

Our Catholic Schools 2006-2007



A Discussion on Ontario's Catholic Schools and Their Future: Summary Report

August 2007

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). The purpose of this exercise was to encourage dialogue about Catholic schools and to generate feedback that would support the Association's strategic communications work. The current discussion asks many of the same questions that were posed seven years ago. This time, however, school boards have 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.

This discussion provides 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.

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 boards 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.

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.

A Coding Template for Group Reports 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 recorded on the School Board Summary Report to assist the board in identifying the key themes and responses surfacing throughout their community.

All this information was then used to create an overview which includes the perspective on all the data identified through the Summary Report. The Overview and Summary Report were then to be submitted to ICE before the end of May, 2007. This report represents the results of reviewing all summary reports received.

THE ANALYSIS

A broad range of members of the Catholic community participated in the discussions within each board. Participants were: school council members, school staff including teachers and administrators, parish council members, students, parents, trustees, school board staff, members of the Catholic Women's League and Knights of Columbus, clergy and other members of the Catholic community.

School boards responded enthusiastically to this initiative. Many expressed their appreciation at the opportunity to relay their opinions to their boards and ICE. The impact of this dialogue is reflected in the high level of participation as 27 of 29 Catholic boards submitted Group Report summaries. Approximately 10,000 individuals took part in the discussion.

The *Our Catholic Schools* Group Report required participants to comment on:

1. The Distinctiveness of Catholic Schools
2. The Value of Catholic Schools
3. The Community's Hopes for Catholic Schools
4. The Major Issues Facing Catholic Schools Today
5. Strategies for Promoting and Protecting Catholic Education
6. What to Tell the School Boards and the Institute for Catholic Education

In addition, if participants wished they could complete an Individual Report after attending the Group discussions. In the Individual Report, three questions were asked:

1. What was said during the group discussion that you would like your school board and ICE to pay particular attention to?
2. What is the most important issue you, personally, think your school board and ICE should address?
3. What would be one or two things you would like to see changed in Catholic education?

RESULTS

A. Group Reports

Common threads across the summary reports from the various boards across the province are identified below and divided into the six questions posed. It is hoped that it reflects and does justice to all points made during the discussions.

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,
- promotes the strong home-school-parish relationship.

(a) A Place Where We Can Exercise Our Freedom to Practice the Catholic Faith Tradition

The majority of school boards noted that Catholic schools are distinctive because they represent religious freedom, in particular the freedom the community enjoys to engage in faith traditions and to share these traditions and faith celebrations with each other and the wider community. There is a real sense of community and sense of belonging within the schools. This is especially felt when the community gathers to express their faith through liturgies, prayers, and sacraments celebrated during the liturgical year. Students find comfort in gathering in prayer and Eucharist, especially in times of crisis. There is daily prayer, retreat time and time to honour God. Time to balance work and play with worship and service to God is important. Schools allow for space, time and reverence for the sacred.

“There is a strong feeling that we are a community of similar beliefs – leading to a sense of belonging.” (Simcoe Muskoka CDSB)

“Faith is not just a sign of the cross; not just mass. Rather faith is a whole way of thinking and being.” (Ottawa CSB)

“A truly Catholic education places students in touch with their identity and heritage.” (Toronto CDSB)

(b) Reinforces the Teaching of Our Catholic Values

The majority of school boards also pointed to the teaching of Gospel values as being a very distinctive, fundamental component of Catholic schools. Gospel values are lived out in the school’s approach to discipline and organization and are infused throughout all aspects of the school curriculum.

“We don’t ‘teach’ character education; we instill and model morals, values and character as well as articulate them.” (Thunder Bay CDSB)

“Most often those values are woven into the curriculum.” (Bruce-Grey CDSB)

(c) A Place Where Students Learn about Social Justice and Service to the Community

Many school boards reported the teaching of Catholic social justice values and service to others is a very distinctive component of Catholic education. The work that students in the pursuit of social justice and to promote the kingdom of God on earth is what truly sets Catholic schools apart from the secular education system. Community service is a Catholic tradition. There is a real commitment to serving others, especially those less fortunate.

“Christian social justice is at the heart of all that we do when we fundraise, in the way we discipline (restorative justice), and in our relationship with one another.” (CDSB of Eastern Ontario)

(d) Promotes Respect For and the Dignity of All People

Respondents indicated that Catholic schools were distinctive for advocating for the respect and dignity of all people. Students work for a better, more caring world based on the teachings of Christ. Catholic schools are inclusive. Catholic schools teach students to recognize Christ in every person and to accept people as they are.

