

Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board

INITIAL ADDRESS

By

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CHAIRPERSON OF THE BOARD

Initial Meeting of the Board
Tuesday, December 1, 2020

“The message of Bethlehem is a message of peace, joy and hope. Bethlehem is the place of birth, of the Saviour’s birth. It is therefore the symbol of new beginnings, the dawning of new era, the breaking in of new time, the opening up of new possibilities, the stirring of new hope.

The birth at Bethlehem is what our Bishops of Ontario, in their Pastoral Letter on Catholic Education have called, “This Moment of Promise”. It is a call to newness. Because it is a call to newness, Christmas is a summons of change, to come to terms with the passing of the “old things” and the loss of security which the old order, the world we are used to provides.”

Your Excellency Bishop Crosby, Fellow Trustees, special guests, Director of Education David Hansen, Student Trustees, ladies and gentlemen. I begin with these words because as we know Advent invites us to prepare for the birth of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The dawning of a new and hope-filled era. I do so as well out of conviction that at this moment in the history of publicly funded Catholic education we are summoned/called to newness/change. I do so finally in honour of two angels from our Catholic school family who were called home to God since our last Initial meeting. The words I quoted were written in 1992 by our beloved and first Adult Faith Animator, Jerry Creedon. They were written with the prayerful support/encouragement of our equally beloved Religion Consultant, Leanne Thompson. We pray that Our Lord Jesus Christ showers Jerry and Leanne with the reward of eternal life and know that their legacies live on in their families and the countless students and staff who have benefitted/learned from their goodness and tremendous Christian witness.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees and indeed our entire Catholic school system, I would like to congratulate recently appointed trustee for Wards 3 & 4, Mr. Tyler Iorio. We look forward to

working with you Tyler and know that we will benefit from your perspectives and your obvious commitment to Catholic education.

We recognize and thank God for the gift of our former colleague and friend Tony Perri. Tony cared deeply about Catholic education and the students in our system particularly those disadvantaged by factors beyond their control. We continue to pray for the repose of his soul and for his wonderful family.

I want to express deep words of admiration and appreciation to staff across our school system. They worked heroically to plan for a safe school re-opening and continue to work tirelessly to ensure the health and safety and well-being of our students and their colleagues. They have done so while promoting the distinct identity of our Christ centred school system. Despite the many and very real challenges, thanks to them and the understanding/support of students and parents, we have much to celebrate and be thankful for.

I have quoted an article I read this past August on more than a few occasions. I do so because it speaks to me of the importance for those involved/leading Catholic education to “keep awake” as we were reminded in this past Sunday’s Gospel and to be open to the need for new beginnings/change. The author, a principal of a Catholic school in the United States wrote this past summer;

“When you go back in the fall please don’t “go back”. Please use this experience to move forward. Continue using tools we may have been forced to use while closed and focus on what we missed most, our students, to build more effective pedagogy and create a more welcoming classroom culture for our students.”

I continue to reflect and pray on the words, *“please don’t go back” and use this experience to “move forward”*. For me they challenge us to envision how we continue to realize our mission to ensure that all learners to realize their fullness of humanity of which Jesus Christ is the model.

With regard to only technology, in a recent article Sr. Helena Burns encourages us to *“take advantage”* of this human achievement and to heed St. John Paul II’s advice when the World Wide Web was a wee thing and *“Bring the face of Christ to the internet.”*

Catholic schools are places where mission is realized through Christian community, where the goodness and witness of teachers and other staff is central to the formation and evangelization of students. I say that not only as a fundamental truth of Catholic education but as well out of concern that the extended school closure and on-going reality of virtual learning has the possibility of disproportionately negatively impacting Catholic schools and certain populations of students. With the increased reality of virtual learning and the ever increasing influence of technology, I believe we are living an unprecedented time of challenge but equally or more so one of opportunity to *“move forward”*. To move forward with laser like focus to create

structures and allocate resources that most directly impact those areas that distinguish publicly funded Catholic schools.

It is a time for “*new beginnings*” or as I read in an article recently, “*this moment of disruption is the perfect opportunity to re-evaluate, re-imagine and re-strategize.*”

To name a few only, I suggest there is need to place added priority on and “*re-imagine*”;

- ❖ Faith formation of staff (trustees);
- ❖ Academic excellence/Religious education;
- ❖ Equity in educational opportunity and concern for the disadvantaged;
- ❖ Relationships (building and nurturing Catholic community);
- ❖ Frequent and effective communication;
- ❖ Leadership;
- ❖ Administrative re-structuring; and
- ❖ Staff and student well-being (mind/body/soul).

