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in Christian Education

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

A Case Study *of*
Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School

Dr. Adrienne Castellon and Dr. Allyson Jule

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AUTHORS

Dr. Adrienne Castellon is associate dean and assistant professor of leadership at Trinity Western University's School of Education.

Dr. Allyson Jule is dean and professor of education at Trinity Western University's School of Education.

Additional research and editorial assistance provided by Dr. Beth Green, Ursula Neuscheler, and Johanna Wolfert.

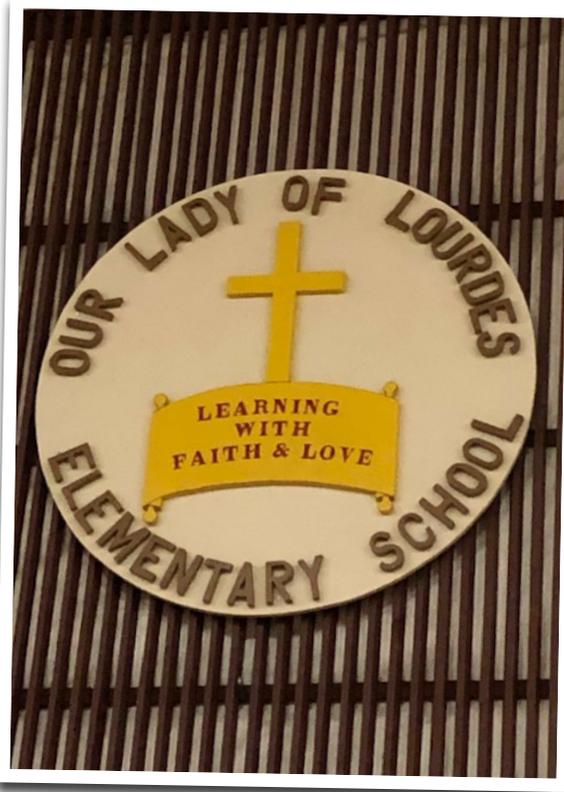
ABOUT CARDUS

Cardus is a non-partisan, faith-based think tank and registered charity dedicated to promoting a flourishing society through independent research, robust public dialogue, and thought-provoking commentary.

The Impact of Parent Involvement

Parents play an important part in every school community. When parents enroll their children in a school, they are invited into that school's culture of values and customs (see Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia 2010). The school-improvement literature underscores the importance of building partnerships with communities and families (Green 2015). Strong parent and community engagement is one of the conditions that bolsters effective leadership of a school's principal (BC Principals and Vice Principals Association 2016; Levin 2008; Louis et al. 2010). The best way to support learners, including those most at risk of underachievement, is to work in partnership with families (Barbour et al. 2018; Jeynes 2007; 2012; Sylva, Jolley, and Goodall 2018).

Two leading theories have shaped the North American literature on parental engagement in recent decades. Epstein (1995) proposes six major types of family-school involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995; 1997) emphasize psychosocial constructs related to parental engagement, which address why parents become involved, how they choose various types of involvement, and the positive influence of this involvement. More recently, it has been suggested that these categories be reformulated based on who sets the agenda for interaction: "school-initiated agendas, where parents conform to school policies or requests; parent-initiated agendas, where school staff are invited to participate in activities determined by parents[:]"



Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School,
West Kelowna, BC

“

“Try to form a fun community so they feel like they belong at the school, not like an outsider, and they will want to be more involved.”

”

School Profile

Name of school: Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School

Type of school: Independent Catholic school

Grade Range of Students: K-7

Number of Students: 141

Number of Staff: 20

Location: West Kelowna, British Columbia

School's mission statement:

“While fostering a relationship with Jesus Christ, our mission is to educate the whole child, in partnership with others, to ensure our students become global citizens” (Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School 2020).



The principal leads a regular assembly that includes parents



“Value even the smallest amount of involvement parents can provide.”



and shared agendas, that reflect collaboration and shared power between parents and school personnel” (Edwards and Kutaka 2015, 5; Ishimaru 2019). A broader conception of parent engagement consists of in-class involvement, curricular involvement, building community, decision-making, and involvement in school reform (Edwards and Kutaka 2015; McKenna and Millen 2013).

Parent involvement is critical in Christian education and has been made a particular priority for Catholic schools. The Vatican officially recognizes parents as the primary educators of their children; school and church play a secondary role by helping parents fulfill their responsibility to guide their children’s formation. When parents enroll their children in any of the Catholic Independent Schools of Nelson Diocese, which includes Our Lady of Lourdes, they sign a Family Statement of Commitment, which outlines the foundational role of parents as educators: “Parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that the primary and natural responsibility for their children’s education belongs” (Congregation for Catholic Education 1997). The school exists to complement the work of parents as the first teachers of their children. Parents should be involved with the life of the school by participating in school councils and committees and through regular collaboration with teachers.

