



# Summary Report

Durham Catholic Parent Involvement Committee

## *Annual Orientation and Commissioning Mass Catholic School Councils*

Durham Catholic District School Board  
Conference Centre  
652 Rossland Road West  
Oshawa, Ontario

Wednesday, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013



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## Executive Summary

The Durham Catholic District School Board's Parent Involvement Committee (DCPIC) hosted its Annual Orientation and Commissioning Ceremony for the 2013-14 academic year – made more significant as it celebrates its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The parent-led advisory committee working within the Durham Catholic District School Board whose purpose is to encourage, support and enhance meaningful parent involvement, organized the event to provide principals, school council chairs and members the opportunity to discuss the importance and benefits of being involved in our schools.

The induction ceremony provided an early opportunity for the newly elected Catholic School Council Chairs to build a relationship with one another and build community at a time when the new elected Council Chairs are setting their goals.

The day provided a forum for all School Council Chairs and DCDSB Principals including DCPIC Executive, Parent Members, Community Representatives, Superintendents of Education and School Board Trustees, to identify parent engagement and allow Council and parents to be on the same page.

These summary notes capture the day's activities, presentations and workshop discussions.

The all-day event started with a special Commissioning Mass in the morning and a welcome from the Chair of the Board of Trustees, the Superintendent of Education and the Chair of the Durham Catholic Parents Involvement Committee.

Invited speaker Michael Reist spoke of parental engagement and how it contributes to student achievement and well-being. Diane Mullane, DCDSB Metal Health Leader spoke of mental health and well-being, and the parent's significant role in enhancing their child's educational experience.

The consulting team of People for Education facilitated the workshops. The *Building Partnerships Workshop* allowed principals and school council chairs/members to work together. The second workshop *School Council Best Practices* focused on school council members and how to create effective school council. Ideas generated from the workshop are captured in these notes as well as the results from the surveys completed by the participants.



Welcome to the Annual Orientation and Commissioning Mass. This is an opportunity for principals, school councils, trustees and parents to communicate and discuss the importance of being involved in the Durham Catholic School Board. Learning and living in faith takes the effort of a community consisting of parents, caregivers and educators. The relationship between parents and teachers is vital in a faith-based education, as parental involvement can positively impact each student's well-being and academic achievement.

## A) Commissioning Mass

Catholic education is a special gift.

It is a system committed to teaching students to contribute their God-given talents to the service of others. Within this system, Catholic teachers have a great responsibility in leading students to "cross the door" to meet Jesus Christ and lead by example.

A recent news story describes a Columbian orphan adopted by an Italian family, who kissed the cross and sat on the chair of the Holy Father, Pope Francis. Father Pope Francis shows no reaction, but with an open heart, accepts children as they are; a feat which teachers should aim to do as well.

### The Candlelight Ceremony

Candles, symbolizing Jesus Christ and His mission, are used to symbolize the light of the Christian church and its commitment to the faith. A representative from each school's Catholic School Council received a candle and took a vow to live a life led by Christ, foster the faith of those in its Catholic community, and put their faith into action.

## B) Welcoming Remarks

**Karen Valentine**, Chair of the DCDSB Board of Trustees, **Gerry O'Reilly**, the Superintendent of Education and **Roxanne Horwitz**, Chair of the Durham Catholic Parents Involvement Committee welcomed the school Principals, School Council Chairs and Members and parents of the Durham region. They thanked all present for their commitment to the Catholic education system.



### **Karen Valentine - Chair, Board of Trustees, DCDSB**

On behalf of fellow Trustees and the Director of Education, **Karen Valentine** thanked parents for their continued dedication and hard work. She started the orientation day by reminding parents of the importance of their commitment to be involved in their children's education. Statistics show the close correlation between parent engagement and student success. It is important to remember where the foundation of a student's education comes from, as parents are the first educators of their children. This is the rich and important groundwork which parents are able to foster at home.

### **Gerry O'Reilly - Superintendent of Education, DCDSB**

**Gerry O'Reilly** was delighted to have Principals and School Council Chairs in attendance. He highlighted that this Year of Faith, titled "The Door of Faith," is a year of opening the doors of our hearts and communities outwards; symbols in welcoming all people.

As Superintendent of Education, Mr. O'Reilly noted the importance of bringing both sides of the community—parents and teachers—together. The value in exercising the relationship between teachers and parents through building a community and a network creates a better student experience. And the importance in building a strong relationship with our children happens through our own example in building a community.

### **Roxanne Horwitz – Chair, Durham Catholic Parents Involvement Committee, DCDSB**

**Roxanne Horwitz**, Chair of the Durham Catholic Parents Involvement Committee (DCPIC) was proud to communicate that the DCPIC is celebrating its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary - marking a special milestone with parents and educators.

Since 1998, the DCPIC has been a strong voice for parents supporting Catholic education in Durham. As a parent-led advisory committee working within the Durham Catholic District School Board, the committee is dedicated to working in partnership with all stakeholders. The committee's mission is to promote faith formation, encourage, support and enhance meaningful parent involvement, and to improve student academic achievement in all its schools.

