

# A Community Conversation 2015:

Report from a  
meeting of Palliser  
stakeholders

Let's talk...



## INTRODUCTION

The Board of Trustees of Palliser Regional Schools convened a division-wide stakeholder meeting on May 28, 2015. This was only the second time the board invited stakeholders from across the geographically large and demographically diverse division to a common gathering. The first was held in May 2012.

A Community Conversation 2015 brought together 195 participants who worked in 25 table groups at the Cultural Recreational Centre in Vulcan. This conversation picked up where the last left off, using input gleaned from the 2012 event as a starting point.

To ensure a broad cross-section of representation from across the division, Palliser Regional Schools encouraged every school community to organize a delegation of at least: one administrator; one teacher; one support staff; one representative of school council; one parent not on school council, from each division of the school. Schools with grades 7 and up were also asked to bring at least one student from Division 3 (Grade 7-9) and Division 4 (Grade 10-12). Each society operating at Palliser's faith-based alternative schools was also invited to bring at least one representative.

Registrants were assigned to tables to ensure a broad mix of representation, and efforts were made to ensure every table had at least one student. Walk-in guests were also accommodated.

Beyond the delegations from schools, each area of Central Office operations was also represented in the discussions. The public was invited to attend through promotions and advertising on the division website, social media sites and in the Sunny South News, Vulcan Advocate and City Light News. Schools were asked to post notices on their own websites and inform all parents of this meeting using their own communication tools.

A facilitator was identified for each table to capture the discussion and ensure the group stayed on task and within the day's tight timelines.

There were just three rules for the event: Everyone has an opportunity to talk in turn. Everyone will listen respectfully. Everyone will stay on topic and respect the time limit.

## BUILDING ON 2012

As individuals registered for the event, they were emailed a two-page summary of the results of the 2012 Community Conversation which focused on the factors that most contribute to school success. The summary shared what Palliser had done in the past three years in each of those areas. The factors from 2012 served as the starting point to A Community Conversation 2015, with participants asked to consider the following questions:

***Which factors from the 2012 Community Conversation are no longer relevant?***

***Which factors are more important than ever and should move up the list?***

***What factors that contribute to school success should be added to the list?***

***Looking at our list of factors we added or moved up the list, what can we do or change to support these factors for success?***

The final question of the day related to Palliser's literacy focus, a program that was in its infancy in 2012 when the first Community Conversation was held. After sharing information about how much reading progress students can lose over the summer if they stop reading, Palliser asked participants to consider: ***What can each of us do in our unique roles in our communities to help prevent the summer reading slide?***

Based on feedback received in 2012, A Community Conversation 2015 was contained to just a two-hour span from 1 to 3 p.m.

As the event concluded, each participant was asked to take two bookmarks, one to keep and one to give away to someone they'd talk with about the day. The bookmarks were designed to spark a conversation about the Palliser event, and included tips for preventing the summer reading slide. They were also asked to share two comments about the day on feedback forms left at each table.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

Comments and suggestions from each of the 25 table groups were reviewed for commonality, suggestions and other feedback. This report attempts to capture the essence of the conversations while documenting ideas or suggestions that may help inspire activities at other schools. Verbatim comments are shared where appropriate and are noted in italics.

## THE RESULTS

The 25 table groups were unanimous in their assessment of the 2012 list of factors that most contribute to school success. All remain relevant. None should be eliminated from the list. Some suggested that instead of a Top 10 list, the factors are all equally important and should not be ranked.

*"They all seem relevant. It's a well-defined list; we are unsure we will ever get to a time when we don't need all of those aspects."*

*"All points should be considered number 1 since they are all important."*

If ranking was to be maintained, two items specifically were mentioned as needing to be at the top of the list.

The top item in 2012 was "Dedicated Staff." Several table groups discussed Palliser's committed and caring staff as being first and foremost contributors to the division and its schools' success.

*"Dedicated staff should remain No. 1. If you don't have dedicated staff, you don't have anything."*

*"I was encouraged to see that the dedicated staff was at the top of the list."*

The other factor most identified as needing to move up the list was No. 10 in 2012: "Student collaboration/engagement."

