

San Ramon Valley Unified School District
Office of the Superintendent

The Next Level?

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Introduction:

The following document represents personal observations and recommendations as Superintendent of Schools of the San Ramon Valley Unified School District. Because the recommendations are mine, they are neither right nor wrong, but simply a personal perspective as to what might be the appropriate next steps for a school district of this quality.

It is my desire that this document not be accepted or rejected, but rather be used to generate discussion and maybe even some debate, resulting in collaborative decision-making, ultimately resulting in clarity of direction for the school district for the next 3-5 years.

This document is created in part to stimulate thoughtful conversation at the staff and community forums planned for the month of November. On page 9 of this document the format and the questions which will be used at the forums can be previewed.

At the heart of this document are two fundamental questions:

1. If the “next level” is to become a world-class school district, what exactly does that mean and what is required for such change to occur?
2. Does this incredible school district, as well as this supportive community, have a desire or even a need to move to the next level of excellence?

First Question: If the “next level” is to become a world-class school district, what exactly does that mean and what is required for successful change?

I recognize that this question might be a little presumptuous on my part as I suggest that becoming a world-class school district should indeed be the next level. I do so because I believe that the San Ramon Valley Unified School District is in a unique position to build on its incredible achievements and is poised to have serious conversations about the future that many other school districts are not in a position to have. We are blessed to have great teachers, a wonderful support staff, and parents and a community who

care about our schools and the children we serve. With so much measurable success already in place, we have the opportunity and obligation to maintain these qualities, while deeply examining what it means to have students prepared not only for college or other post high school education, but also for success and happiness in an exciting, yet demanding and competitive flat world. I certainly have not hidden my interest in aligning the “next level” with an ambitious vision that changes teaching and learning by taking advantage of technology, engaging students in applied learning, while preparing them thoughtfully for a successful global existence.

Second Question: Does this school district, as well as the community, have a desire or need to move to the next level of excellence?

At first blush this might seem like an odd question as hopefully all school districts want to show improvement. But given the level of measurable success (API, similar schools rank, AP class participation, college placement rates, etc.) in the San Ramon Valley USD, it is truly understandable that many may question the need to even talk about “improvement”. We are already a district of choice as our schools are a major factor in generating residential growth in the communities we serve. By most measures we are the highest achieving large school district in the state of California and other school districts are envious of our success.

Given this reality, it is not surprising that there may be hesitancy or even resistance to the concept of “moving to the next level”. Human nature being what it is, a reaction from some might be one of feeling offended if they perceive that somehow embedded in this question is the notion that the accomplishments of the school district are not noted or appreciated. Nothing could be further from the truth, but certainly the question of whether the San Ramon Valley Unified School District is the best place or the worst place to initiate this discussion is a fair question.

The upcoming community and staff forums will provide an opportunity for discussion and input around these important topics and will answer, either directly or indirectly, the question of readiness and/or desire on the part of staff and community.

Perhaps less exciting, but still of great importance is a need to examine internal operations throughout the school district to determine whether they are designed to support a district of our size and complexity, and whether or not we are organized and staffed appropriately for the 21st Century.

This report is not intended to be viewed as a comprehensive, all encompassing, guiding document. Rather, it is intended to be the basis for discussion, collaboration and perhaps even some debate. It is for this reason that the key elements will be briefly presented, in some cases highlighting concept more than detail, while hopefully prompting significant conversation resulting in better ideas and initial steps toward action, which typically is the outcome of thoughtful and engaged collaboration.

The ability to fund any new proposals will certainly surface early in conversations. While acknowledging that this is a major challenge, especially in the state of California which under funds public education, we should not let the lack of funds deter us from our discussion of “what should be”. Nevertheless, some thoughts and ideas related to funding will appear on pages 7 and 8 of this report.

