EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
In 2009, the Upper Canada District School Board embarked on a strategic and progressive initiative to transform an existing resource – school libraries – to models of 21st century learning. From its inception as “Books, Blogs and Tweets,” this initiative has transitioned from Charter R26 “The Modern Library” to its current vision, Charter E42 The Learning Commons.

The Learning Commons Model supports school success through emphasis on 21st century skill development: learning skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and creativity, information literacies which are crucial in a knowledge society, and the development of the new, multiple literacies – digital, visual and textual. The Learning Commons Model seamlessly integrates the physical and virtual learning environments, facilitates the formation of learning partnerships, ensures equitable access to resources, differential learning possibilities, and utilizes emerging technologies as tools for discovery.

To ensure effective and meaningful implementation of this initiative, work to date has focused on creating the solid foundation by which schools can build upon. This work has included re-thinking system structure in the areas of staff job description alignment, supervision and leadership, communicating a new vision for multi-functional physical spaces within individual school environments, and the conceptualization and development of a single, web-based Virtual Learning Commons that provides resources, facilitates interaction and collaboration, and engages all members of the school community.

This report outlines the foundational concepts of the Learning Commons Charter, accomplishments to date, and a blueprint for moving forward.
1. 21st Century Learning

Education in the 21st century is undergoing a transformational shift. Globalization, rapid advances in technology, and the changing nature of the work order have required educators to re-imagine the models, method and resources that are deployed to educate our students. Schools around the world are faced with preparing the youth of today for an unknown future and an uncertain occupational landscape. Education systems are tasked with providing students with a suite of learning skills, personal development and foundational literacies to ensure they are ready for the challenges, and opportunities, of the 21st century, in addition to the core content subjects that have provided the framework of our curriculum. Meeting student outcomes in the areas of creativity and problem-solving, critical thinking, inter-personal communication, and collaboration have required a re-thinking of our pedagogical practices. Exponential increase in access to information and the move to a 'knowledge society' has brought to the forefront the need to embed information literacy skills, and the new literacies – digital, visual and textual - across the curriculum.

In order to achieve our goals, educators must find new ways to integrate content knowledge, learning skills and multiple literacies into a 'whole school' learning experience. The Learning Commons, as a collaborative, flexible, technology-rich educational environment, provides a model for this new vision of 21st century learning.

1.1 The Learning Commons Model

"The Learning Commons liberates the exploration of ideas and concepts, encouraging inquiry, imagination, discovery and creativity through the connection of learners to information, to each other and to communities around the world.”

(OLA, Together for Learning, 2010, p.6)

The Learning Commons model moves student engagement and activity from an 'information-centric' paradigm to one that is 'knowledge-centric' – emphasizing critical inquiry, creativity, and knowledge creation. Students experience a rich and deep conceptual understanding and are able to connect their learning to the context in which they live.

The model is based on four foundational concepts which informs and guides structure, integration and implementation:

1. A Learning Commons is a learner-centered space emphasizing inquiry-based learning and the construction of meaning and knowledge in an active, collaborative environment.
2. The Learning Commons is purposely constructed – physically and virtually – to provide multifunctional spaces for individual study, group work, discussion, facilitated learning and knowledge creation (built pedagogy).
3. Emerging technologies and communication software are employed as tools for ubiquitous learning, providing a seamless integration of physical and virtual learning environments and extending the walls of the Commons, and the classroom, to the ‘whole school’ environment.

4. The Learning Commons extends the definition of the learning community to all students, administrators, teachers and families engaged in education and student success. Learning partnerships, key to modeling collaborative skills development, are facilitated across the school environment, ensuring an integrated, complimentary approach to learning.

The Learning Commons Model, particularly in its meaningful and pedagogically-sound use of mobile technologies and communication software, allows for equitable access and the opportunity to expand differential learning strategies and techniques to ensure all students are able to succeed.

2. Libraries to Learning Commons – Status Update

In 2009, following a stakeholder meeting with parents, students, community members and educators, the School Board developed an ambitious and forward-thinking vision to transform school libraries into 21st century learning centers. The vision, known as “Books, Blogs & Tweets”, acknowledged the important role information literacy skills would play in a knowledge society. From this vision, Charter R26 “The Modern Library” was developed to research and implement a ‘new model and way of operating library and resource rooms’. Through best-practice research, site visits to other boards in the process of re-imagining school libraries, and internal stakeholder discussions, the UCDSB Learning Commons Model was developed and presented to Strategic Council on February 10, 2011. The approach was approved with a recommended implementation date of September 2011.