What makes Catholic schools distinctive: “Both tangible and intangible methods of conveying Christ’s message – visible manifestations of Christ’s gospel message – being inclusive, respecting the dignity of all – tolerance.” (Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington CDSB)

(e) Promotes the Strong Home-School-Parish Relationship

Many boards also noted that Catholic schools promote a strong link between the home, school and parish. This partnership is valued and cultivated. Catholic schools are the rallying point for parents to stay involved in and nurtured by their Catholic faith.

“The interconnectedness between home, school, church and community is what sets us apart. The tight bond between home, school and church encourages the development of strong moral values. It also sets the stage for strong family values which creates caring, compassionate and competent young adults and future families.” (York CDSB)

“The board needs to enter into a deeper level of communication with the diocese and deanery to review the relationships of parishes and schools. I feel that teachers and staff need to be commissioned in a meaningful way by the school’s parish/pastor and recognized in their Catholicism as “teachers of the faith.” (Windsor-Essex CDSB)

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,
- social justice activities and the belief that we are responding to a “call to service”.

(a) The Distinct Culture and the Catholic Tradition

A majority of school boards reported that what their communities valued most about Catholic schools was the Christ centred focus of Catholic schools. The Catholic faith and the traditions reflected in schools helps to generate a sense of community that is greatly valued by the community.

Respondents also reiterated their gratitude for the opportunity Catholic schools provide for students to freely celebrate their faith and all its traditions. Time for prayer, liturgies, masses, sacraments, and retreats, especially during times of crisis and joy are appreciated. Catholic schools provide a balance of work and play with prayer and service. They balance the emotional, spiritual, physical and social needs of students, in other words the whole child is educated. Catholic schools provide the space, time and reverence for the sacred. There is time to gather, celebrate, profess and grow together in faith.

“First and foremost, our Catholic schools are places where our Catholic faith is promoted and celebrated in prayer, learning and school activities among staff and students.” (Renfrew County CDSB)

“I live for those WOW moments when I know that the students’ eyes have been opened to a new way of looking at things, like when I introduced the rosary and they were all so excited to learn more and pray more.” (Dufferin-Peel CDSB)

(b) The Teaching of Values, Morals and Discipline

A majority of school boards also described the teaching of values, morals and strong discipline as highly valued characteristics of Catholic schools. They also reported that the visible signs of our faith in classrooms and other school spaces were expressions of faith traditions that were greatly appreciated and valued.

“We chose a Catholic education for our children as we believe there is a definite difference in the quality of educational experience due to the ‘tone’ set by the Catholic school values. Our children are among other children raised by like minded parents with similar values.” (York CDSB)

(c) The Traditions

Boards reported that their communities place great value on the traditions and history that are part of Catholic education. Parents have an expectation and hope that their children will experience the faith traditions they enjoyed during their youth as students in Catholic schools. Catholic schools are steeped in a rich moral tradition that guides children in their decision-making.

“Parents rely on the schools to impart their faith to their children due to the complex changes in family dynamics as a result of societal changes.” (Waterloo CDSB)

(d) The Connection Between Home, School And Parish

It is believed that the foundation of Catholic education is strengthened by the cooperative relationship between the home, school and parish. Respondents noted that the “triad” in many communities is not as strong as it once was. This has been attributed to many things, including the fact that there are no longer as many priests today as there were in the past. Respondents also noted that the weakening of the triad could also be attributed to the modern day challenges of family life and a lack of family involvement in the church. Respondents did, however, report that the partnership between the home, school and parish is valued.

“The school and church work very hard at keeping their students and families connected through various means. Our world can be quite isolating but outreach is continuously made and support always being offered when there is a family crisis or educational need or concern.” (Ottawa CSB)

(e) Social Justice Activities and the Belief That We Are Responding to a “Call To Service”

Social justice activities and a call to service within the community are also regarded as a valuable characteristic of Catholic schools. The social responsibility and communal perspective to help those less fortunate is instilled in students and is based on the Catholic belief system. Schools provide a positive, all-inclusive, accepting and forgiving learning environment. The focus is on a better more caring world.

“The sense of social justice is based on the teachings and stories from the Scriptures.” (Thunder Bay CDSB)

“Purity of heart, truth, desire what is right – moral and social responsibility, communal perspective, sense of service to transform society.” (London DCSB)

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,
- that social justice issues continue to underpin school environment.

