

## Connect Charter School Parent, Student and Staff Interviews - Executive Summary

Susan Chomistek – June 12, 2017

The eighth annual superintendent interviews of parents, students, and staff members were conducted over several weeks in the spring of 2017 as a component of the ongoing school evaluation process. 40 parents were interviewed between March and May, 2017. In May and June, grades 4 to 9 students as class groups (24 classes - approximately 612 students) were interviewed. I was pleased that Dr. Phil Butterfield was able to join me for all of these sessions. As well, meetings were held with 42 teachers and support staff. The feedback generated through the two questions, "*What causes you to believe that Connect Charter School is a very good school?*" and "*What suggestions for improvement would you like to offer?*" has been organized as commendations or recommendations for further consideration, on the basis of common themes, which were identified through a thematic analysis process. The frequency of common themes is indicated in parentheses and denotes the percentage of respondents who mentioned the theme during the interviews.

### Parent Interview Responses - Key Themes

**The following major areas of commendation (with a response rate of 18% or more) were identified through the parent interviews:**

- 1. The teachers and support staff are very dedicated and the quality of the teaching is excellent (92.5%)** - Representative comments include:
  - Engaged and committed staff who have new approaches to curriculum. They use innovative ways to deliver curriculum which is connected to real life. They are engaged with students and they care about the curriculum. Students understand as they do not make the subject matter too pedantic and they care on a personal level.
  - Observing teachers and staff interacting with students and, with very few exceptions, it is very respectful and each of those teachers or staff have found a way to like or enjoy each of those kids and is truly invested in them as learners. That impresses me. I am deeply in awe of Connect teachers and staff to be really engaged with each kid in a meaningful way. That is completely foundational and if you didn't have that, it wouldn't matter what outdoor trips or other trips you had or what place based learning experiences existed.
  - Teachers are engaged with students and their learning. Their style of teaching and learning gives students empowerment. Students are heard and teachers allow them to dive into the learning and what they are interested in.
- 2. Connect Charter School is a great school (63%)** – Representative comments include:
  - There has been a great culture created at the school where everyone works toward the vision of developing extraordinary citizens. This drives the success of the school. Developing positive relationships are obviously valued – student to student, teacher to student, teacher to parents. The culture of mutual respect is seen in all of the programming –peer mentoring, Family Groups, service learning and social justice. Everyone is working towards the vision.

- Never heard other kids talk with such passion as the kids at Connect do. Students are so loyal and rarely do you hear the kids say anything negative about the school. They articulate it well. They care. The fact that they care is important. The academic side is very strong.
  - Connect School takes its practice seriously. When I first went to the school, there was such a respect for the students. We spoke to the custodian; he likes the kids. We knew the custodian was part of a family. We spoke to a bus driver; he was happy to get the route. There is a feeling that everyone belongs and has a part to play and they are listened to.
- 3. The outdoor and environmental education program is excellent (58%)** – Representative comments include:
- School has a strong focus on outdoor education and stewardship towards the environment.
  - Our kids have really loved the trips and have commented on what they have learned.
  - Overnight trips are great. We appreciated how the grade four students were paired with the grade eight students at Kamp Kiwanis. There was so much growth for our child.
- 4. Connect Charter School provides a well-rounded program through the core courses, the performing and visual arts, physical education, the electives and the leadership programs (55%)** – Representative comments include:
- Appreciate the diversity in programming; there is such a good balance. Our daughter is very artistic, and that program is great. Outdoor ed. is an amazing component that helps them as human beings. Sports for life are a focus – another great program
  - Range of opportunities in Phys. Ed, PVA, and electives – backpacking, Amazing Race, biking. There is a good variety.
  - PVA provides a great outlet for kids who are not as academic and we like how the arts are incorporated into math and science.
- 5. The use of technology in the school significantly enriches learning and teaching (38%)** – Representative comments include:
- Access to technology to enhance my kids’ learning.
  - Appreciate the technology because it is supported here and teachers know how to use it effectively.
  - Use of technology as a tool. Our kids were taught how to use technology effectively, knowing it is not the only tool. They also write and draw. There is a much better balance than six years ago.
- 6. The emphasis on learning and teaching through a disposition of inquiry is highly valued (35%)** – Representative comments include:
- What drew us to the school and continues to resonate with us is the experiential focus- the hands-on learning, the inquiry-based approach, and the extension to the learning.
  - Teachers really buy into the inquiry based model and are empowered to teach well.
  - Inquiry based and hands on learning is great for our children. They are stimulated and challenged.
- 7. The administration provides strong leadership for the school (33%)** – Representative comments include:

