

# Stakeholder Engagement

By Chris Smeaton

*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 May 31, 2017. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.*

One of the four strategic priorities for our division is, "Stakeholders will be well engaged in the educational system." We would like to believe that school newsletters, blogs or other social media options, press releases and school council meetings would serve the purpose and allow us to "put a check in that box." While all of these communication strategies may be effective in delivering messages and information, they generally lack the ability to truly hear from stakeholders. We recognize the importance of teacher feedback to students yet, especially in the past, have been more reticent to open ourselves up to honest and constructive feedback from our stakeholders.

Open houses still have a place in gathering feedback, especially from our parents, and public consultations can bring together diverse voices in the community. However, in a very busy world, it is difficult for many of our stakeholders to free their schedules to participate in-person. In our division, with both urban and rural school populations, this issue is further exacerbated. Recognizing this challenge, Holy Spirit Catholic School Division has utilized an online solution called ThoughtExchange that provides our Board, senior administration and school leaders with tremendous feedback and ensures both government accountability and public assurance.

The ThoughtExchange process is simple and allows for parents, staff, students and community members to contribute. The result is that key ideas emerge that either affirm our work or indicate a need for course correction. To begin with, we ask three open ended questions: (1) What aspects of our school life best demonstrate that we are authentically Catholic schools? (2) What are some ways our division and school can strengthen our Catholic identity? (3) What are some ways we might better prepare our students for a changing future?

Participants are asked to share their answers to these questions during the "Share" phase of the process. This year, a total of 1,474 distinct thoughts were generated by 778 participants. Almost 75% of these respondents were parents.

The second phase allows participants to add stars to the thoughts shared by others. Each thought can receive between one to five stars, depending on the individual's belief in the importance of a particular thought. Over 42,500 stars were assigned during this year's process. This "Star" phase allows the division and each school to easily see what is most important to their stakeholders. The software analyzes the starring patterns and reveals areas of interest and concern.

Final results can be viewed from both the division and individual school levels. At the public Board meeting held in May, these results were presented to the Board of Trustees. They have also been shared with our schools with an expectation that they will be reviewed at school council meetings. But, to increase the level of transparency, the final "Discover" phase, makes all of the results public and accessible through this link: <http://holyspirit2.thoughtexchange.info/>

ThoughtExchange has been a tremendous resource for obtaining open and honest feedback from our stakeholders. It has allowed us to move forward, confident that our stakeholders are well engaged and supportive of the priorities of our school division.