Time will not permit me to comment on each of these areas but I would like to do so with regard to leadership/structures, relationships and equity in educational opportunity. I do so in no way to diminish the; crucial importance of each of the other areas or our school system’s long and rich tradition of academic excellence and commitment to faith formation/religious education (renewal).

Leadership/Structures

“You can do what I cannot do. I can do what you cannot do. Together we can do great things.”

St. Teresa of Calcutta

The past number of months and the enormous amount of work and planning associated with school re-opening (keeping schools open) has only reinforced for me the critical importance of shared leadership. I would suggest that our current reality and the challenges/opportunities the future holds requires a vision of leadership that encourages/rewards initiative and responsible risk taking. Our church teaching with regard to the Principle of Subsidiarity promotes decision making at the local level and a culture that empowers individuals at all levels. Beyond encouraging creativity and innovation, such leadership contributes to the well-being of staff (others).

We have seen the fruits of such creativity throughout our Board's history. (Each Belongs, St. Charles Adult Education and more recently Equal Opportunities Initiative, Eco-Schools, Robotics and Christian Meditation to name only a few).

I say the above to recommend a review of leadership development programs across the system so as to ensure the continued identification, recruitment and selection of faith-filled visionary leaders. Such a review would build on the strength of current practices while re-imagining future needs.

Moving forward as well suggests to me an opportunity to re-imagine administrative structures/portfolios so as to better align with current and future trends/priorities. It would identify and name priorities within various portfolios. To cite a few examples only;

- ❖ A holistic view of Human Resources that encompasses all aspects of staff well-being including faith formation, equity and pastoral care;
- ❖ A vision of elementary and secondary curriculum that provides support for academic excellence both in school and through virtual learning; and
- ❖ A vision of Corporate Services that integrates good stewardship of resources (financial and facilities) with Risk Management and Information Technology.

A future oriented review of these and other structures would focus on service to students and schools. As researchers have concluded, one of the goals of such restructuring would be to assist “leaders to remain closer to the core of teaching and learning where they are most likely to make a difference to students.”

Together with the finalization of our Board’s Multi-Year Strategic Plan, a re-alignment or re-imagining of responsibilities/portfolio would invite shared ownership and accountability throughout our system.

Relationships

Last year I reference a quote which concluded; “*Relationships have the potential to be a defining charism for 21st century Catholic schools.*”

As I discern my own thoughts regarding the future of publicly funded Catholic education, I become increasingly convinced that any renewal must include a focus on relationships. “*Moving forward*” necessitates consideration of the current influence of each of the partners and a re-imagining of strategies so as to strengthen the essential triad of home, school and parish.

Bishop Crosby

We remain blessed in our Diocese with a spiritual leader who cares deeply about publicly funded Catholic education. He gives generously of his time and serves as a constant source of support to our Board and school communities. I would in a special way like to thank and recognize Bishop Crosby for his faith-filled and inspiring leadership throughout these challenging times. By word and deed he has served as a source of hope when it has been most needed. We could not ask for a better faith leader/shepherd to guide the necessary renewal/new beginnings.

I would as well like to publicly congratulate his Excellency Bishop Elect Lobsinger on his recent appointment of Auxiliary Bishop of our Diocese.

Parishes

I would like to express deep appreciation to Pastors and parish communities. During these unprecedented times they have worked very hard to stay connected to and minister to the sacramental and spiritual life of our students and staff. Such creativity and re-imagining will be very important as we strive to renew parish, school and home relations.

Catholic School Councils/Parents

Over the past nine months we have placed increased priority on frequent and effective communication with parents and Catholic school councils. Such communication has not only been important with regard to school re-opening (keeping open) but indeed should be the norm “moving forward”.

Beyond the importance of effective and frequent communication with parents, a re-imagining of relationships invites the development and implementation of strategies to gather input from Catholic school communities and the Catholic Parent Involvement Committee regarding Board policies.

Recent tools used to consult with parents with regard to remote learning and recommended revisions to secondary school boundaries are good examples as to how the input can be gathered and thoughtfully considered.

In terms of re-imagining relationships, an important area to consider is how best to assist/support parents in the understanding of their role as the primary educators of their children. (Particularly in areas of Religious Education and Family Life)

As well the active involvement and assistance of Catholic School Councils and our Catholic Parent Involvement Committee in developing and implementing strategies that support adult faith formation within school and parent communities is essential.

Student Voice/Leaders

We are blessed with two outstanding student trustees; Isabella Micci and Katrina Matthew. They represent all that is good about young people and the students in our Catholic schools.