Ms. Horwitz informed the audience about the planning session held in the summer and planned initiatives for the year ahead. DCPIC is focusing on three areas per its Strategic Plan:

1. Communication
2. Faith Formation
3. School Council Outreach



Council involvement is important as this is a gap that currently needs to be bridged. The DCPIC asked the invited Council Chairs to ask for its support to set up workshops and use it as a resource.

Ms. Horwitz also extended an invitation to all attendees from the Durham region to attend DCPIC's monthly meetings on the first Thursday of each month (except in December and March).

Parents, principals and school council members were invited to create a dialogue and provide DCPIC with suggestions, feedback, and ideas at any time. Mutual involvement is necessary in bringing the community together and reaching desired goals.

For more information, visit: [www.dcpic.ca](http://www.dcpic.ca)

## C) Key Note Speaker - Michael Reist, Author & Education Consultant

**TOPIC: Parent Engagement - Getting Involved. Staying Involved: Why Schools Need Parents**

Keynote speaker **Michael Reist**, best-selling author of *Raising Boys in a New Kind Of World* and *What Every Parent Should Know about School*, is an expert in the field of education, student well-being and parent engagement. For the past 10 years, Reist has been a frequent speaker at parent groups and education conferences across Canada and has been featured on CBC Television and Radio, Global TV, CITY TV, TV Ontario, Today's Parent Magazine, The Globe and Mail, The National Post and the Toronto Star.

Reist recently retired as head of the English Department at Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School in Caledon East. He brings his experience of over 30 years teaching in the classroom working with the Toronto Catholic District School Board and the Peel-Dufferin Catholic School Board. Reist emphasizes that he is a product of the Catholic school system.

### **The History of Parent Engagement in the School System**

Reist believes in building a sustainable, engaging and inclusive parent community for Ontario's Catholic Schools and outlined how to help parents get involved and stay involved; promoting and supporting student success. In sharing his experiences as a teacher and parent (of four children), he communicated that it is important to know all of the players in parent engagement and emphasized the importance of knowing principals and teachers on a personal level before problems arise, not waiting until one surfaces.



Parent engagement relies on the relationship with the Ministry of Education, the school board, school principal, teachers, other parents and most importantly, one's own children. Schools are not corporations or businesses. In the past there were a simple one-room school and parent board and private schools with a parent board. Catholic high schools from grades 11-13 had a parent board until 1984 when the Ontario government fully funded the Catholic District School Board from Kindergarten to OAC.

### **Parliament and the School System**

In 1916, the Ontario Federation of home and school associations was formed. In 1939, the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education was formed; and in 1996, the People for Education organization was created. These are the main three groups listened to by parliament.

Current governance models have:

Two access points of parental power:

1. Elected government – Ministry of Education
2. Elected Trustees – School Board

Four access points of formal influence:

1. Parent Involvement Committee (at the school board level)
2. Special Education Advisory Committee (school board level)
3. School Councils (school level)
4. School Improvement Plan (school level)

Three access points of informal influence:

1. Parent-teacher interviews
2. Phone calls
3. Informal conversations (important to know people on a personal level!)

### **The Responsibility of Parental Committees**

Parent involvement committees (PIC) came into being as a part of the Province's Parent Involvement Policy in 2005, and all boards were required to have a PIC by January 2011.

Parental Committees have four main responsibilities:

1. To develop strategies and initiatives - the board and the board's director can use these strategies to communicate effectively with parents; to encourage support of their children learning at home and at school as well as advice on the use of these strategies.
2. To communicate information from the Ministry to school councils and parents.



3. To determine in consultation with the Director of Education how Ministry funding, if any, for parent engagement is to be allocated.
4. To work with school councils to share effective practices to help engage parents in their children's learning, identify and reduce barriers to parent engagement, and help ensure that schools are welcoming to parents. To support initiatives that help build knowledge and skills that will assist the PIC and school councils of the board with their work.

### **School Councils and Improvement Plans**

A school improvement plan is a road map that sets out the changes a school needs to make to improve the level of student achievement, and show how and when these changes will be made. In developing their school improvement plan the principal, staff, school council, parents and other community members' work through a variety of activities focused on three areas of priority:

1. Curriculum delivery
2. School environment
3. Parental involvement

The purpose of the school council, with the active participation of parents, is to improve *pupil achievement* and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents. School Councils need to ask what are they doing and why they are doing it.

Reist suggested that all School Councils read *People for Education School Council Report 2012*, a report that is published every year. He noticed that there continues to be a *disconnect* between what school councils identify as their most important roles and what they actually spend the most time on. While the majority of councils say that communicating with parents is their most important role, most councils, (40%), report that fundraising takes up the most time.

Many school councils spend a great deal of their time trying to increase participation on the Council. One of the most frequently identified challenges for school councils is the perennial problem of increasing participation. While the average number of parents attending school council meetings has remain unchanged at 11, the range has actually dropped from 0-60 to 0-40 parents. Reist has discovered that parents don't come out to Parent Council Meetings because they don't feel it serves a meaningful purpose and the roles of parents are beyond fundraising!