(a) Stronger Home, School and Parish Relationship

As previously acknowledged, respondents recognize that there is a weakness in the home, school and parish relationship. Following are some of the main suggestions for addressing this issue put forward by respondents:

- a. an accepting and supportive home, school and parish partnership no matter where individuals are along the journey of faith,
- b. greater parental involvement in schools and in particular, in the faith development of children,
- c. more parental involvement in parish life when many do not attend weekly mass,
- d. more involvement of the dioceses and parishes in the life of school communities,
- e. parishes should be encouraged to invite schools to the church more frequently and schools should consider more opportunities where parish groups could be involved in school activities and assemblies.

*“Drawing of the parents into the faith community of the school in order to strengthen the bond in faith between school-home-parish; i.e. faith celebrations that invite parents into the school – skits (drama, music), prayer services.”
(Thunder Bay CDSB)*

“From a parent’s perspective we need to work on ‘Engaging Parents’. Communication amongst all Catholics needs to improve and we need to do more to engage and put less emphasis on being ‘Right’.” (Halton CDSB)

(b) Catholic Schools Continue to Exist

Many school board communities expressed the hope that Catholic schools would continue to exist as part of the publicly funded school system.

Respondents observed that the unity of the Catholic community is something that is important to the future of Catholic schools. To live as witnesses of the Catholic faith with God at the centre is of utmost importance to communities.

“That Catholic schools are able to continue to operate and flourish as they set an example for other systems to follow and aspire to.” (Durham CDSB)

(c) Values Remain Strong Despite Being Countercultural

Schools boards also reported that their communities hoped Catholic schools would continue to provide students with a strong moral foundation and help students to face the challenges of a secular society. Many expressed the wish that the teaching of Catholic values should remain strong despite being countercultural. It was articulated that we should promote ourselves more and publicly articulate our distinctiveness.

“Catholic schools continue to be valued by society at large for their faith-based perspective in a secular world.” (Algonquin and Lakeshore CDSB)
There is a need for creativity in linking the ‘marriage’ of learning with the love of God and service to the community.” (Kenora CDSB)

(d) Staff are Dedicated to Their Faith

It was also expressed that our schools should attract educators committed to the Catholic faith and the mission of the Church. It was hoped that ongoing faith development for all staff would include vocation, prayer life and Catholic church teachings.

Hopes for Catholic schools: “That a focus takes place on hiring faith-filled Catholics.” (St. Clair CDSB)

(e) Social Justice Issues Continue to Underpin School Environment

The Catholic school’s mandate is “missionary” and this must be recognized in its social justice activities.

“We must continue to teach and live Catholic social teachings, transforming society for a better world.” (Northwest CDSB)

(f) Other

Many groups expressed the need to get school councils more involved in their schools. In particular, it was hoped that the role of school councils would go beyond fundraising to focus more on faith development and other aspects of Catholic education. It was proposed that school councils could help counsel and support students in the development of their faith.

“A clear purpose on the role of the School Council in the evangelization process is needed.” (Waterloo CDSB)

Many school boards also reported that they hoped for more youth involvement in the church, in fact a renewal of the youth within the church. They hoped for an increase in youth ministry and that local churches welcome youth. To prevent adolescents from drifting away from the church, the contemporary needs of children and youth should be met and they should feel

welcome and attracted to churches. Youth coordinators should be considered a source for future leadership in the parish community.

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,**
- **negative impact of Ministry priorities (e.g. literacy and numeracy initiatives) on Religious Education.**

(a) Continued Existence of Catholic Schools in Ontario

Communities across the province reported their concern about the future of Catholic schools in light of recent advocacy of system opponents like the “one school system” lobby.

Respondents indicated concern about the public’s perception that Catholic schools were somehow redundant since Catholic schools were very much like public secular schools.

Respondents observed that there is growing public debate around the inequity of funding Catholic schools to the exclusion of other faith-based schools.

“We need to continue to educate the communities about Catholic education and the value of having the two systems. Non-Catholic ratepayers/voters need to know what we are all about so that they are informed and can make positive informed decisions in the event that the question of the existence of our system should be put to a referendum.” (London DCSB)

(b) Inadequate Home and Parish Involvement With Schools

Respondents reported that there are fewer families attending church regularly and that there is an increase in the number of students not baptized in our schools. Many parents are often not involved in the development of their child’s faith and the school is sometimes the only place students receive the teachings of the Catholic faith and spiritual support.

“The issue most raised in this section was the lack of parental nurturing of children’s faith and lack of parental involvement in the parish. Respondents also noted the important role played by the parish in the home-school-parish relationship.” (Renfrew County CDSB)

(c) Staff and Community’s Commitment to the Catholic Faith

Sometimes in the process of hiring, academic credentials are deemed more important than spiritual (Catholic) credentials. A deeper understanding of the Catholic faith and its traditions needs to be cultivated not only in educators but the whole community.