*"Student collaboration should not be at the bottom of the list. Both parents and students need to work together. The environment has changed to a very collaborative environment in preparation for the world of work which has changed to be more collaborative as well."*

*"Student engagement should be moved up. Students are (our) number one priority... Having student voices heard above and beyond just their school."*

Another recurring theme from the table talk was a concern about human resources, particularly support staff positions. At the time of the stakeholder meeting, a new provincial government had been elected, but the terms of the previous government's budget announcement for 2015-2016 were still in effect. That original budget reduced funding for all grants except those related to teacher remuneration, leaving support staff in a particularly vulnerable position. On the afternoon of the event, the provincial government announced that planned grant reductions would not be made but given the timing, participants would not have known that.

It appears considerable conversation from the day focused on Palliser's diversity, which was evident in the crowd of stakeholders. This diversity was embraced by participants.

*"Palliser has a huge advantage because we are diverse. It's not just another cookie cutter school division."*

*"Students have come to appreciate special needs students in a great way ... this is a great life skill for students to be accepting of all students. These provide a very positive perspective."*

*"Division diversity is a strength that should be a part of the list as a factor for Palliser's success."*

*"School boards around us are becoming more of a melting pot, but Palliser protects diversity."*

Several tables suggested reducing the Top 10 list from 2012 to a smaller number of combined priorities that capture the Top 10 in a more cohesive manner. Out of the conversation emerged an umbrella of four key factors that help ensure success in our schools:

**Vision:** Overwhelmingly, participants shared support for Palliser's emphasis on literacy as key to student success. Several comments suggested the division's literacy focus has produced such positive results that it's now time to add a focus on numeracy. Student engagement and student voice contribute greatly to this vision for success and our stakeholders want more opportunities for our students to collaborate and to be heard. Palliser's dedicated staff were repeatedly recognized by stakeholders for contributing to this literacy and student success. Stakeholders commented on the need for more celebration of both staff and student accomplishments.

*"Should vision rank #1? Set the direction, and then other factors fall into place."*

*"Vision - Literacy focus needs to continue because we have seen results which has raised confidence."*

**Leadership:** Leadership was not on the list of factors of success identified in 2012, and that absence was noted by Community Conversation 2015 participants. Leadership as a contributing factor to school and student success goes well beyond strong leadership in school administration or Central Office. Leadership needs to be promoted at all levels of a successful system, and the system has to be open to encouraging each individual to lead using his or her own strengths, whether that's in the classroom, on the playground, peer to peer, or teacher to teacher, colleague to colleague. This open mind and can-do spirit will build on Palliser's success.

It should be noted some participants raised concerns about frequent changes to school leadership.

**Safe and caring communities:** Stakeholders were unanimous in agreeing with the need for safe and

caring schools to give students, staff, parents and the public a welcoming space. Stakeholders felt inclusiveness is part of a safe and caring environment. To ensure this safe and caring space, schools need the resources and support for mental health and wellness and general well-being. Schools should be places for forging meaningful connections between students, staff, parents, Central Office administrators and school board trustees. There was an appreciation for the visibility of trustees and Central Office administrators in schools and a desire for a more trusting relationship among stakeholders built through effective communication.

These safe and caring school communities are built with strong parent support and engagement, meaningful volunteer opportunities and input, broad community involvement and community service work by students and staff.

One group noted the open heart and kindred spirit that can contribute to school success is *"happening in the younger years,"* but there's work to be done in high schools.

*"Increased efforts to understand and assist with mental health issues. This a growing concern in society and in our schools. It is linked to most other items on the list."*

*"We need more resources in mental health, wellness and health, and time to walk with people in crisis. More communication, build strong resources. Advocacy is important."*

*"Overall wellness of students and staff. More awareness around healthy and active lifestyles and the impact on readiness to learn."*

*"Emphasize the community aspect of the school. Increased personal interaction between school kids and the community."*

*"Building relationships between all stakeholders needs to be improved on - a priority."*

**Programming opportunities:** Our students and staff will have access to the resources they need to ensure students have a variety of authentic learning experiences to prepare them for their future endeavours, whether the next grade they'll enter, post-secondary, or work and adult life. These experiences will support 21<sup>st</sup> century learners in their responsible use of technology, development of higher level, critical thinking skills and problem solving.