## **Accountability of the Education System**

So what could improve pupil achievement and enhance the accountability of the education system to parents? Consider the following at the school level:

### Budget, Curriculum and Teacher Performance

Where is the budget being spent? Most schools and administrators say principals make all the decisions and decide budget priorities which are influenced by their Superintendents. Is the curriculum delivery and evaluation accessible and being followed? And how is teacher performance evaluated? Are we getting the best out of our teachers?

### School Climate

Reist states that within five minutes of walking into the door, he can tell if a school is healthy or dysfunctional. School climate is one of the most fundamental aspects of a child's educational experiences. Children learn then they are happy. A stressed child is full of cortisol, preventing the brain from working at its best. The feelings of children are the fundamental foundation for what goes on in their school. Children hear with their heart first - then their mind. Parents or educators cannot get into the head of a child until they get in his heart.

### Stakeholders

It's important that all stakeholders are at the table. The Durham Board is good in this regard as lots of other boards don't have these. At school council meetings, who sets the agenda? Is the agenda meaningful? The School Council Chair should set the agenda. And every meeting should question: are we making a real difference in our children's lives at school? Ask deep core questions, reflect and think.

### Staff Meetings

80% of councils report that their initiatives are conveyed to the teaching staff, but only 9% report being invited to a staff meeting. The school of the future has to open up. When an institution is healthy, it is open and does not fear criticism or negative comments.

### Social networking

The Peel District School Board was the first to have Wi-Fi throughout their schools, and was the first one to institute BYOD (Bring Your Own Device). Have a parent representative for each class who communicates with parents in that class via email lists, facebook groups, Twitter, and school or teacher websites. Technology is becoming the norm – it is already the norm in private schools and starting to



become the norm in public schools. Communicating is a lot easier when there are resources, such as a teacher having a website.

### **A Healthy School**

Bob Dylan once said, “Anyone not in the process of being born is in the process of dying.” Schools need to open up the conversation about creating a healthy, communicative environment that fosters open-mindedness, willingness to learn and willingness to change. School is our children’s second home throughout their formative years. Many kids see the teacher for longer in a day than their parents. Teachers they may fall into the thinking that students are just pupils, but they need to remember that their students are children. As children of God, no matter how they act, see the Christ in them. They are special and are the children of someone.

Dysfunctional Schools can be identified by every decision being made at the top, teachers, parents and children are not listened to, and a pervading climate that produces fear of being judged or criticized. Students experience anger resulting from feelings of powerlessness, and as a result, parents are called for the bad stuff, never the good.

In contrast, healthy schools showcase caring principals who listen to parents, teachers and students and act on input and feedback. Also, active teachers that are engaged with parents and students as individuals and are also open to suggestions for change. Parents that are involved in the lives of their children and their school know about the challenges facing teachers, support teachers and provide feedback. Parents can effect substantive changes and can create an on-going dialogue between teachers that can be informative and rewarding. A parent’s involvement can also foster something new in the school that can remain for years to come. Children at a healthy school feel like they are heard, taken seriously and respected. With an open, safe and encouraging environment, they look forward to going to school each day.

A healthy school is an intentional community. Every school council, parent, teacher and principal should ask these questions: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? Children are naturally curious and parents and teachers need to harness a child’s natural curiosity.

### **Our Vision: The Child Who Learns**

What is our vision of education? Is it a cold factory or a flourishing garden? The meaning of the word *Kindergarten* is that every child is like a flower, blooming and developing at the same time. Christ said *you can tell a tree by its fruit*.



So what is our vision of the child? Children are sent to us by God and we need an education system that acknowledges and respects every child. Catholic schools produce a different kind of child; a school system that respects their true nature. Our job is to support God's purpose in that child. "Glory of God is a man fully alive."

It's important to remember that each child is unique and a mystery to be discovered. Children are not a problem and they need parents to rely on, guide and encourage their academic journey.

Parents and teachers should be aware of some core issues in school for students:

- Curriculum (textbooks, the arts)
- Pedagogy (consistency, coherence)
- Incorporating technology in the classroom
- How to deal with the special needs of all students
- Differentiated instruction (gender)
- Alternative education
- Evaluation (EQAO)
- Bullying
- Discipline
- Drug Use
- The need for movement
- Contact with nature

Collectively, schools and parents can open up the conversation through respect for others, instilling confidence, utilizing kindness, open-mindedness, a willingness to learn and change. School should strive to create a culture that is consistent, meaningful and sustain involvement over time; to foster an environment where students and administrators are happy. If you do something one day; you never know who sees it. We influence people by what we say and do, and we are not even aware of it – there are multiple opportunities to be influenced.

*The greatest wisdom is kindness.*

For more information or questions visit [www.michaelreist.ca](http://www.michaelreist.ca)



## Question and Answer Period

**Question [from a parent]:**

*What should she do when her teenage son and classmates in Advanced Placement (AP) English class are frustrated by their English teacher giving unclear instruction and low marks? All the kids in the class are terrified, e-mailing each other constantly because they don't know what the teacher expects. The parent feels her son cannot learn if he's so scared and frustrated.*

**Michael Reist:**

The first step would be to talk to the teacher, principal, superintendent or trustee. IB and AP programs attract driven students; one of the byproducts of being a driven student is being a perfectionist. In particular, stress due to perfectionism can create a very competitive environment. High performing students need to learn how to cope and adapt to stress in a healthier way. We need to talk to these kids about their mental health because of the type of kids they attract.

