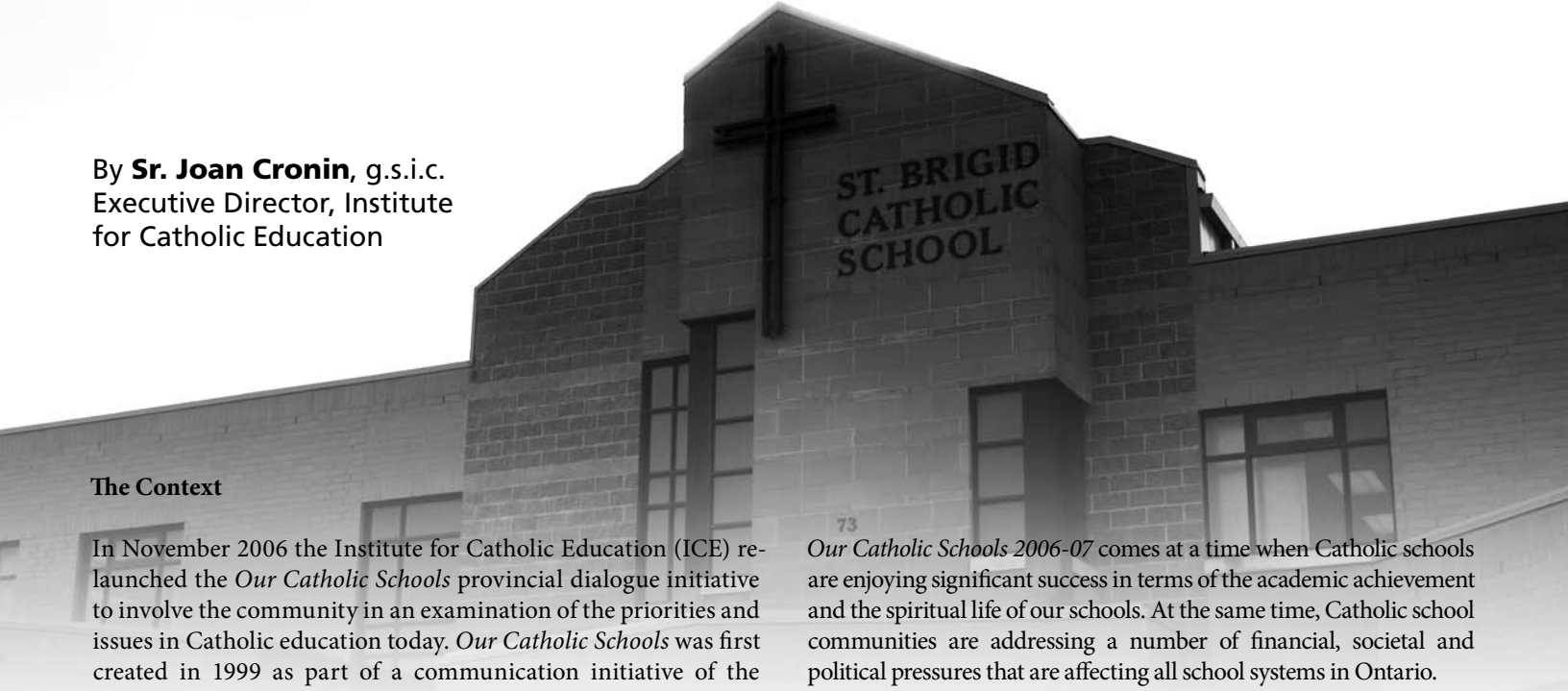


Our Catholic Schools 2006-07

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The Context

In November 2006 the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) re-launched the *Our Catholic Schools* provincial dialogue initiative to involve the community in an examination of the priorities and issues in Catholic education today. *Our Catholic Schools* was first created in 1999 as part of a communication initiative of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) and many of the same questions that were posed seven years ago were used in these discussions. This time, however, school boards had a more direct role to play in accessing, reviewing and summarizing information from their communities.

Our Catholic Schools 2006-07 comes at a time when Catholic schools are enjoying significant success in terms of the academic achievement and the spiritual life of our schools. At the same time, Catholic school communities are addressing a number of financial, societal and political pressures that are affecting all school systems in Ontario.

The discussions provided a structured opportunity for conversation about the essence and value of Ontario's Catholic schools, the challenges they face and the community's hopes for the future of their schools.

The Task

The Institute for Catholic Education had as its goal the participation of as many school board constituents and Catholic education partners as possible in this important dialogue. Participants were expected to use the *Our Catholic Schools* discussion kit to generate observations and other feedback. Information from those

discussions was to be forwarded to boards and they had until the end of May 2007 to submit summary results of those discussions to ICE. The hope was that as many groups as possible within each board would seize the opportunity for structured discussion about their schools.

