

CPCO - How It All Began

Interview with Jim Byrne

CPCO President (1996-1998)

By Carole Clune, Editor, *Principal Connections*



On April 1, 2006 the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO) celebrates its eighth anniversary as an independent organization.

Those who were practising principals or vice-principals during late 1997 and early 1998 can attest that the educational climate could be described in the words of Charles Dickens: It was the best of times and the worst of times.

The Harris government was in power and the education minister was John Snobolen. As early as 1995 there was unease among educators that culminated in an uproar when Minister Snobolen stated publicly that to generate support for change in education the government should create a crisis in educational funding. Snobolen's provocative statement was derided in many circles.

But the education policies of the government had been stated repeatedly and there were rumblings about the possibility of taking principals and vice-principals out of the teachers' federations. However, there was equivocation on this point, which only fuelled the uncertainty and insecurity principals were feeling.

CPCO was still a subcommittee of OECTA at the time, and, unless directly involved, most principals and vice-principals were only peripherally aware of its existence and the fact that it was supported through their OECTA dues. But as tensions escalated there was a growing awareness of CPCO and a great concern about the protection of its members as the educational sands constantly shifted under the feet of all educators.

For some time the OECTA and the CPCO executives had been concerned that the persistent rumours were true, that principals and vice-principals were about to be removed from the federations. This raised many issues, not the least of which was speculation about job security and LTD insurance. People wondered if such a relatively small group of school administrators could stand up to the political pressures of the day. Was the name of the game "divide and conquer"? What did this mean for Catholic schools? Was it the beginning of the end for Catholic education? What did it mean for individual principals and vice-principals? And what was a personal service contract anyway?

The CPCO president at that time was Jim Byrne, a vice-principal from Windsor Essex. Other members of the Executive Council were president-elect Marny Beale (Dufferin Peel), Mary-Catherine Kelly (Peterborough), Ernie Seguin (Cornwall), Arlene McCarthy (Hal-

ton), Emmett Doyle (Brockville), Mike Lavery (Renfrew), and Joe Ravasi (Toronto).

In the spring of 1997, CPCO, under the auspices of OECTA, developed a paper that stated unequivocally that principals belonged in their federations. CPCO/OECTA requested a meeting with the education minister to convey this belief, a meeting in which Jim Byrne was surprised that "Snobolen certainly had a solid grasp of the arguments on both sides of the issue."

Most principals and vice-principals did not want to leave OECTA, and for a brief interlude in September 1997, their fears were allayed when the Harris government declared they would allow school administrators to remain within the federations.

In the middle of these deliberations, in late October 1997, came the heart-wrenching two-week province-wide teachers' strike. The principals, many of them stalwart federation members, some of them former chief negotiators, had taken a strong leadership role in the walkout protesting Bill 160 that prescribed massive and potentially damaging changes to education. It was a dangerous but important position to take.

Following the walkout the premier reversed his position - some say in retaliation for the leadership provided by the principals and vice-principals. It was clear that preparation for the inevitable was necessary. Principals and vice-principals would be legislated out of the federation. It was only a matter of time.

How, then, would CPCO respond? How could it protect its members? Where to begin?

A series of meetings of the CPCO Executive had taken place, some officially sanctioned by OECTA and some not. In fact, there were "unsanctioned" meetings of the CPCO Executive almost every weekend, held under very informal circumstances at Marny Beale's home. With no funding for hotel rooms and other expenses, the Executive would "camp out" at Marny's place, often well into the small hours of the morning, eating a lot of pizza while trying to determine what measures were necessary to preserve Catholic education and support Catholic principals and vice-principals.

Tensions were mounting on another front. In December 1997 a telephone conversation took place involving CPCO president Jim Byrne, OECTA president Marshall Jarvis, and Greg Pollock, OECTA liaison to CPCO. During this conversation the OECTA president cautioned Jim that OECTA was funding CPCO, therefore the CPCO Executive could only act and meet with OECTA's approval.

Jim's response was unequivocal: "We are not asking for permission. We're asking for support."

CPCO had already inherited \$15,000 through the disbanded Ontario Catholic Secondary School Principals' Association in order to continue the John Redmond Award. By the end of December 1997, OECTA provided CPCO with access to an additional \$90,000. In fact, some additional funding above that amount eventually flowed to CPCO from OECTA.

There were many actions that had to take place almost simultaneously. One of the first tasks of the Executive was to establish a network of communication. Under OECTA there were nine districts in the province with CPCO representation of two people per district. These representatives may or may not have been members of their local principals' association. This made clear communication with all principals and vice-principals in the province very difficult. Yet, if CPCO was to be a viable independent organization representing all Catholic principals and vice-principals, communication was critical.

Almost a year earlier CPCO president Jim Byrne had made numerous and lengthy telephone calls to local principals' association presidents, trying to establish contact with all the Catholic principals' associations throughout the province. "This was in anticipation that we were going to need to build a viable network as the crisis created by Snobolen deepened," recalls Byrne. This network would prove to be critical to the ultimate success of establishing CPCO as a viable and independent entity. But it was a difficult task to even get a listing of associations.

Unlike today, the role of CPCO president was not a full-time position. But the demands that year were enormous. Jim asked for a leave from his school board, Windsor-Essex CDSB, and, on behalf of CPCO, barnstormed the province to speak to various groups of principals and vice-principals. He addressed principals' associations in York, Waterloo, Toronto, Sarnia, Wellington, Hamilton, Niagara, Dufferin Peel, Durham, Ottawa-Carleton, Windsor, Sault Ste. Marie, the Eastern Region Conference in Kingston, Simcoe and Peterborough.