- Appreciated how our admin are innovative and yet they still listen to parents.
  - Administration are very engaged with the students and listen to them.
  - I have great trust in the admin as they are strong and know what they are doing
- 8. EXPO is a valuable expansion of our programs (33%)** – Representative comments include:
- Excited about the potential of EXPO and how this programming can support even deeper learning in the students.
  - When EXPO was introduced, it was surprising. Appreciated how parents were listened to, the approach was modified, and our voices were heard in the planning process. We are really happy with it now. We are a small school, so these things can happen. I love the innovative part of this.
  - Layer rich use of technology with amazing outdoor education experiences and, coming in the fall, EXPO takes everything over the top.
- 9. The emphasis on developing students as ethical, respectful, and responsible individuals is highly valued (20%)** – Representative comments include:
- Leadership programs the grades 8 and 9 students do. They help in mentoring students and leading groups. This is powerful for the younger students and for the leaders. Peer mentoring is another area which benefits both the student and the mentor. There is an increased confidence and it gave our son a sense of giving back and it solidified his understanding of some of the things that he was teaching.
  - Students have a strong work ethic and learn presentation skills and are taught responsibility for their learning.
  - Our child has been taught how to take risks and be responsible for his learning through a growth mindset.
- 10. Parent support is very valuable (18%)** – Representative comments include:
- Parent community is great. They have a good understanding of what the school is trying to do and they are there to give support (instruments, bouldering wall, audio system)
  - Volunteer part is really important. Hard to get the volunteer opportunity. You have to fight to get the spots. This is very unique. As a volunteer, the trips are so fun. Because of the volunteering, I got to know more of the parents and the kids. It makes a stronger connection and it helps the whole school.
  - Relationships with the parents is very positive. There is an openness and a transparency

**The following suggestions for further consideration (with a response rate of 13% or more) were identified through the parent interviews:**

- 1. Different approaches to assessment and reporting should be considered (18%)** – Representative comments include:
- Similar assessment/grading between grades.
  - Prefer percentages in the older grades. There is too great a range in a 3.
  - Assessment practices need to be addressed. Having a 3 is too wide a range. It is difficult to see if there is improvement.
- 2. Enhance communication processes (13%)** – Representative comments include:
- I wish that the school would use a uniform mode of communication. Edmodo, Fresh Grade, Power School, Google docs...this gets confusing and time consuming to have all

these platforms. Just from the parents' perspective a more uniform approach would be nice.

- We need a cleaner method of communicating. I don't want different platforms and different ways of communicating and from multiple sources.
- We need a generic learning management system. The communication piece is so important.

**3. Continued or improved strong academic standards (13%)** - Representative comments include:

- Introduced to homework and assignments earlier. They cannot avoid this when they are in higher grades. They can then get into the habit of studying earlier. They can see this is part of their learning curve. Give the students tips on studying, how to achieve goals, how to memorize.
- Need more foundational knowledge.
- Need more rigour. This is the real world. They also need to do final exams.

### **Student Interview Responses - Key Themes**

**Connect Charter School students from grades 4 to 9 were interviewed as class groups. The students were asked two basic questions: What causes you to believe that the Connect Charter School is a very good school? What suggestions for improvement would you offer? It is interesting to note that, without exception, in every class the students identified learning through the disposition of inquiry and meaningful, real-life learning opportunities; outdoor and environmental education and school field trips; the use of technology to enhance learning and teaching; dedicated teachers and staff members; the environment both within and outside the school; and the well-rounded program through the core courses, the performing and visual arts, physical education, and the electives as special features of their learning experience. These themes were, in their view, what make Connect Charter School a great school. When interpreting the student data, it is important to consider that the students were interviewed as a class group, and if one child commented on an area, it is recorded as a class response and not an individual response. The following areas of commendation with a response rate of 100% or more were included:**

**1. Learning through Inquiry and meaningful, real-life learning opportunities (100%)** – Representative comments include:

- Inquiry encourages us to think deeper in our work and not just skim the surface.
- Exploring topics in depth helps us with the understanding and inquiry based learning helps us to learn on our own.
- Education here is different – we don't use text books, it is very creative and very in depth. We explore different ways to approach or to solve problems.

