

# WHAT IS EXCELLENCE?

## An Example of a Joint Parent-Teacher-Staff Inquiry

### WHAT IS EXCELLENCE AT \_\_\_\_\_ SCHOOL?

This was a meeting planned by the high school parents and the Parent Education Initiative (PEI) coordinator. The principal, deans, counselors, college counselor, affective education faculty, faculty chair of the committee on teaching and learning, and the PEI coordinator were present. About 50 parents were in attendance. There were about 200 students in the high school. We began by asking the staff to talk about what excellence at \_\_\_\_\_ School meant to them. This was not so much because we thought their opinions were more important than parents' but because parents had asked the staff members to explain where they stood on this topic individually but never in a large group. Our approach also accommodated parents from backgrounds in which it was typical for parents to hear from the authorities at the school. This would bring them to a meeting initially. I recorded their ideas in order to summarize them for parents in anticipation of a discussion and question-and-answer period and to share with high school parents who could not attend. The staff talked about the following: What is excellence?

- It is about reminding students they are the keys to their success.
- It is seen in objective measures in an institution, such as grades and grade reports.
- It is seen in subjective measures from the child's perspective.
- It is finding student strengths and supporting their development.
- It is a process.

## 2 DEVELOPING CARING RELATIONSHIPS

- It is related to a child’s intrinsic motivation—their own journey of excellence.
- It is about “raising expectations and having them meet them.”
- It is about students wanting to be here.
- It is about parents and staff providing parameters and limits, creating environments for learning, supporting the development of good study skills, and supporting cocurricular activities (not quantity of activities but commitment to an activity).
- It can be pursued through athletics, both as an individual and as part of a group.
- It is about finding a passion for something, pursuing it, and finding just the right college or school setting where this passion can be both pursued and nurtured.
- It is also expected of faculty and staff.
- It is about learning to make choices.
- It is a planning, doing, and reflecting process.

### PARENT-FACULTY/STAFF DISCUSSION

Abbreviations: Q = Question, C = Comment, R = Response, P = Parent, S = Staff

**QP:** Is excellence 4 or 5 hours of homework a night? With all other activities, we are talking about not getting to bed before 11:00 p.m.

**RS:** We need to look at a student’s classes, how they study, find courses that might be taking too much homework time in proportion to the others; look at social time, for example, phone calls and relaxing. Can you find a way to lessen the time and still do excellent work?

**QP:** Is excellence related to the education gained? What is the character of the homework? Is it more of the same, or is it at a different level of learning. Is the student into it? What if they are also involved in the community? The Church? It is hard.

**RS:** We might look at efficiency issues. Look at time management or look at the understanding of the material. Help from a teacher with the latter could help.

**CP:** We are very comfortable as parents with reading for understanding resulting in a more productive discussion the next day. One issue is if grades for homework are an impediment to learning.

**QP:** What are teachers accountable for regarding feedback? My kids say, “If I had to get a paper in on time, why does the teacher get to keep it so long before returning it?”

**RS:** We look at this in teacher evaluations. We feel it is important that they give students feedback, especially before another similar assignment is due.

**QP:** How is this monitored?

**RS:** Some students tell us, I observe in the classroom, students talk to their advisers and come into the office. The student academic board is involved in evaluation.

**QP:** Has the school ever asked the parents what they have learned from children about classes, homework situations, and so on? Has the issue been seen through the child-parent experience or discussions at home? This could be another piece of information to use in helping students and teachers.

**RS:** This has happened informally.

**CS:** In our college years, teachers regularly initiated ways for students to evaluate them.

**RS:** A number of teachers do that.

**QP:** Have they thought about having homerooms mixed grade so older students can share information with younger students?

**RS:** Yes, we started this in the fall with the exception of the freshmen.

**QP:** How do you measure love of learning? Would you need pass/fail classes to make this easier?

**RS:** In grade reports, we give more qualitative feedback.

**QP:** What sets a spark for learning in our children?

**RS:** It helps that students have so many chances for electives. (The PEI coordinator then made a comment about inquiry-based learning as a way for children to pursue a topic of interest. In a previous parent group, a parent had mentioned that her seventh-grade son told her he used to do this in elementary school more but did not have time to read about what interested him anymore. Another parent shared her experience as a parent of a teenager when she was watching her daughter read another novel she didn't need to read and wondering if she should instead be studying for a chemistry test. When her daughter wanted to discuss the book with her, she noted that she felt herself having to hold her tongue and not cut this type of discussion short when she was thinking her daughter had other homework.) The parent asked, "Should we as adults nurture a love of learning, and can we live with the fact that it might mean a few less points on a test in another course?"

#### 4 DEVELOPING CARING RELATIONSHIPS

**QP:** Can you build in more time in the class for love of learning? It could be a 3-minute discussion to take information to a different level.

**RS:** We see students taking discussions of what was learned to halls, the cafeteria, and so on.

**RS:** We have canvased kids. There is a wide range of opportunities to discuss class materials. There is also a lot of socializing going on.

**CS:** When they get excited about something, I think they will make the time.

**RS:** There are also ways teachers can build choices into their assignments. For example, in my class, the students have a lot of latitude in their special projects. They can choose a book or topic that interests them.

**QP:** Are there specific clues to see if they love learning?

**RS:** They will tell you about the subject or what happened in class. They will make a connection between what they are learning in class and what is happening on the news, for example.

**CP:** I feel that our children are very proud of \_\_\_\_\_ School and how hard they have to work.

**QP:** How do you see excellence at \_\_\_\_\_ School beyond grades?

**RS:** We see it in their love of learning. All you have to do is read the College Counselor's letters of recommendation. She identifies so many ways students are excellent, for example, persistence, creativity, how students handle challenges.

**RS:** There is also the \_\_\_\_\_ association at \_\_\_\_\_ School where the students are singled out specifically for their love of learning.

**CS:** If parents know of a student interest, they should tell the teacher. We can't assume the teacher can always figure this out or that the student sees the opportunity to connect an interest with coursework. The parents have a body of knowledge that is important.

**CS:** \_\_\_\_\_ parents don't call very much. In my other school, they called more.

**CP:** Maybe this is because the teachers seem to know the kids and have very good relationships with them.

**RS:** I am encouraged by the parents' value of love of learning.

**CS:** Yet parents need to acknowledge that if they do value it, they have to think twice about putting so much pressure on grades.

**CP:** Kids need to be validated for the effort they put forth in academics, sports, clubs, service learning, and so on. We need to help them search for excellence in varied situations.

**CS:** We have run out of time.

## **FOLLOW-UP OF JOINT INQUIRY**

The group showed an interest in having another discussion about this topic. The coordinator gave the parent leaders a related book by Dr. Doug Heath (*Schools of Hope*), which addressed this topic in depth. The parents decided to have another parent discussion on this book, but not all could read the whole book, so copies of a key chapter were left at the receptionist's desk. Other parents and teachers attended the next meeting, at which the coordinator and a parent verbally summarized the book as it related to the discussion on excellence and included a handout summary. Then parents and teachers had a discussion.

A parent in attendance prepared an article on the discussion, based on these notes, for the high school newsletter to inform parents unable to attend the meeting. While this meeting may have seemed "top-down" in that the school staff members presented their definitions of excellence, it was specifically requested by parents that teachers and staff explain their beliefs and assumptions and open up a discussion. It was a good meeting for this particular school.