was usually defeated by a vote of 4/3 was further evidence, the students believed, that they weren’t being listened to. Susan, grade 11, described it as “the group of four of them having a group think and not listening to anything the community had to say.” Many students tried to contact trustees via e-mail after Board of Education meetings and received no responses, particularly from the four in favour of the reconfiguration. There were many comments about the trustees’ continued refusal to have a dialogue of any kind with the students.

Well we’re supposed to live in like a representative democracy, right and when you can’t get a hold of a politician that’s supposed to represent you that’s troubling to say the least. (Chuck, grade 12)

I’d write e-mails upon e-mails, after every meeting and not get a single reply from any one of the four of them. I’m trying to get my point across cause, you know, it’s hurting and it’s bothering me a bit. I just wanted to talk to somebody, but I’d get nothing. (Colby, grade 9)
C.) An Attempt to Gain Public Support

The students attended meetings, made presentations and had been polite and very respectful. They had tried to tell the trustees why they valued their school, but had not been heard. They felt that their voices were being silenced. "Silencing removes any documentation that all is not well with the workings of the economy, race and gender relations, and public schooling as the route to class mobility" (Fine and Weis, 2003, p. 15). The students felt that more drastic action was necessary. So they began to plan a campaign to get the public's attention and support. They felt that if the public began to understand the situation and began to show their support, it might influence the trustees' decision. They thought that the trustees might be able to ignore youth, but they would have to pay more attention if the broader public began to support the youth in the community. They were creating what Fraser calls counterpublics – "spaces formed out of the very exclusionary practices of the public sphere" (Fraser, 2003, p. 141). Their campaign included a rally, a sit-in at the School Board Office, an early morning walk to Langley Senior Secondary, writing letters and e-mails, presentations at Board of Education meetings, a candlelight vigil, and a sit-in which became a camp-out at the school. As a result, attendance at public meetings continued to grow, varying from two hundred to as many as one thousand when the Board was expected to make its decision.

We believed that the school board was really good and they helped kids. But when they started to come up with this plan to change HDS into a middle school, our school, we kind of lost faith in them. So we decided to
get together and plan events to try and change their minds but as you can
tell, it didn’t work out. (Mitchell, grade 10)

It was kind of a cool experience. As terrible as it was, there were some
good things about it. It was great to be a part of this big student body that
united to fight for our school and fight for our friends and fight for our
education. (Antwon, grade 11)

The students had also developed what Melucci describes as a collective identity.

“The production of a collective identity is an ongoing process which enables the group to
recognize and define itself as such, and which also facilitates mobilization in the public
sphere as a cohesive unit with agreed aims and interests” (Melucci, 2006, p. 91).

I always thought that there was power in numbers. You know, the more
we could show the trustees that there’s a bunch of kids who care about
this. Listen to us. I always thought that kind of thing would be effective.
(Kerry, grade 11)

And the underlining message we wanted everyone to hear is, this is
student based. This isn’t parents telling us to do this. This isn’t teachers
telling us to do this. This was our idea. (Peyton, grade 11)

D.) Leadership

The students recognized that leadership was an important factor if they were
going to have any impact on the community. They indicated that leadership was shared
because there was so much to be done. They believed that the protests needed to be well
organized and include large numbers of students who behaved well in the public eye.

*Under the broad umbrella of leadership, they included communication, education,
conflict resolution, risk taking, trust and respect.*
**Leadership**

In the focus groups and in interviews, the students talked about the leadership they provided and the importance of their shared goal which was to save their school from reconfiguration. They talked about it often during the campaign and were clear with each other about what they were trying to achieve.

We were all aiming toward the same goal of trying to stop HDS from becoming a middle school. We all wanted the same thing and we were willing to work together and come together to achieve that goal.  
(Michelle, a graduate)

**Communication:**

This was one of the areas that the students focused on extensively. In order to have a successful protest, which meant they wanted to influence the public, they needed to have large numbers of students in attendance. The only way they could be sure that this would happen was to communicate with one another regularly. Technology was by far, the preferred choice. They used e-mail and Facebook. Most students said that this was the way they received most of their information. The use of the Internet to e-mail trustees, to share information, and to communicate with one another is what Sirotadescribes as “online activism” (2008, p. 322). It has become very much a part of the political landscape in the United States and Canada and, he says, that “youth are most adept with its use.” Participants also said that they shared information at school because it was a safe place. It was a relatively private sphere in which to prepare for further action in the wider public sphere.
It became a hot topic around the school and I think that's how the information got out to most of the students. Kids would ask questions of other kids and if you had been at the meeting or if you had a parent who had been there and you had information, you'd talk about it at lunchtime, during breaks and between classes. (Lexy, grade 11)

Sometimes kids would snag an area on the floor in the hallway during lunch and just talk about it. Sometimes teachers would let us use their classrooms to talk or share information. (Kay, grade 11)

**Education**

In order for the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary to be effective, the student organizers of the protests believed that students in the school needed information. They needed to be educated about: the plan to reconfigure their school to become a middle school; what trustees were saying about the plan; how the public was reacting; and what students were planning in response to what was happening in the community. They stated that it was unfair to ask students to take risks and participate in the protests if they didn’t have sufficient information. The students need to be able to make informed decisions. To do so they needed to be educated about the cause.

We wanted to get people involved so it was about educating them and getting them to get their friends to come and just try to spread the word. (Kerry, grade 11)

Some kids didn’t know what was going on and then when you would start to explain to them what was happening at the meetings and what was really going on, they would choose to get involved. (Peyton, grade 11)

**Conflict Resolution/Respect**

Participants had lots of conversations and debates about what events/protests would be the most effective. They said that they always managed to sort things out and
come to some kind of consensus because they were so united around their cause. They also talked about respect and how to behave when in the public eye. They understood that in order to win public support, their behavior needed to be appropriate and not detract from their message. It would be easy for the community to reject them as youth who were challenging authority if they were “loud and obnoxious” to get their point across. They did everything they could to be polite, respectful, and articulate in their presentations.

Keeping the school was too important so we’d hang in there until we worked it out. (Sandy, a graduate)

We had lots of debates. We wouldn’t leave in the middle of an argument. Someone would offer an idea or combine two ideas and in the end it would work out perfectly. (Margot, a graduate)

We talked a lot about respect. We asked students to leave meetings or protests if they were being disrespectful. We asked them to behave in a way that you want Stafford to be known. (Melissa, grade 10)

**E.) Risk-Taking Was an Ever Present Element**

Participants were also aware that there were risks involved in the work that they were choosing to do. The response from trustees at the Board of Education meetings was unpredictable. Students or any member of the community might be criticized publicly or simply ignored. Security guards were present at every meeting and at every protest they planned. There was often a police presence as well. They were never sure who might create a disturbance or what might be a reason for them to be removed from a meeting or protest. It was a very risky business for adolescents to be involved in.
It wasn’t easy to make presentations at School Board Meetings, to get up there and be shot down. But you knew it was the best thing to do and that you had support from other people. (Katreena, grade 10)

It felt right (the protests) and the only thing that I was ever worried about was that somebody would get arrested or something and I’d always think about that. (Thomas, grade 10)

I think the whole thing was a risk. I don’t think it could have been done unless you were taking some sort of risk. I think going against any form of government even if it is just a local one is a risk in itself. (Bill, grade 12)

At one meeting a former trustee was removed from the meeting by security guards. A number of students commented on that event and how disconcerting it was. They wondered if the same thing could happen to any one of them.

_____ got thrown out by like the cops or security. I think I was sitting practically right in front of him and they just like ripped him out of his seat and pulled him out. It was pretty harsh considering it was just a board meeting. There was a picture of him in the paper later with bruises on his arm. (Donna, grade 11)

And so they understood the risks they were taking as they organized the campaign to get the trustees’ attention in the hopes of changing at least one vote. (The trustees continued to support the recommendations by a 4/3 vote.)

**F.) Trust Was a Necessary Element**

Being able to trust one another and the adults in the school became very important because of the risks involved. All of the students stated that there was a high level of trust amongst the students and the teachers in the school.
I think everybody, all the teachers and all the students, trusted each other. (Mitchell, grade 10).

The campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary had support both within the school and in the wider community. A few of the more experienced teachers, many of the parents, and some members of the community supported the students by speaking out against the possible reconfiguration at public meetings. This common goal helped to create a level of trust amongst the students and teachers.

G. Seeking Advice from Others

In providing leadership, students said that they sought advice from others. When asked about adults who might have provided support or advice, the conversation in each of the focus groups came to a complete stop. They made eye contact with one another, avoiding eye contact with me. No one was sure where to begin. I asked if they were concerned about their teachers. Several nodded affirmatively. I reminded them that everything they shared in the focus group would be kept confidential and that no one would get into any trouble because of something they said. It was all right then, and the conversation resumed. They explained that they did not want to do anything that might jeopardize a teacher’s career or future in the school district. So they were always very careful, during the campaign to save their school, about the conversations they had and how much information they shared and with whom. This was a revelation to me. I had no idea that the students had shown this much concern and care for their teachers. But it should not have surprised me because they indicated very clearly that this campaign was
about saving their school and the teachers who cared so much about them. This was an example of the cared-for looking out for the one-caring. As Noddings describes, “the one-caring and the cared-for are reciprocally dependent” (1984, p. 58). In order to continue to protect their teachers, I was very careful in editing quotes so that teachers could not be identified in any way.

It was kind of confidential and of course I cared about the teachers and I didn’t want to jeopardize their job or anything. (Michelle, a graduate)

The students were very careful to maintain the fact that anything that they did that could possibly reflect back badly, or poorly on anyone, that it was purely organized by the students, such as the sit-in. They didn’t want to put any teachers in a potential situation of being responsible for something that went wrong. (Margot, a graduate).

The participants said that sometimes they went to teachers for advice and appreciated their candour when they were approached. It was helpful to hear another point of view on the different issues or to get advice about how to proceed.