**Question [from a parent]:**

*How do we marry safety in our schools while opening up the doors? Recently instituted school board cameras which are good in terms of safety do not make the school feel as welcoming.*

**Michael Reist:**

Everyone has to be funneled through the front door, in the world we live in there is no way to avoid that. Once you got your visitor sticker, you should be fine. Have administrators make decisions from a human level (i.e. if a child is being disruptive, a volunteer or parent can offer to walk them around the school). The administrator needs to make the best choice for the child and not simply adhere to school rules, in cases where the rules hinder doing what is best for the child.



## **D) Keynote Speaker - Diane Mullane, C.Psych. Associate and DCDSB Mental Health Leader**

### ***TOPIC: Mental Health and Well-Being***

Diane is a graduate of the University of Toronto, with an honors BA in Psychology and Exceptionality in Human Learning, and a graduate Diploma in Child Study (Child Assessment and Counselling). She has been registered with the College of Psychologists of Ontario as a Psychological Associate since 1996. Diane has provided Psychological Services in the school setting since 1990, and is currently the Mental Health Leader for the Durham Catholic District School Board.

Ms. Mullane began with making reference to DCDSB's Student Well-Being & Achievement Board Improvement Plan for 2013-2014. The persons involved in writing this plan placed well-being before achievement. People at every level of education realize there is no true achievement without well-being.

### **What is Mental Health?**

Mental health is "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." Presently, school boards are realizing that to achieve academic success, they must begin with mental health. Mental health exists on a continuum and varies over time. Stress plays a major factor in where one is on the continuum; a lot of stress can cause one to move up on the continuum whereas less stress will cause a move back to a state of equilibrium.

### **What Are Mental Health Problems?**

Mental health problems are emotional, behavioral and brain-related disturbances that interfere with one's well-being. Many mental health problems have some biological basis. People who have mental health problems may not necessarily have a mental illness and many kids who have mental health problems don't meet the criteria for diagnosis. In Canada one in five students struggle with mental health problems that interfere with their day-to-day functioning. Approximately 4-6 students in every class suffer from mental disorders to the point that it interferes with their functioning.



## **Mental Health and the Academic Setting**

There is a clear relationship between mental health problems and academic achievement. There is a combination of multiple problems that affect mental health, making it a challenge to determine the causes. Genetic predisposition plays a role if a child has parents who suffer from depression. Should life events become stressful, those students susceptible to mental health problems would be more inclined to suffer from mental health problems. Some of the causes of mental health issues are determined by biology (genes that are predisposed), life experiences, individual factors and early trauma experiences in the first few years of a child's life. In 70% of cases, problems begin before the age of 18, with 50% of cases starting before age 14. Comorbidity (the presence of one or more disorders in addition to a primary disorder) also plays a part. If a student has one disorder, other problems are also likely - 45% of cases have more than one mental health problem.

The impact of mental health problems in schools is huge. There is a correlation between mental health and stress in academics that can have lethal consequences. Suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death in ages 16 to 24. Feelings of hopelessness, isolation and lack of support can result in suicidal behavior. Mental health problems are treatable—the earlier, the better. There are many programs that can be used through schools to look at students who may be at risk. The importance of evidence for these programs shows that social and emotional learning is not neutral. Some programs out there are not effective but can actually be harmful and so, it is important schools use evidence-based approaches for treatments and diagnoses.

## **What Can We Do?**

Schools are uniquely positioned to support positive child and youth mental health. Children and youth are with teachers six hours a day, five days a week. Teachers have an enormous influence in shaping students' well-being so it is important to know them on a personal level and to be supportive. Parents and teachers need to recognize that many of their children and students are affected by mental health problems.

Educators are the “eyes and ears” that can help to identify a student in need of support. Educators are not clinicians but they can play an important role in supporting child and youth mental health. The Durham Catholic District School Board is very fortunate to have professional Student Services personnel who support students in a three tiered support model.



1. **Bottom tier:** focusing on universal well-being and mental health promotion utilizing classroom programs, school wide programs, and on overall well-being.
2. **Second tier:** targeted prevention seeking to provide more direct service and group supports for students.
3. **Top tier:** indicated intervention which is clearly hooked up with school support systems.

Currently, we have several programs in place that focus on mental health in the school. We have a very active student services department (not all school boards have student services) that include:

- Social workers
- Child and youth counselors
- Speech and language pathologists

These personnel and programs are all prioritized and accessed through the school team. Out in-school initiatives also include:

- TAMI (Talking about Mental Illness), a program running about 10 years and started in Mental health first aid – literacy program
- Friends for life – anxiety prevention and intervention
- Every school has a mental health tool kit that is a very good resource kit with lots of information
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)

And finally, we must not forget that students are part of a larger community. The role of the community is important. The message to those that suffer from mental health problems should be that because you may be affected by a mental health disorder, you should not be looked upon differently but be shown support from the community.

