

Notebook

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Renfrew County Catholic students outperform province in test results

The latest provincial test results have just been released, and pupils in the county's Catholic schools are performing well above the provincial average in reading, writing and math in grades 3 and 6 and in the grade 9 applied math tests.

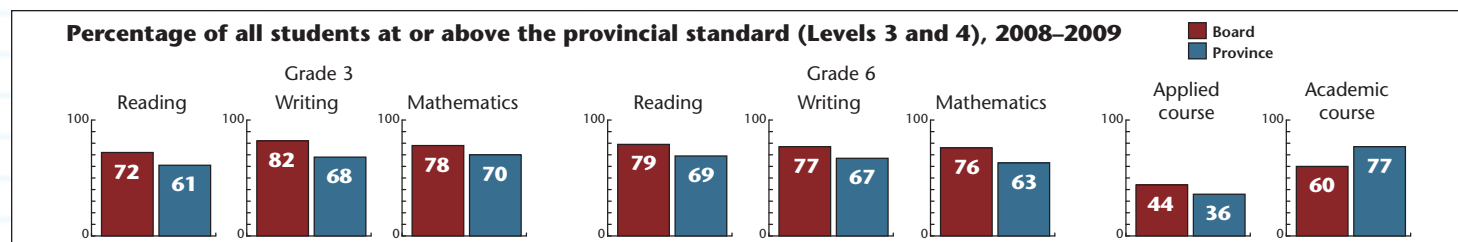
"We continue to be extremely proud of the work done by our teachers and students," comments School Board Chair Andrew Bray.

"These test results indicate that our board is providing an excellent learning environment for our students," he adds. "In seven of the eight standardized tests, we are exceeding the provincial average and our Board targets."

Director of Education Michele Arbour says the impressive results show that the teaching professionals within the board are building on previous assessments and working collaboratively to continually refine the high-yield approaches that they use in the classroom.

The one area where local students were below the provincial average was in the grade 9 academic math test.

"Grade seven to nine mathematics will be a focus for us," Arbour says. "We have a comprehensive math strategy in place to help us identify our strengths and the areas where we can work to further enhance our students' abilities."



Math marks sum up success at St. Joseph's

Start with a group of keen freshmen, add a team of dedicated teachers, and what do you achieve? The highest scores ever on standardized testing in applied and academic mathematics at St. Joseph's Catholic High School.

"Both the staff and students work very hard at their studies," mathematics program leader Bernie Kenny

notes, adding that he is very pleased with the latest results from the 2008–09 tests.

"I'm very happy for the math department and the whole team, including the students, who've worked so hard to have these good results," comments Brennan Trainor, the school's acting principal.

The provincial and school EQAO results will be followed by individualized student reports (ISRs) that show where each student did well and where efforts need to be focused as they move forward this year.

"We'll be taking the ISRs to their Grade 10 teachers and making sure they work on those areas where they can improve," explains Trainor.

It all falls into the student-centered teaching approach at St. Joe's.

"We want to ensure this snapshot doesn't become stagnant, and these pupils continue to grow in mathematics," he says. "The focus continues to be on the individual student."

Trainor is also quick to point out the 2008-09 EQAO marks reflect the talents and expertise of the teaching staff in the elementary feeder schools.

"Special recognition needs to go to those teachers for instilling a solid foundation of learning in this subject," he points out.



St. Joseph's Catholic High School students Jonathan Mulvihill and Joshua Naismith took the grade 9 standardized math test last year. With them is Teacher Brian Friske.

A message from the Director of Education

This issue of **Notebook** focuses on academic achievement. We're pleased to share information about new programs, new approaches to existing practices, and special achievements within our Catholic school community.

This issue also marks the beginning of a new school year—the perfect time to reflect on our roles within the Catholic education system of Renfrew County. I firmly believe that each and every person who reads this newsletter has an important role to play within our system.

Students: I urge you to strive to make this your best school year ever. You are doing very important work, and I guarantee that the effort you make today will shape your future.

Parents: Support your children in their academic work and in finding a balance with their extracurricular activities. You are the most important role model in their lives. Take their studies seriously, guide them to budget their time wisely, and take an active interest in their homework.

Teachers and school board staff: We value the work you do and the dedication you offer. You are the core of our team,

and your daily commitment to the children and youth in our care gives us inspiration and gives them a promising future.

The Catholic clergy: Thank you for your ongoing spiritual and prayerful support of our students and staff. The knowledge and faith you share creates a special environment within our education system. That richness is renewed each time you enter our schools, and each time we enter our churches.

