# Palliser Regional Schools

# Budget Consultation Meetings, and

# Grade Nine Student Speak-Out

# Focus Group

# March, 2010

**Preamble**

In order to make the best decisions for student learning Palliser Regional Schools engages its stakeholders in discussions reflecting on the school division's practices and initiatives.  The budget consultation process was open to all community members and requested wide ranging input on all of Palliser's programs and priorities.   In addition, this year Palliser engaged all of its grade nine students in a discussion of what is working and not working in their learning and what can adults and students do to help improve student learning.  The input offered in these meetings will focus discussions as Palliser's Board of Trustees prepares its future direction and spending priorities.

**Area Consultation Meetings**

Four budget consultation meetings were held across the jurisdiction to gather all stakeholder input. Open invitations were sent out through local media and schools advertising the location and time of each meeting.   The following is a list of meeting locations and dates:

| | |
|---|---|
| Glenmore Christian Academy | March 1, 2010 |
| Dorothy Dalgliesh Elementary | March 2, 2010 |
| County Central High School | March 4, 2010 |
| John Davidson School | March 8, 2010 |

Each budget area consultation meeting requested tables of participants to consider three topics and give their top three priorities for each.  A process of offering individual input, grouping, and coming to consensus was used for each of the three topics.  The three table topics that participants responded to were:

Here are our Table's top three things we think Palliser should START:
Here are our Table's top three things we think Palliser should STOP:
Here are our Table's top three things we think Palliser should CONTINUE:

**Collection and Analysis of Consultation Data**

Information collected from each of the four budget consultation meetings was collected and grouped into seven categories.  They are:

1. **Communication**

Informing parents, communities, and promoting Palliser Schools were identified as both strengths and areas that deserve more attention. Publically celebrating Palliser's successes was also grouped under communication

2. **School Calendar/Timetable**

Changing school calendars to effectively use Palliser resources was considered under this category.  An example of this would be early dismissal of Fridays.

3. **Transportation**

Items identified under transportation included, routing busses, bus driver pay and fees for fieldtrips.

4. **Central Office**

New initiatives, focusing on accountability pillar measures, granting possibilities for unique programs, lobbying government, and central office supports were included in central office.

5. **Classroom Programming**

Small class sizes, ESL supports, mentoring programs, special needs supports, ensuring that the classroom is the focus of our division were grouped under classroom programming.
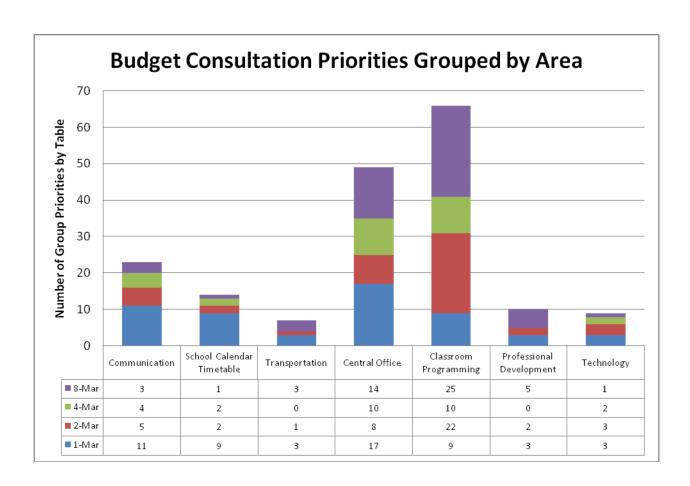
6. **Professional Development**

Supports to all Palliser employees to be current and up-to-date was grouped under professional development, as well as use of collaboration initiatives and supporting teachers' learning in new curriculum areas.

7. **Technology**

New technology initiatives, the continued use of video conferencing instructionally and for meetings and the pace of implementing information technologies in our schools was grouped under technology

**Results from the Four Budget Consultation Meetings**

The following is a build table of all meetings that were held and the areas of priority that were identified. The number of priorities for each of the areas is listed below. The tables are followed by high frequency examples for each area representing the Start, Stop and Continue prompts.