Creating a Global Learning Environment in a Digital World:

When considering changes and/or enhancements needed to create a more global learning environment, it is important not to limit the discussion to the infusion of technology into classrooms, (although that is an important element), nor to simply consider adding new programs or experiences (although perhaps required). Rather, the discussion needs to be grounded in understanding the attributes needed for success and happiness in a world where interdependency is reported on daily in relationship to economic stability or instability, evolving global political relationships, competition for limited energy sources, and cultural and religious understandings and misunderstandings.

We also must never lose sight of the value of great teachers as they are the single most significant factor influencing student learning. If you have great teachers (which our district is filled with) who understand the changes required for the demands of an interconnected world, working in classrooms equipped fully with the proper technology, we have created the basis for extraordinary learning experiences for the students.

The students of the San Ramon Valley Unified School District deserve to learn in environments that value cultural differences and acknowledge that global communication is instant, competition is fierce, and where creativity, entrepreneurship, communication skills, initiative, data management, and critical questioning are as important as the core academic skills in which our district excels. Teaching and learning look different in schools that promote project-based learning, creating meaningful context out of content which is readily available via the Internet, increased student engagement as a result of more relevancy, and where collaboration is viewed as global connectivity, as opposed to being restricted to the classroom.

Additionally, as we prepare students for this digital environment, the need to promote STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education must be seen as a priority, as well as the need for all students to acquire a second language starting in the early grades.

It is in this context that the following recommendations, ideas, and concepts are presented for the purpose of stimulating conversation, reflection and potential change.

Proposal #1: Continuous Academic Improvement:

Regardless of innovations and changes needed for the 21st Century, we must start with a guarantee that all students are equipped with strong academic core skills. These skills become the foundation from which further preparation for a changing world must be built. In a district such as the San Ramon Valley Unified School District it can be a challenge to always improve when the district is already the highest achieving large unified school district in the state. Even so, we continue to have students who need to gain in proficiency levels, achievement gaps associated with ethnic and/or economic backgrounds that need to be closed, and children with special needs who face extra challenges that require additional attention. Each school will of course, continue to focus on academic standards, setting specific improvement targets, while zeroing in on specific students who need assistance, honoring the fact that not all students come from the same backgrounds, nor do they all learn at the same pace or in the same way. This is the foundation that must not be lost in these discussions.

Proposal #2: Creation of Superintendent's Advisory Committee:

Existing within the boundaries of the San Ramon Valley Unified School District and the immediate

surrounding area are huge international corporations, world renowned research labs, as well as highly accomplished individuals who understand at a deep level the globalization demands our students will face. This proposal is to invite corporate executives, scientists and other accomplished individuals to meet with the superintendent and other district leaders to help the district become a true world-class educational organization. Many of these individuals live in our community; some with children in our schools and/or they have thousands of employees who have children enrolled in the district. The goal of this advisory committee is to provide feedback on possible initiatives and to provide guidance based on their firsthand understanding of the changing global economic, social and political environments.

Proposal #3: High School Speakers' Forum:

Each high school is encouraged to create a series of monthly speaker forums where leading authorities will be asked to make a large group presentation based on their personal experience with globalization and the skills needed to succeed and/or STEM challenges and opportunities. Again, because of the community we serve, we are fortunate to have insight from experts readily available. Members of the Superintendent's Advisory Committee may personally present and/or help secure other individuals to participate in the forums.

Proposal #4: Technology Infrastructure Standardization:

While acknowledging this discussion cannot be solely about technology, it is also true that we cannot tap the availability of instant information or incorporate the creativeness, collaboration, and initiative into teaching and learning without a solid and consistent technology infrastructure in place in all classrooms. The following narrative describes the desired infrastructure while Exhibit A depicts it graphically.

- ✓ **Bandwidth / Wireless / Filtering:** Discussions about increasing infrastructure must begin with bandwidth. Failure to address this issue is to set up our teachers and students for frustration and failure. We are currently engaged in steps to increase bandwidth as the district has failed to adequately address this issue in the past. In addition, all schools must be "wired to be wireless". This is fundamental as technology utilization in schools is becoming more mobile for both teachers and students. Failure to create wireless environments prevents schools from moving to the next logical step, which is a 1:1 computer environment for students in classrooms.

