

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

Susan Chomistek – August 20, 2015

The sixth annual superintendent interviews of parents, students, and staff members were conducted over several weeks in the spring of 2015 as a component of the ongoing school evaluation process. On March 12 and 13 during student-led conferences, and over the next two weeks, 50 parents were interviewed. In May and June, grades 4 to 9 students as class groups (24 classes - approximately 600 students) were interviewed. I was pleased that Mr. Darrell Lonsberry was able to join me for all of the student interviews. As well, 47 teacher and support staff members were interviewed. 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. **Connect Charter School is a Great School (96%)** – Representative comments include:
  - I believe Connect Charter is a very good school for students primarily due to its tri-fold mandate: inquiry, technology and outdoor education. These are the magical things that are making education work for my children
  - My child likes coming to school; the mission and values of the school are positive
  - My child loves school (5)
  - Appreciate the opportunities students have had at this school – there are more opportunities here than I can find anywhere else (2)
2. **The Teachers and Support Staff are Very Dedicated and the Quality of the Teaching is Excellent (90%)** - Representative comments include:
  - A very important factor within our school is energized, passionate, specific teachers. These are not average teachers. They have energy and interest. I believe this leads from the top down and is also indicative of charter schools
  - Teachers are engaged and involved
  - There are passionate, energetic teachers who want to do well
  - I have appreciated the excellent qualifications of the staff
3. **The Outdoor and Environmental Education Program is Excellent (66%)** – Representative comments include:

- Connect Charter offers students of many diverse backgrounds the opportunity to learn while participating in wonderful outdoor programs and camps at each grade level
  - Field trips and outdoor education programs are beyond what is offered elsewhere
  - The outdoor education component is very positive for my child (10)
  - The electives in outdoor education are great
- 4. The Emphasis on Learning and Teaching through a Disposition of Inquiry is Highly Valued (32%)** – Representative comments include:
- Inquiry based, hands on learning is a great fit for both strong students and emerging learners
  - It is good for our children who love to explore the world
  - We have appreciated the very innovative approach that is used and the focus on learning through inquiry
  - Our son transitioned into a high school redesign school for 21st century learning very well because of the experience at Connect
- 5. The Emphasis on Developing Students as Ethical, Respectful, and Responsible Individuals is Highly Valued (30%)** – Representative comments include:
- Students are treated with respect and as responsible citizens, not as children
  - There is a culture of collaboration and sharing
  - The school creates confidence in students
  - The leadership development is excellent
  - I appreciate the focus on developing an attitude of global citizenship
  - Students are given more freedom, and they do well with the increased level of responsibility that goes with this
- 6. The Communication Processes used by the Classroom Teachers and Throughout the School are Very Good (24%)** – Representative comments include:
- Communication is excellent
  - I appreciate Edmodo and the blogs (4)
  - I like being connected through Edmodo; I can work with my child at home
  - The notes that are sent home have been helpful
  - The teachers regularly check in with us
  - I liked the approach with student-led conferences; it was much more condensed
  - I liked parent teacher interviews in the fall; I felt listened to
- 7. The Administration Provide Strong Leadership for the School (20%)** – Representative comments include:
- The administrators genuinely care
  - I appreciate the thought behind decisions
  - The administrators make me as a parent feel appreciated
  - The teamwork within the administrative team is evident
  - Our current administration team has many strengths

- Parents trust the combination in the leadership team
- Each of the administrators has areas of ability and talent that are essential to the complete running of Connect

**8. The Use of Technology in the School Significantly Enriches Learning and Teaching (20%)**– Representative comments include:

- I love that our children are learning technology and how to use it responsibly
- The integration of technology has been very beneficial
- Technology is allowing two of my children with learning issues to succeed, to learn in alternate ways, and to present in different mediums
- The one-to-one technology ratio makes a huge difference and the benefits of this are so readily apparent when compared with public school classrooms
- The effective use of technology has helped my child with their learning and with their representation of their learning

**9. Connect Charter School Provides a Well-rounded Program through the Core Courses, the Performing and Visual Arts, Physical Education, and the Electives (18%)** –

Representative comments include:

- The best thing about the school is the different opportunities that are offered: outdoor education, different electives, band, and art
- We appreciate having a wide range of electives available to the students
- Within the core programs, our child has many opportunities to learn from experts
- We really appreciate the electives in the Phys. Ed. program and the way it is structured

**The following suggestions for further consideration (with a response rate of 4% or more) were identified through the parent interviews:**