I did talk to some of the teachers and just wanted to see where they stood on it even though, like Jane said, they had to be cautious about it but I did do that and it helped me out a lot just to hear other people’s ideas, not just my own, you know. (Jay, grade 11)

I talked to them between classes, lunch, sometimes after school, just whenever they had time to talk and whenever I came to them to talk. (Sam, grade 10)

There were three teachers, two of whom had considerable seniority (“older” was the term the students used), they told me, who were open to discussing issues in class. The three teachers were from different departments in the school: English, French, and Social
Studies. Those discussions, the students said were helpful in clarifying information, district policy, and personal safety.

In that class, it would be one student who would ask, “So what’s going on right now?” and then it would develop into a discussion. (Antwon, grade 11)

If you asked any questions they (teachers) would answer honestly which was helpful because they knew more about the school board system than we did at the time. (Susan, grade 11)

The parents were the other group of adults who offered support and advice. They sometimes had an interesting role according to the students. They provided transportation to meetings, sometimes helped with food, and provided supervision when asked. They were not always supportive of the events that the students chose to organize.

The parents actually were really worried about the sit-in. I know a lot of them really didn’t want it to happen but as students we said, we needed to do something more drastic. So we went ahead and then we moved outside and put up our tents. That eventually got shut down because the parents that were there got worried that we would freeze to death because it got a lot colder than we had expected it to. (Peyton, grade 11)

In addition, parents were attending all of the meetings and making presentations to try to influence the trustees. And, sometimes, according to the students, the behavior of the parents was less than stellar and did little to support their cause.

I noticed at board meetings it was more the adults calling out than it was students. That’s the one thing that bugged me the most because they were representing the Stafford community and the community was almost nixed
right away when they started screaming and bantering and using megaphones. (Peter, grade 12)

The students made an effort to deal with this behavior by attending the Parent Advisory Committee meetings and sharing their concerns, in a polite way, they said. They felt it was important that they take on a leadership role with the parents, just as they had in protecting their teachers or demanding that their peers behave respectfully. How the public viewed the students and their cause was very important. They did not want anything to detract from their message through their campaign to save their school.

I attended PAC meetings and I would say, "Well, how are we going to conduct ourselves? We need to be really careful because they (the Board of Education) will twist our words and our actions." (Lexy, grade 11)

Other students mentioned that in addition to the conversations with the parent community, there were far more conversations at home with their parents than usual. Some of those conversations were supportive; others not as supportive. They commented that they had conversations about politics, the current situation, and how to plan for the future. Their involvement in the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary was a catalyst in some ways for creating dialogue with their parents. This was another outcome that I was unaware of. I knew that students and their families were under a lot of stress as this was going on, but was unaware of some of the family dynamics.

My dad has always had the same view on the whole thing and he said, "You know, it's been decided since the start. There's nothing you can do about it." That always was angering but in the same way it was empowering and I don't know if he meant it to be that way but that's what
happened. He’d say, “There’s nothing you can do about it” and then I would want to go fight. (Colby, grade 9)

My dad wasn’t trying to be all like that emotional but he would say, “This is what it is and you need to make the best of it.” He said that he’s going to be there to help but sometimes “We just have to go where the road takes us.” (At this point, the student began to cry). (Kerry, grade 11)

H.) Student Activism: Appearing in the Public Sphere

Students organized a variety of events to try to gain public support. They made a foray into the public sphere. The first event was a rally held at the front of the school. The initial plan was to hold the rally during school time. Some teachers recommended holding it outside of school time. That way, the students would still be sending a message that they valued their education and teachers could attend to show their support for the cause. The students took that advice and planned the rally with the assistance of the PAC executive and it was held after school on the front lawn. All trustees were invited, but only three chose to attend.

The second protest was a walk to the School Board Office to hold a silent protest because they believed that the message that the public needed to hear was that their voices had not been heard. This event was organized completely by the students themselves.

We had it planned out to be... cause we knew that we needed to have the idea of a silent protest. But at the same time we were so worked up about it that there was no possible way for us to be quiet the whole time. so we looked at it as, on our walk there we’ll be as vocal as we possibly can, but once we’re inside the building, that’s when we have to make it this 180 degree like change and become quiet. (Lexy, grade 11).
The students had intended to stay until the School Board Office closed for the day.

However, when they arrived at the office, there were four or five police officers present.

All the doors to the School Board Office were locked except for one main entry door.

The police presence and the locked doors caused some concerns for the student organizers and they began to rethink how long they should stay.

Originally, the walk to the school board office was supposed to be to walk up there and then stay there and don’t leave. But the issue came up that since a lot of the school district administration had been reacting with hiring security and the police were there. We didn’t want any of the students to have to be apprehended by security or police or anything like that. Especially, since the school board is right next to the police station. (Margot, graduate).

Midway through the afternoon, senior staff asked to meet with some of the students. Six of the students agreed to meet and they were escorted upstairs to a private meeting room. The press attempted to follow but was not allowed to enter the room. The students were hopeful that they might get a more fair hearing from members of the School District staff than they had from trustees. Based on their experiences in schools they believed that because senior staff were mainly former teachers that they might be more understanding and sympathetic than the elected officials. Again, they tried to present their argument in a thoughtful and respectful manner.

We tried to use persuasion and history, showing that we are educated people and we do want some respect out of this and we’re a democratic country. Why can’t we be democratic in this situation as well? (Kerry, grade 11)
In, all honesty, it seemed like an act; like they were just being polite and they were treating us like we were elementary students or students who just had no idea what we were really doing. They spent a lot of time saying, "Oh you guys are doing this so well." We would start talking about an issue and then they would interrupt us with "Oh, we just think you guys are being so respectful in the way you did this walk and everything. We think it's so well conducted." We said, "That's great but we want to talk about this..." and I was sitting beside ___ (a member of senior staff) so I could kind of look at the notes s/he was taking and they were absolutely minimal. S/he took down everyone's name, age and grade but that was about the most information s/he actually took down. There were a couple of times where we'd say something and I said, "Could you please write that down?" (Margot, a graduate)

At the end of the meeting, the members of senior staff escorted the students out. The students returned to the front foyer where everyone else was assembled and shared what had been discussed. The student organizers suggested that students clean up and leave quietly at 2:55 p.m., which was the usual dismissal time at school. This is what everyone did. Later the students received letters thanking them for the input. But again, they felt that the adults had failed to listen to them and were treating them just like the trustees had, like "little people."

The next event was an early morning walk to Langley Senior Secondary School. This event was organized in response to some comments trustees had made at a Board of Education meeting. Students had asked how they could possibly get to school safely, walking as far as 4.8 kilometers, along some streets with no sidewalks as early as 7:30 a.m.

I think the walk to LSS came up with questions that we had that weren't answered. Well they were answered, but the answers didn’t make sense. (Kerry, grade 11)

So we asked the question, "How are we going to get to school (Langley Senior Secondary) safely next year?" And they said, "Oh we'll make it work, don't worry." So we wondered how we could show them that it's
not going to be safe. We knew we couldn’t just tell them cause obviously, they’re not going to listen. So we decided we’d have to physically show them. (Peyton, grade 11)

So they organized a walk and they invited all the trustees to join them. Parents and other members of the community chose to join them as well as the school RCMP Liaison Officer. Although most of the students supported and participated in this event, there had apparently been a heated debate about its purpose in the beginning. Some students felt that by going on the walk, they were actually saying, “This is possible, this is safe, it can be done.” In the end the majority of students supported it. What is interesting is that the school district, out of concern for student safety, will be providing a daily shuttle bus service between H. D. Stafford and Langley Secondary next year. (2008 – 2009 school year)

Another event that students participated in was an evening meeting at R.E. Mountain Secondary School in October, where the community was invited to respond to the recommendations prior to the Board of Education voting on them at the end of the month. The newspapers reported an attendance of 750 people. At one point, over fifty students lined up to deliver one-sentence statements about what their school meant to them.

I thought there were a lot of great delegations and a lot of passionate people. The lineup of the students that would say their one line for the ten minutes was huge. I thought it was pretty powerful but apparently not. (Antwon, grade 11)

The Board of Education meeting where the decision about the future of H.D. Stafford Secondary, Langley Senior Secondary, and all of their feeder elementary schools
was going to be made was moved from the School Board Office to the Christian Life Assembly Church. The church seats 1,800 people and a huge turnout was expected. Police were on site beginning at 6 p.m. Students and parents organized a candle light vigil in front of the church beginning at 6 p.m. At 7:30 p.m., they moved inside to attend the meeting. The press estimated that there were 1,000 people in attendance, including students, teachers, parents, former trustees, the mayor of Langley City, and many members of the community.

The students felt that this protest was quite effective given the location of the meeting and the seriousness of the decision. The students were very quiet and respectful inside the church; they said that they understood where they were and what kind of behavior was expected. The participants said that they found it a bit ironic when the Board Chair reminded everyone about the fact that they were in a church and what kind of behavior would be expected when the Board was unwilling to reflect on its own behavior and decision making:

I liked what they said at the beginning of the meeting, reminding us where we were and how we should behave. But at the same time they should have looked at what they were doing. (Kerry, grade 11)

I realized that it was a place of respect and that kind of deal. I, myself, am not religious but I understand that it’s a place of worship and holiness. But the fact that I was there, you know, for the vote to close my school, I still had that kind of anger. Having the meeting in the church didn’t change anything for me on a personal level. (Colby, grade 9)

After the decision was made to reconfigure H.D. Stafford into a middle school and Langley Secondary into a grade 9 through 12 school, the students decided to hold one
more public protest. Their goal, they said was to get Minister Shirley Bond’s attention in order to ask for a meeting with her to discuss the Board of Education’s decision.

