

Lester B. Pearson School Board uses the Internet to extend its reach, be more accountable and accessible to its stakeholders

Internet technology has allowed the Lester B. Pearson School Board to reach a thousand or so people for each of its meetings recently, but the one in December to approve a document called Major School Change for 2010-2011 showed the board to be even more accountable, transparent and accessible to its many stakeholders, as required by Bill 88 changes to the Education Act.

The meeting was held on Dec. 21 at Lindsay Place High School in Pointe Claire, a few blocks from the board's Dorval headquarters, and it attracted an audience of several hundred people which is in itself a big turnout for a board meeting. But by live-streaming the meeting on its website, the board reached another 11,500 people – so many that it caused the site to crash, although some technological wizardry soon got the website running again.

"I find the number way beyond our expectations," said Marcus Tabachnick, chairman of the board. "It reflects that we made this a public process. People knew that the decisions were coming. They knew that they were potentially decisions with a big impact on our system. But 11,000 people is a lot of people for a school board meeting."

After all, he said, "it's not American Idol; it's a school-board meeting."

The numbers reflect the work the LBPSB has done to be more open and accountable in meetings and processes in the wake of Bill 88, amending the Education Act, which requires school boards to improve communication with people.

Tabachnick believes the board has adopted the most complete and complex policy for consultation of any board in the province.

"Any decision that we take that affects more than 10 per cent of a school's population requires a full community consultation," he said. "That's a small threshold. In a school of 250, that's 25 students. So we have to think long and hard before we make decisions and we have to talk to people before we make decisions."

The LBPSB is the only one in the province that has public executive board meetings and it also publishes agendas and meeting minutes on its website, he said.

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K4 PROGRAM
Kindergarten for 4 year olds
with extended daycare

Enhanced Learning Opportunities
PATHWAYS
Providing students with
more pathways to success

Enhanced Learning Opportunities
OPTIONS
Third language instruction
at the elementary level

Enhanced Learning Opportunities
FRANÇAIS
Enhanced K-6 immersion
programs

Enhanced Learning Opportunities
IMMERSION
Increasing the immersion
experience in secondary schools

Enhanced Learning Opportunities
LITERACY
Ensuring all students have
the skills to succeed

"Now we have incorporated a new technology where we have real-time live streaming. Our webcasts are reaching a lot of people and allowing a lot of people to watch the work of council."

Tabachnick hopes the newfound interest in the board will translate into inspiring people to vote in future school-board elections.

"We've got to keep working on finding ways of expanding the reach of the school board into the community – more than just about the reports that come out about a school closure or about something that has gone wrong.

"There is a lot that goes right," he said.

The board makes decisions every month involving close to \$250 million over the course of a year.

"That's a lot of taxpayer money that we are responsible for. And it's more, except for the city of Montreal, than the 40 municipalities that we serve," he said.

For example, the Pearson board is one of the largest employers in the area with 5,000 employees, while it provides transportation and social services such as daycare that affect 40 municipalities.

"What we need is to convince our community that the best education for their kids is in our schools. We do that not just with our graduation rates. We can do that with the services we can provide," Tabachnick said, referring to daycare service the board provides before school, at noon hour and after school for the benefit of parents whose work hours differ from their children's school hours.

"We have to remember that we service a large adult population. We have adult education on one side and growing vocational training programs on the other side. Whether it's to learn a skill out of high school or to change a career path or retrain because of job loss in our community, we have a role to play in the future of society," Tabachnick said.

Director of educational services at LBPSB gears up for new strategy

Michael Chechile, the new director of educational services for the Lester B. Pearson School Board, will have his hands full implementing a new strategy which calls for big changes on several fronts starting in September.

The strategy, named Major School Change for 2010-2011, calls for a significant increase in the amount of French for students, literacy initiatives, third-language instruction, continued technological innovation in the classroom, and creation of new programs for students in vocational training who want to find jobs on leaving high school.

Chechile's job is to bring the changes approved by the board into the classroom for the benefit of the students as soon as this fall. His immediate challenge will include training teachers for the increase in French and continuing the literacy initiative, two areas for which he is particularly suited.

Chechile, the former principal of Westpark Elementary School, teaches in the education departments at Concordia and McGill universities on a part-time basis. At Concordia he teaches a course on the integration of technology into the curriculum, and at McGill he teaches the integration of technology with special needs.

As more smartboards (i.e. interactive screens) make their appearance in the classroom in a program started several years ago, teachers are turning to the technological tools to help them better present age-old concepts to their students. Chechile says the smartboards can help show students how to deal with problems in geometry such as determining an angle through motion on the screen, which leads to a higher retention of a concept.

"We also have many schools that have laptops as well and they're being integrated into the classrooms with high success," he said.

Technology is just another tool – like pens and paintbrushes, or still cameras and video cameras. It is not a replacement for anything or any one, Chechile said.

Using technology has a huge impact on the literacy skills of students, he added, because they get immediate feedback when they don't spell a word correctly and they can use graphics, sound and photos available through computers along with the written word.

"We all know that when you present something using two senses – like words and graphics, or graphics and music – then the retention is a lot higher."

But Chechile is also a firm believer in the basics, especially when it comes to teaching and learning French. "I have a very strong background in literacy and a big passion for education," he said. "What we're also looking at right now is a literacy initiative in the LaSalle-Verdun area, where we want to do some analysis of results of the children at the beginning of their school-



Michael Chechile,
Director of Educational Services

ing to see where they're at. And we want to see, with the literacy implementation, where they're going to be later on in the year."

Students are monitored regularly in French immersion schools to determine their literacy and follow a guided reading program in which they move along at their own pace.

"So we put a lot of resources into the acquisition of the French language," Chechile said, referring to children in elementary schools.

"We also have another program that we are going to pilot in our schools and it's called Français Plus. The program, based on the French immersion model that sees children in kindergarten and Cycle 1 – which is Grades 1 and 2 – getting 85 per cent French, is going to be expanded into Grades 3 and 4" in what Chechile agrees is "a radical change.

"But that is what the community has asked for and it is very doable and we're putting all the resources and educational services at the disposal of the schools to make sure this happens."

In high schools, French may be delivered into such subjects as Social Studies, Physical Science, and Ethics; by the 2011 school year, every high school will be at 50-per-cent French, while some are already there, Chechile said.

Meanwhile, the board faces the challenge of bringing teachers up to speed in this strategy.

"This is a very progressive board with excellent administrators and teachers," Chechile said. "We have more French consultants than ever before to ensure the teachers receive professional development and build learning communities.

"I think that it is important for our students who are going to stay in Quebec to be able to read and write in French as well as English."

As a product of a trilingual education himself, Chechile strongly supports third-language instruction programs. Two schools are implementing Italian and Spanish in a program that offers students the opportunity to be global citizens.

Chechile touched on another initiative of the board, which is to focus on students at risk of dropping out because the traditional model of high school does not fit. Such students may opt for a work-oriented path program.

"It's been proven that when they take ownership, when they see a future, then they do succeed," he said.

He mentioned transportation, food services and equipment services as fields in which students choose to develop skills that will help them find meaningful work.