*"Need to have focus on learning how to use the technology resources - especially at the elementary level. Start young with digital citizenship, how to stay safe. Mature with the technology as we learn to use the tool."*

*"We need to consider how to provide better access to opportunities that actually reflects how students learn (ex. authentic learning experiences)."*

*"More hands-on experience is important."*

## PALLISER'S EFFECTIVENESS MODEL

One of the tables suggested rather than a Top 10 list, the priorities for success would be better displayed as "a web" because all the factors are intertwined. Such a web does exist in Palliser already though it's likely few of our stakeholders are familiar with it.

The **Palliser Effectiveness Model** (see Appendix A) has been used for several years as the basis for the division's school review process and was amended significantly for the first time at the start of the 2014-2015 school year to reflect both the language of Inspiring Education and the expectations for students outlined in the Ministerial Order for Student Success.

The model, a series of concentric circles, draws from 30 years of Effective Schools research, led by Dr. Larry Lezotte in the United States and the late Wayne Hulle in Canada. That research determined key correlates (or characteristics) found in every successful school.

The model echoes the list of 10 factors for success identified by the 2012 Community Conversation, and include leadership, the one factor identified as missing from the list in 2015.

All four factors we identify in this report — **vision, leadership, safe and caring communities, and programming options** — exist on the model in parallel terms. In the Effectiveness Model, the Board of Trustees is charged with establishing the vision. The superintendent's role, derived from his job description, focuses on leadership in all matters of education and organization. The principal, too, is identified as instructional leader who is responsible for creating safe and caring and inclusive schools.

The Superintendent, Principal and Teacher all carry responsibility for communications, community relations, meaningful partnerships, which include ensuring engaging partnerships with community groups, parents, volunteers and students.

In the Effectiveness Model, we also see student welfare and safe and caring schools reflected as key priorities for the Superintendent, Principal and Teacher.

As for programming options and the need for meaningful, authentic learning opportunities, the Effectiveness Model looks to the Teaching Quality Standard which includes an expectation that curriculum is translated into meaningful learning activities.

While not every stakeholder is identified specifically in the Effectiveness Model, which focuses on elements within the division's control and direct influence, it has been the division's philosophy that there is room on the model for every stakeholder to find their area of positive contribution. Although not every employee group is specifically identified in the model, every employee can see their work reflected in the model whether they work supporting a teacher or principal, or in a department that enables our schools to operate efficiently and safely.

The Community Conversations affirm the Effectiveness Model as capturing the essence of factors of school success that are entirely student focused.

In seeking common language and a shared priority list and in light of the key role the Effectiveness Model plays in Palliser's school review process, the division may want to promote the model with all stakeholders beyond those at schools under review. The model's strength is not only its completeness in capturing factors for success, but in demonstrating the powerful alignment of expectations and roles in support of that success.

## IDEA EXCHANGE

Aside from the discussion of factors of success, the day was an opportunity for participants to share their own individual school success stories, and out of that emerged ideas that had been tried and were successful or that could be attempted.

Here are some of the ideas to emerge from the exchange, presented in no particular order:

- Opportunities for support staff to collaborate as part of their professional learning.
- A parent survey to determine what issues they most want to discuss at a future round table event.
- Communication planning and execution at the school level, with robust use of social media and other tools to engage and connect home and school and develop the school's brand identity.
- Mentorship programs to link older students and younger students in sports or academics or just to talk about issues with a trusted older peer.
- A health initiative policy established by the Board to guide progress division-wide.
- Emphasis on financial literacy for high school students to provide life skills in banking, managing credit, and writing resumes.
- Expanded use of the mobile CTS trailers.
- Expanded work experience opportunities and more opportunities for students to explore options after high school.
- Monthly spirit day with a different grade level leading each one with a community service project.
- A council of school councils to enhance communication among school communities.
- More emphasis on student empowerment and independence.
- More opportunities for parents to enhance their parenting skills.
- Encourage teachers to share specific instructions with parents on how they can support their child's learning.
- Hold an Active Living Day so students across Palliser have an opportunity to try an activity they might not get to try in their own school (kayaking, trampolining/tumbling/swimming, archery, laser tag).
- Create more opportunities for schools within the division to have friendly competitions with each other if there aren't enough students for a full team in a competitive league.
- Leader in Me could be expanded to more schools.
- More second language instruction at smaller schools.
- Adopt a Between Friends program to bring students together with senior citizens to forge bonds between generations, foster a sense of community and build understanding between groups.
- Develop a mentor program for single parents.
- Expand the opportunity for robotics programs in schools.

