

London District Catholic School Board

“Our Catholic Schools 2006 – 2007: A Discussion On Ontario’s Catholic Schools and Their Future”

1. What would you like your local school board and the Institute for Catholic Education to pay particular attention to?

Based on the results of the group surveys, a number of areas of focus could be identified for our local school board.

The first area of focus is “Church to our students”. Increasingly, the school plays a significant and solitary role in the faith lives of Catholic school students. Respondents identified the celebration of the church year, sacraments, liturgies and celebrations as distinct features of our Catholic system. The presence of symbols of our faith: prayer tables, religious statues, crucifixes and other images help to create an environment of faith learning. A further factor that identifies our distinctiveness is the presence of priests in schools and that respondents expressed the desire to see an increase in the involvement of priests.

We believe that although we have in the past emphasized a desire for a strong connection and partnership with the local Diocese, this is not seemingly strong enough, nor is it visible. There are obvious reasons for this:

There are fewer people pursuing a religious vocation, and there is a shortage of priests and nuns in general, let alone present in the schools – a comment that occurred frequently.

The public has heard a great deal about the abuse scandals, especially prevalent in the priesthood. Locally in London, this is a significant issue due to the fact that a few of the cases have originated from here (or close by) and have been highly publicized. This has created challenges for many people to question the Church and their faith.

The Diocese is in a time of crisis. As a partner of ours (and indeed a foundation of our System, by Canon law), it is experiencing a decline of public support, financial support, church attendance, and a lack of new vocations (priests and nuns). At the same time the fact that many Catholics are beginning to question church doctrine like never before (Papal infallibility, right of priests to marry, allowing women into the priesthood, conservative approaches and viewpoints of the Vatican, attitudes toward confession, annulment, etc.) is causing many to adopt a “smorgasbord” approach to religion. This creates opportunities for critics of our faith based system.

There is a need for our clergy and parish teams to understand that they are welcome in our schools and for our staffs to feel comfortable in extending the invitation to come to our classes.

Another area of focus is “An Active Faith”. Respondents commented on the distinctive sense of community that was obvious and palpable in their schools. A shared faith was identified as contributing to this feeling and the fact that our Catholic faith provided great comfort to those who were in need of consolation or support. Respondents also identified the concern for social justice as distinctive in Catholic schools and the fact that this sense of justice was grounded in Gospel values. The same Gospel values guide the organization of the school and discipline.

Funding should be dedicated to what we think is important to us as a faith based system. We should be celebrating the Ministry of Jesus, as well as the ministry of education. We have the opportunity to be part of a community based on something deeper than geographical location – our foundation of faith. With that common understanding, we can have the common conversation based on shared beliefs and values in all that we do and say.

There is also a need for strong faith filled leadership from our leaders throughout the system.

2. What is the most important issue that your local school board and the Institute for Catholic Education should address?

The most important single issue that local school boards and ICE should address is to maintain and develop that distinctiveness of our schools and the importance of Gospel values in creating that distinction. In an increasingly secular society, teachers, administrators and parents must remain dedicated to building our communities based on the message of the Gospel. Teachers who are currently in teaching must know and share the great story of the history of the Catholic system in Ontario and rely less on the constitutional provision that endows Catholic education by law.

We need to continue to educate the communities about Catholic education and the value of having the two systems. Non-Catholic ratepayers/voters need to know what we are all about so that they are informed and can make positive informed decisions in the event that the question of the existence of our system should be put to a referendum.

There is a need to bring the unions back to the real reason we are unique – the sense of covenant vs. contract. We must come from one understanding that we are resurrection people. This should be reflected in the common good for everyone and not one specific group versus another.

3. What would you most like to see changed?

We would most like to see an increase in involvement of priests in the faith life of the school. While it is understood that there are fewer priests than in previous generations, their presence is welcomed and missed in schools. It is generally acknowledged that the traditional 'home/church/school' triangle has been weakened by challenges to family life and a lack of family involvement in Church life.

Increased partnership with church/school. This has to come both ways – school to parish and parish to school. We may need to be more invitational to our parishes, remembering to include them in all social activities, assemblies etc.

We have experienced wonderful support through ICE and other groups (such as the CCC) which has resulted in the creation of a distinct Catholic version of curriculum and the Catholic Graduate Expectations. We need to ensure not only that these documents are being used effectively but also that each teacher is consistently promoting a Catholic point of view and consistently infusing a Catholic ethos and vernacular in his/her teaching. Of course that presupposes that the teacher is indeed committed to the Catholic faith, well versed in the Catholic story, and deeply rooted in our traditions. We need more of this.

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