

The Surrey Traditional School

by John Pippus

November/93 - After receiving a copy of Joe Freedman's 10-page charter school proposal, I sent copies to a dozen parents and one trustee I thought would be interested. Informal conversations were held over the next few months.

March 23/94 - Seven parents met to discuss the possibility of starting a school. We agreed on a common definition of an excellent school — high academic expectations, strong sense of discipline and commitment, significant parent involvement, a safe environment, a dress code, and an emphasis on the basics: literacy, numeracy, and self-expression.

We decided to try to have a school operating by September and, realizing the tight time-line, opted to pursue a school operating under the constraints of the Surrey school board, rather than as a more autonomous charter school.

We formalized ourselves as an interim council and decided our first tasks were: a) to build a potential enrollment list, b) to develop a mission statement and business plan and c) to prepare a presentation to the trustees ASAP.

A school in the neighbouring school district of Langley had been quietly operating a "fundamental" school for a number of years. This school had avoided most of the progressive reforms the rest of the province has been forced to implement over the past few years as part of the child-centred "Year 2000" initiative.

Many Surrey students had received permission to attend, and many more (about 75) were on a waiting list. By contacting these parents we had an 'instant' base of support. As well, the local media picked up on our plans and the controversy (and free publicity) began.

April 14/94 - Liz Robertson and I made a joint presentation to the board. About 30 parents showed up at the meeting in support. Through a series of phone calls to trustees beforehand, we determined that four of the seven would be inclined to offer at least initial support.

April 28/94 - The trustees approved the traditional school 'in principle' (four in favour, three against) and instructed staff to look into possible locations, feasibility, and costs.

May/94 - This was an intense time for Liz and me. Besides putting out brush fires set by the teachers' union, media misquotes, etc., we had to field the dozens of calls coming in daily from interested parents and me-

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dia, as well as chase down suitable school sites, and maintain close contact with the four trustees through faxes and phone calls. It was vital to keep them up-to-date and 'on side', answering their objections and doubts, and feeding them positive information wherever possible. Our interim council continued to meet weekly and our numbers continued to grow. Luckily, an old high school was coming available because of a new one being built nearby. It was in good shape, well-equipped, and wouldn't displace anyone.

May 26/94 - Victory! The trustees voted, four-three in favour, and against the recommendations of staff, to let the school go ahead in September. We didn't get all we asked for, but it was a beginning. Instead of two classes of K to Grade 7, we were given only one of each grade (for a total enrollment of 211). Also, our request for a site-based council - with input into hiring and budget allocation - was denied. This will be a battle for another day. Lastly, our request to have our interim council included directly in the hiring of the principal was denied. But - only two and a half months after our first meeting - we had our school.

June 11/94 - Registration Day. This was a huge success with about 200 parents lining up overnight to secure places for their children. It was a graphic demonstration of how desperate parents are to provide their children with what they feel is a solid education.

June 16/94 - This was the last weekly meeting of the interim council and the first meeting of the Surrey Traditional School Parent Advisory Council. An executive was elected, the new principal gave a report, and committees were established. Significantly, the committee with the most sign-ups was the Education Committee. The mandate of this committee is to look into issues of curriculum and school reform in other areas and to maintain a close, professional relationship with the teaching staff. At this meeting there was overwhelming support for a standardized dress code.

This will be the first public school in the province to have a uniform. The challenge is to maintain the original vision and not have the school become 'watered down' by the system, the union, or by the parents themselves. Being an "open catchment" school may prove to be the greatest accountability tool this school has. Because, every day, as the parents drive their children to school, they will ask themselves: "Is it worth it?" If the answer is no, they can choose their own neighbourhood school or, better yet, they can choose to make the traditional school live up to its billing.