**1. Enhance Communication Processes (26%)** – Representative comments include:

- Better communication with parents
- Put on more workshops for parents; teachers could have workshops for parents on topics such as assessment or inquiry
- I am now checking Edmodo more and getting the information, so perhaps there needs to be more training for parents earlier in the year

**2. Carefully Consider the Benefits of Looping (14%)** – Representative comments include:

- Looping of grades is fantastic when the child has a strong relationship with the teacher and when the class is a good fit for them, but it can be a long two years when the situation is not ideal
- Consider looping changes when teaching and learning styles are very different - as the students get older, the looping is less effective; grades 8 and 9 should not loop at all

**3. Different Approaches to Assessment and Reporting Should be Considered (14%)** –

Representative comments include:

- It is a huge adjustment when kids go to high school; changing the grading system as they get older might help them have a better sense of what their marks are
  - I don't like the report cards
  - From the information that is given, I do not know how to help my child; use the talent and intelligence of the staff to create a better system
- 4. Review the Electives Offered (10%)** - Representative comments include:
- Would like to see the electives revamped so there are more hands on activities
  - Could we tap into parents as partners in the electives
  - Would love to see electives on a rotational basis: For example, offer a second language, technology (coding or robotics)
  - Talk to teachers as to what they might see as the categories for electives and then plan them at the beginning of the year
- 5. The Bussing System Should be Examined (8%)** – Representative comments include:
- Expand the area that buses travel; we live outside the city and it is very difficult to get our child to an existing route (we would pay extra money to have this service)
  - Our bussing route was very problematic this year
- 6. Continued Support for the Performing and Visual Arts (8%)** - Representative comments include:
- Would like to see the visual and performing arts supported as well as the band program is supported; parents could perhaps work with leads to assist here
  - Visual arts is a strong program; can parents help even more here
- 7. Consideration should be Given to Offering A Second Language (6%)** – Representative comments include:
- It would be good to have a second language offered; my children were in French Immersion before this
  - I acknowledge the difficulty in adding this dimension to the current schedule and teacher setup, but it is a drawback to have no language options for 6 years
- 8. Transition to High School (6%)** – Representative comments include:
- Ensure a smooth transition to high school
  - Make sure students are prepared for high school and university
- 9. Continued or Improved Strong Academic Standards (4%)** - Representative comments include:
- Make sure there are strong academic standards even after the PATs are gone
  - More rigour in academics

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

**It is interesting to note that without exception in every class the students identified learning through inquiry, the use of technology to enhance learning and teaching, and outdoor education/field trips as special features of their learning experience. 100% of the classes**

indicated that these themes were in their view what make Connect Charter School a great school. As well, the students in 100% of the class interviews made reference to the dedicated teachers and school staff members as a special strength of the 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 50% or more included:

**1. Learning through Inquiry (100%) –**

- We appreciate the hands-on learning activities and learning through inquiry
- Connections are made outside of school that deepen our understanding of what we are studying
- Teachers teach us conceptually and encourage us to learn beyond the classroom
- Inquiry makes our learning relevant to the outside world

**2. Outdoor Education/School Field Trips (100%) –**

- The trips we take are really great; we get to interact with nature and each other
- We appreciate the variety of trips we get to take: Camp Sweet, Southern Alberta History Tour, Bamfield, Rocky Mountain Tour, Winter Camp, all of them

**3. Using Technology to Enhance Learning Experiences (100%) –**

- Technology gives us the freedom and the ability to personalize our learning
- Technology helps us to become more organized, we get different perspectives from our research, and it helps as we prepare our presentations
- The technology we are using is the same as what we will be using in the real world

**4. Dedicated Teachers and School Staff Members (100%) –**

- Our teachers take into consideration how we learn and they are very encouraging
- Our teachers are kind, they respect us, and they treat all students equally
- Teachers challenge us to be better and they believe we are always capable of doing more
- Our teachers trust us
- If our teachers can change something to make it better, they work hard to do this
- Teachers make personal connections and they make our learning relative to the outside world
- Teachers are advocates for you
- Support staff are great
- Unique teachers create innovative programs