**2. Outdoor and environmental education/school field trips (100%)** - Representative comments include:

- Overnight trips where we experience new things and learn about nature and the wild or about the wetlands. We don't just learn information from a book, we experience it.
- Experiential learning and going on field trips and doing things there as the lab and not from a text book.

- Trips – Camp Sweet, winter camp, Fort Steele, SAHT, outdoor ed. electives. We get to go outside to the Weaselhead to learn about our environment.
3. **Using technology to enhance learning experiences (100%)** - Representative comments include:
- Technology in science such as the GIS which is an interesting tool that provides us a variety of opportunities to learn skills in different classes. Technology makes it easier to do your work as you don't have to search through a textbook. 3D printer and stage lights.
  - Productive use of technology.
  - Technology enhances our learning and gets us to delve into topics, read for more information, and get our hands on more parts for our learning.
4. **Dedicated teachers and school staff (100%)** - Representative comments include:
- The office staff are kind and the teachers are positive. There are staff that can help kids who struggle with their learning. Our learning is personalized – teachers expect more from different students.
  - Staff – all have positive attitudes and care for us. Janitors work hard and give us high fives. Staff and teachers trust us. Teachers are really creative in electives and PVA with crazy out of the box activities such as making movies with creative camera shots. Teachers get involved in PD activities outside of the school to help us and we can do things like the Mayor's Expo.
  - Staff, principals, caretakers, superintendents – they are all nice. Teachers are always there when we need help. Student teachers – we learn and they learn - that is really good.
5. **Environment both within and outside the school (100%)** - Representative comments include:
- Nice environment that we are working in. Little things make a difference like the furniture and the posters that are related to our learning and our creations are displayed around the school so others can be inspired. There are paintings in the halls and stairwells. We are able to customize our classrooms.
  - We have the bouldering wall and quiet spaces where we can work if we need to. We have lots of space, especially outside, and more than one space to extend our learning such as the IAC. There is sunlight in every room through windows or solar tubes.
  - School is very clean and the Learning Commons is big and you do many things in there. Our school and playing fields are nice and big so we have opportunities to do a lot of things.
6. **Connect Charter School provides a well-rounded program through the core courses, the performing and visual arts, physical education, and the electives (100%)** – Representative comments include:
- Gym, DPA, PVA, electives: we have so many choices in all of these areas. We have a fleet of bikes and cross country skis for activities.
  - We have variety in our schedules and do a lot of different sports like quiddich, lacrosse cricket. Get to go on field trips and have guest speakers coming in for different cultures and have the pow wow. PVA and PE programs - amazing teachers to teach them and we go into a lot more in depth learning than other schools.

- We are learning about today's issues that affect every one of us - in humanities we learn about politics and issues and dive into them to learn more and in science we do things that affect us every day in our lives. Electives such as woodworking and CO2 powered cars. Focus on core subjects like how we can connect the topics to democracy and politics and how we run it. We have elections and voting on what we want and we are allowed to make the choices.
- There is a high level or standard for our learning and this makes it easier to transfer to other subjects. We have opportunities for different sports. Humanities keep us updated on current events. Over the past two years, our humanities teacher has made us love books. Projects that we do are similar to high school projects. Choices for electives are interesting and prepare us for high school. We know what we are learning and how to apply it in the real world and school prepares us for this.

**The following additional areas of commendation (with a response rate of 67% or more) were also identified.**

- 1. Opportunities for collaboration and leadership (83%)** – Representative comments include:
  - We can make our own clubs and have experiences with how to lead and be a role model.
  - Peer mentoring is positive for both sides - taking on the role helps develop good relationships with someone from a younger grade.
  - Given so many leadership opportunities. Older students are allowed to be leaders for tours and camps.
- 2. Culture of mutual respect in the school (83%)** – Representative comments include:
  - Our school is based around mutual respect. It is easy to bond with friends and build relationships.
  - Community where people always are doing small acts of kindness in every grade. There is a culture of mutual respect – people always feel safe here and the grade nines are so supportive.
  - We share our respect in so many ways – when we sing O' Canada, Peace Festival, Terry Fox Run.
- 3. Student voice is valued (67%)** – Representative comments include:
  - We like that students are listened to.
  - People listen to us to improve our environment.
  - We like doing this survey because we get to improve the school.
- 4. Family Groups are very important (67%)** - Representative comments include:
  - Family Groups bring us together.
  - Family Groups so we can bond with other grades.
  - Family Groups – relationships between students in different grades. As I am in the middle it helps us to see how the older students choose and plan the activities.