As they are directly impacted by decisions made at the school and system level, seeking out and listening to the voices of students is very important. “*Moving forward*” is critically important

areas such as the faith formation/evangelization of young people in a world so influenced by technology requires a listening to and understanding of the life experiences and aspirations of students.

I would like to once again thank our student leaders for their continued support of the “Toonies for Tuition” campaign. It is a wonderful example of Christian service and as well a sign of our students’ understanding/gratitude for the precious gift of publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario.

Employee Groups/Representatives

Any commitment to “*move forward*” necessitates strong relationships with employee groups and their representatives. The most recent round of local bargaining and the valuable work of the “Rooted In Faith – Wellness” Committee are very good examples of how positive relationships with employee group representatives have served to benefit students, staff and our board.

This is one area where I am convinced that a re-imagining of strategies/relationships is essential particularly in a number of priority areas including staff well-being/faith formation and the realization of our mission in the context of virtual learning.

Equity in Educational Opportunities

One of the pillars upon which Catholic education and our school system is built is preferential concern for the disadvantaged and marginalized.

Our Board and staff can take great pride in the continued priority we have placed on the realization of the fullness of humanity for all students. Pillars upon which our system rests such as “Each Belongs”, Equal Opportunities and many others give witness to this commitment.

Saying that, the learning gap associated with extended school closure and the uncertainty of the educational impact of virtual learning particularly on socio-economic disadvantaged and special needs students invites/necessitates a re-imagining and review of the manner in which we develop (research) new initiatives as well as the way resources are allocated.

With regard to equity in opportunity, it is incumbent to acknowledge that anti-black racism and anti-indigenous and other racialized racism exists in our community and schools. The establishment of the Anti-Racism in Education Committee (comprised of students, staff (former) and parents) and the hiring of a System Equity Officer are important first steps in doing better and doing all we can to eradicate the evil/sin of racism and discrimination.

We recognize that *“we cannot evangelize without understanding that people come from a variety of experiences and those experiences matter. Catholic schools are places of hope, places where diversity of human kind is to be celebrated and not feared.”*

In this regard, we pledge to listen to those with lived experiences and thoughtfully consider the work and recommendations of the committee.

As a Board of Trustees and school system, we can take pride in our long standing commitment to good stewardship.

In recent months we have seen the crucial importance of fiscal responsibility and the maintenance of adequate levels of reserve. Through the wise counsel, vision and strong leadership of Associate Director of Corporate Services, Paola Pace Gubekjian and the unity of our Board we have been able to use reserve funds to support the purchase of technology and PPE as well as the hiring of a number of additional staff (custodial, teachers, etc.) to promote physical distancing and enhanced cleaning of our facilities.

This would not have been possible without sound budgeting and regular financial monitoring. This degree of commitment to good stewardship will continue to be necessary to replenish reserves and as well to ensure that we have in place necessary resources to introduce strategies/initiatives that support our commitment to *“move forward”*.

Through the good work of many, we have many causes for celebration and hope;

- ❖ The soon to be completed Our Lady of Hope Catholic Elementary School;
- ❖ The receipt of capital funding for the construction of a new St. James Catholic Elementary replacement school; and
- ❖ The recently received approval to tender the new St. Patrick Catholic Elementary replacement school.

These are all signs of the growth of our system and examples of the fruits of our collective good work.

I would add as well that our Board and school system have benefitted from the receipt of funding under the government's "Audit and Accountability Fund". As you know we were one of only three school boards in the Province to receive funding through this program. The recommendations contained in the reports provide sound advice in terms of sustaining and enhancing our Special Education model of "Each Belongs" as well as the re-structuring of our Information Technology Department.

I would be remiss if I did not on behalf of the Board express appreciation to the Ministry of Education and Provincial Government for providing the necessary resources to hire Optimus Consultants to review these two important areas and as well for their on-going financial support with regard to school re-opening.

The most important causes for celebration are the good and amazing things we see happening in our schools every day. (students and staff)

In this regard, on behalf of the Board of Trustees, I would like to express deep gratitude to staff throughout our system who have and continue to inspire "*Moments of Promise*" in our students and Catholic school communities.

- Thomas Groome wisely wrote that;

"The heart of the Catholic school is the heart of the Catholic teacher."