**5. Culture of Mutual Respect in the School (83%) –**

- There is a respectful environment in the school

- There is collaboration in our school because we help each other and we listen to others' points of view
  - There is a feeling of trust in the school and overall respect
  - It is like we are a community within our school; everyone supports everyone else
  - Appreciate the trust and responsibility that the teachers and administrators give us
- 6. Electives Provide Valuable Learning Experiences (75%) –**
- It is good that we have the opportunity to choose our electives
  - With electives, there is something for everyone, such as financial management, 3-D design, Me to We, robotics, pottery, and much more
- 7. Hands-on Learning Activities and Learning Activities that Connect to Real-life Experiences (67%) -**
- We appreciate the connections outside of the school to the universities and to experts in the field we are studying
  - Hands on learning is more interesting and relevant
- 8. Freedom and Responsibility to Learn Independently (67%) –**
- Students are given choices and challenges
  - We have a lot of freedom in the school: with technology, with the different ways we learn and present our learning, with the choices we get to make, but we also have great responsibility
- 9. Opportunities for Collaboration and Leadership (58%) –**
- We like having the older leaders come on our outdoor ed. trips
  - Appreciate the opportunities to collaborate both within the school and with other people outside of our school
  - More leadership opportunities have been given to us
  - Enjoy the leadership opportunities beginning in grade 4
- 10. Student Voice is Valued (58%) –**
- The principal really listens to us
  - Our school is receptive to the student voice
  - We are listened to; the students' opinions are valued
- 11. Environment Both Within and Outside the School (50%) –**
- There are colourful paintings around the school
  - We like Clem's Garden and all the trees
  - The library is great
  - We enjoy the playground and all the structures
  - The science lab gives us the opportunity for experimenting and hands on learning

**The following suggestions for further consideration (with a response rate of 25% or more) were identified through the student interviews:**

- 1. Outdoor Space Enhancements (92%) –**
  - Make Clem’s Garden bigger and have a bigger naturalization centre
  - More playground equipment
  - More basketball courts and repaint the lines on the existing courts
  - Have a water fountain outside, both for the students and for the community after hours
  - Create an outdoor space for a covered classroom
  - Make a paved area in the compound
- 2. Indoor Space Enhancements (83%) –**
  - Create places to spread out our backpacks or have lockers in the younger grades
  - Bean bag chairs
  - Repaint classrooms
  - Warm water
  - More solar tubes or natural light
  - Change rooms
  - Wheelchair access to the stage
  - Microwaves in the halls or classrooms
  - Upgrade windows so they open
- 3. Offer Second Language Electives (75%) –**
  - We would like to have an opportunity to learn a second language
- 4. Make Provision for more Interschool and Intramural Sports Teams (75%) –**
  - We would like to have more opportunities for intramural and inter-school sports-including soccer, floor hockey, and football
  - There should be teams for grades 4 and 5
  - We would like to expand the teams we play
- 5. Changes to School Electives (67%) –**
  - We like the school electives and would like to have them more often – more cooking electives
- 6. Changes to Family Groups (58%) –**
  - Double period for family groups
  - Change family groups every 2 to 3 years
  - Have family groups for grades 4 to 6 and 7 to 9 - more outside activities for all family groups
  - Family groups for grades 4 – 8; grade 9 students use family group time for flex time
- 7. Changes in Supervision (25%)–**
  - Freedom during the lunch hour to move around to other classes
  - Have the supervisors spread out on the playground instead of bunched up in one place
  - Play zone for rainy days
  - Open campus in grade 9

## Staff Interview Responses - Key Themes

Informal interviews were conducted with (47) staff members and the following major areas of commendation (with a response rate of 26% or more) were identified through the staff interviews:

**1. The Supportive, Caring, Collaborative School Culture is a Key to Success (100%) -**

Representative comments include:

- I appreciate the name Connect and all that means – connection with others, relationships between staff students and parents, connections with family, connections to the outdoors, connection with other staff and schools through social media
- There is an atmosphere of respect in the school and the focus is on children, programming, and teachers
- This is a great place to work; people are approachable and friendly and there is a positive, respectful culture
- I appreciate that we are working to create exceptional citizens for the future
- I am grateful for the professional integrity of teachers, administration, and the superintendent
- I appreciate the dynamic nature of our staff at all levels: there is a mindset of working together to make our school even better

**2. We have a Very Capable and Highly Dedicated Staff (62%) -** Representative comments include:

- There is a “students first” philosophy that keeps many teachers at Connect; I don’t feel that our students ever get lost
- Teachers are chosen for their attributes, attitudes, and strengths and are committed to philosophy of the school
- Staff care deeply about student learning and are committed to the disposition of inquiry that reflects the real world
- Teachers are truly engaged and this leads to student engagement

**3. The Leadership and Support from the Administration/Leadership Team is appreciated (58%) –** Representative comments include:

- Administration has a growth mindset - they encourage us to try new things and appreciate us when we do
- I appreciate how approachable administration is; I feel I can go to them for anything
- I appreciate the autonomy and support that I am given
- There is strong leadership in our school; things are well thought out and considered and the administrators get input and seek consensus