Members of the greater Catholic community: As a supporter of our Catholic schools, you help to provide us with strength and the resources we need to provide quality, faith-based learning opportunities. Please continue to pray for our Catholic schools, and to take a keen interest in the good work that takes place within them.

In Renfrew County's Catholic schools, we are blessed to be working in an environment that combines quality academics with a rich tradition of faith and social responsibility.

May this be an especially rewarding school year for all of us,
Michele Arbour
Director of Education

What am I willing to do?

by Father Ryan Holly

Over the summer while among some priest friends in the United States, our conversation turned to Catholic schools more than once. In the USA, all Catholic schools are private, meaning that they are run exclusively by the local parish or a religious community. That means that parents must pay tuition each year, parishes must have on-going fundraising and parish priests have to find enough money each year to make sure costs are covered and teacher salaries are paid.

You can imagine the shock that my brother priests have when they hear about our Catholic school system in Ontario.

"You mean your parents don't have to pay tuition for their children to go to Catholic school?" they often ask with disbelief. *"I hope you all know how lucky you are up there...we could only dream of that"* more than one shocked priest has said to me.

Whenever I hear those sentiments it snaps me into the reality of how blessed we really are. Catholic children in Ontario have an opportunity unlike many other places in the

world. It is a reality that has evaporated in many of the other provinces of Canada and is therefore to be cherished and guarded by all of us.

I hear people throughout the diocese speak about the wonderful schools in our own board and the faith, warmth and gracious hospitality that are hallmarks of our system.

What we must remember is that pride alone will not safeguard the precious gift that we have.

Any doctor will tell you that prevention is the best medicine and so each of us needs to ask ourselves some questions *now* so that Catholic schools will be around for future generations.

How can we better the Catholic identity at the heart of our schools? Is attendance at Sunday Mass the priority in our life? What am I willing to do to ensure our schools remain Catholic?

If we are going to be witnesses to the value of Catholic education, it is up to all of us to seriously ask ourselves these questions, to ensure we are striving to live the Catholic faith that we profess and therefore let others see that Catholic schools can make a difference in our society.

Summer programs offer a relaxed and productive learning environment

This summer, several students and teachers in Renfrew County's Catholic education system chose to upgrade their skills and get a head-start on the new school year.

More than 300 students across the county went to school in July, taking everything from kindergarten to grade 10 classes in 11 different sites.

The emphasis was on both fun and learning during the four weeks of summer school, with a variety of opportunities including co-operative education courses at the secondary level and a career sampler for senior elementary students offered in cooperation with the Pembroke campus of Algonquin College.

Teachers involved in the summer school program also contributed to university level research on the effectiveness of summer programs in reducing gaps in student achievement.

Another group of teachers provided enriched primary-level reading programs. They will be documenting their findings and providing examples for teachers to use when they coach and assess the skills of their students.

"It's nice to think that we were able to help the system, as well as the students enrolled in summer classes," comments RCCDSB Summer School Principal Shelley Montgomery.

In August, teachers became the students. The Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat provides funding each summer for local presenters to share current information about reading, writing and math.

The RCCDSB joined forces with the local public school board to provide three courses this summer, covering elementary level writing and math and differentiated instruction for grades 7 to 10.

Michael Dombroskie teaches a combined grade 1, 2 and 3 class at George Vanier Catholic School in Combermere. He attended both of the elementary teachers' workshops.

"I came out of it with a better understanding of how to put the package together," he says. "It consolidated my thinking about the board-wide focus on these subjects and how I can apply it in the classroom."

Renfrew County Catholic school makes the provincial top 11 list

A member of the Catholic school family in Renfrew County has been recognized as one of the 11 best schools in the province by the CD Howe Institute.

The report, which came out in August, names John XXIII Catholic School in Arnprior as a provincial leader in making a positive difference in student performance.

The institute's finding is based on the provincial primary and junior division test results from the three academic years 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08 using a fair comparison of socio-economic backgrounds.

John XXIII Principal Sondra Keatley attributes the school's success to a dedicated and knowledgeable staff that works well with the students' supportive families.

"It's evident that the teachers strive to be excellent role models," agrees Acting Vice-Principal Melissa Carroll-Dubeau.

Keatley says that, like all of the talented professionals across the board in Renfrew County, the teachers and support staff at John XXIII put the needs of each child at the heart of what they do.

With such an important common goal, an environment of support, communication and friendship develops within the school.

