

# Parent engagement: It's an attitude

I would like to draw a parallel between the scene I've just described and the field of education. Educators, policy-makers, and parent advocates have spent a great deal of time and effort putting structures in place to create greater opportunities for parent voice and engagement in public schooling. School councils have been legislated across Canada and, in Ontario, there are wonderful structures such as the Parent Engagement Office, a parent involvement policy, parent involvement committees, and a provincial parent board. While really valuable work has been done (and I applaud it), in and of itself, it is not enough. In order to realize the potential these structures offer students, families and the educational system, it will also be critical to spend time and energy developing with educators and school staff attitudes and dispositions which invite true parent engagement.

One of the critical lessons I learned from my research is that it is not about looking outward at others; it is always about looking inward. It is about how willing we are as educators to ask honest questions of ourselves. It is about how willing we are to act honestly on what we learn when we ask those questions. Are we giving parents real – and safe – opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings, to provide input, to have a voice in decisions which impact their children? Are we truly listening – and hearing – what they say to us, without believing that we al-

ready hold the answer? Are we acting on what they say to us? School councils are intended to give parents “meaningful input and an ability to influence decisions that would affect their children and their local schools” (School Councils: A Guide for Members, 2002, p. 2.2). The reality is the structure of a school council can not do this; only an attitude and belief on the part of the educators who enact the school council, a belief that parents are integral to schooling and to realizing enhanced outcomes for students, can make this happen.

Yves Bousquet, a principal with Saskatoon Public Schools, tells a story of a conversation he had with a respected colleague. Yves mentioned to this experienced principal he was considering opening up staff meetings to the parent and community body, making them “school meetings” instead. His colleague responded by saying, “That will never work!” When Yves asked why he did not think it will work, his friend said, “Parents don't have the same information we have. Therefore, they can't play the same part in decision-making processes.” Yves went away and thought about what his colleague had said and he decided his colleague was right – parents do not have the same information educators have. Rather than deciding to exclude them from decision-making processes because of this, Yves decided to ensure they had access to the same information as educators and staff. He did create the school meetings he was

considering. He also opened all professional development sessions to parents and community members. In both settings, he made available to parents all the background information they needed to ‘provide meaningful input and to influence decisions that would affect their children and their local school.’ Yves did not look outward and say, “You are right, these parents do not have enough information to contribute to our decision-making.” Instead, he looked inward and asked himself, “What do I have to do differently to ensure parents can play a meaningful part?” It was his disposition that shaped his action.

At the time Yves made a decision to move to “school meetings,” he was principal of Princess Alexandra Community School. Everyone attending the meetings, staff member or parent, took a seat in a circle. Rather than providing a predetermined agenda, Yves co-constructed the agenda with those in the circle. As they moved from person to person, each individual had an opportunity to put forward agenda items, for information or discussion, or to pass. Yves had the same opportunity to raise items as everyone else. The meeting ended when each person in the circle had had a turn. It was in such a meeting that a parent strongly expressed his concern about what he perceived to be a limited amount of supervision on the playground. He held the floor while he provided accounts of his observations of

the playground and the reasons for his concern. Other parents in the circle affirmed they, too, held similar concerns. Staff listened to the parents and spoke openly of their struggles, with a small staff, to assign more personnel to playground supervision. As parents and staff talked together, they began to generate solutions. In the end, the group decided that parents would play a role in supervision. To support the parents in taking on this task, Yves agreed to arrange some inservicing on safety protocols, first aid, and conflict resolution strategies. He also agreed to purchase safety vests for all adults to wear on the playground so that children would recognize both staff and parents as legitimate supervisors.

So what might this example invite us, as educators, to consider in relation to our attitudes about parent engagement?

**A disposition in which we are willing to give up control.**


Yves no longer prepared the agenda in advance and directed the meeting. When the desired outcomes of a school meeting are clearly defined by the group, we can trust that the items others enter into the conversation are as important and worthy of attention as our own.

**A commitment to respect and honor the process and the people.**

A critical piece in moving to school meetings was to design a strong process which invited voice, and then to trust in the process as it unfolded. Such a process enables us to take a position where we truly are able and open to listen to – and to hear – one another.

**An acceptance of conflict as a natural result of human interaction.**

We often work hard to avoid conflict or to shut it down. It is not conflict itself that is problematic, but our response, or lack of response, to it that is. In this situation, the parent's honest and open expression of concern enabled a satisfactory resolution.