## Budget Consultation Priorities Grouped by Area

| | Communication | School Calendar Timetable | Transportation | Central Office | Classroom Programming | Professional Development | Technology |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8-Mar | 3 | 1 | 3 | 14 | 25 | 5 | 1 |
| 4-Mar | 4 | 2 | 0 | 10 | 10 | 0 | 2 |
| 2-Mar | 5 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 22 | 2 | 3 |
| 1-Mar | 11 | 9 | 3 | 17 | 9 | 3 | 3 |

Summarized comments that relate to major themes or actions that should be **started**, **stopped** and **continued** are located below:

- ✓ Start
- ● Stop
- ➢ Continue

**Classroom Programming**
- ✓ Start/re-examine funding level for classroom student supports
- ✓ Fund/expand counselors/CYCW  student supports eg. Mentorship programs.
- Stop and look at existing programming like the CTS trailers, and make them more efficient.
- Please stop introducing programs – i.e. ESL, and then pulling the support for that program.
- ➢ Identifying what is making a difference for students (successful programs) and ensure that you are getting the best bang for your buck – but keep sustainability in mind (e.g. early literacy).
- ➢ Continue to put kids first! Continue making students the number one priority.

**Central Office**

- ✓ Start looking at creative ways of generating money (e.g. international students, specialty programs – sports/fine arts/etc).
- ✓ Start clarifying what Palliser supports. And what does the society (i.e.) info technology, text book fees cover.
- Stop nothing/ work with existing; try to maintain.
- Stop wasting energy (decrease temperatures, use energy efficient lighting/water…) (try to limit within bills) Cut travel to meetings, of Palliser Administration staff and board.
- ➢ Continue with the amazing 'accountability'! Great job! Continue applying pressure to the government. How can we help do this as parents?
- ➢ Continue to champion the "lease cause" with government.

**Communication**

- ✓ Start promoting the small rural schools and what they have to offer.
- ✓ Ask for student input, what they want to improve education and implement their good ideas (like the Speak-Out Alberta process).
- ✓ Start better communication within the town. Its seniors and all members could be invited to events.
- ➢ Continue to ask for & accept feedback from key stakeholders.
- ➢ School review process (allowing admin to visit other school sites.) and  continue to listen
- ➢ Continue and increase listening to the parent voice.

**School Timetable/Calendar**

- ✓ Start investigating alternate calendars that might save money (e.g. 4 day week, coordinating Spring Break, no half days).
- Stop the charge of in-town busing or standardize the charge for all parents.
- ➢ Encourage schools to have a PD day after Family day before & convention. No lieu day.

**Professional Development**

- ✓ Build the teachers' ability to differentiate to meet the needs of every student including special needs students.
- ✓ Mentoring first year teachers within their school or city without using substitute budgets. Start incentive to reduce substitute budgets.
- ● Stop facilitating extravagant travel for unaccountable Professional Development. Cost versus benefit for all staff?
- ● Make PD Days more effective, cut number of PD days. Review how PD is done in division.
- ➢ Continue supporting new staff.
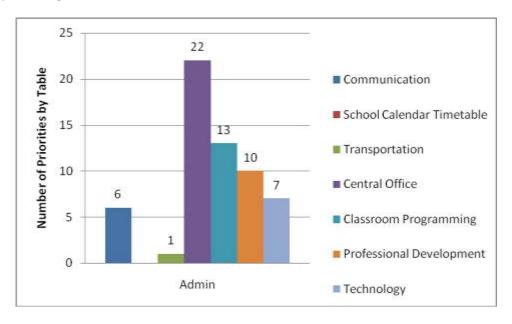- ➢ Continue with professional development for staff to keep them current.

**Technology**

- ✓ Taking action to address IT priorities, allowing admin to provide input into admin time & recognizing that there are limits to pushback both to school leadership & societies.
- ✓ Start video conferencing for meetings.
- ● Slow down technology advancement. We currently have lots of technology in our schools, what we need is time to better learn how to use the technology. Shut down computers at night.
- ➢ Stop technological growth. We would rather see people with our children, not technology, especially in times of recession.
- ➢ Continue teaching with technology.
- ➢ Video Conferencing with training.