We wanted, a meeting with Shirley Bond. That was the ultimate goal, which never happened. It was the ultimate goal but I think we really just wanted to get our point across. The fact that even though the vote had gone through doesn’t change our minds, doesn’t make this any less important to us. (Melissa, grade 10)

The sit-in began in the front foyer of the school and then moved outside to become a camp-out. About eight tents were pitched on the front lawn. The local media attended, but there was little attention from other media outlets even though the student organizers had called and e-mailed all of them. There was no response from any level of government. Gwen, a grade 11 student, said, “It seemed like no one took any notice because the fight was over.”

When asked about which events/protests made a difference, students were in agreement that most of them had an impact.

All of them made a difference. Maybe not necessarily to those who we wanted it to make a difference to but I mean, to me personally, it made a huge difference. It showed that our school really does care about each other and we are willing to stick together through everything. The community stepped up and they were always there. They came and saw. They came and participated. I became closer with a bunch of people that I hadn’t necessarily really been that close with to begin with. So I think it made a huge impact on everybody even if it didn’t change the minds of the trustees. (Melissa, grade 10)

Students took different approaches into expressing their feelings there too, which I thought was good. I mean, be it making posters, making speeches or videos, or t-shirts. It was more effective in the end. (Bill, grade 12)
The most successful event, from the student viewpoint, was the Silent Protest at the School Board Office because it got the greatest media and therefore, public attention.

I’ve never seen a school have more than half of the population walk out of school and go down to a school board office. It’s not that I don’t feel like I got anything out of the meeting that they had with us there. But we gained more support by it. I think the main thing was to get more support and attention. So people in the community would say, “Oh, look what’s that on TV? Oh, I better look into the Stafford crisis and find out what’s happening.” (Lexy, grade 11)

Because of a combination of things: the length of time between when the recommendations were made and when the decision was actually made (February to November 1); the risks involved; and the frustration in how they were treated, the students dealt with some fairly strong emotions.

It was towards the end of the evening when they (the four trustees) left for ten minutes, went behind police lines. And I was just angry, emotional, devastated… (Antwon, grade 11)

Yeah I went through that at the board meeting that was at the Christian Life Assembly Church. I’m just sitting there, just shaking my head as the trustees spoke (about why they would vote to close Stafford) and then five minutes after that I just broke into tears. I actually had to get up and leave and I didn’t come back for the entire thing. (Peter, grade 12)

Some kids’ grades are dropping. Some kids are really stressed out so they get sick. They have the flu or something or they’re just really depressed. They’re not happy and nobody should be like that because life is supposed to be happy. (Judy, grade 9)

I.) Community Support

At the same time, they provided support to one another and found that students from other schools were supporting them as they went through this difficult time. Those
students however, were unwilling to comment publicly for fear of what might happen to
them. This spoke to the situation in the whole district where people seemed afraid to
speak out for fear of reprisal.

People from other schools told me that they were scared they’d be next. So they supported us but they just couldn’t be vocal about it. (Susan, grade 11)

Students also found that many members of the community were supporting them and were surprised and heartened when that support was expressed. During the sit-in, which became a camp-out, the police came by to check on the students. One of the student organizers approached one of the officers to explain the plans for the evening. She asked him about his opinion on what they were trying to do:

So I went and talked to him and I said, “What’s your view on this?” And he said, “I think it’s a good idea. You’re standing up for your school. I’m here to make sure no one gets hurt. So I’m going to stay here until you’re done.” Then he went and bought us all pizza. (Melissa, grade 10)

Another student was shopping in the local mall on one weekend. He happened to be wearing his H. D. Stafford football jacket. A vendor from one of the kiosks approached him to offer support:

“Are you from Stafford?” he asked me. I said, “Yeah, I’m in grade 12.” He said, “I just wanted to tell you that I think you guys did the right thing. They just didn’t listen and I believe that every step you’ve taken was good and was in the right.” (Peter, grade 12)
Another student had attended a performance at Theatre Under the Stars during the summer. She was also wearing a Stafford t-shirt. A woman standing next to her in line turned to her to express her support:

"Do you go to Stafford?" she asked. And I said, "Oh, yeah." She said, "I've been watching the news and reading about you in the newspapers. I have to tell how wonderful I think it is that you are willing to stand up for you school." (Peyton, grade 11)

They said that these and other demonstrations of support from the community gave them the impetus to continue in their struggle to save their school.

J.) What Did They Learn?

I asked the participants what they had learned from their experiences. First of all, they said, they learned a lot of skills: public speaking, organizing events, and conflict resolution. They learned about School District Policy and they read parts of the School Act. They learned how to do research and create power point presentations. They learned how to write press releases and then some appeared on television or radio programs.

They said that they also learned some of life's lessons:

• Life isn't fair. (Peter, grade 12)

• If you truly believe in something then you have to work hard for it. (Peyton, grade 11)

• It's kind of taught me that sometimes the right cause isn't enough to win a fight or even win over people's favours. Life can be pretty unjust. I guess it's an important lesson to learn but it's at a pretty high price. (Mike, grade 12)

• Not all grownups know what's right. (Jay, grade 11)
• You kind of learn what kinds of things people have in them to save something they love. (Judy, grade 9)

They learned something about democratic citizenship:

• I think it gave us a taste of the real world, really with all these politics and being in the news and everything. (Mitchell, grade 10)

• I do have voice and you know, I can stand up for what I believe in and I’m going to do that. (Michelle, a graduate)

• I guess that’s part of being in a democracy. You don’t always get your way and you kind of have to deal with that. (Chuck, grade 12)

• I’m not going to be one of those voters who doesn’t care. (Lexy, grade 11)

And so it seemed they had come to some understanding of what it means to participate as a democratic citizen in the public sphere. From their conversations with me, it was clear that they knew it was important to stand up for what you believe in. It wasn’t always easy; in fact, sometimes it was fraught with risks, but definitely worth doing. They knew that in order to take a position, one must first become knowledgeable about the issues, ask questions, do research, and discuss opinions with others. That way, one comes to an informed opinion. In order to remain informed, it is necessary to pay attention to what any level of government is doing, by attending meetings, reading policy, paying attention to what the media has to say and asking questions of elected officials. They were more aware than ever, that being an adult does not mean that you always make good decisions or know how to behave appropriately. They also discovered that support for your cause can come from your community but also from some unexpected or unanticipated sources. They also came to understand that part of living in a democracy
means that even though you believe passionately in your cause, you may not always get the outcome you want.

As they talked, it became apparent that most of them, except for current grade twelve students, were most concerned about their futures. On paper, reconfiguration of schools to fill seats, and closure of others to save dollars might make sense. But when you hear about the impact on human lives, it is tragic to say the least.

Some students and their families were so angered by the lack of process and the final decision, that they are leaving the Langley School District. Some are selling their homes; whereas others are transporting students to other districts. The Abbotsford School District is also providing daily bus service to any students in Langley who wish to attend the Abbotsford Fundamental School or Rick Hansen Secondary School which offers a Fine Arts Program. A student whose family has sold their home and are moving out of the School District stated:

I mean, if I was in my best state of mind, trying not to freak out or anything, I would want to tell them how it feels and just what kind of an impact they have made on me. I mean, because they’ve pretty much screwed up everything I have. Them, as a collective, have screwed up everything I have cause, I’ve lost where I live and my school. I have to leave all of my friends and my girlfriend and all that. It’s just depressing. (Colby, grade 9)

Some students are choosing not to go to Langley Senior Secondary. The School District has a policy of choice, they say, and they are going to exercise their right to attend a school of their choice. Many of them have submitted cross boundary applications to other high schools. At the same time, they still feel very strongly about their connection to H.D. Stafford Secondary.
Because there's still that emotional connection to the school and there always will be because that was our school and it was taken away from us or it's being taken away from us. I mean, even if we do have to go somewhere else next year, which we aren't going to be happy about, we'll still be H. D. Stafford students. We'll just be H. D. Stafford students in a different building. (Peyton, grade 11)

Something we all take for granted is that graduation from high school is an important event, a milestone in our lives. The school we attended has memories, both good and bad, attached to it. Most of us assume that it will continue to exist even after our departure. For the grade twelve students the building will still be there, but nothing else will remain the same.

I mean, where is our five year reunion going to be or ten year reunion for our grad? I can put my letterman’s jacket up on the wall when I’m done with this year and people will ask, “What school is that?” because it doesn’t exist anymore. It seems like I graduated from a made up high school. (Mike, grade 12)

All of the students stated that their involvement in the democratic process has had an impact on their lives. They understand what it means to be a citizen in a democracy. They are proud of what they have accomplished. Although they weren’t able to influence the final decision, they bonded together and gained a lot of community support. And they said, they have lots of stories to tell about their experience.

You know what? I think it'll forever be a hot topic as long as you know someone who is somehow directly involved with it. I mean, I know when I'm old and gray and looking back on this I'm going to say, “Yeah, I have a story. I was in the last class to graduate in my high school, and this is
what happened.” And it’s going to be a pretty epic story to tell, I think.
(Bill, grade 12)

Chapter Summary:

The students at H.D. Stafford Secondary did their utmost to influence the trustees’ decision. They explained why their school was important to them; they invited trustees to come to the school to discover for themselves what the school was like. When they realized that they were not being listened to or acknowledged, they began to organize protests in an attempt to gain public support. They knew that they needed to behave respectfully whenever they were in the public eye in order to maintain that support. In the end, they were unable to move the trustees from their entrenched position of always voting 4/3 in favour of the reconfiguration. But they have learned a lot from the experience and I expect that their activism will continue into the trustee elections in November 2008. In the next chapter, I discuss my history as an educator and my role as principal during this process. It was definitely a challenge, to lead in difficult times.
Chapter Six: My Story

It is worthwhile then, to examine my own history in order to understand what I bring to the role of the principal in public education. And it is an interesting place that I find myself, having retired as of May 1, 2008 and having the opportunity to reflect on my practice over a span of 35 years. I see myself as a combination of all the roles that I play on a personal and professional level: a teacher/educator, vice principal, principal, a woman in leadership, a mother, sister, and wife (of another high school principal). I am also the daughter of a Manitoba farmer who had a grade 8 education. My mother excelled in school and completed grade 11. This was very unusual for a young woman in her day in the small town in which she grew up. My father always told us that he married our mother because she was, in his words, smart. He claimed that we got our common sense from him and our intellect from her. I was the eldest of five children and helped with the upbringing of the four younger ones.

