

Focus on: School Councils



School Councils, says Marilyn Welsch, can be so much more than fundraisers.

Welsch provided a full day of training at the Westwind Divisional School Council Meeting earlier this year, first outlining the purpose of the parental support group and then ways to make a difference and get others in the community involved.

In the process the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) presenter – a former School Council member and school trustee herself – urged them to “dream hard and dream big” when looking at the possibilities afforded them.

“While everyone values and appreciates the fundraising you do to allow for all those ‘extras,’ the legislation allows you to go beyond that and be a parent advisory body for your principal and the Board,” Welsch said.

The ultimate goal is for School Councils to bring parents and community members together to work with the school to support and enhance student learning. She said

it’s important they realize, however, they are not school governance bodies, employers or school managers

“You must be offered the opportunity to provide advice on a lot of issues, but you are not decision makers,” she said.

School Council members had the opportunity for a little role reversal where they acted as principals and had to make tough decisions. The goal was to help them realize there are a lot of people who offer advice to the principal on any particular issue. In turn, it’s hoped School Council members have a relationship with their administrator where there won’t be hard feelings if their viewpoint isn’t the route ultimately taken.

School Councils don’t have to win the day to make a difference, however. Welsch pointed to research which shows children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to get better grades, miss less school, act up less in class and graduate at a higher rate than others.

The workshop began with an explanation of the purpose and responsibilities of the ASCA and School Councils. The fact Westwind School Division pays the ASCA membership for every one of its School Councils is an indication of the value it places on getting the parents’ perspective, said Welsch.

“As a member of a neighboring school jurisdiction, we always knew Westwind as a Division which listens and is all about community,” said the former Holy Spirit trustee.

Superintendent Ken Sommerfeldt confirmed the value Westwind places in its conversations with parents, adding their voice is “relevant and meaningful.” The Division is committed to providing School Councils with as much information as possible – the training session part of that – so they can better understand the issues and communicate that with the rest of the community.

The training session also saw discussion as to their ideal world for School Council involvement and parental engagement. For some that would mean a full turnout at meetings and more parents volunteering in the classroom, while others spoke of open and respectful conversations – two-way communication – between parents and school staff.

Finally, Welsch had participants look at the barriers or challenges keeping them from making their school community more vibrant and engaged, and specific strategies to address each of those.

If there is a specific educational issue you would like to see covered please email Communications Officer Craig Albrecht at craig.albrecht@westwind.ab.ca



Marilyn Welsch works with Westwind School Councils

One of the resources Westwind School Division makes available to its School Councils is the annual ASCA Conference and General Meeting. This year’s meeting will be held April 24-26 in Edmonton with registration through www.albertaschoolcouncils.ca. Westwind will pay expenses for up to two members from each School Council to attend the conference with schools to register their own School Council members.

For more information email pam.boyson@westwind.ab.ca