This was a formidable task and there was a great sense of urgency. The Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) was already courting Catholic school administrators, hoping to swell their ranks, knowing there is safety and strength in numbers. But Jim recalls, "Our basic premise was that we were not prepared to see Catholic principals and vice-principals become submerged within a larger group that had no commitment to Catholic education." The fact that the vision of OPC was that there would be only one principals' association, OPC, and that it would function "without regard to religion" was troubling.

As Jim conducted these sessions across the province, many issues became clear. The maintenance of the Catholicity of the schools was paramount. There were concerns about personal service contracts and what would be included in them. People questioned how the personal service contracts would be signed and what protections they offered. Worry about legal protection and Long Term Disability insurance was common among principals and vice-principals who were feeling the anxiety of being thrust into uncharted territory.

The responsibilities widened. A constitution had to be drafted and a mission statement developed that emphasized CPCO's commitment to Catholic education and its membership through professional development, communication and the forging of strong partnerships. Following a series of meetings of the CPCO Executive, the beginnings of an independent CPCO emerged.

One of the first tasks was to establish credibility as an independent organization. The late Terry Mangan, former OECTA Deputy General Secretary, advised that the way to do this was to establish linkages with the educational partners - the Catholic bishops, the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE), the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCS-TA) and the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (OCSOA). (Indeed, the possibility of Catholic principals and vice-principals being "folded into" OCSOA was discussed as one option in a number of areas of the province.)

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Stan Kutz, a newly retired principal who had served as a president of CPCO under OECTA, was conscripted in December 1997 as the interim executive director during the transition. Gaby Aloï, who is CPCO's current office supervisor, was hired as executive secretary to set up the first CPCO office, keep track of memberships, and balance the always precarious financial situation.

Funding was constantly at issue. The original funding allocated by OCSSPA had long since been depleted. After a meeting with Pat Slack, Executive Director of OCSTA, and Pat Daly, OCSTA President, Jim tells us not only moral support was offered but some critical financial support. By March 1998 a \$100,000 line of credit was arranged through the trustees' association. CPCO remains indebted to the Catholic trustees for understanding the importance of an independent Catholic principals' association and their willingness to carry through with desperately needed financial support in those early days.

In February 1998 a CPCO bargaining conference was held. This conference successfully established the credibility of CPCO among Catholic principals and vice-principals in the province. It was evidence that CPCO had their common interests at heart. A substantial number of membership applications poured in immediately following this conference.

Jim Byrne also synchronized a province-wide telephone network so all regions could coordinate the progress of developing their personal service contracts with their boards. While some principals and vice-principals still adopted a "wait and see" attitude, by the end of March 1998 over 1400 memberships had flowed in. The Executive worked tirelessly and successfully on their behalf to provide liability protection by April 1, 1998, the date when principals and vice-principals were legislated out of the federation.

A letter was sent to each partner, outlining the objectives of an independent CPCO, its commitment to Catholic education, and stating the intent to work collaboratively, thus establishing CPCO's credibility as a viable entity.

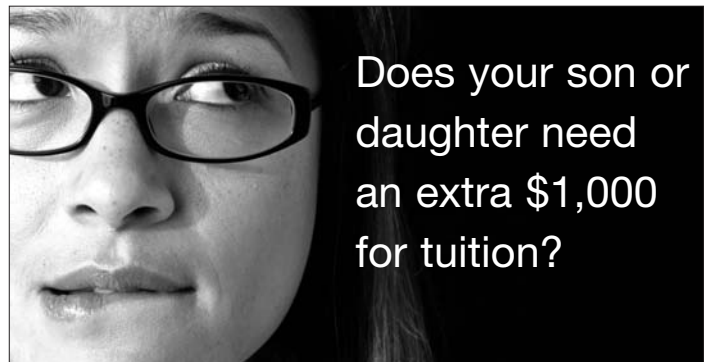
All the facets of the newly independent organization had come together through the efforts of the 1997/1998 Executive. They had no blueprint to follow, just incredible commitment and a willingness to work together.

I don't think I have ever worked before or since with a group of people who have been so selflessly committed to a common goal, and who put the goals of the group and the success of Catholic education ahead of everything else. It was an extraordinary life and growth experience.

Arlene McCarthy, Elementary Councillor 1997/1998

But there was one last important task: Cardinal Ambrozic, Archbishop of Toronto, was contacted to arrange CPCO's inaugural mass at St. Michael's Cathedral for the then 1700 CPCO members.

That bright Saturday morning in May 1998 Catholic school administrators from across the province gathered to give thanks at the inaugural mass. It was the first official function of the newly independent CPCO. The rest, as they say, is history.



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Postscript:

CPCO and its members are indebted to Jim Byrne and his 1997/1998 Executive Council as the architects of the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario as we know it today. They provided leadership, vision, a willingness to work tirelessly in pursuit of a very important cause in an atmosphere of tension, uncertainty and confusion. At CPCO's annual conference in April 2003, Jim and the other members of the founding executive were honoured.

Those who were directly involved in establishing CPCO as a viable, important and vibrant association of Catholic principals and vice-principals often mention that one of the greatest rewards of those turbulent times is the long lasting and deep friendships that were formed.

CPCO's membership has grown to 2174 Catholic principals and vice-principals, representing every jurisdiction in the province.

In recognition of his outstanding service to Catholic education, Jim Byrne will receive the CPCO Distinguished Service Award for 2006 at the CPCO Conference in April.

Looking back at CPCO's accomplishments over the past eight years, one of Jim's greatest pleasures is knowing that not only have CPCO's original objectives been reached, "they have been far exceeded."