I began my career as an elementary school teacher, grade one, to be exact. I began with the intention of teaching both elementary and secondary school before I finished my career. I wanted to do it all: experience and understand education from kindergarten through to grade 12. I had an English and a Primary Education major and a Special Education minor so thought I could make it all work. I also got involved in the Teachers’ Union and served as chair of a variety of committees (Working and Learning Conditions, Agreements, Trustee Elections, and Parent Involvement), vice president, and chief negotiator. At the time I was chief negotiator, Emery Dosdal (the former Deputy Minister of Education) was superintendent in Langley. He encouraged me to consider applying for an administrative position. The principal I was working with at the time was
a friend of Emery’s and the two of them continued to encourage me to apply. I told them both that I loved the classroom and working with students. The principal told me “what I could do for a class of students, I could do for a whole school.” In the end, I accepted a vice principalship at Douglas Park Elementary School. At that point, I had taught grades one through seven, had been a district helping teacher in the area of Language Arts, working with both elementary and secondary students, and had been considering a move to teaching at the secondary level, but this new job opportunity took me down a different path.

I stayed at Douglas Park for twelve years and loved the challenge of the inner city neighbourhood and the work that I did to build community support. Over the ten years that I was principal, the school received designation and funding from the provincial government as a Community School. We also applied and received funding for a full day kindergarten program for all of our students and a school lunch program. The Douglas Park Community School Board of Directors consisted of twenty members: staff, students, parents, seniors, and representatives of a variety of community agencies. I loved the school and received community recognition for the work that I did there. In 2001, I was named Langley’s Woman of the Year as part of the annual Women of Excellence Awards. In 2002, I received the Queen’s Golden Jubilee Medal in recognition of my service to the community. During that time, I also served in a number of positions, including president, for the Langley Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association and member of the board of directors of the Association for Community Education in British Columbia. I could have remained at Douglas Park until I retired, but was looking for a new challenge. And I still wanted the opportunity to work with adolescents. So I applied
for a secondary principalship. Emery had gone by then and we had a new superintendent. The new superintendent told me that I could have the move to secondary, but I would need to serve the apprenticeship: I needed to work as a vice principal first. That was the position they were prepared to offer me. I asked why I had to serve the apprenticeship when one of my colleagues had recently moved from an elementary to a secondary principalship. It was explained to me that there was a concern that someone who had not had the benefit of working first as a secondary vice principal, would not be sufficiently prepared to fulfill the role of secondary principal. I declined the offer at that point. After a few days and considerable soul searching, I called to tell him that I had reconsidered, and if the job was still open, I would take it. I thought that if this position of vice principal was the door into secondary schools, so be it. I moved to H.D. Stafford Secondary in September of 2002. I had the opportunity to work with two of the most creative, intelligent administrators in our district so I learned a lot. After two years, the principal took a leave from the district. The position was posted and I was told that if I wanted it, I would need to apply and compete with “other very capable candidates.” I was deemed to be capable and was offered the position. At that time women held only 2 out of the 7 available secondary principalships. When I left the district, I was the only female secondary principal.

My history is not devoid of struggle, but it is one of optimism. I continue to learn about the culture of high schools and the lives of adolescents and enjoy my relationships with them. Having struggled to gain knowledge and to understand my world in a largely male-dominated culture, I understand my students’ struggle to define themselves, to find their voices. In the school district, for me a more public sphere, I am more like my
students: sometimes I speak, sometimes I protest, sometimes I am silent. School for me, on the other hand, is a safer place, a more private sphere, where I can be myself, largely because of my position. I want it to be a safer place for my students, a place where their voices can be heard, where they can participate in their school, a comparatively private sphere, in preparation for participation in their community, the wider public sphere, as democratic citizens. Appearance in the public sphere is a risky business. It is fraught with danger: being ridiculed or criticized; being silenced by those in power; the possibility of recrimination; losing face. Youth need support as they make their foray into the wider public realm. I believe it is our responsibility as educators to support them in their journey to becoming young adults and to provide them with experiences that will help prepare them to participate as democratic citizens in their communities in the future.

**Helpful Theory**

Over the years, particularly through my studies in the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Policy, I have found that the work of several theorists has guided me in my work as a leader in schools. In all of my interactions with people, be it students, staff, or parents, I have always tried to do as Gadamer suggests, to seek first to understand.

Gadamer says that each individual comes from a unique historical place and that this history shapes our perspective of the world. It is this perspective that he calls a horizon. Horizons are not permanent but are constantly changing as we engage in dialogical encounters with others. As one horizon comes into contact with another, through dialogue, some measure of understanding occurs. Gadamer states that,
“Understanding is always a fusion of horizons” (in Lawn, 2006, p. 66). And in coming to understand the other correctly, we alter the understanding of ourselves. Gadamer also states that understanding is circular or iterative and that one must understand the parts and the whole as one informs the other. He describes this as a Hermeneutic Circle. Gadamer also suggests that each encounter with another requires an openness to possibilities; a putting aside of prejudices and traditions. Decker (2004, p. 67) says that we must suspend judgement to allow the “other’s voice to be heard clearly.” Gadamer’s work has held me in good stead, particularly in my work with adolescents. I find most of them incredibly interesting and insightful and as long as I was able to take the time to spend with them in order to understand, the outcome was usually positive. When my job became overwhelming due to deadlines, time constraints, and multiple demands, it was difficult but not impossible to find that time.

Nel Noddings’ Ethic of Care has also informed my practice. Noddings says, “as human beings we want to care and be cared for. Caring is important in itself” (1984, p. 7). In my work with children and adolescents I have found this to be true. If children and young people feel cared for, they are more likely to become engaged in learning and go on to do their best work. And caring is not incompatible with Gadamer’s work. Both seeking to understand and caring require one to be present, in the moment and responsive to the other or to the cared-for. I care for my students and always try to communicate that to them. I have learned over time that their response to my caring may simply be a little smile, a quiet thank you or a nod but that is enough of a response to meet my needs and to enable me to continue caring for them and for others. And one of the most important aspects of the ethic of care is to help the cared-for discover who they might
become. "I must see the cared-for as he or she is and as he/she might be – as he/she envisions his/her best self – in order to confirm him/her" (Noddings, 1984, p. 67). Some of my best work in relation to adolescents has occurred simply because I've helped them see themselves for who they are and who they might become. Some of them have no idea how the others perceive them nor do they have a real understanding of their strengths and capabilities. It is a delight to confirm them and open the door to possibilities that they might not have considered.

In my work as principal, I always thought that my leadership was about building community. What I have learned through all of my studies is that by working toward democracy in education, a leader builds community. The deliberative model of democracy stresses that IDEALLY all citizens have an equal voice regardless of social position or power. The process of political discussion depends on reasoned argument. Threats and coercion are not accepted parts of the process. Even when votes must be taken, the result is "collective judgment rather than an aggregate of private preferences" (Young, 1996, p. 122). Through my work in schools, with students, staff, and parents, I tried to take this approach. And in so doing, we created a greater sense of community. According to Cohen, "the requirement of providing acceptable reasons for the exercise of political power to those who are governed by it, expresses the equal membership of all – one important element of the ideal of community" (1996, p. 102). So it is through democratic participation that everyone developed a greater sense of community.

The following story brings to life exactly what I'm talking about.
Owen’s Story:

I first met Owen when I arrived at H.D. Stafford Secondary. He was in grade 10. I was in my first year as vice principal at the school and had responsibility for students with last names beginning with M through Z. Owen was a very bright, capable, somewhat edgy kind of kid. He lived with his mother and an older sister and school records indicated that he had Aboriginal heritage. Try as I might, I could not connect with him. He was a puzzle. I often saw him hanging out with the more at-risk students in the school. When fireworks exploded in the trails near the school at Hallowe’en I’d see Owen coming in the back door shortly afterwards. I’d talk with him and he’d offer no explanation or information.

A few months later in that first year, I received a call from a teacher in a classroom in the lower hallway, complaining of music being played over the P.A. system. The other vice principal and I went to investigate. The music was confined to that particular hallway and, try as we might, we couldn’t find where it was coming from and we couldn’t get it turned off. We ended up calling the Maintenance Department and it took them over four hours to track down the problem. There was a walkie-talkie attached to the inside of a speaker in the ceiling outside one of the boys’ washrooms. The walkie-talkie was picking up a signal from somewhere off school property. This was the work of someone quite clever, I thought. It must be Owen. When I approached him at his locker at the end of the day, all he would say was, “Why do you always think it’s me?” “You’re one of the few people I know who is smart enough to pull this off,” I said, and left it at that.
Owen and I would greet each other in the hallway after that. The following year there were fewer issues with fireworks. He was a successful student but he remained detached. And he was good at it.

The following year I was appointed principal at the school. Owen was in Grade 12. Early in September, he came to see me in my office. He told me that he needed Physics 12 to get into Engineering at U.B.C. I said that Physics should be no problem for him as he was a bright guy. Owen explained that it was a problem because he didn’t have Physics 11. But, he went on to say, he had been to the Ministry web site and there were no prerequisites for Physics 12 or for any other grade 12 course for that matter. I knew that he was right. He asked me to help him get into Physics 12. He had already approached the teacher and had been refused admission to the class. Because we’re a small semestered school, there was only one class of Physics 12 and it was already underway. I told him that I would discuss his request with the Physics Department.

