

Building a shared school vision one conversation at a time...

Dreaming Big:

From Imagination to Innovative Education

By Brooke Haller, Janet Carroll, and Kirk Savage, School District No. 33 (Chilliwack)

Raise your hand if you have ever gathered with educator friends around a campfire, kitchen island, or living room coffee table and posed the question, “What if we could open our own school?” Typically, the “own our own school” fantasy starts with dreaming and thinking big, with passionately expressed suggestions centered around utopian ideals like equity, inclusion, diversity, dreams of student-centred learning, inclusive yet personalized programming, flexible learning spaces, community engagement, and creative staff who would move mountains for their students.

Then, inevitably, the exhilaration wanes, the conversation peters out and turns practical. Reluctantly, the dreamers conclude their ideas are “too big.” Not doable. The vision slowly fades, then disappears. After all, the dreamers have

mortgages to pay, families to feed, regular jobs to attend. One day it could happen... but not yet. Or could it?

Two years ago, the vision for Imagine High Integrated Arts and Technology Secondary was sparked when the former University of the Fraser Valley campus in mid-town Chilliwack became available for purchase. Fortunately, the Ministry and the Board of Trustees had the foresight to act quickly and acquire the property. Not only would the new school solve some practical issues for the district, chiefly overcrowding at the secondary level, but now there was potential to create an innovative, secondary school of choice from scratch. It was time to dream big.

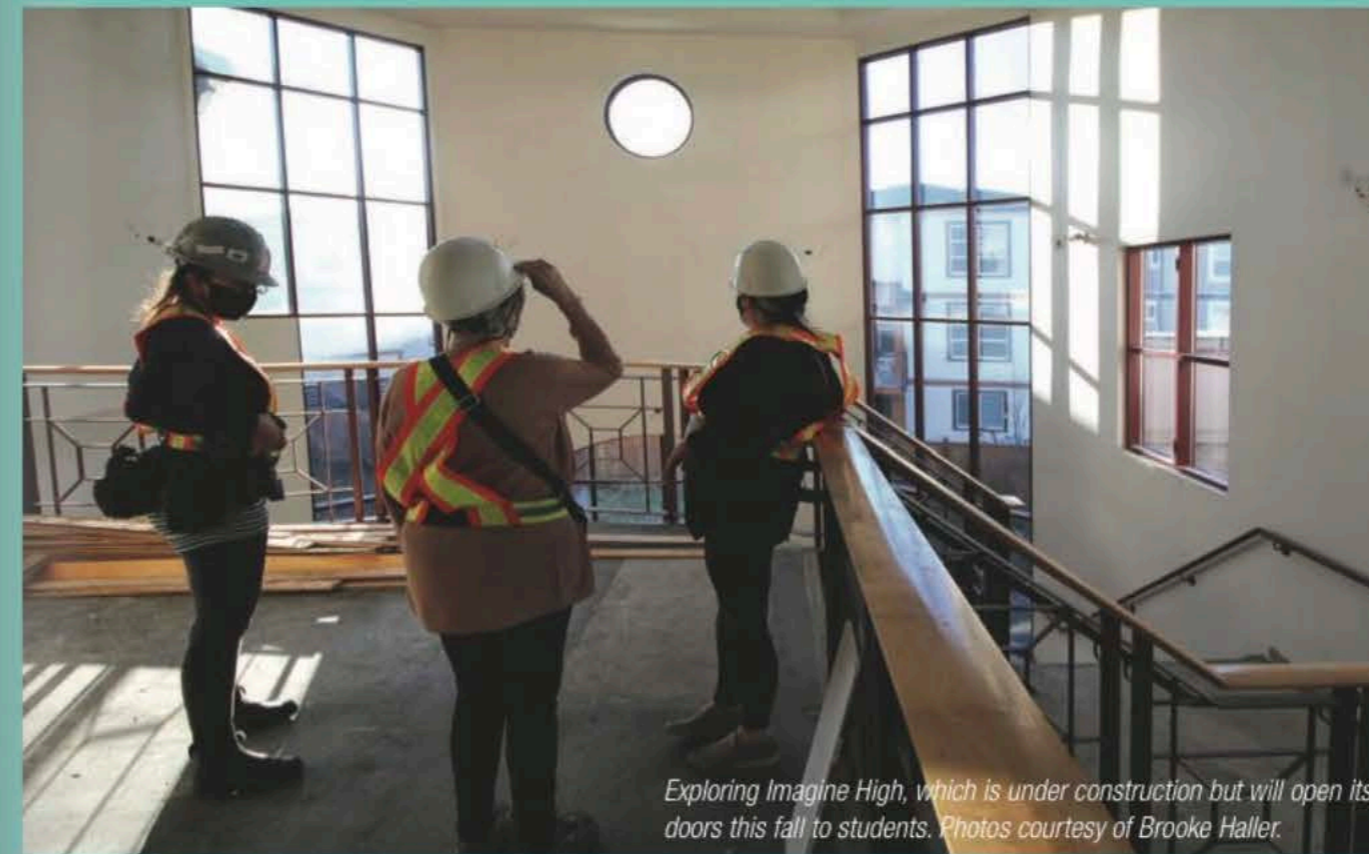
Of course, big dreams require a team of dreamers.

