A Community Conversation:

A report on school success, as shared by Palliser stakeholders

June 2012
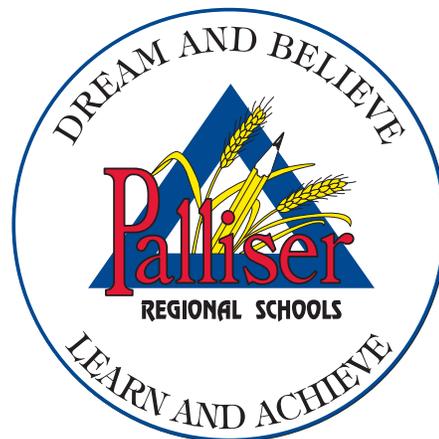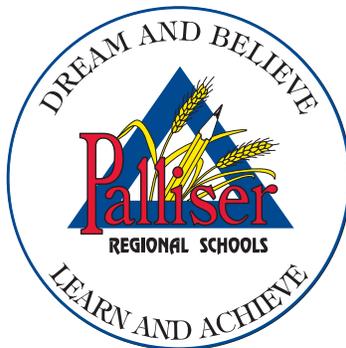
A Community Conversation: A report on school success, as shared by Palliser stakeholders
By Director of Learning Donna Dalby
& Executive Assistant Communications Dawn Sugimoto
Prepared for the Board of Trustees of Palliser Regional Schools
and the Stakeholders They Serve
© Palliser Regional Schools, June 2012

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Board of Trustees of Palliser Regional Schools sponsored an unprecedented meeting of its stakeholders on May 14, 2012, at the Cultural Recreation Centre in Vulcan. For the first time in the division's history, students, staff, parents and public from all parts of the division were invited to a single gathering, in place of regional meetings the Board had organized in previous years.

This was the first time people from all reaches of Palliser engaged in a discussion about school success in one place at one time.

In his welcoming comments that day, Board Chairman Don Zech referred to this gathering as "an important step in our division's continued evolution."

"Less than two decades ago, Palliser was created out of the merger of two rural school divisions serving the County of Lethbridge and Vulcan County," he said. "Today, our schools stretch across southern Alberta to North Calgary. We are rural; we are urban; we are secular; we are faith-based. We are new Canadians and we are fifth-generation southern Albertan. We are First Nations, Hutterian, Low German Mennonite. We are small schools and we are large. But at our core, we all share the same mission: to ensure learning success for every student."

Palliser Regional Schools Superintendent Kevin Gietz shared information on just how much Palliser has changed in the past seven years. In 2005-2006, the division's enrolment was 3,618. In 2012-2013, it's projected Palliser will have more than 7,000 students from Grade 1-12 and children in our Early Childhood Services programs.

The number of schools has also grown from 30 schools in 2005-2006 to 45 schools in 2011-2012, with two more schools, one Hutterian and the other a faith-based alternative program, joining the fold in 2012-2013.

In the face of such diversity, Palliser attempted to ensure a broad cross-section of school and community stakeholders took part in this community conversation. Each school administrator was tasked with organizing a delegation consisting of a minimum of one administrator; one teacher; one support staff; one representative from school council; one parent, not representing school council, from each division at the school; one student from Division 3 (Grades 7-9); one student from Division 4 (Grades 10-12); and one society representative where applicable.

When the event occurred, there were 176 participants at 28 tables.

Each registrant was assigned to a table to give each table a diverse mix of staff, students, parents and school communities.

A table leader was identified for each table. This person was encouraged to participate fully in the discussion, but charged with the task of recording key elements of the discussion through the afternoon.

For three hours that afternoon, individuals at each table engaged in an exercise of talking and, in turn, listening.

The groups tackled five key tasks:

1. Everyone at the table was asked to share a school success story, whether that occurred at the school they attended as a child, their child's school, a school in Palliser or outside the jurisdiction.
2. Reflecting on those success stories, participants were asked to brainstorm all the factors they thought contributed to that success.

> " We have diversity but are connected with a common vision/purpose. "
> — From a participant

3. As a group, all the factors were discussed and grouped by commonality.
4. Next, the groups discussed if this amazing story happened again, what could we do to make it better?
5. As a wrap-up to the conversation, individuals took turns sharing their dream for their school and reflecting on what role they could play in making that dream come true.
6. Finally, participants were asked to offer their comments about the day and reflect on how they could continue this conversation in their own communities.