**The following suggestions for further consideration (with a response rate of 33% or more) were identified through the student interviews:**

1. **Outdoor space enhancements (100%)** - Representative comments include:
  - Small greenhouse so the grade fours do not have to grow tomatoes in the science lab.
  - Consider expanding Clem's Garden, putting in more stepping stones for when it is muddy, and adding bright flowers and benches.
  - Update the basketball nets and go over the paint for the games.
2. **Indoor space enhancements (100%)** – Representative comments include:
  - Bigger windows and take care of the heating issue in the classrooms.
  - Repaint the lockers similar to our logo and paint the stage black. Put a lighting track above the stage and repaint the cabinets in front of the stage.
  - Room for voice recording assignments.
3. **Changes to school electives (58%)** - Representative comments include:
  - More choices for electives - outdoor ed. elective every term, advanced electives more often, or an elective to prepare for high school.
  - More people who can get into specific electives and make clubs if students cannot get into an elective.
4. **Changes to Family Groups (42%)** - Representative comments include:
  - Double periods for Family Groups.
  - Family groups should be changed every year so we meet more teachers and students.
5. **Make provision for more interschool and intramural sports teams (33%)** - Representative comments include:
  - Introduce more school teams such as baseball, flag football, rugby and soccer.
  - Sports teams for younger students.

### **Staff Interview Responses - Key Themes**

**Informal interviews were conducted with (42) staff members and the following major areas of commendation (with a response rate of 12% or more) were identified through the staff interviews:**

1. **The supportive, caring, and collaborative culture is a key to success (88%)** Representative comments include:
  - Our culture is what makes us a good school, the idea of school connectedness with students, staff, and parents as well as our commitment to excellence in education and being innovative with a strong focus on relationships.
  - Supportive school which encompasses the Board, the School Council, the students – everyone.
  - Highly supportive environment where people have enough resources to do what they need to do, support from the Board, admin, parents, students, and other staff, and the belief that “We are all in this together.”
2. **We have a very capable and highly dedicated staff (76%)** - Representative comments include:
  - Staff have the capacity to recognize the needs of the learners and to adapt their teaching to meet the students’ needs.
  - Staff is so dedicated and committed to going above and beyond. There is never a feeling that failure is a possibility.

- Teachers are able to deal with the complexities of being off campus and this provides good learning opportunities for students.
- 3. The leadership and support from the administration/leadership team is appreciated (69%) –**  
Representative comments include:
- Administration team are dedicated to helping teachers handle life, not just curriculum or helping students, but all three of them continue to do what they can to always treat issues with humility and humour while supporting everyone in the school.
  - Leadership is strong. They give support where it is needed and freedom and independence to take charge. The portfolio positions are a great asset, too.
  - Supportive leadership team. They are so positive and constructive and that helps me to be positive and constructive.
- 4. The students are excellent (55%) –** Representative comments include:
- Our students are what makes our school good – there are so many reasons they are great—they set high goals for themselves, and then they strive to achieve them. They are smart and aware of themselves as learners and as people.
  - Students are beyond fantastic!
  - Students are willing to accept challenges and try new things which make them uncomfortable. They grow because of this and embrace challenges.
- 5. EXPO is a very positive element of our school (38%) –** Representative comments include:
- Looking forward to next year and the interdisciplinary and place based approach with EXPO.
  - We are constantly looking at how we can be innovative. Teachers were involved in the process. We are not stagnant as we are constantly looking for ways to get better.
  - Appreciate the partnerships that are being forged. We are pushing what inquiry means and pushing our practice.
- 6. Parental involvement and support is excellent (31%) –** Representative comments include:
- Parents are a huge part of what makes our school great. The parent community does so much to support the work of our school – so many parents volunteer on a regular basis or for field trips or other off site opportunities, Parent Summit committee, EXPO initiative, volunteer committee, Hot lunches, the list goes on
  - Parent involvement is good. They are super involved and super good. Our parents are very academic focused and have a very philosophical approach to education. They value the core objectives but also other aspects of their child’s education.
- 7. We have a great vision for the school and clearly we are moving in the right direction (29%) –**  
Representative comments include:
- There is a great scope and variety of programming within our charter pillars. We have a solid foundation being guided by the exemplary Learning and Teaching Frameworks in taking forward the mandate of our charter. I am excited that we are looking ahead to the next version of Connect.
  - Focus on citizenship and developing extraordinary citizens and all the work that takes place to support it.
  - We have a great school because of the programs and the opportunities for students such as electives and the authentic learning experiences. Hands on learning solidifies

