

A “Champion” For Every Child

How the Calgary Catholic School District is ensuring that no child falls through the cracks.



“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” – Helen Keller

By Gary Strother, Calgary Catholic School District

Several years ago, our district was doing research on continuous improvement and how to change practice at our senior high school level. Something from *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (NASSP, 2004) stuck out in my mind as an opportunity that any teacher or staff member in a school could, and should, do for all of our students. As one of its cornerstone strategies to improve student performance, it spoke to “connections with students” and the need to “increase the quantity and improve

the quality of interactions between students, teachers and other school personnel...” (pg.3).

Although some students are able to get through high school without any real personal connections, the reality is that all students need a supportive environment, some more than others. One of the recommendations was that every high school student would get a “personal adult advocate” to help navigate their school life and personalize their educational experience. This made too much sense.

Long-time educator Rita Pierson stated: “Every child deserves a champion: an adult who will never give up on them, who

understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be” (Pierson, TED Talks Education, 2013). Dr. Jody Carrington has done some work with our district and she speaks to the notion that a child who is positively invested in a relationship will be more likely to take cues from and accept limitations imposed by an adult when that child loses control. Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child looked at resilience and found that no matter the source of hardship, the single most common factor for children who end up doing well is having the support of at least one stable and committed



Students from St. Bernadette show the words that their teacher has given them representing their personal traits.



Patrick Lantz is principal at St. Rupert School where they use the traits of superheroes as virtues in their champion initiative.

 To view a short video on the Champion Initiative go to:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_kQq1BLYCQ

relationship with a parent, caregiver or other adult (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2015).

The research is clear, children need a caring, trusted adult in their lives and although many of our students get that from home, others do not. While some staff felt that being a “champion” was a natural function of being a teacher or working in a school environment, we understood that there were still students falling through the cracks, so something more formal was necessary to catch those outliers.

The Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD) is an urban school board in Calgary, Alberta, that has coterminous boundaries with some rural towns and cities just outside the Calgary boundaries. Serving over 55,000 students in 112 schools, it is the largest Catholic school jurisdiction in

the province and the third largest district overall. Our academic results are some of the best in Alberta but we are always looking to improve.

The champion initiative came to be after we began seeing survey results in our schools showing that up to 20 per cent of some school populations did not feel that they had a trusted adult that they could go to if they had a concern or even something wonderful to share. This was a troubling statistic. Our largest school is almost 2,000 students, and if this was true, then around 400 children in that school alone wouldn’t feel that they had someone to talk to in a time of need or celebration.

On top of this, our number of requests for support for student needs is increasing dramatically. The complexities of our students are on the rise and resources can

be scarce at times. Student wellness is one of our four Board priorities due to these complexities and championing students became one strategy to help move us forward. Wouldn’t it make sense to have someone know each child on a deeper level and provide some support in a timely matter, even if it is just a caring shoulder to lean on? “The truth is, rarely can a response make something better—what makes something better is connection,” (Dr. Brené Brown).

The term champion could easily mean mentor, advocate, difference maker, coach; one of many words that describes a positive and stable caring relationship between a student and any adult in the school. The term itself doesn’t really matter; what matters is that every child has a one-on-one relationship with an adult in the school, and that the child knows who their champion is and the adult knows the children for which they are responsible.

In this program, an adult includes all staff members: teachers, administrators, caretakers, support staff—everyone. As district leadership, we have developed the frame in which parameters were set, but it is up to individual school communities to make it work in their particular context.

In *Planning a School-Based Mentoring Program*, Michael Garringer suggests that a critical ingredient of successful school-based mentoring programs is that you build a solid infrastructure for implementation of the program (Garringer, 2010). This is the rationale for ensuring that every school incorporates an actual plan to implement this initiative and report on that strategy to the district. All of the plans are being shared district-wide through an initiative dashboard so that schools can see what others are doing and either tweak or change their approach altogether should they wish to emulate that program. We are not willing to leave this to chance.

To get this initiative going, we decided to take it slow from the start and allow schools to have a full year to experiment through trial and error. We provided opportunities for our principals to discuss in large and small group settings as to how creating some sort of advocacy program in their particular setting might evolve and take shape. As schools began to move forward, exemplars were presented by principals to their peers to create buzz and further develop ideas. Not surprisingly, programs developed

with a great deal of staff input have shown to require much less buy in and more sincere results.

Our schools have been incredibly creative in developing this initiative. Examples of programs currently implemented include:

- Several schools, like St. Rupert and St. Augustine, are using a superhero approach to being a champion, utilizing the positive attributes of those heroes for their students.
- St. Mary's High School brings their First Nation, Metis and Inuit students together to attend leadership seminars and discuss what is going on in their lives under the guidance of their champion counsellor.
- St. Bernadette School teachers were asked to find a word that best described each student. Those students received a t-shirt with that word on the back. A special ceremony was held in the gym when the t-shirts were handed out and teachers described why the words were chosen for each student. Now, the shirts are worn every Friday.
- St. Sebastian School students chose champions and gave them a trophy

promise sheet. Champions sent personal letters and developed a special mailbox where students could send letters, notes and requests to their champions.

Some of the challenges of creating this type of initiative included finding the time to get champions and their students together; ensuring that all staff truly understand boundary issues and abided by them; emphasizing the need for a formalized approach as opposed to hit and miss, which has been used in the past; determining an appropriate process for choosing champions for students, or the students choosing their champion. All of the challenges we have seen have been overcome with creativity and a will to do what is best for our children.

We are already seeing the benefits of this initiative, especially with some children who have not fit into the regular mold in our schools. One elementary child was physically ill up to five times each day in school. She now makes it through the day and has found someone who will listen and give her the time and hope she needs to keep progressing. For some students, their best or worst six hours of the day can be

spent in our schools; we intend on making it the best! ○

Gary Strother has held the role of chief superintendent of the Calgary Catholic School District since March of 2012 and has worked since 1983 as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, vice principal, principal and superintendent.

Resources:

- *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (NASSP, 2004).
- *Planning a School-Based mentoring Program.* (Garringer, Michael, 2010).
- www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion (Pierson, Rita, 2013).
- Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child, www.developing-child.harvard.edu 2015.
- *The Power of Being Crazy About Kids in the Classroom—A presentation to CCSD Administration* (Carrington, Jody, 2017).

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