

Ode to Support Staff

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 Chris Smeaton, Superintendent for Holy Spirit Catholic School Division and was published on February 21, 2018. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.

It is difficult not to automatically think about teachers when we talk about schools or education. In past articles, I've written about the importance of our school leaders and, just recently, about the unseen life of teachers. But our school systems do not run as effectively and efficiently as they do with only the certificated staff. Support staff (i.e. non-teachers/school administrators) make up between 40-50% of a school jurisdiction's staffing population. I cringe every time we have guest speakers addressing our entire staff at division events who mistakenly refer to only teachers in the crowd because they're missing acknowledging a large group of people who are instrumental to the running of this system.

When I began my career, a wise mentor told me to "make friends" with the school secretary (now called various names) and the custodian. What I learned very quickly was the impact both the front office staff and the caretaking team have on the overall culture of a school. In many instances they are the first contact for parents and students and their influence, with a pleasant greeting or a big smile, goes a long way to make the school environment even more welcoming. Those are just two groups within our support staff who are highly visible, yet their impact is often unseen by the public.

Another group within our support staff that provides tremendous benefit are those who work directly with children, students and parents. This may mean one on one interventions or leading small group activities. It may be supporting our First Nations, Metis or Inuit culture or meeting with parents to discuss mental health, attendance or possibly speech language strategies. Many of these caring individuals assist children and students facing multiple challenges. Sometimes they provide a kind word, or redirection of behaviour or support for opportunities that, without their presence, might be highly unlikely. Regardless, their approach is always delivered with much compassion.

The final group provide more support to the entire system as opposed to individual students and parents. They are sometimes forgotten because they are in central office, but their work is nonetheless invaluable. With a budget of over 60 million dollars, it is extremely important that you have capable people looking after the functions of payroll, human resources, business services and finance. Let's not forget about the contributions of those in the departments of technology and maintenance. And while not direct employees of the division, bus drivers play a valuable role in transporting our students safely to and from school.

The bottom line is that, for school systems to perform at the highest levels, a strong support staff is required. Their impact is critical and should be recognized, even if they are seldom seen front and center.