



NPSC Elementary Student Forum - Many Voices: Students Speaking Up

Report Presented to: The NPSC Board of Trustees Executive Summary

A) Background

The inaugural Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board Elementary Student Forum was entitled “Many Voices: Students Speaking Up”. The Forum was held on Tuesday, May 13th, 2014 from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. in the St. Joseph-Scollard Hall CSS Bear Den. Forty-two elementary students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 attended the Forum, representing all twelve NPSC elementary schools. The Forum was planned, organized, and coordinated by Nicholas Waltenbury (Student Trustee), supported by Mrs. Joanne B nard (Superintendent of Education) and supervised by two NPSC staff. The Forum was facilitated by ten SJSH students in Grades 10 to 12.

Students are the key stakeholders in education and they have great insight into the most effective practices in the education system. This initiative was meant to foster a welcoming environment for all students to feel engaged and contribute to discussion about their education. The Forum reached students from multiple demographics, allowing for a wide range of perspectives to be represented. Attendees learned invaluable leadership, communication, and confidence skills and quickly became active citizens, as facilitators demonstrated the importance of students speaking up about issues they believe in and with the knowledge that their voice is heard can make a difference. The Forum was successful in empowering the students of the NPSC to speak their mind, get involved, and become active learners. The event helped to transform the role of students and provide them with the opportunity to have instrumental voices at Board level in decision making to improve their Catholic education as a whole.

The Forum followed an “open space” model, meaning much of the day was unstructured and open to the participants of the Forum. Students were provided with background information on the Student Voice and SpeakUp initiatives of the Ministry of Education and were given an opportunity to select topics to explore that were of interest and relevant to their own education. Twenty-one topics were selected and discussed over three thirty-minute “breakout sessions” where students circulated the room and joined any group they wished. SJSH student facilitators moderated the discussions and recorded student dialogue. The event also included a presentation from four Grade Nine students regarding the transition from elementary to secondary. This Forum clearly coincides with the ENDS policies of the board as every ENDS statement is related to the Forum in some way and it indisputably corresponds with our vision, “Rooted in Faith, Alive in Spirit”, and our mission: “As a faith community, we provide learning opportunities that

inspire, nurture and celebrate each learner's journey to: reach their full potential, be a contributing member of society, live the richness of their faith, and embrace lifelong learning”.

B) Topics Discussed

Below is a list of all topics discussed in breakout sessions and a brief summary of the discussion. For full reports, please reference *Appendix B, Book of Reports*

Arts in Schools – Improving arts programs (dance, visual, drama, music) within elementary schools and gearing them toward specific student interests of the individual classroom. Teaching all elements of the arts and making the program more unique to appeal to a wider range of students. Providing a further opportunity for students to share their gifts and talents with their peers.

Bullying/Safe Spaces – There is still room for improvement in supporting students who are bullied and making schools safe spaces at all times. Students want cases of bullying to be taken very seriously and immediately addressed and better promotion of resources for victims of bullying. They feel that schools need to be known as a “safe space”.

Clubs - Students want more and different clubs/groups offered in their schools. They feel that everyone should have an opportunity to be matched with a group of like-minded peers to share their common interests.

Creativity - Schools need to foster an environment for students to learn and express themselves in unique and alternate ways. We need to find a new way to teach students and have them interact creatively with each other.

Enrichment Opportunities – Students who are excelling need to be challenged and supported so that they can reach their full potential. There needs to be equal emphasis put on students who are already meeting provincial standard as they deserve to have the opportunity to continue to excel. Schools should provide more opportunity for enrichment and promote extra-curricular opportunities for these students.

French – Students are pleased with current French programs and want more opportunities to extend their skills with more practical application and experience. Best practices from schools should be shared as various students highlighted successful methods in their schools and demonstrated interest in how their peers learn. A need for a better transition from elementary to secondary core French was demonstrated and students want the opportunity to continue their FSL education.

Health Class – Introduce more health programs at the elementary level, teaching a variety of elements of healthy living. Students want more opportunity for upfront open discussion on issues regarding students' health and wellbeing.

Homework – Younger students want more homework, older students want less. All participants agreed they want homework to be more manageable and organized and adequately prepare them for homework levels at secondary and beyond.

Math – Students are very interested about learning and applying math skills. They want to have an opportunity to succeed in math and they want to ensure that they are prepared for the transition from elementary to secondary mathematics education. There was great discussion regarding teaching the basic essential math skills in primary and junior grades.

