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March 25, 2014 – Presentation to RBE re. Connaught  
School Speaking Notes

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I came prepared to speak about public engagement in decision-making. How to do it. How not to.

But reading the Director's report over the weekend it struck me: The future of Connaught is no longer in the public realm.

The future of our school has been reneged to a lawyer, an engineer, and an insurance agent.

Trustees, I beg you. Do not let this happen.

You must pull this decision back into the public arena.

You must pull it back to your table, to our table. Where it belongs.

Do not throw up your hands and say, we have this piece of paper, or that piece of paper...that tells us this school must close...so there's nothing more to do.

This school community needs you to go to bat for them. And you can do it.

Starting tomorrow you can sit down with your lawyer, with your administrators, your engineer and your insurance agency... and the school community... and come up with a plan that works.

No blanket condemnation. Every concern pulled out and examined, one by one. Every condition met. Step by step.

And if there was ever a need for a second opinion...or a third...or even a fourth...this is it.

No one can understand why you will not go there.

Don't throw up your hands and walk away on this, and say it wasn't your decision...that it was beyond your power.

Trustees, find out exactly what it will take to keep this school open come September...and do it.

If you don't want to do that for us, do it for Imperial. Do it for Mount Pleasant up in Saskatoon.

Do it for all the schools that wouldn't pass this same test, and those that may not have capital funding on the horizon. We have to show the way out.

And the way out doesn't start by closing the door.

I beg you...don't let anyone tell you it's impossible to keep Connaught open, or that it's beyond your mandate.

You are our representatives. Not the insurance company's representatives. Not the engineer's

representatives. Not the administration's representatives.

They didn't put you in those chairs. We did. The public.

We need your intervention.

And you need ours.

Please accept that we know things you don't know.

And that we are trying to head you off from a huge mistake.

If you pull the trigger early on this school community, it will...be...gone.

Don't just accept my word. Your survey tells you that people aren't accepting the options before them right now.

Our survey says the same. Just 11 per cent said they were planning to follow a relocation plan.

But we don't need a survey. We know the parents personally. They are our friends and neighbours.

We know what people are saying. We know what they are planning.

And it does not include your options.

There are two Catholic schools, two public schools and one growing private school in our area.

And then there's Montessori...and home schooling. Think about it.

And think about what this will do to the whole system, if the whole system is your main concern.

Come September, 300 or more students not necessarily going in any direction that you might be pointing them toward.

That's why it's critical to turn this back so we have time for a plan that people might get behind.

Right now, you don't have that plan. You might think you do, that you've got it all worked out. But you don't.

We appreciate that some board members and staff have a vision for Connaught, and are in a hurry to get to it.

But your vision is not shared by this school community. Please don't try to impose it on them.

91.7 per cent of parents who answered our survey said a school in the neighbourhood is very important.

And only 2.7 per cent said a new school is very important.

77.8 per cent described their feelings about new school architecture as negative or very negative. Just 5.6 per cent said they had positive feelings, and the number who had very positive feelings was...zero.

86.1 per cent said the school's history and heritage were important or very important to them.

22.2 per cent of parents want repairs to keep the school open to 2015. That might seem small, until you read on.

A further 66.7 per cent want it to stay open indefinitely.

In total, 88.9 per cent of caregivers and 89.7 per cent of all respondents chose options that would see the school remain open up to 2015 at minimum.

You could say our sample was small. And we'd agree. But you have heard this message again and again.

You heard it in the consultation held back in 2012. Retention of the school came out on top, and people wanted a second opinion.

If you attended the Feb. 25 meeting, you heard it loud and clear, and not just from the members of Save Our Connaught. We provided you with the transcripts and the breakdown, for those who missed.

If you look at that open-ended question on your survey, it's there, too. People want a second opinion. They want a different future for the school.

And in the immediate future, they want their school to open its doors come September, as it has done for the parents, grandparents and great grandparents in our community for 102 years.

Now this may seem unfathomable to you. It may seem foolhardy. It may even seem dangerous.

But it is time you started hearing it, really hearing it, and trying to understand it.

And then representing it in your actions and in your decisions, as our trustees.

If you come into our homes you might get it.

Our floors squeak. Our walls are cracked. Our basements are heaved. Sometimes there are emergency repairs, and sometimes we bunk in with our neighbours while renos are underway.

But we come back home. Because these are our homes. Our children grow up in them.

And they look like Connaught.

They feel like Connaught.

You may not like this environment. But we do. It feels like home.

And it cannot be replicated by any architect, any engineer, living today. But it can be improved.

Look at Connaught School in Calgary. Look at Connaught School in Medicine Hat. In fact, you don't even have to look further than Calgary. That's it – that's what most people imagine as about perfect for their kids and neighbourhood.

It's not your fancy replacement, but it does have an atrium. You could even put your garage doors in it, if you really, really want them.

There are so many ideas that could be explored, if we did not have one idea bearing down on us and taking up all the space.

That is the concept you need to come to understand.

This is what the Connaught School community can teach you.

How to be different. How to be inventive.

And, above all else, how to hold a community together.

That is the one thing we do best. It's the one thing we can teach you.

And what you are planning is not the way.

So please, get this school ready for September, no matter what it takes.

No matter who says it can't be done.

Then spend the year in planning, on an equal basis, with the most creative, dynamic community you will ever encounter.

Before that unique, diverse community is broken and dispersed. Which is what will happen, no doubt about it.

It won't be easy, but it is worth the pain. It is worth the time. It's definitely worth \$67,000. I promise you.

So...no more rushed decisions. No more freight trains.

We have the inside knowledge of where our community is headed. We know how to keep people together.

To do it, we have to turn this situation on its head. We cannot give Connaught's future over to the hands of a few select professionals. It must stay in the hands of the many.

Because together, our hands are capable. They are inventive.

We can use them, or we can throw them up in the air.

Please let's put our hands to work.



First step: Connaught must open in September 2014.  
Otherwise it's very hard to see a future for this school.  
It won't matter how much money gets thrown at it.

What happens next is up to us, together.

So find a way. Listen to what people are saying. Keep it open.

That's all I have to say. Thank you.