

# Notebook

Volume five, Issue two  
October 2009

## Parent engagement is an important ingredient in Catholic education

Playground equipment, hot lunches, nutritious breakfasts, special events and class trips... There are a lot of things that would not happen in our schools without the involvement of parents.

This issue of **Notebook** highlights some of the ways that parents are engaged in the Catholic school system of Renfrew County.

"Parents are the first educators of their children," Renfrew County Catholic District School Board Chair Andrew Bray reminds us.

He has been an active supporter of parent engagement in schools for many years. More than 15 years ago, he and Director of Education John Stunt were provincial leaders in the development of school councils.

"We saw it was a good thing, so we went ahead to establish school councils before we were mandated to do so," Bray recalls, noting that today's school councils grew out of fund-raising organizations such as parent teacher associations.

"The councils take on a broader role to enhance learning for students," the school board chair explains.

Hazel Power is an Arnprior parent who has embraced that role. She chairs the county-wide Parent Involvement

Committee, is a member of the School Advisory Councils Implementation Committee, and chairs the school council at St. Joseph's Catholic School in Arnprior.

"The Catholic school system—they make you feel welcome," she says. "They want you to come in and help. That's wonderful."

"You feel like you really do make a difference," she adds.

At St. Joseph's, the school council has a rich history of actively contributing to school life. For a number of years, the parents have asked the principal and teachers for their wish lists, and then done everything in their power to make those wishes come true.

"When you walk in and you present things in the classroom, it's amazing," Power comments. "Their faces light up and they thank you. It's nice to see everybody smile."

One of the most popular smile creators is the Christmas shop run by the school council. Dollar store items are sold for a small profit right at the school, allowing the primary students to do their shopping independently.

The grade 7 and 8 pupils volunteer to help their younger schoolmates choose the perfect gift, and help wrap them to make sure they are "tree ready".

Activities like that make a school a true community, according to Power.

Currently the St. Joseph's school council is focusing on reaching out to a wider group of parents. Power, who has four children and works part-time, understands the demands of a busy schedule. But she also has an appreciation for the rewards of being involved.

She and her fellow council members are looking at new ways to engage other busy parents, such as regular newsletters, an updated website and possibly an interactive internet community.

"It's such a busy life," she acknowledges. "But we don't want anyone to miss out. These school years go by so quickly."



School council members from throughout the county gathered recently to hear Greg McNally, right, share his thoughts about Catholic education. With him here are, from left, Nancy McClusky and Cindy Hutton, parents of Bishop Smith Catholic High School students.

# A message from the Director of Education

The average home of a school-aged child is a busy place. In addition to work and school commitments, there are sports schedules, music lessons, pets to be fed and walked, chores to do.... The list can seem endless.

Yet more and more parents are finding time to become actively involved in our schools. Whether they are members of a school council, lunch hour volunteers, baking or cooking at home, or working in a classroom, moms and dads are active members of the Catholic education team.

This issue of **Notebook** tells some of their stories. In each of them, you will find people who share our commitment to quality Catholic education.

Parenting is an awesome responsibility and privilege. The bond between parent and child is a relationship like no other. Mom and dad are the centre of a child's life—from the initial duties of feeding and protection, to encouraging those first independent steps and beyond.

It would make no sense at all to expect that role to end when a child heads off to school. Rather, the family is joining with a new team of partners who will support them in the next steps in their development.

Years ago, parents walked through the school doors only when they were invited in for the annual open house, or when they were called in because of an issue.

Today's environment is completely different. Parents chat regularly with school staff. They work together to fill extra needs at the school. They combine their efforts to deliver messages and learning opportunities to the children in their care.

Our schools are healthy, rich and vibrant places because of the engagement of parents and other volunteers.

The laughter, warmth and dedication they share help to build a very special environment in our Catholic schools.