After conferring with my administrative colleagues and the counselor for senior grades, I approached the Physics Department Head. Somewhat reluctantly, the teacher accepted Owen into the class.

Everything seemed to be working out just fine until a few weeks later; the music over the P.A. system was back but in a different hallway. I went downstairs to try to locate the problem. On the way, I passed Owen in the hallway. I stopped him and said, “I really need the music to stop.” He replied, “You always think it’s me.” In response, I said, “I helped you with Physics. Now I need your help with the music,” and I walked away. Within 5 to 10 minutes, the music stopped. We never did locate the source.
Several days later, Owen delivered a package to the office counter. It was a brown business-size envelope addressed to me. He made the secretaries assure him that I would receive it. (They told me later that they worried about "something explosive being inside it.") When I returned to the office from a meeting, I received the envelope. I opened it and found a book inside. I opened the book (it was a novel entitled *Three Came Home*). Inside the book, the pages had been hollowed out and resting in that space were the remnants of a walkie-talkie and some wiring. The note enclosed read: *No more pranks. You took the fun out of it.* Later in the day, I saw Owen in the hallway on his way to a class. I told him that I had received his message and said "Thanks." He simply smiled and kept walking.

On the first report card, Owen got 94% in Physics. I congratulated him. On the next report, he had 90%. I went to him and asked what had caused the slippage in his mark. He laughed and said that it was more fun to solve the problems without using the formulas. He was getting the right answers, but lost a few marks for not showing the correct formulas that he used to get the answers. I asked what he intended to do when he wrote the provincial exam because of his goal to get into Engineering. "Don’t worry. I know what they want. I’ll give them the formulas."

Owen wrote the provincial exam and scored 100% in Physics 12. He earned a scholarship and entrance to the Engineering Program at U.B.C. He was true to his word and did what he needed to do.

A year later, I saw Owen at a funeral for a very special and only recently retired teacher from Stafford. He told me that things were going well for him and he’d earned an A average in his first year. He asked, with a twinkle in his eye, if anyone else had taken
Physics 12 without Physics 11. "Yes," I said. "The student passed the course, but he wasn’t as successful as you. Why is that important for you to know?" I asked. "Well, I wouldn’t have discovered my love for Physics otherwise. And I would hope that others would be given the same chance."

Owen and I had a dialogue that spanned several years and took different forms. I focused on speaking. Sometimes he chose not to engage in dialogue; sometimes his dialogue was through a written message (i.e., the note in the book); sometimes he chose to speak with me. My horizon included my history of been able to connect with most of the students I have worked with. His horizon (I believe) included a history of resistance. Over time and through dialogue, we came to understand one another. I learned to be patient, to wait for opportunities to engage in dialogue with him. I also came to understand that to assert the authority of my role would probably end any hope of continuing the dialogue or of coming to know one another better. I also tried to communicate to him that I found him to be very intelligent with a promising future and someone that I was prepared to be an advocate for. Owen seemed to come to some understanding of all of this and the book with the message inside seemed to be his way of letting me know. Our dialogue changed after that. He was less distant but always in control of the conversation. His teachers told me that he seemed to mature a great deal in his last year with us.

Owen graduated in 2004. A year later a team from the Maintenance Department was replacing a speaker for the P.A. system on the outside wall of the gym. Attached to the old speaker they found a series of batteries, a walkie-talkie, and some wiring. They brought the package in and gave it to me. I thought to myself, "Owen, I still don’t know
all about you." I told the men from Maintenance that I was going to keep it all as a souvenir of one of our most challenging but successful students.

Owen and I have seen each other on occasion as he continued his engineering studies at the University of British Columbia. Last year, I joined Facebook. He found my profile page this summer and we have been corresponding on the social network. First he thanked me for the placement in Physics 12 and then he told me what he was doing now that he had graduated with an Engineering Degree:

"Hi there Wendy. How are you? Thank you again for your help in getting me into physics in grade 12. That class and the circumstances associated with me being in that class certainly have played positive roles in my choices and successes in university."

"Right now I am working at the Canadian Space Agency (in Montreal) as a research engineer under the space science department. My job is to re-design a fluid configuration experiment that was put on the shuttle once and do preliminary tests on the Falcon-20 parabolic flight aircraft. The hope is to send the apparatus to the International Space Station and the cool thing about my job is that I will get to be weightless a number of times (at least 10 parabolas ~25 seconds each time)!" (Personal Communication, Facebook, September 10, 2008)

And so the dialogue continues, most often in private spaces: previously in the hallway or in my office at school; and now on Facebook. And we continue to learn from and about one another. "At their best, schools become sanctuaries where talented, responsible adults help children figure out who they are and who they want to become" (Wiens and Coulter, 2008, p. 309). I could have predicted amazing possibilities for Owen, but he was never sure about his own capabilities. Now, I believe that he is. This was one of those times that, as a school, we were at our best.
Helpful Policy

In addition to theory, I pay attention to policy. I used to view policy as constraining. But over time, I have come to view it as a friend. It is a safeguard, and in the current climate in public education in this province, it provided a means for me to do what I wanted as a leader in my school. Included in the School Act is a Statement of Education Policy Order. It includes a Mission Statement, a description of an Educated Citizen, the Goals of Education, and the Duties, Rights and Responsibilities of all of the stakeholder groups in education. It states that school principals:

Have the right to exercise professional judgment in managing the school in accordance with specified duties and powers. They have a corresponding responsibility to ensure that each student is provided with opportunities for a quality education. Principals are to provide administrative leadership, in consultation with teachers and the community that reflects the aspirations of parents and the school community and that is consistent with provincial and district guidelines. They co-operate with parents and the community in the delivery of non-educational support services to students and focus on the following areas of school concern: (1) student access and achievement; (2) quality teaching; (3) communication with parents and the community; and (4) accountability to parents and to the Board.

School Act, p. D-90

These Duties, Rights, and Responsibilities make it very clear that my first responsibility is to ensure that the students in my care receive a quality education. It is also clear to me that I have the responsibility of providing educational leadership to the teaching staff and a responsibility to work with the parents and the community in an effort to “reflect the aspirations of the parents and the school community.” In the 18 years that I have been an administrator in the Langley School District, I have worked in Langley City schools. During that time I have worked closely with parents and at the same time have built
relationships with the local government and various community organizations in effort to support students in their growth and development as they prepare to take their place as citizens in a democracy. I have also worked collaboratively with my staff to support their endeavours in working with students in their classrooms.

The Job Description for School Principals included in my contract with the Langley School District states that the school principal is responsible for:

The school climate, including student and employee attitude to self, others, learning and the school.
The decision-making process in the school.
The community's involvement in the school including perception of the school and support for school programs.
The needs assessment, implementation, development, supervision and evaluation of all curricular and extra curricular programs.
The curricular programming of students, including placement, evaluation, reporting and promotional determination.
The organization and management of physical, material and human resources.
The selection, assignment, development and evaluation of school staff.
The preparation and management of the school's budget.
The safety of pupils.
The security, cleanliness, maintenance, effective use, replacement and acquisition of physical resources.
The compliance with provincial legislation, District Policy and Practices and the Collective Agreements.
In addition to the above school-based responsibilities, the Principal may be assigned extra duties by the Assistant Superintendent of Schools.
(School Operations and Personnel Practices Handbook, No. 3025-6)

The job description is lengthy but clearly lays out the responsibilities of the principal. Of particular interest to me is the reference to the decision-making process in
the school and the expectation that the principal will work toward building community support for the school and school programs. I have always worked towards making the decision-making process as democratic as possible when I was principal and I worked with the community as much as possible to build support for the particular schools I worked in and for public education.

As a member of the British Columbia Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association, I am also bound by its Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Practice. The Code of Ethics states that members of the BCPVPA will:

- Make the well being of students the fundamental value in all decision making and actions;
- Respect the rights of all individuals;
- Meet professional responsibilities with honesty, integrity, and respect for others;
- Support the principle of due process;
- Respect all confidential information;
- Abide by the School Act of British Columbia, School Regulations and Minister of Education Orders;
- Strive to maintain the standards stated in the Code of Professional Practice of the BCPVPA;
- Strive for excellence in administrative services; and
- Promote quality leadership in education

In addition, the Code of Professional Practice states that members of the BCPVPA should:

- Pursue continuous professional growth and development
- Provide effective instructional leadership
- Develop a school vision
- Interpret and implement curriculum
- Organize and manage school programs and resources effectively
- Establish positive community relations
- Develop effective interpersonal relations; and
- Create and foster a positive school climate

The Code of Ethics and the Code of Professional Practice outline expectations very similar to the School Act and the Job Description for Principals as defined by the Langley School District. All of the documents clearly state that the principal is expected to provide leadership and to work with the staff, parents, and the school community to support student success. Interviews for those leadership roles are also an indication of expectations the employer has for the work that the leader will do.

Before the formal interview for the position of principal at H.D. Stafford Secondary, each candidate was given twenty minutes to prepare a response to a question. The question provided asked us to develop a plan to support a school that was facing declining enrolment. We were asked to present our response as the first question of the formal interview. (I kept my notes from the interview.) My plan included: developing a shared vision; including all of the stakeholders; ensuring that all voices were heard; celebrating strengths and successes; identifying areas for improvement; exploring models of successful schools of the same size; seeking community support; addressing problems as they occurred; keeping lines of communication open; being patient and open to new ideas; encouraging and supporting shared leadership. After I was appointed principal of H.D. Stafford Secondary, this is the plan I followed with some additions as we went along. The enrolment began to increase and continued to increase each year and was forecast to continue to grow over the next five years, according to district projections. In my mind, I was doing what was asked of me both in the interview for the principalship and by the Board Chair when he asked the school to reinvent itself to increase enrolment.
So it was armed with sound theory, knowledge of policy, a history of what I believed to be good practice, and an interview that confirmed my leadership plans, that I came to be part of this consultation process about the future of the schools in the South/Central region of Langley.

