



THE VOICE

for Catholic Parents

***Raising children is an awesome responsibility.
We need to remember that we are the role models.***

Aimee Gerdevich, President, OAPCE

The Ontario Association for Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE) has been in existence since 1939. This association is the only provincial Catholic parent association in Ontario. Its roots were established in parishes across the province, supporting Catholic schools in their communities. From parish to local school council to a provincial organization, OAPCE works to fulfill its mission:

We shall preserve and enhance the highest quality publicly funded English Catholic Education in Ontario, enabling all our children to become contributing members of the Church, School, Home and Society in accordance with God's Will.

Membership in OAPCE is through the local school board, not through individual membership by parents or schools. The board pays the membership fee on behalf of its school communities. Twenty-four regions in the province are intended to be represented on OAPCE's board of directors. The head office is located at St. Rita Catholic School in Toronto and is staffed by one part-time employee. The bulk of the association's work is accomplished through the voluntary work of the current members who make up the board of directors.

Communication is considered one of the key functions of OAPCE. They know that it is critical for parents to have the information they need to make informed decisions about their children's education. To fulfill this goal, several strategies have been utilized by the group. Direct contact is made with directors of education to gather their support in disseminating information to parents. The response has been very positive and encouraging. Quarterly mailings directly to school councils have helped to raise the profile of the association. Seasonal newsletters and monthly updates also help to keep parents informed of association work. The website is an excellent source for current information, history of OAPCE and contact information. It can be found at www.oapce.on.ca. Parents and educators are encouraged to sign up for email subscriptions that entitle them to receive e-blasts. These short announcements provide information on current events and

issues, such as the People for Education survey, the Premier's Awards and other timely news.

OAPCE recognizes that in order to influence positive outcomes for all children in Catholic education there is much value in working with educational and community partners. These relationships have helped to further the association's understanding of issues of concern to other partners and the positions taken. The Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) is one of the partnerships that has heightened the awareness of issues for Catholic parents. Communication with member associations such as the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association and the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario has helped in OAPCE's efforts to further their vision to support parents.

Along with its Catholic partners, the association engages in conversation with ministry, education and community agencies. They have had representation on:

- the Ministry of Education initiatives and working tables: curriculum review, Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, Learning to 18;
- the Minister's Partnership Table;
- EQAO's Assessment Review Committee;
- the Ontario College of Teachers initiatives;
- Free the Children; and
- the Catholic Media: The Catholic Register and Salt & Light TV.

Aimee Gerdevich, president of OAPCE commented on the partnership developed with the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario through the development of a workshop for parents and principals, *Engaging Parents*. Very positive feedback has been received from throughout the province on this initiative. Parents appreciated the opportunity to participate in professional learning that supports school teams. Aimee indicated that parents need to understand that the final decision of what happens in a school rests with the principal. OAPCE wants to support the work of the principal.



In doing so they want to make sure that parents have the information they need to have those tough conversations with their principals. She also pointed out that parents need to know where the boundaries are in those discussions. Parents want to know that they have a voice and that they are valued. Parents need to be given the tools to have those conversations. The workshops provided opportunities for meaningful dialogue on how to move the agenda forward, as well as allowing time for parents to get to know one another.

The Ontario Association for Parents in Catholic Education understands the important role that advocacy plays in maintaining a strong Catholic education system. The association is very excited to be working with the Friends and Advocates for Catholic Education project. They are involved in as many board teams as possible. Spreading the good news stories taking place in our Catholic schools is important in furthering the cause of Catholic education.

Another exciting project for OAPCE has been the creation of a workshop for parents on how to incorporate or infuse the faith side of parenting children in real ways and supporting the home/school/parish connections. The workshop was piloted at the October 2009 *When Faith Meets Pedagogy* conference. Further refinements to the content and delivery of the program have been made. The final product will be presented at OAPCE's conference in Niagara Falls on Saturday, May 15, 2010. Following that presentation, the workshop will be offered to interested communities across the province.

As most organizations, OAPCE recognizes that its role in Catholic education continues to evolve. The Most Rev. Frederick Colli, D.D., bishop of the diocese of Thunder Bay, is the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario liaison to the parents' organization. His advocacy for parents has been greatly appreciated. Together they work at building relationships between parents and parishes. Identifying, collecting and sharing models of best practice in parishes where the parish/home relationships have created encouraging results is one of the goals OAPCE hopes to achieve in its future endeavours.

When asked how principals can support the work of OAPCE, Aimee Gerdevich indicated that parents want to help. They would love to be of service to their school principal. The most important thing she says is for principals to keep parents informed. Communicate what is happening in the school community and enlist the parents' support in events other than fundraising and hot dog days. This will lead to the development of relationships that are critical to building trust and respect, and key to communications that are meaningful and effective. That is not to say that the traditional ways parents have supported school communities in the past (and in many places, the most common form of involvement today) are no longer valid or valuable. For many parents this is the best way and the highest level of involvement or engagement they desire. It is important for the principal to be able to recognize this and the only way to do that is to develop relationships with your parent community. It is not easy nor will it happen overnight, but it will be worth the effort!

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