

Our Catholic Schools 2006-07

A Discussion on
Ontario's Catholic Schools
And Their Future

A Guide to Leading
A Group Discussion



Institute for Catholic Education

INTRODUCTION

Our Catholic Schools is a vehicle for discussion about Catholic education, its distinctiveness, its value and its future. Over the next several months, different groups from within the Catholic community across Ontario will use this discussion kit to facilitate discussion about Catholic schools.

Catholic school councils are among the key groups that will be taking part in this process. The parents, students, teachers, principals, school staff, parish and community members who make up our Catholic school councils represent those groups most personally and closely involved in the enterprise of Catholic schools.

Other interested groups within the Catholic community, such as school boards, parish councils, youth groups and organizations such as the Catholic Women's League or the Knights of Columbus, are also invited to participate in discussions as part of this consultation.

The input and opinions from these discussions will be collected and collated at the local Catholic school board office and then shared with the Institute for Catholic Education. Feedback on the results of this consultation will be provided to those groups who have participated. The information collected will also be used as the basis of messages about Catholic education and its future, which can then be shared in various ways with the community at large.

Using this Guide

Your role as a Discussion Leader for a school council or other group is key to the success of this initiative. This guide has been prepared to give you some useful tips. For the most part, these are only suggestions. The two things we do ask of you specifically, is that

- your group respond to the questions on the Group Report Form
- you return the Group Report Form as quickly as possible to your local school board.

YOUR ROLE AS A DISCUSSION LEADER

The discussion kit *Our Catholic Schools 2006-07 – A Discussion On Ontario’s Catholic Schools and Their Future* can be used with a variety of groups of interested stakeholders. The scope of the work required on the part of the Discussion Leader will vary depending on the makeup and size of the group. If, for example, the kit is to be used within a meeting or meetings of a single Catholic school council or other group, preparation will be similar to that required for any regular meeting of the group. If, on the other hand, several Catholic school councils are being called together to use the discussion kit together, more extensive preparation (invitations, notices, announcements, room booking, etc.) will be required.

What follows are general suggestions, which can be adapted to meet the needs of your own local group.

Preparation

Even if someone else is responsible for making all the arrangements for your group, it is advisable to check that everything required is being looked after. This would include a suitable location, clear and adequate notification of when and where to meet, and arrangements for refreshments. If possible, copies of the resource materials should be sent out to participants prior to the date of the discussion.

Be sure that paper and pencils are available for all participants, particularly for the recorder, and for the person selected to fill out the Group Report. If the participants have not met previously, name tags are a good idea. It is always good to arrive in plenty of time to check on physical arrangements (seating, tables, room temperature, etc.), and to greet the participants as they arrive.

During the Discussion

Your primary role is to lead the discussion. Although your own good sense will be your best guide in doing this, the following tips may help:

Listening: The key purpose of this consultation is to give participants a chance to say what they really think. Discussion leaders should be careful to respect all participants’ views, and not to insert personal views into the discussion. No views should be “filtered out.” It is important to know what people really think.

“Mirroring” the Group: You may intervene as often as necessary—but very briefly—to mirror the discussion back to the group. For example, when there seem to be areas of disagreement, it can be helpful to summarize apparently opposing positions and try to clarify them. Another example: when you see a consensus emerging, you can sum it up in a few

words and ask whether the group agrees. This will help keep the discussion moving forward through the Discussion Points.

Making Sure Everyone is Heard: In a small group, a few strong, articulate individuals can sometimes dominate the discussion. Try to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. Gently direct questions to the more hesitant participants. Help them to make their views clear to the group by summing up what you have heard them say: “So you think [summarize what seems to be their main point]. Am I right?”

Keeping the Group with You: Seek the group’s agreement periodically. For example, when you sum up a consensus, ask “Is that right?” before moving on to the next point.

Setting the Schedule

It takes about three hours to complete the Discussion Points. Review the Points in advance and plan how long you might spend on each point. Keep an eye on your schedule during the discussion.

Recording

The Group Report may be filled out by the Discussion Leader, or by a recorder selected by the participants at the beginning of the discussion.

The recorder should understand that it is not always necessary to formulate a consensus. What is important is to record all major views emerging from the discussion.

If someone else is filling out the form, you can suggest that the summing up you do as the discussion progresses is a good source for the Report Form.

LEADING THE DISCUSSION

The following is a step-by-step look at leading a group on the Discussion Points. Each of the preliminary steps is important in situations where the group leader is not well known to the group, or the group itself is made up of individuals who do not know each other. Please take your group through each step that makes sense for their specific situation.

Welcoming Participants

After calling the group to order, thank participants for coming out and participating in this important discussion about our Catholic schools and their future. You needn’t explain the Discussion in detail at this point; there will be time to do that shortly.

Introducing Yourself

If all the participants do not already know you, give your name. You can also say a word about your background, (e.g. “ I am a parent, teacher principal, etc. at St. Mary’s School”). You can also explain how you came to be a discussion leader.

Introduction of Participants

Next, have participants introduce themselves, and say a sentence or two about themselves. (This step may not be necessary in a group which has known each other and worked together for some time).

“Table Map”: If the participants are not all people you know, you may find it useful to jot the names down on a piece of paper, showing where people are sitting in relation to each other. This will make it easier for you to address people by name and involve everyone on the discussion.

Getting Comfortable

Everyone should be reasonably comfortable. Decide now about opening or closing windows, rearranging chairs, etc.

Purpose of the Session

Now is the time to say a few words about the Discussion and the consultation process. You may wish to hand out copies of the pamphlet and suggest that participants read it over on the spot.

