

EDU Conversations with Parent Involvement Committee (PIC) Chairs November 2020

Introduction

The Ministry of Education (EDU) held a virtual meeting with Parent Involvement Committees (PIC) on November 26th to continue dialogue on the successes, promising practices, and challenges related to supporting parents and students since the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.

What follows is a high-level summary of what we heard from PIC Chairs, Co-Chair, Board Leads and staff representing English-language and French-language school boards.

While we heard about new successes and best practices, some of the challenges identified by participants during our April 2020 meeting continue to persist. New challenges included pivoting through the changing nature of COVID-19 restrictions and being fully prepared for students to learn from home, supporting newcomer families, privacy and cybersecurity issues, and how to address the learning gaps between students learning from home compared to those in the classroom.

Feedback from the meeting will inform the ministry's ongoing program and policy supports for students and their families.

What we heard

Question asked: Please share with us some of the successes of your PIC and school board, and promising practices to support parents and families since we last met in the Spring.

Many PIC Chairs reflected upon their flexibility and adaptability to continue their work in a virtual environment. While parents are finding some platforms easier to use than others, school boards are simultaneously testing different platforms to determine what enables maximum communication between schools and parents. Although many parents face difficulty accessing and operating virtual platforms, participants mentioned this shift was well received by rural and Northern boards as they regularly use virtual platforms to host meetings with parents, due to geographic considerations.

Participants also noticed that moving into a virtual environment has led to an increase in attendance/participation in workshops and events, as well as opportunities for parents to connect, engage, and share best practices.

Parents identified multiple promising practices that spoke to some of the benefits of moving to an online environment, including:

- The ability to host PIC events more frequently;
- Increased recruitment of new members;
- Webinars to provide training on online platforms;
- Greater participation in online events such as meetings and workshops;
- Ability to reach new parents that were not able to attend in-person events;
- Creating momentum for parents to join different groups and identifying volunteers;
- Parent associations supporting and collaborating more with school councils and boards;
- School boards actively listening to and responding to the needs of parents;
- Availability of mental health services, including social workers in schools;
- School portal used for communication between parents and teachers; and
- Collaborating with provincial parent organizations

Question asked: Are there new challenges that have arisen for children and families in the new school year?

Parents expressed concerns regarding the conflicting decision of changing their children's attendance back and forth between in person to virtual, or vice versa – which reflected the changing realities and modes of learning under COVID-19. Parents noted that abrupt changes in modes of learning can cause confusion, disrupt relationships, and do not allow for enough time to prepare for online learning (e.g. ensuring access to appropriate technology and childcare).

Maintaining student focus and preventing learning gaps in a virtual environment were also identified as key challenges, with specific consideration for the unique experiences and educational outcomes of students from vulnerable groups. French-language PIC Chairs reported challenges with operating devices for newcomer parents facing language and technology barriers, as well as needing to adapt to the Ontario education system in virtual environments.

Other new challenges identified by parents were:

- Maintaining clear communication with families of children learning from home;
- The possibility to shift all students to virtual learning in the event of a snow day;
- Internet connectivity issues, particularly in Northern regions;
- Lacking access to technological devices for learning;
- Lacking information and training to operate technology and virtual platforms;
- Privacy and cybersecurity issues;
- Parents facing physical isolation from the social aspect of their children's schools (e.g. volunteering, fundraising, visiting teachers/classrooms, and participating in assemblies and celebrations);
- Challenges associated with high school students completing their required community service hours;
- Challenges with students spending most of their time in front of a screen;
- Students connecting to the online platform, but not being engaged in learning;

- Lack of parent participation despite online meetings; and
- Students learning from home facing more difficulty acquiring knowledge compared to students learning in the classroom

Question asked: *Please share with us what you are hearing from parents in your community. How have you been able to reach out and connect with parents and families?*

PIC Chairs identified unique concerns experienced by parents in their respective communities. Parents are trying their best to support their children’s learning while facing difficulty understanding the changing nature of restrictions and guidelines (e.g. mandatory self-isolation policies) impacting the education system under COVID-19.

Some students are feeling fatigued and disengaged due increased screen time, leading to poor mental and physical health. Parents are using a variety of methods to communicate with parents and families, including letters, emails, virtual meetings, social media, and website publishing. French-language PICs share that newcomer parents need to be connected with a member of their community. Additionally, PICs do not necessarily have access to the emails of parents, which makes reaching out challenging. Communicating with parents in an efficient, clear and precise manner remains a challenge.

Question asked: *What else do you suggest would support the work of PICs, school councils, and parents during these unprecedented times?*

Participants expressed their desire for more frequent opportunities to meet and connect with PICs, school councils, and parents. Some ideas included participating in more virtual meetings and connecting through social media channels.

Other suggestions included:

- Scheduling meetings in the evening to accommodate parent schedules;
- Ensuring there is enough advance notice when inviting attendees to the meeting;
- Clearer information and direction communicated by the Ministry of Education;
- Academic supports (e.g. tutoring) for students learning from home; and
- Funding and resources for parent education (e.g. mental health resiliency, parenting in uncertain times, cybersecurity)

Best Practices

- Shift to virtual platforms has increased membership and participation in online events and workshops for some boards
- School boards are actively engaging in and responding to the needs and issues being experienced by students and parents

Challenges

- Disruptions in learning and relationships due to changes in COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines
- Achievement gaps between students learning from home compared to those in the classroom
- Parents feeling disconnected and isolated from school environment
- Language and digital barriers experienced by newcomer families

Conclusion

Throughout the changing nature of the education system under the COVID-19 pandemic, PIC Chairs and participants demonstrated their resiliency and adaptability by identifying successes and sharing the challenges they have faced in supporting students and their parents. More families and students from both English and French boards are taking advantage of virtual platforms by participating in events and workshops to connect with each other and enhance their learning. School boards are strengthening their relationships with PICs in order to effectively respond to address the challenging experiences of parents and families.