## HOW TO STOP THE SUMMER SLIDE

The final question of the day was a brainstorming session about how each participant, in their own unique role in the community, could help stop the summer slide, the loss of reading ability that some students experience over the summer break. Here is a round-up of ideas shared. Some of these ideas

were published in Palliser's second annual report on literacy, "Leadership in Literacy," in June 2015. These are presented in no particular order.

- Provide access to school libraries over the summer months periodically.
- Partner with community libraries to provide library cards and information on summer programs. Library personnel could visit the school or schools could take students to the local library.
- Provide parents with information regarding the summer slide and its impact. We have already created a brochure that schools can share with their community.
- Organize a book swap before the end of the school year so that students get new-to-them books for the summer. We want to get books into the hands of kids.
- Provide book lists with a variety of genres, levels, interests, and when possible books that are appropriate for particular cultures. This would not be a required list. Students should have choice in what they read.
- Create summer book clubs.
- Have teachers and students share what they are reading or will be reading over the summer. Create a visual display of these and/or use book talks.
- Create a Little Free Library in the community. <http://littlefreelibrary.org/>
- Take a picture with your book on summer holidays. Share your pictures with others. One way to do this is through Twitter using the hashtags #whereareyoureading and #SummerReadingChallenge. These could also be used by the school in the fall in a visual display.
- Set reading goals for the summer and keep a reading log. You could also take a "shelfie"-a picture of all of the books you want to read or have read in the summer.
- Share literacy tips with parents. This could be done through Synrevoice, newsletters, flyers, webpage.
- Set up a summer reading program. Perhaps something similar to One School, One Book could be created.
- Postcards to the Principal - students send a postcard about what they are reading to their principal. Staff could also send postcards to students encouraging them to read.
- Don't use reading as a punishment.
- Allow students to take books home using a sign out system over the summer.
- Create a reading routine at home. Turn off the TV or match reading time with screen time.
- Identify books with movies and have children read to book or read those with/to children before they watch the movie.
- Children need adult reading role models-teachers and parents. Read in-front of your children and talk about your reading.
- Use technology. Books don't have to be made of paper. You can access ebooks on a device. Some good apps for ebooks are Wattpad, Epic, Farfaria, and you may be able to access ebooks through your public library card. Goodreads is a great site for online book clubs and book recommendations.
- Create an online forum for students to share book recommendations.
- Give away books at the end of the year. If students wanted to they could donate them back to the classroom library in the fall. Fundraising through the year could go towards purchasing books for families in need.



- Read aloud to your child. Books could also be available to children in the form of audiobooks.
- Could Palliser establish an online sharing library?
- Is it possible to establish credits for high school students through a locally developed literacy course?
- School awards could be given in Scholastic or Chapters gift certificates.
- Set up a volunteer reading program.
- Create a reading to seniors program to run over the summer.
- Encourage summer camps that focus on reading.
- Utilize Google Classroom throughout the summer.
- Set up reading buddies with older and younger students that could meet over the summer.
- Could PBB have a summer literacy/reading program that students could connect to?

There were several suggestions put forth regarding giving prizes for reading. Literacy experts, including those in Palliser, caution our staff and parents about the use of incentives. Reading should be the reward in and of itself. Lifelong readers don't read because they will get a prize at the end of it. The research in the area of providing incentives indicates that when the reward is removed reading behaviour actually decreases unless the reward is directly tied to reading. Providing the reward of a book can support increased reading, but other rewards (i.e. food, activities, etc.) do not have the desired effect (Marinak and Gambrell, 2008, Gambrell, 1996). If incentives are used, they should be in the form of another book or visit to the book store.

## FEEDBACK

At the end of the Community Conversation, 161 comment forms were collected from the tables. This represents an 82.5% return rate of the 195 individuals assigned to table groups who took time to share their comments about the day.