Proper filtering for the safety of students is a requirement that the district takes very seriously. Our existing filtering system is of high quality, although it is never a full substitute for the teaching and the enforcement of acceptable use policies and procedures. The district is continuing to explore additional options, especially given the challenges associated with wireless environments.

- ✓ **All Classrooms:** All classrooms should be equipped with at a minimum, a teaching station consisting of computer and projector, one color printer, a document camera, an amplification sound system to assist students in their learning and to protect teachers' vocal cords, and a laptop or desktop workstation so teachers may communicate with parents, students and other staff members via email and simple websites, complete required reports utilizing the student information system, and access, manage and utilize student performance data.
- ✓ **1:1 Laptops:** If technology is to be fully infused into teaching and learning each and every student must have easy access to a computer beginning around fourth grade. This does not occur when a classroom has 3-4 computers at the side of a room, nor is it sufficiently seamless if a class has to be relocated to a computer lab for an occasional

class period. (See “computer labs” below.)

- ✓ While at some point in the not too distant future each student will arrive at school with some sort of handheld device, for now a reasonable goal is as follows:

Laptop computers on movable carts (or COWS for ‘computers on wheels’) should provide a minimum ratio of one (1) laptop for every three (3) students in grades 4-5, and every two (2) students in grades 6-7-8-9-10, (rotating the COWS into classrooms on an established schedule). In grades 11 and 12 every student should be provided an affordable laptop or netbook for use in school and home.

- ✓ Interactive Whiteboards / Response Devices: Interactive whiteboards provide an opportunity for powerful visual enhancements and curriculum enrichment. The latest models include stimulating curriculum materials, graphics and Internet links, which enrich the instructional process. Many of the boards have optional student response devices, which allow a teacher to check for understanding and to individualize re-teaching based on student responses. Interactive whiteboard and response devices should ideally migrate into all classrooms, grades 3-12, over the next several years.
- ✓ Computer Labs: Moving to a 1:1 computer environment within classrooms reduces, but does not eliminate, the need for comprehensive computer labs. Labs provide an environment for acquisition of specific computing skills, more advanced multi-media work, and projects involving video conferencing. In addition, they are useful for staff and parent training. Consideration of a lab structure is as follows:
 - One (1) computer lab per elementary school to be utilized for K-3 students for initial computer instruction, keyboarding, and applied projects appropriate to the grade level, and video conferencing for all grade levels.
 - One to two (1-2) computer labs per middle school to be used for specialized technology classes, yearbook development, video conferencing, more advanced multi-media productions, etc. In addition, middle school libraries to be equipped with multiple desktop computers available for student research and project development.
 - Three (3) computer labs per high school to be used for specialized technology classes, possible on-line classes, video conferencing, and more advanced multi-media productions, etc. In addition, the yearbook class requires a mini-lab and the library must be equipped with multiple desktop computers available for student research and project development.

Proposal #5: STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) Education Clarification and Expansion:

There is increasing evidence that the United States is failing to provide enough scientists, mathematicians, and engineers to meet the challenges and opportunities that the 21st Century requires. It is estimated that within a few years 90% of all scientists and researchers will reside in Asia. Many of the issues that our students will face in their lives, such as global warming, overwhelming demand for health services, competition for limited energy sources combined with world population growth, bio-diversity loss and other environmental concerns, will require individuals with strong STEM training and expertise. Elements for strengthening STEM support include the following:

