

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION BRIEFING NOTE

PREPARED FOR: Honourable Peter Fassbender, Minister of Education for **Information**
by the Deputy Minister of Education

SUBJECT: openStudent.ca

BACKGROUND:

In early 2010 the Saanich School District announced its intent to develop a new student information system as an alternative to BCeSIS or its replacement. Their product, **openStudent**, is based upon open source software tools. The *openStudent Business Plan* describes the following as objectives:

- Create and continuously evolve software that is developed “for the BC education community, by the BC education community”
- Develop software that is owned and governed by the BC education community (i.e. the school districts)
- Interoperate with other administrative systems and education applications
- Eliminate perceived limitations of commercial software products
- Adopt a non-commercial, non-profit approach to create a solution that is affordable and sustainable

Saanich has prepared a high-level business plan¹ and solicited support from other school districts to fund the development of openStudent. To date, four districts (Cowichan Valley, Comox Valley, Vancouver Island North and Powell River) have indicated support for the initiative and are working with Saanich to create a non-profit society to promote its development. The first components of openStudent were completed in May 2013 and piloted in twenty elementary schools in Saanich and Cowichan Lake school districts. The full production version of the software, which includes support for secondary schools, is not scheduled to be available until the fall of 2015.

The estimated total development cost of openStudent is \$3.90M. Saanich school district has invested \$1.46M from capital reserves and anticipates raising an additional \$2.44M through investments by other school districts and sales outside of British Columbia.

DISCUSSION:

The openStudent initiative is based upon the premise that commercial products are designed for many clients and therefore do not have the inherent flexibility needed to address initial and ongoing requirements for schools in British Columbia. This “made in BC, for BC” philosophy does not take advantage of best practices developed by software vendors with clients in many jurisdictions. The procurement process for **ConnectEdBC** has confirmed that there are products in the marketplace (i.e. Follett Aspen SIS) that meet immediate and future requirements.

OpenStudent is being developed in phases and the complete production version of the software will not be available until the fall of 2015. This is a significant risk for schools that must transition from BCeSIS before it is decommissioned in early 2016.

Saanich states that there are significant financial savings by developing a product in BC rather than purchasing a commercial service. These claims are generally based upon unbalanced comparisons against the costs of BCeSIS, which they have overstated by more than 100%. Saanich’s financial model

¹ <http://www.openstudent.ca/>

(described in their documents) is incomplete and does not accurately reflect ongoing development and hosting costs. An external review of their business model might give a more realistic assessment of actual costs and capacity.

Saanich has is currently promoting the use of an “open source” strategy for developing software. While this approach does have merit for some classes of software, such as system tools and utilities, it has not been shown to be effective for developing complex administrative systems, such as student information systems. Saanich frequently cites the Kuali project, a collaborative development effort by a consortium of post secondary institutions, as a model for “open source” development for the K-12 sector. However, feedback from the CIO of UBC indicates that UBC, one of the founding members of the Kuali Student project, has withdrawn from the initiative due to escalating costs, excessive overhead, lack of responsiveness and unacceptable delivery schedules. In the Gartner Report, analysts were unable to identify any examples where open source efforts had been used successfully to create student information software for complex jurisdictions. Closer examination of the openStudent.ca website shows that it is really not a community-sourced development effort and is being directed by a single school district with nominal participation from “partner” districts.

Saanich frequently claims that there is a great deal of interest in openStudent by other school districts. This is based upon casual queries by district staff and does not necessarily reflect the intentions of their senior administrators. Their list of “Other Interested Districts” contains several districts, including North Vancouver, Vancouver and Nanaimo Ladysmith who have already declared that they wish to be in the first wave of implementers for **ConnectEdBC**. Informal feedback to the Ministry from other “interested districts” shows that they will likely follow suit. Following the initial demonstrations of the Follett Aspen SIS, some employees from the “founding districts” indicated to Ministry staff that they may be reconsidering their options.

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The governance and support model for openStudent remains unclear. When the Ministry of Education conducted the procurement process for a common student information service, Saanich was eliminated from consideration when they were unable to demonstrate that they had the basic organizational structures in place to support a sustainable service.


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Saanich originally positioned openStudent as a candidate for the Province’s common student information service. However when they withdrew from the procurement process, they changed their direction by telling districts that a common solution was not possible and promoting openStudent as an alternative to **ConnectEdBC**. They have directly approached school trustees for several districts who have asked their administrators to evaluate other options. This has become a concern for several districts.

The Ministry of Education is making a major investment in **ConnectEdBC** with the goal of establishing a high-quality service that will support the BC Education Plan. This is also an opportunity to renovate obsolete ministry systems and improve services to students and parents. The success of this venture depends heavily on the province-wide uptake for the new common student information service.

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