**Michele Arbour**  
Director of Education

---

## November: Time to Pray, Remember, Teach

Father Ryan Holly

One of the most common questions that I get asked by students between grades five and 12 is "what happens when we die?" It is certainly a big question, but it also speaks to the deeper longing that lies within each human being, be they young or old. The portion of the liturgical year between now and the beginning of the season of Advent focuses in a particular way on this question. How fitting for us in the Ottawa Valley that this coincides exactly with the time when nature is dying around us in preparation for the months of winter. The Church has dedicated the month of November as a special time where we pray for our loved ones who have died and ponder the reality of life, death and resurrection. Each Sunday at Mass when we pray the creed we profess that we "believe in the resurrection of the dead" which means that as Catholic Christians we believe that even though our bodies die in this life, our souls last forever. Our belief in the resurrection of the dead points to the fact that because of Jesus' own death and resurrection, each of the baptized live in the hope of eternal life in heaven and one day experiencing the resurrection of our own bodies, as promised to us in the sacrament of baptism.

Facing the topic of death is not easy for anyone at any age, but perhaps we can learn from the traditions and prayers of the Church and use the month of November to demonstrate and educate our young people about what we believe regarding eternal life. But how?

We can tell our children that by praying to God for our loved ones who have died, we are asking God to care for them

and that by praying for them at Mass we continue to show our love for those who have died, even if they are no longer physically with us.

Because it is such a delicate subject to address with children, it is difficult for us as adults to sometimes be clear and honest with our young people about the reality of death. When we die we do not turn into angels or experience reincarnation. We believe that our soul leaves the earthly body and is drawn into eternal life with God in heaven as the unique and special person created by God. It is our prayers that lovingly accompany our loved ones on this eternal pilgrimage.

Facing death is never easy, but history and experience has taught that we do a great disservice to our young people when we attempt to shelter them from this reality. Our Catholic faith can assist us in acknowledging the sadness that comes with death, but also showing to our young people that because of Christ's own death and resurrection, we each receive a lasting hope for eternal life. Hope is something that cannot be bought or sold, but only passed on through a living and active relationship of faith in the risen Lord. Take some time during the month of November with your children and talk about those loved ones who have gone before us in death. Remember them in your hearts each time we pray for the dead during Mass and at other times of prayer. Most of all, do not underestimate the power of those youthful questions and yearnings to know that each of us are created for eternal life with God.

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.*

---

## Annual meeting offers a chance for parents to share and learn

Greg McNally has a special mission for parents of Catholic students:

*Share stories. Be proud of our history. Tell others what your school does to improve learning opportunities and foster socially responsible students in your community.*

*And do it with the spirit and energy that is felt when you enter one of our schools.*

That's the passionate message the executive director of the Canadian Catholic School Trustees Association (CCSTA) presented at the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board's school council professional development meeting in September.

He reminded the audience that Catholic schools were among the first schools built in Canada.

"We helped form this country," he said, noting that with 850,000 students now in the Catholic education system, and 35 per cent of the population identifying themselves as Catholic, "we are a real force in Canada."

For McNally, to look forward it is important to continue telling the story of Catholic education.

"We have to be cognizant of our history," he said. "It's no secret; it's up to us."

## A new source of homework help is available on-line

The scene is all too familiar for most parents of high school students.

Cries of frustration fill the house as their son or daughter faces a particularly tough math assignment. Mom and dad haven't tackled calculus since their own secondary school days, and geometry is looking just as foreign and intimidating by now.



Where do you go for help?

A new program by the Ontario Ministry of Education offers an easy solution to that math homework problem.

"Homework Help" is an interactive website chatroom available for grade 7 to 10 math students, and the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board is one of the first school boards in the province to access it.

Open Sundays to Thursdays from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m., the site offers on-line tutoring by Ontario certified teachers with interactive discussion rooms for each grade where students can view a lesson, watch tutors draw on the whiteboard and type in their own questions for on-the-spot help. Other resources include videos of teachers leading classes through the 20 most commonly-asked math problems and interactive math tutorials.