**Transportation**

- ✓ Sending the bus into the Horizon District (many students would come from Taber.)
- ✓ Paying in town bus drivers fairly/equitably.
- ✓ Parents contribute more towards the cost of extracurricular trips.
- ✓ Standardize the charge for bussing for all parents (in-town bussing).
- ➢ Continue extra activities i.e. school dances, field trips, ski trips, have guest speakers come in.

Administration Budget Consultation Priorities Discussed at February 24, 2010 Superintendent's Leadership Meeting



**Central Office**
- ✓ Monitoring CEU's closely!
- ✓ CEU incentives for high school – that will positively impact K-12 (share & play nice).
- • Administrative costs – lunch at admin meetings, water bottles, mileage – receipted refund for gas.
- • Stop amount of time admin is called out of the building.
- • New initiatives – let's do what we're already doing better. E.g. tech, AFL, etc.
- ➢ Look at district goals – does this fit into our goals?
- ➢ Centralized budgeting (sharing the wealth).

**Classroom Programming**
- ✓ Increase looking at schools individually – CYCW (per se), FSLW (per se). Need vs. alternatives, talk to admin to see what the need is.
- • Stop ESL cuts and student supports.
- • Stop expanding variety of tech in the classrooms.
- ➢ Continue collaborative time.
- ➢ Continue to provide an ongoing training for admin.
- ➢ Continue striving for a balanced approach!

**Communication**
- ✓ Encouraging staff focus on what we do well.
- ✓ Publically celebrate success.
- ✓ Educating parents – what is happening, changes.
- ➢ Advertise/sell what we do.
- ➢ Continue the excellent communication between Central Office and Admin – TGIF.

**Professional Development**
- ✓ More staff oriented PD/collaboration – instead of all District-wide collaboration.
- Reconsider, reexamine current structure of collaborative PD Day – revisit,
- ➢ Proper training for admin assistants – commonality for SIRS, Bellamy, Racers.
- ➢ Continue networking schools & school admin.
- ➢ Valuing PD.

**Technology**
- Using VC every other month in 3 central locations then the other month in person (face to face).
- Stop tech changes e.g.:  SIRS programs.
- Stop implementing new technology – maintain what we have.
- Stop expanding the variety of technologies in the classroom.
- Continue to ask the question: is education driving technology or is technology driving education?

**Transportation**
- Consider purchasing buses after 10 years of service.

# Speak Out – the Alberta Student Engagement Initative

## Palliser Regional Schools ‚ Grade 9 Students
## December 2009, January 2010



*The online Wordle Java Applet (at http://www.wordle.net) was used to create the above graphic. Wordle is a tool that generates "word clouds" from text. We used this tool to analyze the responses recevied from 418 Grade 9 students in Palliser Regional Schools. The word clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text; i.e., the words in bigger fonts were mentioned more frequently than those in smaller fonts.*

# Summary

Speak Out – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative was launched in November 2008.  The initiative was created to allow students from across Alberta to discuss their education, including what is working for them, what is not, and what can be changed to make things better. "Alberta's youth must have a voice in the decisions that affect their learning and their futures," said Minister of Education Dave Hancock. "Speak Out is an opportunity for students to tell us how we can offer education programs that are supportive, flexible and consistent with their needs."

