



Principal Connections

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ADVOCATE

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The Power of Parents

By Annalisa Crudo-Perri

There is no more powerful advocate than a parent armed with information and options.

Rod Paige

The word advocate has taken on a whole different level for the parents of children in our Catholic education system. When a child begins his/her school journey at the tender age of four, parents may never imagine the degree of participation required in their child's education.

When my first child started school, I was excited and enthralled he was in a Catholic school that would help shape the person he would become. Initially, I did not think there was a place for me as a parent to help my son grow in school. Very quickly, I learned the only way my son would continue to achieve success would be in partnership with his teachers. I had to actively engage in his education and the truest form of parent engagement, begins with me, and then carries through to my child in his school.

An informed parent is an engaged parent, and an engaged parent can become a parent advocate. This was the journey I first took over 20 years ago and one that through the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE) I help other parents take every day, especially as the pandemic pushes us further to ensure our children's education is being properly prioritized and our children are achieving success.

Parent advocacy in education has existed for a long time and has taken on many different meanings. When my mother became a founding member of the Parent Council at Madonna CSS in the 1980s, the mandate was simply to provide a connection between parents and school. I attended some meetings and there

were never discussions surrounding how curriculum was implemented or how parents can help in their child's success. That was left to the school and staff.

Now, at parent councils across the province, there is a level of accountability and transparency that is expected from parents as councils discuss student achievement, school learning goals, and other important matters. There is an expectation that parents are aware of key issues to improve the system because we all play a critical role.

At OAPCE, as our mandate states: Engage, Advocate, Enhance, we not only



teach parents the very essence of these words to use in their everyday lives, we also encourage them. We want to help build our organization so it truly reflects parental voice across the province. Our role is to further amplify student and parent voice.

Closing out another school year during a pandemic, OAPCE was eager to gather the thoughts of parents so we could better fulfill our mandate – to be the voice of parents in Catholic education. We invited parents to contribute by generating ideas and sharing suggestions. Our findings were then shared with the Ministry of Education and school boards across Ontario to inform the future of education priorities. This is parent advocacy at its finest!

The intent was to crowdsource parent thoughts and ideas on what things should START, what things should STOP, and what things should CONTINUE to be done in publicly-funded Catholic schools. OAPCE utilized a software tool (ideaboardsz.com) to facilitate data collection. There are some limitations around data analytics, but overall, the tool was successful in achieving our two primary objectives: engage parents and gather parents' thoughts and ideas on three key themes, so we could advocate on their behalf.

We focussed on three main areas of interest: Mental Health, Academic Achievement and Virtual Learning & Technology.

Mental Health continued to be a priority focus for many parents. The long-term impacts of COVID-19 will only be realized in coming years. There needs to be a provincially-funded mental health program to support the needs of children now to ensure mentally healthy adults in the future.

Addressing Academic Achievement, many parents raised concerns about experiences of inconsistencies in the way curriculum is delivered from school to school and board to board. The result is inequitable educational experiences leading to inequitable academic achievement. This perception is also extended to marking and evaluations of student work.

COVID launched everyone into **Virtual Learning**. Many school boards achieved in three months what they had planned to implement in the next three to five years with respect to moving towards offering virtual learning options to students. This provided an excellent opportunity for some while a dismal experience for others, specifically in our rural boards. Many parents see the value of supporting our children in skills for the future. Technical “basic” skills such as math and grammar became diluted given the assistance of software tools, as some noted. Three key themes were consistently discussed in parents' comments:

- Inequity and inconsistency with what is taught and how it is taught
- Essential skills and competencies are not taught but are most needed, including holistic-digital literacy, along with life-skills literacy, household management, critical thinking, organizational skills and time management
- Inclusivity – How to work with /teach/recognize individuals with different learning needs, as well as from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds

Overall, our initiative was well received by parents, and we look forward to more conversations so that we can better understand the local, regional and provincial needs of our children across the province. Dialogues help inform parents and teach them to engage in different ways to ensure they can advocate for their child's education. From kitchen table to classroom, from parent council to school board, and from OAPCE to Ministry of Education, parents have a voice that can help our children to learn and ultimately achieve excellence in their schooling.

To my fellow parents, you are not only your child's primary teacher. Your strength, perseverance, resilience and advocacy are pillars to support the continued growth of your child and the prosperity of our future through education. ☺

Dedicated to my mother, Marta Crudo, who taught me how to advocate.

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