Dave Noble, a teacher at Bishop Smith Catholic High School in Pembroke, is leading the initiative for Renfrew County's Catholic schools.

"The feedback from staff and students throughout the county has all been very positive," he says.

Noble will be collecting data on how the new site is used throughout the school year. That information will help refine and develop the site for future users.

Noble will be traveling throughout the county in coming weeks to share information about the new resource with other teachers and with parents. School council meetings and parent workshops will be organized to help him get the message out.

**Teacher Dave Noble, left, is introducing Homework Help across the county.**

## Reading grandmothers take engagement to the next generation



Wendy Donahue looks forward to Thursday mornings.

It's the day she heads to Cathedral Catholic School in Pembroke to be a "Reading Grandmother".

Donahue and two other members of the parish Catholic Women's League are proving that school engagement doesn't need to end with the parents' generation.

Each of them spends an hour and a half at the school every week, offering quiet time with a focus on books.

For Donahue, the time is divided between the kindergarten classroom and grade 5. Her goal is to share her own love of reading with a younger generation.

"I'd like everyone to love reading," she says.

She put a lot of thought into her choice to volunteer at the school, and she hopes that her presence there delivers a message to the young people she meets.

"It shows them that somebody cares and someone is taking an interest in them," she says.

Teacher Rob Townsend agrees. "It's going to instill a little more confidence in each of our students," he says.

**Grade 5 student Zachary Gardner reads to volunteer Wendy Donahue.**

## *Our Mission Statement*

Inspired by our rich heritage and challenged by the struggles of our past, we are an inclusive Catholic educational community called to express our mission as Church to pass on the Good News of Jesus Christ, to make it relevant in the world today, and to be the hope for the future.

# Putting parents to work in the library

No one is as skilled as a mother when it comes to tidying up a room and putting everything in its place.

So parent volunteers were the natural place to turn when the library at St. Andrew's Catholic School in Killaloe needed a revamping.

The call was put out last spring, and for several weeks parents have been at the school, going through the library book by book.

"At last count, we were at book number 2,238," reports Cheri Herbert, whose children are in grades 4 and 6 at the school.

She then explains that the team has made its way through two of the four shelves on the first wall, with just three walls and the free-standing bookshelves still to go.

When they finish, possibly by the end of this school year although there's no guarantee, they will have bar-coded every available book. This means that students will no longer have to manually sign out the resources they need. A quick computerized scan will track who has what and when it is due back.

"It's a huge job," notes Principal Mary Catherine Brisco. "We could never do it without them."

Herbert says it is also fun to be involved in her children's school lives in such a practical way.

"The kids pop in and they talk to you," she says. "And the teachers there are a riot. It's fun to go in there and laugh and joke with them."

"I think sometimes the teachers are a little overwhelmed with all of the things that have to be done at a school," she adds. "It's nice for them to know that there are always parents in the background ready to help. We've got amazing moms and dads."



Cheri Herbert and Lori Browne in the St. Andrew's Catholic School library.

Lori Browne agrees. As a graduate of St. Andrew's, she now enjoys supporting her children who are in grades 1 and 4.

"It's a wonderful school, very friendly, warm and inviting," she says.

Herbert likes to think that active parent volunteers add to the atmosphere.

"I think that it really matters," she concludes.

"Whatever we do, it makes a difference. The kids feel really special because all of those moms and dads got together for a day and did something just for them."



Sharing a meal is an important aspect of community life that takes many fun forms in our schools. Top left, Doreen Gutoskie joined her grandchildren at St. John Bosco in Barry's Bay for a community barbecue. Below left, volunteers Sister Ann Regier, Tammy Molson and Claude Pellerin prepare a healthy breakfast at Holy Name Catholic School in Pembroke, and below, the Schneider's racing team was a big hit at Our Lady of Fatima's open house and barbecue.