Mental Health – Making sure students and teachers are all informed on mental health issues as students feel if people are aware there will be less discrimination and confusion and the school environment can be improved for those who suffer from disorders or disabilities.

Multiculturalism – Promote a wider variety of culture in schools to make students aware of the diverseness and vastness of the world.

Religion – Make the Religion program more encompassing so it is clearly integrated into all aspects of study in our schools. Promote Religious engagement within and outside of school to give students an opportunity to grow in mind, body, and spirit, supported by their Catholic faith.

Rural School Issues – All students in the NPSC are “rural school students”, however those in outlining areas of North Bay are even further affected by rural school issues. Participants feel that all students, regardless of the geography of their school, are entitled to equal opportunities to curricular and extra-curricular programs. A number of hurdles for rural students were identified.

School Spirit – School spirit needs to be fostered by school staff and encouraged for the overall betterment of the school community. This will help to engage as many students as possible in our education system.

Sports in Schools – Students want more and different sports offered in their schools. They want a variety of sports available throughout the year so they can try new things and it will promote physical activity for more students.

Student Councils – Student councils need to be mandated in every NPSC school and be taken more seriously as they are a useful asset to schools and have a lot to offer. Council members should have opportunities to develop leadership skills and be given responsibilities and opportunities to run new events in schools. Student voice/input should be considered in decisions concerning students.

Student Voice – Student Voice needs to be taken seriously in schools and considered in aspects of decision making that involves students. Schools need to foster a safe and nurturing environment where students feel welcome to share their input and opinion.

Teaching/Learning Styles – Teachers should recognize the various types of learners and help students of all groups succeed with the individual skills they have. Students should have an

opportunity to learn to adapt to various teaching styles to prepare them for secondary education where they will have multiple teachers.

Teaching Life Skills – Students need to be prepared for the real world and learn practical skills in the classroom that will allow them to succeed later in life when they must quickly become independent. Curriculum education should always be tied to practical applications so students recognize where skills are used in everyday life.

Technology – Improve technology use in the classroom so that students are using technology to its full potential but still ensuring students have the opportunity to succeed without the assistance of modern-day technology.

Transitions – Improve overall transitions from elementary to SJSJ by giving students an abundance of information to make them as comfortable as possible for their first days and be excited, not nervous, to be transitioning from elementary to secondary (SJSJ).

C) Student Feedback

At the conclusion of the Forum, student participants were given the opportunity to complete and submit a pre-prepared feedback survey. All 42 students participated fully; key findings are highlighted below.

Quantitative responses:

Question	Key Responses
How much did you enjoy the day today?	100% responded either “a little bit” or “a lot”
How much do you feel your voice was heard today?	85% responded either “a little bit” or “a lot”
How much do you feel your leadership skills improved today?	79% responded either “a little bit” or “a lot”
Would you like to attend another student forum in the future?	100% responded “yes”
Do you think we should continue to host student forums in future years?	100% responded “yes”
Do you feel you made a difference in your education today?	88% responded “yes”
Do you think the issues we talked about today are important?	100% responded “yes”

Qualitative responses (key, reoccurring responses highlighted – please note: multiple responses per question were permitted):

What did you enjoy MOST about the student forum?

- The activities and the games (10 responses)
- Meeting new friends from other schools (7 responses)
- Elementary to secondary transition presentation (20 responses)
- Making a difference in my education by sharing my opinion (14 responses)

Key Quotes:

- *“Talking to the Grade Nines really made me feel more confident to move into [high school]”*
- *“I enjoyed how I was heard and appreciated at the forum today”*
- *“The fact that I could make a difference for our education”*
- *“Having my voice heard throughout the NPSC”*
- *“I liked the ‘Breakout Sessions’ the most because my voice was heard”*

What did you enjoy LEAST about the student forum?

- Nothing / I liked everything (28 responses)

Key Quotes:

- *“The only thing I didn’t like was when I first came in, I didn’t really know anyone but in the end I made new friends”*
- *“Nothing, it was awesome”*
- *“There was nothing I didn’t enjoy”*
- *“Nothing, I loved everything”*

What is one thing you would change about the student forum?

- Nothing / I liked everything (23 responses)

Key Quotes:

- *“I wouldn’t change anything”*
- *“I would change nothing about the forum”*
- *“More time to have breakout discussions”*
- *“I would make this before we chose our courses [for Grade Nine]”*

Attachments:

Appendix A: Student Forum Itinerary

Appendix B: Student Forum Book of Reports

*Prepared by J. Bénard (Superintendent of Education) and N. Waltenbury (Student Trustee)
June 15th, 2014*