Leading in Difficult Times

I was appointed principal of H.D. Stafford Secondary School with my duties to commence as of July 1, 2004. I had been one of the vice principals at the school for the previous two years and had come to understand the culture and began to build relationships with students, staff and parents. I had also been present for the discussions regarding the possibility of the Fundamental Program being placed at H.D. Stafford as part of a school within a school model. I was following the plan that I had presented during my interview and I thought things were progressing: student achievement was continuing to improve and the enrolment had increased each year. So I was surprised when I received a visit from a senior staff member in the spring of 2006. The purpose of the visit was to tell me that I was going to have a change in assignment in September 2006. I would be moving to a large elementary school or to one of the district’s alternate programs. I responded that I had only been the principal at Stafford for two years, hardly enough time to make a difference. Besides that, I felt the school had great potential, the staff was amazing, and I loved working with the students from the inner city neighbourhood. When I asked for the rationale for the move, no details were provided. I was asked to consider the two options presented and then let senior management know of my decision after Spring Break. (After the senior staff member left, I made notes about
our conversation.) I did not find either of the two options acceptable and I conveyed that to senior staff. After several discussions with the superintendent about various issues including my mandate and job performance, the Board made the decision to allow me to remain as principal at H.D. Stafford Secondary.

The 2005-2006 school year came to a close and I still couldn’t understand what that had all been about. Over the summer, I thought a lot about what had happened and what I ought to do in the fall. In the end I decided to stay because I loved the school and the work we were doing together. I thought I could handle the rest. It didn’t take long to discover what that would be.

The fall was somewhat uneventful. Then in December, the plans for the Community Consultation with Mike McAvoy were announced. I attended the first meeting at Brookswood Secondary in January, as did a large number of the staff, some parents and a few students. We hosted the second meeting at H. D. Stafford in February. There were presentations about the decline in enrolment that was occurring province-wide and the projected decline in the enrolment in the Langley School District. Participants attending the meetings were asked to discuss possible solutions to the problem at tables set up in the gym. All notes were collected, but no one was asked to report out. All the notes from all the discussions were posted on the School District Web Site. After the second meeting, the consultant, Mike McAvoy visited all the schools in the South/Central Region. At the end of February 2007, a final meeting was held where he was to present his findings to the public. Prior to that public meeting, all administrators in the region were invited to a dinner meeting to hear his recommendations. Less than an hour later he shared his recommendations with the
public. Mr. McAvoy recommended: the closure or reconfiguration of H. D. Stafford Secondary into a middle school by September of 2008; the middle school students would then go to Langley Senior Secondary for grades nine through twelve. He went on to say that all elementary feeder schools to H. D. Stafford and Langley Secondary would then have a kindergarten to grade five configuration. To say that everyone in the room was stunned is an understatement. No one from the public recalled a middle school being something sought after as a solution to the problem of declining enrolment. Mr. McAvoy indicated that he would be sharing his recommendations with Senior Management and the Board of Education at their next meeting. He said that it would be up to Senior Management to develop the final recommendations based on his findings.

I began to think about what all of this meant. Mr. McAvoy was suggesting the closure or reconfiguration of our school and the resulting rescue of Langley Secondary School. It would be a struggle, but most of the Stafford students could be accommodated at Langley Secondary because it was a bigger school and had space because it was currently operating at about 74% capacity. I wondered about the establishment of a middle school in one region when there had been no community discussions about the value of middle schools. Mr. McAvoy was suggesting a change in the configuration of all the elementary feeder schools for Langley Secondary and H. D. Stafford. As kindergarten to grade five schools, some of those elementary schools would be operating at less than 50% capacity by September 2008. Surely that meant closure of one or more of them in the not too distant future? And I wondered why this particular set of schools would be kindergarten to grade five while the rest of the elementary schools in the district would retain their configuration of kindergarten to grade seven. I wondered what all of
this had to do with improving student achievement, which was supposed to be one of the
guiding principles in the whole process. And I wondered about the conversation I had
had with the superintendent in the previous year about my re-assignment and how that
might have fit into this whole plan. Lots of questions, not very many answers.

I attended all of the Board of Education meetings and all of the additional
consultation meetings about the proposed plans for the reconfiguration of H. D. Stafford
and Langley Secondary. The students began their campaign to save their school and the
parents got involved as well. As principal of the school I felt that I needed to be
knowledgeable about the proposed plans, accompanying reports, and about what was
being said at public meetings. I needed to know because I needed to work with my
school community: students, staff, parents, and community members. They came to see
me to seek clarification about everything from school district policy to achievement and
enrolment data. Sometimes they asked for advice; sometimes they just needed to express
their frustration. Sometimes I was able to offer a different perspective on what had
happened at a particular meeting. It was a difficult spot in which I found myself. I could
not defend the Board because I believed the recommendations, if adopted, were going to
negatively impact too many students. But I could not speak openly about what I thought
because I was the Board’s representative in the school. What I did instead was encourage
them all to get involved in the democratic process, as that was their right. I felt that that
was within my mandate as the school principal. I chose to use administrative power to
promote public dialogue. Senior staff noticed my attendance at all of the meetings
through the spring and stated that none of the other school principals were attending all of
the meetings. I explained my need for information so that I could work with my community.

The first event organized by students was a rally held on the front lawn of the school. The two vice principals and I were directed to provide security and remain on site until the rally concluded and everyone had gone home. This we did. When the students organized their walk to the School Board Office, we were directed to meet with the student leaders to inform them that we expected them to remain in class, as it was a regular day of instruction. This we did as well. The students informed us that most of them had parent permission to leave the school for the afternoon. We were also informed that the R.C.M.P. had been contacted to provide an escort for the two hundred plus students. When the students planned the early morning walk to Langley Senior Secondary, I was instructed to: direct my staff not to participate in the walk; advise the students that the walk was not a school sanctioned activity and that they should not participate; and communicate to the Parent Advisory Committee that the staff and students had been informed of these directives. I was told that the Board of Education understood the student and parent concerns about safety and these would be dealt with in the Transition Plan. The students went ahead with their protest and were joined by parents, community members, trustees, and members of the Langley Teachers’ Association. The staff came to school and reported for work as instructed. These situations were stressful for all of us, but I believed students had the right to protest within a democratic society.

Each spring, secondary schools develop a master schedule for the coming year based on current enrolment, new registrations (including incoming grade eights), and
course selections by students. In the spring, there were 198 grade eight students registered for September 2007. As the community became more aware of the possible plan to reconfigure H. D. Stafford to a middle school by September 2008, students in all grades, but particularly grade eight, began to apply for cross boundary applications to attend other high schools. Because cross boundary applications are often not approved until September, it was difficult to determine what the enrolment was actually going to be in the coming school year. We built our schedule based on the district projections for the fall and the information we had. We had consistently had more students each September than projected, so I believed this to be a safe estimate. Langley School District is decentralized in that each school does its own staffing projections, hiring, and has responsibility for the total budget. So this was a bit of a risk. By the middle of September, the actual enrolment was 30 students below projection. This meant that in order to balance the budget, the school should surplus at least one teacher, possibly two. Given everything that my staff had been through and was still going through, I chose not to surplus anyone and asked for permission to run a deficit.

I met with senior staff and a team from accounting. I explained that I had shared my concerns about the enrolment projections with them back in the spring. I believed that given the current situation, surplusing staff was not an option. I believed that the deficit could be reduced because there were two teachers going on leave in second semester and we could make some adjustments to the schedule by collapsing some blocks and reorganizing some classes. I also believed that the uncertainty in the enrolment was not caused by the school, but by the district and that it should not be the school's responsibility to remedy the situation. It was explained to me that I could create a
balanced budget based on anticipated revenue in second semester. But I did not have to “surplus” any staff and I was grateful for that. I created a balanced budget at the end of September.

After that meeting an accountant of Compliance and Internal Control came to H. D. Stafford to review all the registration forms and cross boundary applications for the 2007-2008 school year. He was asked to prepare a report on his findings. The accountant spent three days working in a small office in the counseling centre, reviewing forms and contacting parents. He said he had concluded that I was indeed telling the truth about the enrolment, but he said that families were not very truthful about their reasons for leaving the school according to the disclosures on the cross boundary applications or in conversations with him on the telephone. And that would be the sum of his report. I could not recall, in the 17 years that I had provided leadership in the district, coming under such scrutiny.

October was a very difficult month and everyone was on edge. At the beginning of the week when the Board of Education was scheduled to make its decision, I was on my way back to my office after a lengthy staff meeting and encountered a security guard in the hallway. She told me that she was looking for a washroom. I gave her directions and then asked what she was doing in the school. She explained that she and two other security guards had been hired for the week to protect the school from expected vandalism. They would be working each evening, she said. I asked who had hired them. The School District was the reply. I asked who they anticipated would vandalize the school. She said, “Students, that’s all I know.” And then she asked me who I was and I replied that I was the principal. Then she said that she found it strange that the School
District hadn’t let the principal know what was going on. Equally strange was the fact that the School District believed that students who cared so much for their school and were trying so hard to save it, would think of doing damage to it.

A few weeks later, after the Board of Education had made its decision, the students announced their plans for a sit-in in an attempt to get a meeting with Minister of Education Shirley Bond. I was asked to talk to the students in an attempt to re-direct them. I met with the students who told me that they were determined to go ahead and that they would begin inside the school after school hours then would move the protest outside and on to Langley City property after that.

The students began the sit-in in the front foyer and then later moved outside. I stayed to supervise while they were inside the building (for more detail, see Chapter 2). The security guards arrived and we discussed their concerns about the students, who had moved on to city property, but were too close to the street and at some risk. So the security company took responsibility for moving them back on to school property and for their safety for the remainder of the evening. The students had a peaceful protest as expected, cleaned up, and left by 11 p.m. due mainly to the very cold weather. The parents who were supervising made sure that every student had a ride home. These students and their families took their responsibilities as members of a democratic society very seriously.