The resulting implementation strategy focused on three priority activities:

- Alignment of the roles and responsibilities of Library Technicians to the Learning Commons Model and development of the organizational and administrative structure to support the initiative.
- Provision of enhanced and equitable access to information resources and collaborative knowledge spaces through the development of a Virtual Learning Commons (VLC).
- Transformation of physical spaces from libraries to ‘whole-school’ learning environments.

The following section describes accomplishments to date within each of the priority areas.
2.1 Organizational Design

2.1.1 Learning Commons Informationists

The transformation from a school library, to a modern library, to a Learning Commons Model required a review and alignment of the roles and responsibilities of school Library Technicians to reflect the conceptual underpinning of the Learning Commons. Library Technician job descriptions were reviewed and revisions made in discussion with the union governing this employee group. Emphasis was placed on the use of technology, digital media, increasing accessibility to information resources, the supervisory responsibilities of the former Library Technicians and professional development.

Revised job descriptions and a name change to ‘Learning Commons Informationist’ was presented and positively received by the union (CUPE). The job descriptions were forwarded to the Job Evaluation Committee which completed its evaluation in June 2011. To reflect modifications in job responsibilities, the committee increased the positions hourly wage ($1.25 per hour increase).

Learning Commons Informationists were re-assigned to the ‘Family of Schools’ model, and given responsibility, in most instances, for one secondary school and 2-4 elementary schools per 1.0 FTE. The total FTE allocation was reduced by 1.5 FTEs (due to attrition) for a total allocation of 27.5 FTEs. A teleconference was held with Library Technicians on June 28, 2011 advising them of the changes to their position title and responsibilities.

2.1.2 Learning Commons Managers

The process of finding managers appropriate to the new roles ran from October-November of 2012. Advertising in local papers was augmented by postings in national library publications and reinforced through the use of social media.

Initial interviews were held with select candidates from around the province and as far away as Alberta. The top candidates were invited to a second round.

This follow-up round included a teaching component which mandated the use of technology, as well as the need to demonstrate knowledge and connections to the Ontario Curriculum. This process resulted in the hiring of Patricia Sutherland and Jennifer Farlam who started in their positions on January 9th, 2012.

Patricia graduated from the University of Western Ontario in London with a Master’s degree of Library and Information Science. She is currently completing a Masters of Educational Policy Studies (Global Studies in Education) from the University of Illinois. Prior to accepting this position, she served as the CEO-Chief Librarian for the Brockville Public Library, Library Manager at the College of the North Atlantic in Qatar, Business Librarian for the Ottawa Public Library, Branch Manager for Halifax Public Libraries,
Executive Director of the British Columbia Library association, and as a consultant for the National Library of Canada.

Jennifer graduated from Sheridan College in Oakville with a degree in programming and data management. Prior to accepting this position, she served for seven years as a Library Technician/Learning Commons Informationist in the UCDSB. In addition to her experience working in the field of education she also has extensive management experience in the private sector and has worked as a computer programmer. She brings with her an impressive knowledge and understanding of existing and emerging technologies and their effective use in education.

2.2 Virtual Learning Commons

The Virtual Learning Commons (VLC) provides a signature product for the board’s transition to the Learning Commons Model. By utilizing Web 2.0 tools and incorporating online, popular behavior (collective knowledge construction, creativity and community-building), the VLC symbolizes learning as an activity that transcends physical space, is mobile, can be personally-constructed, and is available ‘anytime/anywhere’. The site’s conceptual learning framework (appended to this report) emphasizes the seamless relationship between content access and content creation, and provides multiple opportunities for the development of learning communities between and among students and teachers. In line with the Learning Commons Model’s ‘learning partnerships’ foundational concept, the audience for the VLC includes students, teachers, administrators and families.

