

Catholic Roundtable

Results Overview

*From the meeting held with community members on Monday, September 25, 2017
at the St. Basil Catholic Education Centre*

Preamble

During the June 2017 Regular Meeting, the Board of Trustees for the Holy Spirit Catholic School Division directed the Superintendent of Schools to organize a “Catholic Roundtable” intended to both inform division stakeholders about the recent threats to Catholic education and to gather feedback to develop a plan for advocacy into the future.

Invitations were sent to clergy, parish councils, school councils, teachers, principals, and other interested community members for the Monday, September 25, 2017 event. One hundred and four (104) participants attended and were asked to respond to the following three questions:

1. Why is Catholic education worth defending?
2. How can you demonstrate more support for Catholic education?
3. What are some ways to welcome families back to church and to Catholic education?

The responses were transcribed, categorized, reviewed to discern areas where different individuals may have provided similar responses, increasing their pertinence, and processed to formulate an overview intended to encapsulate the thoughts of the majority.

This information will be presented to the Board of Trustees at its November 29, 2017 Regular Meeting for further discussion and consideration of a future plan for the advocacy of Catholic Education. The report will be made publicly available shortly after Board review.

Why is Catholic education worth defending?

Probably the strongest explanation for why people felt that Catholic education is worth defending is because Catholic schools provide a safe place where students are permitted to both speak and learn about God and Jesus. Catholic schools ensure that this religious education is permitted in all aspects of the school, not just compartmentalized to religion classes, and students are encouraged to openly pray and develop a relationship with God. It was also argued that Catholic education serves as a means of protection, guarding our children from the bombardment of secular and self-centered messages by reinforcing the often counter-cultural truths, ethics, and values that have existed for over 2000 years.

The desire to have a safe place for children to learn about their faith stems from a desire to reinforce the values being instilled in the home and a recognition that Faith is an intrinsic aspect of culture and identity, which must be nourished in order to remain healthy and strong over the coming generations.

It was inferred that the work of Catholic education, to deliver a holistic education (intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and socially) for our children, could only improve future society by ensuring that the morals and ethics of Christ's message are instilled. One benefit of this moral formation would be that children would be more loving and accepting of all individuals, having been taught to uphold the dignity of the human person, and eventually become better leaders and citizens who care for all people, regardless of their differences. Catholic education was also seen as a means of lovingly bridging students to the greater Catholic community, further allowing them to see that they are part of something greater than themselves. Some individuals also spoke to the potential for Catholic education to both strengthen the faith life of many families and to provide a mechanism for evangelization to those previously unaware of the Gospel message.

While many submitted moral examples to reinforce the importance of a Catholic education, a few participants proposed practical and legal reasons for the continuation and defense of the system. Namely, it remains our Constitutional Right to Religious Freedom to have an affordable, publicly funded Catholic education system, and the choice of parents to enroll their children in this system strengthens democracy in Alberta. Some added that the provision of educational choice in Alberta further challenges competing school jurisdictions to perform better, which ultimately benefits students.

“Our society has broken homes and hurting children and we need to teach our kids love, forgiveness, mercy, kindness.”

How can you demonstrate more support for Catholic education?

Participants provided numerous responses on how best to demonstrate support for Catholic education. These tended to branch into four spheres: public advocacy, role modelling Catholicity, financial assistance, and spiritual support.

In terms of public advocacy, many suggested that letters or petitions voicing support for Catholic education could be used to lobby the government (Premier, Minister of Education, MLAs), alongside being politically involved in the system and voting for candidates that support Catholic education. Letters with well-formed arguments in support of Catholic education could also be forwarded to media outlets in the province.

Outside of the political system, it was indicated that there would be power in individuals simply initiating dialogue and speaking out in support of Catholic education in regular social settings. This would increase understanding about Catholic education's mandate, improve awareness regarding the attacks being made against the system, and diminish the misinformation that has recently been spread. Further support should be given to others advocating for Catholic education, whether they are school leaders or parents who have opted to enroll their children in our schools. A few also proposed that personal testimonies from students, grandparents, clergy, etc... may be an effective means of demonstrating the value of Catholic education in the current context.

To assist advocates in ensuring that they are sharing the right messages about Catholic education, it was suggested that a public awareness campaign be launched. This campaign would explain the foundations of Catholic education and its history in the province, highlight public works and the fact that all social justice activities are based on the teachings of Christ and our desire to do His will, and celebrate the successes of the system, schools, and students. It was also suggested that an effort be made to specifically highlight how Catholic education differs from its public education counterpart. Social media was cited as the primary vehicle to send these messages to the community, but signage, print news, television, and mail-outs were also recommended as potential mechanisms for advertising.