"They've built bonds and a trusting relationship with each other," Keatley says of the team at John XXIII. The principal notes that an atmosphere of genuine caring and compassion for the children shows in everything they do.

The teachers' leadership follows a board-wide focus on modeled, shared, guided and independent reading and writing.

Although the standardized testing is based on reading, writing and math results, she explains that the school's philosophy is to ensure the students are well-rounded in all areas.

"We feel it's important to expose the children to things that they wouldn't normally be exposed to, to broaden their experiences," she says, adding that it is an approach that keeps both students and teachers excited about coming to school.

At John XXIII students have the opportunity to participate in bowling, skating, and swimming programs as well as noon-hour sports, cross-country running and skiing.

The arts are also high on the list of priorities at John XXIII and during Catholic Education Week each year the school hosts an art show featuring work created by the students.

A supportive school council helps to bring in theatre productions, dancers and musicians to add new cultural experiences for the children.

The final important element that rounds out the enrichment of student life in Catholic schools throughout the county is the encouragement and spiritual guidance of the local parishes.

Special religious events at John XXIII include the annual Christmas concert and the "Living Stations of the Cross" during Holy Week.

The church also plays an active ongoing role in the school's day-to-day routines.

"We certainly are blessed to have the support of St. John Chrysostom and Our Lady of Perpetual Help parishes," Keatley concludes.



John XXIII Grade 4-5 Teacher Wendy Kuehl leads her students through a lesson.

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.

Flu prevention becomes an active writing lesson for primary students

Staff and students at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School in Pembroke will be turning to some in-house experts for advice when it comes to avoiding the swine flu this fall.

The leadership will be provided by Karen Conway's grade 1-2 class.

One of their first lessons this fall focused on proper hand-washing and how it helps keep people healthy.

It was all part of a writing lesson that combined studies in health, drama (acting out hand-washing actions), speaking and listening skills, interactive writing and media literacy because photos of the actions were taken and the class later added captions.

Their finished product will be displayed in their classroom as an ongoing reminder of how to avoid getting the flu, and it may also be shared with other students in the school.



Ms. Conway's students fight the flu at the classroom sink.

Preparing for flu season

Teaching students proper hand-washing is just one element of the RCCDSB's preparations for flu season and, in particular, the potential return of the H1N1 (swine) virus.

A board committee has prepared an operational response plan that sets out the roles of students, parents, teachers and board administration in keeping everyone as healthy as possible.

The full plan is available on the website at www.rccdsb.edu.on.ca

Among the items parents should know:

- custodians will be checking hand-washing facilities daily to ensure students have everything they need

- students will be encouraged to use their own pens, pencils, tissues, etc. to reduce the need to share
- children with flu-like symptoms (fever or cough combined with a sore throat, aching muscles, joint pain or weakness) should be kept at home
- students who become ill with flu-like symptoms at school will be separated from other children
- staff and volunteers are also being advised to stay home if they are not well.

Parents will be receiving more information directly from each school, and the board will post updates on its website as further information becomes available.

New music program begins on a high note

A roving band of musicians will be visiting Renfrew County's Catholic elementary schools this year, inspiring young students to unleash their own musical talents.

As part of a fresh approach to teaching the arts, the school board has hired three local musicians to enrich its elementary music program.

Jessica Belanger, Janice Hawthorne and Katie Bartlett have unique areas of expertise. Belanger's background includes a BA in opera performance from McGill University and a freshly-minted Bachelor of Education degree from Nipissing University. Hawthorne is a piano teacher who has taught music at the secondary



Jessica Belanger shares her love of music with some students at George Vanier Catholic School in Combermere.

level at Bishop Smith Catholic High School in Pembroke for the past 10 years. As a clarinetist, Bartlett adds the orchestral element to the mix.

"We are all delighted that the board is moving in this direction," says Belanger. "They've really raised the bar."

Hawthorne is excited about the potential to foster a lifelong love of music in the children they encounter.

She expects the new musical focus in the younger grades will build a strong musical culture throughout the education system over time.

"The young students are blank slates and you can really develop their abilities from the beginning," she explains. "They don't have any feelings of intimidation."

The new program will focus on vocal music in the primary grades, add instrumental music by teaching the recorder as well as voice in grades 4 to 6, and delve into vocal and music appreciation in grades 7 and 8.

In addition to the new focus on music, classroom teachers will be delivering fresh provincial curriculum in drama, dance and the visual arts this year.

"It's a very exciting time to be teaching the arts in our elementary schools," comments Lynn Denault, the coordinator of elementary program for the RCCDSB.