what students are learning in class. Because of our charter, they are given experiences they might not have otherwise had.

**8. The outdoor and environmental education programs and taking learning beyond the classroom continues to be a key component of the school learning activities and the success of the school (26%)** – Representative comments include:

- Outdoor ed. experiences are great – I am improving because of the support I am receiving.
- Outdoor education program is great as it gives an opportunity to build relationships - teachers to students, students to students, teachers to parents, students to parents.
- Having bikes available has been great and our location is conducive to strong outdoor educational opportunities.

**9. Budget allocation and acquisition of appropriate resource for students is effective (14%)** - Representative comments include:

- Site-based financial management makes a difference. As a teacher, I have control over the program and ownership of it and I am given the resources to do what I believe is best for student learning.
- Great resources so we can enrich the learning environment and design programs about what is best for students.

**10. The focus on professional development and ongoing growth is appreciated (12%)** Representative comments include:

- There is a focus on PD and it is supported through resources. Really appreciate the professional development and how educational assistants are also included and valued.
- Professional development is so valuable and PD opportunities with a school wide focus.

**11. Technology is making a difference in the learning opportunities for students (12%)** - Representative comments include:

- Effective use of technology in the school. It is not considered the be all and end all, it is just used effectively.
- Technology – the green screens, Apps, Google capabilities, integration of technology into place-based opportunities, the connectivity.

**The following suggestions for further consideration (with a response rate of 10% or more) were identified through the staff member interviews:**

**1. Considerations when implementing EXPO (31%)** - Representative comments include:

- Moving into EXPO, we need support in developing interdisciplinary work.
- Stay true to our commitment to inquiry as we move towards EXPO.
- Important moving forward that we have effective professional development in experiential learning.

**2. Consider ways to ensure workload is manageable and there are not too many priorities (21%)**- Representative comments include:

- Number of things that are going on at one time. There are so many priorities. Focussing on fewer might allow us to do everything better. Perhaps we could do Family Groups less often even though these are very valuable. Learning Strategies is another area where these could be held less often.
- Tendency that all schools have to keep adding things. Sometimes less is more.

- We have a lot of balls in the air. There is only so much time, yet we still want to push our practice and do what is best for all students. Planning for field trips takes a lot of work and this can take away from other work we are doing. How do we manage everything?
3. **Enhance communication (17%)** - Representative comments include:
    - Need to improve some aspects of our communication.
    - Could we use the monitor outside the office for activities for the day?
    - We are taking on more responsibilities and need to have really good communication with teachers so they can be supported.
  4. **Further refine and enhance leadership practices in school (16%)** - Representative comments include:
    - Admin presence in the classroom. If a teacher is new to the school, there is a great deal of presence. Provide this support to all teachers.
    - Release time for portfolio leaders is a necessity. They are taking on a lot of administrative responsibilities and need time to support teachers.
    - Nervous about our admin workload. They are working so hard and I don't think it is sustainable.
  5. **Do more to address the special learning and personal development needs of students (10%)** - Representative comments include:
    - Needs to be more support so everyone embraces the inclusive education philosophy.
    - To me, the inclusive education mandate remains at the forefront and needs to be the priority so that every student is successful. We need to focus time and energy on that. The counselling position needs to be a priority and should be a full-time position.
    - Teachers having a better understanding of diversity and needs of our students.
  6. **Enhance professional development programs and initiatives (10%)** - Representative comments include:
    - Need to maximize the benefit in our PD activities. Place based education and our charter pillars have to be our focus.
    - Re-examine how we do PD days. What could we be using the time for? Could we put staff meetings at the end of the day?
    - We need to use PD more effectively. Bring in external people.