“The major challenge facing Catholic education today and into the future is the lack of religious understanding on the part of some of the teachers. While many are practicing their faith by regular church attendance and participation in the life and ministry of their local parish, many are not and religion in the schools can become just one more subject to be taught in an already full curriculum. (Ottawa CSB)

(d) Community Apathy and Indifference

Respondents reported a need for the Catholic community to be less complacent about the *enduring gift*. The community needs to be better educated to address the threats to Catholic education and become more vocal about the distinctiveness of Catholic schools. This complacency is attributed to religious illiteracy, pride and/or lack of proper faith formation. Some do not fully accept all Catholic teachings.

“Many of our teachers are not Catholic. Although good people and excellent educators, it must be difficult for them to teach something they don’t believe in regardless of how much training they have.” (Superior North CDSB)

“Apathy is our greatest threat. There has to be a Big Plan. Define the problems and dialogue to find solutions. Do not let the demands of curriculum push Religious Education to the sidelines.” (Sudbury CDSB)

(e) Negative Impact of Ministry Priorities (e.g., Literacy and Numeracy Initiatives) on Religious Education

A demanding curriculum that focuses on results (both literacy and numeracy) and not Religious Education is another issue of concern for many school boards. Educators feel pressure from the Ministry of Education to improve EQAO results and implement government initiatives.

“Educators must keep faith integrated into the entire curriculum so that we remain distinctive and effective.” (Northwest CDSB)

(f) Other

Funding challenges are another issue described by many school boards. The funding formula is structurally sound but inadequately funded.

Some school boards also noted the declining enrolment in their school system as an issue. Schools and parishes have closed and schools have opened up their doors to non-Catholics which has been a challenge. A change in the social diversity and increasing immigration

from non-Catholic and even non-Christian countries has resulted in Catholics becoming the minority.

“Declining enrolment in our school system created by qualifications for entry, migration out of Ontario, immigration from non-Catholic countries.” (Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB)

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.**

(a) Communication and Self Promotion

Respondents indicated that effective promotion was important to the future survival of Catholic schools. Ontarians need to understand those attributes and characteristics that make our system distinctive. We also need to educate Ontarians on the history of Catholic education and the contributions that our graduates make to society.

We need to celebrate our achievements and contributions to the world. Through media we should demonstrate our distinctiveness as well as foster our Catholic identity. Jesus’ Gospel message should be proclaimed as the central focus of the religious purpose of Catholic schools. The most important teaching of Jesus is God’s salvation – the kingdom of God is at hand. We need to be inspired by this message.

“Promote and celebrate our schools, masses and who we are, celebrate our uniqueness.” (Huron-Perth CDSB)

“We must be prepared to counteract the growing loudly and uninformed vocal secular opinion that denounces the need for a fully funded Catholic school system. Our Board must be prepared to fight in the newspapers, the radio talk shows, the media, to justify our existence and our right to be funded and to co-exist with the public system. We must get out and about and sing our praises.” (Ottawa CSB)

(b) Greater Home, School and Parish Partnership

The promotion and protection of Catholic education for the future can also be achieved by promoting a stronger home, school and parish partnership. The home-school-parish relationship should be re-imagined. There should be increased church and home support. For example, schools need greater involvement in preparing students for the sacraments. Clergy should be more visible in the schools. Parents should be more engaged in the life of the school. Church attendance needs to improve as well. Catholics (staff and families) could be encouraged to return to parish communities and attend church social events, like picnics and family masses.

“We need to preserve and strengthen the home-school-parish relationship through greater parent involvement in our schools, especially through volunteering, and to welcome clergy into our schools.” (Renfrew County CDSB)

(c) Dialogue Among Catholic Partners

Catholic education can also be promoted and protected for the future by way of dialogue among partners. The entire Catholic community: schools, trustees, parents, parishes, dioceses, ICE, Catholic organizations, etc. should continue to work together to promote and protect Catholic education.

“There needs to be dialogue among the partners – ‘a unification of all the partnerships within the Catholic system’, ‘a strong message from the Bishop through priests and schools to increase awareness and promote a call to action’, ‘promote partnership with the parish – encourage involvement rather than weekly mass’”. (Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB)

(d) Faith Development for Staff and Parents

Many school boards also reported that Catholic education can be promoted and protected for the future through the faith development of staff and parents.