In December 2009 and January 2010, Dan Ryder, District Principal in Palliser Regional Schools, and Clarice Gilbert, AISI Facilitator, conducted Speak Out Forums at 17 schools with 418 Grade 9 students using the DVD Toolkit.  The schools involved and the number of participants at each location is listed below.

| School | Number of Participants | School | Number of Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Arrowwood Community School | 1 | Huntsville School | 3 |
| Barons School | 2 | John Davidson School | 1 |
| Brant Christian School | 9 | Kate Andrews High School | 81 |
| Calgary Christian High School | 46 | Master's Academy | 36 |
| Champion Community School | 8 | Menno Simons Christian | 14 |
| Coalhurst High School | 31 | Milo Community School | 11 |
| County Central High School | 40 | Noble Central School | 13 |
| Glenmore Christian Academy | 48 | Picture Butte High School | 43 |
| Heritage Christian Academy | 31 | | |

# The Speak Out Forum

At the beginning of each Speak Out Forum, an overview of Speak Out – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative, was provided. Students were separated into small working groups, which typically included six to eight students and one table leader. The table leaders were identified by the school Principal. They helped the students keep on task and capture their findings.  Each Speak Out Forum included activities and games for team development within each working group. These team-building activities were interspersed with the facilitation questions.

**The Facilitation**

The Speak Out Forum facilitation process included individual and group brainstorming, clustering of similar ideas, theming, and voting in small working groups.

Below is a summary of the facilitation process employed during the Forum:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Brainstorm** | <ul><li>Ask students to brainstorm their ideas onto the sticky notes:  one idea per note.</li><li>Ask students to get at least 4 or 5 ideas each.</li></ul> |
| **Share** | <ul><li>Ask students to share their ideas with the group.</li><li>Ask each person to share what's most important to them, by reading it out loud and placing it in the centre of the table.</li><li>Go to the next person and ask for their most important idea.  Go around the table.</li><li>Round Two:  Ask each student to share and place their NEXT most important idea in the centre of the table.</li><li>Round Three:  Ask if anyone has anything different they'd like to add to the centre.   There should be a pile of sticky notes in the centre of the table.</li></ul> |
| **Cluster** | <ul><li>Ask the group to start pairing the stickies that have similar ideas.</li><li>Read the ideas together as they get paired off.</li><li>Start adding similar ideas to the pairs to make clusters.</li></ul> |
| **Name** | <ul><li>Once everything is clustered, challenge the group to try to name the cluster of stickies.</li><li>Write the name of that cluster onto a sticky and place it on top of the stickies.</li><li>Name all of the clusters.</li></ul> |
| **Post** | <ul><li>As a group decide what are the two most important ideas they want to bring forward to the larger group for voting.</li><li>Write the group's top two ideas (cluster names) on the flip chart paper.</li><li>Send a student to tape the paper up on the wall.  Once all papers have been posted from the other groups, get ready to vote!</li></ul> |
| **Vote** | <ul><li>Give each student 2 dots to vote in the dot-ocracy.</li></ul> |

The participants were asked to respond to the following four questions:
1. What does it look like when you are learning at your best?
2. What is holding you back from learning at your best?
3. What actions can adults take to improve how education looks and feels?
4. What actions can students take to improve how education looks and feels?

The Speak Out team understands the importance of being open and transparent in this process. The student-generated data from each Speak Out Forum was transcribed into a "What We Heard" document and posted on the Speak Out website. The "What We Heard" documents from Palliser Regional Schools are in Appendix D. A "What We Heard" document was not prepared for Arrowwood School as that student did not complete the formal Forum. Instead, that student's contributions are included in the larger summary.
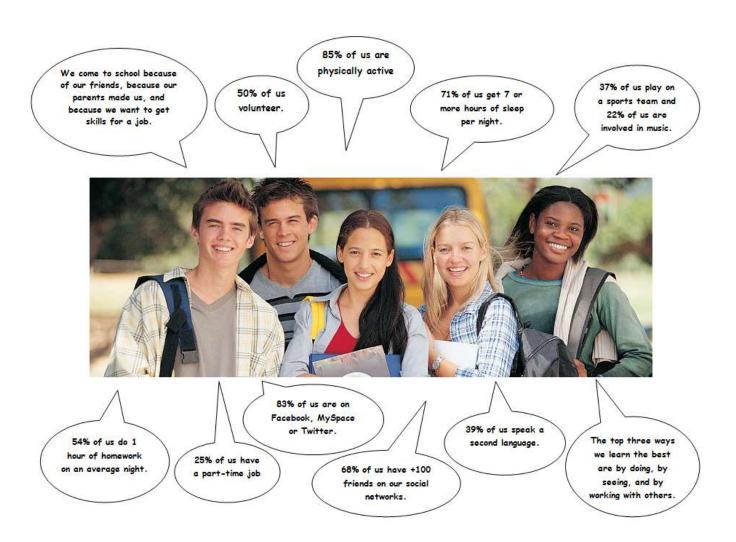
**Resources**

At each table there were a few resources available to participants to help frame the discussion. These include the "Think About" page and the "Rules of Engagement" page.