Methodology

The researcher visited the school in April 2019. After learning about the project, staff participated in an online survey focused on parent engagement; a focus group of six staff members discussed their responses to the survey questions in more depth. The quoted material without citation throughout this profile is drawn from survey responses. The researcher also interviewed the school principal. The researcher was given a tour of the school, participated in staff prayer and a whole-school Lenten prayer service, spoke with students, and visited classrooms.

Appreciative Inquiry

This research was guided by an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, which focuses on the strengths of individuals and their organizations (Stavros, Godwin, and Cooperrider 2015, 97). AI is often used in school-based research (Bergmark and Kostenius 2018; Calabrese 2015; Gordon 2016; Tittle 2018; Waters and White 2015; Zepeda and Ponticell 2018). According to Ryan and colleagues (1999, 164–65), AI is effective because it “can be used to guide school reform within any school community—public or private, from the elementary through the secondary level” and “[assesses] the positive dimensions of a school’s culture, while simultaneously providing qualitative data that could help administrators and teachers.” By emphasizing strengths rather than problems in schools, AI can avoid de-energizing teachers, staff, and administrators (Ryan et al. 1999, 167).



“I think my biggest piece of advice is build the relationships and make it personal. . . . Once there’s that connection and then that personal invitation, then you’re more likely to get involved and welcome them into the school.”



Examples of Parent Engagement

Our Lady of Lourdes has an active parent volunteer community that is engaged in the school in a variety of ways. As with other schools in the diocese, parents who enroll their students at Our Lady of Lourdes are encouraged to join the school’s Parent Support Group (PSG). This volunteer group, which is overseen by the school principal and executive of the school board, plays a key role in coordinating social activities and fundraising projects for the school. The PSG meets monthly to plan major initiatives, which have included dances, barbecues, Christmas concerts, a pancake dinner, and drama productions. Through this group, the parents also sponsor and prepare a weekly hot-lunch program, drive students to

seniors’ centres, help with uniforms, and facilitate hosting arrangements for international students. The PSG provides funds for classroom technology, such as Chromebooks and projectors, as well as technology support when needed.

Parents from the local parish can also be appointed to serve on Our Lady of Lourdes’s school council, the governing body responsible for the school’s finances as well as setting its policies and procedures. This group and the PSG are active in their fundraising efforts, organizing a number of events, and ensuring these events are well attended, by promoting them throughout their personal networks. The largest and most successful event of the year is the “Black Tie” evening, when the parents transform the gym into a ballroom and run a silent auction. The PSG also runs a pub night, a circus-themed event, and a back-to-school breakfast; the school council hosts a trivia night in the spring. Given that Our Lady of Lourdes is an independent school and as such receives 50 percent of the per-student funding (and none of the capital funding) that public schools receive from the provincial government, the revenue generated through these fundraising initiatives is crucial to the financial sustainability of the school.

In addition to providing financial support, parents at Our Lady of Lourdes share their skills with the school in a myriad of ways—some directly related to education and others to the general operation of the school. One parent, for example, “helps prepare all of the marketing



Parents help at lunchtime



An encouraging message

materials for the school” (Grootjes 2019), while others volunteer at Mass and prayer activities. Parents are invited to volunteer in classrooms, coach athletic teams, supervise and provide transportation for field trips, and help with drama productions and music clubs. As environmentalists, medical doctors, dentists, pilots, flight attendants, and more, parents are invited to children’s classrooms as guest speakers. A parent in the community who runs wine tours has made arrangements with the school to use the tour buses for field trips. In many ways, parents and educators are partners at Our Lady of Lourdes.

The school’s custodians—a husband-and-wife team who have been involved at Our Lady of Lourdes for twenty-five years as parents, employees, and parishioners—are recognized throughout the school district for their ability to build relationships with and tap into the resources of the community. When Our Lady of Lourdes installed a new accessible playground, for instance, the custodians played a leading role in mobilizing parent and parish volunteers; they also organized donations of coffee and sandwiches from local businesses as well as backhoe equipment and other services. The custodial team often turns to parents when the school needs electrical, plumbing, or general maintenance and repair services.