We thank the teachers in our system for generously responding to God's call to "*Teach as Jesus did.*"

- Custodians, Assistant Custodians, Maintenance, Educational Assistants, Clerical, Early Childhood Educators, Child and Youth Workers, Speech Pathologists, Social Workers, Mental Health and Indigenous Education Leads, System Equity Officer and all central and school support staff for your dedicated service. You serve as critically important supports for our students.
- Always but particularly throughout these unprecedented times, those working in various central administrative positions provide invaluable support to our schools and Board; Finance, Budget, Procurement, Planning & Accommodation, Transportation, Accounts, Printing, Shipping, Human Resources, Information Technology, Communications, Plant and Community Use of Schools.
- Principals, Vice-Principals, Chaplaincy Leaders, Senior Managers, Managers, Program Leader Religion and Family Life and Consultants for your faith-filled leadership.
- Kelly Lazure-Valconi, Laura Muraca and Meg Petkoff for your selfless service and commitment to the well-being (body, mind and soul) of staff and through them students.
- Assistant Superintendents; Julie Angiolillo, Greg Tabone, Sandra Scime and Superintendents of Education; Toni Kovach, Sandie Pizzuti, Corrado Ciapanna, Morris Hucal and Ivana Fortino for your very important system leadership and commitment to the good of our Catholic schools
- Controller of Business Services, Nancy DeGiuli and Superintendent of Human Resources, Angelo Romano. They are wonderful examples to all they serve with and at all times display a keen understanding of the Catholic integration of “faith and reason” and “vocation and work”.

- Recently our Associate Director of Corporate Services, Paola Pace-Gubekjian was recognized for her “extraordinary service” to Catholic education. The well-deserved presentation of the Award for Distinguished Service was in recognition of her tireless work, dedicated service, many sacrifices and significant contribution to the students in our school system and to the good of publicly funded Catholic education.
- I want to thank Director of Education, David Hansen for his faith-filled leadership and Christian witness. This call to “*move forward*” requires both bold and courageous leadership. We are indeed fortunate to have Mr. Hansen as the administrative leader of our school system at this important time.
- On behalf of the Board of Trustees and personally I would like to thank Emilia Rastelli and Sandra Giacinti for their valuable work coordinating meeting packages, minutes and planning important system events.
- I would like to express my deep personal gratitude to those who are of such invaluable support and assistance to me.
- To my fellow trustees for your friendship, trust and confidence. G. Emmett Cardinal Carter wrote;

“He or she who seeks the office of trustee is seeking an honourable office.”

Each of you are tremendous examples of living the ministry of Catholic Trustee with honour.

- Paolo and Ada Lucchesi, custodial staff at the board office. For reminding me and so many others each day that “there is no such thing as “just jobs” in a Catholic school (system). There are only various forms of service, each calling for extraordinary dedication.”

- Director of Communication, Marnie Jadon for her sound advice and assistance on so many occasions. Our school system has for a number of years benefitted tremendously from Marnie's professionalism and commitment but no more so than over the past 9 months.
- Kelly Lazure-Valconi for the strong support she is for so many and for the outstanding service she provides to me and to our staff and students. She truly lives the call to provide Pastoral care.
- I cannot thank Lorena Madalena enough for her incredible skills, tireless work and invaluable assistance. Beyond the indispensable support she provides to me, she has worked night and day to ensure trustees are kept informed of any and all pandemic related issues. In addition to her exemplary service to our school system, Lorena has and continues to make a significant contribution to the mission of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association and the Canadian Catholic School Trustees' Association.
- It has been written that; "you cannot choose your family. They are God's gift to you." No words could be truer for me.
- I want to thank my four wonderful and always supportive children; Michael, Kyle, Colleen and Monica and daughter-in-law Robyn. Each has taught me more than they will ever know and I could not be more proud of them.
- Most especially and I know insufficiently, I would like to thank Carol. She has been and remains my wisest counsellor, strongest source of support and best friend. (George Strait song; "I Cross my Heart". "You will always be the miracle that makes my life complete")

For over 170 years, Catholic schools in Hamilton-Wentworth have provided excellence in Christ centred learning for countless young people. They have done so as a result of the commitment, vision, tireless work and sacrifice of Bishops, Clergy, Religious Sisters, lay teachers and other staff, Catholic ratepayers, parents and Trustees.

As I reflect on that glorious past and the challenges associated with the extended school closure, school re-opening and the reality of the world young people live in today, I am convinced there is a need to look to the future. A future which St. John Paul II once told us “starts today”. I see this moment (our time) as one of challenge yes but even more so great opportunity. I do so in particular because of the dedicated and good people that contribute to the protection and promotion of the precious gift of publicly funded Catholic education.

It is my prayer that as we open our hearts and minds to the promise of “*moving forward*” and “*new beginnings*” we do so in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola;

“Act as if everything depended on us; trust as if everything depended on God.”

Thank you and God bless Catholic education.