In the Winter 2009 edition of the School Advocate, Gord Kerr called for an evaluation of the structures through which the Ontario Ministry is working to enhance parent engagement in the province (p. 6). He articulated a sound rationale for an evaluation of the PIC's (Parent Involvement Committees) as a means of strengthening and enriching the current work being done in schools. In supporting Gord's position, I would like to suggest that such an inquiry focus on the attitudes and dispositions of those enacting the structures to engage parents. The structures are in place. It is now up to educators to live within them in relational ways. It will take a disposition on the part of educators that sees parent voice and meaningful input into decision-making as being important and integral to all the work they do. We need to ask ourselves what is needed to create that disposition. 

**Please see SCHOOL on pg. 8**



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**I walked by my son's bedroom a little earlier today and was dismayed to see the chaotic state it was in.** Clothes cover the floor, drawers and closet doors hang open, his laundry basket is still full of the clean laundry that never got put away and his book shelves are loaded with many more things than books. Why is it that our son's room continues to be in such disarray when we have provided him with spaces and places for all his things? Any of you who have children can probably answer this question easily! The mess truly doesn't bother him and there are many other things he would rather spend his time on than keeping his room tidy and organized. While we have provided the structure our son needs to organize his room, we have not yet influenced his attitude about its organization. Standing in his doorway this morning, it was obvious to me what work we still need to do.



**Gord Kerr**

M. Ed.

**A few weeks ago, I went cross country skiing just outside of Parry Sound.** The winter has been a good one for cross country ski enthusiasts. The snow came early and stayed. After finishing a ski, I overheard some conversation about how disappointing it was that school would be starting before Labour Day this coming September. Aside from the disruption to families who would need to return home from holidays to get the kids back to school, the conversation turned to all those resorts, campgrounds and small businesses in the area that depend on every summer weekend for the business to sustain themselves for the rest of the year. Communities dependent on tourism dollars place a high value on summer weekends.

## Starting school after Labour Day

And of course, long holiday weekends like the Labour Day weekend are particularly important for business.

In Toronto, the Canadian National Exhibition cried out that they depend on high school students to operate many of the concessions and rides while the CNE is open, and that sending their workers back to school before that final Labour Day weekend finale would disrupt their ability to continue operating through those last few days. How many other businesses around Ontario need their high school students to continue working through that last weekend of the summer?

In any year, starting school before the Labour Day weekend presents a disruption to the usual ebb and flow of family life. But this year, during a rather pronounced economic downturn, starting school early presents the opportunity to disrupt the economies of Ontario's communities when they can least afford such a disruption. Starting school early in 2009 appears like a self-inflicted constraint on the economy when Ontario's economy needs stimulus, not constraint.

Of course, there are schools where families and children choose to send their students back to school early. But this is

not one of those situations involving family choice.

It was not the intention of any board to cause a disruption to the local economy. It was an unintended consequence of trying to fit in the number of required instructional days and professional development days into a constrained calendar. No harm intended, but plenty of potential harm to be done.

There have been problems with inconsistent school calendars before. A few years ago, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) held their March break at a different time from many of the surrounding Greater Toronto Area boards. It doesn't sound like such a problem, until taking into account that many TDSB teachers live in York, Peel, Durham or Halton, and many teachers for York, Peel, Durham and Halton live in Toronto. When the TDSB teachers who lived outside of Toronto were on break, their children needed to be in school, and when the children were on break, their parents had to work. The simple shift of a break by a single week had the effect of disrupting the family lives of so many people.

Decisions about the school calendar are made independently by 72 school boards and

several school authorities. Given the number of people involved in setting the calendar, and the number of different decision making bodies involved, it's amazing that there are not more problems and inconsistencies. Someday, it may make sense for the calendar to be established on a province wide basis, with exceptions requested by individual boards who offer alternative programming that demands an alternative school calendar.

At this time, however, it remains a board level responsibility and decision. And despite the uproar about the planned early start for the 2009 / 2010 school year, the Minister defended the boards' authority over this decision. Minister Kathleen Wynne did, however, encourage boards to start the regular school year after the long Labour Day holiday weekend.

Within a struggling economy, starting school after Labour Day makes good sense. Protecting the decision rights of school boards also makes sense. Yet, by encouraging boards to start up after Labour Day, the Minister of Education has contributed to sustaining an economy that operates based on the histori-