The format was intended to encourage participation by all in attendance, to celebrate school success in all its forms, and to learn what factors were present to contribute to these successes. In short, the goal of the day was to identify the key ingredients in the recipe of success for our students.

Although community school, Central Office departments and alternative schools from across Palliser were represented, it should be noted that Palliser's 16 Hutterian Colony schools were under-represented in this forum. Although the colony principal was in attendance, parents, staff and students from the colonies were not part of the event.

Further, the timing of the event, from 1 to 4 p.m., presented a barrier to some participants who had to leave early for busing or other considerations.

What follows is a summary of findings for each of the key questions posed as well as the participants' comments during A Community Conversation based on analysis of data collected from each table.

Question 1: What factors contributed to the success story?

Success is a complicated recipe because everyone's story is unique. Through conversation, however, key themes emerged.

1. **Dedicated staff:** The factor identified most often in individuals' success stories was dedicated staff, both teachers and support staff. A knowledgeable, caring, student-focused individual seemed to be a common ingredient in many successes in our schools. One table listed the following under the heading "Relationships": "Student-staff relationships, cheerful and caring personalities from all staff, not just teachers, caring teachers, caring people, helping students believe they can be successful and supporting the student through that. . . Staff that are willing to listen and also understand each individual." Another table acknowledged "Caring staff. Personal dedication of staff." Other groups referred to staff "going above and beyond." From another table emerged a call for "Commitment, passion and positive attitude from all levels. . . Participants also thought teachers with the qualities mentioned above were vital . . ."

2. **Safe and caring environments:** Many comments referred to the need for students, staff, parents and public to feel welcome at their school. The safe environment was needed for individuals to take risks, try new ideas and grow. Comments included: "Everyone counts; compassion for others" and "Freedom to run with a concept; environment that feels safe." One participant described how "the safe environment created by the teacher helped give her daughter the confidence" to perform in public.

3. **Programming opportunities (academic and non-academic, on-campus and off-campus):** Several participants spoke of the value of a broad range of programming tailored to the needs of the individual

"
Every one of us has a responsibility in the education process.
"
— From a participant

student, providing the student with real-world opportunities. One table discussed "Using a variety of environments to promote a range of educational experiences, i.e. field trips, outdoors, museums, recreation centres, other locations/environments within the school. . . Connecting students to authentic, practical and real-world learning opportunities." In another conversation, participants discussed the importance of fine arts including art, drama, choir and concerts. The table discussion included a call for more promotion of the arts, and time in the school schedule for arts programming. At another table, participants discussed the importance of "exposure to diverse cultures and people" and the need to "continue to offer trips to expose children to the world around them."

4. **Vision:** Many groups spoke about the importance of having a common vision and working toward that vision. "Vision — this seemed to be the most important factor according to our group. The vision came from either a staff member, community member and sometimes from a student. The vision was often someone with an amazing idea. . . That person usually had a passion to sell the idea." Another table created a grouping of factors called "Goals/Expectations: Strong vision to see it happen; common goal; intentionality (saw a need). . ." Another table grouping referred to the need for "vision/convictions/vision for change."

5. **Communication/relationships:** Several of the table groups referred to the importance of building strong relationships between students, staff, parents and the community at large because everyone has a vested interest in student success. One parent commented, he/she believed "teachers/administrators (should) never (be) afraid to contact me as a parent." Another group commented, "Schools are often like a big family; relationships between staff, students and families." Another group discussed, "Personal relationships create more ownership for the community – it is not just something read in the school newsletter but people are taking ownership of it."

6. **Access to resources (tie):** Participants discussed the importance of schools having the resources they need to meet students' needs, and discussed ways to access funding, human and other resources. Some individuals said they would commit to fundraising or advocacy to ensure resources are available. Although it did not make the Top 10 list of factors, some participants referred specifically to the importance of small class sizes, which also become an issue of resources and facilities. At one table, the list of factors began with: "Community association funding for our classroom, what our teachers need to teach" and included "Invest in the teacher; Invest in the community" and "Funding."

   Open heart, open minds/A can-do spirit (tie): Several groups referred to attitude guiding achievement of success. Their own success stories occurred in part because people were open minded to something new. One participant said a factor to his/her success story hinged on the fact that "Central Office was open minded and supporting beliefs and cultural differences. . ." Another table group discussed the need to "focus on the positives, potentials and flexibility, not on barriers." One table discussion summed it up this way: "Sharing ideas and being open to ideas; having a 'can do it' mentality (we are taught that there are no limitations on what we can do or learn). . . be willing to try new things."