**4. The Students are Excellent (43%) -** Representative comments include:

- We have a culture of students who are willing to take risks and are independent thinkers

- *Me to We* has made a big difference in our school
- There are multiple ways for students to demonstrate their understanding and to connect with learning and they do very well with this
- The students at our school are amazing
- We have a diverse student population
- There is a high level of respect with our students
- Peer tutoring has been great, both for the tutors and for the students with whom they work

**5. The Focus on Professional Development and Continual Growth is Appreciated (40%) -**

Representative comments Include:

- Our staff retreats this year were so positive and focused on our charter goals and the vision of our school
- The collaboration and planning time is very beneficial and it build relationships with colleagues
- The growth mindset within the school is very positive and it is embedded in the framework of the charter
- I appreciate how focused the professional development opportunities have been
- The research and innovation opportunities are fantastic

**6. The Outdoor and Environmental Education Programs and Taking Learning Beyond the Classroom Continue to be a Key Component of the School Learning Activities and the Success of the School (36%) -** Representative comments include:

- Students are given so many positive opportunities – outdoor education trips, cross-country skiing, biking, and so much more
- A real area of growth this year was the outdoor education program and I felt that the progress we made was very effective in moving this area of our charter forward
- The outdoor education leadership program was excellent
- The opportunities for kids are exceptional: outdoor education programs, access to resources, science, enrichment

**7. We have a Great Vision for the School within Our Charter (28%) -** Representative comments include:

- I really like the charter of our school
- I love teaching through the disposition of inquiry, I like technology because it can allow inquiry to become even deeper, and the outdoor education component is excellent
- The exemplary framework has helped to focus our school community as we all work together
- We have strong leadership and the school is well run from the board down. The members of the Board of Directors are very supportive and interested in what we are doing as teachers

**8. Parental Involvement and Support is Excellent (26%)** - Representative comments include:

- Parents know what is happening in the school and are quick to volunteer when needed
- Parental involvement is phenomenal and the support we have for Camp Sweet, outdoor education, the great nine celebration, and other committees is great
- I love how parents are truly involved as partners

**The following suggestions for further consideration (with response rate of 19% or more) were identified through the staff member interviews:**

**1. Continue with the Work on a Strong Focus on our Charter Pillars (40%)** -Representative comments include:

- We have started on a very deliberate path to improvement. Let's talk about the pillars and examine them. We had outdoor education retreats focused on this pillar and I felt this was very effective. Let's do the same for inquiry and technology
- I really like the pillars of our charter I think we need to delve deeply into each of them and make sure that everyone understands why we are doing what we are doing

**2. Do More to Address the Special Learning and Personal Development Needs of our Students (26%)** – Representative comments include:

- Continue building capacity for inclusion
- More time spent with inclusive practices coach would help
- As a staff, we should look at the research on gender and learning

**3. Enhance and Celebrate Professional Development Programs and Initiatives (21%)** – Representative comments include:

- With always pushing ourselves as professionals to the next level, sometimes we don't reflect enough on what we have done before we move on to something else
- With Professional Development, I would like to bring in more experts who would help us enhance what we are already doing (Galileo)
- I really like the Professional Learning Networks: could we dedicate more time to these

**4. Leadership and Leadership Opportunities (19%)** – Representative comments include:

- I would like to see admin in the classrooms even more. I have valued the interactions this year
- Everyone has strengths and would love to contribute; as the portfolio positions evolve, give other people opportunities to have these positions

## **Concluding Observations**

There was a very positive response from the parents, students, and staff members to the opportunity to share their views in regard to areas of commendation and suggestions for further consideration relating to learning and teaching in Connect Charter School. Clearly, there is agreement that there is something very special about Connect Charter School, and there is strong support for the emphasis on providing a comprehensive program with rich learning experiences in mathematics, science, the humanities, physical education, the performing and visual arts and the variety of electives. The feedback from parents, students and staff members all strongly support the charter goals, mission, vision, and guiding principles, which are outlined in the 15-year charter document approved by the Minister of Education in July 2012. The participants expressed very strong support for the emphasis on learning through a disposition of inquiry, enhancing learning and teaching through the appropriate use of technology and providing authentic, engaging learning experiences in the school and beyond through the extensive outdoor education/field trips and out-of-school programs. As well, the respondents made reference to the importance of the culture of collaboration and the culture of respect that have become hallmarks of the school, as well as the high level of active and meaningful engagement of teachers and students, which continues to be best summarized in the observation, "It is never just an ordinary day".