The Tools

The discussion kit provided easy to follow guidelines and a format for group discussions in order to encourage maximum participation. The kit consisted of 10 handouts, including opening and closing prayers, a guide to leading a group discussion, discussion points, resource materials, PowerPoint slides, the format for both group and individual discussion reports and further reading materials. The entire package was provided to boards in hard copy and on CD and was deposited on the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association's website for participants or board staff to download, as required.

A coding template for group and individual reports was provided as part of the package and this helped school boards to collate and summarize responses from their community. The template originated from the first discussion held in 2000.

Information and themes recorded through this process were then entered on the School Board Summary Report to assist the board in identifying the key themes and responses surfacing throughout their community.

Between March and April 2007, school boards were asked to review and collate responses from the community and to prepare the local board overview report.

All this information was then used to create an overview, which included the perspective on all the data identified through the Summary Report. This report represents the results of reviewing all summary reports received.

The common threads which exist throughout the reports received, have been identified below and divided into the six questions posed.

1. The Distinctiveness of Catholic Schools

The top five responses to the question, “What did the groups say about the distinctiveness of Catholic schools?” were:

- a place where we can exercise our freedom to practice the Catholic faith tradition;
- reinforces the teaching of our Catholic values;
- a place where students learn about social justice and service to the community;
- promotes respect for and the dignity of all people; and
- promotes the strong home-school-parish relationship.

2. The Value of Catholic Schools

The top five responses to the question, “What did the groups say they value about Catholic schools?” were:

- the distinct culture and the Catholic tradition;
- the teaching of values, morals and discipline;
- the traditions;
- the connection between home, school and parish; and
- social justice activities and the belief that we are responding to a “call to service”.

3. The Community’s Hopes for Catholic Schools

The top five responses to the question, “What did the groups say about their hopes for the future?” were:

- stronger home, school and parish relationship;
- that Catholic schools continue to exist;
- that values remain strong despite being countercultural;
- that staff are dedicated to their faith; and
- that social justice issues continue to underpin school environment.



Observations

It is apparent that the main responses or themes resulting in this second province-wide invitation to discuss *Our Catholic Schools* remain much the same as they did in the first province-wide discussion in 2000. It is also evident when we review the main points made within each question that a few common themes arise: we must promote and protect our Catholic faith traditions as core to our Catholic schools; parent and parish involvement in the Catholic school community are key to strengthening an important resource in Catholic education – the triad, home-school-parish and; social justice and the response to a “call to service” are distinctive attributes of Catholic schools that are valued by the community.

It is very evident that the community appreciates the freedom to articulate and practice the Catholic faith within the learning environment of Catholic schools. This is what the community believes is *distinctive* about Catholic schools and it is something that is greatly valued. Discussion participants further added that the faith formation of all, especially staff in Catholic schools, was important to maintaining and protecting the Catholic tradition.

4. The Major Issues Facing Catholic Schools Today

The five main responses to the question, “What did the groups say were the major issues facing Catholic education now and in the future?” were:

- the continued existence of Catholic schools in Ontario;
- inadequate home and parish involvement with schools;
- staff and community’s commitment to the Catholic faith;
- community apathy and indifference; and
- negative impact of Ministry priorities (e.g. literacy and numeracy initiatives) on Religious Education.

5. Strategies for Promoting and Protecting Catholic Education

The top six responses to the question, “What did the groups say about how to promote and protect Catholic education for the future?” were:

- communication and self promotion;
- greater home, school and parish partnership;
- dialogue among Catholic partners;
- faith development for staff and parents;
- staying true to our Catholic identity; and
- political mobilization.

6. What to Tell the School Boards and the Institute for Catholic Education

When groups were asked to elaborate on other information they would like to share with their school boards and the Institute for Catholic Education, responses generally fell into four main theme categories:

- communicate and promote Catholic education through leadership;
- strengthen the home, school and parish partnership;
- provide adult faith development and faith formation; and
- remain faith-based.

Throughout the dialogue there was concern raised around the level of overall vigilance and commitment to protecting the Catholic faith in light of pressures and assaults from single system advocates. To counter this issue it was suggested that the Catholic community focus on effective promotional and defensive strategies. It was further suggested that these strategies should clearly illustrate the distinctiveness of the system to wider audiences and strengthen our position and relationship with Ontario’s political decision makers.

Participants in the 2006-07 *Our Catholic Schools* dialogue spoke about the future of Catholic schools as being the responsibility of the entire Catholic community. They acknowledge that Catholic schools provide the most effective means for the evangelization of our children and that all stakeholders need to be involved: home, school, parish, Catholic educational partners – *everyone*.

Let us move forward wide awake!