In the words of Janet Carroll, Program Director (Consultant)

Kirk [Kirk Savage, Assistant Superintendent, Chilliwack School District] invited me out for Thai food one rainy day in November 2019 and

pitched the idea of hiring me as the consultant for the new Integrated Arts and Technology Secondary School that School District 33 would be opening in 2021. “It’s going to be world-class,” Kirk promised, his eyes lighting up. He described plans for the facility and spoke of creating an out-of-the-box secondary learning environment that would be unique, innovative, and downright fantastic. I listened with a judicious combination of intrigue and skepticism. Big plans, I thought. I told him I would think about it.

Vision, as we know, is contagious. I caught the bug from Kirk that day and my mind started exploding with ideas. I started to wonder, “How on earth can we pull this off?” It is one thing to think outside the box, to fantasize about what could be, and quite another to put one’s money where one’s mouth is and actually do the thing that exists outside the box. The thought was alternately thrilling and terrifying. As Stephen Covey says, “The wonderful thing is that vision is greater



Exploring Imagine High, which is under construction but will open its doors this fall to students. Photos courtesy of Brooke Haller.

than baggage.” Kirk and I met for lunch again. I told him, yes, count me in.

In the words of Brooke Haller, Principal

On a random Tuesday an educator friend forwarded me a posting for a principalship in Chilliwack for a new Integrated Arts and Technology Secondary School. At the time, I was happily living and working in the southern interior desert, but the posting was irresistible. It was as if I was reading a posting for the imaginary school Kirk alluded to earlier, that every educator dreams about, but no one thinks they will ever have the chance to do in a public-school setting.

Every bullet point brought a new surge of possibility. The posting spoke to everything I had imagined school could be – innovative, integrated, and rooted in arts and technology. It was irresistible enough to inspire me to leave my role, community, and home to begin this entirely new life adventure. I was so appreciative for the partnership with Janet and the support of someone deeply connected in the valley community, and equally appreciative for Kirk’s support to dream big.

The way forward

Brooke came on board in March 2020. Now there were three of us. We had a plant

which was undergoing renovations. Check. We had a mandate (build a world-class school of choice). Check. We had the four Pillars of Integrated Arts and Technology developed in partnership with now retired Assistant Superintendent, Janet Hall. We had the Board’s strategic plan to guide our planning. We had the B.C. Curriculum and its potential. We had examples of schools from all over the world, where inquiry, project-based learning, and design thinking have transformed the way kids learn, and teachers teach. We had community partners whose expertise and enthusiasm we could harness. We had big dreams about creating a place where kids and staff could find joy, meaning, purpose, and community.

We started by asking ourselves: Who is this school for? Some kids? All kids? What do we believe about learning? About creativity? Can all kids thrive in a school where creativity is encouraged and celebrated? Is creativity different from talent? What are the pedagogical underpinnings that support the development of a creative mindset? What does the research say about the integration of arts and technology and its impact on student motivation and achievement? And, if we believe the school must be equitable and diverse and inclusive, then how do we ensure that all kids can succeed and thrive at Imagine High?

