

# Canadian Parents for French PEI response to Education Governance Commission/Department of Education and Early Childhood Development/November 2011

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Thank you for this opportunity to present to you tonight. Canadian Parents for French (CPF) was founded 1977 by a group of 35 parents looking for better opportunities for their children to learn French. We have grown to over 25,000 members across the country, with approximately 800 members in PEI. We are structured much like the Home and School Federations with national, provincial and local entities.

Although CPF's focus is on FSL education and therefore narrower than education in general, we do feel we have something to offer this committee. Through our work we have encountered most of the topics you are covering, keeping in mind we make no claim to expertise in any area. We hope what we have to say, will add to what you have already discovered and help complete the end composite.

## **School Boards**

Through our work we have attended School Board meetings at all three school boards on many occasions and as recent as the ESD Meeting in Souris in September 2011. We have found that there is a difference in the look and feel in each of these. Some are more controlled/parliamentary, some are less rigid with more opportunity for input but all are professional. All SB trustees are, in our opinion, engaged in the process for the right reasons.

What could be improved?

Policy development: We agree (with the H&S Federation) that School Boards should have the same or similar policies and procedures, at least in some areas. We believe that this would make it easier for new trustees as well as parents, to understand the parameters they need to respect in order to effect change. At first glance, there seems to be no benefit to have School Boards with differing policies on such things as smoking, cell phones, bullying etc. Student welfare should be treated the same no matter where you live on PEI or who is making policy. I would think this would also streamline operations in this area and perhaps have a cost saving result. Does this mean amalgamation of the school boards? We think it important to look at all the possible scenarios, perhaps a Ministers Directive would suffice, perhaps these policies should be written by the Dept?

We were aghast, as I think as most were, with the dissolution of the ESD Board. What could have happened to have prevented this? Who is overseeing the overseers? School board trustees need to be

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knowledgeable about their duties and understand their place in the scheme of things. Perhaps a more accessible form of orientation for trustees is needed; a great model might be the Credit Union who has their members complete an on-line course within a predetermined time period.

*The Trustees' task is to be the critical link between communities and school boards. Trustees are responsible to their communities for the quality of education provided in local schools within the approved financial framework. In order to do this there needs to be a conduit for information going back and forth, from the school board to the community and vice versa. We believe that a lessening of the "parliamentary procedure" at school board meetings might help to encourage parents to attend and participate more fully. Perhaps even seek a seat at the table. As well, information about SB activities could be more readily accessible, perhaps on the SB websites. In addition, SB trustees names and contact information should be available on the SB web sites. They are elected and have an obligation to be available to those they represent.*

## **Ministerial Level**

We believe that that part of the Minister's duties is to set policies and guidelines for school boards, directors of education, principals and other school board officials. Although the School Boards are "at arm's length" the buck has to stop somewhere and we believe it is at the Minister's door. Someone needs to ensure that the Minister's directives are followed; someone has to ensure that the School Boards are following their own policies and procedures and that the School Administrators are complaint and so on. The Minister's office should not be able to pass the buck. The Ministerial level is where hard decisions are made. School closures, refusing to build new schools where none are necessary, ensuring the province wide implementation of changes to curriculum that might not seem popular at the time, are responsibilities of this office. It is not a popularity contest. Research and facts need to be the contributors for actions not who is going to be upset.

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**What is the single most important thing we would want to do if re-designing how PEI's education system is set up and run?**

## **Parental involvement**

There is thirty years of research showing that parents' involvement in their children's education has a significant impact on children's academic and developmental goals (Epstein, 2001; Nye, Turner & Schwartz, 2006). But how parents are involved matters — and the involvement that makes the biggest difference to students' chances for success in school isn't what many would expect.

Researchers divide parent involvement into two basic categories:

- Home-based activities and attitudes, such as having high expectations, talking together about school, building work habits and a positive approach to learning, or reading together.
- School-based activities, such as communicating with teachers, attending meetings about your child, volunteering in the classroom or school council work.

A review of the research shows that it is the home based activities and attitudes that are more closely linked to students' academic achievement, but even then, it is the kind of home-based activities that matters most. These are;

1. Parents having high (but reasonable) expectations of their children
2. Parents talking with their children, particularly about school
3. Parents helping their children develop positive attitudes towards learning and strong work habits
4. Parents reading to or with their children

THERE IS A GAP BETWEEN WHAT RESEARCH SAYS, AND WHAT PARENTS AND SCHOOLS DO. For example, according to children surveyed their parents don't regularly talk to them about school (less than 46%) or read with them. (Less than 22%) ([Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2010, pp. 6-16, 22-31](#)).

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Then what about Option 2 for involving parents? This same study says that while 86% of teachers say they keep all parents informed about school activities, only 32% say they feel successful helping all parents understand student learning goals and outcomes.

The results suggest a continued emphasis on school-based parent involvement— getting people into the school and participating in activities. This emphasis is particularly problematic in light of the evidence that school based parent involvement (volunteering, going to council meetings) is most relevant to white, upper-middle class two parent families. (Ho & Willms, 1996). Ontario research confirms school councils are not generally representative of the parent community. (Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Corter, Harris & Pelletier). School councils do however; offer important opportunities for community building, decision-making, communication and building social networks and a stronger constituency for public education (see e.g. Epstein, 1995). But an over-emphasis on school-based involvement may also increase stress on very busy parents— which isn't good for anyone. (see e.g. Lerner et al., 2002; Corter & Pelletier, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

So what is the answer to the “Parental involvement” conundrum? First we might look at how policies and procedures might be limiting parent participation. Are there ways to widen the definition of “Parent councils” or be more inclusive of other parent groups? Are there ways for groups like ours (who have over 800 members) to participate more fully within the education system. We believe that there are many parents who wish to be more involved but lack the knowhow, it is important to listen to those that are not so easily heard.

Careful policy work is required to help make home-based parent participation in education visible and make it “count” for teachers and principals. While there is no quick fix or program that will ensure effective parent involvement that boosts the success of all children, more could be done to communicate with parents about how they can support their children’s education. Policy that includes outreach to all parents about what they do at home may reach beyond those parents who are involved at the school. This form of outreach may help to at least partially address the current achievement gap between high-and low performing students.

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As well, the good news is that school-based practices can make a difference, but it's less about programs and more about communication, collaboration and building relationships (Mattingly et al., 2002). The research suggests that schools and teachers can be effective in supporting parents' effective involvement with their children at home and student success through a pattern of general and specific invitations, which ask for, facilitate and value parent's involvement; two-way communication; and outreach to all parents.

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