“We are only as strong as our weakest link. We must strive to maintain the highest of standards both academically and in terms of faith development.” (Dufferin-Peel CDSB)

(e) Staying True to Our Catholic Identity

The promotion and protection of Catholic education for the future can also be achieved by staying true to our core values and faith traditions. Schools need to lead by example and walk the talk. Schools need to model our Catholic faith for students and the community. There should be increased time for prayer, retreats, and spiritual development days.

“Be aware and knowledgeable about Catholic education which is based on the Gospels. The Scriptures do not change.” (Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington CDSB)

(f) Political Mobilization

Catholic education can also be promoted and protected for the future by way of political mobilization. A strong political voice on behalf of Catholic education is needed and should be sought. We should know our history, lobby politicians and get involved in political parties so that they hear our voice.

“Encourage political participation to promote and defend Catholic schools in an informed fashion (know our own history, lobby politicians, get involved with political parties).” (Algonquin and Lakeshore CDSB)

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,**
- **remain faith-based.**

(a) Communicate and Promote Catholic Education Through Leadership

Respondents felt strongly that both the board and ICE should communicate Catholic values and distinctiveness through their leadership. They should be the first to raise the awareness of the importance of Catholic education. There should be a public relations campaign to educate the public regarding the history of our school system and how we are different from the public system. With publicity, a societal gain in consensus that our graduates are indeed different can be achieved. Some respondents suggested that there should be more visibility on the part of the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Good dialogue among partners should be encouraged, and strengthened through improved internal and external communication. A strong united voice is needed to amplify our messages and to effectively protect our system. Among the suggestions to strengthen the Catholic community were board sponsored information nights for parents and the wider community, e.g. “Our Catholic Schools.”

“We must learn how to properly promote the value of Catholic education rather than always take a defensive stance.” (CDSB of Eastern Ontario)

“Ensure dialogue among the partners in Catholic education; work together in solidarity with all stakeholders, school communities, parishes and ICE collaboratively with a united voice.” (Brant Haldimand Norfolk CDSB)

(b) Strengthen the Home, School and Parish Partnership

Communities identified a need for ICE and school boards to address weaknesses in the home, school and parish relationship.

“Our teachers and staff need our (parish) support and understanding, our faith and gratitude for the people they are, persons who daily walk the talk and live the life they speak and act. God bless them all. The church and all society need Catholic schools.” (Dufferin-Peel CDSB)

(c) Provide Adult Faith Development and Faith Formation

Many school boards also reported that the groups would like to tell school boards and ICE to provide staff faith development and faith formation opportunities. There was an expressed need for board funded mandatory religious education courses for teachers. Also, more formal courses at universities with regards to Catholic education should be provided. There should be more religious training for teachers (e.g., Religious Education Part 1, 2 and 3). It was also proposed that professional development days be held that were organized around more spiritual guidance.

“Spiritual guidance for staff, more support for regular classroom teachers.” (London DCSB)

“Catholic schools whenever possible ought to connect with major events taking place in the Catholic world and use this as an opportunity for instruction and practice of the faith. For example, next year’s Eucharistic Congress to be held in Quebec City presents all of us and every school the perfect time to learn more about Eucharistic Adoration and our Samaritan mission that naturally follows. One cannot love God without loving one’s neighbours.” (Toronto CDSB)

(d) Remain Faith-Based

A final thought reported by school boards as indicated by groups as to what they would like to tell school boards and ICE is simply to remain faith-based and not be driven by financial concerns. Ultimately, God should remain the centre of our educational system.

“Trustees must assume strong leadership roles by writing letters to the editors, by being pro-active, seen and heard.” (Huron-Superior CDSB)

“We need more faith formation among adults in our system which would include ways to excite the young educators in our system about faith formation.” (Niagara CDSB)

B. Individual Reports

Only eleven school boards provided a summary of Individual Reports. All of what was reported echoes the thoughts and sentiments written in the Group Reports.

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.

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.

NEXT STEPS

Continue the discussions in your community. Share this report with those who were involved in the dialogue at your board. How similar are your local board views and the provincial views?

We must take action now. We invite you to take some small steps.

1. How will you personally promote and protect Ontario Catholic education?
 - a. What can be done in your home, at your school, in your parish this year?
 - b. What can be done in your community this year?
 - c. What can be done by the Ontario Catholic education partners this year?
2. How will you personally strengthen the ties between home, school and parish?
 - a. What can your schools do this year?
 - b. What can your families do this year?
 - c. What can your parishes do this year?
3. How will you personally be more authentic and true to your Catholic identity and Catholic faith?