In December, the Langley Advance named the H.D. Stafford story its Newsmaker of the Year. Photos from the various student protests covered the front page. The editorial stated: “it is in 2008 that the trustees who pushed the reconfiguration through will have to prove that it was worth the effort that angered so many people – and they’ll
have to face those people at the polls (if they dare) in the fall of 2008. (*Langley Advance*, December 28, 2007, p. 8). Students took heart that even though their campaign hadn’t been successful the community was continuing to pay attention to the issue and will do so well into the fall when the elections take place. A reporter called me and asked for a comment about the story, and then he asked, “I’m putting my pen down now so this is off the record. Is there anything in this for kids?” “There’s nothing in this for kids,” I replied. “In a few years that might change, but for right now, there’s nothing.” “That’s what I thought,” was his reply.

In April 2008, the Board of Education approved its budget for the coming year. They proudly announced that due to school closures and the reconfigurations in the South/Central area, the district had saved $1.6 million. This was something “to be celebrated,” said one of the trustees. The fact that this was at the human cost to 3,500 students whose lives will be impacted by the changes in the coming year was not lost on the press. The *Langley Advance* commented that the extra funding came at the “cost of school closures, controversy, and heated debate” (May 2, 2008, p. 5).

**Decisions, Decisions…**

I had spent a lot of time thinking about what I would do if this decision went ahead. I had come to the conclusion that I did not want to be part of what the district was calling the Transition Plan. I had too much of a personal investment in the school and the community to want to be part of dismantling it. Nor could I be part of a plan for a number of schools that I could not support. Because the final report and
recommendations did not in any way reflect the comments made during the consultation process, in my opinion it was a sham.

Before all of this started I had planned to work for a few more years, but intended that to be at H.D. Stafford Secondary. I thought that it was going to be my last school. I loved the work of the principal and I had come to love this small high school that was on its way to becoming something special. And students certainly told me that that was an accurate perception. So in the end, I decided to leave at the end of the first semester. I applied for and was granted educational leave as of February 1, until May 1, 2008, when I retired. I was fortunate that I had that option.

Now that I have retired, I have begun to speak about my concerns. Being silent is no longer an option or a choice. It is my turn as Arendt says, “to appear, to be seen and heard by others” (in Baehr, 200, p. 199). What is at stake here is the future of public education in Langley. Education and democracy are inextricably linked. Some one needs to speak up. At the moment “too few people have too much power to decide for others” (Wiens and Coulter, 2008, p. 301). And I have learned from some of the best – my students. From living through that experience together we have “combined power and created wisdom” (Lincoln, 1995, p. 28).

**Chapter Summary:**

In this chapter, I have provided a summary of what this consultation process and its outcome were like for me as the principal, the leader in the school. It was never easy. What made it possible for me to provide leadership was knowledge of theory and policy;
years of experience; community support; and moral courage. Chapter Six is the final chapter and is a brief summary of this research project.
Chapter Seven: Student Voice Works When Students Decide on the Agenda

My intention in embarking on this study was an attempt to discover the answer to the question, *How do high school students come to participate in the public sphere as democratic citizens?* In the public education system in the province of British Columbia, we take pride in the belief that we prepare students for participation as citizens in a democracy. In spite of good intentions, educators do little to engage students in any meaningful way in decisions that impact their education or their lives in schools.

In the literature, the term student voice has come to be used to describe student involvement in decision making in schools. The assumption is that students will have a voice – will be heard, listened to. And by being heard, students will be involved in and have an influence on the decisions made. “Students have a unique perspective on what happens in schools and classrooms and on the dynamics between their schools and their communities that can inform what happens in those schools and classrooms” (Cook-Sather 2002, p. 3 citing: Cook-Sather & Shultz, 2001; Weis & Fine, 1993; Willis, 1997; and Nespor, 1997). One would hope then that students would have an influence on decisions about their learning and about their life in schools. But such is not the case. Student voice as it currently exists in schools has become very narrow in definition and in many cases is used to support school reform efforts rather than to serve students and their needs. A small number of students participate in discussions often related to improvement in achievement in various curricular areas. Their participation has little to do with meaningful decision making in the school. According to Laforest and Phillips, for involvement to be meaningful “participation must link back to decision making” (2007, p. 78). When the decisions are limited to achievement data, involvement has little
There is also very little focus on the development of democratic citizenship. A prime example is the creation by the provincial government of School Planning Councils. In each high school in the province, a student representative is asked or volunteers to work with parents, a teacher, and the school principal to review achievement data and to set goals to improve achievement results.

There are some unique situations in schools where opportunities for students to participate as democratic citizens do occur. These happen because of courageous educators working in classrooms who are willing to take the risk of "changing oppressive practices even if complete change seems or is unattainable" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 6; citing Welch, 1990). Or it happens in other situations where students take on the responsibility for their own agenda and participate as democratic citizens in their own right. This was the case at H.D. Stafford Secondary School during the past year. A group of students who were concerned about a decision that the elected officials were going to make about their school, decided to get involved in the political process in the hopes of influencing the outcome. As I had been a participant observer to their campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary, I had some ideas about why they had decided to become involved and some ideas about how they had come to be so successful in organizing events and gaining public support. But I felt I needed to investigate more systematically in order to understand the answer to my question.

I conducted a case study of the students at H.D. Stafford Secondary School in the city of Langley. The secondary school was slated for closure and reconfiguration as a middle school for grades six, seven, and eight as of September 2008. The decision had been made by the Langley Board of Education after a lengthy public consultation process
which began in the spring and concluded in the fall of 2007. This was seen as a solution to what was considered the problem of declining enrolment in the Langley School District. The Board of Education had hired Mr. Mike McAvoy to conduct the consultation process. Laforest and Phillips state, “Responsibility for leading consultations is increasingly being contracted out to professional for-profit facilitators or consultants who have no direct responsibility to the public.” What stands out is the “lack of engagement on the part of policy makers who are once removed from the contracted consultation process” (2007, p. 76). This distance makes it much easier for policy makers to disregard the concerns of the community or to champion their cause.

The students at the school organized a campaign to save their school which included: a rally; a sit-in at the School Board office; an early morning walk to the neighbouring high school that they were expected to attend after the reconfiguration took place; a candle light vigil; a sit-in at their school; many presentations at Board of Education meetings; letters to the editor of the two local newspapers; letters and e-mails to trustees; and appearances on radio and television.

As participant observer at all of these events, I kept field notes of my observations. In addition, I kept a journal of my day to day interactions with students, staff, parents, and senior staff. I also collected and analyzed documents and reports created by the ministry and the school district. I reviewed all newspaper articles and editorials that related to possible reconfiguration. In addition, I conducted focus groups and individual or shared interviews with students who volunteered to participate in the study. There were nineteen students who participated in the focus groups: 4 graduates, 1 grade 12 student, 9 grade 11 students, 4 grade 10 students and 1 grade 9 student. There
were twenty-one students who participated in the interviews: 3 graduates, 4 grade 12 students, 8 grade 11 students, 5 grade 10 students, and 1 grade 9 student. After I had analyzed all the data, I met with a group of students to share the results and get their feedback before writing the final report.

The students said that in the beginning, the major concern for them was the possible loss of their high school. It was a small school with an enrolment of about 740 students. Participants said that they knew their teachers well and had good relationships with most of them, having had them for more than one course. They said that their teachers cared about them and worked with them to help them to be successful. They also knew one another quite well and when a new student arrived in the school, everyone knew about it because it was unusual to see a face in the hallway that wasn’t recognizable. Because of the smaller size, students also had lots of opportunities to be in the school musical, or play on a team of their choice, or volunteer on the Student Council or Grad Council, or to participate in the life of the school in any other way. One student commented that because of those opportunities, “You could find yourself.” It was easier to explore different identities, to discover the person you wanted to become. The students had opportunities to engage in dialogue with one another in private spaces, to appear to one another, and to begin to develop their own identities.

Because they cared about their school, they began to make presentations at Board of Education meetings and to write letters to school trustees. They believed that if the trustees only knew what a good school it was, they wouldn’t go ahead with the closure and reconfiguration.
As the students attended meetings they became quite appalled by the treatment they received from trustees, particularly the Board chair. Students were called “little people” and were told that the “decisions were for big people to make.” Calling students little people or viewing them as incomplete or emerging adults, assumes that “youth occupy a less powerful status than adults” (Bilken, 2004, p.722). It also assumes that schools are in the process of preparing youth for citizenship, therefore, they should not be treated as citizens with equal rights. Students were ignored by trustees when they made presentations and some students noticed trustees passing notes to one another when members of the public were addressing them. The students became very angry about the trustees’ refusal to recognize them as legitimate citizens in their community. Students realized very quickly that they were not going to influence the trustees’ thinking very easily and began to organize protests in the hopes of gaining public support. They ventured into the wider public sphere in an attempt to share their perspective and in the hopes of actually having a debate about their ideas which is what Benhabib states is the purpose of the public sphere (2008, p. 102).

Students shared leadership responsibilities throughout their campaign. They told me that leadership included communication, education, conflict resolution, risk taking, trust and respect. Their goal was to save their school. They emphasized this goal in their conversations with one another and with their parents and community members. They felt the common goal was essential to effective leadership. Technology was the preferred method of communication. The students used e-mail and Facebook regularly to share information and to advise students of upcoming events.
Education was also critical because students needed to understand the issues in order to make decisions about whether to get involved in the protests or events. They also indicated that they worked hard to resolve conflicts because their goal was so important. The Board of Education hired security guards and requested RCMP officers to be in attendance at meetings and at the protests students organized. Trustees were also seen leaving meetings to go to their vehicles with a police or security escort. This moral panic first described by Stanley Cohen in 1972 (Kelly, 2006, p. 30) explains the “role of mass media in helping to incite public concerns about various youth and other issues.” This moral panic was also used as justification to ignore the students’ concerns.