### ***Reflection***

We all have a role to play in student well-being. As a member of DCPIC, think about the activities you organize in the school, and how these activities might influence each student's sense of belonging and well-being. Always make sure that all students are included. Are there barriers (financial, or other) that prevent some students/families from participating? How can we fix that and make all families feel welcome?



### **Summary**

The Durham Catholic Parent Involvement Committee (DCPIC) is very passionate about advocating mental health and well-being for all students. A student's mental health and well-being is incorporated into everything we do. It should not be an add-on, but something that is included in every topic. Schools are the most critical location for wellness promotion, early identification and intervention. Schools are also the best locations for combating the stigma associated with mental illness.

**Save the Date: Kevin Cameron – April 1<sup>st</sup> (Mental Health Speaker)**

## **E) Building Partnerships Workshop**

**Speaker: Jacqui Strachan, Director of Outreach and Parent Support at People for Education**

Jackie Strachan spoke on the importance of Parental Involvement in a child's education (*refer to People for Education: Tips for Principals- handout*). The four key points that were emphasized were the following:

1. *Hold high expectations of your children.* Let your children know that you think it is important they do well in school. Research indicates that high parental expectations and the consistency in communicating those expectations with their kids have the greatest impact on student achievement.
2. *Talking to kids about school at home.* Talk to your child about what's happening at school – activities, programs and what they are learning. There is a need to improve. Less than half of students in grade 3 (46%) have reported of talking to a parents or guardian "every day or almost every day"; by grade 6, this percentage drops to 38%. A recent study indicates that talking to kids about school at home, referred too as "home discussion" had a greater impact on academic achievement than monitoring homework, being at home after school or limiting TV or outing times during the week.
3. *Help your children develop a positive attitude towards learning and good work habits.* Research shows that the greatest influence you can have on your child's chance for success in school life is how you influence their attitudes, their sense of persona, competence and their work habits.





4. *Read to your kids.* Reading is the foundation of all education. Make reading fun and enjoyable!

These four things together make a greater difference for kids than volunteering in school, helping with homework, limiting TV, limiting play time, and eating dinner, combined together. Parents do make a difference!

Furthermore, she spoke on the Role of School Councils in relation to student success. 80% of school councils have stated that parental communication is the most important factor in determining the success of a student. 13% stated their role is to improve student achievement and 6% felt that they enhance accountability of schools to parents.

Strachan stated that school Councils need to communicate with parents about the ways that they can get involved. Moreover, technology such as Twitter would be helpful in to let parents know what's going on in their schools.

### ***Parent Discussion***

#### **How do you communicate with your community right now?**

Communication is primarily done through Email, Newsletters, District/School Websites and the physical presence at a child's school. It was recommended to generate a mass e-mail list per school, for communications.

- Members of St. Paul Catholic School suggested allocating a part of the school's webpage for Parent Council updates. Further, they also suggested keeping track of the hits and traffic for the website.
- Member of St. Matthew the Evangelist Catholic School recommends for each teacher have an individual webpage for their students to access.
- Member of St. Mark the Evangelist catholic School suggested having a Parent Representative in charge of updating the website for their child's teacher. School Newsletter

#### **What are the advantages?**

- **Emails** grant parents the option of opting out. It practices inclusiveness, allowing an individual to stay in the loop about school events. It is easy to communicate with other parents about events, fundraisers etc. via email. Furthermore Social Media such as Twitter allow for immediate updates of events and news.
  - Member of St. Paul Catholic School stated that when parents know what's going in the school it helps them feel included



- A parent cannot expect their children to tell them everything as soon as they come in through the door
  
- Openness - everyone knows what's going on (i.e. when EQAO, Education Quality and Accountability Office, scores are published)
- **Newsletters** promote a sense of community, alongside making people aware of significant community events and happenings
- **District/School Websites (*Online Parental Portal*)** are user friendly and make all school events and news easily accessible. All the information can be stored on one page. It also is a direct method of communication between the school board and parents.

### **What are the limitations of the methods?**

Some people may have limited access to computers and further may lack the necessary knowledge of how to use the technology. Technological methods of communication may also encourage unreasonable expectations from parents who may expect constant updates. Social Media may lead to negative postings and attitudes. Further, there are issues of security and spam.

### **What can you do to improve communications?**

Parents can meet with their child's teacher to discuss and keep an open line of communication between the two parties. The teacher should contact parents for any significant issues or concerns; meanwhile, monitoring child individually, on a daily basis for smaller problems. Reaching out to parents that deal with their children on their everyday basis is important.

### **What are your concerns about broader communication and how can you address them?**

A major concern is one of safety. Everyone plays a role in keeping the school a safe and enjoyable place; it is important to be a proactive parent. Safe practices include: honoring the system and using respectful discourse.

### **How can principals help school councils communicate?**

Principals can support school council communication by designating a specific section of the school website for direct communication with parents. The school webpage can also be used to post specific instructions for parents. Communication can also be enhanced by allocating a section of the school newsletter for parental communications. Furthermore, posting stickers on student agenda indicating important events (especially helpful for Primary students), also helps parents to stay aware of significant happenings at school.



