

Engaging the Student Voice:

By Ken Sommerfeldt

Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Ken Sommerfeldt, Superintendent for Westwind School Division No. 74 and was published on June 7, 2017. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.

What is the purpose of schools? It has been said that the reason we have schools is for children to learn, grow and mature as they prepare to take their place among the leadership of the rising generation. If this is so, then all that is done in schools should be connected to what is best for the educational needs and experiences of students. While there are many essential components of a great education, it is worthwhile to listen to the voices of the students who are experiencing this education.

About three years ago, I felt the urge to undertake a more formal approach to hearing the student voice, and responding to the messages we are hearing. Clearly, the Principals door is open in public schools, and students have access to their school leaders to share their opinions, frustrations, suggestions, and compliments. But in Westwind, we determined to establish a forum for students to engage with elected Trustees, and the Sr. Administration in a new way. Each secondary school was asked to appoint students who represented a cross section of their student population to be part of a student group. This group was joined by the Superintendent, an Assistant Superintendent, and elected Trustees from the Board.

The Student Engagement Committee numbering between 30 and 40 people meet three times each year. We take the opportunity to provide some leadership training for the students, and each session has a component where the students provide meaningful information about their educational experiences to the Superintendent and Trustees. Generally we use online mechanisms to ensure the candid confidentiality of the respondents and we provide the students with summaries of the information that is provided.

Following these meetings, the students then go back to their schools and meet with their school administration about the conversations and learning they have experienced with their peers from across the School Division. In some cases, at the encouragement of principals, these students have presented their thoughts and ideas to the entire staff of their school and offered suggestions, advice, and encouragement to their teachers in a meaningful dialogue. The Trustees who are part of this committee also report back to their colleagues on the Board about the perspective of the students they have interacted with.

On numerous occasions at the Board level, the thoughts, ideas, and passion of students had significant influence on the decision-making actions of the Board. Hearing and responding to the student voice in education is viewed to be essential to the vision, direction, and passion in Westwind.