



LIGHTING THE WAY

THE VOICE OF STUDENT LEADERS

As Catholic educators we deeply appreciate the importance of preparing our students to become the next generation of Catholic parents, teachers, leaders and citizens. The Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations perfectly prescribe the specific attributes we wish to develop in our students. The many opportunities for student government present the vehicles of practice for our young people to learn key skills for leading their generation now and in the future. With these considerations in mind, the inaugural Ontario Catholic Student Leadership Conference (OCSLC) was held in Niagara Falls from March 31 to April 2, 2011.



Hosted by the Niagara Catholic District School Board (NCDSB), the OCSLC brought together approximately 400 participants from 25 English and two French Catholic district school boards. The student body was comprised of student trustees and student senate leaders. Most boards met or exceeded the invitation to send two student leaders from each high school and their decisions were well rewarded by the information that students brought back to their schools and school boards.

The conference program was based on the objectives and logistics of Vision 2020, the strategic planning initiative undertaken by NCDSB in 2009-10 that included over 300 students from schools across the board. Vision 2020 was presented by Chair Kathy Burtnik to other Catholic trustees during a FACE

presentation at the 2010 Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) conference in Thunder Bay. Kathy's board also offered to help any other board that might be interested in adding the student perspective to strategic planning. The offer was immediately added to the action plans for the FACE project and became a reality after meeting with the leadership of the Catholic Board Council (CBC) of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association in December 2010. Within four months, the board team and the CBC had collaborated on the development of a conference that produced powerful belief statements and an impressive commitment by the students to their Catholic faith.

During the three-day conference the student leaders were engaged in focus group discussions led by student facilitators. These students were trained by Maria Sanchez Keane, a very



gifted consultant from London who has worked with several Catholic boards. Out of the focus groups came a series of key points that were incorporated into three themes: strengths and highlights of the Catholic school system; a collective vision of Catholic schools in the future; and challenges facing Catholic schools. Using eClickers the students selected three items in each theme and the results were presented on the final morning. Each student received a copy of the report on a USB stick along with 500 photos from the conference. Many of the students have presented the report to their school boards.

Minister of Education Leona Dombrowsky gave a personal and powerful message about student leadership to the participants. She emphasized the importance of hearing their voices in the education plans set out by Premier McGuinty and the Ministry of Education. The students were treated to a warm and humorous talk by Fr. Norm Roberts who provided perspectives on the students' changing roles and responsibilities during their maturation. Friday's keynote speaker was Fr. Jim Mulligan who called on students to be leaders now, not in the future. His words expressed great confidence in their abilities to take on leadership responsibilities. Bishop Gerard

Bergie was present throughout the conference and his homily at St. Patrick's Church was a call to Catholic leadership that was deeply appreciated by the congregation in the packed church. However, most students will remember the rim shots from the student band that punctuated Bishop Bergie's witty punch lines.

The Ontario Catholic education community owes much gratitude to the staff of the Niagara Catholic District School Board for their tireless efforts before and during the inaugural OCSLC. Special thanks to Director of Education John Crocco for his enthusiasm, vision and perseverance in the planning and promotion of the OCSLC. Thank you to Chair Kathy Burtnik and the trustees of NCDSB for supporting the financial and operational responsibilities of hosting the OCSLC. Thank you to the student leaders who gave their ideas and energy to the planning committee; Olivia Suppa, Sergio Morales, Natalie Rizzo, Laura Limarzi, Tayler Black, Matt McLean, Pat Fowler and Shelby Levesque. Best wishes to the staff of the Ottawa Catholic School Board and the CDSB of Eastern Ontario who will host the next Ontario Catholic Student Leadership Conference in Ottawa in 2013.

From the OCSLC report:

Strengths and Highlights of Catholic Education

- inclusivity and respect; all are welcome
- connected worldwide; social justice, human dignity and solidarity
- values and morality
- high academic standards; pursuit of excellence
- awareness raising and fundraising for others
- catholic nurturing community; belonging to one another
- catholic leaders of today; taking the lead and taking action
- opportunities to express and share our faith

Our Collective Vision for Catholic Education

- All are welcomed and treated equally as individuals.
- We are a proud, vibrant and caring school community where students and staff are enthusiastically involved.
- Our religious studies equip us to live our faith in a diverse world taught by enthusiastic, passionate teachers.
- Following in Christ's steps and as global citizens, we embrace our role as stewards of creation through our acts of justice.
- Our faith is embodied within our communities (being proud

of our schools, parishes, homes and uniforms).

- We have leading edge technology, which prepares us to pursue all of our educational dreams.
- We are the Church, fully accepting and fully inclusive.
- Our Catholic academic program prepares us to fully engage with the world.
- Catholic leadership is everyone.

Challenges Catholic Education May Face Over the Next Ten Years

- impact of negative secular media; media's focus on negative stories about Catholicism
- loss of government support and funding
- lack of progression, lack of change in our Catholic Faith, which causes people to lose trust in religion
- losing the younger generation
- apathy; losing the will to fight and losing community support
- maintaining respect for traditions while growing with the up-and-coming generations