7. **Inclusiveness:** Alberta Education has focused much attention on the need for a more inclusive education system. The department's website states: "The goal of an inclusive education system is to provide all students with the most appropriate learning environments and opportunities for them to best achieve their potential." In the context of "A Community Conversation," inclusion refers to that

> " Today was very uplifting. It gave us the opportunity for great discussions, idea sharing and the opportunity to discuss collaboration for the future between schools. "
>
> — From a participant

and more. Participants said inclusiveness was a part of their success story because there was meaningful involvement by students, staff, parents and community. One table group referred to the importance of a "sense of belonging, inclusion," while another cited "inclusion of all children, community and staff" as being a factor in success.

8. **Volunteer input/Community engagement (tie):** The two factors tied in eighth place may appear to be linked, but the two are quite different. Volunteer input/Community engagement refers to the importance of providing meaningful and purposeful roles for people outside the school in support of student success. One group summarized it this way: "Volunteers – these were the workers who helped make the vision become reality. The volunteers were the people who helped plan and implement the vision. According to our table, most volunteers were from the community." Another said a factor for success was "A parent group willing to volunteer." At another table, the importance of community engagement was stated as: "Community – belief that it takes a group or village to help a student succeed, belief that this young person will be taking care of me in my community someday – model the behavior desired, community awareness."

   Volunteer initiative service/Service/Giving Back (tie): While the previous ingredient in the recipe for success addresses the importance of the school being an inviting place for volunteers from all corners, this ingredient refers to the importance of students serving as volunteers and giving back to their community. One participant shared a success story about students performing acts of community service. He/she said, "Students were very engaged and excited to do another one after feeling how wonderful it was to give back in a way they hadn't previously experienced." At another table, participants expressed desire for more "service opportunities for students — then they may value what they have." Still another referred to the importance of "Volunteer initiative by students; giving back; serving one another."

9. **Parent support and engagement:** Parent engagement is more than having parents fundraise, donate baking or photocopy worksheets. Participants spoke of a deeper partnership in which parents felt they had a valued voice in their school and the division. A school council is one mechanism for ensuring a parent voice in the school. One group emphasized the importance of school council by listing it as a factor in success in this way: "Parent council 6x," and another referred to a 91 per cent participation rate in parent-teacher interviews at a school. At another table, the discussion emphasized the importance of parents and others having a voice in their schools and being invited in: "Don't be afraid to ask, ask all parents to participate."

10. **Student collaboration/engagement:** According to participants, success often came as a result of the power of collaboration between students and their level of engagement, interest and passion for the project or subject matter. At one table, "Empowering students to own their own education, committed students, great peers" and "Empowering and engaging students to become involved in their school and community," were both among factors identified as contributing to success. At another, factors included "student interaction/interest" and "love of learning." At another, "an atmosphere where students are motivated to learn and work hard to accomplish what is required," was a factor in success. Participants in another group credited "responsibility and teamwork; students being passionate about what they are doing" for contributing to success.

" Get involved. Tell people
that their voice matters. "
— From a participant

This list of Top 10 contributing factors is certainly not intended to incapsulate the sum of factors discussed in A Community Conversation. In fact, there are many other factors that were raised repeatedly, though less frequently than the factors named above. Others, in no particular order, were:
- School board involvement;
- Responsible students;
- Student leadership;
- Professional leadership;
- Administrative leadership;
- Pride of school community;
- Fun;
- Professional development;
- Student focus;
- Detailed planning;
- Faith-based community;
- Celebration of success;
- Small class sizes.

Question 2: If this amazing success story were to happen again, what could we do to make it even better?

With participants having shared their amazing story and with the feelings and emotions of that success fresh in their minds, we asked them to think about how we could have made a great moment even better.

Interestingly, at least one participant responded, "Change nothing – maintain the commitment and positive attitudes."

