

Making Connections – People for Education’s Annual Conference

Notes by attendee Jackie Allen, Secretary of Pine Glen Public School Parent Council, Huntsville
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Keynote Speaker – Jean Clinton

Summary: Dr. Jean Clinton was engaging, funny and very informative. Her address was relevant and provoked thought. I took a lot away from what she said and look forward to sharing her thoughts with my parent council.

Slides/thoughts I enjoyed and want to bring back to my school:

“Through the renewed vision, Ontario is setting it’s sights...it will be a system that recognizes well-being as an instrumental factor in students’ academic success and promotes greater equity that all students can be their best. Achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being, enhancing public confidence”

“Well being is that positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are being met.”

“Mental well-being is about having a sense of purpose, hope, belonging and meaning in our daily lives”

“Sense of self and spirit, meaningful learning experiences, physical and emotional safety, supportive relationships, sense of belonging, healthy minds and bodies”

“Draft transferable skills: critical thinking, innovation and creativity, self directed learning, collaboration, communication, citizenship.”

“Conditions for powerful learning: safe environment, personal investment, real world application, fun, relevance to their lives, social, interesting questions, positive environment, real audience, passion, teachers/mentors, autonomy and agency, challenging, not time constrained”

Things I took from her address: Use the school as a location for community activity. Normalize feelings of anxiety – don’t use it as a reason not to do something. Spend time with our children. Learning setbacks are not about class size, they’re about the learning environment; although, 30 is too many! 15 to 1 is different than 30 to 2. Although, you can have a miserable class of 15 and a very happy class of 26, it’s all about learning environment.

Ideas it gave me: Have a school community council where we share ideas, what works and what doesn’t, share resources, discussion online via twitter or in person/google hang out/skype. Ask people from other councils to guest star and share their experiences.

How can I make all of this happen in Pine Glen/Huntsville/Muskoka?

Panel #1 – Pushing the Limits

I apologize; much of this session went over my head. I did not find it relevant to my personal life or my school. One teacher on the panel, however, had great ideas including a genius hour, where he dedicated an hour every day to letting the kids decide that they were interested in. Letting them decide what to research, what to make, what to do. It is totally individual student driven. He learned as he went, some students needed time to think about what they were interested in. It was foreign to them to be able to decide what they wanted to do.

I want that, questions to take home with you.

How are kids prepared to change the world?

What are you teaching that matters to my kids? How do you know it matters?

How are you investing in getting to know my child? How are you investing to engage and empower them?

How are you keeping parents involved?

What are you doing to teach your children to go behind?

Morning Workshop: AM5 – School Closings

Summary: I was very interested to attend this session; however I found it quite dull. We did not have much time for a discussion/questions at the end, which I did find much more engaging and informative. The individual panel speeches were, unfortunately, quite boring. One of the speakers, on a school board, mentioned that there are 120 schools slated for closure. What this does, is amalgamate one school with another. This does have benefits, such as combining resources and obtaining more funds for things like music programs that many small schools don't have. Closing schools in rural communities, especially single school towns, has a big negative impact on the culture and the community as a whole. To help with this, some school boards are trying to rent out their vacant space to community hubs which will offer additional programs to students attending that school. It does seem like the best alternative to closing a school. www.communityhubsontario.ca Personally, I offered up the question of "why can't they just change the boundary lines of some schools?" In Huntsville, Huntsville Public is above capacity at approx 550 students and Pine Glen is below capacity at 220. Some students travel past Pine Glen to attend Huntsville Public. Why can the boundary line simply be moved so that those students move to Pine Glen? The answer to this is that sometimes it is even more controversial to move boundary lines than to close the school. It is not simple and can start a domino effect.

Another issue raised was, in communities where schools are falling apart and repairs are not being made in a timely fashion, why can't the schools be sold to the municipality and have it the job of the town to maintain the schools and the school board rent from the municipality? This was also something that was disagreed with by the panel as these are two different boards that do not communicate well together.

Panel #2 – Assessment and Reporting

This panel was interesting to listen to, however, like the last panel, I didn't find very much of what they said to be relevant to me or my capabilities of what I could do at my school.

Summary: Discussing EQUAO and the gap between the purpose and the unintended consequences. It was intended to find students that were falling between the cracks. Ensuring that a student would not make it to grade 10 without being able to read. It was brought up that the EQUAO results generated good data, but that it was inadvertently used to rank schools, which was not the intention. Schools are now spending too much time preparing students for this test as they are worried about how they will rank, instead of spending time teaching students about things that matter. About skills that are not tested with EQUAO. It was discussed that possibly testing students as they learn instead of having to recap all subjects at testing time. Allowing school boards to create tests specific to their demographic and students.

Afternoon Workshops: PM3 – Fundraising and Equity

Summary: I learned a lot in this session about equity in fundraising and the vast differences between average parent incomes and the amount raised by parent councils. Our discussion, which dominated the session, was very thought provoking and it was nice to hear different points of view. The speakers were very thought provoking and reminded me what it means to be a member of a parent council. School council purpose is to assist in the academic achievement of the students. Discuss EQUAO results and how to make learning better at the school. Have a school improvement plan and discuss what to focus on during the school year. Have teachers come in and discuss what's going on in class, invite a different teacher each month. It's not all about fundraising and discussing how to spend the money! Have a separate fundraising committee that then reports to the rest of the council. Have a fundraising policy including budget, goals and number of fundraising events. Some parents feel that the school council is constantly asking for money and they get sick of it. Combine community with fundraising,

have movie nights and fun fair with free activities. Instead of offering prizes, offer school wide incentives like extending one recess or having teachers wear funny clothes.

People for Education has collected data from various school all around the province and learned that while some schools are fundraising for ipads and other technology other schools are fundraising to provide nutrition to their students. We had a good discussion about equity and that this gap is not acceptable. However, how do we change it? Is this a matter of some schools requiring more funding for nutrition programs so children can have the basic necessities of learning? Some of the data obtained, however, was not cut and dry. Some schools raise \$5,000 per year, while others \$100,000 per year. This amount is not broken down into categories, like how much was raised for a school trip, terry fox, jump rope for heart, parent council, etc. If further data was collected it would be easier to properly interpret and review. The representative from People for Education commented however, that these surveys that they send to each school in Ontario is voluntary and each principal may interpret the questions differently. Some may have listed the amount just from the school council while others recorded the total amount fundraised in the school.

Final Summary: I found, as a parent, some of the content went over my head. I'm not 100% sure if it was the content, or the way it was delivered but I just didn't understand. I feel like you had to be a doctor, lawyer, trustee, CEO or member of some level of government to fully comprehend what was being said. That's why I loved Dr. Jean Clinton so much, I think what she said easily understood and delivered with daily life examples and humour. The panels were, unfortunately, mostly dry. I did take quite a bit away from this conference that I'll share with my parent council. It was very thought provoking and expanded my way of thinking. I know I would appreciate it more if the discussions were brought down to a level that is more easily understood for people without a university education.

I really did appreciate that all of the sessions applied to the vast majority of people. I understand that some people have individual needs, IEPs, native/cultural issues, LGBTQ, disabilities, low income, etc, that I find sometimes the average families that don't fall into any of those categories get missed and discussions don't apply to us. For example, I subscribe to Peach Jar and the majority of the information they post is not relevant to me or my children.

I have completed the online survey sent by Jacqui Strachan on behalf of People for Education.

Thank you so much for allowing me to attend this conference. I really hope I can attend again next year, or if not then, possibly in a couple years.