### **BIG IDEAS FROM PARENT DISCUSSION**

- Make information available online in real-time. Have parents view from home the meetings being streamed from schools.
- Keep the communication channels open.
- “Bring a Friend Night” at School Council Meetings
- Use Newsletter as a hub of community events and church meetings
- Priority in engaging students to engage parents
- Sharing coping strategies- as a school council, share tips on how to deal with stress and how to organize and plan.
- Event Idea – Family Cooking Sessions
- Support other parents, listen (face to face communication)
- Emphasize the idea that parents need to know that they are not alone
- Fundraising
- Use of Synervoice (automatic call machine) to promote events
- Focus on meaningful activities

## **F) School Council Best Practices Workshop**

### **Speaker: Jacqui Strachan, Director of Outreach and Parent Support at People for Education**

Jacqui began by speaking of how important it is to build an Engaged Community. The advantage of having an Engaged Community is that there are plenty of resources. She moved on to expand and discuss the *7 Steps of Building an Engaged Community* – refer to the handout distributed. The details discussed, follow below:

#### **Step 1: You have to want it!**

Jacqui begins by sharing a personal experience. She had asked parents what their hidden talents were and encouraged them to use it in their child’s schools. She recruited a Costume Designer, who helped with the costumes of an upcoming play and a restaurant owner of a Thai restaurant who took care of the food for the next event.



Both parents and teacher must take initiative. Everyone must play a role in making a school feel welcome. For example, encourage community engagement by putting a mop and cleaner next to the wall, as opposed to putting up barrier signs on the wall (i.e. clean your shoes).

### **Step 2: Make the School a Welcoming Place**

Story: A Principal at a school with a high aboriginal population noticed that the numbers were really low on school picture day- money was a barrier. So the principal initiated a family picture day, instead of student picture day. Families of 2 showed up, families of 20 showed up. The family pictures were then made into a collage and displayed in the front of the school. This example sends a message about the importance of community.

Media affects the perception of community and misdirects people to feel danger. Furthermore, Jacqui states that school communities should not let security outweigh community in their schools. Multilingual welcome sign and greetings with friendly smiles are ways to make schools a more welcoming place; and parent volunteers help in making schools a safe and secure zone.

### **Step 3: Community Building 101**

To engage someone, they have to feel like they're a part of a community; and to make a community, everyone must feel involved. Councils have the freedom of discussing matters that are not limited only to education. Social events can be planned; for example, BBQ's and fun fair events introduce people to each other on a personal level. Further, during these events, food brings people together. Focus on community building especially when fundraising is limited- when the parents of a school community are mostly from the working class.

Jacqui again shares a personal experience: she once hosted an *Eid* dinner at a school and the people who showed up were of Islamic faith; on a separate occasion, she hosted a Fun Fair, for which the attendees were mostly white Canadians. As a means of inviting both cultures, Jacqui then organized an international food fair; to which, parents of different backgrounds attended and further got to know each other and make connections. Jacqui claims that once those relationships are in place, there will be more people showing up the council meetings.

### **Step 4: Make Connections Early and Often**

Keeping it positive encourages parental engagement. Schools should direct parents towards having healthy parent-child relations (i.e. eating at least one meal a week as a family, can significantly reduce eating disorders). Use parent and student ambassadors to encourage engagement. Always make sure that staff members have access to all information that is needed by parents; make sure teachers know about the School Council and make announcements during concerts.



### **Step 5: Invite, Invite, Invite again**

Use as many forms of Social Media as possible to communicate with students and parents, including: email, Twitter, Facebook and web-pages. Further, it is never enough to write on the school newsletter, “student council, next week” amidst all the technology however, it is also important to remember the power of face-to-face conversation.

### **Step 6: Make Meetings Friendly and Inviting**

It is important to keep in mind that most parents that attend school meetings, have probably never sat in a formal meeting before. So it is important that meetings be warm and inviting, rather than formal. There are many things that can be done in order to make meetings warm and inviting.

Welcome new people enthusiastically - even before the meeting has formally started. Assigning a specific student to greet the parents will be a good idea. It is also important to make sure that translators are available in the languages of the parents attending. Acknowledging all parents for their contributions and for their value also shows respect. Furthermore, having parents introduce each other will have them communicating and engaging with each other.

Another way to hold their attention is by bringing in interesting speakers and further by providing entertaining child care services during the meetings. Hosting School Council meetings online via Skype allows easier access to people in the community that cannot be present. Lastly, parents should come to a consensus when discussing an issue; and only when there are two equally strong sides to an issue, they should result to the voting system.

### **Step 7: Lower Expectations and Be Patient**

If only 10 parent members show up on average at each weekly Parent Council meeting, do not be discouraged. A council can be run effectively even with only 10 members. Numbers show that 95% of Newcomer Parents are more supportive than many Native Parents, who do not have positive attitudes towards their child’s school communities. These gaps of achievement, resources and knowledge in the Native Canadian community need to be closed. A school council that keeps consistency, without being discouraged due to the lack of parental support, will attain an active parent body who is willing to help their school. If you worry about numbers and not content, you won’t be effective.