Students understood that there were risks involved in participating in events with a police presence. One student said, “I was always worried about someone being arrested.” The leaders of the student protests were also very clear with their peers about respectful behavior whenever they were in the public eye. They did not want anything to detract from their message.

Students were also very clear that they organized the protests. It was not their teachers and it was not their parents who took on the leadership for the events. They were very careful, they said, about not sharing any information with their teachers because they wanted to protect them. They did not want teachers to feel obligated to inform their employer or to have to make a decision about their own participation.

In the end, the vote in favour of reconfiguration passed by a 4/3 vote. The students were very upset with the outcome. Some students are having a very hard time accepting the outcome and the fact that their high school will cease to exist at the end of the school year; others are having an easier time and are moving forward. Many of the
student participants said that they had learned some of life’s lessons through the process: “Life isn’t fair”; “That’s part of living in a democracy. You don’t always get your way and you have to deal with that”; “I’m not going to be one of those voters who doesn’t care.” They also learned first-hand about administrative power. They said that the Board seemed to have a “group think” and imposed their will on the community. They also learned about the power created by communicative action. They discovered what they could accomplish as their collective agency was generated through public dialogue.

Looking ahead to the fall and the next school year, some of the students are choosing to attend Langley Senior Secondary, the neighbouring high school which will now have a grade 9-12 configuration. Some students have applied for cross boundary permits to attend another high school in the school district. Some students have registered and plan to attend schools in neighbouring districts. And some families have sold their homes and are moving out of the Langley School District altogether. This plan to deal with declining enrolment by amalgamating schools may not achieve its intended outcome if many students leave the school district.

Being the principal at the school through this consultation process and the ensuing campaign organized by the students was never easy. I found that I needed to be: knowledgeable about policy; grounded by some theorists whose work I had come to value; well informed about what was going on at the district level and within my school; a good listener and strong communicator. Because of my many years of experience in public education I had a fair amount of community support. All of these things came together, to help me navigate my way through this political process.
How did the school come to find itself embroiled in this situation? Simply put, the Neo-liberal policies developed by the provincial government which the Langley Board of Education implemented with little regard for the welfare of students and the concerns of the community brought the school to this place.

What did I learn from this study? I learned that schools can do a great deal to prepare and support young people as they begin to participate as citizens in a democratic society. Private spaces for dialogue where students can share ideas, discuss perspectives, come to some form of understanding and begin to appear to one another are essential. Through dialogue young people begin to understand the person they are, the person they wish to become. They begin to establish their identities. With the support of caring adults, students can then venture into the more public sphere to debate those perspectives, test those ideas, to see if they hold up under public scrutiny. This is no easy task given all the other demands on public education today. “The cultivation of a democratic citizenry is not a simple challenge” (Benhabib, 2008, p. 110). But it is possible. It takes moral courage, political will, and shared leadership in the belief that democracy will not survive without an educated citizenship.

Implications for Future Research

This study has helped me to understand how it was that students came to be involved in the public sphere as democratic citizens. This study also illustrates how much more we need to take into account the views of young people in order to democratize schooling – give them more of a say in how and what they learn. Levin suggests that there are several things schools can do:
1. Make a practice of raising with students, in classes and other settings, the central issues of schooling as propositions to be discussed seriously, but without the evident answers.

2. Organize learning in classrooms as practices of inquiry.

3. A student voice in selecting topics for study, textbooks, and readings, and evaluation practices could be part of every classroom.

4. Give real tasks to student organizations.

5. The practice of democracy should be tied clearly to the school’s educational program. (1998, p. 74)

Kelly and Brandes cite more proactive assessment strategies that teachers had used to “address young people’s sense of powerlessness within school”:

(a) having students participate in deciding how to assess what and how they learn, (b) involving students in setting criteria for assessment, (c) having students help decide upon weighting of various components of assignments, (d) encouraging student self-assessment and student-led conferences, and (e) being willing to de-center their authority as teachers by discussing and critically examining teacher-student power dynamics and questioning the image of the teacher as infallible or always the expert. (2008, p. 63).

Levin’s and Kelly and Brandes’ suggestions are quite compatible and implementing some or all of them in a school as a pilot project would form the basis for an interesting study.
A further study of interest would be to interview the teachers in the school to determine their level of involvement and why they chose to participate/not participate in the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary. The students identified three teachers who became very involved, at great risk. I would be interested to know why that was and to hear their stories.

I would also be interested in student perceptions about the role that I played as the principal, one of the leaders in the school. Was it positive, negative or neutral? Did my style of leadership in the school make their decisions any easier or any more difficult?

I would also like to further examine under what conditions students might be likely to replicate this action.

One of the things I would really like to do is have the students publish an article that talks about what makes a good high school. They took considerable risk to save their school. It seems to me that their stories would do a lot to inform the education community.

One other study would be to follow up with the student leaders of the campaign to Keep Stafford Secondary over the next year to see how or if they continue to participate in the public sphere in some way.

Of one thing I am certain. Because of their experiences, they have in their heads and hearts, images, thoughts and feelings of what it takes to participate in the public sphere as democratic citizens. They will move forward as changed people because of that. It is unfortunate that the elected officials did not follow their lead. The trustees were unable to “take the standpoint of others into account, to reverse perspectives and see the world through different eyes” (Benhabib, 2008, p.110).
Levin said it best: "The reconciliation of education and democracy rests on a vision of society in which reflection, dialogue, critical thinking, and mutual care are central" (1998, p. 73). And schools can become places that foster that vision. What is needed is moral courage, political will, and shared leadership in the belief that democracy will not survive without an educated citizenship.
Postscript
The 2008 Municipal Election

In June of 2008, after completing the initial draft of this dissertation, I was approached by several members of the community--a former Board of Education Chair, the current and the former Mayors of Langley City, School Trustees, many parents, teachers, and students-- and was asked to consider running for School Trustee in the Municipal Election in the fall. In the beginning, I have to admit, I wasn’t all that interested in running for political office. I believed that it was important to speak up in defense of public education and about the situation in Langley School District. I had had a few opportunities to do so at public meetings in the community and at the graduation ceremony for the students at H.D. Stafford Secondary.

Then the former mayor said to me, “This community needs some hope for the future, for their children, for public education in Langley. As a future trustee you will offer them that.” I had always respected her and her work in the community and I knew what she meant. The community was demoralized from its experience and confidence in public education was being eroded. In addition, I had been out of schools for five months and I missed being around children, youth, and teachers. I missed the excitement and energy associated with learning together. Becoming a trustee would put me back in touch with schools in a different way, I thought. So I decided to run for election.

In June, I issued a press release announcing my candidacy. The community responded positively, overall. Over the summer, I received e-mails and contacts on Facebook from students. They offered to help out in my campaign and--in cases where they were eligible to vote--assured me that they would vote for me. One student set up a
group on Facebook, encouraging everyone she knew to vote for me and other candidates that I was associated with.

We held a Harvest Dance in October to raise funds for the election. Students helped out with barbecuing hamburgers, clearing tables, and providing entertainment.

In early November, we organized a leaflet drop and many students volunteered to deliver leaflets. It poured rain that day, but they went out for several hours, delivering 250 – 300 leaflets apiece.

On Election Day, students came back to Langley from the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria so that they could vote for my fellow candidates and me. They let me know via e-mail or on Facebook that they had voted. They contacted friends and relatives and reminded them to get out to vote. And they came out to the Election Night Party to help us celebrate. My favourite photo from that evening is of them giving me a “group hug” to celebrate our success.

What was the outcome? Well, we now have a majority on the Board of Education. As for me? I topped the polls. Those young people continued to amaze me. They said they weren’t going to be voters who didn’t care. And they meant it.

And now new and different work has begun. I’m learning about another facet of public education, that of being a trustee. And some of the students are still attending Board of Education Meetings, keeping themselves informed. I’m secretly hoping that some of them will be candidates for public office some day in the future.
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Appendix A

Creating Possibilities for Democratic Citizenship
Focus Group Questions

What things did you discuss/debate when you were together?

How did you communicate with each other: about organization of events; about what mattered during this time?

Were there people you trusted? Who were they? Why did you trust them?

Were there adults who helped, provided advice? Please explain.

What other things did adults do that were helpful? Not so helpful?

Who were the students who got involved?

Did the group of students change over time?

Did you get mad at each other? How did you work things out?

How did you decide on what kind of action would be the most effective? Were there some ideas that were discarded? Why did that happen?

How did you prepare for public events?

Which events do you think worked well? Which ones do you think were the most successful? Why? Which ones do you think had an impact on the public?

How did you feel about being in the public eye? What did it feel like when the event was over?

Do you think any of the activities (protests) made a difference?

What did you learn? How will you use what you’ve learned in the future?

Is there a story that you’d like to share with the group about something that happened during all of the work that you did together?
Appendix B

Creating Possibilities for Democratic Citizenship
Individual or Paired Interview Questions

Which events did you get involved in? Why did you decide to get involved?

Did you organize or provide leadership for any events? Can you describe what you did?

Did anyone help you? Who? Why do you think that they wanted to help?

Would you do something like that again? Why? Would you help other students do something similar?

How are you feeling about this now that the Board of Education has made its decision and it’s all over?

What did you learn from your experience? Is there anything else that you’d like to share about the experience? A story you’d like to share?
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

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Other locations where the research will be conducted:
Timms Community Centre or attached City Library Subject's Home

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
Wendy Christine Johnson
David Coulter
Michelle Stack

SPONSORING AGENCIES:
N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
Creating Possibilities for Democratic Citizenship

REB MEETING DATE: February 14, 2008
CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: February 14, 2009

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:

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The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair

171