June 20, 2000

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Dosdall, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: <u>Blueprints On-line</u>

ORIGINATOR: G. Reynolds, Department Head

RESOURCE
STAFF: Ann Calverley, Pat Redhead

INFORMATION

The purpose of this report is to provide information regarding the district's ***Blueprints On-line*** conference. From May 8 to 26, 2000, the conference was offered to an audience of both internal and external delegates as a pilot project. ***Blueprints On-line*** represented an abbreviated Internet version of the district's ***Blueprints for Success*** conference. Because it was a pilot and represented the district's first experience with providing a virtual conference, participants were invited to attend free of charge. However, they were asked to evaluate the conference at its conclusion. The purpose of the pilot was to:

- Assess the level of interest in and support for accessing professional development in an on-line format.
- Collect data to create a suitable funding or cost-recovery model for future virtual conferences and for ***Blueprints for Success*** in particular.
- Explore and evaluate the use of WebCT as a suitable on-line environment for hosting a virtual conference.
- Establish guidelines and models of use for creating successful virtual conferences in the future.

Invitations to participate in ***Blueprints On-line*** were extended to district leadership staff as well as to delegates who participated in either ***The Revolution Continues!*** or the ***Blueprints for Success*** conferences, individuals who have expressed interest in the work of the district, all Alberta school superintendents, and selected staff at both the University of Alberta and Alberta Learning. The conference was originally limited to 60 participants. However, interest was higher than expected and 76 delegates were registered to participate. Of these, 30 were external delegates and 46 were district staff. Internal delegates included principals, assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, and teachers. From the international community, registrants included members of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, as well as individuals from Israel, the USA, and Zaire. Dr. Bruce Caldwell, Dean of Education at the University of Melbourne, also registered.

Blueprints On-line offered three general sessions and a keynote address. During the three weeks of the conference, participants could access the content of the conference sessions at their convenience. Each of the three sessions included text, graphics and tables, as well as threaded discussion. The keynote address was made available at the beginning of the last week of the conference and like the sessions, also featured threaded discussion. The sessions were prepared, presented and monitored by teams of district staff including school principals and central services staff members. Staff in District Technology provided considerable technology support to the project. Conference sessions addressed the following topics:

- ***The Road Well Travelled: 20 Years of School based Budgeting***
  Laurie Elkow, Delwood School and Mary-Ellen Deising, Budget Services
- ***Leadership Institutes for Principal Preparation and Development***
  Dale Skoreyko, Bannerman School and Donna Barrett and Shirley Stiles, Leadership Services
- ***Monitoring Our Most Crucial Results***
  Carol Symons, Hillcrest School and Anne Mulgrew, Student Assessment
- ***Edmonton Public Schools: What We Are Learning About Knowledge Management***
  Dr. Emery Dosdall, presenter and Gary Reynolds, moderator

Blueprints On-line was offered using WebCT, a product which has been licensed by Alberta Learning for all K-12 and post-secondary institutions in the province. WebCT is an integrated suite of applications for creating Internet-based learning and training environments. WebCT or World-Wide-Web Course Tools was originally developed to offer virtual courses at the university level but multiple uses are also possible in K-12 educational settings. One of the advantages of the WebCT platform is that in addition to providing content, it is easy to create, monitor and manage discussion groups and chat rooms, and to create and view the results of quizzes and surveys. The 'environment' or 'course' is secure because every participant is a registered user and entry is password-protected.

Evaluation of the Project

The plan to evaluate the effectiveness of *Blueprints On-line* included the criteria of staff satisfaction, participation/usage, technical considerations, and amount of learning. The plan also included the following data collection strategies:

- Pre-conference and post-conference surveys of participants, and conference presenters and organizers.
- Anecdotal notes from the debriefing meeting of conference organizers and presenters.
- WebCT monitoring tools to determine use of content pages and discussion groups.

The following general observations are made from the data collected and analyzed as well as from the comments of staff involved in the project.

Conference Participants

- Of the 76 individuals who registered, 64 signed in, and a total of 40 actually participated in the conference sessions and/or keynote. 12 individuals registered but did not sign in.