In explaining the Discussion, you may wish to talk about the following:

- ***Our Catholic Schools 2006-07 – A Discussion on Catholic Schools and Their Future*** is part of an awareness and engagement strategy first undertaken in 1999 by the Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association and currently sponsored by the Institute for Catholic Education. It is designed to increase awareness of what makes Catholic schools distinctive, and to deepen and broaden the level of support for our Catholic schools.

As one of Ontario’s four equally funded public school systems, Catholic schools must be distinctive and must be understood to be distinctive, if we are to justify the existence of our system. Although many of us participating in the Discussion have been involved with Catholic schools for many years, we may not have really thought or talked to each other about our schools in the terms suggested by the Discussion.

- ***The Goals of the Discussion:*** Generating this kind of conversation at local sites across Ontario is one of the important goals of the Discussion. Increased awareness and understanding about Catholic schools is a first step in deepening and broadening commitment to and support for Catholic education. Those within the Catholic education community who have been part of the Discussion will be better able to explain to others (members of our own groups, our neighbours, fellow parishioners, the broader community

in which we live) just what Catholic schools are and why they make a difference to us and to society at large.

- **The Discussion Process:** Groups will be invited to participate in discussions similar to this over the next several months. These groups will include Catholic school councils, groups of Councils, other groups within the Catholic education community, groups of parishioners, and other Catholic organizations. Each group will be asked to prepare and return a Group Report Form to share the group's views on Catholic schools. All of the Report Forms will be read and considered by the local school board before being collated and summarized as a regional report for the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE).

The content of these reports will help to generate clear, strong messages about Catholic schools that can then be shared in various ways with the broader community. For example, they may form the basis of core speeches about our Catholic school system that can be used across Ontario by those called upon to speak publicly about our schools. They can also form the basis of written communications (newsletters, media reports) about our schools.

Establishing Ground Rules

It is important for discussion groups to follow the outline and have well-understood ground rules. It is good to get the group to agree to follow the Discussion Points, as a way of focusing the discussion and the input it will provide to school boards and ICE. The Discussion Points are not intended to limit discussion. They are open-ended and give everyone a chance to speak freely.

Timing

You should let participants know that other groups have found this discussion to take from two to three hours. Indicate that you will keep an eye on the clock as the discussion proceeds to be sure you are not falling behind. It is a good idea to check before you begin if some members of the group have a specific time at which they must leave, so that you can adjust your timelines accordingly.

Choosing a Recorder

Now is a good time to ask for someone to volunteer to record responses on the Group Report. The group may select a member of the group or the Discussion Leader for this task.

A recorder chosen from the group should be given the Group Report form to read immediately, and to keep handy throughout the session, as an indication of the kind of information that needs to be recorded. If needed, supply the recorder with a paper and pen to take notes.

The Group Report form must be completed at the end of the discussion. It is the responsibility of the Discussion Leader to return it to the local school board office within 24 hours.

Some General Points

You may want to remind participants before you begin that this exercise is not designed to convince people of any particular point of view. It is not necessary to reach consensus. Impasses can be recorded on either a group or individual form. It is useful to get differences of opinion out in the open.

There are no correct answers. What is wanted is an honest expression of views.

Option: The discussion kit includes PowerPoint slides (on CD and in print) that can be used to generate discussion and set the context for the issues to be discussed. An LCD projector and laptop will be needed to operate the PowerPoint presentation OR you may choose to copy and distribute hard copies of the printed slides that are included in the kit.

The Discussion Points

Please use the Discussion Points in your group. They are intended only to open the discussion on the issues. You can help develop and deepen the discussion through active listening – ask follow-up questions, try to identify the common interests among the participants.

Drawing up Lists: Some of the Discussion Points require the group to draw up lists. Ask for suggestions from the participants at large, and jot down every suggestion. You will likely need to help the group to boil down the list. This can be done by letting participants talk long enough for two or three major issues to emerge, or by grouping similar ideas. Be sure to seek the agreement of the group on grouping or identifying issues that seem to be shared.

Convergence/Divergence: It is not necessary to get consensus on every point. Use your judgment regarding the length of time to devote to any particular debate. Participants can always “agree to disagree”. The Report Form can record strongly held minority views.

What Happens Next?

Remind the participants that their input will be forwarded to their local Catholic district school board (or Authority) and then from there will be forwarded to the Institute for Catholic Education. The input will be compiled during the winter months of 2007 and will be shared with stakeholders in the spring.

Participating groups should be encouraged to approach other members of their own constituency about participating in similar discussion groups about Catholic schools. For example, student representatives on Catholic school councils might approach the Student Council about having a discussion. Teacher representatives might bring the discussion to a staff meeting.

It is our hope that this Discussion Kit will continue to be used long after the date for collecting formal input has passed, as a way of continuing the important dialogue on Catholic schools and their future.

Individual and Group Reports

Explain to the group that Individual Reports are available for those who wish them. They are not required, but do give individuals another means of being sure their views are heard.

Please gather the completed Individual Reports and mail them with the Group Report to your local Catholic school board. If contact information for your local board is not included in your kit and you need assistance, please contact the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association at (416) 932-9460 or email: smcmillan@ocsta.on.ca.

Thanks

Please pass on to participants the sincere thanks of your Catholic school board and of the Institute for Catholic Education for taking the time to express their thoughts about our Catholic schools and their future.

After the Session

If a recorder was selected from the group, be sure to make arrangements for the Group Report, which should be completed as soon as possible. Remember that you, not the recorder, are responsible for sending the Report as soon as possible following the discussion to your local school board.

Note for the Discussion Leader

You have taken on a very important role that will help to strengthen our system. Your commitment to the future of our Catholic schools is truly appreciated.