At other tables, however, a direction for building on success emerged from the conversation. Here's a look at the actions that top the list:

1. **Get the word out:** Several participants spoke about the need to share more information about success with more people. Some thought this could be accomplished through advertising. Another table suggested using video to share information with larger groups of people; another discussed the importance of sharing information between Palliser schools "so that a larger group of students could participate." Other participants suggested emphasizing "up and coming" information on school events on Palliser's website, in addition to highlighting successes after they've happened. At another, there was emphasis on sharing success stories: "We share stories and it is a powerful metaphor to think about storytelling as a way to preserve these remarkable experiences so that we can share it with the people who need to hear it." In one specific success story, regarding a service project, participants discussed how much more impactful the success could have been "if we had double the kids, we could do more and now it's getting the word out there to share the success to bring more people on board." Another group suggested "more consistent" communication with all stakeholders would be productive. From one table came suggestions that each school have a communication committee to share success stories,

> " For all of our differences, at our core we are the same. We want more for our children than we had for ourselves. "
> — Don Zech, Palliser Chairman

or that students drive the communication with each other about their own success stories.

2. **Opportunities for purposeful public/parent engagement:** Just as participants identified public and parent engagement as being key to past successes, they said providing more opportunity for parents and public to be involved would make for even greater success. Participants discussed the importance of asking all parents to take part, giving parents and others the opportunity to brainstorm ideas so they are involved from the outset, and ensuring parents and public have meaningful involvement on planning committees. From one table, emerged a call for "More community and family involvement and more communication," a recommendation that also ties in with getting the word out. One table group suggested parent engagement surveys so parents can choose to be involved where they're most comfortable. From another table came a suggestion that we "collaborate together and share with other schools and communities within Palliser, so that we become stronger together." Another group summed it up simply: "Get everybody involved."

3. **More money/time/resources:** Inevitably, as thoughts turn to building on success, thoughts also turn to the resources available to do so. One participant acknowledged that resources are finite, but he/she suggested better communication about what resources exist would help. This was echoed by another table group, which stated: "More funding for programs (playgrounds, programs for those with disabilities without having to leave their community); People need to know what funds are available for which situations so that they can get assistance as required." Another called for "long-term, stable funding." From another table came the wish for more time to mount challenges and activities for students from various grades, to build relationships within the school, and one participant said teachers need more resources and time to give students what they need in the classroom.

4. **Offer more options:** A number of participants spoke about the importance of students having a broad range of programming, activities and opportunities suited to their individual needs and interests as being key to even greater success. "More non-core time," "Make time in the schedule for fine arts," and "Help students to excel in their area of interest," were among the comments presented. From another table came the call for expanded music programming and more hands-on activities including CTS courses. Another suggested expansion of mentoring programs.

5. **Appreciation and recognition:** From one table, came the suggestion of the importance of both celebration and recognition. Another suggested each teacher should have a small budget to recognize student success, while another table urged "Strong appreciation for the work that parents do to support the school." One participant commented, "I want to do these things. I don't get paid. . . Recognition is important."

The preceding five suggestions to enhance success were by far the most common raised in A Community Conversation. Others include, in no particular order:

- Dream even bigger;
- More orientation programming;
- Facility improvements;
- Celebrating faith;
- Student-to-student forums or activities, collaboration;
- School responsive to home and community;
- Celebrating diversity/faith;

" Round table discussions are " excellent always, but this one, in particular.
 — From a participant

- More counselling support;
- Continued focus on safe, caring, respectful environments;
- Meaningful opportunities for student engagement in community/school;
- No more provincial achievement tests;
- More day care/before- and after-school care;
- Maintain small class sizes;
- More school trips;
- School trips early in the year to promote bonding;
- Grow small schools;
- Be realistic and focused;
- Focus on the positive;
- Central Office staff attendance at more school events;
- Plan ahead for staffing and classroom space;
- More opportunities for partner play.

Question 3: What is your dream for your school and your role in realizing that dream?

As a final exercise of the afternoon, participants were encouraged to share their dream for their school and what they'd envision as their role for making that dream a reality. The question reinforces the concept that whoever we are, we do have a role to play in school success, whether as a parent, a student, a member of the staff or someone who lives and cares about the community.

We had expected this question would deliver some suggested actions for building on Palliser success. Instead, a review of the data revealed that the dreams we have for our schools are as diverse and individualized as the students we serve.

Your Take on the Community Conversation

At the end of the day, participants were asked to provide three comments about the day, name two people they would tell about the day, and offer one thing they would do to continue this conversation in their community. Participants were also asked if they would participate in a forum like A Community Conversation again. We received 156 responses from 176 attendees.

Strikingly, out of the 156 respondents, only four said they would not participate in a similar forum if given the opportunity. One of those four said he/she would decline attending again so that someone else from the school staff could have the opportunity.

There were a number of common themes in the feedback offered by participants.