## *Parent Discussion*

### **1. Make a list of the reasons why you want an engaged community. What are the benefits to the school and the community?**

A parent stated that the main reason she wants an engaged school community is because her children attend the school and she wants to be involved. Another claimed that it is important to have parents a part of school councils in high schools. Another stated that a lot of people lack knowledge of what is available to them and would benefit through more involvement; she also is an advocate of using social media to involve parents.

There are many benefits to an engaged community. It sets a stage to address issues and concerns; it is a way to encourage and support effective communication between parents, students and staff. It is most beneficial for the kids. Parents remain informed and aware of the events and happenings at school and further become more open to help out at schools. Through an engaged community, specific problems and issues can be delegated to separate groups of people and dealt with more intricately. The more people you have engaged in the council, the more beneficial it will be.

### **2. How do you make the school more welcoming to all families?**

A parent felt that a school becomes more welcoming to families when they invite parents to school councils and help them become more familiar with school council procedures. Another recommended staggering meetings - changing the dates every other month to include more parents that may not be available on certain evenings. Another believes hosting events such as Meet the Teacher BBQs and potlucks (i.e. before a Christmas Concert) also makes parents feel welcome; hosting a BBQ for the grade 9's at some schools will bring the students together - it may make some students feel more comfortable. Another suggested hosting a Breakfast Club once a month.

There were also some specific suggestions including: setting up the Family Christmas Tree at the front of the school and inviting families to bring in an ornament each; hosting an event where families buy a light bulb (\$1/each) for a deceased member of their family to decorate on a Christmas Tree and signing a loved one's name onto the ribbon which will wrap around the Christmas Tree were also among the suggestions. Donating money that has been raised to a charitable organization (Make a Wish Foundation, Knights of Columbus) also promotes inclusiveness. Another idea was to hold a donation event where children buy Christmas gifts for others (age, gender) in their school whose family may not be able to afford gifts. Furthermore, keeping the Christmas tree unlit until the first mass on Christmas



Eve, displays the respect of tradition. The school can also consider sponsoring children in the coming years.

### **3. Identify all the opportunities to connect with parents – in the school and in the community**

A parent emphasized that it is important for the Council to have publicity, so others can witness their involvement; further, the Council should lead by example through community involvement. They can send out mass emails that recruit School Volunteers to help out with local school events (i.e. Literacy Club).

Parent- Teacher nights are significant in making connections with parents. Furthermore, phone-calls and face- to-face appointments should be available by request, if there is ever a problem.

#### ***BIG IDEAS FROM PARENT DISCUSSION***

- “Smile for the Camera” slogan (to make security cameras seem more community friendly)
- Popcorn and Movie Night – Free Event (you will find no one is paying attention to the movie because children often end up playing while parents socialize)
- Parent fieldtrips during the weekends, so more parents can be involved and get to know each other
- Meeting in pubs
- Ensure to engage the Principal because when they are on the Parent Council side - things are much easier for everyone involved
- “Tea, Tissues, and Coffee” event for Kindergarten Parents (dropping off their little ones on the first day of school)
- Ensure all parents of all programs are part of the Parent Council
- Importance of succession planning – to carry through with all great ideas

#### ***Save the Date - People for Education Conference this Saturday, November 2nd***

Contact Jackie from People for Education for more information at [jacqui@peopleforeducation.ca](mailto:jacqui@peopleforeducation.ca)

Jackie suggests joining the group Edugeeks on Facebook for more great ideas:  
<https://www.facebook.com/edugeek.net>



## **APPENDIX A: Summary of Survey Responses**

*Note to reader: Responses are documented in verbatim; feedback was not provided for every question on the forms collected..*

### **Survey No.1 - Workshop Feedback**

#### **Workshop 1: Building Partnerships with Principals and School Chairs/members**

##### **A) How do you communicate with your community right now?**

- Teacher websites
- School Website (CSC tab)
- Monthly Newsletter
- Email Address List
- Twitter feed
- Calendar
- Sign Board
- Newspaper

##### **B) What are the advantages?**

- There are many avenues of communication
- Information is sent to all community members

##### **C) What are the limitations of your methods?**

- Not always instant
- Information is not extensive
- It doesn't seek input - we communicate outwardly only

##### **D) What can you do to improve communications?**

- Use Twitter
- Use Facebook
- Compile e-mail address list
- Provide information to parents on how they can e-mail or contact us

##### **E) What are your concerns about broader communication and how can you address them?**

- Facebook communications on status ... could be problematic
- Need to be more creative and open-minded with communications
- Use more communication





**F) How can principals help school councils communicate?**

- Post agendas, summaries of work and future foci
- Establish an e-mail list of parents who want to be contacted regarding school activities and notices
- Facilitate conversations about new ways to communicate

**Faith Formation – Catholic Community Culture and Caring**

*Engaging learner in rich experiences that authentically ingrate Catholic virtues and social teachings, reflective of student voice, service, and dignity for all.*