### **If Palliser had another meeting like this, I would recommend it to people I know.**

Yes 155

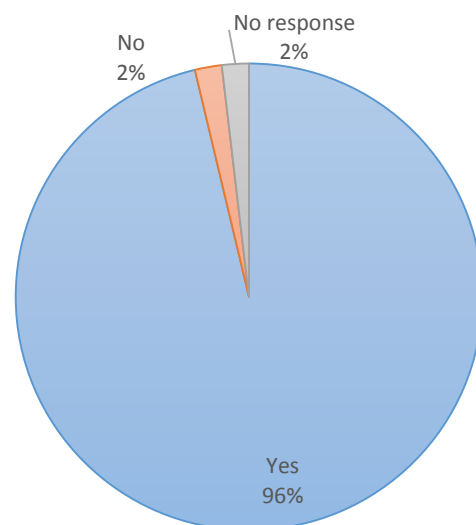
No 3

No Response 3

One YES respondent said location would be a challenge for others to attend. Another qualified the response by saying YES, if the information is actually used to build/improve services.

### **When it comes to communications from my school or Palliser, I prefer to receive information in one of the following ways:**

We asked respondents to pick their top two methods of communication. Some picked none or one, others picked more than two.



Letter home: 37

Email: 119

Text: 23

Website: 37

Other: Four individuals named other methods. They were: Blog, In Person, Letter at School, Facebook and Twitter.

We invited respondents to provide two comments about the day. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Two strong themes emerged: the importance of the student voice at the tables; and an appreciation for the diversity of stakeholders at the tables.

*"The setting was very comfortable. It was very easy to talk to other people about the questions/comments that were brought up. I will be walking away with some really great ideas to take to my parent council/principal to help the kids in my school be more successful."*

*"It was very interesting to me to hear from all different levels of people's perspectives on one issue and be able to provide my own opinions. Valuable information was shared that I would not have considered based on my position as an office admin and a parent."*

*"Really enjoyed the diversity, which somehow also reinforced all our similarities :- ) in regards to what we see as priorities. Great organization re questions/format/time frame etc."*

*"I thought it was a great opportunity for students to have a voice in the future of their schools and districts. I would like to see more than one student from different schools (maybe a small and large school) so we have more schools/communities being represented."*

*"The student at our table was very engaged and I would advise to have more student involvement. Maybe reduce the topics to allow deeper discussion of fewer topics. Maybe split topics up. It was great to talk to people who do not necessarily share the same viewpoint. Wonderful to have a student in our group. Very articulate. Recommend a facilitator and a conversation recorder at each table. Hard to do both!"*

*"Thanks for opening my eyes to summer slide."*

Every comment provided on the feedback forms was included in a report shared with the Board of Trustees at its regular meeting June 9, 2015. To review all comments in their entirety, please download the PDF from our website at <http://www.pallisersd.ab.ca/download/33630>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