Many participants voiced support for the format that encouraged both talking and listening and the move to a single stakeholders' meeting, rather than regional gatherings. Two participants suggested Palliser go back

> " I felt my voice was heard. "
> — From a participant

to regional stakeholder meetings.

Here are some sample comments:

- "What an amazing opportunity to 'hear' people's hearts and to understand the heartbeat of the Palliser community. People want to engage! They want to see the schools succeed."
- "It was very interesting to learn some of the challenges in other schools. Big or small, the core of all schools is the same — the goals and dreams for our students are the same."
- "Enjoyable — really liked hearing views from other areas. Normally it just ones that are similar."
- "Excellent opportunity to talk to a group across the district at more one-on-one level."
- "A wonderful idea to bring so many perspectives together to improve student success."
- "Great to hear from all stakeholders. We all want what is best for the students — that's obvious."
- "Absolutely outstanding opportunity to listen and share how wonderful our communities really are and how Palliser supports all of our staff and students."
- "Think it was an ultimate way to understand other schools and students."
- "Conversation focused around students, community involvement, ways to give back. Kindness, caring, sharing. Growth of a child."
- "I am very inspired that you are being so innovative by involving parents, educators and trustees."
- "I appreciated the range of individuals represented —bus drivers/town council/parents/students/staff."
- "It was great to get the whole division together to collaborate."

There was diversity of opinion on the time allotted for key questions and discussion:

- "Could shorten some of the time allotted but otherwise this was a great idea and should be held annually."
- "The time seemed to fly."
- "Perhaps shorten the time to discuss/share as sometimes there was a little too much time."
- "We identified barriers and could use more time to explore ideas that work!"
- "I think it would have been beneficial to prepare participants with the questions ahead of time. We could have used more time."

Several participants used their feedback form to issue a call to action to Palliser:

- "Success will be determined when we observe the changes that follow today."
- "I would like to see something be done as a result of this talk. It is one thing to talk and promise one thing, and another to take action and encourage change."
- "This was an excellent opportunity to share ideas, network and hopefully move Palliser forward."
- "Would hope that thoughts and ideas shared are put into realization."
- "We are all hoping to see more ideas come to fruition."
- "I wonder if anything concrete will come from our time spent here today. I'm looking forward to seeing the improvements we talked about today."
- "I would like to know what actually is done with the info gathered."
- "Hopefully the ideas, discussion we had today is used in some way for future success."

As much as participants want a response from Palliser to the day's discussion, they were also embracing

> " (Engagement) isn't just neighbourly. It's a necessity. "
> — Kevin Gietz, Superintendent

their own role in keeping this conversation about success going. The evaluation form asked specifically what participants would do to continue the conversation. Interestingly, 28 respondents said they would continue A Community Conversation at their school council, parent council or society board. Very few respondents left this blank, suggesting they saw value in the conversation and its continuation.

Sample comments include:
- "Talk to community members **AND** my own kids about their dreams."
- "Ask the thoughts and opinions of others in my school community. Find out what we can improve upon."
- "Get involved. Tell people that their voice matters."
- "Attend council meetings."
- "Share this positive experience and get others involved."
- "Tell people it's about the kids."
- "Question others on what they would do to build community."
- "Try this at our school and community."
- "Try to keep talking about what we can do to help our community."
- "Talk about it with neighbours."
- "Listen better, become more involved.

The feedback asked participants to identify two people they would tell about the afternoon. This was intended to help encourage a continuation of this conversation.

Finally, and significantly, several participants commented how valuable it was to have students involved in the discussion. There were three tables out of 28 which did not have a student representative. For future forums, Palliser will have to find ways to encourage more students to attend.
- "Including the students was a fabulous idea."
- "Great to hear from so many different people. I loved the mix and I loved having the student's perspective."
- "The student at our table had a clear understanding of his school."
- "Would love to see the kids get together for the last question and see what they would dream."
- "Student involvement (was) excellent."

Conclusion

This stakeholders' meeting was dramatically different in format and scope than any undertaken by Palliser Regional Schools in the past. Based on the valuable information that was shared and the positive reception from participants, it would appear evident that the event was purposeful and successful. A diverse group of stakeholders met and engaged in meaningful conversation, further evidence that student success is everyone's business.

This report will be presented to the Board of Trustees of Palliser Regional Schools at its meeting June 19, 2012, will be distributed to participants and posted publicly on Palliser's website at www.pallisersd.ab.ca.

> " The Palliser district puts into practice what it believes — kids come first.
> — From a participant