The "Think About" page prompted students to consider a number of factors affecting their education, including, stress, pace of learning, creativity, leadership, preparing for the future, time management, and so on. The "Think About" page is attached in Appendix A.

The "Rules of Engagement" were designed to keep the discussion on topic, while respecting the students in the group. The "Rules of Engagement" include speaking respectfully to each other, thinking about what other are saying, and respecting differences of opinions. Also included is the request for anonymity. No names are used. This rule is in place to encourage students to think beyond the personal and think more broadly about their learning experiences. The "Rules of Engagement" page is attached in Appendix B.

# Who's in the Room?

The following demographic percentages are based on an average of the responses collected from each of the 418 participating students using a student questionnaire. A copy of this questionnaire, "Who's in the Room", can be provided upon request. Here is a snapshot of the Palliser students who participated.
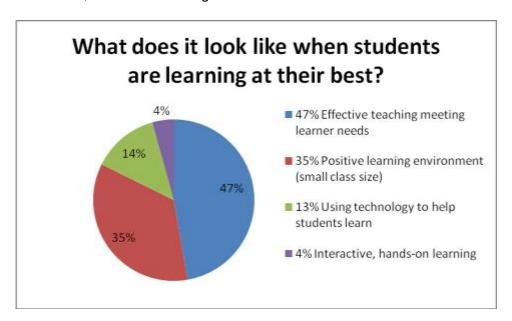


*Photo courtesy of Alberta Education and the Alberta Teacher's Association.*

# What We Heard from Palliser's Grade 9 Students

**Prompt one: What does it look like when you are learning at your best?**

The purpose of this prompt was to identify the conditions and tools required for optimal learning. Students were encouraged to consider how they learn best, both in school and in their personal lives. The following themes are taken directly from student input and summarize the ideas that consistently arose from each Speak Out Forum.
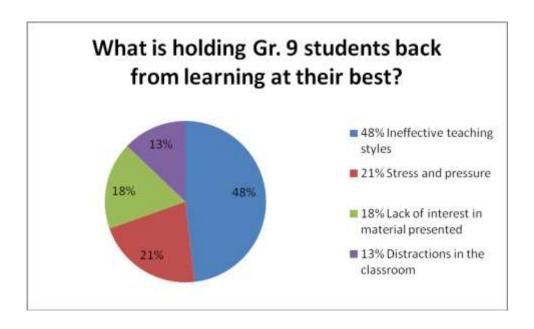
1. Effective teaching meeting learner needs
2. Positive learning environment (small class size)
3. Using technology to help students learn
4. Interactive, hands-on learning



**Prompt two: What is holding you back from learning at your best?**

The purpose of this prompt was to have students reflect on the boundaries or limitations that prevent them from reaching their individual "optimal learning." The following themes are taken directly from student input and summarize the ideas that consistently arose from each Speak Out Forum.
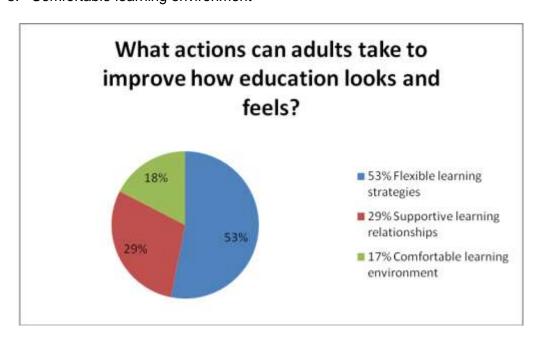
1. Ineffective teaching styles
2. Stress and pressure
3. Lack of interest in material presented
4. Distractions in the classroom