Being a solid and publicly visible role model of Catholicity was mentioned by many as being an important way of demonstrating support for Catholic education. Some ways to do this included ensuring that individuals invited and welcomed others to school and church based activities, embarking on social justice activities within the community, and organizing events/activities to help develop meaningful relationships within the community, particularly for youth. Parish and school support for each other's activities and aims was also noted as a good way to further community building.

Though not as frequently mentioned, some did indicate that providing financial assistance to Catholic education would be important. This included ensuring tax dollars are appropriately directed to the Catholic division; supporting school fundraising efforts; providing other donations, bursaries, grants, and/or wills; and potentially sponsoring school events, awards, and/or scholarships.

Prayer was brought forward as being a valuable means to demonstrate spiritual support for Catholic education. One individual suggested organizing school groups dedicated to prayer and including Catholic education as an intention.

An overarching theme that emerged was that the students themselves could and should be accessed to demonstrate their own support of Catholic education. They could be asked to add their own voice to efforts to advocate to the government, develop their own social media messages supporting Catholic education, or be involved in community social justice projects that demonstrate the power of Catholic education to raise engaged citizens.

“Our actions, words, giving, evangelization in our community demonstrate our truth and our beginnings. We need to talk to our neighbors and encourage newcomers. Welcome, Welcome, Welcome. Speak the word and live the word.”

What are some ways to welcome families back to church and to Catholic education?

For most respondents, the answer to this question was pastoral. It begins with prayer and leads to personally reaching out to those who have become disconnected from the church, either by engaging them in conversation or by visiting and developing a relationship with them. Then, through open and honest dialogue, we are called to ask these individuals what has turned them away from the church, to listen to their responses, answer any questions they may have, and acknowledge their fears and concerns - all without judgement. Some suggestion was made about developing a ministry to assist in this outreach work.

The next step is to invite them to return. Invitation was widely seen as one of the most important aspects to the entire process and ranged from, again, a personal invitation that speaks to how things have changed, to the use of social media or mail-out invitations to the home or through the school.

Should new people come to church, it was agreed that a welcoming and loving atmosphere would need to be supplied; one that is truly accepting. Concern was raised that individuals may be made to feel guilty for not being frequent attenders, that families with small children would be treated with disdain, or that couples in a “mixed” religious marriage might feel especially uncomfortable or concerned about being judged.

Once welcomed, further efforts need to be placed on continuing to develop relationships with these new or returning Catholics. Suggestions to build community included planning and hosting social events (e.g. free BBQs, games, potlucks, dances, etc....) and ensuring high-quality, relevant programs are offered. Recommended programs included a vibrant youth ministry, a multitude of children’s liturgy activities, and the potential creation of a ministry focused on the family. Programming ideas for family ministry included parenting classes and/or faith formation about Catholicism (e.g. the Mass, the bible, Catechism, and Catholic history) to both decrease overall misconceptions and give families a forum to ask questions.

The relationship between school and parish was also seen as important to helping draw families back to the church. Several individuals noted that the school’s familiar and non-threatening environment may be used to enhance parent comfort with religious activities, like the Mass, and eventually lead them to joining the church on a regular basis. Many also suggested that having schools take the lead during Sunday Masses (e.g. having students singing in the choir, reading, serving as ushers, etc...), is a wonderful way to fully engage students, potentially increasing their attendance and service to the church in the future. In either scenario, the rise in student participation in both parish and school liturgies would provide additional opportunities for their parents/friends/family/neighbours/supporters to become reengaged in the Faith as well. Another suggestion to engage children in the Mass was to consider having a course taught in Seminary that may help clergy better prepare homilies directed at children. Lastly, comments were made about how both the school and parish may support each other by sharing each organization’s important communications/events with the greater community.

In terms of truly drawing individuals back to Catholic education, it was frequently suggested that having the school resume a larger role in the coordination of sacramental preparation would be prudent. It was also noted that it is essential to have strong Catholic role models serving in schools, thus increased efforts must be made to hire Catholic teachers who continually practice their faith. Participants also recommended that it would be important for Catholic education to promote and advertise more about its unique characteristics, successes, and ability to provide a “holistic approach [to education] without a loss of academics,” though it would also be necessary to compete with the public system in terms of programming choices.

“We need to find more or different ways to show our families the relevance of Jesus Christ teachings and our Catholic principles in everyday life and how blessings follow when we try to follow them.”

“Embrace and love first, worry about the ‘rules’ later.”