The VLC was designed around 2 key content areas - facilitated content and collaborative content - that underlay the structure of the 4 major components of the site:

1. Reference Platform and Knowledge Repository

The VLC moves student reference and homework help to the ‘whole school’ environment by providing real-time information support services through an interactive reference platform. A web-based, open-access system provides the opportunity to deliver supplemental assistance through links to external student homework support services (eg. public library online help, provincial math online tutors) and direct calling access to the Peer Support Phone Line (peer support during the hours of 4-10pm). Providing an environment of seamless integration of facilitated content and user-created content, and incorporating the ‘24/7, anytime/anywhere’ model of web-based service is achieved by utilizing an interactive reference platform that builds an accessible, constantly updated, knowledge bank or repository.
2. Information Resources

The VLC provides a central location to access digital information which supports student research, curriculum activities and the development of information and digital literacy skills. Digital content found in this area is primarily curated and includes institutionally-licensed information sources (eg. electronic databases, eBooks), accessible information sources (eg. Knowledge Ontario electronic databases) and research/topic guides. Research/topic guides are flexible, easily-created by multiple contributors and interpreted to include: subject and/or grade-specific resources, guides to Web 2.0 tools etc. They are both visual and textual and will house multi-format content suitable for differential learning. To promote the collaborative construction of knowledge, guides have the ability to incorporate discussion, comment and interactive activities.

3. Teacher’s Curriculum Repository

Current research has shown that for technology to be incorporated into the classroom, and applied with sound pedagogical practices, teachers require: 1) a repository of curriculum materials by grade, subject and device; 2) a forum to discuss techniques, classroom experience and best practice; and 3) training in the use of the devices and integration of numerous devices to create a classroom ‘tech-ecosystem’. The VLC is well-suited to meet these needs. Research/topic guide software incorporating discussion and interactive capabilities is applied to curriculum resource guides. The knowledge-building repository (reference platform) serves as a collaborative information support service for teachers, specifically in the use of technology and how to utilize multiple technologies in the classroom.

4. Learning Community

The Learning Community component is a loose collection of links to related sites, research/topic guides of a more general nature (eg Schools – Class Websites), links to social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, an LC blog, running RSS feeds. Also included are resources that have relevance to the whole district learning community – the school calendar, study tips, student resources, and news of interest to students. It is envisioned that user input will assist in developing this section of the VLC.

To build-in sustainability, the site has been designed as a dynamic learning environment with an extensible and ‘nimble’ infrastructure that is capable of continually evolving to meet the learning and collaborative needs of the target audiences and to be accessible through, and usable with, multiple technology devices.

To date, a functional requirement analysis has been developed for the Virtual Learning Commons, software sourced and evaluated, and a beta mock-up of the Learning Commons website is in development.
3. Next Steps

The immediate priorities over the coming 6 months will be to operationalize the implementation priorities and develop a strong foundation by which to move the Learning Commons Model forward throughout the school district. Four key projects have been identified for this phase: roll-out of the Virtual Learning Commons; developing Learning Commons Informationist capacity; implementing technology-based pilot projects; and transforming physical spaces and resources.

3.1 Virtual Learning Commons Roll-Out

Emphasis will be placed over the coming 6 months on working with LCI’s, teachers and students to develop start-up content for the website and encourage collaborative online participation. The VLC will then be ‘rolled out’ to the learning community, promoted as a learning resource, evaluated and modified as necessary.

3.2 Building Learning Commons Informationist (LCI) Capacity

Training and development needs for Learning Commons Informationists will be assessed and a plan implemented incorporating both formal and informal training. Modeling the type of learning environment the Learning Commons seeks to create, communities of learning will be developed within this staff group to promote collaborative learning and current awareness. Training and orientation to new technologies will be a central focus of this professional development, as will the development of learning partnerships within the school environment. This process has already begun with three professional development sessions having already taken place for the LCIs since January.

3.3 Implementing Technology-Based Learning Pilot Projects

The development of learning partnerships centered around the use of technology in the curriculum will be piloted in both elementary and secondary schools to determine procedural and practical implications and best practices. On completion and evaluation of these pilot projects, assistance with technology-enhanced information research will be rolled-out to the entire district. Several projects have already commenced.

3.4 Transforming Physical Space

Models and guidelines outlining best practices will be developed to assist Principals and LCI’s in individual schools with transforming their libraries into Learning Commons. Print collection standards will also be recommended to ensure consistency and equitable access to resources throughout the school district.
APPENDIX A: Learning Commons Conceptual Framework

Virtual Learning Commons

Student

Teacher

Search & Retrieval
Databases Catalogue

Web 2.0 tools
Knowledge - Builder platform
Tutorials

Curriculum repository

Resource sharing/discussion (tech, pedagogy)

Collaborative Learning/Content Creation

Portals Class Sites

Knowledge - Builder platform

Resource sharing/discussion (tech, pedagogy)

Creation -
Content -
Creation -
Content -

Collaborative Learning/Content Creation

Learning/ Curricular Resources

Learning Commons

Independent Study