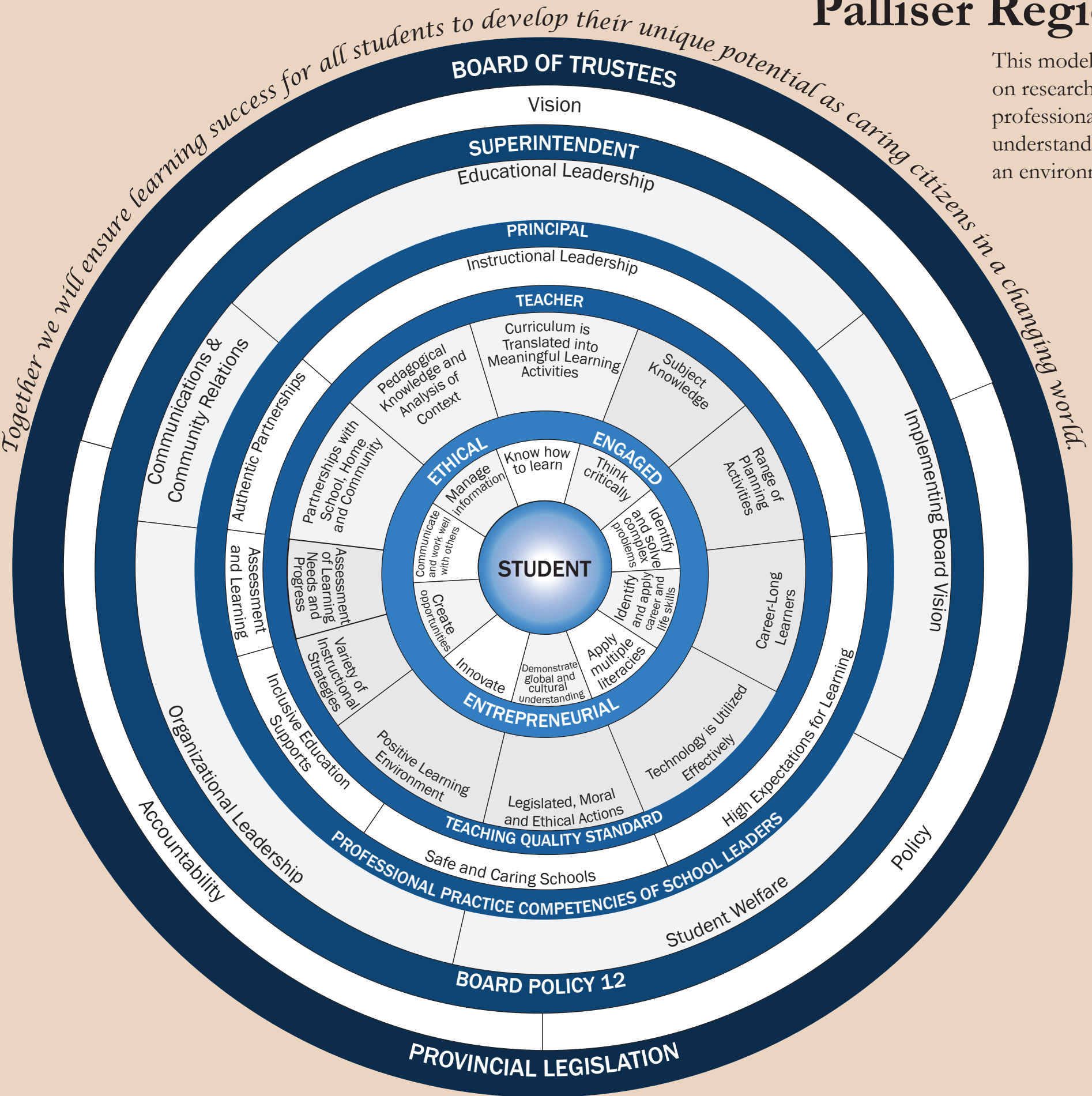
Based on the feedback, A Community Conversation 2015 was an overwhelming success, bolstering a sense of community in Palliser, creating a forum for sharing and offering productive feedback on areas of emphasis for Palliser board and administration moving forward.

A thank you goes to Central Office staff who organized the event, Central Office administration and school leaders who facilitated the table talk discussions and captured comments, and all 195 students, staff, parents and other stakeholders who spent the afternoon talking about school and student success.

# Palliser Regional Schools Effectiveness Model



This model for an effective, student-focused school system is based on research as well as principles described by Inspiring Education, professional standards of teachers and principals, and the understanding that alignment of goals and vision at all levels creates an environment for achieving those goals and attaining that vision.



## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Elected every four years;  
Conducts annual evaluations to ensure it is meeting stakeholders' needs;  
Operates a centralized system of supports for all schools;  
and allocates resources based on student needs.

## SUPERINTENDENT

Honours the Board's vision and direction;  
Ensures a system-wide culture of high expectations and accountability;  
Ensures ongoing improvement through school goals, school reviews, and accountability processes;  
Literacy, assessment for learning and safe and caring school environments are long-term priorities for student success;  
Ensures support personnel and services are in place to support principals and teachers.

## PRINCIPALS

Must demonstrate professional practice competency in these areas:

- Fostering effective relationships;
- Embodying visionary leadership;
- Leading a learning committee;
- Providing instructional leadership;
- Developing and facilitating leadership;
- Managing school operations and resources;
- Understanding and responding to the larger societal context.

## TEACHERS

Acknowledged as the single most important person to the student's success in school;  
Is supported through mentorship, coaching, professional development and collaboration time;  
Fosters high expectations for each student's learning.

## STUDENTS

The system exists to support each student to achieve the highest level of success possible.