**A) What experiences do we involve our Catholic school communities?**

- School Liturgies, Masses
- Celebration of Excellence – Catholic Virtues
- Special Celebrations e.g. Walk of Faith
- Recess Success – Student Wellness
- Rosary Apostolate (Monthly)
- Special Occasion Mass (Advent)
- Gr. 2 Rosary Program
- Gr.4 Bible Ceremony
- Communion and Confirmation Prep
- Communicate monthly focus on school calendar
- Restorative practice focus – distribute brochure, included in agenda presented at CSC

**B) How do we help out Catholic school communities with their faith formation?**

- By having Council support sacraments e.g. gift
- By supporting student wellness programs e.g. recess success
- By enhancing the home/school/parish connection
- Through a very strong relationship with Parish
- With faith focused celebrations such as Christmas concerts, masses and celebrations at the school – open to all

**C) What are some of our successes in the area?**

- The sense of community is strong



## **Workshop 2: School Councils Sharing Best Practices**

### **A) Make a list of the reason why you want an engaged community. What are the benefits to the school and the community?**

- Kids are comfortable
- Enriches academic achievement
- Makes people feel welcome
- Establish good communication with teachers and parents
- Everyone has a sense of ownership – want to be at school

### **B) How do you make the school more welcoming to all families?**

- Send a survey to parents to capture their talents and what they can contribute
- Host free events for families (use grant funds) or ask community partners or parents to volunteer their time and talents

### **C) Identify all of the opportunities to connect with parents – in the school and in the community.**

- “Meet the teacher” night
- Christmas concerts
- Events that include both parents and children e.g. family wellness night
- Notes in agenda
- E-mail
- Twitter

### **D) What strategies do you use to make people feel welcome and included at meetings? How can you avoid being labeled a clique? How do you welcome new ideas and new people?**

- Acknowledge new people
- Don’t conduct intimidating meetings

*[end of Survey #1 results]*



## Survey No.2 – DCPIC Survey to Assist in Parent Engagement Planning

### A) Can you give us an idea of future services and/or offerings that we could develop for your use e.g. speakers, workshops, etc.?

- Compile a list of speakers, or ideas for speakers
- Obtain help in bringing popular workshops/speakers to school
- Invite more speakers like Michael Reist – someone who can educate the teachers/principals on accommodating children (boys) differently (funded under our Parent Involvement funds, etc.) and is an in-depth presentation
- Get the names or organizations that can come to school council meetings to speak on subjects, areas related to school and community, culture and caring
- Bring in more guest speakers; have workshops for home schools or a community of schools; hold workshops for smaller groups at school level – throughout the year
- Have video streaming of presentations
- Bring in motivational speakers
- Hold autism workshops for parents
- Hold Well Being and Mental Health workshops
- Provide information on how to identify a child's special needs
- Develop strategies on how school councils can support the school improvement plan
- Greater implementation of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device)
- Develop ideas about how to use parent involvement
- Address sentiments parents have about feeling no choice but to send their child to private school due to lack of support from DCDSB
- Hold evening meetings for parents who may not be able to attend during the day
- Get books for council members too
- When we hear of these informative meetings, Principal facilitates - need more involvement.
- Principal Association to give perspective on role of the Principal
- Restorative Practice
- More training for teachers in understanding mental health and the well-being of children – specifically on how to make it easier for children to learn
- Have Council Members inform parents about the limitations of parents at Council

### B) Are there any issues you may have been encountered or are currently experiencing as part of your school council that the PIC committee can help with? Can you provide some details?

- Assistance needed with establishing , increasing and improving effective communication with the school community, council members and all parents
- Some clique-ness issues
- Difficult to access and distribute e-mail addresses



- Changes made by principal causing disruptions and confusion for staff and students. Although they feel the changes are beneficial but are not to staff and students.
- Getting the different people in council to work together
- Need assistance with financial questions
- Parents don't want to be involved and are not engaged. The same 2-3 always turn up.
- Not enough attendance at PIC meetings
- Teachers do not understand that each child learns differently – need means by which to work with each child
- Too much time spent on fundraising that needs to be put towards student achievement
- PIC website seems to be focused on communicating strictly to Chairs
- Overwhelmed with “expectations” of what is expected
- Hold visits to each school council
- CSC roles need to be redefined
- Provide information on what PIC is, what PIC offers and how PIC can help
- Need to develop a sense of “ownership” of one's school and need community building in action (i.e. per Michael Reisman – get kids to paint bathrooms)

**C) What clarification or information can we provide to you to assist you in your understanding of the role of student councils in our board?**

- Clarify and provide information/handouts on the role of:  
**School Councils, Parish Reps, parent councils, parents and PIC's role and services**
- What are our limitations and how effectively are we and our voices?
- Perform a role reversal with administrators and parents – can lead to greater understanding and positive collaboration
- Provide information on Privacy Policy regarding the contacting of parents
- Knowing the dates of PAC meetings, PIC can choose a school/date
- Define topics Councils can touch on
- Distribute Michael Reist's presentation to all attendees and other PowerPoint presentations

*[End of survey #2 results]*