## What is holding Gr. 9 students back from learning at their best?

- 48% Ineffective teaching styles
- 21% Stress and pressure
- 18% Lack of interest in material presented
- 13% Distractions in the classroom

**Prompt three: What actions can adults take to improve how education looks and feels?**

The purpose of this prompt was to allow students to be creative and provide solutions or strategies for overcoming the obstacles, boundaries or limitations identified in the discussion on the second prompt. This prompt specifically examines actions that **adults** can take. The following themes are taken directly from student input and summarize the ideas that consistently arose from each Speak Out Forum.

1. Flexible learning strategies
2. Supportive learning relationships
3. Comfortable learning environment

## What actions can adults take to improve how education looks and feels?

- 53% Flexible learning strategies
- 29% Supportive learning relationships
- 17% Comfortable learning environment

**Prompt four: What actions can students take to improve how education looks and feels?**

The purpose of this prompt was to allow students to be creative and provide solutions or strategies for overcoming the obstacles, boundaries or limitations identified in the discussion on the second prompt. This prompt specifically examines actions that **students** can take. The following themes are taken directly from student input and summarize the ideas that consistently arose from each Speak Out Forum.
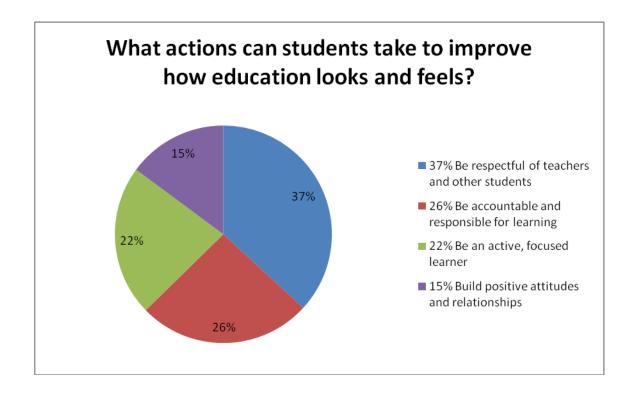
1. Be respectful of teachers and other students
2. Be accountable and responsible for learning
3. Be an active, focused learner
4. Build positive attitudes and relationships

## What actions can students take to improve how education looks and feels?

- 37% Be respectful of teachers and other students
- 26% Be accountable and responsible for learning
- 22% Be an active, focused learner
- 15% Build positive attitudes and relationships

# Participant Evaluation of Four Budget Consultation Meetings

| Budget Consultation Evaluation | Average /4 |
|---|---|
| **Session Format** | 3.4 |
| **Background Materials/Handouts** | 3.2 |
| **Presentation** | 3.4 |
| **Group Discussion** | 3.8 |
| **Opportunity to Provide Input** | 3.7 |
| **Meeting Environment (location, sound, refreshments)** | 3.6 |
| **Personal Value** | 3.4 |
| **Did this session meet your expectations?** | 16 Yes/ 2 No |

**What did you like best about this session?**

Being listened to.

The opportunity to voice my opinion.

Table of budget spending.

Change to voice our opinions.

Having a voice or say.

Being able to voice our opinions.

Discussion was very open.

The frank discussion.

The opportunity to discuss views and opinions.

Group discussion - nice to know what others are thinking.

People explained questions I had, or things that I didn't know about.

**Suggestions for improvement/other comments:**

A link sent in an e-mail to the proposed budget so it could be reviewed prior to the group discussion.

More discussion with the whole group results discussed.

Listen to what we have to say.

Hard to hear at table at times (echo in gym)

I would have liked to know what areas Palliser is considering cutting. Sometimes as parents it's hard to think of where & what may be cut until we hear it from you.

Hand out the hand out at the start, sometimes powerpoint too fast or too small to read. Point of View – Palliser's - Government not of the things that went "wrong" before…Why are we in this situation? Did we save?