While we had a desire to offer an approach to learning that was innovative and different, we wanted to be deliberate in our planning. Yes, Imagine High is a school of choice but it was critical that students of all stripes could thrive. We believed that the kind of learning we were envisioning would be accessible to all students.

Our first step was to nail down the researched foundation for Imagine High by creating a white paper which would guide our decision-making. We researched, read articles, books, zoomed, visited schools, connected with educators in our district and beyond about the innovative practices in their schools. The three of us talked (non-stop, it seemed), emailed our ideas to each other, pushed our collective thinking, tossed around ideas (no matter how wild), shared understandings and epiphanies. We felt at times that the paper would never end, but we knew we had a road map to guide our work. Suddenly, we knew where we were going and we felt confident that the road, while less travelled, was built on a solid foundation: compassion, empathy, and human-centered learning anchor everything we do.

Our next step was reaching out to our community to contextualize our research. Most importantly, our goal was to welcome others to help co-create the Imagine vision. Our outreach was extensive, from phone calls to emails, from Zoom meetings to socially distanced face-to-face conversations. Since August 1, 2020, we have logged over 600 conversations with dozens of educators and administrators, creative entrepreneurs, community arts organizations, post-secondary scholars, community leaders, and the general public.

Our conversations involved more listening than talking as we asked our thought partners about what they imagined a school like Imagine High could be. We were inspired by beautiful stories from across the province and around the world about innovative learning environments that have been redesigned to be collaborative, authentic, personalized, student centered, and rooted in equity, diversity, and

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inclusion. Our thought partners have challenged us to re-imagine what a secondary school could be and have helped solidify our commitment to make learning at Imagine High relevant, connected, and integrated.

The highlight of our work has been the empathy interviews with our students. We Zoomed with each registrant and their parents or guardians (plus dogs, cats, baby brothers and sisters, grandparents, and in one case, a parrot). Those conversations have been rich, moving, illuminating, and critical to both our vision and school design. Our students tell us that they want to feel connected to peers within a creative community. They are eager to show their learning in multiple ways. They have expressed a desire to go deep into their interests and passions, to try new things, to experiment, and to find meaning and joy.

By engaging with our students and families well in advance of the school opening, and listening carefully to their hopes, dreams, and fears, we are seizing the opportunity to backwards design the school to meet the needs of our students rather than preparing students to fit into the school. Student and parent voice will inform every aspect of our Imagine High learning community, from teacher recruitment to course offerings to plans for exhibitions of learning.

Vision is created through a shared narrative and, when people contribute to and see themselves in a vision, they feel a deep sense of connection and investment. While there is a need to have a clear articulation for family and community around what the Imagine approach will look like, we know that there needs to be space for grassroots innovation and maximum flexibility within the Imagine framework. In many ways, the vision for Imagine is a living document that will grow and evolve to reflect the students, families, and staff that are part of the larger Imagine community. Our school vision will never be finished because education is an iterative process that requires continuous checks and balances, organic shifts, continual evolution, and courageous learning.

Visions are delicate creatures; their growth requires authentic input, deep conversations, and a genuine desire for meaningful and honest engagement. The vision for Imagine High reflects the hopes, aspirations, and dreams of our students, parents, and the wider community. As leaders, we are stewards, not owners, of the Imagine vision. We feel confident that as our vision shifts and evolves, it is built on a solid foundation of moral purpose. The journey to realize the dream of Imagine High is on-going. The work is inspiring, challenging, and deeply important to the success of our students. The work continues, one conversation at a time. Follow our journey on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @imaginesd33!

Imagine High Integrated Arts and Technology Secondary is an innovative and vibrant school community, fostering and celebrating creativity, where students find meaning and contribute to the community within the school and beyond. This article was co-authored by Brooke Haller, Principal; Janet Carroll, Program Director (Consultant) and BCSSA Alumni; and Kirk Savage, Assistant Superintendent, Chilliwack School District.

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