- ✓ As mentioned earlier, we have access to STEM expertise because of corporate, research and educational organizations located in the immediate area. Converting this access to meaningful partnerships, presentations, visitations and job shadowing is a challenge that must be addressed.
- ✓ Elementary science specialists are currently optional as determined by staff at each school. If STEM is to be a priority for the school district, elementary science specialists must become mandatory, not optional.
- ✓ All elementary science labs to be augmented with a teaching station, interactive whiteboard, Internet access to digital libraries, USB microscopes, and simulation/modeling programs.
- ✓ All middle school science labs to be augmented with a teaching station, interactive white board, Internet access to digital libraries, simulation/modeling programs, digital probeware/sensors, USB spectrophotometers, electrophoresis equipment, projecting microscopes (for life science), and column chromatography.
- ✓ All high school science labs to be augmented with a teaching station, interactive whiteboard, Internet access to digital libraries, simulation/modeling programs, projecting microscopes (life science), and video conferencing capabilities. High school labs also to be equipped with GPS units, polymerase chain reactor (PCR) and a variety of digital probes, monitors and sensors.
- ✓ Each middle school to offer an Applied Technology / Intro to Engineering elective class utilizing a similar array of hands-on, highly engaging learning modules.
- ✓ Each high school to offer a multi-year engineering strand of courses, including an Advanced Placement offering. Diversity of program strands is encouraged, allowing students to select the school with the strand that best meets their interest.

Proposal #6: Expansion of World Language Instruction:

If we are serious about preparing our students better for competence in a global environment, then certainly the discussion must include the need to provide world language instruction in the earlier grades and cultural travel experiences for our older students.

Unlike much of the world, America has long resisted the need to have its citizenry know two or more languages. Perhaps this has been because of geographical isolation in comparison to other places such as Europe, our economic and political leadership in the world, or the perception that English is the international language of choice. For whatever reason, acquiring other languages has not been a high priority for the nation. With the flattening of the world, the ease of travel, and the increasing economic globalization, knowing a second language is becoming more and more desirable, if not required. Elements of this proposal for Board, staff and community consideration include the following:

- ✓ Because of financial limitations, Spanish and Chinese to be established as priority for district funding.
- ✓ Spanish and Chinese language instruction to be offered beginning at fourth grade, either during the school day (preferred) or as an optional extended day programs funded by the district or parent support organizations.
- ✓ All middle schools to offer two-year programs in Spanish and Chinese. Successful completion equates to the high school first year program –earning credit for first year Spanish or Chinese. (We may get to a level of proficiency that middle school students could earn two years of world language credit at the middle school level.)

- ✓ High schools to offer four years of Spanish and Chinese instruction.
- ✓ High schools to sponsor optional 2-week summer trips to destinations where full language immersion is required and cultural awareness is expanded.
- ✓ Each high school may offer one additional world language, provided they have enough students to support a minimum of three years of study.
- ✓ Two-way student foreign exchange programs to be expanded.

Proposal #7: Optional Instructional Day for Senior Students:

Graduation from high school is as close in our society to a ‘rite of passage’ as we have. We expect our senior students to leave the controlled environment of high school and then succeed independently in an adult world that requires thoughtful decision-making and accountability. If this rite of passage is limited to a commencement ceremony we may be inadvertently setting up our students, regardless of how well prepared academically they may be, for a difficult transition to the adult world. This proposal recommends that we allow, (but not require), our senior students to be off campus half days, provided they are engaged in an activity approved by parents (unless the student is 18 or older) and their school advisor. Possible options include, but are not limited to:

- ✓ Gainful employment in a part time job, and/or job shadowing for career awareness
- ✓ Taking classes at a community college
- ✓ Involvement in community service and/or political advocacy role
- ✓ Enrollment in approved on-line course of study
- ✓ None of the above, as students may opt to take additional classes at their high school

Proposal # 8: Facility Development:

As we design schools, select furniture and examine the use of existing space, consideration must be given to structuring facilities for the future, not the past. Creating schools which are wireless, with technological capabilities built into the structure, closely examining space allocation required for traditional computer labs, and exploring furniture which is mobile and easily accommodates laptop computers and flexible groupings for collaborative projects are examples of aligning the facilities endeavors with our academic endeavors. Related to this discussion are questions about a future facility bond, as Measure A was never intended to complete the renovation of the whole district. We also face opportunities and challenges related to energy use and conservation related to building design and human behavior. How important is it that schools model energy conservation and / or explore alternative sources? Finally, should the use of alternative energy sources such as solar or wind be linked to student learning opportunities, perhaps integrating it into the STEM initiative?