The Culture Connection

The high level of parental engagement at Our Lady of Lourdes is an extension of the close-knit, supportive culture that characterizes the school as a whole. In addition to being invited to volunteer when opportunities arise, parents are greeted each time they visit the school, which for some is daily: “We don’t have buses, so the parents are at the school in the morning and afternoon and it becomes a community because of visiting, knowing the



“We recognize that people are very busy with their work/careers, and it can be very difficult for them to get time to be at the school or involved in the various activities/projects. Show your appreciation! We put on a volunteer tea each year as a thank-you to all who have had some part of our school year.”



parents well, and helping in the classroom.” The students appreciate their parents’ involvement; they enjoy seeing them around the school and on field trips. One educator highlighted the sense of pride expressed by many students when their parents volunteer at the school: “My young students are often making comments like, ‘My mom did that,’ or ‘My dad helped with that.’”

Our Lady of Lourdes’s leaders take a highly proactive approach to encouraging parent involvement. The school’s registration package includes a page dedicated to volunteer opportunities at the school:

“Each year with the registration form we send home a list of areas that people can volunteer in, and it also asks for other skills and talents. This way, we can reach out and ask parents to help with certain events or areas that we need help in. We are also a small community,



Parents help with a fundraising gala

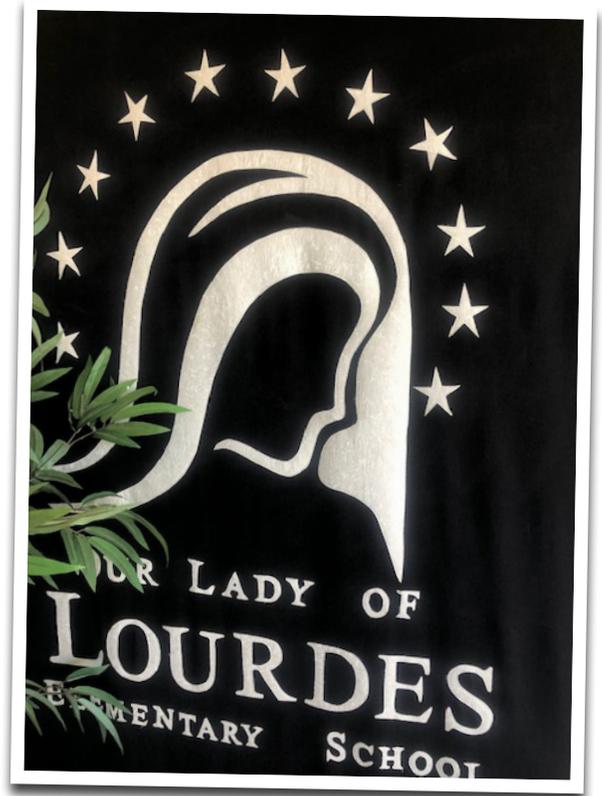
so as [we] get to know parents we start to learn what businesses they may run, etc., and can reach out to them for support. For instance, we have a parent that we know is great with developing marketing material and logos[, so] we have asked him to design a new logo for our new daycare and for our gym.” (Grootjes 2019)

There is also an invitation to all parents to express interest in participating in the school council or PSG. When these groups have open meetings, all parents and parishioners are invited to attend, which “gives parents the feeling that they have a say or that other parents have a say on their behalf” and “creates community and promotes the activities happening at the school.”

One of the responsibilities of every school principal is to facilitate parental engagement. Through a range of initiatives, the principal at Our Lady of Lourdes helps develop deep relationships between the school and the wider community and connects families to important social networks and community resources. In the words of the principal, “I think my kind of basis for everything is relationship. It’s about basing and building those relationships.” The principal’s actions effectively serve to create social capital within the school community. Social capital has been defined as “the resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network of associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar 2011, 1067). Our Lady of Lourdes’s principal is an example of what Putnam (2000, 23) describes as “sociological superglue.” For example, she reports intentionally connecting new families to current school families and to the informal “parking-lot dads group.” In this way, she empowers families through a new set of networks, information, and supports. She emphasized that she believes that relationships and networks can be used by individuals and groups as a resource and for community building (see Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988). This role of the principal—and indeed of education generally—is particularly significant in light of a recent survey by the Angus Reid Institute (2019), which revealed that nearly a quarter of Canadians face serious social isolation and loneliness.

Key Takeaways

1. Given the primary role of parents in children's education at Christian schools in general and Catholic schools in particular, it is important that these schools invite parents to be involved in the school community.
2. Fostering a welcoming atmosphere in a school is an important component of building relationships with the school's families and, by extension, encouraging parental involvement.
3. Schools can promote more effective parental involvement through proactive efforts to discover the unique skills and resources each parent has to offer and to creatively connect those skills to the school's needs.
4. Inviting parents to participate in the operations and decision-making processes of their children's school is a good way to demonstrate to them that they are valuable members of the school community.
5. School leaders should consider how they can create policies, expectations, cultures, and practices that build social capital in their school communities.
6. Schools can play an important role in addressing social isolation experienced by students and their families.



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