- Participants were positive regarding **Blueprints On-line**, with most commenting that this was their first experience with an on-line conference.
- The majority commented that they found both the sessions and the keynote informative, and appreciated the opportunity to participate in the discussions.
- Most participants were comfortable with using the technology.

Conference Presenters

- Expressed concern in offering a conference of this nature to both internal and external delegates at the same time. It was felt that based on the audience, session content would vary in the level of detail provided, as well as the terminology used.
- Reported that they did not like presenting their session content on-line as much as they did presenting it in a face to face venue.
- Felt that they needed to learn about moderating on-line discussions more effectively. In some cases, session discussion was dominated by a limited number of people and ranged well beyond the content of the session.
- Indicated that in future, they would make their conference sessions more thought-provoking and controversial, and less focused on the provision of information and data.
- Suggested that for future conferences, new content be added and that the conference time frame be shortened from three weeks to from one week to ten days.
- Indicated that because of the time commitment involved in ongoing monitoring and commenting in the discussion groups, they would not want to participate in an on-line conference and an on-site conference simultaneously.
- Learned a great deal about the technical aspects of providing content in a virtual conference format.

Conference Organizers

- Found the WebCT platform was relatively easy to use, and offered many features which allowed for both provision of information, as well as comprehensive evaluations of many dimensions of the conference.
- Learned that it is important to make sessions more interactive by using audio, providing presentations in real time, and supplementing presentations with tools such as PowerPoint.

The major conclusions based on the purposes of the project and actions recommended for the future are attached in Appendix I.

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Appendix I - Blueprints On-line Pilot Project

Blueprints On-line Pilot Project

1. Assess the level of interest in and support for accessing professional development in an on-line format.

Results	Future Actions
The level of interest is high. ▪ With only 2 weeks notice, 76 people registered and more were on a waiting list. ▪ 70% indicated that they would participate again and 30% may participate again.	Marketing should begin earlier and should take a variety of formats, including Internet-based marketing techniques such as assuring that search engines direct people to the information.

2. Collect data to create a suitable funding or cost-recovery model for future virtual conferences and for *Blueprints for Success* in particular.

Results	Future Actions
Participants are not willing to pay very much. ▪ 41 % would pay $50 or less. ▪ 42 % would participate only if it was free. The costs of developing and hosting the virtual conference are primarily measured in staff time. Staff involved included presenters, moderators, conference organizers, and technical support staff.	▪ Charge participants for the virtual conference or include an additional fee for the in-person conference that would include an on-line component. ▪ Keep costs down by revising existing content rather than creating new content each time and limiting the duration of discussion forums, which are time-consuming for moderators. ▪ It is unlikely that a fee that would recover the costs would also be acceptable to participants.

3. Explore and evaluate the use of WebCT as a suitable on-line environment for hosting a virtual conference.

Results	Future Actions
WebCT is suitable for a virtual conference because is it easy to use and provides effective tracking and evaluation tools. There are, however, a	WebCT should continue to be used for hosting virtual conferences. ▪ It is too expensive to create an

	Internet-based conference 'from scratch' because technical expertise is required.
few constraints to development imposed by the focus on students and courses, which is the basic premise upon which WebCT was created.	▪ WebCT leaves the control in the hands of the common person rather than requiring a lot of technical expertise or support.
	▪ New features that incorporate other media formats, such as PowerPoint and audio, should be included in the future.

4. Establish guidelines and models of use for creating successful virtual conferences in the future.

Results	Future Actions
The virtual conference used the analogy of an actual, in-person conference. Content and discussion occurred in print and on-screen formats.	*Blueprints On-line* should be treated as an action research project in which improvements are made each time it is offered.
The presenters and moderators gained experience in operating in an on-line environment and have ideas about how they would change things in the future.	▪ The conference will be archived for demonstration purposes to assist others as they begin to use WebCT.
	▪ A combination of the in-person conference with an on-line component should be tested.
	▪ The presenters' ideas for improving the virtual conference should be tested.