The Funding Challenge: Is it ironic or foolish to even be discussing innovations and modifications in the present economic environment? As “wards of the state” the San Ramon Valley Unified School District, like all school districts in California, is going through a very difficult period of time. Our funding has been cut, and we face the prospect of further cuts either this year or next. While we have been able to avoid some of the devastating cuts and employee concessions seen in other districts we are clearly not out of the woods by any means.

Given this reality there is no doubt that funding of these proposals will be a major challenge and perhaps even a barrier to implementation, at least initially. We are currently engaged in a struggle to maintain programs and services, as well as doing what we can to compensate our employees competitively and to provide health care benefits to the best of our ability. While not being naive about the funding challenge,

it has typically been my experience that only after a shared vision is created and excitement generated, that people begin to tackle the issue of funding. We are very fortunate to have strong parent support, particularly when they rally around a project or program they believe in. Even though we recognize that this is not how schools should be funded, it is deeply appreciated. We do, however, recognize that there can be questions of equity as certainly some schools have an ability to generate funds more easily than others.

Even if we are unable to fund desired initiatives at this time, we owe it to our students, staff and the community to enter into discussion about what a distinguished school district such as ours should look like as we prepare students for a much different world.

Some thoughts and comments related to funding include the following:

- ✓ The district has the ability and the resources through facility bond funds and other restricted dollars to provide the needed infrastructure of increased bandwidth and wireless classrooms. This work is currently underway. This is essential for the infusion of technology into teaching and learning.
- ✓ The district has some ability to provide professional development through contracts with vendors, demonstration classrooms which encourage visitations and observations, a proposed professional development center, and by tapping into the collaborative spirit which exists within our teaching ranks as they share their own best practices with other teachers. Beginning this November, Educational Services will be initiating an on-line calendar of weekly training opportunities which staff may register for via the School Loop system.
- ✓ The reality of implementation is that in most cases it requires a phased approach, perhaps phased differently at each school depending on school priorities.
- ✓ The San Ramon Valley Education Foundation may wish to select one or more of the proposals for on-going support. They may also want to weigh individual teacher grant applications that align with Foundation priorities. Many foundations have discovered that being identified with a significant initiative can actually be helpful in fundraising efforts.
- ✓ Funding of technology equipment, especially computers, is best achieved through leasing, which protects cash flow and provides a simple method for refreshing of equipment every 4-5 years.
- ✓ Choices must be made. Several school based foundations have already shifted money from other projects or programs in order to purchase carts with laptop computers for classroom use.
- ✓ Additionally, technology infrastructure, including classroom technology, needs a sustainable funding base. This may be done via renewing facility bonds which include a strong technology component, expansion of the Education Foundation's Endowment Fund, and/or from a corporation or individual that commits significant funds for long term support.

Thank you for your consideration and thoughtful feedback. I look forward to some rich discussions reflecting many perspectives about the readiness and willingness of the district to move to the next level, and if so, what it might look like.

Forum Structure / Questions:

Each forum will start with a brief update about the school district and observations of the year to-date, followed by an introduction of each of the proposals.

For proposal “one” and “two” (continuous academic improvement and formation of superintendent’s advisory committee) participants will be asked to share comments and recommendations back directly to the superintendent via email. (senoch@srvusd.net). For the other recommendations participants will be invited to select two (2) breakout sessions on those topics of greatest interest.

Core questions applicable to all sessions will include:

1. What does being a “world class” school district mean to you?
2. Do you believe the SRVUSD is the right place or the wrong place to seriously explore the “next level”, and why?
3. What do you find exciting, important and/or interesting regarding the proposal being discussed in your breakout session?
4. What questions, concerns and/or suggestions do you have regarding this proposal?
5. On a scale of 1-10 (1 = very low, 10 = very high) how vigorously should the school district pursue the particular proposal?
6. What other proposals do you wish were included in order to move the district to the next level?

21st Century Teaching and Learning

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